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SN 6876 - Welfare Regimes under the Irish Poor Law, 1850-1921

The project set out to investigate the history of statutory poor relief in Ireland from the end of the Great Famine in 1850 to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. Using qualitative and quantitative data, it explored the character, organisation and operation of the poor law in Ireland. It has identified national, regional and local patterns in the provision and utilisation of relief, and has revealed the existence of what appear to be distinct welfare regimes with both regional and ideological characteristics. Case studies of thirteen poor law unions in different parts of the country were undertaken in order to explore the influence of factors such as religion, politics and regional economics on the scope and character of relief practices.

The datasets produced by the project include two databases of poor law statistics for the whole of Ireland together with a number of datasets relating to the poor law unions selected as case studies. These are primarily tab delimited text files, readable with Excel or similar applications, compiled from the admission registers of the union workhouses, and rtf/pdf files containing extracts from the minutes of boards of guardians' meetings.

Methodology:

The project combined macro and micro analysis to compile a picture of poor relief that moved from the national perspective through the regional to the local. Published annual returns were used to compile two databases of poor law statistics, broken down by poor law union, for the period 1850-1914. (Full returns were not made in the same way after this date.) The first included the total numbers in receipt of relief in each union each year, and the second the amount expended in each union. Analysis of these figures revealed regional and temporal trends in the provision of relief and confirmed the existence, in statistical terms at least, of three distinct welfare regimes operating in different parts of Ireland. Research then focused on these three areas, broadly defined as west, north, and south. (These terms are used as general descriptions and are not intended to be geographically precise.) Each of the three project researchers focused primarily on one region. Thirteen poor law unions were selected as case studies: Belfast, Ballycastle, Ballymoney and Clogher in the north; Glenties, Westport, and Tralee in the west; and North Dublin, Cork, Kinsale, Thurles, Mountmellick and Kilmallock in the south. The aim was to provide a representative cross section of urban / rural, industrial / agricultural, core / periphery unions, although the availability of source material also influenced the final selection. The nature of the sources also determined the research methods used for different poor law unions. Where workhouse admissions registers were available (Belfast, Ballycastle, Ballymoney, Clogher, Glenties, Cork, Kinsale, North Dublin and Thurles), these were used to create Excel databases. Details of all admissions in as many census years as possible were recorded. (Sampling was used for Belfast and for North Dublin in 1901. Here the very high number of admissions meant that entering the details of every inmate was impractical.) The minute books of the union administering body, the board of guardians, were also consulted for all the case study unions and relevant extracts noted. In unions where workhouse admission registers were unavailable, figures for the number in receipt of relief broken down by age and sex (which are given in the minute books on a weekly basis) were recorded quarterly at five year intervals together with other relevant information. Local newspapers were consulted for reports of the meetings of the boards of guardians. Since the surviving administrative records for unions in the west are very limited, being largely confined to minute books, more extensive use was made of local newspapers and official government papers when researching these unions than was the case with unions in other regions. The research data collected was analysed on a union and a regional level.

Project Findings:

The project has made it possible to reassess the nature and experience of poverty in Ireland in the post-Famine period, and the administrative and ideological structures of poor relief. Analysis of national and regional trends in the provision of poor relief has revealed significant changes over time in patterns of relief, and the existence of what appear to be distinct welfare regimes reflecting socio-economic and ideological attributes in the west and north, and to a lesser extent in the south of the country. It is clear that rates of poor relief were increasing in the post-Famine period. Outdoor relief increased from a very low base in the immediate post-Famine period, to a level of around 20 recipients per 1,000 population where it remained until beginning to decline in the second decade of the twentieth century. Indoor relief increased markedly over the period. This is in contrast to the situation in Britain where rates of relief were declining in the period prior to World War I. The explanation appears to lie not in increasing levels of pauperism in Ireland but in changing patterns of workhouse usage, and attitudes to poverty. Analysis of workhouse admission registers has demonstrated that by the end of the nineteenth century, a large proportion of inmates of provincial workhouses were casual, peripatetic visitors who stayed for a single night. Longer-term residents comprised mainly children, the elderly and the sick and infirm. In the major cities where substantial numbers of people existed on the margins of economic independence, workhouses were more closely integrated into the institutional landscape of poverty and welfare providing a regular resource for people affected by temporary want.

In addition to examining trends in and patterns of relief both nationally and in different parts of the country, research findings have illuminated particular aspects of the poor law such as the care of children, medical provision, and emergency relief. For example, the introduction of a boarding-out system allowing children to be removed from the workhouse and supported in a family environment has been investigated and the reasons for the limited implementation of this policy explored. Further findings emerging from the project can be summarised as follows: that contemporary understandings and experiences of poverty were diverse, unstable and contested; that poor families were subject to regular dissolutions and reconstitutions, and that familial networks were extended and family ties elastic; that there was a significant urban-rural divide in poor law practices; that the poor relief system was shaped by political and cultural priorities that changed over time; that local practices frequently diverged from national policy; that access criteria reflected ideological imperatives more than need; that the poor were active historical agents making calculated choices about how, when and where to apply for aid.

Table *union_relief_figures_1850-1914.tab*

field	variable	note
a	id	ID of record
b	union	Poor Law Union
c	year	Year
d	indoor	Number of paupers in workhouse
e	outdoor	Number of paupers receiving outdoor
f	in_blind_deaf_and_dumb_asylums	Number of paupers in blind, deaf, and dumb asylums
g	total_number_relieved	Total numbers of paupers receiving poor law relief
h	collective_number_of_days	Total number of days paupers received aid
i	avg_dys_each_pau	Average days paupers received aid
j	av_daily_num_ind	Average daily number of paupers in workhouse
k	av_daily_num_out	Average daily number of paupers receiving outdoor relief
l	notes	Additional remarks
m	cost_of_provisions_£	Total yearly costs for provisions in £
n	cost_of_clothing_£	Total yearly costs for clothes in £
o	total_cost	Yearly costs in total in £
p	av_wkl_cst_prn	Average weekly costs for provisions in £
q	av_wkl_cst_cl	Average weekly costs for clothes in £
r	av_wkl_cst_ttl	Average weekly cost in total in £

Tables in folder *registers* and *statistical_data_from_minute_books*:

The titles of the variables and the codes are generally self-explaining.

Codes to identify family types (variable *family_type*) in Cork Workhouse (tables *cork_ar_1851_tab*, *cork_ar_1871.tab*, *cork_ar_1901*, *cork_1r_1911*)

code	note
a	both parents and siblings
b	father and sibling (widower)
b1	father and sibling
c	mother and siblings (widow)
d	mother and siblings (father deserted)
d1	husband refuses to support
e	mother and siblings (father away)
f	mother and siblings (father in gaol)
g	orphan with siblings
h	father and siblings (mother in workhouse already)
i	mother and siblings (father in workhouse already)
i1	siblings (father in workhouse already)
j	siblings on their own

k	either parent in w/k already
l	illegitimate child with mother
m	mother with siblings (no explanation for father)
m1	father with siblings (no explanation for mother)
n	children with no parents
o	siblings with parent/s in gaol
p	orphan with adults not parents [had up until 10650 as g]
q	adult siblings [had up until 10600 as i]

Notes regarding the North Dublin Union and Thurles Indoor Registers.

The Excel files contain a number of standard categories taken from the source itself (e.g. gender, age etc) and some categories that I devised based on my analysis of the material (e.g. 'released to'). There is also usually a column entitled 'notes' which relates to random notes made by me or the clerk at the time that provides extra information not regularly recorded but that is useful and interesting nonetheless. It should be fairly clear what information is mine, usually written in the form of a question or a point about a family relationship, and what is the clerk's, often information about location of parents, children or register location of a child / parent that entered separately. Sometimes I have looked up information alluded to by the clerk and entered it myself.

Re. 'age': 100, 200, 300 mean the following:

- 100 is a child for whom the age is unknown. This meant that it would be counted in any query where I search for someone aged 14 or under [child].
- 200 is an adult for whom the age is unknown. This meant that it would be included in any query where searched for someone aged 15 and over [adult].
- 300 is a pauper whose age is unknown or unclear. Therefore they cannot be easily included in either child or age category. When counting 'adults' and 'children' or age in general it might be as well to omit these entirely or refer to them as 'age unknown'.
- 0.00011 – 11 days old
- 0.011 – 11 weeks
- 0.11 – 11 months
- 0.1 – 1 month

'cc' means 'Cab Case'. I suspect this means that the individual was brought to the workhouse in a cab provided for or paid by the union.

Issues that emerged when collecting the data – the main one was illegibility or damage to parts of the MS. This meant that for some years a proportion of the data was illegible making it difficult to make conclusions about gender, age, relationships between inmates being admitted at the same time (if any existed), and repeat visitors etc. This occurred in 1871 (a few first names were illegible), 1881 (340 entries out of 8050), 1891 (142 out of 3440) and 1911 (5 out of 7491). This relates only to the names being illegible but often this meant other information was also illegible. 1880-81 was the worst affected owing to water damage to the bottom section of the register. The 1891 database ends mid-year (20 May 1891). This is where the register ends. The next register in the sequence is missing.

Sampling occurred only in 1901 where the total number admitted was over 12,000. I sampled every tenth individual in order to achieve a 10 percent sample. This meant that family groups were omitted. However, to combat this problem I included a column 'family group' that described the family, if any, the individual pauper entered with. I also ensured that 'accompanied with' was included as a category of analysis so while we do not have the entire year's admissions, we do have as much information on the individuals who comprise the 10 percent sample as was possible. The greatest potential problem that emerged from the 1901 sample related to whether it was representative of all admissions for the year since there was a greater proportion of children included in the sample than there had been for any complete year before and after 1901. However, a check on weekly admissions in the minute book statistics revealed that in fact that this rise in the proportion of children admitted was not a function of the sample, but did in fact occur in that year. Therefore, the sample for 1901 is considered to be representative of the entire year.