

Poor Law Relief and the Role of the Belfast Board of Guardians from 1850 to 1900

The aim of this paper is to give a picture of poor relief in the Belfast Union from 1850 to 1900, to show that this area had a remarkable way of dealing with poverty alleviation throughout this period because of history and above all the men who were in charge of Poor Law Relief in this part of Ulster. The Irish poor Laws were the same as in the rest of Ireland, but they were implemented with much more severity because the Belfast Guardians were convinced they had a mission which, for them, went beyond the mere task of granting relief. Few authors have concentrated on this subject, though it is of major interest to understand the social evolutions of this complex environment. First of all, I will show the importance and the role of the Belfast Board of Guardians as far as indoor relief is concerned, and then, I will focus on the reasons why this administration refused for a long time to change its way of relieving the most destitute.

In order to understand how the treatment of poverty was carried out in the region of Belfast, it is necessary to recall the situation which was prevailing at that time in this part of Ulster. From the late 1830s, there were major sociological transformations in the North-East of Ireland. As a result, of the incapacity of the rural world to modernize, waves of migrations towards the different urban centres of the region of Belfast started to take place. Thus, many people decided to leave the countryside to settle down in towns with the hope of finding a better place to live. The population of towns like Lisburn or Larne rose rapidly but their growth had nothing in common with what was going on in Belfast. First, due to the success of linen and then shipbuilding, this city acted as a real magnet for people living in the surrounding counties. Its population rose from about 20,000 inhabitants in the early 1830s, to nearly 350,000 in 1900. At that time, this formidable expansion was similar to that of major British cities like Liverpool or Manchester, however it was more difficult for the authorities of Belfast to cope with this growth as there was not any other industrial centre capable of absorbing these waves of migration. Even if there were job opportunities in Belfast, many people, most of the time men, at the beginning, couldn't participate to the economic growth of the city because they had not always the necessary qualifications, and as a result, their life conditions were sometimes even worse than in the countryside. In this context, the Poor Law system played a very important role to prevent all forms of social disorders.

The Poor Laws were introduced in Ireland in 1838, and from that time, the country was divided into 130 Unions run by Boards of Guardians which had to deal with social and sanitary problems, as well as the maintenance of roads and house buildings. In fact, towards 1840, the Irish Boards of Guardians took over all the powers which were in the hands of the Grand Juries before 1838. Forty-three Unions were thus created in the 9 counties of the Province of Ulster.

The Belfast Board of Guardians was a very powerful administration made up of 22 Guardians, most of whom were coming from the world of trade. Although they were in theory obliged to obey the Poor Law Commissioners or, from 1872, the Local Government Board, in reality, they took decisions without referring to anybody. It had already been the case when, in 1844, the Board wanted to build a sort of wooden shelter to isolate all the contagious people. The Poor Law Commissioners were opposed to this decision, however in January 1847, the Belfast Board which had not abandoned its initial project started to erect a Fever Hospital next to the workhouse, and this obviously did not please the Commissioners. They indicated that this was a wrong initiative but it did not upset the Guardians who replied by using a very hard and straightforward tone: “[...] The Commissioners interfere unnecessarily with details of management.”¹

When the Commissioners realized it was a good measure, other boards of Guardians followed suit. From that time, all the actions of the Belfast Board of Guardians were characterized by autonomy and pragmatic views which were supposed to improve more the management of the workhouse than the condition of the inmates. After the episode of the Famine which had put many Boards of Guardians in a very difficult financial situation, the Belfast Board of Guardians was often presented as one of the best administrations in handling poverty matters. The Belfast Board of Guardians’ financial situation was very good and it always had a surplus, which was not very common after the Famine.

Indeed, after 1850, there was a dramatic diminution in the number of people relieved in the Irish workhouses and particularly in those of Ulster. Between 1860 and 1900, there was a reduction by 60% in the numbers of inmates in the workhouses of Ulster. There were 3 reasons which may account for this loss of inmates. First of all, one can stress the progressive disappearance of epidemics which had been particularly deadly in the East of Ulster and which had forced many people to flock to the various workhouses of the Province. Then, the passing of the Poor Relief Medical Act in 1851, also called the Charity Act, which forced

¹ *Minutes of the Belfast Board of Guardians*, January 17th 1847, BG/7/A/5, PRONI, Belfast

Guardians to create dispensaries where people could go if they were ill, can also be put forward to explain this phenomenon. Finally, the third cause to this demographic decrease can be attributed to massive emigrations after the Famine.

Between 1850 and 1900, the population of the nine counties of the Province of Ulster lost about 430,000 inhabitants.² All the counties were concerned by a major reduction in the number of people, except county Antrim which benefited from the exceptional growth of the city of Belfast. During this period, only a few Ulster towns gained inhabitants (Belfast, Larne and Lisburn). It is within this context that the role of the Belfast Board of Guardians has to be examined. The massive development of Belfast can explain that the population of the Belfast workhouse remained at very high levels till the end of the 20th century. The minutes of the Belfast Board of Guardians reveal that there was a constant rise in the number of inmates and that it only steadied when migrations came to a halt.

The period going from 1860 to 1890 is very important because it is characterized by political divisions, social tensions and above all demographic modifications with the arrival of many Catholics coming from the rural parts of counties Antrim and Down who began to challenge protestant hegemony. It is difficult to state, for this whole period, if there was a majority of Catholics or Protestants within the Belfast Workhouse, as the religious denominations are rarely mentioned, however, these statistics are available between 1870-1880, and they show that at that time, there were about 70% of Catholics in the Belfast Workhouse. The remaining 30% were made up of inmates who belonged to the Church of Ireland. This confirms the fact that Presbyterians were a sort of elite, among which the proportion of paupers was less important. In a way, the Belfast Workhouse reproduced the social inequalities which affected the Catholic community in the different parts of the city, and this corroborates Anthony Hepburn's analysis of the growing difficulties of Catholics compared to Protestants as regards jobs and housing in Belfast. As the political situation got tensed, the fate of Catholic people with respect to poverty relief became more and more complicated.

In June 1880, as Belfast was undergoing a severe economic crisis, there were 80% of domestics and 20% of workers among the female inmates of the Belfast Workhouse. Concerning male inmates there were 40% of labourers, 30% of workers and 30% of employees. The increase in the number of inmates in the Belfast Workhouse accelerated very clearly in the early 1860s when the first religious riots broke out. The riots of August 1864

² W. E. Vaughan and A. J. Fitzpatrick, *Irish Historical Statistics: Population, 1821-1971* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1978), p. 313.

were really severe since 12 people died during these sectarian confrontations. Each time there was a riot, it had an impact on the population of the Belfast Workhouse, probably because some people who had been driven out of their homes had nowhere to live. This situation did not take place in the Lisburn Workhouse or in the surroundings workhouses, probably because sectarianism was less acute in these areas.

Beyond these religious aspects, the statistics of the Belfast Workhouse are really interesting because they give us an amazing picture of the categories of persons who were relieved indoor. They also show that the Belfast Workhouse was the only place where the number of inmates kept on increasing regularly after 1850.

Table n°1: Different categories of inmates who benefited from indoor relief in the Belfast Workhouse from 1851 to 1890.³

<i>Belfast Workhouse</i>	Overall population	Able-bodied persons (M/W)	Elderly people, ill and disabled people + children <15 years old
21 Dec. 1851	1351	754	597/ -
24 Dec. 1860	1388	687	701 (140 children)
24 Dec. 1870	2195	860	1335 (540 children)
10 Jan. 1871	2676	1106	1570 (693 children)
30 Oct. 1880	2522	1001	1521(650 children)
10 Dec. 1890	3606	1472	2134 (634 children)

³ *Minutes of the Belfast Board of Guardians, 1851-90, BG/7/A/10-64, PRONI, Belfast.*

Table n°2: Different categories of inmates who benefited from indoor relief in the Lisburn Workhouse from 1851 to 1890.⁴

<i>Lisburn Workhouse</i>	Overall population	Able-bodied persons (M/W)	Elderly people, ill and disabled people + children <15 years old
14 Dec. 1851	357	145	212 (121 children)
4 Feb. 1860	260	57	203 (124 children)
15 April 1870	261	36	225 (79 children)
14 Aug 1875	190	35	155 (79 children)
26 June 1880	266	30	236 (72 children)
10 Dec. 1890	156	20	136 (45 children)

Table n°3: Different categories of inmates who benefited from indoor relief in the Larne Workhouse from 1851 to 1890.⁵

<i>Larne Workhouse</i>	Overall population	Able-bodied persons (M/W)	Elderly people, ill and disabled people + children <15 years old
4 Dec. 1851	329	122	207 (60 children)
31 March 1860	200	44	166 (65 children)
17 March 1870	300	34	266 (95 children)
17 Aug 1880	266	22	244(77 children)
10 Dec. 1890	174	22	152 (65children)

⁴ *Minutes of the Lisburn Board of Guardians, 1851-1890, BG/19/A/10-86, PRONI, Belfast.*

⁵ *Minutes of the Larne Board of Guardians, 1851-90, BG/17/A/5-76, PRONI, Belfast.*

Table n°4: Different categories of inmates who benefited from indoor relief in the Antrim Workhouse from 1851 to 1890.⁶

<i>Antrim Workhouse</i>	Overall population	Able-bodied persons (M/W)	Elderly people, ill and disabled people + children <15 years old
11 Dec.1853	230	Able-bodied persons	167 (98 children)
11 March1860	291	Able-bodied persons	236(140 children)
10 March 1870	284	Able-bodied persons	254(135 children)
20 Dec. 1880	294	Able-bodied persons	239 (98 children)
10 Dec. 1890	170	Able-bodied persons	154 (48 children)

From the end of the 1860s to the beginning of the 20th century, all the categories of the population were relieved in the Belfast Workhouse. In fact, it worked as a microcosm in which infants, children, young adults, elderly and disabled people were gathered. Able-bodied adults also accounted for a large part of the overall population of the Belfast Workhouse. From 1850 to 1900, and even beyond, they accounted for more than 40% of the total population, with two thirds of women inmates. It means that for a long time, women were considered as more worth relieving indoor than men. This situation was all the more difficult for men, that up to the 1860s, they were more likely to remain unemployed than women before the shipbuilding industry began to take off. Indeed, there were more opportunities for women due the importance of the textile sector in Belfast. The children, and particularly the infants, were more and more numerous towards the end of the 19th century, even if the passing of the Medical Charity Act in 1851 had recommended infants to be boarded out till the age of 5, instead of being raised in a workhouse.

In Antrim, Larne and Lisburn, the percentage of able-bodied adults were regularly below 20% and disabled persons, infants and elderly people accounted for about 70% to 80% of their overall population. However, it is difficult to compare all these workhouses since the three smaller ones had a much lower number of inmates. The Antrim, Larne and Lisburn

⁶ *Minutes of the Antrim Board of Guardians, 1851-90, BG/1/A/3-39, PRONI, Belfast.*

workhouses were much more similar to the workhouses of Great Britain where there was a majority of old or disabled people. Besides, people tended to stay for shorter periods in these workhouses than in the Belfast Workhouse. There were a significant number of infants but their proportions had nothing in common with those of the Belfast Workhouse. Very often, the children relieved in the Belfast Workhouse were far more numerous than the overall population of many workhouses of Great-Britain.

The impact of the Belfast Board of Guardians' social treatment of poverty had far reaching consequences. First of all, by the end of the 19th century, with the arrival of a severe economic crisis, the number of indoor relief skyrocketed and, as a result, there were more than 4,000 people in the Belfast Workhouse. This overpopulation entailed a high mortality rate which was above 30% (it means that for an overall population of 4,000 inmates, an average of 1,200 people died every year at the end of the 19th century). In fact, the mortality rate had reached this level at the end of the 1860s and it remained rather steady till the dissolution of the Belfast Board of Guardians in 1939. This high mortality rate served as a sort of safety valve and, in a way, these Malthusian principles prevented the workhouse to be confronted to an unbearable overpopulation which, otherwise, would have probably led to a social explosion. An analysis of the death records shows that all the categories of inmates were concerned by mortality. It is true that the death toll among infants and old people was really high, but there were also high number of deaths among young adults, particularly those aged between 25 and 40 years old. There were a lot of young adult inmates whose deaths were due to cancer, tuberculosis or even bronchitis, but very often, they were just the result of a weak overall health status. It is true that when they entered the workhouse, many people were already in poor condition and then their health deteriorated very rapidly because of promiscuity and bad diet. This high mortality is however surprising as the Belfast Workhouse had staff and medical facilities of high quality, but prolongation of life by medical means was not one of their main objectives. Not only food was of low quality, but it was also given in very small quantities to reduce the cost of indoor relief which was quite high when the Belfast Workhouse was overcrowded.

Towards 1880, the situation was so serious in the Belfast Workhouse, that the Local Government Board asked for an inquiry to be carried out. Normally, the Belfast Workhouse was often presented as a model because its financial situation was really good after the episode of the Famine contrary to what was going on in the rest of Ireland. Indeed, the report of the inquiry pointed out that the financial situation was good, but that the level of hygiene was far from being satisfactory and that works had to be done to improve the life of inmates.

This inquiry not only confirmed the high mortality rate especially among the young children, but also stressed different dysfunctions. Some of the members of the Belfast Board of Guardians were accused of refusing to relieve people in the workhouse on the grounds they were not poor enough. Their severity and lack of humanity was clearly stressed in the report. There were also problems as regards the relationships between the Belfast Board of Guardians and its suppliers. Some of them complained that the Guardians were imposing very low prices to the different traders they were working with, and that they were slow to pay what they had ordered. The Belfast Workhouse was controlled by Guardians who were coming from the world of trade and they took advantage of their position to set their conditions.

This inquiry laid the emphasis upon serious problems, but nevertheless, it did not change the whole situation because, in the end, the Local Government did not take any sanctions against those who were judged as responsible. Besides, it put into question the revelations of Dr Mac Cabe, the medical inspector who had made a very negative sanitary report on the state on the Belfast Workhouse. Finally, the post of medical inspector was given to another person, Dr Brodie, and the following inquiries were no longer negative which was probably what the Local Government Board was aiming at from the beginning.

Another aspect which is worth looking at, is the way outdoor relief was granted. For a long time, the Belfast Guardians refused to grant outdoor relief because they considered that many jobs were available and that people could easily maintain themselves or their family if they were hardworking. They were against outdoor relief because, as Presbyterians, they considered poverty as a sin, and according to them, it had to be treated severely and not encouraged. For a long time, the Belfast Guardians stuck close to the Poor Law Extension Act, 1847 principles which stipulated that outdoor relief could only be granted in periods of exceptional distress, so, regularly, they decided that indoor relief was the right solution. A close exam of the minutes of the Belfast Board of Guardians often reveals moralizing declarations towards those who were asking for outdoor relief. On top of that, the Guardians made very careful inquiries on the recipients to check if they were worthy of being relieved outdoor. Many of those who were refused outdoor relief were often judged as lazy and not doing their utmost to find a job.

Table n°5: Number of people who benefited from indoor relief in the Belfast Union from 1851 to 1890.⁷

<i>Belfast Workhouse</i>	Outdoor relief
21 Dec. 1851	/
24 Dec. 1860	/
24 Dec. 1870	/
10 Jan. 1871	/
30 Oct. 1880	246
10 Dec. 1890	320

Table n°6: Number of people who benefited from outdoor relief in the Lisburn Union from 1851 to 1890.⁸

<i>Lisburn Workhouse</i>	Outdoor relief
14 Dec. 1851	/
4 Feb. 1860	3
15 April 1870	60
14 Aug 1875	91
26 June 1880	216
10 Dec. 1890	337

⁷ *Minutes of the Belfast Board of Guardians, 1851-90, BG/7/A/10-64, PRONI, Belfast.*

⁸ *Minutes of the Lisburn Board of Guardians, 1851-1890, BG/19/A/10-86, PRONI, Belfast.*

Table n°7: Number of people who benefited from outdoor relief in the Larne Union from 1851 to 1890.⁹

<i>Larne</i> <i>Workhouse</i>	Outdoor relief
4 Dec. 1851	/
31 March 1860	40
17 March 1870	65
17 Aug 1880	115
10 Dec. 1890	190

Table n°8: Number of people who benefited from outdoor relief in the Antrim Union from 1851 to 1890.¹⁰

<i>Antrim</i> <i>Workhouse</i>	Outdoor Relief
11 Dec. 1853	/
11 March 1860	/
10 March 1870	10
20 Dec. 1880	113
10 Dec. 1890	182

In the 1870s, indoor relief cost, as an average, about 2s 2d per individual and per day in Ireland. Many Boards therefore chose to grant outdoor relief to save money and to be more efficient as regards poverty alleviation. At that time, the Lisburn Board of Guardians granted amounts going from 2s for a single person to 6s for a large family. Towards 1880, the Belfast Board of Guardians started granting outdoor relief, but most of the time, it reserved this aid to old persons or to women with children. The amounts given by the Belfast Board of Guardians

⁹ *Minutes of the Larne Board of Guardians, 1851-90, BG/17/A/5-76, PRONI, Belfast.*

¹⁰ *Minutes of the Antrim Board of Guardians, 1851-90, BG/1/A/3-39, PRONI, Belfast.*

were lower than those of the other Unions of the region of Belfast since they oscillated between 2s and 4s and were granted in kind (this lasted till the 1932 crisis outdoor relief) so recipients were given vouchers to get foodstuffs in the shops run by the members of the Belfast Board of Guardians. One can easily imagine the embarrassment of those who were obliged to ask for food.

This hostility towards outdoor relief is all the more incomprehensible that the rateable value in the Belfast Union was much higher than in any other Union of Ulster which, as a consequence, meant the Belfast Board of Guardians had sufficient resources to finance outdoor relief. The Belfast Board of Guardians’ refusal of granting outdoor relief was in contradiction with its aim of reducing public spending and not increasing rates. However, the Belfast Guardians preferred paying a higher cost of relief to keep undesirable citizens away from the society than granting them outdoor relief. This corresponded to the mission they had set themselves from the beginning.

Table 9: Rateable Values in the Unions of Belfast, Lisburn, Antrim and Larne in 1861-62 (used as a basis for the calculation of the Poor Law Rate).¹¹

Unions	Amounts
Belfast	£305 651 12s 0d
Lisburn	£162 838 25s 0d
Antrim	£119 599 8s 0d
Larne	£91 719 9d 0d

The Belfast Union had a higher rateable value than British Unions like Bethnal Green or Poplar in England which had chosen to be more generous with respect to the granting of outdoor relief. In 1870, the Bethnal Green Union had a rateable value of £240 940, and its Board of Guardians levied a poor rate of 1s 8d in the Pound as part of the Poor Law Rate, whereas the Belfast Board of Guardians levied a rate of 1s in the Pound in Belfast.¹²

¹¹ *Griffith Valuation, Belfast Union*, October 17th 1861, p. 531, *Lisburn Union*, April 30th 1862, County Down, p. 172, County Antrim, p.122, *Antrim Union*, 26 March 26th 1862, p. 202, *Larne Union*, December 11th 1861, p. 179, PRONI, Belfast.

¹² Pat Ryan, “Politics and Relief: East London Unions in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries”, in Michael Rose (ed.), *The Poor and the City: the English Poor Laws in its Urban Context, 1834-1914* (New York: St Martin’s Press), p. 145-147.

By refusing to grant outdoor relief for a long time, the Belfast Board of Guardians prevented many people from being self-supporting, and this phenomenon accelerated the emergence of a religious identity to the detriment of poor people who, as a consequence, were unable to get a clear idea of their own status in the society. This may explain that at the turn of the 20th century, labour values were slow to catch on in the Belfast region, contrary to what was going in Great-Britain.

Whereas the 1834 law was designed to set people to work and drive them towards industries, the 1838 law was passed to tackle the extreme poverty which was prevailing throughout Ireland. The Belfast Union could have easily followed the same path as most of English Unions because there were industries and the city was booming, but the hard line chosen by the Belfast Guardians prevented the poorest citizens to participate to the economic development of Belfast. Their refusal of granting outdoor relief can be explained by their mentality but also by the history and the rapid expansion of the city that nobody had planned. From the beginning of its existence, the Belfast Board of Guardians considered indoor relief as the central element of its social policy and was convinced that its role was to protect the exceptional growth of the region. Because all the Guardians were Protestants, they thought they had to defend the heritage of their own community. For them, poverty relief was a way for Protestants to maintain their hegemony. The Belfast Board of Guardians' methods were much stricter than those chosen by the other boards of the rest of the UK because the Guardians in Belfast were influenced by Calvinist principles which divided people into two categories, those elected by God and those who were reprobate. At the opposite, the Poplar Guardians, in the East of London, used outdoor relief to promote labour values and the number of people they relieved, at the end of the 19th century, was around 6,000. They also used poverty alleviation as a means of staying in power. In the second part of the 19th century, the Belfast Board of Guardians had a real influence and power and it seems that nobody dared to tell them to act differently.¹³

¹³ Pat Ryan, "Politics and Relief: East London Unions in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries", *op.cit.*, p. 145.

The Belfast Union was too populated to have only one workhouse and it should have been divided into two or three units as it was the case in cities like Manchester or Liverpool to reduce overpopulation in the Belfast Workhouse. Because the Belfast Guardians were rapidly controlling an enormous structure, they thought they were untouchable and could carry out their social policy in their own way. This led to an accumulation of irregularities and frustrations, and rapidly, the relationships between the Belfast Board of Guardians and poor people became really tensed. Paddy Devlin said later that the Belfast Guardians “[...] behaved like petty tyrants towards applicants. They saw themselves as front-line soldiers in the campaign to force unwanted citizens of Belfast to move abroad.”¹⁴

In spite of the 1905 Vice Regal Commission which was quite severe with the Irish Poor Laws, the Belfast Board of Guardians did not change much, and it continued to relieve the poor exactly as it did in 1840. Only the presence of women guardians contributed, towards the end of the 19th century, to improve the condition of inmates but the Belfast Board of Guardians’ social approach remained very contrasted and kept on swinging between light and darkness. In 1901, the Belfast Workhouse was already resorting to x-rays to diagnose fractures or other medical problems, and about 60 important surgery operations were carried out during that year. On the one hand, the Belfast Board of Guardians was supervising very modern medical facilities to treat diseases like tuberculosis and cancer (in 1920 with the opening of the Abercorn Hospital), but on the other hand, it continued on looking poor people down which minimized the positive effects of its pragmatic views.

As time went on, the Belfast Guardians were more concerned by political matters, such as the debate on *Home Rule*, than by social issues, and the fate of poor people was really secondary for them. The Belfast Board of Guardians made regular comments on the political situation which did not seem to be the case in the surroundings Boards. Progressively, it became an ally of the Unionist party and when the first Northern Ireland Government came to power, this situation accelerated, and as a consequence, the Belfast Board of Guardians even adopted a harder line than before.

¹⁴ Paddy, Devlin, *Yes We Have No Bananas, Outdoor Relief in Belfast, 1920-1939* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1981), p. 78.

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