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# *The Lives of the Poor in Cahir in 1821*

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by Maria Luddy\*

In 1817, 1818 and 1819 severe fever epidemics raged through the country. K.H. Connell estimated that deaths from these fevers may have been as high as 44,300.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to prevent their re-occurrence, and to promote public health, the Government set up the General Board of Health in Dublin in 1820. This permanent Board, which included amongst its members the famous John David La Touche and Peter La Touche, bankers and philanthropists, provided the Government with information and advice on matters relating to public health.

The first Board was set up particularly to examine those conditions which might give rise to fever. As was the usual custom regarding government enquiries at this time, a list of questions was forwarded to people of substance — landowners and clergymen, for example, in each county. The information was returned and then collated. Although the enquiry of the first Board of Health covered the entire country, only a summary of information relating to the province of Munster was actually published.

The information provided, however, went far beyond examining the health of the poor. Through the evidence of Lady Glengall, who made the return for Cahir, we get a unique look at the lives of the poor in Cahir in the second decade of the nineteenth century. The following extract is a prime source for an examination of the social, cultural and economic life of nineteenth-century Cahir.<sup>2</sup>

## **Reply from Lady Glengall, County Tipperary**

Gentlemen,

Dr. Beale having already filled up one of these papers, I take the liberty of sending my remarks on various subjects of your enquiries; and I am more induced to do so, and I have taken great pains to inform myself on these points, and flatter myself that I can speak from long experience, and an intimate knowledge of the habits, wants, and distresses of the poor in this neighbourhood.

Your humble servant,  
E. Glengall

### **DWELLINGS**

1. *Are the dwellings of the poorer classes so situated, in general, as to be not unfavourable to health? Is there much bog, or marsh, strictly so called, in your neighbourhood?*
- A. This town is extremely well situated, and ought to be very healthy. The river Suir runs through it, and it is placed on two hills sloping to the river. There is no bog in the neighbourhood, which is a great inconvenience, but notwithstanding these natural advantages, disease is very prevalent.

\*See similar article by the same author, relating to Fethard in 1821, in *Tipperary Historical Journal* 1990, pp. 121-127. — Editor, *THJ*.



2. *Is the sub-stratum or rock of the country limestone, slate, granite, or of what other material is composed?*
- A. Limestone and gravel.
3. *Does the custom prevail of forming deposits of putrefying vegetable or animal matter near the dwellings of the inhabitants? Have means been employed, with success, for the prevention of such nuisances?*
- A. Abundantly. But there is great want of pumps in the town, for when there are floods in the river, it is very much troubled. If government were to encourage the putting down pumps or fountains in all towns, it would conduce *much* to health and convenience.
4. *Do any facts evince the unwholesomeness of the effluvia proceeding from water in which flax has been steeped, contiguous to the inhabitations of the poor?*
- A. Dunghills were very prevalent in the town, nay, they used to pile them up to the tops of their houses, and form cesspools of putrid water before their doors, but by great exertion and perseverance, we have succeeded in getting rid of them. In the country, however, they flourish as usual. At first, it was thought by the common people to be an act of great tyranny, but they now acknowledge the propriety of it, and it could be effected in all towns, if the upper orders of society would exert themselves, but alas! few will take any trouble about that or anything else. The supineness of the gentry is much to be deplored.
5. *Of what materials are the cabins mostly constructed? Are they often built in part below the ground? What apertures have they for the admission of air and light? If provided with windows, are these so constructed as to admit of being occasionally opened? Are the dwellings of the poor in general constructed with chimneys?*
- A. There are some back lanes where infection is bred, and disease, poverty and filth prevail.
6. *What improvements in the construction of their dwellings conducive to dryness, ventilation, and light are practicable? Are the poor disposed to adopt such improvements? Be so good as to describe the general internal state of their dwellings.*
- A. There are no such nuisances at Cahir. The powers vested in the magistrates are quite sufficient if they would exercise them. At Cahir we have the advantage of a Manor Court and Seneschal appointed by the Earl of Glengall, who performs his duties right well, and it is of infinite service, he is an active zealous person, his name is Robert Barry. The want of sewers prevails in all small towns in Ireland, and is a dreadful nuisance.
7. *Are their cabins much crowded, particularly in the night time?*
- A. Nothing is more difficult than to induce the common Irish to allow proper ventilation in their houses. If you build cabins or cottages for them with windows, they either stop them up, or shut the shutters, if there be any, and contrive every expedient to exclude the light and air. They fancy that the former hurts their eyes, and that the latter is too cold. I have advised them constantly and repeatedly, but to no purpose. Their dwellings are in general wretched hovels, swarming with children, pigs, vermin, and filth, both inside and out, and their inclination, as well as their poverty, go hand in hand on this score, they have no pride or pleasure in a clean house, for the female part of the population are not taught cleanliness, which is the great source of this evil.



8. *Do the inhabitants lie promiscuously, and are cattle sheltered in their dwellings?*
- A. The houses are much crowded both in the towns and country, they often receive whole families out of charity, and the usual inhabitants are very numerous, they sleep promiscuously, which is of course a dreadful thing. There are not regular lodging houses in this town, but in larger ones, I dare say, inspection would be useful, though difficult to manage.
9. *What is the condition of the poor inhabitants as to bedding? Do they sleep on straw, heath, rushes, or dried leaves?*
- A. They are very ill of as to bedding and night covering. Straw and heath make their beds, they are much stinted in both.

## CLOTHING

1. *Of what materials does the clothing of the poor generally consist? Is much or any attention bestowed on its renewal or cleansing?*
- A. The males are, on the whole, not ill clothed, but the females are wretchedly clad. They wear poor calicoes, and bad stuffs in this country. In the counties of Cork and Kerry, they manufacture a sort of woollen that is far preferable. Many of the females have not linen next to their skin, whence proceeds the dreadful stench that dirt engenders, and which is injurious to health.
2. *Can you adduce any facts in proof of the opinion, that disease is extended among the poor by infected clothing?*
- A. Certainly not. The idea of public wash houses is an excellent one, and I would humbly, but strongly, recommend it to be put in execution by government, if possible. On mature reflection I am sure it might be done without much expense. It might be built round a lime kiln as at Glasgow or Edinburgh, I know not which; and the profits of selling the lime would defray the expense of the fuel, and even soap, and they might be put under the direction of a Committee of charitable and zealous persons. I would, myself, immediately establish one, but that my family have already done, and are doing so much, that there must be a limit to our expenditure. But if government could be induced to build it, I would undertake with the assistance of a Committee of the respectable inhabitants, to watch over it, and to promote it in every way.
3. *Are the habits of the lower classes in your neighbourhood cleanly? If not, what methods are most likely to introduce cleanliness? Has any plan for this purpose been put in practice in your neighbourhood with success?*
- A. Not answered.

## DIET

1. *Is the diet of the lower classes sufficient as to quantity, and is it of good quality? Does it give origin to disease, or further it progress?*
- A. Potatoes are abundant, but the poor are dreadfully off for milk, they cannot afford to buy it, nor is there sufficient in the country to supply them.
2. *Be so good as to state the price of bread, potatoes, oatmeal, milk and salt, generally in your neighbourhood,*



*with the average price of each of these articles throughout the year.*

A. I am not aware of any unwholesome liquor sold, except whiskey may be so deemed.

3. *Does fish form a considerable article of diet amongst the poor people? Are fisheries encouraged? Do any and what obstructions exist to further the extension of the fisheries, and by what means are these obstructions likely to be removed?*

A. Little or no fish is used by the poor, it being an inland county, we have nothing to do with fisheries.

## FUEL

1. *Is turf the only fuel in your neighbourhood, or is there any considerable and regular supply of coal?*

A. Turf is the only fuel of the poor and it is very scarce. I conceive want of firing is very conducive to disease and want of cleanliness, and for this reason public wash-houses would be very desirable.

2. *Are the poor well supplied with fuel? Has the want of this article favoured the extension of disease?*

A. Not answered.

3. *In the mode of burning their fuel are any changes practicable like to diminish its consumption and promote ventilation?*

A. As the large fire-places give the only chance of ventilation, I think it advisable to leave them as they are, though they, perhaps, burn more fuel, but a turf fire is made on the ground, and though it throws out little or no heat, I know not of any better mode of making the fire places.

## EMPLOYMENT

1. *What are the wages of labour in your neighbourhood? Is there sufficient employment for the poor? Can you propose any means of employment productive to the community or to individuals, suggested by the locality of your district?*

A. Ten pence per day is the usual rate of wages, but there is great want of employment for all ranks of persons, artisans as well as labourers. This proceeds from want of capital, for there is a great quantity of waste land unreclaimed, usually called *rags*, at the foot of our magnificent chain of mountains, some of which have been reclaimed in Lord Glengall's estate, and turn out remarkable well. Thousands of acres could be brought in, and if any plan could be devised, by which government was enabled to make loans out of the funds in the hands of the Loan Commissioners for this purpose, it would greatly benefit the whole country; but no man will give his whole estate as security. Why not take security in lands so reclaimed? 30,000 acres could be brought in, in the course of three years, if such advances were made, the population would be employed, and the necessity of colonization would be superseded. The inhabitants are so numerous that they are eating each other up. They are perishing for want, and these lands which are capable made excellent, are waste, and must remain so. Some of these *rags* that have been reclaimed, grow good wheat. I am informed that there are upwards of 100,000 acres of these *rags*.



2. *How are females employed, and what are the daily benefits which may accrue to a family from such employment? State also the effects of different kinds of employment on the health of the poor.*
- A. Here lies the mischief. The females are totally unemployed, except during harvest and potato season. But they are so ignorant that few know how to do anything, not even to work at their needle. Where they given habits of industry and cleanliness, it would add to the comfort of their families in every way, and they would bring up their children to industry instead of to theft and wickedness of all descriptions. They are willing to work if they were taught and had the means, but they have not even materials of any kind to work with or upon.

## CONTAGION

1. *Do any customs contributing to extend febrile or other infection, at present exist among the poor? if so, can these be opposed or counteracted with any probability of success?*
- A. Not answered.
2. *Are mendicants numerous? Can you state any facts in proof of the communication of disease, by strolling or other beggars? Can you point out any causes which produce or promote mendicity?*
- A. Strolling mendicants are numerous, and the poor rarely refuse to admit them, often in whole families, and it was undoubtedly by their means that the dreadful epidemic fever was spread. We use all the means in our power to discourage this practice, and have succeeded pretty well in the town, but cannot altogether prevent it. Fever is always prevalent in this neighbourhood.
3. *Is fever now prevalent in your neighbourhood? — If so, does it spread through families? State what has been the general prevalence of fever, within your memory, among the poor.*
- A. The hospital prevents its spreading in a great measure. I have never known the town free from fever.
4. *Are persons attacked with fever speedily removed to an hospital: and are measures employed to purify the clothing and bedding of such patients, or of their families? And if this is the case, be so good as to state, particularly, these or other preventive measures. Also, if any mode of cleansing the walls and furniture of infected house has been resorted to with success?*
- A. All persons attacked with fever, are immediately removed into our hospital, both from the town and from five or six miles round it. This hospital is perfectly well conducted. All means are used to purify the clothing, bedding, etc., and clean linen is given to the patients on their admission. The hospital is constantly whitewashed. It was built by private subscription, and it is supported in a great measure by the same means, with the addition of county grants. I am proud to say that it has relieved, together with our dispensary, thousands since its establishment. Dr. Beale receives a salary of £100 yearly; an Apothecary receives £50 a year. Dr. Beale attends all the poor who are recommended, at their own houses, and the fever patients are brought immediately into the hospital. Dr. Beale is both attentive and skilful, and the whole is under the inspection and control of a Committee. This establishment was just completed as the epidemic fever broke out, it was originally intended for seventeen beds, but we have had forty-five intern patients in it a time. It is hardly ever empty, and the poor are too happy to be admitted and are most grateful to those who established it, and perfectly aware of its advantages. During one year it relieved 500 intern patients; and 1500 fever patients alone were attended to, in and out of the hospital, during that time.



5. *Have the lower classes readily concurred in the measures of prevention, which were generally recommended for adoption, during the progress of the late Epidemic Fever?*
- A. During the great prevalence of fever, the poor readily concurred in all measures taken for their relief.
6. *What means appear to you most likely to remove their prejudices, and to convince the sufferers, that cleanliness of all kinds, free admission of air and light to houses and cabins, warm and dry clothing, the avoiding excessive fatigue and night air, and the immediate separation of the sick from the healthy during the prevalence of epidemic disease, are their best and surest preservative from danger?*
- A. Not answered.

### ENDEMIC AND GENERAL DISEASES

1. *Are any other diseases prevalent in your vicinity, and from what causes do they chiefly originate?*
- A. Not answered.
2. *Does the smallpox often make its appearance? Does it prove fatal to a large proportion of those whom it seizes? Is vaccine inoculation generally and successfully practised?*
- A. Not answered.
3. *Do any manufactures, peculiarly injurious to health, exist in your neighbourhood? How do they operate, and how are their bad effects to be remedied?*
- A. None.
4. *Are spirituous liquors consumed to excess by the middle and lower classes in your neighbourhood? To what extent is malt liquor in use amongst them? Do you think that the habit of intoxication gains ground among the poor? If you can devise any practicable means of checking so serious an evil, state them in detail.*
- A. Not answered.
5. *Do any charitable societies exist in your neighbourhood for the relief of the poor during sickness, and for the encouragement of good and healthful habits? Can you suggest any mode of extending these societies, or rendering their operations more efficacious?*
- A. In answer to this, I refer to what I have already said of our dispensary and fever hospital, which is overlooked chiefly by my family, assisted by the Quakers, who are the most actively benevolent persons in this neighbourhood, and under whose care all charities are sure to do well. We have lately established a spinning school and factory, for the purpose of giving employment to the female population. I have given out two hundred wheels, and a portion of flax weekly, to each spinner, and I sell the yarn in the public market at prime cost. I get as much sale as I could wish, and it has already done much good. The females are most anxious to be admitted, and attend with great obedience to the rules of the establishment. It is of no use to give out wheels, as most of the trustees of the Linen Board do, for they are left idle three fourths of the year, for want among the poor of the means to buy flax, and also from having no markets established for the sale of yarn. I hope to be able to extend the establishment in time; but as yet I have received no aid from the Linen Board, and my whole capital, both for procuring wheels, reels, and flax, I have received by begging subscriptions. I find the women and girls grow daily more cleanly; I have no fault to find with their want of industry. I am obliged to refuse thousands



of applications for admission. Those persons who buy my yarn have given it to be woven; so that though my capital does not permit me to make linen on account of the institution, it has produced work for all weavers in the town, of whom there are now then in full time work who were before idle and penniless. I am convinced, from experience, that nothing will so much tend to meliorate the condition of the poor, as attention to the habits of the females. To teach them industry, and how to wash, work, spin and knit, is of more use than to teach them to read and write. If the Linen Board could be induced to grant small salaries of £10 or £15 a year to spinning mistresses in each county; for the poor, who fancy they know how to spin, execute this work so ill, that it is unfit for sale; and they reel it contrary to the Act of Parliament, not on reels, which they do not possess, but on two nails stuck on the wall, so that if exposed to sale it is liable to seizure. Spinning schools, if established for only three or four years, could teach so many, that the art would then be disseminated through the country. If the ladies residing in the country could be brought to attend to the poor females it would be of infinite service. With respect to industry, it is more the means than the will of the poor that are deficient.

I again take the liberty of reverting to the public wash-houses, which I am sure would be of the greatest service, and which I look forward to the hope of seeing established, through the means of your Board, and if so, I beg to bespeak your patronage for the first that may be established, which shall be attended to with the greatest zeal.

Cahir, March 12, 1821.

Your humble servant,  
E. Glengall.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. For an account of the extent of epidemics, inoculation and dispensaries in Ireland, see K.H. Connell: *The Population of Ireland, 1750-1845* (Oxford, 1950).
2. *First Report of the General Health Board* (Dublin, 1822).

#### **FOR PUBLICATION AUTUMN 1991**

### **The Diary of Mary Mathew**

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