

Irish Work Houses

Joyce Curran Cannon, MA
Irish Studies Lecturer
February 2014

The Poor Law in Ireland

- From the time of St. Patrick until British colonization in the 16th century, members of religious orders cared for the sick and indigent.
- Under British colonial rule – The Penal Law time – monasteries and religious communities were suppressed – care system was gone.
- Colonization was main reason for poverty.

Limerick City Workhouse

- 1772 original Poor Law passed by Irish Parliament established workhouse in every county.
- Only aged, feeble, infants, and lunatics, need apply. Anyone with a breath left must work.
- Sturdy vagrant men and young females who seek employment were also admitted – or forced in.
- Work or beg, and no provision for widows.

Limerick City Workhouse

- Population = 41 inmates.
- Dickensian conditions, but were paid 1/3rd of money earned and receive two meals per day.
- For destitute, it was salvation, despite the chains.
- Funding came from local government on Irish soil (Grand Juries), and private donations.

The Irish Poor Relief Act of 1838

- Law enacted by British Parliament, initially divides Ireland into 130 Poor law Unions, based on British Relief system with one exception: no “Outdoor Relief.”
- Overseen by Boards of Guardians. System paid for by ratepayers, landowners and tenants. **MUST** enter the workhouse to receive any form of Relief.

Causes of Irish poverty prior to the Great Famine of the 1840s:

- **British colonization:** take out vs put in. Lack of agricultural improvements and absentee landlords led to disaster.
- **Laissez-Faire economy**
- **Loss of native Irish leadership since the “Flight of the Earls” in 1607:**
 - No functioning aristocracy and virtually no middle class, therefore native Irish were unable to form pressure groups or strong resistance movements.

Causes of Irish poverty prior to the Great Famine of the 1840s:

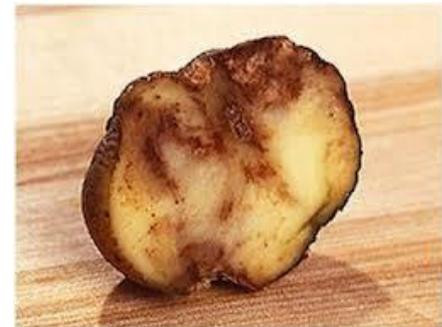
- o **Extreme population growth** - particularly during Napoleonic wars of the late 17th and early 18th century. Trade was good, but there were too many people on too little soil.



Causes of Irish poverty prior to the Great Famine of the 1840s:

o **Post Napoleonic Wars:**

- o famines, and mini-depressions = Irish no longer fed England.
- o Peasants over-subdivide land
- o Potato is major, virtually only, foodstuff
- o Landlords raise rents, tenants unable to pay, evict – now roaming, homeless peasantry = danger to the established order



Causes of Irish poverty prior to the Great Famine of the 1840s:

- At the onset of the Famine, no outdoor relief in times of acute distress.
- Eventually it had to be implemented.
- All of these scenarios and conditions led to abject poverty and collapse of the workhouse system in the 1840s.
- They also led to the deaths of millions and the loss of millions more through emigration.

Causes of Irish poverty prior to the Great Famine of the 1840s:

- On the plus side, they ultimately led to the bankruptcy of the Irish Landlord system and the beginning of peasant proprietorship.



The Great Famine – An Gorta Mor =1846-1851

- What happens to the Workhouse during the Famine ?
 - Extreme overcrowding – high death rates
 - Export to save lives and treasure
 - Emigration provision is in workhouse law for inmates; more people try to enter in order to get out!
 - Two year residency requirement enacted.

What happens to the Workhouse during the Famine ?

- Emigration Commission set up paid passage from workhouses, primarily to North America, and Australia.
- Poor Law funds pay.
- Private estates owners, such as Booth and Tuke, and crown estates, also export their peasants.
- Tuke refuses to assist those in workhouse.

1847 Emigration to Britain

- Liverpool had 200,000 people = got 350,000 Irish in 5 months!
- Crashes English relief system – had to stop Irish emigration to Britain.
- Plans made to provide emigration to British North America, the United States, and Australia.
- Outdoor relief was granted as there was literally “no room in the inn”, the workhouse.

1847 Emigration to Britain

- British government increases emigration - tax landlords even more.
- Landlords evict – up the rates - put more inmates in workhouse.
- Plan or accident?



Infamous Gregory Act of 1847 (Second Poor Law Act)

- No person can enter the workhouse for relief if works over 1/4th acre.
- Great increase in Irish poor – boon for landlord – more property
- Overturned in 1862.
- Landlords enlarge estates by consolidation

Life in the Limerick Workhouse

- During the Famine life was chaotic: food was less than subsistence and disease was the main killer.
- Filth was everywhere; it was a broken system in a broken land.
- Families were separated, famine fever, and cholera were epidemic; basic sanitation was non-existent.

Life in the Limerick Workhouse

- Schooling came to a halt.
- The death rate was appalling.
- People who were dying to get in were soon dying to get out.
- Abuses of the person were prevalent, but seldom addressed.

In Ordinary Times

- Women in the workhouse learned sewing, upholstery, weaving, wool carding
- Men broke stones, worked the land, and did other chores suitable for the sturdy.
- Both sexes participated in cleaning and repairing the workhouse.
- Sexes were usually separated, even if spouses were with them.

In Ordinary Times

- Virtually impossible to do during Famine.
- Children over 2 were separated from parents.



Evolution of Health Care System

- 1840s and 1850s Sisters of Mercy, nurses who assist with sanitation and disease prevention, start visiting Limerick workhouse.
- By 1861, they began the takeover of the Limerick workhouse and cared for the sick within their walls.

Evolution of Health Care System

- Workhouses (Alms Houses) lasted well into the 20th century, housing people with no one to care for them - widows and orphans, elderly poor, those on the fringe of society, the insane, the traveling people - all were eligible for assistance in the workhouse.

Evolution of Health Care System

- Workhouse population increased during the late 19th century Irish Land Wars due to eviction, yet never to the degree of the 1840s.
- The dissolution of the workhouse system began in 1882, but was not completed until the 20th century.

Limerick to Nashua

- In 1883, 65 women from the Limerick workhouse were sent to Nashua, New Hampshire, as contract workers to work in the cotton mills. The northeast was a popular route for young men and women because of our factory system.
- From 1851-1907, 44,800 received some form of assisted emigration.



The Legacy of the Irish Workhouse

- Workhouses were forever known as “pathways to death”.
- They created shame and fear in the Irish psyche.
- Conversely, many thousands of lives were saved that would otherwise have been lost during the Great Famine.

The Legacy of the Irish Workhouse

- As a result of the Great Famine and the Irish Workhouse system the fabric of Irish society was overhauled.
- By the last quarter of the 19th century, a New Ireland, based on the Irish stem family, “Irish Ireland,” was created by those who were able to remain at home.

Irish Ireland

- All elements of Irish society participated in Irish Ireland.
 - Agrarian reforms were begun.
 - Emigration was institutionalized; it had to be (no more scarce resources for too many people)
 - Irish Independence from Great Britain won in 20th century.