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## Yardsticks for workhouses during the great famine

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**Yardsticks for Workhouses during the Great Famine**

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**UCD SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS  
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## YARDSTICKS FOR WORKHOUSES DURING THE GREAT FAMINE<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at a workshop on the poor law, Oxford Brookes University, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2007. I thank, without implicating, workshop participants, and Mary Daly, Peter Gray, Niall Ó Ciosáin, and Peter Solar for comments on an earlier draft, and Tim Guinnane for earlier collaborations.

## INTRODUCTION

It has been proposed by some to establish poor-laws in Ireland; but, from the wretched and degraded state of the common people, and the total want of decent pride, which in England prevents so many from having recourse to parish assistance, there is little reason to doubt, that, on the establishment of such laws, the whole of the landed property would very soon be absorbed, or the system be given up in despair.

Malthus, *Essay on Population* (2<sup>th</sup> edition)<sup>2</sup>

Poverty in Ireland was almost certainly more prevalent in 1838, when the Irish Poor Law was passed, than in 1803, when Malthus made the glum prognosis cited above. Nonetheless, during the admittedly short interval between 1838 and the Great Famine the impact of the poor law was very different from what he had predicted.

The Poor Law (Ireland) Act of 1838, closely modeled on the New Poor Law of 1834, envisaged the creation of administrative units called 'unions' centered on market towns and of a size that would be consistent with most paupers living within walking distance of a union workhouse (see Nicholls 1856; Hall & Hall 1843: III, 336-60; O'Brien 1982, 1985; Kinealy 1995: 104-7). The act delegated responsibility at the local level for union management to boards of guardians, the majority of whom were to be elected by ratepayers.<sup>3</sup> The boards were ultimately responsible to a Poor Law Commission based in Dublin. 130 unions were eventually declared. They ranged in geographical size from 38,917 acres (Dublin North) to 507,154 acres (Ballina) and in population from 18,571 (Dunfanaghy) to 178,745 (Dublin South). The Commissioners aimed to spread the work of

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<sup>2</sup> In later editions Malthus later changed 'wretched and degraded' to 'depressed', and omitted the passage about pride and parish assistance.

<sup>3</sup> The new system was the first to offer the 'strong' farming class a political voice (e.g. Grace 2000: 22-3). Later it would play a key role in the land struggle (Feingold 1984).

workhouse construction evenly throughout the country, so as not to affect building costs in any particular region unduly (Nicholls 1856: 260). By late March 1841 115 out of a total of 130 workhouses were contracted for, and built or being built (Nicholls 1856: 259).

Although the creation of workhouses proceeded more slowly in the poorer regions of Ireland, the new regime was functioning across most of the island before the impact of the potato blight began to bite.<sup>4</sup> Total poor law expenditure even in 1846 (£0.4 million) was small relative to the annual gross rental income of landlords (about £12 million), and about £60,000 of that was spent in the mainly urban unions of Cork, Belfast, and Dublin North and South. Total expenditure up to 1846 was only £1.9 million.

Far from being overwhelmed by paupers undeterred by the principle of 'less eligibility', few of the new workhouses were stretched in the early years. During the first quarter of 1844, just over fifty thousand paupers were relieved in workhouses designed to hold twice that number, while 36,381 remained on the last day of the quarter. Eighty-five of the 124 workhouses open on New Year's Day 1846 were less than half full, and the occupancy rate was eighty per cent or more in only ten of those. Moreover, paradoxically, pressure on accommodation was higher and turnover was lower in better-off unions (i.e. those with a high poor law valuation per head).<sup>5</sup> The only workhouses that were full or nearly full on at the beginning of 1846 were those in the mainly urban unions of Cork, Belfast, Dublin North and South, and Waterford. At the other end (but excluding

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<sup>4</sup> For recent analyses of the Famine see e.g. Donnelly 2002; Ó Gráda 1999; Kinealy 1994.

<sup>5</sup> 'Pressure' is defined as the number of inmates on New Year's Day 1846 as a proportion of capacity. 'Turnover' is defined as the number of admissions during 1846 divided by the number of inmates at the beginning of the year. The correlations were 0.512 (PLV per head and 'pressure') and -0.338 (PLV per head and 'turnover').

workhouses that had opened in 1845) were Ballinrobe, Bantry, Castlebar, Inishowen, and Stranorlar. In these workhouses the number of inmates ranged from 12 per cent (Ballinrobe) to 18 per cent of capacity (Stranorlar). Alternatively, excluding the five 'urban' unions and those not yet open at the end of 1844, the occupancy rate at the beginning of 1846 was only 0.45. Defining turnover as the ratio of the total number admitted during 1846 to the number in the workhouse on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1846, turnover was highest in Fermoy, Dunfanaghy, and Lowtherstown (today's Irvinestown) (ratios over 20), and lowest in Baltinglass, Naas, and Shillelagh (ratios less than 2).

Even by the end of March 1846 the workhouses still contained fewer than fifty thousand inmates. Nor were most of those admitted feckless loafers, as Malthus and his followers feared. In the first three months of 1844 three in five of them were children aged under fifteen, while the 'infirm or diseased' inmates included 1,311 cripples, 1,292 'idiots', and 706 who were blind or nearly so (Ó Gráda 1999: 51). In an age when most people married, over one-third of the adults relieved were single men and women without children.<sup>6</sup> The Halls, who, 'suddenly and unexpected', visited several workhouses in the course of their tours during the summers of 1841 and 1842, found few able-bodied paupers in them, and 'literally none of the male sex'; and 'where we noticed women capable of labour, we found that their children were invariably inmates of another ward' (Hall & Hall 1843: III, 356). Malthus and his followers had misjudged the nature of Irish poverty: before the Famine most the Irish poor 'prefer[red] the freedom of their precarious

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<sup>6</sup> The data on inmates in 1844 are taken from the *Tenth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners* (London, 1844).

trade to the dismal certainty within [workhouse] walls' (W.M. Thackeray as cited in Hickey 2002: 109).

With the intensification of the Famine, however, the workhouses were faced with awesome responsibilities not envisaged in 1838. By mid-October 1846 four workhouses were already full to capacity, and admissions continued to increase so fast that workhouses in the worst hit regions were being forced to refuse admissions by the end of the year. The peak in admissions reached at the end of February 1847 reflected a capacity and public health constraints, not a peak in the crisis. Numbers would rise again later as more accommodation was made available.

To make matters worse, from mid-1847 on poor law system bore the main brunt of public famine relief. Irish landlords in the west of Ireland, many of them already in severe financial difficulty due to years of living beyond their means, were in no position to fund the necessary relief expenditure (Eiríksson and Ó Gráda 2006). The workhouses, which were intended to alleviate poverty and mitigate mortality, witnessed one quarter or so of all famine deaths. Many could not cope, unable either to raise the funds necessary for day-to-day maintenance or prevent mortality from escalating. During the famine years the Poor Law Commissioners dismissed over thirty boards of guardians, and replaced them by paid, full-time vice-commissioners.

The geographical size of unions mattered. In the cases of Ballina and Tralee unions, in particular, the destitute living in areas far from the workhouse suffered particularly badly. The Tralee guardians warned parish wardens from Dingle electoral district against sending them any more paupers in February 1847; towards the end of the year they agreed

to the erection of a temporary workhouse in Dingle since the poor were 'perfectly unable' for the 30-40 mile journey east (NLI, Ms. 7,860?).

A key weakness of the system was the total reliance of workhouses on a system of local taxation for their upkeep. Already in October 1846 unions were rejecting applicants for the want of funds, and nearly all unions in Connacht were in financial difficulties 'as it was almost impossible to get any one to pay 1s. of any rent or tax'. The Commissioners deemed the payment of interest on funds borrowed to finance current expenditure illegal, prompting poor law commissioner Edward Twistleton to propose (in confidence) that the government pay the interest charges on any private borrowing (IUP1, p. 1, Twistleton to Gray, 26<sup>th</sup> Oct 1846). During the Famine, indebtedness was linked to poverty. The correlation between debt per head in October 1847 and average poor law valuation per head was -0.36 (n=130); in September 1848 it was -0.24. Indebtedness due to heavy outgoings and unpaid rates severely constrained the ability of the workhouses to relieve the poor during the Famine.

The sesquicentennial of the Great Famine in the mid-1990s prompted the publication of several excellent studies of individual workhouses (e.g. Ó Cathaoir 1994; Byrne 1995; Ó Canainn 1995; Murphy 1996: 60-80; MacAtasney 1997a, 1997b; Ó Murchadha 1997; Grace 2000; O'Brien 2000). In addition, the main focus of the government-funded National Famine Research Project, which had its origins in an unsuccessful attempt in the early 1990s to seek funding from the British ESRC, was on a range of poor law unions. The choice of unions was intended to be pragmatic rather than scientific, with the objective of representing as broad a range of 'outcomes' as possible.



The choice of unions depended on two criteria: the availability of documentation and geographical spread. In the end those selected were Ennistymon, Dublin North, Enniskillen, Kinsale, Parsonstown (today's Birr), Thurles, Ballina, Inishowen, and Rathdrum. The aim of the NFRP was to further the study of the Famine through local studies, rather than to focus on the management of unions *per se*. Reports on all unions except Kinsale were completed, and digitized versions of at least some of them are being made available to scholars soon.<sup>7</sup> Although the intended aggregative analysis based on the individual case studies was not done, two of the project leaders have invoked some of the case studies in their later work (e.g. Daly 2007; Ó Gráda 1999; Guinnane and Ó Gráda 2002a, 2002b; Guinnane, McCabe, and Ó Gráda 2004).

Both the individual studies listed above and those conducted under the auspices of the NFRP highlighted many instances of callous behaviour towards the famine poor. For example, Andrés Eiríksson's analysis of Parsonstown's indoor relief register for 1849 shows that nearly two-thirds of those who died in the workhouse did so between the third and sixth week after admission. This prompted the cautious suggestion from Eiríksson that 'rather than being sick on admission most inmates became ill...very soon after entering the house' (Eiríksson 1996a: Ch. 9). A similar pattern may be detected in Ennistymon (Eiríksson 1996b). By contrast Catherine Cox (1996) notes, on the basis of its registers, that the great majority of those who entered the North Dublin Union workhouse in a 'healthy' state during the Famine left it alive, implying that this workhouse was competently managed (compare Guinnane and Ó Gráda 2002b). Both internal and

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<sup>7</sup> They will soon be available on the website of the Humanities Institute of Ireland, UCD ([www.ucd.ie/hii](http://www.ucd.ie/hii)).

external evidence suggest that unions such as Enniskillen, Kilrush, and Ennistymon were very poorly managed. Such studies were conducted in isolation, however; comparative analyses of workhouses are scarce.

How to evaluate workhouse performance?<sup>8</sup> One would not impose the same criteria on a workhouse during the Famine as on a hospital or nursing home in Ireland today or even a century ago. Nor should one expect a workhouse in counties Mayo or Clare, where baseline poverty and the pressures caused by the famine were much greater, to perform as well as a workhouse in, say, counties Down or Antrim. The present paper discusses and presents some preliminary evidence on five performance measures. The first relates to the date when a workhouse opened for business, on the principle that late openings may have represented a lack of diligence or procrastination on the part of guardians. The second measure focuses on the attendance of guardians at board meetings, on the assumption that lax attendance reduced the quality of board supervision of the workhouse. The third relates to the probability of a board being dissolved by the Poor Law Commissioners for failure to discharge its functions. The fourth invokes information assembled by Sir William Wilde and published in the 1851 census 'Tables of Death' on the causes of death in the workhouses during the Great Famine. It posits a link between the quality of workhouse management and the proportion of workhouse deaths due to contagious or infectious disease. The fifth relates to union indebtedness.

## 1. *OPENING FOR BUSINESS*

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<sup>8</sup> This paper revisits a topic already broached in an earlier paper by Tim Guinnane and the present author (Guinnane and Ó Gráda 2002a).

The first workhouse to open was that in Cork city (1<sup>st</sup> March 1840), closely followed by Dublin South (April 24<sup>th</sup> 1840) and Dublin North (May 4<sup>th</sup> 1840). These three mainly urban unions piggybacked on earlier municipal provisions for poor relief. The last to open was Clifden (on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1847), preceded by Glenties (July 24<sup>th</sup> 1846) and Cahirciveen (October 17<sup>th</sup> 1846). This suggests a connection between relative peripherality and backwardness, on the one hand, and delays in opening for business, on the other. Workhouses in poorer regions were indeed slower to open, because local elites found it more difficult to raise funds and pay for the building work.

TABLE 1. WORKHOUSE OPENING DATA AND WEALTH BY PROVINCE		
Province	Average Opening Date	Average PLV per head
Leinster	9 <sup>th</sup> March 1842	£2.38
Munster	11 <sup>th</sup> November 1842	£1.52
Ulster	26 <sup>th</sup> December 1842	£1.35
Connacht	20 <sup>th</sup> July 1843	£1.11

Table 1 reports the average date of opening and average valuation per head for the four provinces. The average opening day was earliest in Leinster, the richest province; it was latest in Connacht, the poorest. The correlation across all 130 unions between poor law valuation per head (a convenient measure of relative wealth) and the date of opening was very high, -0.51. Figure 1 below plots poor law valuation per head (*AVGPLV*) against the date of opening for inmates; Figure 2 plots *AVGPLV* against the total rates received per head of population up to 1846. The amount collected per head ranged from less than £10

in Tuam, Clifden, Enniskillen, Glenties, Lowtherstown, and Milford to over £150 in Dublin South, Dunshaughlin, Cork, and Dublin North. Clearly, workhouses were quicker to open where living standards were higher and where rates had been collected abundantly. The associated regressions are reported in Table 2.

Among the laggards Tuam union was notorious: although a rate had been set in October 1842, and the workhouse declared fit for the reception of inmates in August 1842, no rates had been collected by the end of 1843. The Commissioners dissolved the Tuam board of guardians in 1845 for failing to fulfill their obligations (Nicholls 1856: 295-6, 300, 305). Up to the end of 1846 Tuam had raised less in rates per head of population than any other union. In other recalcitrant unions, the police and military were employed, with mixed success, to enforce the collection of rates.

Figures 1 and 2

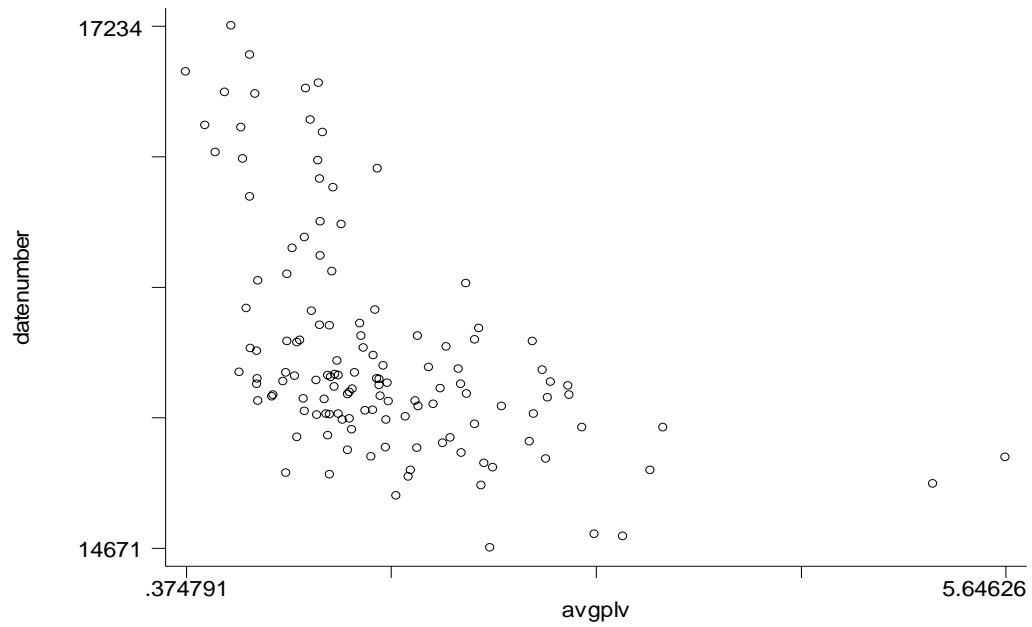
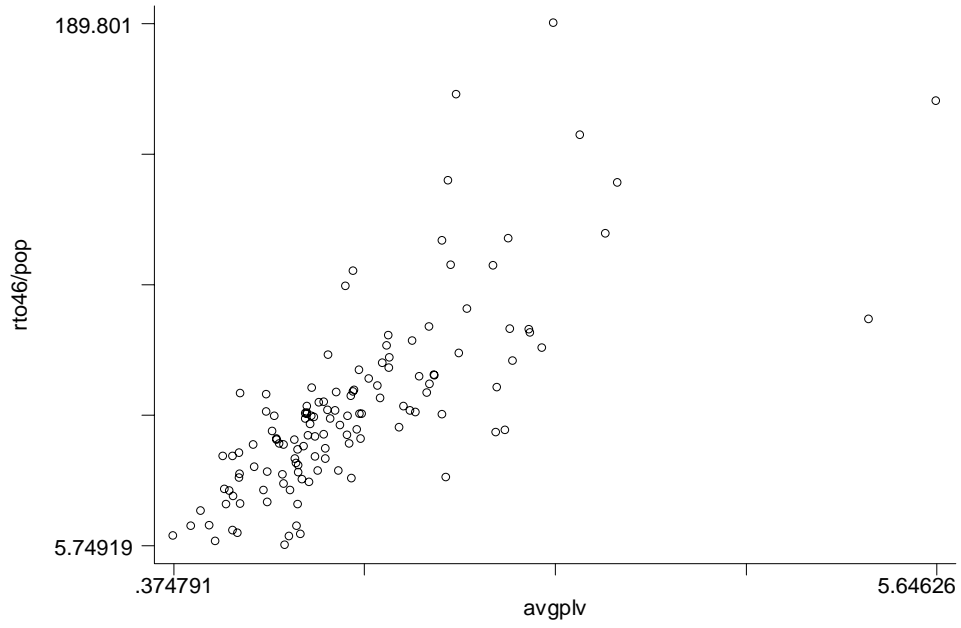


TABLE 2. WORKHOUSE OPENING DATES, RATES COLLECTED, AND INCOME			
Variable	Dependent Variable		
	<i>DATEOPEN</i>	<i>DATEOPEN</i>	<i>DATEOPEN</i>
<i>AVGPLV</i>	-347.89 (-6.70)	-916.03 (-6.27)	-398.04 (-2.62)
<i>AVGPLVSQ</i>		118.36 (4.12)	76.18 (2.93)
<i>RTO4POP</i>			-10.28 (-6.31)
Constant	16193.15 (172.31)	16730.25 (196.20)	16580.69 (118.52)
N	130	130	130
RsqAdj	0.254	0.337	0.492

Although it had been projected for ‘completion’ by July 1842, Clifden’s workhouse did not open until March 1847, when the famine was at its peak. In early November 1847, the Clifden guardians were meeting in the courthouse due to prevalence of fever in the workhouse, and the treasurer (who lived fifty miles away in Galway) had only £19 in hands. But was the relative poverty of the area served by the workhouse partly responsible for the delay in its opening, and its subsequent failure to prevent the spread of disease? A poor law inspector’s report dated Christmas Day 1847 absolved the guardians from some of the blame for the conditions facing inmates. The workhouse lacked bedding and clothing, and accommodation was insufficient, but the guardians had tendered for clothing and bedding, and the builders who had been contracted to perform repair work

were blaming the weather for delays. The poor law inspector put the lack of sanitary facilities down to the 'the idle laziness of the tradesmen', and deemed Clifden's problems 'almost inseparable from the locality in which the workhouse is placed...so distant as it is from towns where the guardians could supply themselves with materials and contractors for executing necessary works'. He added that a medical assistant who had visited the workhouse a week previously had just died of typhus, and informed the commissioners that he would 'now find it still more difficult to induce the Guardians to visit the house'.<sup>9</sup> A month later a visiting poor law inspector pleaded (in vain) with the Commissioners that 'the time has arrived when relief should be given to this Union in aid of rates' (IUP3, p. 289).

Castlederg and Lurgan, on the other hand, are examples of workhouses located in relatively poor areas, yet early to open (2<sup>nd</sup> March 1841 and 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1842, respectively). Other workhouses also opened much sooner than might be expected from their relative wealth, while some in relatively privileged areas were laggard. Table 3 reports the results of a simple exercise aimed at identifying 'early-' and 'late-opening' workhouses, after controlling for relative poverty. The opening date was first regressed on average poor law valuation per head of population (*AVGPLV*) and the same term squared (*AVGPLVSQ*). Then the differences (in days) between actual and expected opening date were ranked. The table reports the twelve 'best' and 'worst' workhouses that emerge from this exercise. Thus, for example, Castlederg workhouse in county Tyrone opened for pauper inmates over two years sooner than one might have predicted,

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.connemara.net/history/workhouse.php>

given its *AVGPLV*. At the other extreme, Castlerea in county Roscommon was three years later than predicted by the model. Six of the best performers were located in Ulster, four of the laggards in Connacht. However, the earliest openers included Boyle in Connacht, while the late-openers included three Ulster unions, Letterkenny, Lowtherstown, and Enniskillen.<sup>10</sup>

TABLE 3. 'EARLY' AND 'LATE' OPENING WORKHOUSES

<i>'Early' Openings</i>			<i>'Laggard' Openings</i>		
<i>Union</i>	<i>Date Opened</i>	<i>Residual</i>	<i>Union</i>	<i>Date Opened</i>	<i>Residual</i>
Castleberg	02/03/1841	882	Antrim	19/09/1843	-671
Lurgan	22/02/1841	708	Swinford	14/04/1846	-703
Omagh	24/08/1841	660	Mountmellick	03/01/1845	-716
Gortin	19/02/1842	653	Letterkenny	14/05/1845	-787
Kilrush	09/07/1842	600	Milford	06/04/1846	-842
Scariff	11/05/1842	577	Lowtherstown	01/10/1845	-945
Londonderry	10/11/1840	575	Enniskillen	01/12/1845	-957
Magherafelt	11/03/1842	568	Killarney	05/04/1845	-969
Cork	01/03/1840	566	Cahirciveen	17/10/1846	-1010
Skibereen	19/03/1842	555	Clifden	08/03/1847	-1064
Mohill	08/06/1842	545	Tuam	04/05/1846	-1093
Boyle	31/12/1841	498	Castlerea	30/05/1846	-1170

<sup>10</sup> In some cases there was a big delay between the workhouse being projected for 'completion' or 'declared fit for the reception of paupers' and the first admission. A case in point is Antrim where completion was planned for March 1842, eighteen months before the first pauper was admitted. Others laggards in this respect were Tralee, Roscommon, Macroom, and Athy.



## 2. ATTENDANCE AT BOARD MEETINGS

In each union a board of guardians was responsible for the administration of the poor law at local level. These boards contained a number of appointed or *ex officio* members (mostly members of the landed elite), but most guardians were elected by rate-payers<sup>11</sup>. The board members, who were unpaid, were responsible for the appointment of workhouse staff and of rate collectors, the negotiation of contracts, the setting of a poor rate, and the admission of pauper inmates. For some, board membership was a matter of *noblesse oblige* or civic duty; for others, a means of personal or political advancement. Most guardians saw their task as one of squaring the legal requirement of each union to care for the destitute with keeping the burden on the ratepayers who elected them as low as possible. One guardian complained in December 1846: 'To tell the truth, it would be better for me and the ratepayers to send the paupers of our division to Brundley's Hotel. It would be as cheap as the way we are paying for them at present' (*Tipperary Vindicator*, 30<sup>th</sup> December 1846, as cited in Grace 2000: 23). Yet at the height of the famine, workhouse penny-pinching led to many cases of serving the poor inedible and contaminated food, depriving them of proper clothing and bedding, and burying them without coffins.

While some guardians served out of a sense of duty, others were alive to the opportunities presented for clientelism and patronage. Meetings were typically weekly, although in nearly all cases the number of meetings increased as the crisis intensified. Guardians elected before the famine were faced with responsibilities they had not reckoned on. Although the day-to-day running of the workhouse was the responsibility

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<sup>11</sup> A useful source on workhouse history, which provides the numbers of *ex officio* and elected guardians in each union, is <http://www.workhouses.org.uk>.

of the workhouse master and his small staff, the ultimate responsibility for management rested with the guardians.

Strictly speaking, the attendance of all or most guardians at every meeting was not necessary. Indeed, a full attendance on a regular basis might have impeded the business of the board. Nevertheless, trends in attendance offer one guide to the attention paid by guardians to the affairs of the union. From the outset, the performance of boards was mixed. In many cases, there were complaints about lax attendance. For example, on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1847 only three members attended a board meeting in Milford; four days earlier in Mohill it was only 'only by the exertions of the master seeking for and inducing three of the Guardians to attend that a quorum could be formed' (IUP3, pp. 117, 131). In early 1848 Carrick-on-Shannon's controversial poor law inspector, Captain Wynne, insisted that the board meet daily in order to administer out-door relief, which the board refused to do, whereupon Wynne asked for the board to be dissolved. On 5<sup>th</sup> May 1848 few 'astounded' guardians attended the meeting announcing their dissolution. Most of the others were attending either a cattle show in Dublin or fairs locally (McAtasney 1997a; O'Brien 1999: 37).

A comparative analysis of workhouse attendance, controlling for the distances guardians had to travel and the relative poverty of the union, would be very useful. The relatively high survival rate of workhouse minute books makes such an exercise quite feasible. Here, however, the analysis is limited to partial evidence from a small selection of workhouses. The first, Ballinrobe, had a dismal record of attendance. A minute forwarded to Sir William Somerville on July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1847 noted seventeen scheduled meetings

with no attendance; forty attended by only 3 to 6 guardians (out of 26 elected and eight ex officio guardians); eleven where the attendance ranged between eight and thirteen; and four where it ranged between fourteen and twenty (IUP1, p. 215). This means that, excluding the meetings at which nobody attended, the average attendance was less than seven. Ballinrobe's board was dissolved on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1847.

Very different was the record in Drogheda, where the board met for the first time on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1839. Between then and 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1843 the board, consisting of twenty-five elected guardians and a small number of ex officio guardians, met 112 times. Members seem to have been allowed send other family members as substitutes. The average attendance was an impressive fifteen or so.

An analysis by Daniel Grace of the attendance at Nenagh between 31 March 1842 and 18 February 1843 reports two guardians attending 42 and 46 meetings each out of a total of 47 and, at the other extreme, two more attending four and six meetings. There was a geographical aspect to attendance. The four guardians from the three most distant divisions attended an average of 13 meetings. Some complained about frequent meetings interfering with their businesses (Grace 2000: 24).

Figure 1. Attendance at Meetings, Enniskillen May 1845 to March 1848

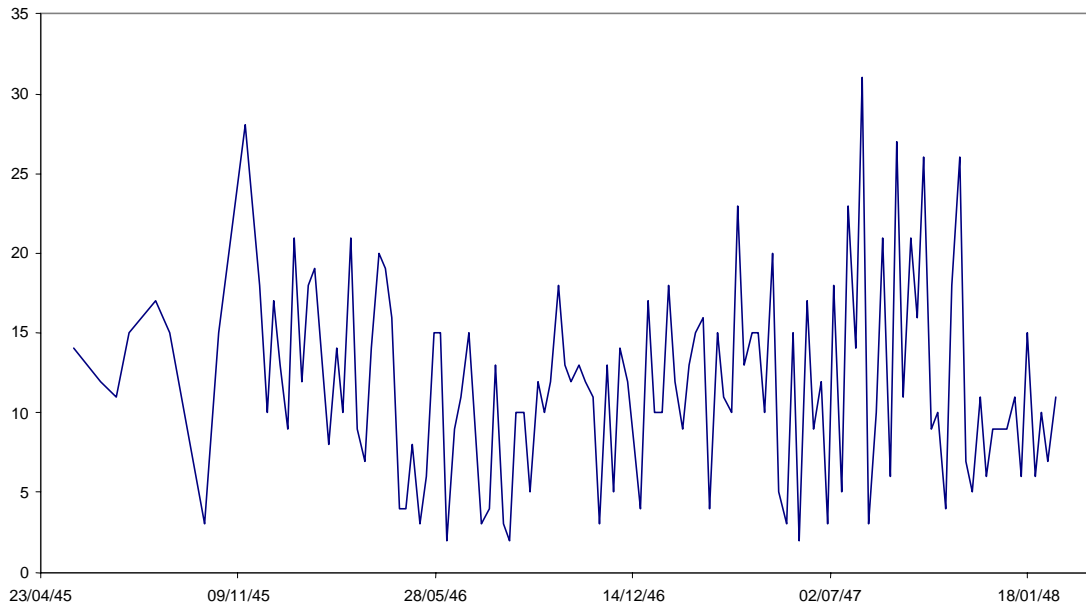
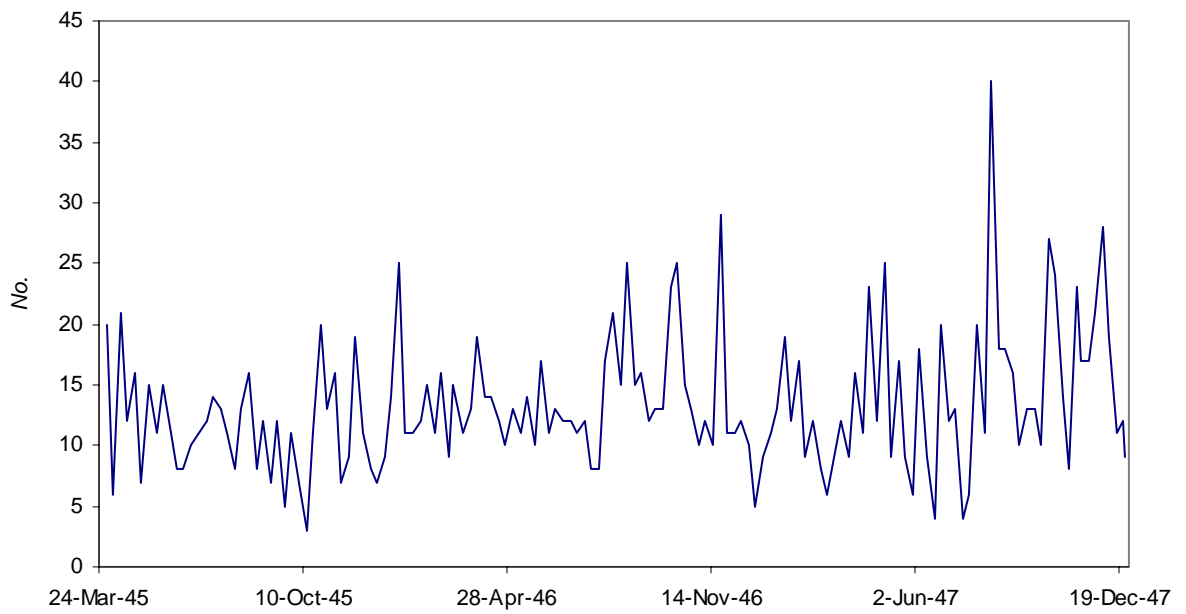


Figure 2. Attendance in Ballina, March 1845-Dec 1847



Attendance at board meetings in Enniskillen during the Famine was also poor (PRONI, BG14/A/2). The Enniskillen board consisted of forty guardians, thirty of whom were elected. Average attendance between May 1845 and March 1848, when the board was dissolved, was only twelve. The highest recorded attendance (31) was on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1847, when the main item on the agenda was a formal protest against pressure from the poor law commissioners to have what was deemed a high rate imposed on the union. The next highest attendances were on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1845, when 'tenders were opened for the supply of meal, potatoes, bread, turf etc.', and on 7<sup>th</sup> Sept 1847, when 'having been apprised that important business was to have been transacted, relative to the striking of rates and the appointment of relieving officers, there was a large number of guardians in attendance' (*Impartial Reporter*, 20<sup>th</sup> November 1845; 9<sup>th</sup> September 1847). But there were several occasions when only two, three or five guardians showed up, and when meetings had to be abandoned for want of a quorum. In the wake of their visit on 16<sup>th</sup> March 1847 the workhouse visiting committee pleaded that 'some members of the Board would occasionally visit and report upon the state of the house'. A month later one guardian proposed that at future meetings the board consider the claims of applicants for admission before moving to other business, 'so as to secure the aid of a greater number of Guardians in the more strict scrutiny which is found necessary to make to prevent imposition'.<sup>12</sup> On 1<sup>st</sup> June 1847 only three members had assembled by two o'clock, when the meeting was adjourned. No worthwhile business was conducted in August 1847 for the same reason. A meeting of the guardians in late August 1847 was cancelled because of 'the small

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<sup>12</sup> PRONI, BG14/A/1, Rough minutes of Enniskillen Board of Guardians, 17 November 1846, 26 January 1847, 16 March 1847, 31 August 1847, 28 September 1847.

attendance of Guardians in consequence of the Lough Erne Regatta'. On 25<sup>th</sup> January 1848 'no business of importance was transacted' due to the poor attendance. Only eight guardians attended the last meeting of the board prior to dissolution.

Lax attendance at board meetings was by no means confined to Enniskillen, however. In Waterford City, only two guardians could be relied on to attend regularly during the Famine. The absentees placed enormous pressure on the few who did attend. The scale of business at a board meeting attended only by eleven out of a total membership of sixty or so in December 1847 led to a decision to meet four times weekly in future. On St. Patrick's Day 1848 only one guardian showed up, two less than the quorum of three. The guardian was advised by a visiting poor law inspector to decide on applications on his own. The following day he wrote to the inspector that he had relieved six hundred paupers, a task that had kept him at his desk until eleven in the evening (Byrne 1995: 125-7).

Ballina poor law union, the most extensive in the country, is a special case. Open relatively early (by November 1842), its workhouse had operated well below capacity before the Famine, but by late 1846 it was already nearly full, and short of bedding and clothes for its inmates. Attendance in Ballina between March 1845 and December 1847 averaged thirteen. This was not a bad average, but low attendance from the remote Erris district was a problem. The five-hour journey by coach to the workhouse in Ballina helps explain the lax attendance of Erris-based guardians. One Erris guardian, Dennis Bingham, attended once in 1845 and once in 1846; three of the Reilly family of Belmullet served on the board, but between them they attended only three meetings in 1845-46. In all, the four

Erris guardians made it to Ballina only eight times in 1845 and 1846, and not once in 1847 (Ó Gráda 1999: 76, 250fn84).

According to a temporary poor law inspector, the Ballina guardians were 'principally men in the lower rank of life, whose occupations would preclude their devoting much time to public business' (IUP2, p. 389). This became an acute problem towards the end of 1847. The inspector believed that 'unless the Board meet more frequently and give more time to business, it is impossible that they can carry out the business of this large Union properly', and told the Commissioners so in December 1847. When they demanded more frequent meetings, the inspector's reaction was to ask for the appointment of paid vice-guardians as soon as possible, 'without at all questioning the good intentions of the Guardians individually (which, as regards a large majority, I have no reason to do)' (IUP2, p. 392). The Ballina board was accordingly dissolved on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1847. Within less than two months the vice-guardians had run up a bill of £1,500, 'exclusive of liabilities incurred by the former Board' (IUP3, p. 200).

### *3. DISMISSAL OF BOARDS OF GUARDIANS*

The Commissioners in Dublin dismissed boards of guardians only as a last resort. The most common grounds for dissolution were mounting debts, an inability to collect rates, refusal to strike a rate, and conditions in the workhouse (Kinealy 1994: 206-10). By the end of 1848 thirty-four boards had been dissolved. Most of those were located in the west where the famine conditions were worst. Fourteen were in either Connacht or Clare;

several others were in a cluster stretching from Lowtherstown in the north to Tullamore in the south, and another including Waterford, New Ross, Carlow, and Kilkenny. Were the problems facing these unions self-inflicted, or due to circumstances beyond their control?

Table 4 presents the results of modeling the probability of dissolution as a function of a range of variables, some truly exogenous and outside the guardians' control, some arguably within their control. *RTO46POP* is the total sum collected in rates to the end of 1846; *DR*, the death rate in the workhouse between 1841 and 1851; and *PROPSTARV*, the proportion dying of starvation-related causes. The variable packing the most powerful explanatory punch was *BALPOP*, our measure of union indebtedness<sup>13</sup>: it alone produced a pseudo- $R^2$  of 0.32. This is an unsurprising result. The addition of other variables, reflecting conditions in the union at large, increased pseudo-  $R^2$  to 0.48. In other words, the guardians who laboured under the most challenging conditions were most likely to be dissolved. Table 5 lists those unions linked to the ten biggest positive and negative residuals. These are interpreted loosely as, respectively, unions administered by boards that were dissolved but should not have been, and boards which were not dissolved, but should have.

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<sup>13</sup> *BALPOP* is defined as the average of net indebtedness in the months of October and December 1847, and March and September 1848.



TABLE 4. MODELLING THE DISSOLUTION OF BOARDS	
Variable	Coefficients and t-values
<i>SOUP</i>	1.704 (1.49)
<i>BALPOP</i>	6.825 (3.40)
<i>AVGPLV</i>	0.696 (2.29)
<i>DR</i>	23.23 (2.00)
<i>AREA</i>	1.89e-06 (0.78)
<i>RTO46POP</i>	-0.025 (-2.15)
<i>PROPDDF</i>	1.295 (1.16)
<i>PROPSTARV</i>	3.247 (1.37)
<i>CONSTANT</i>	-2.977 (-3.93)
N	119
R-sq (robust)	0.495
Prob >chi2	0.0000

TABLE 5. OUTLIERS (based on above)		
Rank	<i>Dissolved but should not have been</i>	<i>Should have been dissolved but were not</i>
1	Trim	Killarney
2	Tipp	Sligo
3	Cavan	Swinford
4	Lowtherstown	Mullingar
5	Granard	Nenagh
6	Cootehill	Parsonstown
7	Tullamore	Kells
8	Kilkenny	Fermoy
9	New Ross	Mountmellick
10	Kanturk	Kilmallock
11	Longford	Carrick-on-Suir
12	Thurles	Tralee

#### 4. CAUSES OF DEATH IN THE WORKHOUSE

As noted earlier, a significant proportion of famine deaths were recorded in the workhouses. This is only partly because many came to the workhouse in a dying state. As noted earlier, in some cases the lag between entry and death suggests that conditions in the workhouse were responsible for many deaths. The workhouses' reputation in turn probably deterred some from entering them (Murphy 1996: 64). Others arrived healthy, but succumbed to some infectious disease contracted in the workhouse. This suggests another yardstick of workhouse performance: the proportion of deaths in workhouses due to infectious diseases.

William Wilde compiled these data for his analysis of mortality in the 1851 census. Unlike the other data in the 'Tables of Death', their coverage is relatively complete. Scholars have not used them much so far (Mokyr and Ó Gráda 2002). True, detailed data by cause of death for nine unions are lacking, and the data for another eight at least are of dubious quality. Another shortcoming is that Wilde's disaggregated workhouse data refer to the 1841-51 period as a whole, rather than the famine period. These shortcomings are unlikely to distort the analysis of the data much, however.<sup>14</sup>

The mortality from contagious diseases also has an exogenous component: it was easier for a workhouse in, say, counties Down or Dublin to control mortality from infectious disease than one in Clare or Galway. The correlation between *AVGPLV* and *PROPEPID* (the proportion of workhouse deaths due to 'zymotic or epidemic, endemic and contagious diseases') was about -0.26. 'Zymotic or epidemic, endemic and contagious

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<sup>14</sup> Table II of Wilde's 'Tables of Death' records an additional 58,059 deaths in permanent and temporary fever hospitals, mostly from 'fever' in 1847-49.

diseases' were responsible for high proportions of all deaths in most unions in Connacht, Clare, and Kerry. They also exacted heavy tolls in Donegal and Ballyshannon unions and, more surprisingly, Bailieborough and Oldcastle.

The regression reported below in Table 6 models *PROPEPID* as a function of the degree of indebtedness in 1847-48 per head of population (*BALPOP*), the death rate in 1841-51 (*DR*), poor law valuation per head (*AVGPLV*), and the proportion of the population on free soup rations on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1847 (*SOUP*). The gaps between predicted and actual values of *PROPEPID* are then used to identify 'outlier' unions whose record was better or worse than expected. The top half of Table 7 reports those workhouses with the highest and lowest shares of death due to epidemic diseases. The bottom half lists those that performed 'best' and 'worst' after controlling for background factors. Note that the sharp differences between the top and bottom panels. The poor record of workhouses like Bantry or Castlebar is partly accounted for by their extreme poverty; it is the high incidence deaths from epidemic disease in workhouses in relatively prosperous areas like Oldcastle or Dunshaughlin that is most striking in this respect.

Also of interest are workhouses with high proportions of deaths from three causes linked directly to malnutrition: marasmus, dropsy, and outright starvation (Table 8). Marasmus, listed as the cause of 16,288 workhouse deaths, is an often fatal form of protein malnutrition most likely to strike children; its symptoms of dry, loose skin, hair loss, and voracious hunger are unambiguous. Marasmus often leads to dehydration and infection. Dropsy, responsible for 6,530 deaths, is an obsolete term for hunger edema. The census recorded only 328 deaths from starvation in workhouses. In over half of workhouses (77),

no deaths from outright starvation were recorded, and only a single death was recorded in a further fourteen. Well over half the deaths from starvation were recorded in four unions: Enniscorthy (55), Bandon (48), Parsonstown (41), and Listowel (38). Clearly, these data are as much a function of how deaths were labeled by the responsible medical officer as any genuine difference in workhouse conditions. However, deaths from marasmus and dropsy are good proxies for starvation deaths. Note that the high proportions of deaths from starvation-linked conditions were outside the worst-hit areas. Whether these deaths were due to poor workhouse fare or the starving condition of inmates on admission remains unclear.

TABLE 6. ACCOUNTING FOR THE VARIATION IN THE PROPORTION OF D-D-F DEATHS		
Variable	Coefficient	t
<i>AVGPLV</i>	-0.048	-2.08
<i>BALPOP</i>	0.278	1.98
<i>SOUP</i>	0.246	2.96
<i>CONST</i>	0.398	7.67
N	119	
R-squared (robust)	0.312	
Prob > F	0.0000	

TABLE 7. UNIONS WITH HIGHEST AND LOWEST PERCENTAGES OF DEATHS FROM INFECTIOUS DISEASES			
Highest 12		Lowest 12	
Castlebar	0.80916	Navan	0.200717
Bantry	0.806285	Dungannon	0.192584
Ballinrobe	0.784384	Lismore	0.190476
Roscommon	0.758871	Glenties	0.188679
Enniskillen	0.75049	Downpatrick	0.182232
Clifden	0.725707	Dublin North	0.176267
Westport	0.706576	Celbridge	0.153719
Manorhamilton	0.692775	Cashel	0.141879
Ballyshannon	0.681424	Newry	0.135052
Galway	0.678788	Lisburn	0.130628
Carrickonshannon	0.667413	Kilkenny	0.126214
Monaghan	0.661765	Midleton	0.108747
'Worst' 12		'Best' 12	
Enniskillen	0.331696	Navan	-0.16858
Dunshaughlin	0.312781	Dungannon	-0.18709
Monaghan	0.302287	Lismore	-0.19523
Manorhamilton	0.298517	Newcastlewest	-0.19961
Ballyshannon	0.294839	Boyle	-0.20127
Bantry	0.261465	Lisburn	-0.20653
Skibbereen	0.239207	Newry	-0.22279
Carrickonshannon	0.234909	Midleton	-0.2283
Tipperary	0.222594	Kanturk	-0.24054
Roscommon	0.2144	Kilkenny	-0.28678
Oldcastle	0.205312	Glenties	-0.30649
Ballinrobe	0.203278	Cashel	-0.3189
The unions excluded for lack of reliable data are Athlone, Ballymena, Callan, Carlow, Castlereagh, Dungarvan, Kilrush, Kinsale, Mohill, Scariff, and Waterford			

TABLE 8. WORKHOUSES WITH THE HIGHEST PROPORTIONS OF DEATHS FROM STARVATION, MARASMUS, AND DROPSY	
Union	% of total
Dunfanaghy	31.8
Dundalk	31.6
Parsonstown	28.9
New Ross	27.8
Newtownards	24.4
Granard	22.7
Mullingar	21.9
Tullamore	20.5
Cork	20.2
Gort	19.3

Table 9, which focuses on Enniskillen poor law union, compares like with like. It uses the neighbouring workhouses of Clogher, Lowtherstown, and Lisnaskea, situated in unions with a comparable poor law valuation per head. On this reckoning, the Enniskillen guardians performed poorly. Adding the percentages dying of diarrhea, dysentery, and fever (*DDF*) to those dying from marasmus, dropsy, and starvation (*MDS*) places Enniskillen in a very poor light compared to its three neighbours. In Clogher the percentages succumbing to starvation-linked diseases was also high, but the proportions dying from *DDF* were much lower. In Lisnaskea the proportions dying from *DDF* was almost as high as in Enniskillen, but the share of *MDS* was modest.

## 5. UNION INDEBTEDNESS

As noted earlier, the unions that bore the brunt of the crisis were also most likely to be those constrained by debt. Indebtedness was linked to poverty. The correlation between debt per head in October 1847 and average poor law per head was -0.36; in September 1848 it was -0.24. The associated elasticities, 1.6 and 0.9, respectively, imply that the effect was 'big'. Modelling union indebtedness in 1847-48 (*BALPOP*) as a function of factors exogenous to union management, *AVGPLV*, *SOUP*, *PROPEPD*, and *PROPSTARV* produced the result reported in Table 9. The signs of all coefficients are 'right', and the explanatory power of the regression considerable. Table 10 then reports the results of using the difference between the actual and predicted values of *BALPOP* from [2] to identify unions that performed 'better' and 'worse' than expected.

TABLE 10. MODELLING UNION INDEBTEDNESS	
Variable	Coefficients and t-statistics
<i>SOUP</i>	0.230 (3.38)
<i>PROPDDF</i>	0.164 (2.12)
<i>PROPSTARV</i>	0.186 (1.29)
<i>DATEOPEN</i>	0.000033 (1.90)
<i>CONST</i>	0.592 (2.28)
N	119
R-squared (robust)	0.316
Prob > F	0.0000

TABLE 11. 'Highest' and 'Worst' Debtor Unions			
'HIGHEST'		'LOWEST'	
<i>Union</i>	<i>BALPOP</i>	<i>Union</i>	<i>BALPOP</i>
Gort	-0.45876	Monaghan	0.076611
Galway	-0.40057	Ballycastle	0.0804
Castlebar	-0.36202	Rathkeale	0.083463
Bantry	-0.34124	Trim	0.088489
Newcastlewest	-0.32675	Ballinasloe	0.109456
Roscommon	-0.29362	Wexford	0.116047
Carrick-on-Shannon	-0.27278	Naas	0.124244
Tuam	-0.26345	Bandon	0.132845
Kenmare	-0.2609	Strabane	0.145237
Clifden	-0.24219	Clonmel	0.171105
Ennistymon	-0.23939	Midleton	0.219679
Navan	-0.21894	Mallow	0.285042
'BEST'		'WORST'	
<i>Union</i>	<i>Residual</i>	<i>Union</i>	<i>Residual</i>
Mallow	-0.37174	Shillelagh	0.13052
Midleton	-0.238001	Castleblaney	0.13511
Clonmel	-0.206768	Castlebar	0.14516
Rathkeale	-0.191433	Carrickonshannon	0.14881
Macroom	-0.191161	Abbeyleix	0.15119
Ballinasloe	-0.174913	Cashel	0.15539
Bandon	-0.167435	Kilkenny	0.16257
Dunfanaghy	-0.166408	Bantry	0.17903
Monaghan	-0.149202	Newcastlewest	0.20301
Wexford	-0.141243	Navan	0.21171
Strabane	-0.135721	Galway	0.21587
Naas	-0.132111	Gort	0.24584

## 6. CONCLUSION

The decision by Lord John Russell's administration to force famine relief on to the poor law, without cross-subsidizing the poorer unions, was a disastrous one (Donnelly 2002: 103-6). It meant that workhouses could not provide a safe haven for the destitute. Conditions in many workhouses, in turn, were such that thousands chose to die outside



them rather than submit to the risks and the hardships of indoor relief. The stigma that attached to the regime ever after speaks volumes (Ó Gráda 2006: ch. 11). This is the greatest indictment of the workhouse system. At the same time, clearly there was room for human action at the local level. Local case studies point to unions that were conscientiously run, even against great odds, and to others which were subject to neglect. However, the endogeneity of human agency in the circumstances of the 1840s is also clear.

The goal of this paper has been to propose different ways in which workhouse performance might be evaluated, due allowance being made for background conditions. The correlations between performances as measured by four of our criteria (see below) are all statistically significant, though low enough to suggest that a judgment on the basis of any single criterion may be misleading. Table 13 accordingly lists the twelve worst performers by three criteria. Six unions (Castlebar, Bantry, Galway, Enniskillen, Clifden, and Carrick-on-Shannon) appear at least twice, and this is taken as tentative evidence for poor management. Further work along these lines would refine and, very likely, amend these results.

	<i>DATEOPEN</i>	<i>DISSOLVED</i>	<i>BALPOP47</i>	<i>PROPEPID</i>
<i>DATEOPEN</i>	1.000			
<i>DISSOLVED</i>	0.322	1.000		
<i>BALPOP47</i>	0.325	0.579	1.000	
<i>PROPEPID</i>	0.331	0.423	0.419	1.000

TABLE 13. WORST-PERFORMING BY THREE YARDSTICKS		
OPENING DATE	DDF DEATHS	DEBT
Castlerea	<i>Castlebar</i>	Gort
Tuam	<i>Bantry</i>	<i>Galway</i>
<i>Clifden</i>	Ballinrobe	Navan
Cahirciveen	Roscommon	Newcastlewest
Killarney	<i>Enniskillen</i>	<i>Bantry</i>
<i>Enniskillen</i>	<i>Clifden</i>	Kilkenny
Lowtherstown	Westport	Cashel
Milford	Manorhamilton	Abbeyleix
Letterkenny	Ballyshannon	<i>Carrick-on-shannon</i>
Mountmellick	<i>Galway</i>	<i>Castlebar</i>
Swinford	<i>Carrick-on-shannon</i>	Castleblaney
Antrim	Monaghan	Shillelagh

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TABLE 9. CAUSES OF DEATH IN ENNISKILLEN AND NEIGHBOURING WORKHOUSES

Cause of Death	<i>ENNISKILLEN</i>		<i>LISNASKEA</i>		<i>LOWTHERSTOWN</i>		<i>CLOGHER</i>	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Dysentery	138	114	164	145	77	64	25	34
Diarrhoea	207	156	6	7	0	0	30	15
Fever	240	276	84	105	112	114	50	59
Measles	69	58	3	3	56	39	1	3
Smallpox	42	37	1	0	7	14	2	8
Marasmus	68	59	11	11	0	2	23	17
Dropsy	55	38	16	3	2	5	19	11
Starvation								
Deaths from Known Causes	1017	979	485	443	417	380	325	312
[1] Deaths from Diarrhoea-Dysentery-Fever (%)	57.5	55.8	52.4	58.0	45.3	46.8	32.3	34.6
[2] Deaths from Marasmus-Dropsy-Starvation (%)	12.1	9.9	5.8	3.2	0.5	1.8	12.9	9.0
[3] [1]+[2]	67.6	65.7	58.2	61.2	45.8	48.6	45.2	43.6
Poor Law Valuation (£)	96,108		46,919		43,994		42,278	
Population	81,534		37,920		34,963		39,801	
PLV per head (£)	1.18		1.24		1.26		1.06	