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## Agency and famine relief: Enniskillen workhouse during the great irish famine

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**Agency and Famine Relief: Enniskillen Workhouse during  
the Great Irish Famine**

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AGENCY AND FAMINE RELIEF:  
ENNISKILLEN WORKHOUSE DURING THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Much of the human toll exacted by famines can be explained in terms of baseline living standards and the relative severity of the harvest shortfall in question. Both time-series and cross section evidence confirms the link between pre-famine poverty and food availability, on the one hand, and excess mortality, on the other. But the extent and character of public action matters too. In the case of major famines the extent of relief is endogenous: the severity of the crisis reduces the funds available and the effectiveness of institutional support. In the case of local famines, however, there is an exogenous aspect to relief. The conditionality of relief, the speed with which decisions are made, and the quality of the bureaucracy may make a difference.

The toll of the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s in terms of lives lost is usually put at around one million. At least one in five of these deaths occurred inside one of the 130 workhouses established in the wake of the Irish Poor Law Act of 1838. Though the poor law was not designed with a catastrophe on the scale of the famine in mind, it would be one of the main vehicles for relieving the poor throughout the crisis. At the outset it shared this responsibility with massive public works schemes and publicly funded soup kitchens, but from the summer of 1847 the poor law would bear the brunt of the crisis alone. From then on, the British Treasury acted as if the crisis was a purely 'local' one, capable of resolution through a combination of local taxation and local charity.

As in England the poor law divided Ireland into 'unions'. Each union was responsible for financing and providing relief to the poor within its jurisdiction. Though relief provision was a local matter, officially appointed poor law commissioners sought to

enforce a reasonably uniform welfare regime throughout the country, always with the principle of 'less eligibility' in mind. At first the Irish poor law was administered from London, but from August 1847 Ireland had its own poor law commissioners, based in Dublin's Custom House. Each union was the responsibility of a board of guardians. The board included both *ex officio* (mainly landowners and magistrates) and elected guardians. The latter were elected by the union's ratepayers, i.e. households holding landed or house property with a valuation of £4 or above. The board of guardians, which normally met in the workhouse boardroom once a week, was responsible for appointing and discharging the workhouse staff and the rate collectors, vetting contracts, admitting new inmates, and generally carrying out the instructions of the poor law commissioners.

In a handful of urban areas previously existing houses of industry were incorporated into the new poor law regime. Most workhouses had to be constructed from scratch, however. Christine Kinealy (1994: 25) deems 'the speed with which the country was divided, guardians elected, and the workhouses built and opened' impressive. This is correct, but the opening dates varied considerably across the country. Ninety-two workhouses were admitting paupers by the end of 1842, but five of Connacht's eighteen workhouses and two of Munster's thirty-five did not open their doors until after the first attack of potato blight in the summer of 1845. By and large, as Tables 1 and 2 show, the richer the union the earlier the opening; the stragglers tended to be in smaller unions in the remote west.

Though the onset of the Great Famine is sometimes dated from the first attack of potato blight or of *phythophtera infestans* in the summer of 1845, the Irish workhouse

system still housed fewer than fifty thousand paupers, or 0.6 per cent of the entire population, at the end of March 1846. The very young and the elderly were over-represented. The inmates also included many deserted wives or single mothers, as well as a contingent of able-bodied men, which fluctuated more with the seasons and the state of the labour market.

The number of workhouse inmates rose rapidly from the autumn of 1846, when the potato blight attacked for a second time. By mid-October 1846 four workhouses were already full, and three months later the workhouses held nearly one hundred thousand people. By the end of 1846 three in five workhouses already contained more inmates than they had accommodation for, and many were turning away would-be inmates (Ó Gráda 1999: 50-2). Of those still with spare capacity, a third or so were in less affected areas in the northeast and east. Ominously, however, several more were located in areas already threatened with disaster, but lacking the resources and the political will to cope (good examples are the workhouses of Ballina, Ballinrobe, Ennistymon, Gort, Kilrush, Swinford, and Westport).

The historiography of the Irish workhouse regime is a negative one, and understandably so. The stigma attached to the 'poorhouse' for as long as it lasted dates from the famine period (Ó Gráda 2001). Tales of mismanagement, cruelty, venality, and corruption – some doubtless apocryphal, many well documented – abound (e.g. Eiriksson 1996; Ó Murchadha 1996; McAtasney 1997). Judging by the lack of favourable mentions, well-managed unions were the exception (see however Moane 2001; Foley 1986).

Evaluating the management of union workhouses is no easy matter, however.

The constraints and the context facing agents are important. Two recent papers by two of the present authors (Guinnane and Ó Gráda 2002a; 2002b) address the issue of yardsticks for competent workhouse management. The first of these offers a comparative perspective, defining poorly run unions by their outlier status in a model predicting deaths in a particular union using a range of co-variates. It offers examples of unions that under- and over-performed, after controlling for the economic and locational conditions that faced them. The second is a case study of one well-documented urban workhouse, that of the North Dublin Union. This found that most of the deaths there were due to factors outside the guardians' control.<sup>1</sup>

This paper offers a case study of Enniskillen Poor Law Union, one of the very few other workhouses whose admission registers and minute books have survived intact for the famine period.<sup>2</sup> The minute books, combined with regular reports in Enniskillen's two newspapers, the *Impartial Reporter* and the *Enniskillen Chronicle*, offer a vivid perspective on the attitudes of the local ruling class during crisis (compare Vincent 1992), while the admissions records provide the raw material for a more statistical focus on workhouse famine victims. Part 2 below describes the local context. Part 3 describes how the union and the workhouse were managed. Part 4 offers a profile of the workhouse inmates based on the admissions registers. Part 5 is an analysis of survival and death in the workhouse. Part 6 concludes.

## 2. ENNISKILLEN UNION IN CONTEXT:

The boundaries of Enniskillen union were announced on 20 August 1840.<sup>3</sup> Its

213,961 statute acres made it thirteenth out of 130 unions in terms of size and its population of 81,534 twenty-sixth in terms of numbers. The union consisted of good land around the county town of Enniskillen and poor land in its periphery. Enniskillen (with a population of 5,686 in 1841) was the only town of any size; the union also included the villages of Tempo (422), Ballinamallard (376), Derrygonnelly (265), and Lisbellaw (260). The union contained part of county Cavan and a corner of county Tyrone.

On the eve of the famine farming was the main industry in the Enniskillen Poor Law Union. Well into the nineteenth century, however, linen spinning and weaving had still been important in parts of Fermanagh. In the baronies of Knockninny, Coole, and Magherastephana in 1821 'trades, manufactures, and handicraft' had been provided well over half of all employment. By contrast in Lurg and Magheraboy baronies in the northwest of the county their employment shares in the same year were only 17 and 30 per cent. However, linen sales were small in the mid-1830s, smaller than in Donegal and a fraction of sales in other Ulster counties. The county still contained over twenty one thousand spinners in 1841 but the number of weavers was down to a few thousand. Most of these workers were probably living in the area that would comprise Enniskillen union. The decline of the linen industry in this area is reflected in the fate of Enniskillen's linen hall, built in the 1830s, which never fulfilled its intended function.

In the early 1830s the travel writer Henry Inglis claimed that Fermanagh landholders were relatively well off (Inglis 1835). And, despite the pressures on the linen industry, the Poor Inquiry implied little change or mild improvement in the living standards of the poor since 1815. Pauperism was reportedly limited to the



neighbourhood of the county town of Enniskillen. Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary* (1837: vol. 1, 606) described the town in the mid-1830s as 'remarkable for its respectable and thriving appearance', and listed the 'numerous' residences of the nobility and the gentry in the town's neighbourhood, many of whom would soon be represented on the Enniskillen board of guardians. According to the 1841 census, most families in the town resided in second-class accommodation, and 71 per cent of its males over five and 57 per cent of its females claimed some literacy. Literacy rates in the rest of the county were somewhat lower (see Table 2). Yet Fermanagh was one of Ireland's poorer counties. On the eve of the Great Famine Enniskillen Poor Law Union was 96<sup>th</sup> out of 130 in terms of poor law valuation per head of population. In terms of literacy the county ranked considerably higher, however; in 1841 39.1 per cent of its males aged five years and above, and 16.1 percent of females aged five and above, declared that they could read and write. This can be compared to percentages of 22.5 and 7.9 for the province of Connacht as a whole, 32.7 and 14.6 for the province of Munster, and 34.0 and 15.5 for Ireland as a whole.

About half of the Union's population was Roman Catholic. The rest were overwhelmingly members of the Established Church. There were hardly any Presbyterians: indeed in October 1846 one guardian (Mr. Hall) questioned the wisdom of paying a chaplain for 'half a dozen of a particular persuasion' (*EC*, 22 October 1846; *IR*, 1 October 1846; compare Miller 1999). Sectarian tensions were endemic in the area but they don't seem to have affected the business of the union.

Enniskillen union originally consisted of twenty electoral districts. Excluding Tempo, for which some of the necessary information is lacking, the correlations between

population change during the 'famine decade' (1841-51) and poor law valuation per capita (-0.564), population change and admissions per head of population (-0.655), and population decline and the proportion of small farms (-0.191), were all as might be expected. However, the strong positive correlation between poor law valuation per head and the admissions rate (+0.822) is more surprising.

The background to the famine in Enniskillen and Fermanagh is described in Livingstone (1969); Cunningham (1997); McAtamney (1994); McCabe (1996). The severe impact of the famine on is reflected in the decline in its population from 156,481 to 116,047 (or 25.8 per cent) between 1841 and 1851. The decline was considerably more than in the province of Ulster (15.7 per cent) or in Ireland as a whole (19.9 per cent). As Table 2 shows, the impact across the county was uneven: within Enniskillen poor law union the worst affected electoral division of Rahalton lost 39.4 per cent of its population during the decade while Glen, the least affected, lost only 13 per cent.

### 3. UNION MANAGEMENT:

Both the local press and the board minutes furnish evidence or at least broad hints of the venality and meanness of guardians. Suspicions that guardians were given preference in the bidding for contracts for food and fuel were widespread (see *IR*, Sept 1847 to February 1848). Symptomatic of the priorities of the Earl of Enniskillen, chairman of the board, was that the first item up for discussion at a meeting in September 1846 was his complaint that the valuation of one of his own townlands was too high (*EC*, 1 Oct. 1846). Symptomatic too was the reluctance of the guardians to

accept the Commissioners' case that eleven relieving officers would suffice to oversee outdoor relief, rather than the twenty (i.e. one per division) initially sought by the guardians. Appointing relieving officers brought patronage. On the other hand in April-May 1847 some guardians want paupers to be buried without a coffin. One guardian (Hall) deemed £600 a year 'a great sum to be paying for coffins' (*EC*, 29 April, 6 May). Also typical was the decision of the guardians in August 1846 to reduce the number of meals daily from three to two, in order to save about 3d daily per inmate. The *Fermanagh Chronicle* noted that some guardians were unhappy at the long gap between dinner (3 p.m.) and the next meal at 10 a.m. the following day, but the *Impartial Reporter* (27 August) agreed with this economy measure, and trusted that the guardians 'will not permit themselves to be wheedled into again permitting [supper] by any assistant commissioner'.

The physical state of the workhouse and the prevalence of fever therein were also repeatedly commented on in the press. In mid-November 1846 the visiting committee could not 'too strongly animadvert on the general state of filth and dirt of the poor house of this union, which must eventually result in fever and other diseases'. By late January 1847 'sickness in general and fever in particular [were] rapidly increasing'. In early February, in response to a plea from the assistant poor law commissioner Mr. Otway not to make 'a charnel house' out of the workhouse by admitting diseased patients, medical officer George Nixon replied that 'no portion of the house was free from disease except, perhaps, the board room'. Nixon put this state of affairs down to want of clothing and want of cleanliness. 'My reasons for being so urgent are first that every officer with one or two exceptions have been already more or less affected with fever some of them more than once.' The workhouse was a health hazard right through the famine. In April 1847

Nixon reported (BGM, BG14/A/2):

The sewers were inadequate and flooded the laundry ward. The overflowing cesspool was causing disease...[Because] the drying room had been converted into a nursery...[t]here was no means of drying the straw used by those who slept on the floor. The interior of the workhouse was not whitewashed...there was no ventilation. There was not enough clothes...meals were irregular and inadequate. A new fever hospital was needed as 100 patients lay on thirty bedsteads in Hall's Lane. Water supplies were hopeless. In the workhouse there were only 69 beds, the remainder of the inmates lying on the floor...there were only two nurses for 312 patients.

Such was the situation on 9 February 1847 that the guardians met in the town hall rather than in the workhouse boardroom. For several weeks thereafter they met in the town hall, in the market house, or in the linen hall, for fear of contracting fever. On 11 May the small number of guardians who had arrived for the weekly meeting did not meet in the town hall, because it too was now 'an abode of infectious disease' (*EC*, 13 May 1847). 'The guardians might be seen walking backward and forward through the streets, enquiring of each other where they were to meet that day. One o'clock came and when every place was denied them, W.A. Dane Esq., our respected sub-Sheriff, proffered the use of the Grand Jury Room, in the Court House.' One the following week things turned to farce, when Dane would not allow the court house to be used again, because on the previous occasion the venue was immediately 'thronged with contractors, officers from the house, paupers, etc.' This forced the few guardians who had shown up to ask a local shopkeeper, Terence Mihan, for permission to meet for a few minutes on his premises.

Mihan dutifully obliged (*EC*, 20 May 1847). On the following Tuesday the meeting was switched to the linen hall.

For several weeks at the height of the crisis entry into the workhouse was severely restricted for want of clothing and funds. The numbers seeking admission at the weekly board meetings grew, until on in late April and early May 1847 the guardians were forced to yield (*IR*, 6 May 1847):

Then the miserable creatures, finding the door open, rushed in, the stronger trampling the weaker and the room was in a few minutes crowded, proceedings were stopped; some of the guardians were for adjourning the meeting and would have done so but for the exertions of others who with great difficulty succeeded in ridding the room (*sic*); the imploring and agonising looks of the unfortunate creatures but too truly indicated the increase of disease and hardship in this portion of the country; children appeared to be dying in the act of endeavouring to extract sustenance from the dried-up breast of their parents, others more mature in years were propped up by some relative or acquaintance who was fast hastening to a similar state of weakness. The general appearance was truly sickening. An endeavour was made to enter their names when some fearing they might be excluded another rush was made, and put hors de combat the guardians at the board. The horrors of the black hole of Calcutta were endured by them for a time. They rushed to the window and gasped for breath; they found they had nothing for it but to admit them all indiscriminately. They were all sent round to the Poorhouse and admitted.

Anecdotal evidence surely tells a tale. However, measurable yardsticks of union performance are also available, and several also imply that Enniskillen union and the

workhouse were poorly run.

*First*, the workhouse was slow to open its doors, even relative to its poverty level. Table 2 points to the strong association between the timing of the opening of workhouses, and relative economic position of the relevant union.<sup>4</sup> In this respect workhouses in Leinster had an average lead of eighteen months over those in Connacht, the poorest of the four provinces. Enniskillen workhouse opened on 1 December 1845. Enniskillen, 96<sup>th</sup> in terms of poor law valuation per head (£1.18 against an average of £1.61 in the country as a whole), was only 123<sup>rd</sup> of 130 to open. The late opening of the workhouse left little time for ‘non-crisis’ admissions before the famine.

*Second*, a high proportion of those admitted into the workhouse died. Between the 1st of December 1845 and spring 1851 over two thousand inmates (1,042 males and 998 females) are recorded as having died there. The number admitted between these two dates was about 10,500, implying a ratio of deaths to admissions of one in five. In the period up to mid-1847 about one in four of those admitted died.

*Third*, a high proportion of the Enniskillen dead perished from infectious diseases. This meant either that they entered the workhouse in a very bad state, in which case they should have been admitted sooner or catered for elsewhere, or else that they contracted an infectious disease within the workhouse from another inmate. Sir William Wilde’s Tables of Death in the 1851 census contain quite detailed and complete cause-of-death data on the workhouse. The percentage dying of the main famine-related

infectious diseases (diarrhoea, dysentery, and fever, or DDF) in Enniskillen was relatively high, about 56-57 per cent. So were the percentages succumbing to marasmus and dropsy, both famine-related conditions indicating severe malnutrition. Marasmus entailed the death from starvation or malnutrition of young children and infants, while the hallmark of dropsy (what today is called hunger oedema) was the swelling that sometimes accompanies acute starvation (Mokyr and Ó Gráda 2002: 20). Whether inmates succumbing to these diseases acquired them in the workhouse due to inadequate diet, or arrived in a dying state and on the verge of starvation, cannot be known, however.

Table 3 compares the numbers of deaths from these causes in Enniskillen with the numbers in Fermanagh's other workhouses, Lisnaskea and Lowtherstown, and in Clogher in adjoining southwest Tyrone. All four poor law unions had similar valuations per head of population. Significantly, the percentage attributable to dysentery, diarrhoea, and fever was highest in Enniskillen. So was the percentage attributable to marasmus and dropsy, though these causes also exacted a heavy toll in Clogher. On both counts Fermanagh union fared poorly during the Famine.

The urgency of the situation in the workhouse at the height of the crisis prompted one guardian to confess 'it was the opinion of many that the healthy paupers should be turned out, and the entire house turned into a fever hospital'. Some weeks later a local newspaper reported an exchange between guardians as follows (*EC*, 27 May 1847; 8 July 1847):

*W.A. Dane (county sub-sheriff):* Dr Phelan said that a pauper in fever would be

better off thrown behind a ditch than in a poorhouse.

*Dr. G.A. Nixon (medical officer):* Ye sentenced in one day 200 persons to death.

*Paul Dane (workhouse clerk):* We did not -- they sentenced themselves to death.

*Dr. G.A. Nixon* (after the guardians vote against building a fever hospital):  
Now that is all over, I have only to say there are 24 persons lying of fever in the house, and the rain is dripping down on them at this moment.

*Paul Dane* Mr. Otway said there were seventeen poor houses in Ireland worse than ours.

At the beginning of June 1847 the medical officer (now Dr. Phelan) was still complaining about the deplorable state of fever in the workhouse. A month later he deemed the state of house much improved, but he declared the premises rented on Hall's Lane for fever patients to be 'in a state of dilapidation' (*EC* 3 June 1847; 22 July 1847). The lack of funds prevented the acquisition of adequate premises for fever patients for several months: only on 4 January 1848 did a majority of the board formally agree to the erection of a proper fever hospital.

*Fourth*, attendance at board meetings was poor (PRONI, BG14/A/2). There were forty guardians, thirty of whom were elected by the ratepayers. The average attendance between May 1845 and March 1848, when the board was dissolved, was only twelve. The highest recorded attendance (31) was on 3 August 1847. On that day the guardians met mainly to protest formally against pressure from the commissioners to have 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' (*IR*, 20<sup>th</sup> Nov 1845; 9<sup>th</sup> Sept 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 meaningful attendance of guardians. In the wake of their visit on 16 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>5</sup> On the first of 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 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 before its dissolution.

In the Enniskillen guardians' defense, it must be admitted that lax attendance at board meetings was by no means confined to Enniskillen (e.g. Ó Gráda 1999: 250, fn. 84).

*Fifth*, Enniskillen's board of guardians was one of only four in Ulster to suffer the indignity of being disbanded by the Poor Law Commissioners and replaced by vice-guardians (IUP, vol. 3, pp. 107-126). The board was dissolved 7 March 1848 in the wake of a damning report by poor law inspector D'Arcy to the Commissioners five days earlier. Though D'Arcy deemed the workhouse itself well kept and the master (who had replaced an earlier man deemed not up to the task) 'attentive and intelligent', he found the 'yards and sewerage...in a wretched state', and inmates' clothing quite inadequate -- so much so that women inmates had no change of linen while soiled linen was being washed. D'Arcy also declared the facilities in the workhouse day room inadequate and likely to promote disease, and was damning in his verdict of the building housing fever patients (p. 108). He found the allocations made by relieving officers to those on outdoor relief 'totally inadequate'. He instanced Catherine Smith, a widow with six children, whose weekly allowance was 1s 8d, and William Ross, a lame invalid with a wife and 5 children, who was given a weekly allowance 2s. All these problems stemmed from the guardians' lack of determination to collect the rates.

The poor law inspector concluded that unless the commissioners took affairs in hand, the union 'must proceed from bad to worse'. He recommended that a reformed board should stop paying 'double prices' for supplies on 'credit of a doubtful description'; should strike a rate sufficient to meet demands; should commit to attending regularly and perform their duties. This would enable 'the guardians of this wealthy Union to maintain their paupers on very moderate rates'. The guardian opposed the dissolution.

The Commissioners repeatedly berated the laxness of the guardians in collecting

rates, and threatened them with dissolution long before the event (*IR*, 9 Sept 1847). Now one of the biggest faults of this form of poor relief was that it weighed most heavily on regions least in a position to pay, and Enniskillen was a relatively poor union. Moreover, within each union rates were levied on electoral divisions in proportion to their supply of workhouse inmates, so the system was doubly regressive. However, the commissioners certainly had a point: during 1846 Enniskillen's rate collectors had managed to garner only 9d per head of population, against an average per union of 54d. Of Ireland's 130 unions, only Clifden and Tuam had performed worse in this respect. Six months before dissolution the guardians had struck a rate, which if collected along with outstanding arrears would have realised £12,831, but on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1848, however, £8,621 remained collected, and on the eve of dissolution the figure still stood at nearly £7,000. At the end of January the board's liabilities included £4,216 due to contractors, workhouse officials in salaries, etc.; £3,115 for advances under Temporary Relief Act, and £300 owed to the government. The guardians' credit against these liabilities was only £482. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that several wealthy guardians were in default themselves.<sup>6</sup> Though debts of this order were not unusual in poorer unions, the neighbouring unions of Lisnaskea and Lowtherstown fared much better than Enniskillen.

By May 1847 the *Enniskillen Chronicle* was complaining that while the town's traders and shopkeepers were all paying their rates, the rural divisions who were building up arrears. Farmers were refusing to pay unless their neighbours were made to pay. One rate collector claimed that 'he would not be able to collect the money even with the assistance of all the constabulary and military in the county' (*EC*, 29 April 1847). 'The defalcations of the many [were] bringing ruin on the few', so the *Chronicle* urged the collectors to serve

notice and then distrain if necessary. The guardians continually pleaded inability to collect the rates. In June 1847, when the union had no money to clothe new inmates, the Commissioners offered to supply cast-off military clothing. In the weeks before dissolution there was increasing pressure on the guardians to act. In mid-June 1847 the Ulster Bank was rejecting most cheques drawn on the board; the bank refused to honour a cheque for £190 payable to Mr. Burchell, the union's main supplier of oatmeal. In mid-December 1847 several contractors were very anxious for payment of sums long due to them, but they could not be paid until there were funds in the bank. The payment of workhouse officers was delayed for the same reason. The shortage of funds meant that there was none left over for outdoor relief. At their meeting of 4<sup>th</sup> January 1848 the guardians voted £24 to be spent on outdoor relief, with a maximum of 8d each to any adult, and of 4d to children. On 18<sup>th</sup> January 1848 the guardians passed the following motion:

That the clerk be directed to write to the several rate collectors, and apprise them that unless they make a large payment on Saturday next, the 22<sup>nd</sup> inst, they will be proceeded against for disobedience of orders, under Act 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Vic., ch. 56, sec. 108.

In the wake of dissolution the *Impartial Reporter* was scathing about the commissioner's 'ukase'. However, within a few weeks they were conceding that the vice-guardians were doing a good job (*IR*, 23 March 1848, 18 May 1848). Significantly, within a few weeks of the board's dissolution, the collection of poor rates was proceeding satisfactorily.

#### 4. ADMISSIONS

As noted earlier, the admissions registers of the workhouse survive. Unfortunately the data are not as complete as one would like. Religion, age, and marital status are usually given, as is the electoral division of origin. Whether one entered the workhouse alone or as part of a family grouping is also usually apparent. But the information on health, occupation, and condition on arrival is usually lacking.

As noted earlier the union's population was almost equally divided in confessional terms. This implies that Catholics were significantly over-represented among the workhouse inmates during the famine. Moreover, the Catholic share grew as the crisis intensified. Given that the union's Catholics were disproportionately landless or confined to smaller farms on inferior soils, this is hardly surprising. The proportions dying between opening day and early April 1847, when the board was dissolved, was roughly the same for both groups (29 per cent for Catholics, 28.6 per cent for Protestants).

Catholics were over-represented among women, orphans, deserted children, and both married and widowed inmates. The majority of the relative small number dubbed 'bastards' were Protestant, perhaps because such infants tended to be raised in the Church of Ireland, whatever their origins. Catholics were also over-represented in all age categories.

The inmates were more likely to be female than male. Female over-representation (and therefore presumably female vulnerability to the famine) was greatest at between

twenty and sixty years, and three in four of those admitted in their thirties were women. Nonetheless, a majority of those dying in the workhouse between December 1845 and July 1847 were male. 32.2 per cent of male inmates died in this period, against 26.1 per cent of female.

## 5. HAZARDS

Our earlier discussion of workhouse conditions raises the question of whether the workhouse actually helped anyone, and if so, who. Examining this question is a different way of asking whether the workhouse was well managed. There are several possible outcome measures one might like to examine here, but the most important is the only one available to us, which is whether inmates survived their stay in the workhouse, and if so for how long. The Enniskillen workhouse register survives, with important omissions, for the Famine period, and offers the chance to assess some claims made in the literature for this example.

The tool we use is one of a class of statistical models that are called by several different names. Economists generally use the biometric term “failure analysis”.<sup>7</sup> The idea is to study the determinants of a spell’s length. The spell for our study is the time an individual is in the workhouse. We are mostly interested in the conditional probability that a spell ends at a particular time, that is, whether a Catholic dies sooner than a Protestant, or whether people who entered in 1847 die sooner than those who entered in 1845. We use the Cox proportional-hazards model, which is perhaps the most popular model of this type. The Cox model has two important virtues. Because it is semi-parametric, we do not need specify the shape of the underlying hazard rate. The Cox

model lets the data shape the hazard as it wants, and only assumes that the effect of each covariate is to produce a proportional shift in the hazard.<sup>8</sup> Time-varying covariates are simple to use in this framework. This allows us to see whether the risk of dying changed during the Famine.

The Enniskillen workhouse data are not ideal, and force us to make some compromises. The start of a spell is simple enough – someone enters the workhouse – but there are two ways to end it – to die in the workhouse or to walk out. This suggests a competing-risks model. There is some potential for complication here if there is much correlation between the two risks. In modern mortality studies, for example, the fact that smoking causes both heart disease and cancer means that these two death risks are correlated. In our situation the correlation seems low. Our approach assumes that the risks are conditionally independent (in the statistical sense); once we control for covariates, the model assumes that the risk of dying in the workhouse is independent of the risk of walking out of the workhouse. This is the most common approach, which is hardly a justification, but it is hard to think of forces in this application that imply a correlation between the risk of dying in the workhouse and the risk of leaving it. We have not tried to deal with a second complication, which is the problem of unobserved heterogeneity. Suppose that each inmate in the workhouse had some trait unrecorded in the data that improved their ability to survive in the workhouse. Then those still alive in the workhouse after six months would have a higher value of this trait; the weak ones would die first. In general unobserved heterogeneity biases the estimated hazard rate in such a way as to make it decline with time (or rise less slowly with time). The estimated hazards in our model do in fact decline sharply with time. This effect may reflect, in part,

unobserved heterogeneity. There are several ways to deal with this problem, but all require either panel data or considerable additional econometric structure. The former is not available here, and the latter involves additional assumptions we would rather not make.

The Cox model suggests two natural ways of thinking about the questions we seek to address. First, we can ask whether observed covariates shift the baseline hazard function. That is, we can assume that there is a single underlying baseline hazard rate for death, and force the covariates to work by shifting that baseline hazard up or down. This allows us to see whether events beyond the Guardians' control raise or lower death rates. Second, one can use observed covariates to define several "strata," each of which has its own baseline hazard with differing levels and shapes. The strata allow more complicated effects; for example, this might suggest that inmates in one stratum do well upon admission, but are more likely to die over time. That kind of pattern is ruled out if we just have one stratum. The natural strata in this study would be the time the individual entered the workhouse. Conditions in 1846 might create very different mortality probabilities from those governing life in 1847. The regression reported below has a single stratum, although we experimented with a multi-strata approach.<sup>9</sup>

### *Definitions of covariates*

Table 5 reports our preferred model. We measure time in the number of months since the person enters the workhouse. After some experimentation we defined time in months and censored all observations at twelve months. About 98 percent of the sample leaves the workhouse within one year of entry. Our covariates are of two types: those



that reflect a characteristic of the inmate that does not change over time (for example, sex or the age at which the inmate was admitted to the workhouse), and those that change over time. *Catholic* and *female* are what the names suggest. The next six variables described the inmate's family status and whether they were admitted alone or as part of a group. The reference category here is a never-married person who entered as part of a group, such as a child with a family. The next two groups of variables are the workhouse staff's efforts to categorize the inmate's condition upon entry. 'Dirty' inmates presumably had been on the road or in more desperate circumstances before they were admitted. The only information we have for the inmate's health status upon admission is the rough categorization 'disabled'. The reference category for both 'dirty' and 'disabled' is missing information. About two-thirds of the sample has not information on 'dirty', and the situation is slightly worse for 'disabled'.

We parameterize age as follows: we have dummies for *infants* and for *children* (1-5 years). Those aged five and above have a (continuous) quadratic spline. We experimented with distinct treatments for older inmates but found, somewhat surprisingly, that their experience was fully captured by the age splines.

Some factors that affect the risk of death in the workhouse change over time. Ideally we would have proxies for strain on the workhouse, conditions outside, and so forth. In our study of the North Dublin Union, for example, we had proxies for mortality conditions outside the workhouse, and food price measures that suggested the difficulty of sustaining a family without relief. Here we lack any useful covariates of this type, so instead we use a series of dummy variables. The reference month is December 1845, the first month for which we have data. The first dummy is one in January 1846, the second

is one in February 1847, etc. These dummies are useful in that they indicate which months were worst in the workhouse, but they lack the clear interpretation of the mortality or price dummies used earlier.

The Enniskillen data have a serious problem that probably accounts for the results that follow: thirty-two percent of all observations are missing the date on which the inmate died or left. All of these observations had to be excluded, because any effort to “fix” the dates by assumption would confer the same bias on the results. Dropping the observations, of course, is problematic if there is any correlation between the chance the information is missing and any variable of interest. This is straightforward sample-selection bias. Here we have good cause to worry. The data become worse as the famine progresses. About 18 percent of inmates admitted in 1846 are missing the date of death or discharge. The information is missing for 46 percent of inmates admitted in 1847. The model reported below was re-estimated for those admitted in 1846 only, as a rough check on the sensitivity of our results to the missing data problem. Somewhat surprisingly, the results do not change much if we restrict the data to 1846. This gives us some confidence in what follows. But we have to bear in mind these problems in interpreting the results reported here.

### *Results*

We experimented with several different specifications, the main implications of which we now mention. In the model described in Table 5 we include all the age and sex variables, even though some are not statistically significant. Exclusion of these variables affects some of our other results and we thought it best to retain them as basic controls.

Our criterion for the inclusion of other variables in the final model is that it be part of a 'block' of variables that are jointly statistically significant. Thus some of the individual time dummies are not significantly different from zero, but the entire block of such variables is significant and was included in final model. The coefficients are relative hazard rates; so, for example, being an infant raises the risk of dying by 1.5 times the 'baseline' hazard. The t-ratios have the usual interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

The results hold some surprises given findings for other famines. In mid-nineteenth century Fermanagh Catholics were poorer and underrepresented politically, yet Catholic inmates in the workhouse did not fare significantly worse than others in the workhouse. Gender had no effect either. This is an equally surprising result, since most studies of famine mortality suggest a slight female advantage. It could be that females entered the workhouse in a worse state than males.<sup>11</sup> We experimented with several gender interactions (for example, female infants, aged females) and found no significant effects. The regression also suggests that family status and membership in a family group did not affect mortality chances in the workhouse. This again is surprising, given our findings for the North Dublin Union (Guinnane and Ó Gráda 2002). The findings for 'dirty' probably reflect the fact that so much information is missing there. Being either 'dirty' or 'clean' raises the probability of death, which on its own terms makes no sense. But it is worth noting that this information is lacking for almost all of the inmates admitted in the worst year of the famine, Black '47. This implausible result may be driven entirely by the fact that this information is missing for most inmates who died. The results for disabled inmates make more sense, but almost as much information is missing in those cases.

These negative findings may all reflect positively on the workhouse administration, in the following way. A finding that people admitted alone were more likely to die (which was true in the North Dublin workhouse) suggests that the institution was a tough place and that survival depended on protection against other inmates. Our inability to single out inmates most likely to die suggests a roughly equal treatment.

One negative result is especially interesting. The Enniskillen workhouse admitted inmates from all over the Union, and the register records which electoral division they came from. As noted earlier, electoral divisions were rated in part according to how many inmates they had in the workhouse, raising the probability that a hard-up or stingy electoral division would try to keep its poor out of the workhouse. Whatever the incentives, we find no evidence that mortality probabilities differed by electoral division. We experimented with dummies for each electoral division and found that their collective impact was zero.<sup>12</sup>

The time dummies tell a different and terrifying story. Death in the workhouse might not have depended on an inmate's characteristics, but it became more and more likely through 1847. Throughout 1846, death in the workhouse was almost random. The only observable influence were the effects already noted. Then, starting in 1847, mortality probabilities climbed rapidly; by the summer of 1847 an inmate was as much as 17 times as likely to die in the workhouse as he or she was in December 1845.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Only after similar scrutiny of other surviving workhouse registers and further

comparative analysis of workhouse administration, paying due attention to baseline poverty levels, will we be in a position to pronounce definitively on the management of Enniskillen union during the Great Famine. At this stage we can claim no more than that the evidence presented here is consistent with careless, incompetent, and penny-pinching management of the workhouse. The marked improvement in the union's affairs after the dissolution of the board in March 1848 corroborates.

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TABLE 1: OCCUPATIONS AND LITERACY IN FERMANAGH BEFORE THE FAMINE

| <b>Location</b>     | <b>%TMH21</b> | <b>%AG21</b> | <b>%MT41</b> | <b>%ILL41M</b> | <b>%ILL41F</b> | <b>%POPCH4151</b> |
|---------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|
| <i>Baronies</i>     |               |              |              |                |                |                   |
| (*) Clonkelly       | 53.8          | 32.1         | 19.0         | 39.5           | 50.5           |                   |
| (*) Coole           | 60.2          | 31.4         | 18.1         | 39.4           | 52.0           |                   |
| (*) Glenawley       | 44.7          | 37.8         | 16.9         | 41.5           | 58.6           |                   |
| (*) Knockninny      | 51.0          | 37.2         | 12.8         | 45.8           | 62.7           |                   |
| Lurg                | 17.0          | 56.8         | 23.2         | 41.1           | 53.7           |                   |
| Magheraboy          | 30.0          | 46.1         | 22.3         | 34.2           | 53.7           |                   |
| (*) Magherastephana | 57.1          | 31.3         | 24.0         | 34.2           | 43.3           |                   |
| (*) Tyrkennedy      | 36.7          | 40.4         | 26.2         | 35.5           | 46.3           |                   |
| <i>Fermanagh</i>    | 45.1          | 38.3         | 21.4         | 39.4           | 51.9           |                   |
| <i>Ulster</i>       | 55.3          | 31.1         | 32.2         | 35.5           | 45.4           |                   |
| <i>Ireland</i>      | 41.2          | 40.1         | 23.9         | 46.5           | 58.7           |                   |

*Key:*

- %TMH21: Persons chiefly employed in trades, manufactures, and handicraft in 1821
- AG21: Persons chiefly employed in agriculture in 1821
- %MT41: Percent families chiefly employed in manufactures, trades, etc. in 1841
- %ILL41: Percent illiterate aged five and over in 1841
- %POPCH4151: Percent population change 1841-51

(\*): all or mainly in Enniskillen Poor Law Union

TABLE 2. THE TIMING OF WORKHOUSE OPENINGS.

a. *Chronology and Poor Law Valuation*

| <i>Date Open</i> | <i>Number</i> | <i>Avg PLV per head (£)</i> |
|------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Before end 1841  | 38            | 2.13                        |
| 1842             | 54            | 1.59                        |
| 1843-44          | 21            | 1.36                        |
| 1845-            | 17            | 0.90                        |

b. *Mean Opening Date by Province*

| <i>Province</i> | <i>Number</i> | <i>Avg PLV per head (£)</i> | <i>Avg date open</i> |
|-----------------|---------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| Leinster        | 34            | 2.41                        | 11 Apr 1842          |
| Munster         | 35            | 1.55                        | 9 Sept 1842          |
| Ulster          | 43            | 1.30                        | 28 Dec 1842          |
| Connacht        | 18            | 1.04                        | 13 Aug 1843          |

TABLE 3: CAUSES OF DEATH IN ENNISKILLEN AND NEIGHBOURING UNIONS

| <i>Cause of Death</i>                | <i>Enniskillen</i> |               | <i>Lisnaskea</i> |               | <i>Lowtherstown</i> |               | <i>Clogher</i> |               |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|------------------|---------------|---------------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
|                                      | <i>Male</i>        | <i>Female</i> | <i>Male</i>      | <i>Female</i> | <i>Male</i>         | <i>Female</i> | <i>Male</i>    | <i>Female</i> |
| 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            |
| Deaths from known causes             | 1017               | 979           | 485              | 443           | 417                 | 380           | 325            | 312           |
| [1]. Deaths from DDF (%)             | 57.5               | 55.8          | 52.4             | 58.0          | 45.3                | 46.8          | 32.3           | 34.6          |
| [2]. Deaths from Marasmus/Dropsy (%) | 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           |               | 43,944              |               | 42,278         |               |
| Population in 1841                   | 81,534             |               | 37,920           |               | 34,963              |               | 39,801         |               |
| PLV per head                         | £1.18              |               | £1.24            |               | £1.26               |               | £1.06          |               |

Source: 1851 Census Tables of Death, Vol. 2.

*TABLE 4. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF WORKHOUSE INMATES*

| <i>Age</i> | <i>Protestants</i> | <i>Catholics</i> | <i>% Catholic</i> |
|------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| 0-4        | 208                | 365              | 63.7              |
| 5-9        | 204                | 390              | 65.7              |
| 10-19      | 352                | 752              | 68.1              |
| 20-29      | 99                 | 147              | 59.8              |
| 30-39      | 114                | 213              | 65.1              |
| 40-59      | 161                | 294              | 64.6              |
| 60+        | 108                | 265              | 71.0              |
| total      | 1246               | 2426             | 66.1              |

  

|         | <i>Protestants</i> | <i>Catholics</i> | <i>% Catholic</i> |
|---------|--------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Males   | 590                | 1096             | 65.0              |
| Females | 662                | 1610             | 70.9              |

  

|          |     |     |      |
|----------|-----|-----|------|
| Orphans  | 68  | 124 | 64.6 |
| Bastards | 46  | 33  | 41.8 |
| Deserted | 28  | 47  | 62.7 |
| Widowed  | 96  | 184 | 65.7 |
| Married  | 119 | 258 | 68.4 |

  

| <i>Date of Admission</i> |     |     |      |
|--------------------------|-----|-----|------|
| 1/12/45-30/6/46          | 236 | 366 | 60.8 |
| 1/7/46-31/12/46          | 455 | 888 | 66.1 |
| 1/1/47-31/3/47           | 305 | 738 | 70.8 |
| 1/4/46-4/7/47            | 258 | 448 | 63.5 |

  

| <i>Age</i> | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> | <i>% Female</i> |
|------------|-------------|---------------|-----------------|
| 0-4        | 288         | 292           | 50.3            |
| 5-9        | 330         | 271           | 45.1            |
| 10-19      | 553         | 572           | 50.8            |
| 20-29      | 69          | 183           | 72.6            |
| 30-39      | 82          | 252           | 75.4            |
| 40-59      | 178         | 285           | 61.6            |
| 60+        | 197         | 179           | 47.4            |
| Total      | 1697        | 2034          | 54.5            |

*Source:* Enniskillen Workhouse Admissions Registers

*Table 5: DETERMINANTS OF MORTALITY RISK IN THE WORKHOUSE*

| Variable           | Relative hazard | T-ratio | Mean of variable |
|--------------------|-----------------|---------|------------------|
| Catholic           | 0.96            | -0.70   | 0.64             |
| Female             | 0.97            | -0.52   | 0.53             |
| Married            | 0.94            | -0.56   | 0.14             |
| Widowed            | 0.96            | -0.27   | 0.10             |
| Deserted           | 1.09            | 0.48    | 0.02             |
| Bastard            | 0.88            | -0.43   | 0.03             |
| Orphan             | 0.93            | -0.56   | 0.08             |
| Alone              | 1.00            | -0.04   | 0.33             |
| Dirty              | 1.40            | 2.94    | 0.33             |
| Clean              | 1.24            | 1.81    | 0.23             |
| Disabled           | 1.04            | 0.24    | 0.14             |
| Not disabled       | 0.62            | -4.61   | 0.46             |
| Infant             | 1.54            | 2.64    | 0.05             |
| Children           | 1.39            | 3.68    | 0.14             |
| Age spline         | 0.99            | -1.60   | 20.35            |
| Age spline squared | 1.00            | 4.12    | 948.83           |
| January 1846       | 0.86            | -0.21   | 0.02             |
| February 1846      | 0.61            | -0.66   | 0.03             |
| March 1846         | 0.25            | -1.54   | 0.03             |
| April 1846         | 0.37            | -1.22   | 0.03             |
| May 1846           | 0.58            | -0.73   | 0.03             |
| June 1846          | 0.21            | -1.72   | 0.04             |
| July 1846          | 0.49            | -0.96   | 0.04             |
| August 1846        | 0.53            | -0.87   | 0.03             |
| September 1846     | 0.53            | -0.90   | 0.04             |
| October 1846       | 1.03            | 0.05    | 0.05             |
| November 1846      | 1.35            | 0.49    | 0.06             |
| December 1846      | 2.59            | 1.60    | 0.11             |
| January 1847       | 3.50            | 2.11    | 0.11             |
| February 1847      | 6.97            | 3.27    | 0.08             |
| March 1847         | 4.80            | 2.62    | 0.09             |
| April 1847         | 14.85           | 4.52    | 0.07             |
| May 1847           | 17.79           | 4.81    | 0.06             |
| June 1847          | 21.65           | 5.09    | 0.03             |
| July 1847          | 12.23           | 4.04    | 0.01             |
| August 1847        | 4.46            | 2.12    | 0.01             |
| September 1847     | 3.82            | 1.87    | 0.01             |
| October 1847       | 0.95            | -0.05   | 0.00             |
| November 1847      | 7.34            | 2.94    | 0.00             |
| December 1847      | 6.72            | 2.92    | 0.00             |
| January 1848       | 10.26           | 3.01    | 0.00             |
| February 1848      | 4.97            | 2.49    | 0.00             |

Number of inmates: 2515; number of person-months of exposure: 7318; log-likelihood = -6308; chi-square statistic = 1184 (p=0)

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The sesquicentennial commemoration of the mid-1990s prompted a flood of local studies of the Irish famine. Noteworthy workhouse and union case-studies include Eiriksson (1996a, 1996b); Grace (2000); Kinealy (1992, 1996); McAtasney (1997); Moane (2001); O'Brien (1999); Ó Cathaoir (1994); O'Gorman (1995); Ó Murchadha (1996).

<sup>2</sup> Lindsay and Fitzpatrick (1994) is a useful guide to what is available. However, its description of what survives for Enniskillen poor law union is inaccurate.

<sup>3</sup> There were several minor changes between then and 1847 and major changes in April 1850, which need not concern us here.

<sup>4</sup> Regressing the date of opening (*DATEOPEN*) on the average poor law valuation (*AVPLV*) and rates collected to 1846 produced the following outcome. Note too how the number admitted to 1846 was negatively related to *AVPLV* and positively related to *RATESTO46*.

|                    |                 |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| Dep. variable      | <i>DATEOPEN</i> |
| Adj R <sup>2</sup> | 0.3647          |
| N                  | 130             |
| <i>AVPLV</i>       | -251.7 (-4.85)  |
| <i>RATESTO46</i>   | -.0124 (-4.82)  |
| <i>CONST</i>       | 16218 (186.65)  |

Note: t-statistics in parentheses

<sup>5</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.

<sup>6</sup> The names of defaulting landowners had been made public in mid-November 1847 and published in the *Impartial Reporter*. They included several guardians (John Vesey Grey Porter of Lisbellaw, Captain B. Archdall, Thomas Kernaghan, and others).

<sup>7</sup> For an earlier application of duration methods in Irish economic history see Guinnane, 'Age at leaving home in rural Ireland'. The model used in the present paper differs in some important respects. However, it is identical to that used in Guinnane and Ó Gráda, 'Mortality in the North Dublin Union'.

<sup>8</sup> Proportionality is an assumption itself. We have tested this assumption for our models, using the so-called 'Schoenfeld residuals'. For more on this, see Guinnane and Ó Gráda, 'Mortality in the North Dublin Union', 496, fn29.

<sup>9</sup> Our earlier study found that multiple strata were important. The present dataset is smaller and missing far more information; the differing results here may reflect something truly different in Enniskillen, or may just reflect the limitations of the data.

<sup>10</sup> The standard errors were corrected for clustering using White's method.

<sup>11</sup> See Kate Macintyre, 'Famine and the female mortality advantage'.

<sup>12</sup> That is, we can reject that null hypothesis that these parameters are not zero at the 99 percent confidence level.