IVRLA[1] RESEARCH REPORT: IRISH FAMINE

Dr Andrés Eiríksson (Researcher)

1. CONTEXT

This project continues the work undertaken by the National Famine Commemoration Project from 1996 to 1999. That project, a joint initiative between UCD and Trinity College, Dublin,[2] was established to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Famine and researched statistical sources of eight poor law unions and their workhouses from various parts of Ireland during the Famine period. The unions included were Dublin North, Ballina (Co. Mayo), Enniskillen (Co. Fermanagh), Ennistymon (Co. Clare), Inishowen (Co. Donegal), Kinsale (Co. Cork), Parsonstown (King's County)[3] and Rathdrum (Co. Wicklow). The findings were presented in eight written reports, one for each union. These reports were never published outside of the two universities and, although they have been used and quoted in published academic work, they have not so far been made publicly available in any systematic form.

The aim of the IVRLA project was to deliver some of the statistics and data from the earlier project (specifically those derived from workhouse primary sources) and make them accessible online. As this project was undertaken from October to December 2009, it was not feasible to include all eight unions from the original study so the scope was limited to four

[1] The UCD Irish Virtual Research Library and Archive (IVRLA) is a major digitisation project which was undertaken by University College Dublin from 2005 to 2009. Material selected from UCD's extensive resources of archival and rare material was digitised and catalogued before being made available from a single virtual location (http://ivrla.ucd.ie). This digitised material covers a wide range of humanities and social science disciplines and is arranged in curated collections which can be browsed, searched, bookmarked, or downloaded. In addition to the digitisation of existing UCD collections, the IVRLA conducted a series of demonstrator projects. The remit of these projects was to develop additional digital research resources and to present these in the form of an exhibition collection. Some of these projects incorporated existing IVRLA material but many generated new content which was inspired by the potential of digital resources. Consequently, the IVRLA and its demonstrator projects show how digital repositories can provide access to diverse archival research materials as well as challenging the ways in which we consider digital content and generate research in a digital environment. The IVRLA is a component of the UCD Humanities Institute of Ireland and is funded under the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLI) Cycle 3, administered by the Higher Education Authority.

[2] The principal investigators on the National Famine Commemoration Project were Professor Mary E. Daly and Professor Cormac Ó Gráda (from UCD) and Professor David Dickson and Professor David Fitzpatrick (from Trinity College Dublin). The project researchers were Andrés Eiríksson, Catherine Cox and Desmond McCabe. The IVRLA are most grateful to Professors Dickson and Fitzpatrick, for their generous permission to reproduce the research from the National Famine Commemoration Project, and to Dr. Catherine Cox for her permission to use her research work from that project and for her help in accessing the relevant files.

[3] Parsonstown is an old name for the town now called Birr situated in Co. Offaly.

unions, for which primary data tables and statistical analysis has been made available. This facilitates researchers in this area by allowing them access to some of the very valuable research conducted by the National Famine Commemoration Project.

2. PROJECT OVERVIEW

The sources of the original studies included census reports, agricultural statistics, baptismal and marriage records, local market reports and many others. A large part of the research focused on two important, and hitherto little used, workhouse sources: Board of Guardians' Minute Books and Indoor Relief Registers. These provide vital information on workhouse management, conditions and inmates. Although all Irish workhouses kept both Minute Books and Indoor Relief Registers during the time of Famine, relatively few have survived. As regards the eight unions listed above, there are big gaps in the primary sources of each workhouse, and the material varies in quantity and quality, depending on the diligence of workhouse authorities and their record keepers. For each union, the source data was initially recorded in excel spreadsheets. The data in these spreadsheets was later analysed and the results of this analysis incorporated into a full research report.

Given the short timeframe of the IVRLA project, it was important to establish, firstly, that the original data collected could still be accessed and, secondly, that the unions selected were ones which had consistent data from the Famine period. Accordingly, the four workhouses included for this project are Ennistymon, Inishowen, Rathdrum and Parsonstown (now Birr). The primary sources for this data were the Indoor Relief Registers and Minute Books, which have been augmented by the 1851 Census of Ireland and other sources as explained in Section 3 below. The online collection for this project includes the original excel data as well as various tables and graphs derived from this data.

3. DETAILED OUTPUT

This section gives an overview of the sources from which data was collected for the original project, details the work done and resource provided by the current IVRLA project, and offers a brief commentary on each of the four unions that have been dealt with as part of this project.

Source Material Gathered for National Famine Commemoration Project

Indoor Relief Registers

The Indoor Relief Registers (IRR) provide information on all individuals admitted to the workhouse. In almost all cases the following information was recorded: name of inmate; gender; age at time of admission; family status; electoral division to which inmate belonged; date of admission; and departure. Generally, it was also stated whether the inmate died in the workhouse or was discharged. Information less frequently provided was religion; occupation; state of health; and clothing when admitted. These registers provide us with a social profile of inmates, at least as regards age, gender and family status. They provide the same for those who were discharged and those who died in the workhouse. They show the time spent in the workhouse between admission and either death or discharge. Indeed, in all cases they show constant coming and going to and from the workhouse during the Famine, suggesting that there was a "revolving door" pattern where most people viewed the workhouse as a temporary solution and stayed for only a few weeks at a time.

The information recorded in the Indoor Relief Registers for Inishowen, Parsonstown and Rathdrum was recorded (in some cases on a statistically sampled basis) in an excel file for each union. No names were recorded in the excel source files as the focus of the original project was on the social and economic effects of the famine rather than on specific families or individuals.

Minute Books

The Board of Guardians' Minute Books give aggregated weekly statistics on the number of people admitted to the workhouse, those discharged and those who died inside the house. They also give the number of inmates remaining in the house at the end of the week. These sometimes distinguish between children, adult males and adult females, also sometimes between able-bodied adults and those considered old and infirm. They show the number of inmates in the workhouse at different times, the level of admissions, discharges and deaths. They show the level of overcrowding in the workhouse and highlight the relationship between overcrowding, destitution and death.

The Minute Books provide weekly statistics, but do not include exact dates of admission, discharges and deaths. When compiling monthly and yearly statistics from the Minute Books, figures are placed within the month in which the week ended. For example, those admitted during the week ending 2 January 1847 are placed within the monthly figures of January 1847. The Minute Books were used as a primary source for Ennistymon as there was no IRR available for that workhouse.

Excel Resources Provided By the IVRLA Project

As the National Famine Commemoration Project was concluded ten years before the IVRLA project started, the time span meant that it was not only difficult to locate the original excel files but, due to time elapsed and technology changes, some of the files were inaccessible.[4] Furthermore, the source excel files gathered under the original project were intended for internal project use only rather than for publication. Hence, all source files were reformatted and corrected (where required) before being made available through the IVRLA. For the Ennistymon union, it was necessary to re-examine some of the workhouse records to verify some of the data.

A set of tables and graphs for each workhouse are also provided. These are based on the source excel files and provide extensive analysis of the data, including variables such as length of stay; religious, social, age, family and gender profile of inmates; and causes of death. Many of these had been included within the reports of the original project. For this project they have been reviewed, corrected, and reformatted; in some cases additional analysis has also been provided. When constructing the tables, births (of which there were few) were included as admissions. All children entering the workhouse with a parent or parents are classified in the tables as "in family," including those listed as illegitimate in the registers (again, very few cases). The Inishowen excel source file includes a column on the number of weeks spent in the workhouse. The formula used there is of course applicable to all unions and has been used to construct tables for time between admissions and discharges/deaths for all workhouses.

The following excel resources have been provided and can be accessed or downloaded by clicking on the relevant union in the IVRLA collection. All files are in Excel 2003 format.

1. Inishowen
    a. Source data from Indoor Relief Registers from September 1843 to December 1852 (on a sample basis of every 5th entry).
    b. 11 tables and 2 graphs based on the above data.
2. Parsonstown
    a. Source data from Indoor Relief Registers from April 1842 to June 1843 and from January to April 1849 (all entries).
    b. 21 tables and 4 graphs based on the above data.

[4] For example, one of the Inishowen files concerning deaths in that workhouse had become corrupt and, despite various attempts to retrieve the data, remained inaccessible.

3. Rathdrum
    a. Source data from Indoor Relief Registers from May 1849 to December 1852 (on a sample basis of every 5th entry).
    b. 13 tables and 7 graphs based on the above data.
4. Ennistymon
    a. Source data from Minute Book weekly aggregated statistics for 409 weeks from March 1848 to December 1855.
    b. Source data from weekly medical reports in the Minute Books from April 1848 to February 1850, giving deaths from various causes. This covers a total of 100 weeks and 859 deaths.
    c. Source data from Parliamentary Papers concerning inmates who died in 1850 and 1851 (a total of 1,394 deaths). This is the only resource compiled from a source other than workhouse papers. (H.C. 1851 (484), xlix, 279).
    d. 13 tables and 6 graphs based on the above data.

Commentary on Individual Unions

Background information on each of the four Poor Law unions[5] included in this project is given below. It includes an overview on the records maintained within each union workhouse, details the collation of these records for the original project, and refers to some of the detailed tables now made available for each union by the IVRLA project.

Inishowen

The Inishowen union was one of five poor law unions located partly or wholly within Co. Donegal. Unlike many unions in Ireland its boundaries were not altered in 1850. According to census estimates, the union population was 43,869 in 1841 and 38,962 in 1851, a decrease of 11%. The workhouse opened in September 1843. The Board of Guardians' Minute Books do not include regular weekly rates of admissions, discharges, death and number of inmates; hence, aggregated figures on these variables have been estimated from the Indoor Relief Registers. The number of inmates was low compared to the other three

[5] Information provided in relation to population and size of unions is taken from census sources which were consulted for the original project. Details were not always available directly and researchers had, in some instances, to add up various electoral divisions to make up the area corresponding to the original poor law union. The full unpublished reports by Catherine Cox (for Inishowen and Rathdrum) and Andrés Eiríksson (for Parsonstown and Ennistymon) are included in the works cited below

workhouses and was generally matched by the official capacity of the house. There was no extended period of critical overcrowding nor was there a period of rapidly increasing deaths and rising death rate. The 1851 Census records a total of 432 deaths in the workhouse up until March 1851 (Table 8), by far the lowest figure of the four workhouses dealt with in this project. Co. Donegal suffered relatively lightly from the Great Famine and the union of Inishowen appears to have suffered less than its neighboring unions.

Tables on social profile of inmates, time in workhouse and survival are constructed from the Indoor Relief Registers from September 1843 to December 1852. The original project recorded every 5th entry, giving an excel list of 1,692 inmates. The column on departure from the workhouse only indicates if the inmate died in the workhouse; discharges are not specifically commented on. There are 111 deaths thus recorded. Judging from the total number of deaths listed in the 1851 Census, we can safely presume that almost all those whose fate is not stated in the registers were discharged. Tables 3 and 10 are based on that presumption.

Parsonstown

When established in 1839, the Poor Law Union of Parsonstown comprised 251,982 statute acres. Of these, about three-quarters were in King's County (now Co. Offaly) while the rest was in Co. Tipperary. In 1850 the union was reduced in size and changes made to boundaries of both the union and its electoral divisions. This affected mostly the Tipperary part of the union, which was reduced in area by more than half. The population of the original union area was 76,527 in 1841 and 55,193 in 1851, a decrease of 28%.

Opened in April 1842, the workhouse was located in Parsonstown, now known as Birr. During the Famine several premises in the town, such as Syngfield House and stores in Castle Street and elsewhere, were hired as auxiliary premises. The workhouse was closed in 1922, but the main building is still standing.

The main data sources are the Board of Guardians' Minute Books and the Indoor Relief Registers. The former provide aggregated weekly figures for admissions, discharges and deaths and are nearly complete from January 1843 throughout the Famine period. Gaps occur in March 1848 and these are filled by using figures published in the *King's County Chronicle*. There are two surviving Indoor Relief Registers for the Parsonstown workhouse, one from 1842-43, the other one from early 1849. All entries in the registers from these periods are included in the excel source file. The timing of the surviving registers allows comparison between conditions in the workhouse in pre-Famine times and at the height of the

Famine in 1849. Although the 1849 IRR records cover only January to April, it happens to be the height of the crisis in the workhouse, with the number of admissions, inmates and deaths all peaking. It was also a period of overcrowding, compounded by refusal of the Board of Guardians to grant outdoor relief.[6]

As shown in Table 17, derived from the 1851 Census, the Parsonstown workhouse was unusual in that marasmus (a malnutrition disease confined to children), rather than contagious diseases, was the main cause of death. However, fever and cholera were more prominent in the workhouse than these figures suggest. Many fever patients and almost all cholera patients were transferred at an early stage to the Parsonstown Fever and Cholera Hospitals and were registered as discharged from the workhouse although they may have died soon afterwards. Nonetheless, the prevalence of marasmus is striking and is reflected in the very high death rate amongst children in the Parsonstown workhouse in 1849.

Rathdrum

The union of Rathdrum was one of five Co. Wicklow unions established in 1839. Small changes were made to the union boundaries in 1849, increasing the size of the union by about 20,000 statute acres. The population of the union decreased from 56,660 in 1841 to 47,932 in 1851, a decline of 17%.

The Rathdrum workhouse opened in March 1842, but statistical sources on conditions in the house are scant before late 1847. The tables on admissions, discharges, deaths and number of inmates have been constructed from the Board of Guardians' Minute Books, but unfortunately there are several gaps in the returns before late 1847 and again in 1849. We do know, however, that in December 1846 the Poor Law Commissioners complained to the Board of Guardians that there were now 640 inmates in the workhouse designed to host 600 (Cox, *Rathdrum* 62). Overcrowding continued in early 1847 and in February that year the workhouse was officially declared full and no further admissions were accepted. Unfortunately, statistics from this time are missing, so we do not know the full extent of this first period of overcrowding and its effect on deaths and the death rate. The second period of overcrowding began in November 1847 and peaked in January 1848, eventually solved by providing extra accommodation by auxiliaries and temporary fever sheds. There appears to be a strong correlation between this second period of overcrowding and increasing number of

[6] Under the Poor Law Amendment Act (1847), outdoor relief (in the form of food, clothing or money) might be made available to the destitute in the worst affected districts when workhouse accommodation was not available.

deaths, primarily from fever (Figures 6 and 7). This relationship was not so strong during the third and final period of overcrowding in the first five months of 1850. This time the crisis was alleviated by increasing discharges of able-bodied paupers rather than by sourcing additional accommodation. The 285 people discharged in July 1850 included 111 people who emigrated to Canada on a workhouse assisted emigration scheme. The peak in discharges the following August may represent further number of discharges for emigration.

The tables on social profile of the inmates, their time in the workhouse and whether they died or were discharged are constructed from the Indoor Relief Register, which exists from May 1849 to December 1852. The IRR data is based on the selection of every 5th entry, giving an excel list of over 1,300 inmates. This does not include the critical period of rising deaths and high death rate in late 1847 and early 1848.

Ennistymon

Ennistymon was one of five poor law unions in Co. Clare established in 1839. It had a population of 53,012 in 1841. The changes made to boundaries of unions and electoral divisions in 1850 increased the number of Clare unions to nine and reduced the size of the Ennistymon union from 176,182 to 99,281 statute acres. In 1861 the population of the area corresponding to the old union area was 40,741, having decreased by 23% since 1841.

The Ennistymon workhouse opened in September 1842, designed to host 600 inmates. As already indicated, the sources on the Ennistymon workhouse differ from those of the other workhouses. No Indoor Relief Registers for the Ennistymon workhouse have survived. On the other hand, the Minute Books are unusually detailed, in particular as regards death and disease in the house.

Figures for admissions, discharges, deaths and inmates are limited for the pre-Famine and early Famine periods. However, the Minute Books (in addition to the usual weekly admission figures) include statements of the number of IRR entries examined and signed for by the Board of Guardians each week. Comparison between these registry signing figures and recorded admission figures (when both are available from the Minute Books) show that the two are very close and that the Minute Book registry signing figures can be used as a proxy for admission figures. Hence, annual figures for admissions were estimated for all years. Death figures were estimated with the help of the Census of Ireland 1851 and a parliamentary report.[7] From the estimates of admissions and deaths it is sometimes possible to estimate the

[7] Full citations are given in the Works Cited section at the end of the paper.

number of discharges; however, for this to be relatively accurate the number of inmates in the house at the start and end of the period needs to be known. As this was not always the case estimates of the annual number of discharges for 1844, 1847 and 1848 are not provided.

Two separate excel files giving information on workhouse deaths are provided. The first one, derived from the medical reports in the Minute Books, dates from April 1848 to February 1850 and gives the number who died from the various diseases each week. It comprises about 65% of all deaths occurring in the workhouse premises during that period. The second file covers the period from March 1850 to March 1851 and is constructed from Parliamentary Papers. This gives more detailed information on each individual death: cause of death, age and gender, admission and death date. It covers about 85% of all deaths recorded as having occurred in union buildings at the time.

A quick glance at the tables may suggest a discrepancy between the Census death figures and the project's estimate of annual death figures. This is not the case; in fact the two match each other quite well. The Census figure for deaths from the opening of the workhouse in 1842 up until March 1851 is 3,843. The project estimation from 1844 until end of March 1851 is 3,809.[8] There is, however, an anomaly between the project data and the Census in one regard. The two excel files concerning deaths from 1848 to 1851 include over 600 cases of diarrhoea, whereas the Census only lists 394 deaths caused by the same disease. The Census, however, has a great number of deaths by unknown cause, no less than 600. It must be presumed that many deaths recorded in medical reports as being from diarrhoea were listed in the Census as being of unspecified cause.

Attention must be drawn to the high level of destitution in the union and the workhouse, the frequent periods of massive overcrowding, followed by periods of rising death and high death rate. This overcrowding occurred in spite of extensive outdoor relief (Table 4, Figure 3) and continuous expansion of workhouse premises, official workhouse capacity increasing from the original 600 in 1842 to 4,235 in 1851 (Table 5, Figure 4). At that stage the workhouse premises comprised ten different buildings in various parts of the union. Clare was one of the counties worst affected by the Great Famine, and Ennistymon was probably the most destitute of the five Clare unions.

[8] This figure of 3,809 is derived from adding the annual deaths for 1844 to 1850, which total 3,074 (Table 1) and the monthly deaths from January to March 1851 (Table 2), which total 735.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The statistical tables provide researchers with some indication of what can be done with the excel source files and the availability of the actual source files gives researchers access to original data; together they are a significant resource for scholars of the Irish Famine. This was a pilot project conducted over a very short period and there is significant potential for adding to the famine resources made available here. In relation to the National Famine Commemoration Project (and subject to the permission of the joint principal investigators of that project), the original written reports could be digitised and catalogued, attempts could be made to locate and recover more of the original excel data files, and further analysis could be provided. Further resources on the Irish Famine could also be added, allowing the website to become a significant reference site for the scholars in this area. While any such future developments would depend on the availability of further funding, the research team hopes that the resources provided to date will nonetheless prove useful to scholars of the Irish Famine and looks forward to seeing outputs from these scholars.

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