

Report On Irish Poor Law System in the Famine Years.ⁱ

By Dr. Richard Robert Madden



RICHARD ROBERT MADDEN^{*} was born on 22 August 1798. He was educated at a school in Dublin and studied medicine in Paris, Naples and London. In the 1820s he travelled in the near east. In 1828 he married Harriet Elmslie of Jamaica, and they had three sons. In 1853 he went to Jamaica, where he served as one of the special magistrates appointed to superintend the statute abolishing slavery, he became a strong advocate of the liberated slaves. He later worked in Havana, Cuba and in Africa. In 1845 he returned to Ireland for a short time. From May 1847 to January 1849 he served as the Colonial Secretary of Western Australia where he then became a strong advocate for aboriginal rights. From 1852 - 1880 he was secretary to the Loan Fund Board at Dublin Castle. He died at Booterstown[†] on 5 February 1886.

A man with a strong social conscience he was not ignorant of the consequences of the Great Famine. To this end in February 1850, he visited the notorious Kilrush Workhouse and wrote the following report.

He was later accused of pretending that he was there officially as a representative of the English Government, a charge which he vehemently denied. In answering the accusations against him he presented his report to the Government. As a result conditions at the Kilrush Workhouse were improved and the horrendous death rate was reduced. His report was never made public and only appears in his memoirs that were produced by his son **Thomas More Madden**[‡] and published 5 years after his death in 1891.

Ian Beard
28 September 2014

^{*} Boylan, Henry (1998). *A Dictionary of Irish Biography, 3rd Edition*. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan. p. 262. [ISBN 0-7171-2945-4](#).

[†] Booterstown, is a coastal townland and civil parish, situated in the Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown, about 7 km south of the city of Dublin in Ireland.

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Report On Irish Poor Law System in the Famine Years.

The picture of life and death in Irish workhouses, and the condition of the peasantry in the south and west of Ireland during the closing period of the calamitous famine epoch forty years ago, contained in the documents alluded to, affords a graphic and accurate description of a state of things the existence of which in any Christian land might seem almost impossible, but which was too well proven at that time. In the belief therefore that this statement may be found of future as well as of present interest, the following are well authenticated and hitherto unpublished

Report by Dr Madden is here inserted:—

6TH LETTER SIGNED “X” ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE IRISH POOR LAWS, IN FEBRUARY 1851.[§]

The state of the Kilrush Union parent workhouse and its auxiliaries in the month of February last is the chief subject of the present communication. To this account, the result of personal inquiry and observation, some details of a later date are added. The parent workhouse in Kilrush in the month of February last presented, on the days for receiving applications for admissions, spectacles of the most extraordinary description that were probably ever witnessed in any Christian land; such as I never beheld before, and pray I may never witness again. On the occasion referred to there was a multitude of human beings, exceeding a thousand, congregated round the building, men, women and children, in every state of famine debility and disease, arising from want of food, want of sufficient raiment, and in many cases want of shelter fit for human beings in that inclement season.

There were a considerable number of low-backed cars from which the horses had been unyoked ranged along the wall in front of the entrance. On these cars applicants for admission were lying stretched on straw, chiefly aged people of both sexes, and children, even infants. On some cars there were as many as four or five pallid, listless, emaciated, ragged children; on others, famished creatures, far gone in fever, this entry, and dropsy, unable to walk, stand, or even to sit upright, and these sick and famishing creatures were bought there, as I was informed, by neighbours who had lent cars to convey them to the Poorhouse, and a great number of them, to use their own language, “for a coffin.” On surprise being expressed at hearing this reason given for the removal of these people and the question being repeated, one of these moribund applicants for admission in order to get a shell and a grave — a man more like a skeleton than a living man, yet not much more above 40 years of age, — said in a low, hollow tone of voice — “yes, to get a coffin, your honour.”

There was a vast number, moreover, of others apparently in the last stage of destitution who had crawled there from distant places, that seemed to be nearly in as bad a condition as those stretched on the cars. They were squatting about the outer walls waiting their turn to be called, while the courtyard was thronged with a dense mass of misery which was not only shocking, but terrifying even to look upon and to pass through. And yet these applicants for admission into the Kilrush Poorhouse, so frightfully earnest and eager to get into that asylum, clamouring and pressing forward, the less weak thrusting aside the more infirm, the young hustling the old, the women pulling back the children, larger children pushing back the smaller, uttering confused cries of pain, impatience, anger and despair, had only come there when every other means of sustaining life had failed. There was not one of those I questioned who had not a mortal terror of that Poorhouse of Kilrush, and had not overcome it, only when the charity on which they had eked out a miserable existence had been utterly exhausted, or when the use of the boiled metals and other weeds which had been their food of late had brought them to the brink of the grave. A close observer could tell those amongst them who had been thus subdued by starvation to this last resource, not only by the sight of their form and features — hardly those of

[§] Set up in type but not published. This letter being forwarded to the government and acted on by them, the weekly mortality in Killrush Poorhouses was reduced in a few weeks from 80 odd to an amount varying from 20 to 30. — R. R. M.

human beings — but also by that peculiar smell of mouldy substances which is perceptible about the persons of starving people.

The tumult round the door was almost equalled by the turmoil and confusion that reigned in the hall, where the guardians were assembled deciding on the claims of the famished multitude, and applying it to each case “the workhouse test.” It was surprising amidst the uproar and horrid strife of shrill and most discordant cries out any business could have been transacted there.

Aspro concerto, orribile armornia,
D’alte querele d’ululi, e di strida,
Istranamente concord s’udia.

There was nothing of downright harshness, however, observable in the conduct of the Poor Law officials toward the unfortunate wretches who stood before them awaiting their doom. The terrible duty that devolved on these gentlemen was performed apparently in a cool, quiet, business-like manner, by men accustomed by their office — “triste ministerium” — to such scenes, and therefore capable of dealing with them in the manner they thought best for the interests of ratepayers, and, as far as was consistent with the latter, it is to be presumed, for the interests of humanity. The difficulty of the position of those gentlemen it would not be easy to exaggerate. But, what adequate idea would any words convey of the frightful condition of the people of those districts which constitute the Kilrush Union that could furnish such an appalling spectacle of human misery as I have referred to on this occasion, resulting as it did to a very great extent, from acts that have assumed in this locality the character of a settled policy — *the destruction of the houses of the poor*.

The Poor Law contemplated a provision for the destitute on whom the hand of God had fallen heavily in time of great calamity, — for the poor thus stricken down who could not live by labour. But the work of eviction has so augmented pauperism that the Poorhouse accommodation in the land proves insufficient to afford shelter for the poor who have been unhoused by their fellow-men. The whole of the West of Ireland, and above all the county Clare, at the present moment can be best described by comparing its condition to that of a weak man dying slowly of chronic disease for which there is no remedy (deserving that name) has been applied, sinking gradually by the most hideous of all deaths — that of starvation, daily becoming a more appalling spectacle, a more frightful spectre of humanity, — going down in a prolonged agony by a process of inanition to the grave. I speak not only from the evidence of other people’s eyes or observation, nor do I speak lightly or on insufficient grounds, on this grave subject, when I solemnly affirm, to the best of my belief in knowledge, that society in the whole of the West and very largely in the South of Ireland is at this moment in a state of disorganisation brought on by destitution and eviction, approaching fast to a dissolution of all its bonds. A man who knows well the condition of the people, has elsewhere observed:—

“Perhaps when the Celtic race has passed away, the future archaeologist, in pouring over these accounts of famine and eviction, will deny their authenticity, and maintain that, in an age of civilisation, and in a country not devastated by war, but abounding with the fruits of nature, it was impossible that men should sink into the grave unnoticed and unremembered. But the very brutes of the field which are now feeding where the wives and children of the peasant and the farmer once gathered round the domestic hearth — the kite and the ravenous dog that have feasted upon their unburied corpses, — these bear witness to the immensity of that calamity which no tongue but that of an angel’s could adequately describe. For I have a strong conviction that the height, the depth, the immensity of that distress never can be known until the recording angel shall produce his official report on the day of Judgement.”

We may now go back to Kilrush. — The task of deciding on the applications for admission into the workhouse on the occasion I have referred to required indeed no ordinary degree of mental composure. The consideration of the claims of each batch of famine-stricken paupers that was admitted, was made

amidst din of frightful sounds of human voices, expressive of entreaty, remonstrance and authority, or else on the other hand of suffering, of mortal anxiety, and of despair — screams of children admitted being taken away from mothers, shrieks of daughters parting with fathers whom they knew would never see again, sobs and moans of women about to be separated from their husbands: — a babel of shrieks and supplications. Amidst these cries, that of a poor child about eleven years of age (a fine, intelligent looking boy as I ever saw), all the time I was in that hall prevailed over the others exclaiming — “Ah, mammy, mammy; don’t leave me, mammy. I won’t stay here without you. Oh, mammy, dear, sure you won’t leave me in this place!” I heard one of the guardians speak to the child two or three words — kind and soothing words. This gentleman’s name I learned was Keane. He is an ex-officio guardian, and I feel bound to say thus much, because I know there are many such men who, though not popular, are more humane than they apparently care to be deemed. Behold, then the multitude of paupers — by some described as some thousands, by me as exceeding one thousand in number — congregated on one day round the Poorhouse of Kilrush, clamouring for admission — and then enquire into the result of their importunities. Of that multitude of famishing people, 209 were admitted on this occasion, and outdoor relief was given to widows with two or more children, in Indian corn meal, in value to the amount of £7 7s. 3d.!!! The numbers who received this outdoor relief were 523, and the value of the meal given to each “widow with two or more children” was under 3½d. But what became of the hundreds who received neither indoor nor outdoor relief? Numbers of them slept that night under the shelter of hedges in the ditches outside the town, and some were suffered to sleep, without a rag to cover them, or a wisp of straw to lie upon, under the arches and the porch of the Market House. On the occasion I refer to there were 4,858 inmates in the Kilrush Poorhouse and its eight auxiliaries, and with those admitted that day, viz., 209, the number was increased to 5067. I asked for a weekly return of the inmates and the deaths from the latter end of December 1850, to the beginning of February 1851, of which the following is the substance:

	Inmates	Deaths
Week ending December 28th , 1850	4315	24
“ January 4th 1851	4569	14
“ January 11th “	4997	17
“ January 18th “	4956	25
“ January 25th “	4869	35
“ February 1st “	4981	51
“ February 6th “	5067	30
“ March 8th 1851		56
“ March 15th 1851		68
And since then it has increased to		72

I was also then furnished with the following official returns, the importance of which is greater than might be imagined by a mere cursory glance at them.

Number of deaths for the year ended 29 th Sept. 1849	505
Ditto for year ended 29 September 1850	1392
Number of admissions for year ended 29 th Sept. 1849	8089
Ditto for year ended 29 September 1850	12,670

The highest rate paid in this Union was 6s. 6d. to 3s. 6d. in the pound. The average cost of a pauper per week was 10d. In another return very competent authority observes — “The average cost of a pauper per week, including hospital and infirmary patients, is 10¼d. I should say those in the house do not cost 8d. per week each.” Eightpence for the sustenance of a human being of adult age for seven days!!! Let us see how this expenditure is met.

[Here in the manuscript before us follow 10 folio pages of information with reference to population, area, and valuation of the twelve Poor-Law divisions reported on, the dietary for each class of inmates in Kilrush and other Irish workhouses, and comparative tables shewing the treatment of similar classes in various English country London workhouses. For these tables the limits of this work do not however afford sufficient space.]

The present dietary of the English workhouses, it is well known, has been reduced to the smallest amount of nutritious food deemed sufficient to maintain life in health and strength. We now proceed to compare the actual amount of food, animal, vegetable and farinaceous, of an adult male English pauper for one week in the St. Pancras workhouse, with the quantity of food given to an Irish adult pauper in the Kilrush Union workhouse, premising that the data for the facts in regard to both are obtained from official returns...

ONE WEEK'S FOOD FOR AN ADULT PAUPER IN ST. PANCRAS' WORKHOUSE, AND IN KILRUSH POORHOUSE.

	Meat	Bread	Vegetables	Stirrabout	Milk	Porridge	Soup	Pd'g	Cheese	Beer	Milk	Cocoa
St. Pancras	18 oz.	92 oz.	36 oz.	—	14½ Pints	29 oz. Meal	6 Pts.	12 oz.	6 oz.	11 P	—	—
Kilrush	18 oz.	112 oz.	—	56 oz. Indian Meal in	—	—	14 Pints contain'g 2 oz. oatm'l. & 2 oz. Vegetables, each pint say 56 ounces.	—	—	—	—	3 Pts.

In the Kilrush dietary, then, we look in vain for animal food, for vegetables, for milk, and indeed for bread fit for the food of man. It were well that the guardians understood distinctly that humanity is not differently constituted in Ireland to what it is in England. Is there one law of nature regulating the functions of a man in an English Poorhouse and another controlling the digestive organs and vital powers of an Irish pauper? It may be sometimes forgotten, but should never be unknown that there is but one law of God for the observance of all rulers, and the protection of the poor of all climes; and when that law is signally violated in their persons, there is no amount of sophistry that can fritter away the responsibility or guilt of a great crime against humanity.

To my inquiry of the proper authority on the subject of the state of health of the inmates the written answer was — “dysentery and diarrhoea very prevalent at present, which is attributed to the dietary and the overcrowding of the houses.” In the official Minute Book I found the following Report, made by the medical officer of the, at the period of the awful increase of the mortality in this Institution. —

“Gentlemen, — I beg to bring the present overcrowded state of the infirmary under your especial notice, with a view of adding additional wards or apartments appropriated to the use of the sick.

I regret to say that sickness is very much on the increase, it spread being principally amongst the old and infirm and the very young.

“The mortality is so frightfully high, and so many of the old and infirm are dropping off, in many instances somewhat suddenly, that I must urgently impress the necessity of allowing a sufficient supply of milk for breakfast instead of the cocoa now used.

“The sick, both in the infirmary and in the hospital, are not getting the prescribed quantity of milk — the nurses say they are from 150 to 180 quarts a day short. This should be supplied if possible as it is their chief nutriment.

“Signed,

“T. S. B. O'DONNELL.”

This gentleman did his duty to his God, to his patients, and to his employers: he pointed out the means of stopping the ravages made by an insufficient dietary, and consequent on overcrowding in the several houses. If that terrible mortality went on unchecked, the fault was not his. No change was made in consequence of this protest. Great evils were predicted from a persistence in the existing dietary. That dietary was persisted in — the predictions were accomplished. The people were carried off in numbers unheard of before in any Poorhouse. The guardians are answerable for this mortality. In the parent house as well as in the auxiliaries, material order and cleanliness are carefully attended to, but a proper understanding of the means essential for securing moral order, inculcating habits of industry, restoring debilitated energies of mind and body, resisting formidable tendencies to disease, and prolonging life, are not observable in the government of any of these houses. But above all evils prevailing in the management, the monster evil of the Kilrush Poorhouses is insufficient food. The diet may be said to be wholly farinaceous; and I have elsewhere observed that human beings being cooped up in crowded places, constantly breathing and infected atmosphere, debarred from active exercise, having no manual labour, and no means of maintaining or renovating impaired strength by either, cannot longer be kept in health, or in life, on this diet. When, moreover, the farinaceous food is of a bad kind, the digestive and then the vital powers even of the strongest will gradually break down; while those of the infirm, the very young, and the very old, will utterly and speedily fail; and these persons will pine away and die with as much certainty as if they had been taken off by poison. You kill men by half feeding as effectually as if you took their blood by stabbing; and you destroy life by a process which kills more effectually and more rapidly when the scanty supply of food is of a bad quality. The bread of the Kilrush Union poorhouse and its auxiliary is not fit for the food of man — at least it was not so two months ago. It is composed of equal parts of rye and barley, and is black, clammy, badly baked, unsightly, and distasteful. When I pressed my fingers on it, the soft part pitted as if it were a mass of putty. I heard several of the paupers declare they could not eat it. And whilst I was present, orders were charitably given by the medical officer for the removal of two languid-looking boys from one of the auxiliaries to the infirmary, with the view, I believe, of furnishing them there with food that was more fit for them. It must be observed, though the doctor has the power of ordering wine and porter to the sick in hospital, he has not the power of changing the diet of the infirm unless he takes them into hospital. The accommodation there is extremely limited, the number of the infirm is very great, and this may be counted as one cause of the enormous mortality that has taken place here.

The diet, I repeat, is insufficient for the maintenance of life in health for a period of many weeks. It is scanty in quantity and bad in quality there is not a due admixture of vegetable substances with the farinaceous food. There are, in fact, no vegetable substances used at all, except in the water whitened with meal, which is termed soup in the dietary, and in this liquid turnips or parsnips, in very small quantities are allowed. The small allowance of milk, which in other Poorhouses counteracted the evil effects of an otherwise exclusively farinaceous diet, here unfortunately was substituted in the case of adults by cocoa, and in the case of the children was either reduced to half the quantity, or, in some cases, wholly withheld, and substituted by a composition called artificial milk, which would serve no purpose with regard to nutriment, or as a corrective of food wholly farinaceous.

If the cost of each pauper was increased to the amount of 14d. or 15d. per week for his sustenance, by procuring the milk necessary for his health, and to which he was entitled, the Union would in all probability be saved the expense of some of the alcoholic stimulants which the doctor is allowed to prescribe for the sick and dying in hospital. The union might be saved also the expense of a vast number of coffins, the cost of which varies from 2s. 6d. for the large two 1s. 6d. for the small. The gratuity likewise might be spared that is allowed the pauper who daily conveys the cartload of the Poorhouse dead to the wide-mouth trench that yawns in the churchyard in the vicinity of the town. There are other considerations I am aware unfavourable to this view of the question. But on the supposition that the life of a human being is of more importance than any saving that can be effected by a cessation of the cost that his maintenance in life may have occasioned, I find it difficult to conclude that the economy that has been practised here ought to be imitated elsewhere, or suffered to be continued in this place in the face of the awful mortality co-existence with it, or of the protest against the former of the Poorhouse medical officer recorded in the Minutes of the proceedings of the Board of Guardians: —

There are no stated times for parents to see their children, but occasionally they may see them. There are no fixed times for relatives to see their dying friends, but, *if they come* they are allowed to see them.

The Leadmore auxiliary house is destined for children from 9 to 15 years of age. On the 6th of February last, the number of the inmates, including 42 adults who acted as attendants, was 1851. There is no industrial employment in any of the Kilrush Houses, none here except that of a few children who were engaged in mending clothes, and about 20 others who occupied in the courtyard at the period referred to, making up small heaps of manure. There was a school, however, attached to this auxiliary, and several hundred children were present. The teacher, Mr Mahoney, evidently had taken great pains with the children, and some of the classes did a great credit to the efforts of their instructor. But the painful consideration was forced on the mind — of what avail was this book learning likely to be to these pauper children without industrial training?

The clothing of a vast number of these boys was so bad that it might be supposed that old rags had not been taken from them. Such, I believe, was not the fact. In the house of the female children in this establishment there were 951 inmates. The clothing of the girls was, if possible, worse than that of the boys.

The master of the Leadmore auxiliary, an intelligent and apparently a humane person, Mr. B. Foley, lamented there was no employment for the inmates. There was no spinning, there was no sewing except by about twelve or fifteen children. Some time ago there were 94 girls employed at knitting, which has been introduced at his instance. He had prevailed on the guardians to advance 30s. for materials, and this was the whole cost of the experiment to the Union. But it was given up, because he could get no buyers in the town for the stockings. In the house none are given to the paupers, nor shoes either to men, women, or children. The children were all of the fourth class — from 9 to 15 years of age. Their diet was as follows:—

Morning Meal

5 ozs. Indian meal in stirrabout, 1 naggin *of artificial milk*, composed of ¼ oz. of flour and ¼ oz. of ground rice mixed up and boiled in water.

Dinner.

Brown bread 10 ounces — the same given to paupers of all classes — composed of rye and barley in equal parts, and 1 pint and a half of soup or porridge, consisting of 1¼ oz. of oatmeal, *some* parsnips and turnips, and a little salt and pepper.

Supper

Brown bread, 4 oz.

There is no infirmary in the Leadmore auxiliary. The children when they fall sick must be removed to the parent house infirmary. The diet cannot be altered in this House, so that when ailing before they are sent to the infirmary, which is at some distance, they must remain on the common diet. There is the same want here that exists in all the Irish Poorhouses — the want of all opportunity for air and exercise in places fit for children's amusement out of doors. The children, from the want of suitable day sheds in wet weather, are cooped up all day in the school-room; but every morning they are sent down to the river-side at the rear of the premises to wash their feet. The dormitories of this house are only 7 ½ ft. high; those in the building called "the store" are only four or five; those in the house for girls called "the cottage" are nearly 11 feet in height. The number of boys crowded together in four dormitories, namely, 846, is far too great for the space as in the female dormitories — three sleep in one bed. Notwithstanding the original defects of those buildings of Leadmore, — never intended for the purposes to which they have been converted, — all that could possibly be effected to render them more fit for those purposes was done by a gentleman connected for three years with the affairs of the Union. This gentleman, Captain Kennedy, to whom all arrangements of any good kind existing in the Leadmore Poorhouse are due, has gained his honours dearly indeed for his own quiet and repose, like all men who fight great battles for humanity; but those honours will wear well and last longer than the remembrance of any vain efforts to decry them. A word or two, in conclusion, of the Poorhouse dead that for the three last weeks of March amounted to 219. The dead are interred every morning in a churchyard about a mile and a half from the town. The bodies are carted away without any appearance of a funeral ceremony: no attendance of priest or parson, no pall. The coffins — if the frail boards nailed together for the remains of paupers may be so called — are made by contract and furnished "at a very low figure." The paupers' trench in a corner of the churchyard, which I visited, is a large pit, the yawning aperture about twenty feet square. The dead are deposited in layers, and over each coffin a little earth is thinly scattered, just sufficient to conceal the boards. The thickness of this covering of clay I found did not amount to two inches over the last tier of coffins deposited there. A pauper who drives the cart, and another who accompanies him to assist in taking the coffins from that conveyance, and slipping them down into the trench, are the only funeral attendants. It is very rare that any of the kith or kin of a pauper accompany his remains to the grave, because there are so many deaths and so much difficulty in ascertaining anything about the identity of such a multitude of paupers as those amounting to half 100 or more who die in a week, that it is seldom anything is known of the deaths in the Poorhouse by the friends outside, if any there be left, until long after they have taken place.

The Abbé Bergia, in his "Dictionnaire de Theologia" (Art. Funerailles, Tome 3, page 453), inveighs against the barbarity of the Romans, as it is found exhibited in the contempt with which they treated the poor and enslaved, who, dying without the means of defraying the charges of funeral expenses, were buried like dogs. This conduct of their's, he says: "Est une preuve de leur barbarie et de leur sot orgueil, car quand on use de cruauté envers des morts, on n'est disposé à rendre beaucoup d'humanité envers les vivans." Ah! good Abbé Bergia, what a necessity would you have had for ransacking the graves of the old Romans for evidences of barbarity connected with the modes of disposing of the remains of the poor, had you lived in our day in visited the Kilrush Union!

"Nothing," says Charles Lamb, "tends more to keep up in the imaginations of the poorest sort of people a grievous horror of the workhouses than the manner in which the pauper funerals are conducted in this metropolis."** This was said of pauper burials in England, where there is some semblance of respect for the dead — some affectation of sympathy with the poor. But what would Charles Lamb say of pauper burials in this Christian land of ours if he witnessed one in the churchyard of Kilrush?

"X."— (R. R. Madden).

** The Works Of Charles Lamb — "Letters on Burial Societies."

P. S. — To have witnessed the scenes that have come in the way of my observation in Irish Poorhouses, and to have been silent, would have been a crime, with something of the guilt of blood in it. It cannot now be said in England that the horrors that have taken place here have been totally ignored. It ought not to be said here — “the crimes of this land are wafted with impunity on the sea.”

“Eunt totis terrarum criminal velis!”

Of myself and my aim I will only say — I am not of the number of those who are perpetually troubling public attention. I have no applause to gain, no personal objects to promote, no feelings of resentment to gratify, by taking the course I have done. I therefore come forward without fear with full confidence, and a strong faith in the power of truth and God’s protection for it, and denounce acts which appear to me to be great crimes against humanity.

February 7th, 1851

“X.”

(Transcribed from the original text by Ian Beard who kindly contributed it for publication on workhouses.org.uk)

ⁱ *The memoirs (chiefly autobiographical) from 1798-1886, of Richard Robert Madden* by Madden, Richard Robert, 1798-1886; edited by Madden, Thomas More, 1838-1902, Published by: Ward & Downey, London 1891 – Pages 248-254