

Women and Officialdom in Clonmel Workhouse November 1848 - November 1853

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Three layers of officialdom were involved in the day- to-day running of Clonmel and other Poor Law Unions in Ireland:

1. Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales implemented Poor Relief (Ireland) Act 1838 in Ireland. They set down the general rules. The granting of relief was subject to their direction and control. The Commissioners could not interfere in individual cases.¹

2. The Poor Law Guardians, who comprised the second layer of officialdom, possessed a degree of flexibility regarding admissions. They were wealthy local men who were levied for the upkeep of the destitute poor, and were ultimately responsible for the day-to-day maintenance and running of the workhouses in Ireland. They took in women and children as opposed to accommodating entire families. The Guardians had a vested interest in the workhouse maintaining the minimum possible number of inmates and that 'everyday life in the workhouse intermeshed with ambitious schemes for pauper removal through emigration.'² Clonmel Union was no exception to this as all references to emigration in this five year period refer to women and children only.

3. The staff such as relieving officers, to whom application for admission was made in the local area in addition to matrons, masters, porters and schoolteachers who worked inside the workhouses comprised the final layer of the structure under which the Clonmel workhouse operated. This latter group, with the exception of the Relieving Officer, had no official power, and was subject to constant reminders from Commissioners and Guardians of the need to enforce rules and regulations and to take their duties seriously.

This essay covers the years 1848 to 1853, the years of extreme poverty and distress caused by the Great Famine in Ireland. The English Poor Law was applied to Ireland in 1838 and parochial outdoor relief was replaced by a harsh and rigid centralized workhouse system. The English workhouse system was completely unsuited to Irish needs since in England it aimed to compel the able-bodied to work whereas in Ireland there was no work for those who sought it.³ There was ample food in the Clonmel area but people could not afford to buy it. The people of Clonmel were 'desperate and absolutely starving for want of employment or wages'.⁴ The causes of widespread poverty in Ireland were completely overlooked. Only individuals who were destitute through illness or misfortune were perceived as the deserving poor.⁵ The Poor Law was not equipped to deal with the famine disaster yet the government made it clear that Irish property would have to pay for Irish poverty.⁶ The country was ultimately divided into 163 Poor Law Unions each with its own workhouse financed by the levying of a poor rate. Clonmel Poor Law Union was officially formed on 25th March 1839 and covered an area of 139 square miles. Its operation was overseen by an elected Board of Guardians representing its ten electoral divisions. The

population within the union at the 1831 census had been 37,094 with the population of Clonmel itself recorded at 16,140.

There were around a million people relying on poor relief in Ireland (indoor and outdoor) in June and July 1848-1849 and this imposed an impossible burden on the finances of the unions.⁷ Under the Poor Law Ireland Act of 1838 (adapted from the English Poor Law Act of 1834), Poor Law Unions were required to apply what was known as the 'workhouse test'. The first tenet of the 1834 Act came to be known as the 'all-or-nothing' principle because the recipient either got total provision for himself and his family in the workhouse or nothing at all. The second principle was known as that of 'less eligibility'. By making conditions in the workhouse worse than the conditions of the lowest paid worker outside, a man would be forced to get work rather than commit himself and his family to the harsh conditions of life in the workhouse.⁸ On entry to the workhouse, males and females were classified and segregated and children over two were separated from their parents.

This research will focus on 'able-bodied women' as they constituted the largest adult category in the workhouses. There were at least twice as many able-bodied women as men in the workhouses of Ireland between 1851 and 1872.⁹ Legally, women and children were dependents of a husband or father. However, Irish pauper women were far removed from Victorian domestic ideology which viewed a wife as the 'angel of the household', depending on her husband for financial support and providing a caring environment in which to rear children. In stark contrast, Mary Cullen has shown that the labouring family of the period operated as an interdependent economic unit and that 'the wife's contribution was a crucial one without which the economic unit could not have survived'.¹⁰ Cullen argues that the wife regularly became the sole family breadwinner during crisis periods as she could support the entire family by begging. A wife was also capable of supporting herself and her children for several months while her husband went away to seek work.¹¹ Maria Luddy, acknowledges that women were involved in various farming tasks at this time in Ireland.¹² Women therefore had no option but to seek shelter in the workhouse for themselves and their children in times when the family economy was in crisis. Unmarried mothers also had no alternative but to become dependent on the cold comfort of the workhouse. These women were social outcasts and could not gain employment. The Poor Relief [Ireland] Act 1838 laid down that the unmarried mother was liable for the support of her illegitimate child up to the age of fifteen. The natural father had no liability for his child under this Act.¹³

In Clonmel, there were often four times as many able-bodied women as men and hundreds of children in the workhouse at any one time. The evidence from the Minute Books suggests that women entered Clonmel workhouse on a seasonal basis during particularly hard times. McLoughlin's main argument is that spouses often agreed on a short stay in the workhouse as a survival strategy during times of extreme hardship. To gain entry to the workhouse, women would proclaim themselves as 'deserted' or 'destitute' while their husbands journeyed to various parts of Ireland or England in search of work. Guardians were often fully aware of the situation but took women and children in as opposed to applying the 'workhouse test' which would have meant providing support for entire families.

Unfortunately the Admissions Register for Clonmel has not survived so there is no record of the stated reasons for entering the workhouse. However, statistics for the years 1850 to early 1853 reveal a seasonal trend consistent with McLoughlin's findings:

	Able-bodied Males	Able-bodied Females
18th of May, 1850	207	612
24th of August, 1850	230	448
21st of September, 1850	115	374
14th of December, 1850	204	653
	Able-bodied Males	Able-bodied Females
26th of February, 1852	230	805
22nd of May, 1852	160	703
14th of August, 1852	80	429
13th of September, 1852	67	382
22nd of January, 1853	177	697

This table illustrates, that there were almost four times as many able-bodied women as men in Clonmel workhouse in February of 1852. The numbers dropped considerably at harvest time and again increased dramatically by January of 1853. The number of children remained constant at between approximately 1200 up to 1359. The evidence suggests that women left their children in the workhouse while they went outside to work from time to time. The Guardians generally acted in accordance with the guidelines of the Commissioners, however, the fact that the Commissioners could not interfere in individual cases¹⁴ allowed for a degree of flexibility with regard to admissions. Mary Shea, for example, was admitted to Clonmel workhouse on November 22nd, 1852 and was discharged a week later 'her husband being able and willing to support her.'¹⁵ There was no mention of prosecution for desertion, which is perhaps an indication that the Guardians were fully aware of her situation and took her in while her husband sought work. The minutes of January 13th, 1853 reveal that some women chose to take shelter in the workhouse even though they obviously had access to money. Mary Ryan undoubtedly lied about being destitute in order to gain entry to the workhouse. She was discharged for having a box with articles belonging to the Union and also a Savings Bank Pass Book with sums that had been lodged regularly since 1835. She was placed under investigation.¹⁶ Mary Goggin appears in the punishment book in February of the same year for cursing and blaspheming. She also had 25 shillings on her person and was 'ordered to be discharged not being destitute'.¹⁷ These occurrences seem to question the widely held view that the workhouse was a place where people went as a last resort when they had absolutely no alternative.

Many Poor Law guardians regarded female paupers as a drain on the rates because they entered the workhouse more frequently and stayed for longer periods than male paupers. Emigration provided one method of reducing the number of pauper women that the Guardians were obliged to support.¹⁸ From the earliest years of the Poor Law, several of the Boards of Guardians had been eager to transport some of their paupers overseas. Assisting paupers to emigrate had a double appeal; it would decrease the number of people in the workhouse and it would give paupers the chance of a new life overseas.

During the famine years in Ireland, an acute shortage of women in the new colonies of Australia led to the inclusion of female orphans from workhouses in an existing scheme to send out as many young unmarried women as possible from Ireland and England.¹⁹ Between May 1848 and April 1850, twenty ships carrying in all 4,175 orphan girls from Irish workhouses, left Plymouth for Australia.²⁰ The only expense that the Guardians had to bear was the cost of the trip to Plymouth and the supply of a 'trousseau' consisting of six shifts, two flannel petticoats, six pairs of stockings, two pairs of shoes and two gowns, one to be of

warm material. The workhouses contributed £3 to £5 per girl, the balance of the cost being funded by the Colonial Office.²¹

Several girls from Clonmel were sent out to Australia under this scheme. In one of many examples, the names of eight girls were put forward at a meeting of April 16th, 1849:

Names of female emigrants approved to go from Clonmel Union Workhouse by next opportunity:

Bridget Farrell age 18
 Alice Crotty age 15
 Judith Crotty age 17
 Margaret Long age 19
 Mary Cummin age 17
 Catherine Ryan age 17
 Margaret Kennedy age 17
 Judith Hughes age 18

A separate group of twenty-eight girls aged between sixteen and nineteen were sent out two days after this meeting, on April 18 1849. It was noted that there were several other females in the workhouse 'eligible and willing to go' and for whom the Guardians were 'satisfied to defray the expenses of outfit etc. when sanctioned by the Commissioners'.²² It is certain that at least fifty girls between the ages of 14 and 19 were sent out to Australia from Clonmel Union under this scheme. In outlining their scheme, the Emigration Commissioners placed great emphasis on the importance of seeking suitable candidates. Australian colonists had come to resent the fact that their country had become a repository for convicts, paupers and other undesirable or unwanted individuals from Britain and Ireland.²³ In Clonmel, in December, 1849, it was deemed that Catherine Slattery, aged 17, was a suitable candidate. The young girl in question was not an orphan at all but clearly, from an official standpoint, she was viewed as a potentially permanent resident of the workhouse as her father could not provide for her as he was an 'aged and delicate man'.²⁴

Perhaps the underlying official view was that Catherine Slattery would also cease to be a burden on the rates. Once again the notion of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor prevails; Catherine Slattery was to be sent where she would gain employment as opposed to relying indefinitely on poor relief in Clonmel workhouse. Sixteen female 'orphan' emigrants, including Catherine Slattery were chosen to be sent out on the ship *Maria* in December 1849. They ranged in age from fourteen to eighteen.²⁵ The scheme was short-lived, however, as the first arrivals in Sydney from Ulster in 1848 were accused by Dr. Douglas, the Surgeon-Superintendent in charge of the girls on the journey, of being prostitutes and beggars. In spite of the lack of complaints in 1849 and 1850 and the successful placement of many of the girls, the initial bad publicity was a major factor in bringing the scheme to an end. Robins suggests that probably the main influence operating against the scheme was that the colonists had now rejected the idea that their state should continue to be built up on the unwanted produce of the workhouses and jails of Britain and Ireland.²⁶

There was also some aid available to help families to emigrate. They would often receive a supplementary sum of money or an outfit for the journey when relatives or friends had already paid the passage.²⁷ Once again, consistent with the view that women and children were likely to be long-term dependents on the Poor Law; these potential emigrants were mothers and children.

Another harsh reality of the desperate situation in Ireland at this time was the vast number of orphans and abandoned children who became dependent on the Poor Law. The minute books of Clonmel Union for August 22nd, 1850 tell of an occurrence all too common in many workhouses of Ireland at the time."

An infant child was heard crying at 11.30 p.m. Monday night by porter. He informed the Master and the door was opened. There was a child on the flags with no person in charge of it. The child was taken into the house".²⁸

During the Famine vast numbers of parents, helpless in the face of catastrophe, totally abandoned their offspring to the Poor Law system.²⁹ Children were often claimed, years later, by families who had emigrated and other children who were sent for from various parts of Ireland when parents felt they could again support them. The parents then often found themselves facing prosecution for desertion.³⁰ Dympna McLoughlin has argued that the temporary abandonment of children was another essential survival strategy that provided a means for women to enter situations or beg until they could provide for the upkeep of their children themselves.³¹ Parents could be prosecuted for abandoning children but this was rarely done. The minutes of May 31st, 1850 refer to only one such case in the five year period: This case involved a family called Keane, who originally belonged to the Dungarvan Union³² The Clonmel Guardians were obviously concerned that each Union should be financially responsible only for its own destitute poor. The minutes of March 13th, 1851 illustrate that the Guardians of Clonmel accepted the fact that they would have to provide extra accommodation for deserted children. Officials were engaged in discussions regarding the provision of a new workhouse. The Guardians were:

anxious that no time should be lost due to the great increase in the number of young persons being orphans and deserted children likely to be for a long time inmates of the workhouse. Calls for a great exertion to prepare suitable school rooms and apartments where proper classification can be attended to which is in the present circumstances very difficult.³³

Evidence from Clonmel workhouse suggests that a large number of mothers entered the workhouse with their children and saw their children regularly in spite of the fact that they were officially supposed to be separated from each other. For example, the minutes of October 25th, 1852 allude to the necessity to control the numbers of children visiting their mothers:

Colonel Phipps reported to the Board the irregularity he witnessed at the additional ward, two or three hundred children from Quay ward having been allowed to visit their mothers it was ordered that not more than 20 be allowed at a time to leave the Quay ward for that purpose. The Laundry is to be set aside on future occasions for visiting. The requisition to be previously signed by the Master.³⁴

This particular incident illustrates a conflict of viewpoint between the Guardians and staff. Throughout the minute books of Clonmel, there is evidence of a distinct lack of interest, in the rigid application of rules and regulations on the part of the workhouse staff. They worked, after all, in the same appalling conditions in which the paupers lived and were

surrounded by death and disease. The Guardians, on this occasion, were compelled to call a halt to the practice of allowing hundreds of children to visit their mothers. However, there is also a marked difference in official policy from previous years. In 1849, Catherine Ryan and Isabella Dwyer received forty-eight hours punishment (not specified) each having obtained a pass to visit their children at the additional wards.³⁵ In July, 1851 the Board had cautioned officers of the house not to grant leave to any pauper to leave the house to visit other paupers at auxiliary workhouses. Visits were confined to emergencies only.³⁶ Evidently, staff members ignored these instructions but by 1852 the Board was at least prepared to facilitate visits between mothers and their children. Perhaps the diminishing financial strain of the post-famine period contributed to a degree of leniency.

There is no evidence of such leniency regarding the laws on vagrancy in Clonmel Union however. In defiance of the various Poor Law administrative boundaries, paupers wandered the length and breadth of the country entering the nearest workhouse in times of need. Much time and effort at the meetings of the Poor Law Guardians went into deciding who would pay for the upkeep of the inmates. If a pauper came into a particular area seeking admission to the workhouse then the rate payers of that particular region would have to pay for his or her upkeep. The Guardians in Clonmel were very concerned about vagrants coming into the town. Several examples illustrate that the guardians and officers strictly adhered to the law regarding the Vagrancy Act of 1847. The minutes of a meeting on January 25th, 1852 considered the problem of vagrants entering the town:

Vagrants passing through the town might endanger the health of the inmates. There is a marked difference in a person becoming destitute within the Union and a vagrant who had illegally left the Union to which he may belong and go into another Union without any means of support and depending on casual relief on the road. In all such cases, the law enacts the punishment of confinement in jail.³⁷

Once again, the Guardians were particularly concerned about having to provide support for vagrants who did not reside within the boundaries of Clonmel Poor Law Union.

In September of the same year, Clonmel Guardians granted admission to a seventeen-year old girl and her mother because they believed that officials in Carrick-on-Suir workhouse had acted illegally by refusing them entry. The two had originally come from Limerick but had entered Carrick-on-Suir two weeks previously from nearby Portlaw. They had been in Carrick-on-Suir workhouse for two days when the Relieving Officer there sent a message instructing them to leave the workhouse. They had not been brought before the Board there and when they went to the Relieving Officer he sent them to the Bridewell on a charge of vagrancy. They were subsequently sent to Clonmel jail for one week. The girl explained that her mother was ill and they were allowed to stay one more week in jail but were finally put out. The Relieving Officer from Clonmel took charge of them and immediately gave them an order for admission. The Relieving Officer said the mother appeared to be dying. The woman did in fact die within a few hours of entering the workhouse. It was decided that:

The foregoing case is submitted for the consideration of the P.L. Commissioners. This is not the first time that paupers have been turned out of Carrick-on-Suir Union in a state of destitution. If the woman's story is correct, this family had for four years been within the Carrick-on-Suir Union and it is evident the mother was not in a state to support herself.³⁸

The mother and daughter were treated with compassion by the officials of the jail and by the Relieving Officer in Clonmel, however, they gained entry to Clonmel workhouse only because they fulfilled the official criteria for entry to the workhouse. They resided in the area and they were destitute, in other words, 'deserving' poor.

The opposite fate awaited a woman who entered the town from Fermoy in April, 1853. She had asked alms from the Relieving Officer, Mr. King who declined as she had entered the town from Fermoy that morning. He handed her over to police under instructions from the Guardians. Two weeks later the same woman came to him for a ticket to get her a night's lodging in the workhouse but he had no authority to give the ticket, knowing she had left Fermoy to support herself by begging. He handed her over to the town watchman after 8p.m. believing that he was carrying out the written instructions of the Guardians. The official viewpoint of the Guardians was that 'a woman who had a husband earning wages cannot be considered destitute merely for voluntarily leaving the Union to which she belonged and that she was acting illegally by begging contrary to the law'.³⁹ The official views regarding the laws pertaining to vagrancy were strictly adhered to in Clonmel. The woman could not gain admittance to the workhouse because she was honest about her situation. She did not reside within the boundaries of Clonmel Union and had voluntarily left another Union. The Relieving Officer could not help her because he was aware of her circumstances [her husband had some work and also she had left another Union] and he could not act contrary to the instructions of the Guardians who strictly adhered to the law regarding vagrancy. The centralized and inflexible nature of the Poor Law administration is particularly apparent in this situation.

Other officers of the workhouse found themselves as much the victims of officialdom as paupers. Pilfering of clothing and bedding was a constant problem in Clonmel workhouse. Pauper women were the main culprits as they had access to the laundry. For example, the Matron reported, in January, 1850 that:

Paupers will not hesitate to tear up and destroy even new articles and at the same time contrive that no particular person can be pointed out. Matron says that all control over female paupers has gradually (over the last three months) been taken out of her hands.⁴⁰

This incident also reveals that the women in the laundry deliberately destroyed new clothes in what appears to be a form of joint protest. As John O'Connor has pointed out, 'the fact that rules for discipline were laid down and enforced by the staff did not mean that the inmates always accepted or abided by them'.⁴¹ However, the Board ultimately felt the necessity to make the matron and master personally responsible for all missing articles unless they could prove that the deficient articles were under the immediate charge of other parties and beyond their control.⁴²

On another occasion, in February 1950, it transpired that there was a deficiency of 122 blankets in the additional wards. The ward-master had not kept a record of what was sent back to the store and the inventory was not signed on many occasions. The matron was accused of being a party to the fraud. It was decided that the master and matron were answerable for deficiencies in the number of blankets and ought to defray the expense of replacing them, in spite of the fact that they could not pin responsibility on anyone, including paupers. The Board admitted that 'it would be utterly impossible to prevent pilfering by paupers'⁴³ yet the master had to pay compensation of £10.00 to the Union, a

substantial sum. Even though the matron had initially drawn attention to the problem the official stance was that the only way to increase the efficiency of the staff was to make them pay for losses.

Conflicting official viewpoints were again in evidence when an inspection of the Morton St and Banfield's Auxilliary workhouses in 1851 revealed that the families of the master, the matron and that of the schoolmistress were residing with them. This was strictly against regulations and had not been agreed at the time of their respective appointments. They were warned that 'in the event of repetition of such an infraction in the Poor Law regulations, a sealed order will be issued for their dismissal'.⁴⁴ However, the following month the Guardians, with the approval of the Commissioners, allowed Mrs. Power, the matron, to have her youngest child (age 6) reside with her.⁴⁵ The reason for this unusual departure from official policy is not stated. There is however, ample evidence in the minute books to suggest that the Guardians were extremely pleased with the improvements in discipline and order since the appointment of Mrs. Power as matron. As a general rule, officers were mainly selected for their ability to discipline and regiment the inmates rather than for their humanitarian qualities.⁴⁶

Differing viewpoints between the Commissioners and Guardians are again apparent with regard to the appointment of a new matron for Quay St. Ward, no. 3. The Board of Guardians was prepared to allow Mrs. Sheehy to have her four month old baby reside with her. However, the Commissioners held a different view. In the minutes of the meeting of February 27 1851:

Ellen Sheehy be appointed thereto at a salary of £20.00 per annum, an apartment and rations. Her infant (4 months old) is allowed to reside with her subject to the approval of the Poor Law Commissioners.⁴⁷

However, Mrs. Sheehy was called to the board room, where a letter from the Commissioners was read to her. The letter directed the Guardians to reconsider her appointment as Matron of no. 3 Quay Ward. She stated that she would send her infant to nurse and thereby remove any obstacle to her devoting her whole time to her duties. The Board considered this satisfactory and requested the sanction of the Poor Law Commissioners to her appointment.⁴⁸ Mrs. Sheehy's appointment was finally sanctioned at a meeting on May 15th, 1851 but only after the Commissioners received a letter from the Guardians confirming that she had sent out her infant to nurse as she had agreed. Mrs. Sheehy later applied to have her eldest daughter reside with her and was refused.⁴⁹

The rigid rules and regulations of a centralized Poor Law system are again clearly evident with regard to the treatment of Mrs. Sheehy. The Commissioners adhered strictly to rules and regulations at all times. The Guardians were dealing with real people and had initially been pragmatic in intending to allow Ellen Sheehy's infant to reside with her. However, the official views of the Commissioners prevailed and they were adamant that Mrs. Sheehy would not be employed unless she sent her child out to nurse. In spite of the prevailing middle-class domestic ideology that stressed the importance of a mother's role, the official view was that Mrs. Sheehy's devotion to her duties in Quay St. Ward was more important. She was, in fact, less likely to spend time with her infant than pauper women whose children under the age of two were allowed to remain in their care.

The women of Clonmel workhouse during the years 1848 to 1853 interacted with officialdom in many different ways. The vast majority of inmates of Clonmel workhouse, as

elsewhere, were women and children. Research in recent years has shown that unmarried mothers, deserted wives and unemployed women flocked to the workhouses of Ireland in times of family crisis.

The minute books of Clonmel Union contain hundreds of letters from Commissioners to Guardians and visa versa. The Commissioners clearly applied the rigid rules and regulations of the Poor Law, whereas the Guardians had to provide the finance for the day to day running of the workhouse. All their concerns, from pilfering to assisted emigration, were financial. Clonmel Guardians were very concerned that they provided support only for those who resided within the boundaries of Clonmel Union. In this regard, the Guardians were strongly opposed to vagrancy and strictly adhered to the letter of the law. The minute books of Clonmel Union ultimately reveal a cold, harsh regime obsessed with paperwork and rules and regulations amid rare glimpses of humanity.

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⁴⁷Minutes, Clonmel Union, 27 February, 1851.

⁴⁸Minutes, Clonmel Union, 6 March, 1851.

⁴⁹Minutes, Clonmel Union, 20 November, 1851.