Poor Relief in Ireland, 1851-1914

Review Number:
1265
Publish date:
Thursday, 7 June, 2012
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ISBN:
9783034307376
Date of Publication:
2011
Price:
£50.00
Pages:
321pp.
Publisher:
Peter Lang
Place of Publication:
Bern
Reviewer:
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Mel Cousins' *Poor Relief in Ireland, 1851–1914* is an addition to the developing historiographical field of poor relief in not just Irish history writing but at an international level. The increased focus on pre-modern welfare regimes such as the poor law has, as one leading historian of German relief commented, 'become a privileged site of inquiry for historians'.(1) While much work has concentrated on German and English experiences, the Irish case also has received recent attention from scholars. This book makes an important contribution to this growing and developing international historiography, and significantly adds to Irish social history, which has traditionally been the poor sister of political history.

The Irish Poor Law is undoubtedly a rich topic for historians. Created in 1838 and inspired by the 1834 New English Poor Law, the system rapidly expanded and by the 1850s over 150 workhouses had been established. These were run by locally appointed and elected boards of guardians (poor law boards), and controlled by a central authority, initially the Poor Law Commissioners, replaced by the Local Government Board in 1872. Although the poor law and the stigmatising workhouse have been most closely associated with the horrors of the Great Irish Famine, the system remained the most prominent form of welfare provision in Ireland for much of the 19th and early 20th century. The workhouse (indoor relief), outdoor relief and medical relief, provided by both workhouse infirmaries and the dispensary system, ensured that literally hundreds of thousands of the Irish poor came into contact with the poor law on an annual basis. The study of the poor law, on which a wide variety of disparate source material survives, provides for a range of insights into issues relating to poverty, attitudes towards the poor and the development of social policy at both a local, regional and central government level.

In the introduction the author clearly outlines the aims and objectives of the work, which are to examine the

temporal transformations in indoor and outdoor relief in Ireland, explore regional variations in relief provision, concentrate on political and class struggles on poor law boards, and to outline the broader role of the poor law and the boards of guardians in local politics and communities. The book is divided into ten chapters along with an introduction and conclusion.

The first chapter provides a statistical analysis of poor relief trends in the period 1851–1914. Extensive analysis of the expenditure levels of relief in Ireland leads the author to highlight that expenditure per GDP did not increase significantly over time and in turn did not have a major role in Ireland's economic development. Also, the statistics reveal a relative stability in spending along with a significant shift towards outdoor relief as the period progressed. The second chapter examines the regional differences in poor relief trends. Cousin's identifies three regions with contrasting levels of poor relief; the religiously divided north, the peripheral and poor west, and the more prosperous south. The wealth of a region, seasonable unemployment amongst agricultural labourers and demographic structure are all highlighted as important factors in determining levels of regional relief. Furthermore, urban areas witnessed higher levels of indoor relief and lower levels of outdoor relief than their rural counterparts. The level of outdoor relief in the southern region was influenced by the importance of agricultural labourers in the region who utilised outdoor relief. In the western region the high levels of poverty and poor rateable land ensured that local property was unable to sustain high levels of relief.

The low level of relief in the northern unions was brought about by a number of reasons. Northern boards of guardians were largely Protestant and unionist in religious and political outlook in contrast to their southern nationalist and Catholic counterparts. The temptation to portray sectarian discrimination (that is, Protestant guardians refusing poorer Catholics outdoor relief) as the sole factor in these lower northern levels is tempered. The author highlights that northern unions with a large Catholic population were generally poorer and couldn't afford to grant extensive relief. A greater ethos of 'self-help' in the unionist/Protestant community, along with a desire to discourage unwanted inward migration into the urban regions, were also important factors. However, religion is not totally discounted, and it is highlighted that 'sectarian tensions' and Protestantism helped to inform self-help attitudes towards the poor (p. 59). These insights are important for a wider understanding of relief practices. In a European context, Lutheran and reformed Protestant northern European countries are viewed as having been more reliant on state relief systems; in contrast to southern Europe which provided more informal charitable relief, largely through Catholic religious authorities.(2) Paradoxically, Ireland demonstrated a contrasting experience, whereby the Catholic regions in the country granted more publically-funded relief than Protestant regions.

The third chapter examines the place of relief in supporting families. Concentrating on three cases studies of workhouses (Dublin in 1861, Ennis in 1901 and Mullingar in 1879) and utilising census returns, indoor registers and Helen Burke's earlier work, the author stresses the fact that nuclear families (both parents and children) rarely if ever entered workhouses.(3) Instead, it was 'incomplete families' (such as single parents, parentless children, etc) along with single persons that were most likely to seek indoor relief, while limitations remained on outdoor relief in many regions for much of the period. The system didn't support the family unit most common in the country, the nuclear family, and in many cases 'Irish poor law relief policy focused on providing support only where families were broken down' (p. 79).

While the first three chapters concentrate on trends in relief practices, the following six explore the political and social tensions and clashes that surrounded the poor law. In post-famine Ireland social, economic, demographic and political transformations occurred as the population contracted, the agricultural economy altered from a largely tillage to a pastoral one, and a general rise in living standards and expectations was brought about by a degree of economic prosperity. The period was also marked by heightened nationalist politics in the form of Fenianism in the 1860s and Home Rule in the 1870s. By the 1880s Irish society had become dominated by the Irish Land War, and an on-going political and agrarian agitation between Irish nationalist tenant farmers and their representatives and unionist landlords. The poor law, and in particular boards of guardians, became the focal point for political conflicts at a local level. Chapters four to seven examine the effect of these widespread transformations on the poor law, a process which the noted historian, W. L. Feingold, has previously termed as the 'politicisation' of boards of guardians in post-famine Ireland.(4)

Chapter four explores the role of politics in the era from 1864 to the outbreak of the Irish Land War in the late 1870s. During this period issues such as debates over union rating, religion and the role of outdoor relief were popular amongst emerging nationalist politicians, which demonstrated that such figures had established 'distinctive policies on poor law issues' before the establishment of the Irish Home Rule Party (p. 111). Chapters five, six and seven examine the role of the poor law during the Irish Land War, a period which witnessed the beginnings of a farmer proprietorship class as the most influential grouping in provincial Irish society, and the sidelining of Irish landlords. The politicisation of local boards of guardians during this period has received a degree of attention from Irish historians, most notably in the work of W. L. Feingold and latterly by Virginia Crossman along with this reviewer.(5)

Cousins highlights how the serious economic distress of the period challenged the primacy of the workhouse in the system and how temporary legislation was introduced which allowed outdoor relief to the able-bodied in 1880, 1881 and 1886. In turn, the numbers on outdoor relief grew greater than the number on indoor relief for the first time since the great famine. These measures, coupled with the wrestling of control of poor law boards from landlords by local nationalists, represented a significant transfer of power at a local level. However, Cousins dismisses the socially radical potential of this transformation, stating that local nationalists didn't adopt any distinctive polices on a 'left-right political spectrum' (p. 129).

Chapter six turns to non-workhouse forms of relief in the form of outdoor relief and labourers cottages. During the post-famine period outdoor relief, which was not allowed to the able-bodied and entitlement largely restricted to the impotent poor, grew extensively. A number of historians have viewed this growth as a result of the emergence of nationalists on local boards of guardians who were more willing and eager to grant such relief than their unionist landlord counterparts. However, Cousins argues that other economic factors were centrally important in determining patterns in outdoor relief. Such provision was often tied to the needs of local labour supply and the larger proportion of agricultural labourers in a poor law union, the higher the level of outdoor relief distributed. Cousins challenges the idea that outdoor relief grew in areas of high political agitation, believing that 'looking at the broader picture it is clear that outdoor relief increased most rapidly in a wide range of counties in which agitation was not very high' (p. 149). While these offer a number of new interpretations of the growth and role of outdoor relief, they could have been more substantiated by less reliance on statistics, and more extensive use of qualitative case studies for the first stage of the land war (1879–81). The statement that 'there is an almost total absence of any explicit discussion at broad level as to policy on outdoor relief (p. 158)' is problematic. Recently published research, which admittedly appeared after this monograph, demonstrates that heated political discussions concerning outdoor relief were a feature of board meetings in counties Kerry, Mayo and in Cork City during the 1880s. This wider work argues that outdoor relief was an important form of patronage for local middle-class nationalists challenging the social and political power of landlords during this period.(6) Nationalists created new terms of entitlement where political outlook (along with deservingness, respectability and need) were all factors which determined accessibility to assistance such as outdoor relief and labourers' cottages.(7)

Chapter seven continues to examine the importance of nationalist control over local poor law boards and examines whether such developments altered poor law practices. The chapter concentrates on what is often

referred to as the 'second phase' of the land war, the 'Plan of Campaign', which amounted to a renewed agrarian agitation in the form of rent strikes fought out on individual estates during the years 1886–91. Based on a combination of statistics and case studies, it is demonstrated that outdoor relief actually dropped in unions which were the focus of political and agrarian agitation. In the on-going rent battles with landlords, nationalists didn't strategically grant outdoor relief to their supporters or to evicted tenants, demonstrating that the 'nationalisation of the boards had limited impact on poor law practices' (p. 184). However, the Local Government Board did deal stringently with local boards of guardians which attempted to use poor relief for such purposes. Of the five case studies provided, the Athy and New Ross boards were suspended and replaced by government-appointed paid officials, and two others, Portumna and Loughrea, were surcharged for the illegal use of poor relief, demonstrating that the poor law was an important front in tensions between the government and local nationalists during the Plan of Campaign.

Chapter eight concentrates on the development of the poor law after the turbulent 1880s. During the 1890s the intense political activity within local boards of guardians was dissipated by the wider Parnellite schism in nationalism. The period witnessed a general rising of standards in poor law provision brought about by reforms such as the 1898 forbidding of 'pauper nursing' in workhouse infirmaries. Sporadic distress continued to affect the western seaboard, albeit at a lesser rate than earlier in the century, which was met by relief works, as opposed to the extension of outdoor relief. Significant transformations in the governance of the poor law emerged with the introduction of the 1898 Local Government Act. Along with establishing county and rural councils, the act removed ex-officio (largely landlord) guardians, ended plural voting rights based on property, and extended rating from the electoral division to the union. The government became responsible for the rates that landlords were previously liable for, in return for their loss of rights in the system. Although both these measures were previously called for by nationalists, little change in poor relief policy developed beyond the extension of the building of labourers' cottages. Evidently the poor relief measures that were in place at the start of 20th century were favoured by local nationalists and the democratisation of the system led to no major policy transformation. In 1896 women were also allowed to sit as guardians for the first time, although this didn't amount to a significant increase in female participation in local poor law politics. Also local boards witnessed a return to politics during the early 20th century with local nationalists and central government clashing over the holding of local political meetings of the United Irish League in board rooms, and the granting of contracts for provisions along political lines. However, these clashes had limited potential. Local nationalists were wary of surcharges from central government which would have led to extra taxation on the rate-paying electorate.

The second last chapter examines the place of boards of guardians and the poor law in local politics and the broader community. Building on Feingold's analysis of the social composition of poor law guardians in the 1870s and 1880s, this chapter examines the social make-up of boards by using the 1901 and 1911 census. A Catholic middle class of farmers and traders (such as shopkeepers and publicans), the most powerful socio-economic group in southern provincial Ireland, dominated many local boards. Interestingly the northern poor law boards with a Protestant majority witnessed an over-representation of Presbyterian and Methodist guardians and an under-representation of members of the Church of Ireland. Importantly, this section of the book examines the composition of urban unions in Belfast and Dublin and highlights that landlords and merchants predominated in the ranks of guardians while only Dublin witnessed some degree of labourer or trade union involvement and manufacturers didn't feature in either city. In Dublin the religious composition of urban boards was reflective of each denomination's proportion in the wider population although this was not the case in Belfast where Catholics had limited participation.

The final chapter addresses an often ignored aspect of the poor law; the eventual winding-up of the system during the Edwardian period. Although the New Liberal welfare measures of this period have received much focus, the subsequent effect on the poor law and how the workhouse system was transformed is less well understood. This chapter highlights the development of the other types of residential care including mental asylums and industrial schools. However, the numbers of 'lunatic' sick in workhouses didn't decrease significantly during this period, indicating a degree of class difference in the social composition of inmates in workhouses and asylums. The trend towards institutionalisation as a central plank in Irish welfare policy

continued and by the end of the 19th century more children were in industrial homes than workhouses. The introduction of major welfare measures, especially the 1908 Old Age Pension Act, which was extended to the pauper aged in 1909, helped to reduce the number of elderly in workhouses.

Overall this work provides a synoptical and panoramic account of the development of the Irish Poor Law system between 1851 and 1914. One of the work's major strengths is that it outlines all the major developments in the system during this period. Also, Cousins' major argument, that nationalist control of the poor law locally didn't radically alter welfare regimes, has much validity, which is particularly demonstrated in the continuation of similar policies after democratisation in 1898. However, outdoor relief was an important dynamic in local politics during the upheaval of the 1880s and especially during the first phase of the land war (1879-82), something which the work doesn't fully examine. Notwithstanding, this work represents an important addition to Irish social history, makes a significant contribution to current understandings and debates surrounding the Irish Poor Law, and will be the first port of call for many working in the general field of Irish welfare history.

Notes

1. Larry Frohman, *Poor Relief and Welfare in Germany from the Reformation to World War 1* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 1.Back to (1)
2. See Sigrun Kahl, 'The religious roots of modern poverty policy: Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed Protestant traditions compared', *European Journal of Sociology*, 46, 1, 91–126.Back to (2)
3. Helen Bruke, *The Poor Law and the People in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Littlehampton, 1987). Back to (3)
4. W. L. Feingold, *The Revolt of the Tenantry: the Transformation of Local Government in Ireland, 1872–86* (Boston, 1984).Back to (4)
5. Virginia Crossman, 'The New Ross workhouse riot of 1887: nationalism, class and the Irish Poor Laws', *Past and Present*, 179 (May 2003), 135–58; Virginia Crossman and Donnacha Sean Lucey, '"One huge abuse": The Cork Board of Guardians and the expansion of outdoor relief in post-Famine Ireland', *English Historical Review*, 126, 523 (December 2011), 1386–1407; Donnacha Sean Lucey, 'Power, politics and poor relief during the Irish Land War, 1879–82', *Irish Historical Studies*, 38, 148 (November 2011), 584–98.Back to (5)
6. Lucey, 'Power, politics and poor relief during the Irish Land War, 1879–82', *Irish Historical Studies*, 584–98; Crossman and Lucey, '"One huge abuse": the Cork Board of Guardians and the expansion of outdoor relief in post-Famine Ireland', *English Historical Review*, 1386–1407.Back to (6)
7. Virginia Crossman, *Politics, Pauperism and Power in Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Manchester, 2006).Back to (7)

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