

**‘Reflections on the Dunmanway Union, and its
Workhouse, During the Great Famine’**

The horrors of the famine are such as would almost seem fabulous if we read of them in books... Great numbers are buried without coffins... miserable creatures crawling up the rocks on the coast in search of edible weeds... coffinless bodies that had been interred in kitchen gardens are rooted up by pigs and dogs and devoured.

~ A description of the Famine in West Cork, by W. J. O'Neill Daunt.¹

Such was the suffering in West Cork during the Great Famine that the area achieved, in the words of one historian, 'world notoriety.'² However, despite its central West Cork location, Dunmanway is rarely mentioned in the same breath as the unions of Skibbereen and Schull, which were bywords for suffering and hunger during the Famine, and have remained so to this day. This essay will attempt to explain some of the reasons why this is may be the case. First, this paper will provide a thorough examination of the Dunmanway workhouse minute books in order to show how the potato disease initially impacted upon the workhouse, and how the situation rapidly developed into a crisis. It will then be demonstrated that the Dunmanway Union had the good fortune of being served by many well-meaning and charitable individuals during its darkest hour, a fact which goes against the long-held public perception of workhouse staff as cruel and heartless. Finally, the essay will offer some comparisons between the Dunmanway Union and other unions - both regionally and in a wider national context - which demonstrate how badly the union suffered during the Famine, but also that its experiences could have been even more horrific.

¹ W. J. O'Neill Daunt, *A Life Spent for Ireland; Selections from the Journals of W.J. O'Neill Daunt, Edited by his daughter*, (Irish University Press, Shannon, 1972), p. 62.

² Paul Bew, *Ireland; the Politics of Enmity 1789-2006*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007), p. 187.

For any historical study that concerns itself with a union and its workhouse, the key primary source will be the Board of Guardian minute books for the union in question. Within the Dunmanway Board of Guardian's minute books the first real sign of an impending disaster comes in early November 1845. On the first day of that month, the 'Special Business' section of the minutes contains a discussion of the potato crop's failure, and is ended by a statement expressing the Guardian's optimistic belief that the government would 'take the most prompt steps to mitigate so fearful a calamity.'³ Although this is the first clear reference to the advent of the Great Famine, a closer inspection of the minute books reveals that anxiety was already growing among the Dunmanway Guardians with regards to the potato disease. On 18 October the clerk recorded that a tender for 2000 lbs of potatoes by a farmer Regan had been accepted.⁴ Tellingly, this amount was double the amount of previous tenders up to that point. Inmate numbers had not increased (they were in fact lower than those recorded in the previous spring⁵) so this can be interpreted as an attempt to stockpile potatoes by the workhouse staff. On 8 November - one week after the Guardian's statement of confidence in the government - the clerk was directed to advertise for the supply of 3000 lbs of potatoes.⁶ Ominously, this advert had to be placed again the following week after no tenders were forthcoming.⁷ Potatoes did remain available until at least January 1846 in the Dunmanway union, but steps were already being taken to ensure against their spoilage. On 31 January the Visiting Committee, a group tasked with making weekly inspections of the workhouses and their conditions, advised that the 'potatoes should not in future be washed until just before being boiled,' a recommendation that highlights how valuable the once abundant potato had already become by this relatively

³ Dunmanway union minute books, BG/83/A/2, 1 November 1845. The Dunmanway minute books are viewable at Cork City and County Archives.

⁴ BG/83/A/2, 18 October 1845.

⁵ There were 125 recorded inmates on 18 October 1845. In April inmate numbers reached a year peak of 218. BG/83/A/2, 12 April 1845.

⁶ BG/83/A/2, 8 November 1845.

⁷ BG/83/A/2, 15 November 1845.

early stage.⁸ Indeed, by April of that year Daniel Conner, Chairman of the Board of Guardians at that time, went on record as saying that the union could not ‘get potatoes to purchase.’⁹ Clearly, the Famine in Dunmanway had now begun in earnest.

As with the attempts to buy larger amounts of potatoes, there are other ways in which the Dunmanway workhouse minute books contain information that is not explicitly written down. A good illustration of this is the ‘Visiting Committee’ section of the minute books, where a weekly report on the condition of the workhouse was to be recorded, and this was done so diligently in Dunmanway’s case throughout 1845. From the start of 1846, however, things began to change. On the 21st of March the Visiting Committee found the house just to be in ‘tolerable’ order, and for two weeks in April only a curt ‘no report made’ is recorded.¹⁰ From this point onwards visiting committee entries are at best sporadic, and often absent for long periods. Clearly, these absences were a result of the ever-worsening famine situation in the Dunmanway union. An over-stretching of resources within the workhouse system throughout the country meant that sacrifices had to be made, and workhouse inspections became less and less frequent. The occasional Visiting Committee entries that do appear are rarely positive. An entry made in July 1846, regarding the maintenance of the Workhouse’s sewage system, is worth quoting at length in order to highlight just how grim conditions could be for the inmates:

The attention of the members of the committee has been formally called during their visit to the mode of emptying the cesspool of the house by means of buckets worked by the pauper. This mode they consider highly objectionable for the following reasons... The offensive state in which the atmosphere is kept (during cleaning) and the consequent want of ventilation in the house from the necessity of closing the windows towards the yard... The degrading duty which the unfortunate paupers are called on to execute in discharging the cesspools.¹¹

⁸ BG/83/A/3, 31 January 1846.

⁹ Scarcity Commission, further return showing the progress of disease in the potatoes, the complaints which have been made, and the applications for relief, for the week ending the 4th day of April 1846, p. 3.

¹⁰ BG/83/A/3, 21 March 1846, 11 April 1846, 18 April 1846.

¹¹ BG/83/A/3, 18 July 1846.

A Visiting Committee report made at the very end of 1846, at a time when inmate numbers had rocketed to 620 (compared to 145 inmates less than a year previously), notes - with no little understatement - that 'the general appearance of the house is somewhat altered by the numbers admitted.'¹² In the minute books for 1847, the worst year of the crisis in Dunmanway, the Visiting Committee sections are almost exclusively left empty. An entry made on 25 September, however, perhaps sums up the workhouse system's inadequacy in the face of the Great Famine: with the rest of that week's pages required to record the ongoing crisis, the Visiting Committee section - instead of detailing a workhouse inspection - simply lists an order for 'one ton of Indian meal.'¹³

The Dunmanway Board of Guardian minute books for 1847, often referred to as Black '47, make grim reading.¹⁴ Inmate numbers reached a peak of 866 - over double the designed capacity - in the third week of March, and 76 people died in one week alone during the same month.¹⁵ As the following map (Figure 1) shows, the Dunmanway workhouse provided indoor relief to between 150 and 200 of every 1,000 persons who resided within the union for the year ending 29 September 1847. Tellingly, of all 130 Poor Law unions, only the Kinsale and Cork City unions matched this rate of relief, and only the Clonmel workhouse provided for a higher percentage of its union's population than the Dunmanway workhouse during this period.

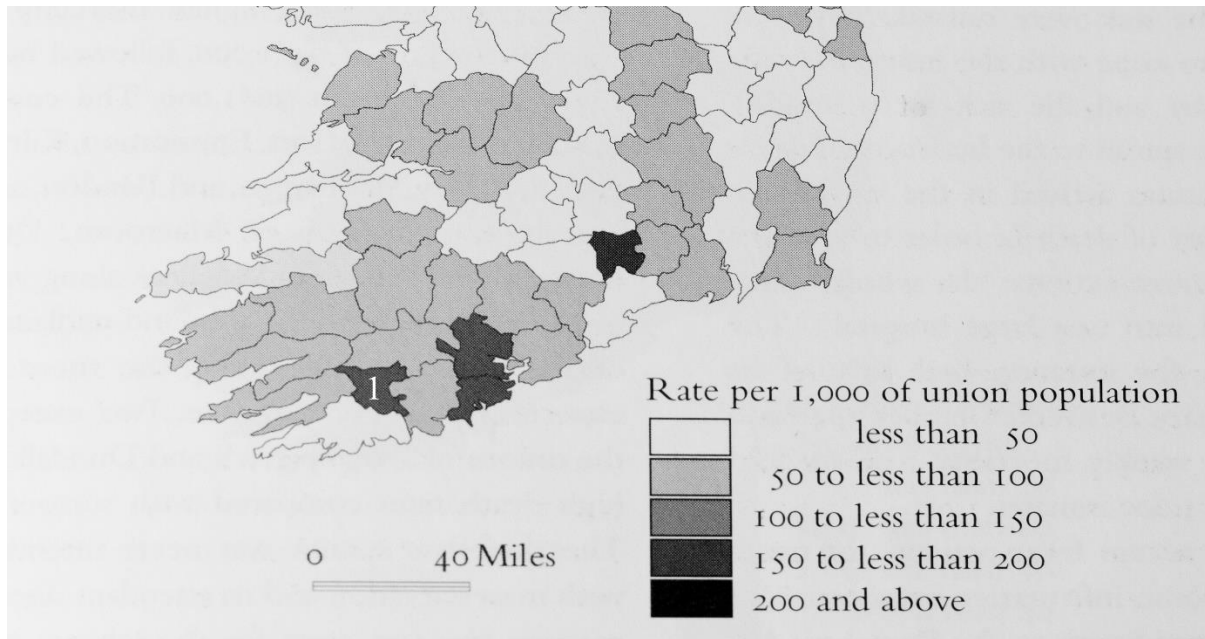
¹² BG/83/A/3, 26 December 1846.

¹³ BG/83/A/3, 25 September 1847.

¹⁴ Michelle O'Mahony, *Famine in Cork City*, (Mercier Press, Cork, 2005), p. 41.

¹⁵ BG/83/A/4, 20 March 1847, 27 March 1847.

Figure 1: Rate of workhouse relief provided during the year ending 29 September 1847.



Dunmanway Union is represented by the number 1. Source: Liam Kennedy, Paul S. Ell, E.M. Crawford & L.A. Clarkson, *Mapping the Great Irish Famine*, (Four Courts Press, Dublin, 1999), p. 127.

The same date on which Dunmanway workhouse recorded its highest number of inmates – 27 March 1847 – was used by the government to compare inmate numbers in all the Poor Law’s workhouses. Of the nine Irish workhouses built to hold 400 paupers, Dunmanway workhouse, at over double its capacity, was by far the most overcrowded. In comparison, another workhouse of the same capacity at Celbridge, County Kildare, held just 348 inmates on the same date.¹⁶ This is telling given the fact that the two unions were roughly comparable in both size and population: according to the 1841 census Dunmanway had a population of 30,527 compared to 25,242 in Celbridge, while Dunmanway Union covered 89,802 statute acres compared to Celbridge’s 86,055.¹⁷ Such a difference in the number of workhouse inmates

¹⁶ Poor Law Unions (Ireland). Return of the acreable contents, and population of the several unions in Ireland in 1841; the number of workhouses; number of inmates each workhouse was constructed to contain, and the total number of paupers in each on the 27th March 1847, 1847, pp. 1-6. (Hereafter: Return of the acreable contents)

¹⁷ Return of the acreable contents, p. 2, p. 3.

during the Famine's darkest period must surely reflect the severity of the situation in West Cork.

Figure 2: Irish Unions with workhouses built to contain a maximum of 400 inmates.

Name of Union	Population in 1841	No. of Inmates on 27/3/1847
Balrothery	28,116	600
Cahirciveen	30,888	300
Celbridge	25,242	348
Dunmanway	30,527	866
Dunshaughlin	20,985	491
Larne	38,758	556
Lowtherstown	34,963	530
Milford	38,108	387
Shillelagh	34,800	504
Stranorlar	25,786	391

Source: Poor Law Unions (Ireland). Return of the acreable contents, and population of the several unions in Ireland in 1841; the number of workhouses; number of inmates each workhouse was constructed to contain, and the total number of paupers in each on the 27th March 1847.

Within the West Cork context, the same report also offers some clues as to why the Skibbereen Union suffered even more than the Dunmanway Union. The Skibbereen Union was not just larger in size than its near neighbour (this is discussed further below), it also had a much larger population. The 1841 census records 104,508 people as resident in the Skibbereen Union, and while this figure had no doubt altered somewhat by the year 1847, it is likely that the Union's population was still over three times the size of the Dunmanway Union's.¹⁸ Despite this ratio,

¹⁸ Return of the acreable contents, p. 3, p. 5.

the Skibbereen workhouse had only been built to hold 800 paupers, exactly double the amount of the Dunmanway workhouse.¹⁹ Furthermore, while by March 1847 the Dunmanway workhouse had managed to increase its capacity by thirty per cent - through the hiring of a nearby house – Skibbereen Union had only increased its capacity by ten per cent during the same period.²⁰

The Dunmanway workhouse minute books regularly record the large financial burden that the Famine was placing on the union. By this stage coffins had become a regular expense for the Guardians, and the cost of these tragic necessities amounted to the sum of £25 over just two weeks in May.²¹ The cost could have even been greater, were it not for the fact that sometimes a single coffin was used to hold two, even three, bodies.²² The extra money required for coffins was a further strain on the Guardian's finances, which by this time were in disarray. Around this time there appeared to be genuine fears that the workhouse would have to close if loans could not be found to alleviate the union's financial woes.²³ In this regard the Dunmanway Union was not alone. A government report shows that on 1 January 1847, 47 out of the 130 unions were in debt to some degree.²⁴ On 24 April 1847 the Dunmanway Union was over £211 in debt, and each week the clerk had to alter the minute book's wording from 'balance in favour of' to 'balance against.'²⁵

¹⁹ Hickey, *Famine in West Cork*, p. 109.

²⁰ Return of the acreable contents, p. 3, p. 5.

²¹ BG/83/A/4, 15 May 1847, 22 May 1847.

²² O'Neill Daunt, *A Life Spent for Ireland*, p. 62.

²³ Michael Galvin, *Black Blight; the Great Famine, 1845-1852: a Four Parish Study*, (Litho Press, Cork, 1995), p. 212.

²⁴ Poor Law Unions (Ireland). A return showing the state of the funds of the several unions in Ireland, on the 31st day of January 1847, and the progress of the collection during the month, 1847, pp. 1-4.

²⁵ BG/83/A/4, 24 April 1847.

Although the Dunmanway Union suffered greatly during the period from 1845 to 1852, it is largely accepted that those sufferings were not on the same scale as in its larger neighbouring unions. This applies especially to the unions of Skibbereen and Schull. Helped in part by reports and graphic drawings which featured in *The Illustrated London News*, these two unions had become notorious for the hunger and suffering which was occurring there by the early months of 1847.²⁶ Such was the crisis within the Skibbereen Union that the Poor Law Commissioners became personally involved in its administration and it also received 'extra' aid under the February 1847 Temporary Relief Act (often referred to as the Soup Kitchen Act).²⁷ The Dunmanway Union, despite the horrors it too was experiencing, received no extra help from the government and it was therefore left to the well-meaning and charitable individuals both within the workhouse system and in Dunmanway town itself to try and alleviate the suffering of the poor.²⁸

In general, history has not been kind to the men who administrated the workhouses or to the men and women who staffed them, with writings from the period helping to embed a negative image in famine folklore. The historian Gerard O'Brien, for example, believes that 'the evil reputation of masters and of workhouse staff generally is not contradicted by the available evidence.'²⁹ The memoirs of the well-known Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa are a good

²⁶ Patrick Hickey, 'Mortality and Emigration in Six Parishes in the Union of Skibbereen, West Cork, 1846-47', in John Crowley, William J. Smyth and Mike Murphy (eds.), *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, (Cork University Press, Cork, 2012), p. 373.

²⁷ This 'extra' aid took the form of two financial controllers being appointed to the Skibbereen Union instead of the one appointed in every other union. Hickey, *Famine in West Cork*, p. 200.

²⁸ The fact that the government stayed out of the Dunmanway Union's affairs may have been a blessing in disguise. The correspondence between Sir Charles Trevelyan and those tasked with administering famine relief, such as Sir Randolph Routh, of the commissariat branch of the army, depicts a confused and muddled response in Skibbereen. In one letter, from January 1847, Routh informs Trevelyan that 'too much money is finding its way to Skibbereen,' and that some of the poor have become ill from the sudden 'abundance' of food. Clearly this was not an accurate picture, as hundreds would soon die in Skibbereen from starvation. The Dunmanway Union barely features at all within the same correspondence, which comprises hundreds of letters. Source: Correspondence from July, 1846, to January, 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of the distress in Ireland, Commissariat series, 1847, pp. 450-451.

²⁹ Gerard O'Brien, 'Workhouse Management in Pre-Famine Ireland', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, Vol. 86C (1986), p. 126.

example of this. They record Lione Fleming, who was Chairman of the Skibbereen Board of Guardians during the Famine, as a man who would lament a falling death-rate within his workhouse: 'Too bad, too bad,' the heartless Fleming is alleged to have said, 'last week was a better week than this.'³⁰ While such individuals did no doubt exist, the evidence suggests that Dunmanway workhouse was run by a group of men who showed genuine concern for the paupers under their ward.

Members of the Dunmanway Board of Guardians called numerous local meetings as the crisis grew, in an attempt to spur some action on behalf of the government. Actions like these were not always attempted elsewhere. The Guardians of the Cork Union, for example, neglected to implement any extra measures in case they were 'interpreted as an indication of generosity, or indeed humanity.'³¹ At one of these Dunmanway meetings Board member James Gillman requested that the government refrain from collecting a proportion of the union's debt in order to alleviate the 'crisis' caused 'by the blight and rot of our crops.'³² According to the diaries of a politically-active Dunmanway union resident, William O'Neill Daunt, in August 1846 a group of 'landlords, priests and parsons' met in Dunmanway to 'take measures to avert famine from the people.'³³ At a large meeting one month later Major General Shouldham, another member of the Board of Guardians, pledged that he and his colleagues would try to create employment for the people; 'in every way in our power and to the full extent of our means.'³⁴ At the same meeting Shouldham also made a somewhat desperate plea for help to the

³⁰ John O'Connor, *The Workhouses of Ireland; the Fate of Ireland's Poor*, (Anvil, Dublin, 1995), pp. 188-189. In fairness to Fleming, this story is likely exaggerated, and Hickey's *Famine in West Cork* paints him in a much more caring light.

³¹ Colman O'Mahony, *Cork's Poor Law Palace; Workhouse Life 1838-1890*, (Rosmathun Press, Cork, 2005), p. 29.

³² Galvin, *Black Blight*, p. 132.

³³ O'Neill Daunt, *A Life Spent for Ireland*, p. 53.

³⁴ Galvin, *Black Blight*, p. 189.

government, who he believed must not have been ‘at all aware of the frightful extent of destitution now existing in the country.’³⁵

A similar gathering to those detailed above, on 18 August 1847, attended by labourers ‘wretched and shaken by the hunger,’ heard a depressing report on the failure of the potato crop delivered by the Dunmanway parish priest, Fr. James Doheny.³⁶ Fr. Doheny was a key figure in Dunmanway during the Famine, and another who went to great lengths in order to ease the pain and suffering widely experienced. The relationship between Fr. Doheny and the Dunmanway Board of Guardians was often strained (the Guardians accused Fr. Doheny of interfering with Board of Guardian elections, and of ‘acting contrary to the Poor Law’), but he appears to have been a genuine and helpful presence in the workhouse during the Famine.³⁷ The popular priest had concerned himself with funding a harvest of potatoes for the destitute even before the first crop failures which heralded the arrival of the famine, and he often spoke out publicly in support of the poor.³⁸ Clearly then, Fr. Doheny went to extraordinary lengths for his parishioners during the famine, and indeed his health would soon suffer for it. When exhaustion and illness forced Fr. Doheny’s absence even his adversaries on the Board of Guardians were forced to admit that ‘no man could better discharge his duties’.³⁹

The poor of the Dunmanway union also had the further good fortune that a number of locals did their utmost to provide food for the hungry. Prominent among these were the Cox sisters, Martha and Katherine, who ‘worked tirelessly to alleviate the condition of the local poor.’⁴⁰ Such was the level of effort by the Cox sisters, who were part of the Dunmanway Indian Meal

³⁵ Galvin, *Black Blight*, p. 189. This statement shows the fact that little help had come from the government so far, and highlights the hopeless optimism contained in the Guardian’s previous belief that the government would ‘take prompt steps’ to avert a calamity (see footnote 3).

³⁶ Galvin, *Black Blight*, p. 159. It should be noted that Galvin erroneously names Fr. Doheny as Michael, not James.

³⁷ Donal O’Donovan, *Fr. James Doheny; Parish Priest of Dunmanway, 1818-1848*, (Inspire, Cork, 2004), p. 41.

³⁸ O’Donovan, *Fr. James Doheny*, pp. 70-71.

³⁹ O’Donovan, *Fr. James Doheny*, p. 71.

⁴⁰ Christine Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland*, (Bloomsbury, London, 2013), p. 152.

Ladies' Committee and came from a well-known land-owning family, that they received an inscribed silver tea service from Fr. Doheny in 1848, and also gained some recognition as far away as America for their sacrifices.⁴¹

Other committee's also played their part. The Dunmanway Relief Committee 'extensively placarded' the union with notices urging farmers to employ labourers, and received praise from Captain Huband, the government's inspecting officer for County Cork, in doing so.⁴² While it is likely, then, that there is some truth in the negative characterisations of workhouse guardians, staff and benefactors in post-Famine folklore, such descriptions do not fit those involved with the Dunmanway Union during the Famine.

As was no doubt the case within other unions, those who administrated the Poor Law in Dunmanway did their utmost to alleviate the suffering of the poor. In one regard, however, the Dunmanway Union appears to have been a genuine outlier within the Poor Law system. While the uniform design of Irish workhouses ensured that conditions in the Dunmanway workhouse were no better than elsewhere (it was said to be 'dirty and disorderly' at the height of the crisis in 1847⁴³), there was much more leeway to be found in the administration of the unions, and in this regard the Dunmanway Board of Guardians proved themselves to be quite unique. The Dunmanway Union was the only union in the entire country to avail of Section Forty-Four of the Poor Law Bill, which allowed them to standardize rates across the entire union (as opposed to different rates for different electoral divisions). This decision allowed the Dunmanway Guardians to 'no longer spend their time in squabbling' or waste time 'inspecting complicated

⁴¹ Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland*, p. 94, p. 153.

⁴² Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of the distress in Ireland, Board of Works series, (Second part), p. 98.

⁴³ O'Connor, *The Workhouses of Ireland*, p. 147.

accounts,' and instead 'work together for the object of relieving the destitute.'⁴⁴ 'To their credit,' continues the report, 'they (the Guardians) preferred justice to self-interest.'⁴⁵ Another report from the same year used the Dunmanway Union as the only Munster example of a district in which 'the Poor Rates have been collected with a degree of fidelity and exactness, which reflects much credit on the local management.'⁴⁶

The Dunmanway Guardians had, in fact, taken a proactive approach to their positions from the very beginning. They did not rest on their laurels and took their positions very seriously. Even before the workhouse had admitted its first inmate the Guardians had been actively working to improve the Poor Law. In February 1841 the Guardians made clear to the government their belief that 'the good intended by the Poor Law Act will be totally defeated while strolling beggars are allowed to exercise the trade of begging.'⁴⁷ This stance against mendacity appears to have been successful as the Guardians reported in 1846 that 'the Poor Law System has worked well. Mendacity has considerably abated.'⁴⁸ In the same report the Guardians displayed that their desire to improve the Poor Law had not waned in the previous five years, suggesting that 'too much power should not be placed into the hands of the Poor Law Commissioners,' and that the 'size of unions should be more equalized.'⁴⁹

The thoroughness with which the Dunmanway Guardians performed their duties was of benefit to them and to their union from the first stages of the Poor Law. Despite the widespread apprehension among the public about the Poor Law during its formative years,⁵⁰ rate-payers in the Dunmanway Union were 'content with the valuations' of their property, no doubt assured

⁴⁴ Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, 1846, p. 642.

⁴⁵ Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, 1846, p. 642.

⁴⁶ Twelfth annual report of the Poor Law Commissioners, with appendices, 1846, p. 24.

⁴⁷ Appendices B. to F. of the Eighth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, 1842, p. 347.

⁴⁸ Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, 1846, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords, 1846, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Gerard O'Brien, 'The Establishment of Poor-Law Unions in Ireland, 1838-43', *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 90 (November 1982), p. 101.

by the comprehensive manner in which the Dunmanway Guardians carried out this task.⁵¹ There were no objections from any landlord, and not one single notice of appeal had been lodged.⁵² Comparing this with the situation that occurred in the Skibbereen Union, where ‘military aid’ was required to quell the ‘spirit of resistance... to the collection of the Poor Rate,’ we can see how the Dunmanway Guardians were on a much surer footing to deal with disaster when it came.⁵³

The Dunmanway Guardians were also actively involved during the construction of the union’s workhouse, and once again their efforts ensured that Dunmanway gained a slight advantage over other unions. This is evident in a letter from the Architect George Wilkinson to the Poor Law Commissioners which discusses the Dunmanway Guardians:⁵⁴

In reference to the fourth charge of the Guardians, complaining of neglect, and of extraordinary conduct on my part, in the course I have taken, I have to state, that I regret very much that I have incurred such unfavourable opinions, having endeavoured at Dunmanway, more particularly than elsewhere, to act in accordance with the views of the guardians.⁵⁵

A later report further demonstrates how the Dunmanway Guardians actively involved themselves in the workhouse’s construction, and also highlights the high esteem in which they

⁵¹ Reports Relative to the Valuations for Poor Rates, and to the Registered Elective Franchise in Ireland (Second Series, Part 1, VII & VIII.), 1841, pp. 225-226.

⁵² Reports Relative to the Valuations for Poor Rates, 1841, p. 226.

⁵³ Poor Relief (Ireland), Return relative to erection of poor-houses, education of paupers, salaries of officers, expenditure, and rates, 1843, p. 148.

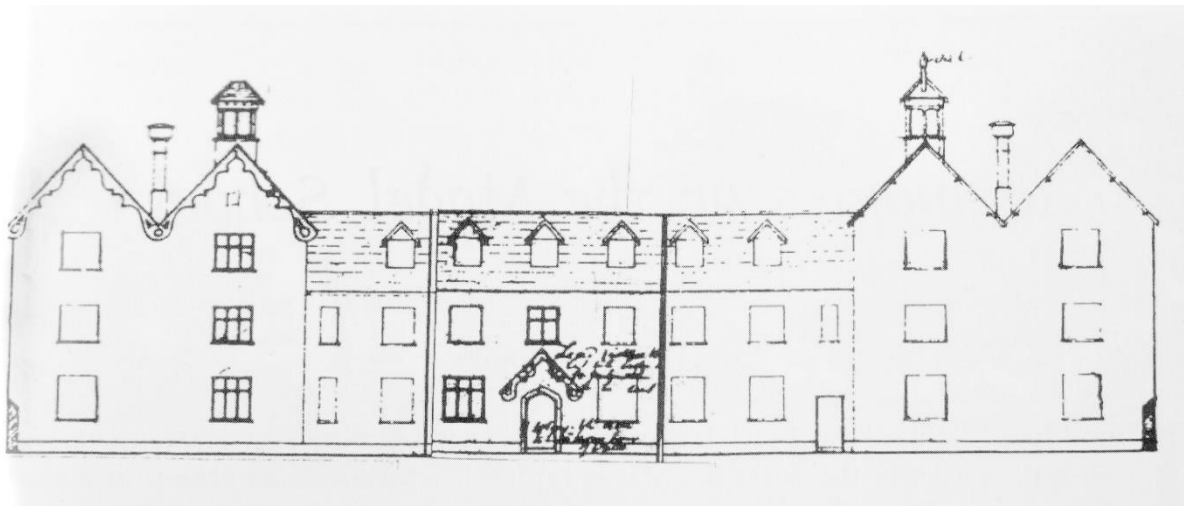
⁵⁴ Wilkinson had been tasked in 1838 with designing a uniform model of workhouse for construction in Ireland. It speaks volumes about the Poor Law’s implementation that Wilkinson, despite his insistence that the Irish paupers would not even need paved floors, was criticised for his ‘reckless extravagance.’ Peter Gray, *The Making of the Irish Poor Law 1815-43*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2009), p. 298.

⁵⁵ Poor Relief (Ireland), further returns to an order of the Honourable the House of Commons, 17 March 1843, pp. 368-369.

were obviously held. Here, an architect is responding to charges that shoddy workmanship had allowed damp to become a problem:

The building, during its progress, was frequently inspected by very intelligent Guardians experienced in building operations, and the clerk of works was appointed on their recommendation; the wall in question may consequently be presumed to have been well built, and I have heard the Guardians express their opinion that it was so, and that on more than one occasion.⁵⁶

Figure 3: A Sketch of the Dunmanway Workhouse.



Source: Dunmanway Historical Society.

It is perhaps not surprising therefore, with the Guardians so involved in its construction, that at a cost of £6200 the Dunmanway workhouse was the most expensive of its size (capacity 400) built up to that point in time.⁵⁷ The Dunmanway Guardians also spent three times the amount on fittings than was spent at an identically sized workhouse built in Larne, County Antrim.⁵⁸ It

⁵⁶ Appendix to the report of the Commissioner appointed to inquire into the execution of the contracts for certain union workhouses in Ireland, 1844, pp. 35-36.

⁵⁷ O'Connor, *The Workhouses of Ireland*, Appendix 13, pp. 260-263.

⁵⁸ O'Connor, *The Workhouses of Ireland*, Appendix 13, pp. 260-263.

is important to remember, however, that despite these extra costs the Dunmanway workhouse remained a grim place to reside, and was of course intended to be so.⁵⁹

The Dunmanway Union also had other advantages over some unions that were not the work of its Guardians. Many people had concerns that unions had been made too large to provide effective relief to the poor, and indeed this issue would turn out to be a problem during the Famine, when distance would prove to be a ‘fatal obstacle for the destitute.’⁶⁰ Although Dunmanway Union covered a considerable area – 89,802 statute acres (140 square miles) – it was positively convenient compared to unions like that of Tralee, also in Munster, which covered a colossal 351,000 acres (548 square miles).⁶¹ In fact, out of all 130 unions in Ireland, only thirteen were smaller than the Dunmanway Union, and five of these could be considered city districts.⁶² The relatively manageable size of the Dunmanway Union, therefore, would have made helping the poor during the Famine a much easier task than in larger unions. On this point, it is worth noting that Skibbereen Union covered 369 square miles, over two and a half times that of Dunmanway.⁶³

Another issue regarding the creation of unions was the location of the workhouse within market towns, rather than in the geographical centre of each union.⁶⁴ While this was true to an extent within the Dunmanway Union, the town of Dunmanway was indeed roughly central to the union. Furthermore, the town was a natural hub for trading and activity in the area; numerous market days were held there throughout the year, and new roads had been opened in the 1830s to service the town, making it more accessible to people than we might imagine today.⁶⁵ This

⁵⁹ Malachy Powell, ‘The Workhouses of Ireland’, *University Review*, Vol. 3, No. 7 (Spring, 1965), p. 7.

⁶⁰ Gray, *The Making of the Irish Poor Law 1815-43*, p. 289, p. 293.

⁶¹ Gray, *The Making of the Irish Poor Law 1815-43*, p. 293.

⁶² The five are Rathdown, Balrothery, Dublin North, Dublin South (all in area which is now Dublin city), and Belfast. Seventh Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, with appendices, 1841, pp. 276-277.

⁶³ Seventh Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, 1841, p. 276.

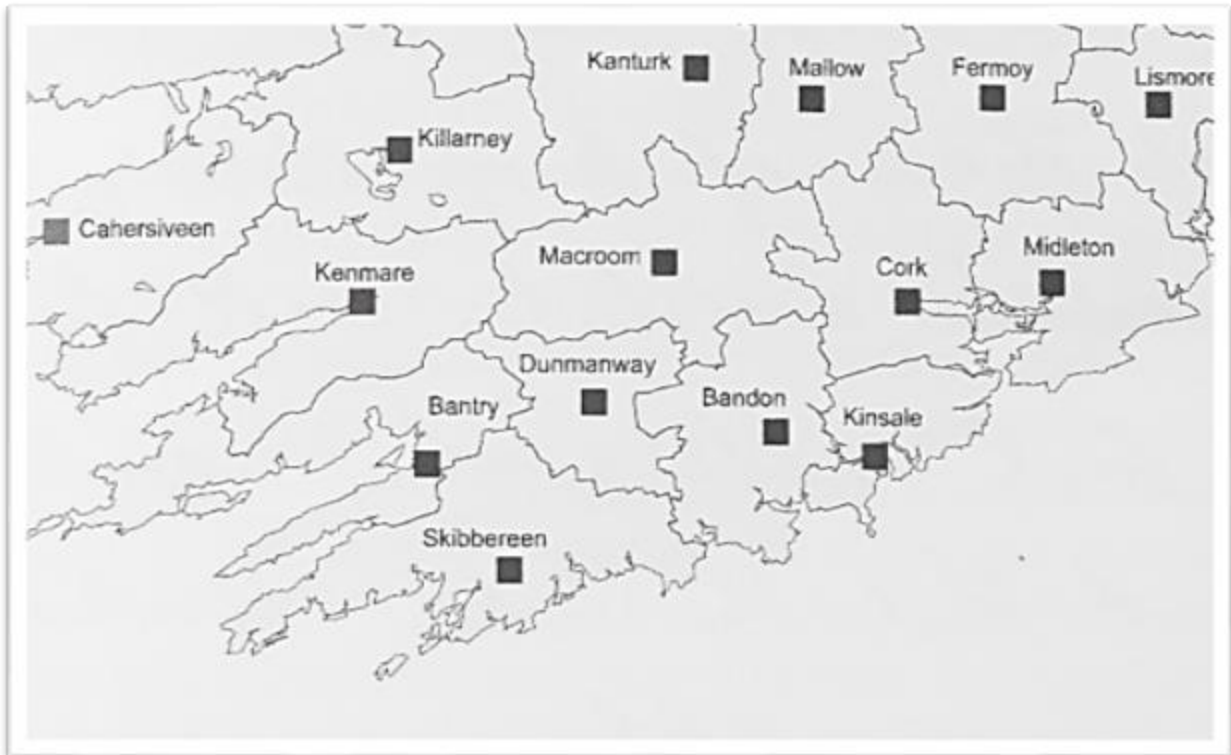
⁶⁴ Gray, *The Making of the Irish Poor Law 1815-43*, p. 289.

⁶⁵ Galvin, *Black Blight*, p. 31.

accessibility would be an obvious advantage during the Famine, allowing paupers to access the workhouse easier than was likely the case in surrounding unions.

Figure 4: A Map of Poor Law Unions in County Cork.

Note the centrality of the workhouse (represented by the dark square) within the Dunmanway Union, and the relative size of the Union compared to those of Macroom and Skibbereen.

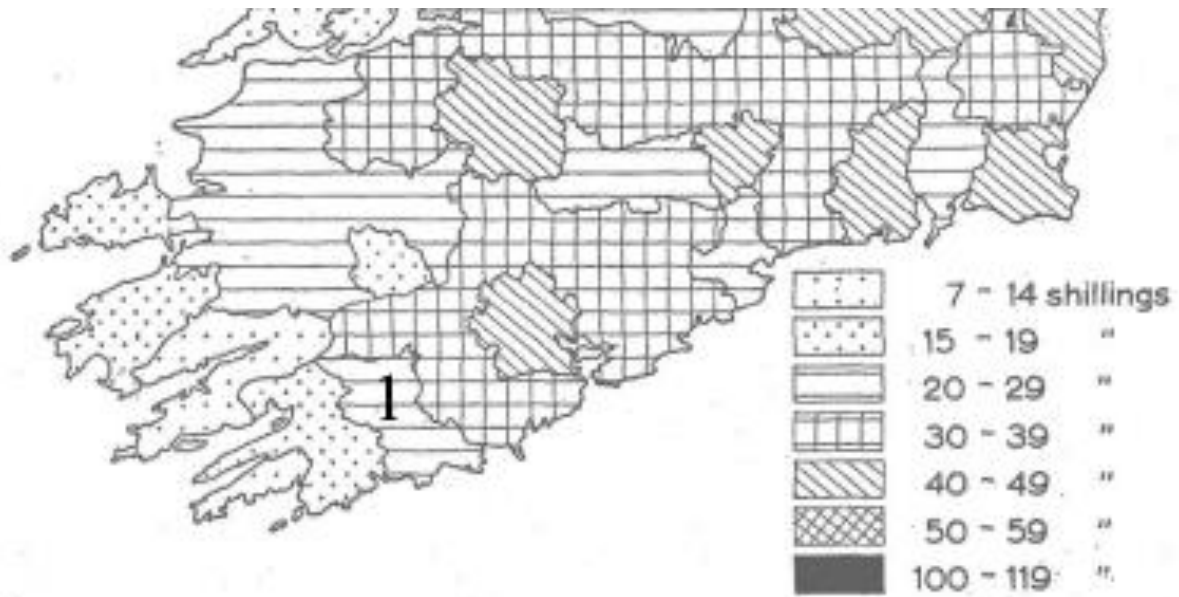


Source: Atlas of the Great Irish Famine, p. 125.

Perhaps the main advantage the Dunmanway Union had over neighbouring Skibbereen was that it was, relatively speaking, financially better off in the years preceding the Famine. Those with more assets were able to survive longer, and the historian who has done most to chronicle the extent of the Famine in West Cork - Pat Hickey – draws a direct correlation between

‘poverty and mortality.’⁶⁶ As is shown in the following map (Figure 5), the Dunmanway Union was valued in a higher shilling per head bracket than its more westerly neighbours. It is because of this reason, and those detailed above, that Dunmanway Union did not suffer to the same extent as Skibbereen and other nearby unions.

Figure 5: 1841 Poor Law valuations per head.



Dunmanway Union is represented by the number 1. Source: S.H. Cousens, ‘The Regional Variation in Mortality during the Great Irish Famine’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, Vol. 63 (1962-1964), p. 129.

In conclusion, this essay has outlined how the Great Famine affected the Dunmanway Union from 1845 to 1852. It has attempted to show how the key primary source for any historical work that concerns a workhouse – the Board of Guardian minute books – can often tell us more than what is actually written down. In the case studied here, the minute books, along with other primary and secondary sources, reveal that Dunmanway was fortunate to be served by a group of capable and kind individuals. The actions of the Cox sisters, Fr. Doheny, William O’Neill

⁶⁶ Pat Hickey, ‘Famine in West Cork’, in Patrick O’Flanagan and Cornelius Buttmer (eds.), *Cork: History and Society; Interdisciplinary Essays on the History of an Irish County*, (Geography Publications, Dublin, 1993), pp. 900-901.

Daunt, and those on the Relief and Dunmanway Indian Meal Ladies' Committees served to ensure that the Famine in Dunmanway was not as bad as it could have been. Even more crucially, the actions and zeal of the Dunmanway Board of Guardians, both before and during the Famine, almost certainly protected many paupers from the terrible fate of their peers. We can therefore add the case of Dunmanway to the contradictions against O'Brien's assertion regarding the 'evil reputation' of workhouse staff. Similar charges, however, still stand against those designed and passed into law so-flawed an act. Thanks to the unsuitability and limitations of the Poor Law, many more suffered than was necessary, and this should not be forgotten.

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