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**'Better off thrown behind a ditch'  
Enniskillen Workhouse during the Great Famine**

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'BETTER OFF THROWN BEHIND A DITCH':  
ENNISKILLEN WORKHOUSE DURING THE GREAT FAMINE<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, harvest failures in contexts of economic backwardness and mass poverty have accounted for much of the excess mortality caused by famines. In the case of Ireland in the 1840s cross section evidence confirms the link between pre-famine poverty and food availability, on the one hand, and the death toll, on the other. But this by no means excludes the roles of public policy and human agency, as stressed in recent famine historiography<sup>1</sup>. The conditionality and generosity of relief, the speed with which decisions are made, and the quality of the bureaucracy on the spot must make a difference to the number of lives lost or saved. This paper focuses on how ways in which local agents in Ireland allocated what resources were left to them may have exacerbated or mitigated famine's toll.

The cost 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 July 1838. This act inaugurated a system of poor relief in Ireland analogous but not identical to the systems recently introduced in England and Wales. Though the Irish 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 poor relief throughout the crisis.<sup>2</sup> At the outset it shared this responsibility with massive public works schemes and publicly funded soup kitchens, but from the summer of 1847 the agencies established under the poor law would bear the brunt of the crisis alone. From then on, the British Treasury with the support of Westminster acted as if the crisis was a purely 'local' one, capable of resolution through a combination of public relief financed by local taxation and neighbourhood help raised by local charity.<sup>3</sup>

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. 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 assistant poor law commissioners sought to enforce a reasonably uniform welfare regime throughout

the country, always with the principle of 'less eligibility' in mind. In ordinary circumstances relief was to be confined to those willing to enter the union workhouse, built according to standard specifications, in the largest and most central market town in each district, and placed under the management of a local board of guardians. Unlike any form of local administration previously created, most households above the poverty line had a say in the composition of the board of guardians. Accordingly, though about one quarter of those on each local board were *ex officio* guardians (mainly landowners and magistrates nominated to membership by the Poor Law Commission as individuals of sufficient local wealth and standing to be supposed to have a stake in prudent management of house and union), the remaining guardians were elected by union ratepayers, i.e. male heads of 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, supervised the poor rate valuation survey upon which local taxation was based, was responsible for striking and collecting the poor rates as the need was seen to arise, appointed and discharged the workhouse staff and the rate collectors, vetted supply and trade contracts, and determined on the admission and discharge of inmates and aspects of their care, carrying out the mandate of relief as expressed in legislation. To a certain extent the board was monitored by the Poor Law Commission, which was empowered to dissolve a union acting in defiance of legally established codes of practice, but short of this ultimate sanction guardians had considerable discretion in the character of management. Guardians might thus manage a union's affairs poorly for months before the authorities moved in.

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 deems 'the speed with which the country was divided, guardians elected, and the workhouses built and opened'<sup>4</sup> impressive. This is broadly correct, but the opening dates in fact varied considerably across the country. Ninety-two workhouses were admitting paupers by the end of 1842, but five of the eighteen workhouses projected for Connacht 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 Table 1 shows, the richer the union, the earlier the opening; the stragglers tended to be in smaller unions in the remote west.<sup>5</sup>

Though the onset of the Great Famine is sometimes dated from the first attack of potato blight (*Phytophthora 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, the number of which in the workhouse system had fluctuated since 1842 with the seasons and with the state of the labour market. The workhouse population continued to reflect the demands of chronic poverty and vagrancy until later that year.

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 workhouse system 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 boards of guardians were turning away would-be inmates.<sup>6</sup> Of those houses still with spare capacity, a third or so were in less affected areas in the northeast and east. Ominously, however, it is apparent that there were a number of workhouses still with empty beds though located in some of those areas most obviously threatened with disaster. Such unions tended to lack the material 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' dates from the famine period.<sup>7</sup> Tales of mismanagement, cruelty, venality, and corruption – some doubtless apocryphal, many well documented – abound.<sup>8</sup> Judging by the lack of favourable mentions, well-managed unions were the exception.<sup>9</sup>

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

The constraints and the context facing agents are important. Two recent papers by Tim Guinnane and one of the present authors<sup>10</sup> address the issue of yardsticks for competent workhouse management. The first of these papers 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 probably due to factors outside the guardians' control.<sup>11</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>12</sup> It builds on the study of Enniskillen Poor Law Union undertaken in 1996 by one of the present authors (McCabe) under the direction of the National Famine Research Project, and carries out a more elaborate statistical analysis than attempted therein of the database of workhouse admissions, discharges, births and deaths compiled by McCabe in respect of the union from December 1845 to July 1847. 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<sup>13</sup>, while the admissions records provide the raw material for a more statistical focus on workhouse famine victims.

The outline of this paper is as follows. Part 2 below describes the local context in Enniskillen poor law union. 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 concludes.

## 2. ENNISKILLEN UNION IN CONTEXT:

The boundaries of Enniskillen union were announced on 20 August 1840.<sup>14</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 (mostly in tillage) 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. Land use had shifted somewhat from tillage to grazing between the 1800s and the 1840s. Crops raised were principally oats and potatoes, with significant though fluctuating acreages under barley and wheat. Dairying and the associated production and sale of store cattle comprised the regional staple in livestock. Well into the nineteenth century, however, yarn spinning had also been important in parts of Fermanagh. In the baronies of Knockninny, Coole, and Magherastephana in 1821 'trades, manufactures, and handicrafts' had provided well over half of all employment. By contrast in Lurg and Magheraboy, two baronies in the northwest of the county, their employment shares in the same year were only 17 and 30 per cent. Linen sales were small in the mid-1830s, smaller than in Donegal and a fraction of sales in other Ulster counties (indeed textile production had never been of comparable importance in Fermanagh). The county still contained over twenty one thousand spinners in 1841 but the number of weavers was no more than a few thousand. Most of these workers were probably living in the area that would comprise Enniskillen union. The weakness 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.<sup>15</sup> And, despite the pressures on the linen industry, the Poor Inquiry implied little change or mild improvement in the living standards of the poor in the county since 1815. Pauperism was reportedly limited to the cabin suburbs of the county town of Enniskillen. It appears that a larger

proportion of corn was retained for home consumption on Fermanagh holdings than usual elsewhere, and seasonal migration was low in the Enniskillen district during the 1830s. This suggests that estate demands on the small tenant may have been lighter than in other counties in the region. Samuel Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary* described the town in the mid-1830s as 'remarkable for its respectable and thriving appearance'<sup>16</sup>, 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 1) but Fermanagh ranked 12<sup>th</sup> of 32 Irish counties in educational status. 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.

[Table 1 about here]

Yet Fermanagh was one of Ireland's poorer counties, ranking 21<sup>st</sup> in terms of per capita poor law valuation. Further, 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. One of the local newspapers protested in September 1847 that Inglis had unwittingly misrepresented the level of tenant well-being in the county, arguing that passable tenant grooming was no proof of substance, as 'the very poorest in Ulster are well known to have a taste for decency and cleanliness'. Certainly the perception of regional comfort and security conveyed in Inglis influenced attitudes in the British Treasury and in the Poor Law Commission towards pleas for aid from that quarter. The apparent conflict of evidence between poor county and union valuations and strong literacy scores together with tourist impressions of order and respectability



may indeed have some basis in cultural variation across the provinces.<sup>17</sup>

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'.<sup>18</sup> 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. The lower the poor law valuation per capita the steeper the decline in population and the larger the proportion of admissions to the workhouse. Also, the greater the proportion of small farms, the greater the population decline. However, the strong positive correlation between poor law valuation per head and the admissions rate (+0.822) is more surprising. Perhaps the richer the area the more intensively it was farmed and the greater the population of cottier labourers, whose households would be at greater risk than those of smallholders in tenancy.

The course of the famine in Enniskillen and Fermanagh has been described in studies by Peadar Livingstone, John Cunningham, Neil McAtamney, and Desmond McCabe.<sup>19</sup> McCabe provides some detail on the local economy and on union development drawn primarily from his cross-tabulations of census, Board of Works and Poor Law Commission data published in the British parliamentary papers. The severe impact of the famine on the county 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 than in Ireland as a whole (19.9 per cent). 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 (though the poorest in terms of valuation per capita and per acre), lost only 13 per cent.

### 3. UNION MANAGEMENT:

The first election of guardians in the Enniskillen union was held in the summer of 1840. On 21<sup>st</sup> September 1840 the guardians gathered for the first time in the county courthouse. Present on this occasion (a full attendance for the first and last time) were 29 elected guardians and 10 ex-officio guardians. It became invariable practice for the earl of Enniskillen or a senior member of the Cole family to take the chair at board meetings. Assistant poor law commissioner Caesar Otway made a habit of attending meetings to keep track of the views of guardians and to attempt to steer them on a course acceptable to the Commission.

Both the local press and the board minutes furnish evidence or at least broad hints of the venality and meanness of guardians. Things did not start well in this regard. The guardians were responsible for the financial management of workhouse construction (though the design and erection of each workhouse was the job of George Wilkinson, Commission architect). In the case of Enniskillen the overall cost of building the workhouse was raised about 33 per cent because of sharp practice on the part of the earl of Enniskillen, who sold the board a site on the lake shore near the town. After selling the land at a fixed price per acre, and somehow getting away with giving the impression that the Irish acre was the intended measure according to contract, the earl changed his mind shortly after the transfer and successfully demanded instead the agreed price per acre for the area of the site in statute acres (the statute acre was two thirds of the Irish acre). This of course increased the debt burden on the union. It is difficult to imagine that such a contract could have passed a meeting of guardians in the first place without acquiescence or collusion on their part.

Suspicious that guardians were given preference in the bidding for contracts for food and fuel were widespread.<sup>20</sup> 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<sup>21</sup>. This took up much board time at a critical juncture during the onset of crisis. 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, with the large salary cost the higher number would entail. Appointing relieving officers brought patronage. On the other hand the guardians proved ever-alert to contrive cheese-paring economies at the expense of pauper welfare. A majority of guardians carried through a resolution to eliminate supper in the workhouse in August 1846, in order to save about 3d daily per inmate and in the face of complaint by Otway on behalf of the Poor Law Commission. 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* 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'<sup>22</sup>. In April-May 1847 some guardians wanted paupers to be buried without a coffin. One guardian (Hall) deemed £600 a year 'a great sum to be paying for coffins'<sup>23</sup>.

More important, the board was extremely dilatory in responding to the mounting sanitary crisis in the house. The physical state of the workhouse and the prevalence of fever therein were 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<sup>24</sup>:

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.

The outcome in fact was that the guardians turned their back on the house and met for several months anywhere except in the board-room. On 9 February 1847 that the guardians met in the town hall. 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'<sup>25</sup>. '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.' In 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 plead with a local shopkeeper, Terence Mihan, for permission

to meet for a few minutes on his premises. Mihan dutifully obliged.<sup>26</sup> On the following Tuesday the meeting was switched to the local linen hall, then disused. It may be emphasised that if anything the primary duty of the board was to be fully conversant with the state of the house.

Numbers seeking to get into the workhouse had been small and manageable during most of 1846. Late that year there was a sudden (not large) increase in admissions, to about twenty or thirty persons weekly. These were probably long-term vagrants and the town poor overcoming initial reluctance to enter. At this point there was little sense of urgency among the guardians. In April 1846 there was a total of 274 paupers in a house built to contain a thousand persons at maximum stretch. County authorities only woke up to the prospect of widespread famine in late September 1846. Local relief committees were slow to form. Though public employment on the roads was available under the board of works, it was the local relief committee (organised voluntarily) that passed labourers as eligible to get relief work. Nothing could be done without committee co-operation and it is significant that numbers employed in the county between October 1846 and March 1847 were very few. The number of paupers clamouring for a place in the workhouse spiralled from October 1846 on. In-house relief was the principal recourse for union poor in this period.

However 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 in late April and early May 1847 the guardians were forced to yield<sup>27</sup>:

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. Union administration was clearly staggering and uncertain and board conduct and intentions week by week do not look creditable in hindsight. 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 the relative economic position of the relevant union.<sup>28</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 or for the relief bureaucracy to get into gear.

*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 intercurrent 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.<sup>29</sup> 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, as reported in the 1851 census. All four poor law unions had similar valuations per head of population. Significantly, the percentage of deaths 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 Enniskillen union fared poorly during the Famine.

[Table 3 about here]

Throughout 1846 and 1847 the board of guardians repeatedly resisted pleas to establish a purpose-built fever hospital. The urgency of the situation in the workhouse at the height of the crisis prompted one dissenting 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'. In May 1847 fever patients were transferred to decrepit houses rented in the town (from one of the guardians). Some weeks later a local newspaper reported further debate over the construction of a fever hospital. An exchange between guardians and medical officer went as follows<sup>30</sup>:

*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 dying 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'<sup>31</sup>. 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.<sup>32</sup> 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'<sup>33</sup>. It will be borne in mind that this last matter was a bone of contention between guardians and Poor Law Commission.

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 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>34</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<sup>35</sup>.

*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.<sup>36</sup> 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 used for housing fever patients. He found the allocations made by relieving officers to paupers 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 five children, who was given a weekly allowance 2s. A majority of guardians had earlier rejected efforts to have outdoor relief given in kind (which was most practical in circumstances of great inflation and local vending monopoly) and insisted on giving a monetary allowance that was unlikely to be enough to meet family necessities. It may be relevant that several of the more active guardians were leading town merchants. 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; and 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 guardians opposed the dissolution.

All of these problems stemmed essentially from want of funds, arising in turn from lack of board determination to collect the rates. The Commissioners repeatedly berated the laxness of the guardians with regard to rate collection, and had threatened them with dissolution long before the event (*IR*, 9 Sept 1847). Now in

fairness to the local relief administration it should be acknowledged that there were inherently regressive aspects to the poor rate system. It was organised in such a way that it weighed most heavily on regions least in a position to pay. Where there was greatest poverty, the financial requirement in local poor rates was also greatest. Though Enniskillen presents some anomalies in the makeup of its economy (there clearly was some wealth in the region and tenants were demonstrably capable of paying poor rates) it was certainly 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. Of course the Poor Law Commission was not going to concede such a case, no matter how often the Enniskillen board asked for treasury loans to carry the union through crisis. And the progressive dimension of the poor rate system consisted in the exemption from rates of the poorest smallholders (valued under £4) whose requirements were supposed to be met by their landlords in fee. However, the commissioners had a point. First, the valuation survey had been obstructed and delayed for years without effective board intervention: in May 1843 Enniskillen union was one of only four Irish unions without a completed valuation. 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. Second, in early September 1847, six months before eventual dissolution, the guardians had got around to striking 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 1848 the liabilities of the board amounted to about £7,600 - including £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 probity and good faith of the board was further undermined by the fact that several wealthy guardians were themselves in default.<sup>37</sup> Though debts of this order were not unusual in poorer unions, the neighbouring unions of Lisnaskea and

Lowtherstown fared much better than Enniskillen. The supposition remains that guardians refused to act decisively because this would have entailed bringing great and unwelcome personal cost on their heads. There were few violent confrontations between farmers and collectors in the union and when the vice-guardians set about getting in the rate in March and April 1848 they managed it without disturbance. The guardians had hesitated to impose rates until it was too late and then were reluctant to discipline or punish rate-collectors in the last months of their tenure.

By May 1847 the *Enniskillen Chronicle* was complaining that while the town's traders and shopkeepers were all paying their rates, the rural divisions were building up arrears. Farmers were refusing to pay unless their neighbours were made to pay. One rate collector claimed (with some exaggeration) that 'he would not be able to collect the money even with the assistance of all the constabulary and military in the county'<sup>38</sup>. '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. In June 1847 the guardians had no money to clothe new inmates, and after casting about for aid accepted a consignment of surplus military dress from the Poor Law Commission. In the weeks before dissolution there was increasing pressure on the guardians to act. By mid-June 1847 the Ulster Bank was rejecting most cheques drawn on the board; refusing in particular to honour a cheque for £190 payable to Mr. Burchell, the main supplier of oatmeal to the house. There were no funds in the union account. By mid-December 1847 most union contractors were owed very considerable sums and were bringing in supplies of different sorts very irregularly and in very small amounts, often adulterated, their main aim being at this stage to hold on to their contract until payment was received. Want of funds meant that workhouse officers were paid very irregularly and it is probably no coincidence that house discipline was deplorable. Demoralised officers proved unable to persuade disgruntled inmates to assist with house chores or even to enforce wholesome procedures for dealing with sewage and slops. At one point inmates polluted the yards with impunity and worse, fouled the space under one of the staircases inside the house,

howling down any efforts at stopping them. When it came to voting through outdoor relief, the guardians proved continually obstructive. The question whether twenty or twelve relieving officers should be appointed wasted vital time. Then when it came to its belated introduction in January 1848, the grand sum of £24 was voted for distribution to those eligible for relief out of doors - a maximum of 8d each to any adult, and of 4d for the provision of 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, soon they were conceding that the vice-guardians were doing a good job.<sup>39</sup> Significantly, within a few weeks of the board's dissolution, the collection of poor rates was proceeding satisfactorily.

Administrative failure was intimately related to the matter of rate collection. First, the workhouse opened late because there was enormous controversy over the initial poor law valuation (the final survey probably understated land values), driven entirely by the more vocal and wealthy landowners-cum-guardians. The guardians were also reluctant to set up and operate the mechanism of rate collection. As landowners in fee they did not want to pay for those on their estates below the threshold of exemption. The strong suspicion is that the high death toll in Enniskillen workhouse from famine-related infectious diseases was due to poor regulation of the workhouse diet; resistance to the admission of paupers at crucial phases of the famine; poor sanitation within the house partly generated by the kind of chaos to be expected when officers are unpaid and fail to observe or to enforce normal rules of house conduct; and was partly related to the dogged reluctance of guardians to promote expenditure on a decent fever hospital. Money was available

on loan from the Central Fever Board for building these hospitals but of course taking out a loan would have necessitated realising the rate without delay to meet regular repayments. The laxity of board attendance on the part of guardians was probably connected to a refusal to 'move business on', because doing so would always involve sanctioning items of expenditure implicitly lead to the improved collection of rates. Things came to a standstill at board meetings when rates were mooted.

The question might be asked, what was in it for the rate collectors? Why shouldn't they have gone steadily about the collection, given that they got paid on commission, and dealt with ratepayers other than their employers, the landowning guardians? It appears that they acted in collusion with several of the guardians (or even the majority), cheered on by the earl of Enniskillen. From the start the collectors had got a very good deal in terms of commission. Most of the appointees were related to one or other of the guardians. And they were allowed to hold on to rates gathered for a lot longer than they should have been. Accordingly, it is likely that the collectors were grateful for income received or anticipated and played along with the board. And it was naturally more convenient for defaulting guardians to take shelter behind general failure in the collection than to be distinguished for individual non-payment as rates were brought in.

The last straw for the Poor Law Commission was the persistent attempt by the guardians to get an unsecured loan from government to tide them over crisis (allegedly until the rate collection would work smoothly). The Commission was not convinced that the guardians had any real intention of putting the collection of rates in order. Though the board passed a motion on 18 January 1848 calling on the rate collectors to make large payments on pain of prosecution, this was the roar of a paper tiger and nothing of any consequence happened in subsequent weeks. The motion was passed for effect, to impress the Commission in the course of negotiations for a loan.

#### 4. ADMISSIONS

Data on workhouse admissions offers a different perspective on the management of workhouses. Such data survive only for a minority of workhouses, however.<sup>40</sup> As noted earlier, the Enniskillen admissions registers survive, although 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 above, the union's population was almost equally divided in confessional terms. As Table 4 shows, 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. This does not in itself discount the possibility that Catholics were discriminated against at point of entry by an exclusively Protestant staff and board – we do not know the Catholic share of the poorest strata of population. But the trend of the data is suggestive of impartial administration. Looking at survival rates among the inmates of different denominations may allay doubts on this score. 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).

[Table 4 about here]

Table 4 also indicates that Catholics were over-represented among women, orphans, deserted children, and both married and widowed inmates. The majority of the relative small number of children dubbed 'bastards' were Protestant, perhaps because such infants tended to be raised in the Church of Ireland, whatever their origins.<sup>41</sup> Catholics were also over-represented in all age categories.

Finally, 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. This outcome is consistent with the more general finding<sup>42</sup> that males are more likely to succumb to famine than females.

## 5. CONCLUSION

One of the main reasons for the massive death toll of the Great Famine was the decision of the authorities in London to place the main responsibility for relieving the poor on a locally financed poor law system. This compounded the burden borne by those living in areas least in a position to provide relief. In the overall scheme of things, then, the main focus of this paper is of less importance than some other issues in famine historiography. Still, workhouse management arguably mattered too, sometimes exacerbating or mitigating the contours of suffering and death. Our study of how Enniskillen's elite acquitted themselves is hardly reassuring. Yet 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 of guardians in March 1848 corroborates.



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TABLE 1: OCCUPATIONS AND LITERACY IN FERMANAGH BEFORE THE FAMINE

Location	%TMH21	%AG21	%MT41	%ILL41M	%ILL41F	%POPCH4151
<i>Baronies</i>						
(*) Clonkelly	53.8	32.1	19.0	39.5	50.5	-34.4
(*) Coole	60.2	31.4	18.1	39.4	52.0	-36.3
(*) Glenawley	44.7	37.8	16.9	41.5	58.6	-27.8
(*) Knockninny	51.0	37.2	12.8	45.8	62.7	-20.8
Lurg	17.0	56.8	23.2	41.1	53.7	-26.1
Magheraboy	30.0	46.1	22.3	34.2	53.7	-26.5
(*) Magherastephana	57.1	31.3	24.0	34.2	43.3	-23.0
(*) Tyrkennedy	36.7	40.4	26.2	35.5	46.3	-18.7
<i>Fermanagh</i>	45.1	38.3	21.4	39.4	51.9	-25.8
<i>Ulster</i>	55.3	31.1	32.2	35.5	45.4	-15.7
<i>Ireland</i>	41.2	40.1	23.9	46.5	58.7	-19.8

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

TABLE 4. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF WORKHOUSE INMATES

TABLE 4. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF WORKHOUSE INMATES			
Age	Protestants	Catholics	% Catholic
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	1,246	2,426	66.1
Males	590	1,096	65.0
Females	662	1,610	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
Date of Admission			
1/12/45 to 30/6/46	236	366	60.8
1/7/46 to 31/12/46	455	888	66.1
1/1/47 to 31/3/47	305	738	70.8
1/4/47 to 4/7/47	258	448	63.5
Age	Male	Female	% Female
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	1,697	2,034	54.5
<i>Source:</i> Enniskillen Workhouse Admissions Registers			



## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> And Jim Donnelly's *The Irish Potato Famine* is noteworthy in this respect.

<sup>2</sup> Gray, *The Making of the Irish Poor Law*.

<sup>3</sup> For more general accounts of the poor law and the famine, see Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*; Ó Gráda, *Black '47*; Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*.

<sup>4</sup> *This Great Calamity*, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Ó Gráda, 'Yardsticks for Irish workhouses'.

<sup>6</sup> Ó Gráda, *Black '47*, pp. 50-2.

<sup>7</sup> Ó Gráda, 'Famine, trauma, and memory'.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Eiríksson, *Parsonstown*; Ó Murchadha, *Sable Wings over the Sand*; McAtasney 1997.

<sup>9</sup> See however Moane, 'Limerick'; Foley, 'Killarney'.

<sup>10</sup> Guinnane and Ó Gráda, 'The workhouses and Irish famine mortality'; 'Mortality in the North Dublin Union during the Great Famine'; see too Ó Gráda, 'Yardsticks'.

<sup>11</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 Eiríksson, *Ennistymon*; Eiríksson, *Parsonstown*; McCabe, *Enniskillen*; Grace, *Nenagh*; Hickey, *Famine in West Cork*; McAtasney, 'This Dreadful Visitation'; Moane, 'Limerick'; O'Brien, *Famine and Community in Mullingar Poor Law Union*; Ó Cathaoir,

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'The poor law in County Wicklow'; O'Gorman, *Pride of Paper Tigers*; Ó Murchadha, *Sable Wings over the Sand*.

<sup>12</sup> Lindsay and Fitzpatrick, *Records of the Great Famine*, is a useful guide to what is available. However, its description of what survives for Enniskillen poor law union is inaccurate.

<sup>13</sup> Compare Vincent, 'A political orchestration'.

<sup>14</sup> There were several minor changes between then and 1847 and major changes in April 1850, which need not concern us here.

<sup>15</sup> Inglis, *Tour in Ireland*, p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Lewis, *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (London, 1837), vol. 1, 606.

<sup>17</sup> For more local context see Cunningham, 'The famine in Fermanagh'; Livingstone, *The Fermanagh Story*; Mac Annaidh, *Fermanagh Books, Writers, and Newspapers of the Nineteenth Century*; McAtamney, 'The Great Famine in County Fermanagh'; Maguire, *Hey-days, Fair-days and Not-so-good Old Days*; Vincent, 'A political orchestration'. On the poor law in Ulster Grant, 'The Famine in Ulster', is still very useful.

<sup>18</sup> *EC*, 22 October 1846; *IR*, 1 October 1846; compare Miller, 'Presbyterians'.

<sup>19</sup> Livingstone, *Fermanagh Story*; Cunningham, 'The famine in Fermanagh'; McAtamney, 'The Great Famine in County Fermanagh'; McCabe, *Enniskillen*.

<sup>20</sup> See *IR*, Sept 1847 to February 1848.

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<sup>21</sup> *EC*, 1 Oct. 1846.

<sup>22</sup> *IR*, 27 August 1847.

<sup>23</sup> *EC*, 29 April, 6 May 1847.

<sup>24</sup> Public Records Office of Northern Ireland [PRONI], BGM, BG14/A/2 [rough minutes of meetings of the Enniskillen Board of Guardians].

<sup>25</sup> *EC*, 13 May 1847.

<sup>26</sup> *EC*, 20 May 1847.

<sup>27</sup> *IR*, 6 May 1847.

<sup>28</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>29</sup> Mokyr and Ó Gráda, 'Famine disease and famine mortality: lessons from the Irish

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experience, 1845-50', p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> EC, 27 May 1847; 8 July 1847.

<sup>31</sup> EC 3 June 1847; 22 July 1847.

<sup>32</sup> PRONI, BG14/A/2.

<sup>33</sup> IR, 20<sup>th</sup> Nov 1845; 9<sup>th</sup> Sept 1847.

<sup>34</sup> PRONI, BG14/A/1, 17 November 1846, 26 January 1847, 16 March 1847, 31 August 1847, 28 September 1847.

<sup>35</sup> e.g. Ó Gráda, *Black '47*, p. 250, fn. 84.

<sup>36</sup> IUP, vol. 3, pp. 107-126.

<sup>37</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>38</sup> EC, 29 April 1847.

<sup>39</sup> IR, 23 March 1848, 18 May 1848.

<sup>40</sup> Lindsay and Fitzpatrick, *Records of the Irish Famine*.

<sup>41</sup> On illegitimacy during the famine see Kennedy, 'Bastardy'.

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<sup>42</sup> E.g. Ó Grada, *Famine*, pp. 98-102; Macintyre, 'Famine and the female mortality advantage'.