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‘A Gigantic System of Casual Pauperism’: The Contested Role of the Workhouse in Late Nineteenth-Century Belfast

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On 28 June 1882, shortly after midnight, Sub-Constable John Duke, on his night beat on the Lisburn Road in Belfast, came across a young woman and her two small children – one an infant, the other a child of about five years old – crouched on the pavement against the walls of the city’s workhouse. Seeing that the woman was respectably dressed and was clearly in distress, the policeman approached her and enquired to know what she was doing there. The woman, Ellen M., explained that three months earlier her husband, a bank clerk, had left her without support and that, in her own words, ‘she had lived as long as she could, she could support herself no longer and that she had been advised that this [the workhouse] was her only remedy’. Having travelled in from Greencastle, a ‘respectable’ middle-class village on the outskirts of the town, and arrived after the workhouse gates were locked she had been told by the porter that she was too late and would not be admitted. Constable Duke finally succeeded in rousing the master and gaining admission for the woman and her children at 1.30 a.m. A Mr Williamson, who lived next to the workhouse and who had been woken by the voices, testified that the woman ‘was not the sort of woman you normally see at the workhouse gate’. He also said that, as he was admitting her to the workhouse, the master shouted at her in an ‘abusive manner – a manner that one would not even use to a dog’.¹

At the time when the original incident occurred, it led to widespread public condemnation of the harsh regime that existed in Belfast workhouse, letters to newspapers criticizing the way in which the ‘respectable poor’ were treated by the poor law authorities and, eventually, to the holding of a Poor Law Inquiry. Closer examination of this particular case, however, raises many questions about the Irish poor law, revealing multiple layers of meaning surrounding perceptions and the reality of

poverty, welfare and the poor. Under examination at the Poor Law Inquiry on 14 August 1882, two months after this incident had occurred, Ellen admitted that she did not have a husband, neither had she come in from Greencastle. Rather she and her illegitimate children lived in lodgings just off the Grosvenor Road, minutes from the workhouse. When asked again why she had brought her two small children out on such a night to seek admission in the workhouse she admitted that she had come to the workhouse in order that the poor law guardians might prosecute the father of her children for failing to support them.²

This incident, and many others like it, highlights the very real disparity that existed between the ideals of the poor law – order, control, rationality – and the chaotic reality that was the urban workhouse in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, it suggests that the function of the workhouse was being contested by those who administered it, those who paid rates for its upkeep and those who sought refuge within its walls. It introduces the binary of ‘norm’ and ‘deviance’ and raises the question of whether there existed different levels of welfare available to those whom late nineteenth-century society considered able to fit within its standards of normality and decency, and to the others who fell outside those boundaries. Did society accept different standards of treatment for those who conformed and those who failed to conform to these culturally reinforced norms? In the case of Ellen M., she had to temporarily assume a character that fitted this ‘norm’ in the belief that she would thus have a much better chance of receiving relief. One wonders, would the same public outcry at her treatment have resulted had she not come across as a respectable married women? And, finally, it raises the question of perception and reality, the validity of different accounts and the reliability of witness statements regarding the operation of the poor law in late nineteenth-century Ireland.

This chapter will examine these tensions as they worked themselves out in the provision of poor relief in Belfast at the turn of the century. Through an examination of poor law records and newspaper coverage, it will demonstrate the extent to which the reality of Belfast workhouse – as experienced both by those who were relieved and those who worked and administered it – deviated from the ‘norm’ of how relief was officially supposed to be administered as legislated for by the Irish Poor Law. By exploring the contested space that the workhouse represented in the late nineteenth-century

city it will highlight the increasingly important role that the workhouse played there for those considered 'deviant' by Victorian society.

The poor law in the city

Firstly, however, we must set Belfast workhouse in its social and economic context. Nineteenth-century Belfast had witnessed a phenomenal growth in terms of its population, the development of its industries and its economic output. By the 1890s Belfast had 'the largest weaving factory, the largest shipping output, the largest tobacco factory and the largest rope-works in the world'.³ This economic success and rapid growth was not without its price, however, as Belfast also experienced serious problems of housing and sanitation, disease, poverty and destitution – something that placed a huge strain on the city's welfare system. Young women, in particular, flocked to the city in search of work in one of the many linen mills that now dominated the city's skyline. Census figures show that in 1881 there were 24,245 people employed in the textile industry in the city. Out of these, 17,600 (73 per cent) were women of whom just under a third were under the age of 20.⁴ By 1907, 61,000 people were employed in the city's textile industry, the great majority of them women.⁵ While work was available to many, it was not secure. Times of illness, pregnancy or domestic crises could lead to a woman being unable to carry on working. There were others who, unable to find suitable employment, resorted to a wide variety of strategies for survival, including prostitution. Likewise, men who had travelled to the city in search of work often discovered that they lacked the necessary skills for the kinds of jobs that were available. Shipbuilding, the main source of employment for men in the city, demanded specialized skill-sets for most of the better-paid jobs; so many of the young men who came to Belfast in search of work were lucky to be taken on as casual labourers.⁶ Despite the economic boom that Belfast was enjoying, therefore, men and women, old and young could all find themselves vulnerable to sickness, unemployment and destitution, and pushed increasingly to the margins of society.

Relief for Belfast's poor came in a variety of forms – there were numerous philanthropic organizations for the sick and infirm, there were shelters for 'fallen women' attached to the three main churches in the city and there was the old poor house run by Belfast Charitable Society. But, as was

the case throughout Ireland, the overwhelming majority of those that sought and received poor relief did so under the auspices of the Irish Poor Law. The Poor Law, introduced in 1838 and based closely on the new English Poor Law of 1834, represented the first national system of poor relief in the country. For administrative purposes the country was initially divided into 130 poor law Unions in each of which the poor would be maintained by rates collected from the owners of property. Each Union was administered by a board of poor law guardians, some of whom were elected from ratepayers and some appointed from the magistracy, all of whom had to be resident in the Union. Their role was to meet regularly to oversee the administration of the poor law and to raise rates to pay for the upkeep of the poor of their Union.

At the heart of the Irish Poor Law was the workhouse: a workhouse was to be built in the main town of each poor law Union. A fundamental principle of the Irish Poor Law was that the only form of relief to be granted should be admission into the workhouse where crude shelter and minimal sustenance was offered in return for days of tedious manual labour. Another was that only the truly destitute, the ‘deserving poor’ rather than the idle and profligate, would receive relief. It was aimed at those who were unable to fend for themselves – the vulnerable, infirm or elderly – and those who met society’s rather narrow definition of ‘deserving’. Intense public and intellectual debate at the time surrounded the introduction of welfare – indeed there were many who held that this was a dangerous course of action for a government to take, that by introducing a system of legalized poor relief you were encouraging indolence among the poorer classes.⁷ In order to prevent this ‘misuse’ or ‘abuse’ of the system and to ensure that only those who really needed it sought and received relief, the principle of ‘less eligibility’ was to be applied – conditions in the workhouse were to be worse than those of the poorest-paid labourer outside the workhouse. Working conditions in the workhouse were to be so unpleasant and maintenance so basic that none but the truly destitute would willingly seek relief there. In addition, it was intended that the shame and stigma attached to the label ‘pauper’ would act as an extra deterrent.

By the middle of the nineteenth century 163 workhouses had been erected in towns across Ireland. Austere and forbidding, they physically occupied a prominent position in the towns and came to be reviled as an institution. Reformer Laura Stephens, writing in the *New Ireland Review* in 1900, said of

them that ‘the great gloomy pile of grey stone buildings, surrounded with high walls is unmistakable’.⁸ They were constructed to accommodate hundreds of paupers, the maximum capacity of each depending on the size of the Union’s population. The buildings were generally constructed to a common plan, designed to enforce strict segregation of various classes of pauper while at the same time facilitating supervision by workhouse officials. Denounced in Irish nationalist rhetoric as a degrading and foreign system and abhorred by many sections of Irish society, the workhouse became demonized at the time, and indeed has remained so right up to the present in local memory and in popular historiography. Even today, many speak of elderly relatives who fear going to a particular hospital or nursing home because the building used to be the workhouse. John O’Connor, writing his popular history of the Irish workhouse in 1993, described it as ‘the most hated and feared institution ever established in Ireland’.⁹ However, as I have already suggested, the reality of how and why the workhouse was used was much more complex and varied than has been popularly imagined.

A strategy for survival – using the workhouse

Despite the fact that the workhouse was intended to be so unpleasant as to deter people from seeking relief, by the latter decades of the nineteenth century one of the issues that increasingly vexed Irish poor law guardians was the rising number of people who made use of it in ways that were never intended by the architects of the poor law. One of the main problems was the increase in the number of those who used the workhouse as a place of casual lodging, coming into the workhouse for a night so they could get accommodation and a meal of sorts and then discharging themselves the following morning. Many of these ‘casuals’ travelled aimlessly round Ireland, moving from one workhouse to another and then reappearing back at the same workhouse several months later. By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, it is evident that many Irish workhouses had come to serve a much wider definition of the poor than the so called ‘deserving poor’ for whom they were originally intended – that, indeed, their principal function had changed from being a place where only the utterly destitute would receive relief in return for hard manual labour to one where large numbers of able-bodied were admitted for a single night, discharging themselves again early the next day – those who, according to the prevailing discourse of eligibility, would have been regarded as the ‘deviant poor’.¹⁰

This change in the use of the workhouse can be clearly seen from an analysis of the workhouse admission registers. These massive volumes recorded the name, address, gender, religion, occupation, state of health and dates of admission and discharge of every individual admitted to the workhouse. The collection and analysis of this data has therefore left us with an accurate picture of who used the workhouse and how the demographic profile of those seeking admission changed over time. The most obvious trend that emerges from this analysis is that towards the end of the century there was a steady increase in the number of people being admitted to many workhouses across the north of Ireland. For rural Unions, whose populations had remained fairly steady or even declined and which were generally enjoying a greater degree of prosperity than had previously been the case, this seems to have been a surprising trend. In Belfast, this increase was particularly dramatic, something which placed the administration under great strain: even the system of entering details of those admitted into the workhouse registers, normally highly regulated, broke down under the weight of the sheer numbers turning up at the doors each day. From the end of the Famine through to the mid 1870s the numbers admitted to Belfast workhouse in any given year had always remained in and around 10,000. By 1880 the annual intake had risen to around 20,000, while in 1913 over 29,000 people were registered as having been admitted.¹¹

This increase in admissions can be partly explained by the population boom which Belfast experienced over the period, with people from all over rural Ulster and further afield flocking to the city in search of work. But this is only one possible explanation. What was possibly a more significant factor was the changing attitude that the city's poor showed toward the workhouse. When records are examined, it becomes apparent that the way in which the workhouse was being used was changing. There were actually fewer people staying in the workhouse for long periods of time, but the numbers of those admitted who remained in for one or two nights increased significantly.¹² Rather than being seen as a place to be feared and shunned, and only used by those who were utterly destitute, the workhouse gradually began to serve a variety of purposes for many groups of people who were never included in the poor law's idea of the 'deserving poor' – those who turned up seeking admission during the day and evening, spent one or two nights there and then moved on again. These were the

people who were swelling the numbers of admissions and, it seems, the authorities could do little to prevent it. One group of people who seem to have used the workhouse in this way was the economic migrants we have already mentioned. For many who arrived without family to go to, who were unfamiliar with the city, or who simply did not have the money to pay for a night's accommodation, the workhouse may have been the only place to seek temporary refuge. In addition, unlike Dublin and many British cities, Belfast did not have a night asylum where the range of casuals – the temporary homeless or migrants from the country – could find food and shelter for a night. This was something that frequently caused friction between Belfast's guardians (answerable to the ratepayers) on one hand and the central Local Government Board on the other and reveals the real tension that existed between the poor, the local poor law guardians and the official poor law administration. At one meeting a guardian angrily declared that:

They had no right to keep paupers from Antrim or Newtownards in the Belfast Union. It was a great hardship that they were saddling the ratepayers with extra cost without making any effort to have a law passed which would compel them to keep none but paupers from their own union.

Another guardian agreed that 'every time they brought the matter to the Local Government Board they were informed that "where destitution existed it was the duty of the guardians to relieve it"'. He added that:

Belfast had such a name that people came to it from all quarters. They brought their aunts and uncles and grandmothers with them and when they took a house in which there was not room for those relatives they sent them up to the workhouse.¹³

Workhouse admission records would confirm this picture – many of those who were admitted on a number of occasions gave their address as somewhere outside Belfast the first time they were admitted, and as a street somewhere in Belfast on subsequent admissions.¹⁴

Belfast’s established poor, those already living in the city, also seem to have used the workhouse as a place of casual accommodation. By the closing decades of the nineteenth century a picture emerges of the poor coming back and forth from the workhouse on a regular basis, many of them shifting about constantly from one lodging house to another and using the workhouse as somewhere to stay in between times. Taking four sample months between October 1900 and July 1901 it is possible to trace large numbers of people who come back to the workhouse again and again. As Figure 1 shows, a total of 110 people were admitted to Belfast workhouse four or more times during that four-month period, two of them being admitted ten times during the same period.

Figure 3.1: Table showing number of repeat admissions in Belfast workhouse in October 1900 and January, April and July 1901

number of times admitted	number of people
10	2
9	3
8	6
7	2
6	11
5	24
4	62
Total	110

Source: Belfast workhouse indoor register, 1900-01¹⁵

When we look beyond the statistics to examine the individual people who were returning so regularly to the workhouse, we see a picture of insecurity and rootlessness, people who seem to have had no regular home but who moved from one lodging house to another. For many of these, the workhouse

appears to have been a fairly regular retreat. As might be expected, many of these were elderly people, generally either single or widowed and therefore perhaps more likely to need institutional support if they fell ill or could not support themselves. Perhaps more surprisingly, a significant proportion of those who frequented the workhouse were aged between 16 and 60, and were people who would have been considered able-bodied adults and therefore not eligible for statutory welfare. Maggie F., a 32-year-old mill worker and a widow, was admitted ten times during this period, each time accompanied by her seven-year-old son. About half of these times, her address is registered as being the workhouse, while at other times her address is given as either Gertrude Street, Vulcan Street or Foundry Street, all of which appear to have been small terraced streets located in the largely Protestant Ballymacarrett area just to the east of the city centre. The length of time she and her son stayed in the workhouse ranged from three days to three weeks. Joseph S., a 40-year-old labourer, was admitted to the workhouse eight times during this four-month period, while John L., a 60-year-old iron dresser, turned up six times, his address variously given as Balkan Street and John Street, both of which were situated off the Catholic Falls Road to the west of the city, and Sheriff Street in Short Strand, a small Catholic enclave in the predominantly Protestant east of the city. Not just individuals, but entire families seemed to live this way. John B. was admitted nine times over this period, most of these times with his wife and three children; and each time their address was different. It must be remembered that these glimpses of the workhouse registers were taken at four-monthly intervals, and there is every reason to believe that the same people frequented the workhouse just as much in the intervening periods.¹⁶

Public and official responses

So great was the extent of this type of use that Belfast's poor law guardians and sections of the local press were constantly preoccupied with the appropriate responses to the problem. Minute books and newspaper accounts of meetings reveal the extent to which this matter seemed to dominate both official proceedings and public debate. The debate surrounding this issue highlights not only the helplessness of the authorities in the face of this use of the poor law, but also the extent to which the established discourse of welfare provision was being challenged. Belfast's workhouse administration

was frequently under attack from the city's rate-paying public who complained that it was being used as a casual lodging house by large sections of the city's poorest classes, something which was in complete defiance of the fundamental principles of the poor law. This line of attack was spearheaded by the city's conservative and unionist newspapers, those whose readership largely constituted Belfast's ratepayers. In one article, written in 1885, the *Belfast News-Letter* states in a rather tongue-in-cheek fashion, that the workhouse had been converted into:

a huge lodging house by a large number of lusty, happy-go-lucky tramps and vagrants who deemed it an honour and a privilege to be able to withdraw from the bustle and noise of the busy town to the shades of calm seclusion and philosophic retirement which the splendidly build edifice on the Lisburn Rd known as the 'house' affords.¹⁷

The problem had become so serious that the chairman and several members of the board of guardians travelled to Dublin to compare the way the workhouse was used there with their experience in Belfast. The results were striking: during the first six months of 1884, 500 more paupers were admitted to Belfast workhouse than to Dublin's two workhouses put together. However, when they investigated further, they found that the actual number being relieved on any given night in Belfast was much lower than in Dublin, as inmates only stayed for a few nights at a time, thus confirming what the city's worthies had long suspected – that for many sections of Belfast's poorer classes the workhouse served a useful purpose as a casual lodging house, their food and shelter being provided at the expense of Belfast's ratepayers. 'This,' claimed an outraged editorial in the *Belfast News-Letter*, 'proves that in this town there is a gigantic system of casual pauperism never contemplated by the poor laws.' The article went on to state that:

this intolerable practice of tramps and vagrants running in and out at their pleasure and convenience, enjoying themselves outside during the day and returning to be housed and fed by the ratepayers at night must receive a check.

Belfast workhouse was, by the chairman's own admission, 'no longer a workhouse according to the intention of the law'.¹⁸

What really exercised Belfast's poor law guardians was the way in which sections of the city's poorer classes – men and women alike – used the workhouse as somewhere to sleep at night, discharging themselves first thing in the morning, only to return late the following night seeking admission again. This was completely contrary to one of the fundamental principles of the poor law that, in return for shelter, the able-bodied would spend their day engaged in hard manual labour. As was the case with Ellen M. which we noted at the beginning of this paper, Belfast's workhouse officials were frequently being castigated for leaving people – particularly women with children – lying outside the workhouse walls overnight. In November 1877, complaints were made in the press that a young woman, Mary S., was found in the street outside the workhouse in the middle of the night. The following month the Town Inspector sent the Board of Guardians a written statement detailing a list of destitute people seen outside the workhouse in the middle of the night over a period of several months. The picture thus created, particularly by sections of the press, seemed to confirm the popular image of unmitigated hardship and utter helplessness on the part of the poor. Yet when some of these stories are investigated more closely, as was the case with Ellen M., a more complex picture emerges. Often, it was in fact the authorities who were helpless to prevent the workhouse being used in this way. When Mary S.'s case was examined, it emerged that she regularly discharged herself from the workhouse in the morning after having had a place to sleep and a meal of sorts. On this occasion, having left the workhouse that morning she returned late at night in an advanced state of drunkenness, without a relieving officer's ticket of admission and, according to the night watchman, clearly in possession of enough money to pay for lodgings.¹⁹

Responding to the statement of the Town Inspector on the matter, the chairman of Belfast Board of Guardians, David Taylor, agreed that women with children should never be left outside the workhouse overnight. However he went on to draw attention to the problem faced by the poor law authorities – that of preventing women such as these from using the workhouse as an easy place to find free lodging and thus discouraging this kind of behaviour:

We must endeavour to devise some means of preventing these inhuman mothers taking their children out of the house and dragging them through the streets of Belfast half-clothed and hungry until they think fit in the middle of the night to come back with them again to the workhouse.²⁰

When the matter was raised in parliament, one MP made it clear that guardians and officials were totally helpless to prevent this casual use of the workhouse. One woman, he told the house, had left the workhouse and been readmitted 59 times over a period of several years, just one of the many who came and went on a regular basis.²¹ Responding to criticisms of the workhouse administration made by Belfast magistrate (and, of course, ratepayer) Robert Hamilton, Taylor again reiterated this sense of powerlessness on the part of the authorities:

Mr Hamilton states that the workhouse is more like a lodging house than anything else and complains of paupers being allowed out for the day to return in the evening. The Master has no power to prevent this – any inmate can leave the house on giving three hours' notice and return on the same day and should the Master refuse such admission, then a hue and cry would be raised by the public about the cruelty and inhumanity of the workhouse officials for leaving women and children lying exposed all night at the workhouse gates.²²

Belfast workhouse was also being criticized by a number of prominent people for the ‘moral degeneracy’ it exhibited in terms of both the laxity of discipline among staff and of the questionable morality of those admitted. By the late 1870s, the immorality and vice of the workhouse featured heavily in the pages of the unionist and nationalist press alike. In March 1879, the nationalist *Freeman’s Journal* carried a front page story about the serious allegations made against the workhouse administration by the Roman Catholic chaplain of the workhouse, Rev Bernard McCann:

Very serious charges, we note, have been made against the Belfast Workhouse administration by the Catholic chaplain, the Rev Bernard McCann. Portions of its wards are hotbeds of immorality. Women of bad character, he alleges, are freely admitted into the house ... the really deserving poor, the rev gentleman goes on to say, prefer to endure hunger and cold outside to entering such a place, while the class whom the Poor Law never intended sheltering or cherishing are enabled to hibernate comfortably, are provided with nurses and have every want supplied, only to enable them, with the return of health and fine weather, to start afresh upon their career of dissipation and vice.²³

Just the previous month, Belfast magistrate Robert Hamilton had made a very public condemnation of conditions in the workhouse. In a speech which was reported in the unionist *Ulster Examiner*, he condemned the workhouse as ‘a den of immorality, drunkenness and vice’. Women of ill-repute, he announced, were mixing freely with other inmates, while many young unmarried women had given birth in the workhouse.²⁴ In the House of Commons speech already mentioned, the member of parliament for Clonmel, Mr Moore, roundly condemned ‘the disgraceful state of management in Belfast Workhouse’, levelling many accusations of lax morality and ill-discipline at the workhouse staff and management.²⁵ Comments such as these seemed to confirm popular impressions of the degenerate state of Belfast workhouse and highlight the ongoing debate over the type of people who

were considered worthy to receive relief in the workhouse – the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’, the ‘norm’ and the ‘deviant’.

Perception and reality

But how much truth lay in these accusations? A Poor Law Inquiry, held in 1881 as a direct result of these accusations, contained some damning evidence regarding the administration of the workhouse and laid wide open the whole debate surrounding the question of eligibility for relief on the grounds of perceived morality – of conformity and ‘deviance’. Evidence was given that the master of the workhouse had, indeed, left women and children lying outside the workhouse overnight in cold and wet conditions on a number of occasions and also that he had been under the influence of alcohol while in charge of the workhouse. However, the Relieving Officer, whose duty it was to provide a ‘line’ or ticket of admission, testified that at least one of the girls who had been refused admission was what was known as a ‘runner’ or someone who repeatedly left the workhouse during the day only to come back late at night. Thus the difficulty of discerning ‘eligibility’ is highlighted – if someone is wilfully disregarding the rules surrounding relief, should the ratepayers of the city pay for them to be fed and sheltered? The chairman of the Board of Guardians, David Hamilton, stated that the guardians were doing all in their power to prevent this abuse of the workhouse facilities, and had recently introduced a rule that women ‘of this class’ should commit to staying in the workhouse for at least a month ‘before quitting’.

When faced with the accusation that women of ‘ill repute’ (single mothers and prostitutes) mixed freely with ‘decent’ women, Hamilton denied that such freedom of movement between the classes of women was permitted. He did, however, stress that all types of people were admitted to the workhouse and strenuously challenged the assumption that eligibility for relief should be determined by moral character:

I am aware that there are large numbers of ill-conducted women admitted from time to time into the house. The only ground upon which they or any others

are admitted is that of destitution. My impression, and that, I believe, of the board, is that we have nothing to do with character in considering the granting of relief, but simply to consider the question of destitution.²⁶

Regarding the use that single mothers made of the workhouse, a close examination of the indoor registers would seem to confirm that a significant number of single mothers and single girls who were pregnant sought accommodation in the workhouse. Looking at three years – 1864, 1878 and 1901 – on average around eight per cent of the women admitted who were aged between 16 and 60 were single and pregnant, while anywhere up to a quarter of the women in this age bracket were single mothers. In total, during the month of October 1900, there were 28 single pregnant girls admitted to Belfast workhouse. A further 51 women were admitted with illegitimate children.²⁷ Rural workhouses were also used in this way, but, perhaps not surprisingly, the city workhouse showed an even higher percentage of adult women who were single mothers or mothers-to-be. For women such as these, often ostracized by their families, or by communities that placed a high value on moral conformity, the workhouse offered a roof over their head, food for themselves and their children and the possibility of healthcare during the birth of their child.

There were alternative places of shelter for single girls such as these, many of them attached to one of the main religious denominations in the city. The Ulster Magdalene Asylum was run by the Church of Ireland, while the Ulster Female Penitentiary in Brunswick Street was closely connected to the Presbyterian Church – each of these sought to provide shelter for women who were working as prostitutes or had fallen on hard times, and were run on a strictly non-denominational basis. The Good Shepherd Convent at Ballynafeigh provided residential care for up to 30 girls. While the conditions in these asylums were generally much more pleasant than those in the workhouse, they were physically restricted in the number they could admit through lack of space and resources. Furthermore it was possible that the reforming ethos of these institutions, and the fact that the women were not allowed to keep their illegitimate children, rendered them in some ways less attractive than the workhouse, where at least women enjoyed a certain degree of freedom to keep their illegitimate children and, it seems, to come and go as they pleased.²⁸

In line with the accusations levelled at it, Belfast's workhouse does also seem to have provided semi-permanent accommodation for some of the city's prostitutes, something which caused further concern for the worthy ratepayers and poor law guardians of the city. Prostitution was rife in certain areas of nineteenth-century Belfast, in common with all the major towns and cities of nineteenth-century Ireland. Philanthropist and Congregationalist clergyman Rev W.M. O'Hanlon, recording his experiences of the city's poorest classes, noted the existence of 'five notorious brothels' in one street, while in another there were nine. Hudson's Entry (Gresham Street) was described as 'a complete den of vice and uncleanness, probably unsurpassed in what is called the civilized world'. Newspapers also contained regular reports of riots, theft and drunkenness and assault in 'houses of ill repute' across the city.²⁹ One estimate suggests that in 1845 there were 236 prostitutes operating out of brothels in various parts of the city.³⁰ Across the country, it was a fairly common occurrence for prostitutes to be admitted to workhouses. Admission registers frequently show women having their occupation registered as 'prostitute', although this has to be treated with a degree of caution, as women with several illegitimate children were often labelled in this way regardless of whether they acted as prostitutes or not. The workhouse authorities were frequently lambasted for the laxity of moral control exercised in the workhouses. One public letter, written in 1854, condemned the poor law authorities for failing to segregate women of varying moral character within the workhouse, claiming that

Miscreants became inmates of the workhouse for the sole purpose of seducing young girls of tender years to leave the house and enter on a life of infamy; and in many cases they have been successful.³¹

An examination of the admission registers for Belfast workhouse would confirm that prostitutes – or those so labelled – not only frequented the workhouse, but seemed to make it their semi-permanent accommodation. One woman, Mary-Ann S., for example, her occupation listed as prostitute, was admitted to Belfast workhouse with her one-year-old daughter six times during the month of October 1900, each time staying in the workhouse for several days. In total that month they spent 25 nights out

of 31 in the workhouse. In the same month, Mary-Ann C., also listed as a prostitute and who also had one child, was admitted four times but for longer periods at a time. She and her child were admitted on 8 October and remained in the workhouse for six days. The day after they were discharged, they returned to the workhouse and remained for a further five days, a pattern that continued for the rest of the month and, presumably, for many months.³² Some of the women registered as prostitutes who were admitted in October 1900 came from reform homes, some came from the gaol, but many of them gave their address simply as 'workhouse'. Two stand out in particular – Bridget T., aged 40, and Sophie S., whose age seems to have ranged between 45 and 50, both of whom were admitted numerous times. Once or twice their address is given as the gaol, or a street in Belfast, but the vast majority of times their address is given as 'the workhouse'. For women such as these, who appear to have been completely outside society's view of the 'norm', the workhouse was possibly the only refuge available. Despite the regulations established by the architects of the Irish Poor Law, the principles of 'less eligibility' on which the legislation was based and the public outcry from the city's moral middle classes, these women chose to utilize the poor law, and the workhouse in particular, as one of their strategies for survival.³³

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to examine some of the tensions that existed between those who sought relief, those who administered it and those who paid for it in late nineteenth-century Belfast. In this quintessentially Victorian industrializing city, dominated as it was by a largely Presbyterian, middle-class mercantile elite, it is particularly interesting to explore the public discourse surrounding ideas of inclusion and exclusion; to look at those who were deemed deserving of relief and those who, because of perceived deviance from the social and moral 'norms' set by society or enshrined in the Poor Law, were regarded as 'undeserving'; and, finally, to examine the ways in which those who were regarded as the 'undeserving poor' continued to include the workhouse in their range of strategies for survival.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Belfast workhouse seems to have become a sanctuary for many different groups of people. For those whom the poor law sought to exclude from eligibility – the able-

bodied poor or the ‘casuals’ or night lodgers who just wanted somewhere to sleep before heading on – the workhouse seems to have served a useful purpose, one which the poor law had never intended. For those women whom society regarded as morally ‘deviant’ it offered a place to shelter, a temporary or even semi-permanent accommodation for them and their illegitimate children. Once within the workhouse walls, there seems to have been little moral censure – indeed, it was, perhaps, this freedom from censure that made the workhouse seem a less formidable option than one of the city’s reformatory homes. Furthermore, it seems that these women had freedom to come and go more or less as they pleased.

Belfast workhouse was undoubtedly a deeply unpleasant place to have to spend even a single night; however, the records demonstrate clearly that it served a variety of useful functions for some sections of the city’s poor. In defiance of the core principles of the poor law and despite the repeated attempts on the part of the authorities to control what they saw as a massive abuse of the system, the poor increasingly made choices, utilized the workhouse as suited them and resisted the attempts of the poor law to differentiate between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor. In doing so, those who could be perceived as ‘deviant’ from the norm represented a significant challenge to the dominant constructs of poverty and its relief in late nineteenth-century Ireland.

¹ *Belfast News-Letter*, 15 August 1882.

² *Ibid.*

³ I. Budge and C. O’Leary (1973) *Belfast: approach to crisis, a study of Belfast politics 1613-1970* (London: St Martin’s Press), p. 107.

⁴ Census of Ireland for the year 1881, part i, vol. iii. Province of Ulster, HC 1882, [C.3204], lxxviii.1 (London 1882).

⁵ D.L. Armstrong (1951) ‘Social and economic conditions in the Belfast linen industry, 1850-1900’ in *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 7, no. 28, pp. 235-69, here 241.

⁶ J.P. Lynch (2001) *An unlikely success story: the Belfast shipbuilding industry 1880-1935* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation), p. 2.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of the debates on Irish poverty and its relief, see P. Gray (2009) *The making of the Irish poor law 1815-43* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

⁸ Laura Stephens (1900) *New Ireland Review*, vol. 13, May 1900, p. 129.

⁹ John O'Connor (1995) *The workhouses of Ireland: the fate of Ireland's poor* (Dublin: Anvil Books), p. 13.

¹⁰ See O. Purdue (2011) 'Regional dimensions of the Irish Poor Law: the north of Ireland 1851-1921' in V. Crossman and P. Gray (eds) *Poverty and Welfare in Ireland 1838-1948* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press), pp. 23-36.

¹¹ Annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland 1880, HC 1880 [C.2603] [C.2603-I], xxviii, 1, 39 (London, 1880); Annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland 1913-14, HC 1914 [Cd.7561] xxxix, 595 (London, 1914).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Belfast News-Letter*, August 11, 1886.

¹⁴ Belfast indoor registers 1878, 1900, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereafter: PRONI), BG/7/G.

¹⁵ Belfast indoor registers 1900-1, PRONI, BG/7/G.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Belfast News-Letter*, 18 March 1885.

¹⁸ *Belfast News-Letter*, 9 March 1885.

¹⁹ Minutes, Belfast Board of Guardians, 27 November 1877, PRONI, BG/7/A/42.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Hansard Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 3rd series (1 September 1880) vol. 256, cc 998-1016.

²² Minutes, Belfast Board of Guardians, 27 November 1877, PRONI, BG/7/A/42.

²³ *Freeman's Journal*, 14 March 1879.

²⁴ Quoted in Minutes, Belfast Board of Guardians, February 1879, PRONI, BG/7/1/43.

²⁵ Hansard Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 3rd series (1 September 1880), vol. 256, cc 998-1016.

²⁶ Belfast Workhouse. Copies of minutes of evidence taken at the recent inquiry held at the Belfast Workhouse by Inspectors Bourke and Brodie, together with their report thereon, HC 1881, lxxix.69, p. 123.

²⁷ Indoor registers for Belfast workhouse 1864, 1878, 1900-1, PRONI, BG/7/G/49-54.

²⁸ See M. Luddy (1990) 'Prostitution and rescue work in nineteenth-century Ireland', in M. Luddy and C. Murphy (eds) *Women surviving* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press), pp. 51-84.

²⁹ W. O'Hanlon (1853) *Walks among the poor of Belfast and suggestions for their improvement*, quoted in W.A. Maguire (1993) *Belfast* (Keele: Carnegie Publishing), p. 40.

³⁰ Quoted in M. Luddy (1997) "'Abandoned women and bad characters": prostitution in nineteenth-century Ireland' in *Women's History Review*, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 485-504, here 486.

³¹ Annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws of relief for the poor in Ireland, H.C. 1854-55, xxiv, appendix A, p. 64.

³² Indoor registers for Belfast workhouse, October 1900, PRONI, BG/7/G.

³³ *Ibid.*