

Boccoughs and God's Poor: Deserving and Undeserving Poor in Irish Popular Culture

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One of principal issues in the history of ideology in nineteenth-century Ireland has been the scale and character of the social interventions of the state. Compared to contemporary Britain, these were massive and far-reaching, in response to what was seen as acute economic crisis and continuing violence and disorder, most spectacularly manifest in the case of agrarian secret societies. The first half of the century, for example, saw the establishment of a centralised, full-time professional police force and court system, as well as a nationally-organised and funded primary school structure.¹

In general, studies of these interventions have presented them as acculturating initiatives, attempting to produce change in attitudes and behaviour through a mixture of coercion and persuasion, and producing either massive resistance or massive change. Some studies have gone further, and have examined the reception of these interventions by those whom they affected, and of popular attitudes to those interventions in general. In the area of police and courts, for example, the use of petty sessions courts by the peasantry in Mayo has been discussed by McCabe and the public perception of the police by Griffin.²

This paper will consider one aspect of the reception of what was perhaps the most striking change in administration, the introduction of a Poor Law system of workhouses for the destitute, which was established in 1838 following a series of government reports in the previous decade. The Poor Law contrasts with the other administrative innovations in that there had been hardly any provision of that kind before, whereas in the cases of education and law, for example, structures, official or unofficial, predated the large-scale state interventions.³

1 The classic account is in O. MacDonagh, *Ireland: The Union and Its Aftermath* (London, 1977).

2 D. McCabe, 'Magistrates, Peasants and the Petty Sessions Courts: Mayo 1823-50' in *Cathair na Mart*, v (1985), pp. 45-53; B. Griffin, "'Such Varmint': The Dublin Police and the Public, 1838-1913' in *Irish Studies Review*, no. 13 (1995-96), pp. 21-5.

3 Such mechanisms as existed are discussed in D. Dickson, 'In Search of the Old Irish Poor Law' in R. Mitchison and P. Roebuck (eds), *Economy and Society in Scotland and Ireland 1500-1939* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 149-59.

The historiography of the Poor Law in Ireland, in common with studies of poor relief mechanisms elsewhere, has been mainly institutional and administrative, an approach dictated by the nature of the source material, the bulk of which consists of administrative records. This is accompanied by discussion of ideological debates within those sections of the élite who were responsible for policy. Some have moved beyond an institutional focus, reconstructing, for example, the lives of some inmates who saw admission to the workhouse as a temporary expedient in a wider repertoire of survival strategies, or looking at the ratepayers who funded the system and at their reluctance or refusal to pay those rates.⁴

Little is known about public attitudes to the introduction of a bureaucratized welfare system, and how this related to popular conceptions of social responsibility and action. Were the ideas on which poor relief was founded shared by any section of the people, were the categories it used widely understood or even translatable into those of a popular culture which was rural and largely Gaelic?

The initial evidence on these issues comes from the report of the inquiry into Irish poverty of 1835. This inquiry, which took a very wide interpretation of poverty and recommended a program of capital investment and training rather than exclusive reliance on a workhouse system, spent two years gathering information at oral hearings. These hearings took place in one parish per barony in 17 counties, and, constitute a rich ethnographic source, both for attitudes and practices. This paper uses principally the reports from the mid-western counties, Roscommon, Galway and Clare, as well as Longford and Cork. The witnesses, whose contributions are given in extensive form, came from all classes. In Kilkee, Co. Clare, for example, they included two landlords, two Catholic priests, an Anglican minister, a doctor, two large farmers, one middling farmer, two small farmers, a cottier with two acres, a labourer, a nailer, a widow 'lately evicted', two beggars 'and several other farmers, labourers and tradesmen'.⁵

In early nineteenth-century Ireland, begging, 'vagrancy' in the language of the report, took place on an enormous scale. Economic crisis and deindustrialisation, producing massive unemployment in both agricultural and textile regions, meant that there was a large number of landless beggars, as well as others whose holdings were insufficient to maintain them throughout the year.⁶

4 H. Burke, *The People and the Poor Law in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 1987); C. Clear, *The Homeless Young in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Galway, 1993); G. O'Brien, 'The New Poor Law in Pre-Famine Ireland: A Case History' in *Irish Economic and Social History*, xii (1985), pp. 33-49.

5 *First Report of His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland*, H.C. 1835, xxxii. All subsequent page references in the text are to this report. There is a brief discussion of the report as an ethnographic source in N. Ó Ciosáin, 'Introduction' in *Poverty before the Famine: County Clare 1835* (Ennis, 1996).

6 T. O'Neill, 'Poverty in Ireland 1815-45' in *Folk-Life*, xi (1973), pp. 22-33.

During the summer months, between the planting and harvesting of the potatoes, hundreds of thousands of people left their homes to beg. Some of the wealthier witnesses talk of giving to eighty or a hundred beggars every day in the summer, with farmers, cottiers and even the poorest of labourers in employment lodging beggars overnight. The beggars were almost invariably given alms in the form of potatoes rather than money.

How did the attitudes towards poverty and relief held by the less well-off donors compare with official or élite ones? We can begin with one of the distinctions which was fundamental to the official view, that between 'deserving poor', to whom relief should be extended, and the 'undeserving poor', to whom it should not. Those who conducted the inquiry thought that the distinction was not generally made, and that 'indiscriminate almsgiving' exacerbated the problem of poverty. At first sight, much of the testimony corroborates this, with witnesses declaring that they gave for the grace of God, that 'we do not look into circumstances' before giving, but held to the older Christian idea of charity as benefiting the donor rather than the recipient.

In practice, however, alms were not given without qualification, and many witnesses describe some means of discrimination between beggars. One of the most explicit statements came from Michael Rourke, a labourer in Ballymahon, Co. Longford:

I give lodgings to beggars, but would not admit every sort; the means I have of distinguishing is this – I see some of them quarrelling among themselves and blaspheming; many too on fair days get drunk on whiskey. I would not admit such characters into my house ... I am becoming more cautious in giving shelter to beggars ... one of them cut my blanket in two, and took half of it away with her; another stole my wife's cap; and a third stole a knife and fork from me. (p. 563)

Further west, there was a more precisely delineated characterisation of the undeserving poor. This was the figure of the 'boccough', a term used by witnesses from Mayo and Roscommon down to west Cork. In Boyle, Co. Roscommon, the testimony was summed up as follows:

There is a particular class of beggars, called boccoughs, who resort to deceptive means of exciting compassion; they are usually found at fairs and markets, and are the most immoral class among the poor ... Boccough is an Irish word, signifying a beggar who strolls about, affecting the appearance of impotence or scrofulous disease. (p. 510)

These beggars were also reported as asking for money, rather than potatoes, and this money was thought to be either hoarded or spent on whiskey.

As a representation, the boccough corresponds to much of the classic image of the undeserving poor in early modern Europe. This was a category which had emerged within the urban cultures of later medieval Europe, partly as the result of poor relief mechanisms in towns and cities coming under pressure from increasing immigration from rural areas, especially in years of agricultural crisis. In adjudicating between claims on relief, urban authorities favoured those who were resident in the towns and saw the newcomers as less deserving of help.⁷ A representation of the undeserving poor emerged in the form of a pejorative taxonomy, describing them as constituting different categories of tricksters and frauds. A fourteenth-century municipal statute in Augsburg, for example, forbade entry to five types of beggar: those who pretended to be converted Jews, those who pretended sickness, pilgrims who slept in front of churches, those who claimed to be murderers on the run, and those who wore hoods, presumably monks or pretended monks. Such categorisations developed into a literary genre which constructed more elaborate and ingenious typologies. This literature, which has been extensively discussed by Geremek and Camporesi, reached its height in an Italian work of 1485, *Speculum Cerretanorum*, 'The Mirror of Beggars', which listed 39 categories, including for example 'affarinati', 'those who beg for flour under the pretence that it is to be made into communion wafers'. Other texts added to this by representing beggars as a fully developed counterculture, with a 'King of Beggars' and a beggars' language, known in English as 'cant'.⁸

The distinction between deserving and undeserving poor remained probably the fundamental distinction in social welfare policy in Europe until the twentieth century, and it underlay many of the developments of the early modern period. From the sixteenth century onwards, for example, when some of the urban poor began to be confined in large institutions, it was often the undeserving who were enclosed, partly because they were considered to be deceitful and dangerous, while many of the deserving continued to be helped at home. 'Indoor' and 'outdoor' relief, therefore, initially corresponded roughly to 'undeserving' and 'deserving'.

These motifs of fraud and counterculture are very much in evidence in descriptions of boccoughs by the witnesses interviewed by the Poor Inquiry. In Kilcreest, Co. Galway, John Griffin, a weaver, told of

One man who goes about from fair to fair, with his arm bandaged from the elbow down, and though you would think by looking at him that

7 S. Woolf, introduction, *The Poor in Western Europe in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London, 1986); R. Jutte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1994).

8 B. Geremek, *Truands et Misérables dans l'Europe Moderne (1350-1600)* (Paris, 1980); P. Camporesi, *Il Libro Dei Vagabondi* (Bologna, 1973).

he could scarcely move it, there is not a man in the room can use the two arms better than he. He was one day on the bridge of Ennis, where he had a quarrel with a policeman, to whom he gave a sound drubbing with his crutch and hunted him off the bridge.

Mr Mahon, a farmer, added that

That man gave his daughter £30 fortune. He is like a king over the others, and people say he has a tribute from each of them. I saw him, at the fair of Kilcreest, take off the bandage in a drunken fit, and defy any man in the fair to try him at the stick. (pp. 478-9)

In Kilkeerin, Co. Roscommon, a stonemason called Gaffney said that

There is a place near Strokestown, where they assemble every year in immense numbers; at this fair, called the fair of Ballinafad, the beggars are married for a year. The ceremony is performed by joining the hands of the parties over a pair of crutches, and hundreds return to have the rite renewed year after year. (p. 513)

Here the counterculture motif is extended to rites of passage and a suggestion that beggars have their own religion, making use of a convenient pun between a crutch and a cross, a pun which also worked in Irish, since crutches are 'maidí croise', 'cross sticks'.

The word 'bacach', literally 'lame', used in the sense of 'beggar', and with some pejorative overtones, was well-established in nineteenth-century Gaelic culture. 'Deilín na mbacach', 'the beggars' litany' or 'the beggars' rigmarole', a stylised prayer or blessing in return for alms and lodging, was an established oral genre throughout western regions. A song from Co. Waterford, 'Bacach Buí na Léige', 'The Yellow Beggar of the League' was glossed by a twentieth-century editor as follows:

The beggars in old times in Ireland were a very well organised community, and in each district had something closely resembling a trade union for the purpose of excluding beggars from other districts.⁹

If the witnesses to the Poor Inquiry had an image of the undeserving poor, they also had one of the deserving poor, and a very clear distinction was made between the boccoughs and other beggars. This distinction persisted, to judge

9 D. de hÍde, *Amhráin Diadha Chúige Chonnacht* (Dublin, 1906), pp. 288-90; E. Ó Muirgheasa, *Dánta Diadha Uladh* (Dublin, 1936), pp. 380-96; M. Ní Annagáin and S. Clandillon, *Londubh an Chairn* (London, 1927), no. 60.

from a proverb current in Co. Mayo in the early twentieth century, 'ní bacach an fear siúil ach bochtán Dé' ('the wandering man is not a boccough but one of God's poor'). Even a proverb which exhorted charity, in other words, made a clear distinction between types of beggar.¹⁰

These fundamental categories of official poor relief, along with their representations, were therefore well-established in popular culture in early nineteenth-century Ireland. Differences emerge, however, in the ways in which individual beggars were allotted to these categories. For urban authorities, and later for the state, the undeserving were mobile, usually coming from rural areas into towns, and were not known to those from whom they sought aid. The witnesses to the Poor Inquiry, on the contrary, did not doubt the bona fides of the mobile rural poor, who, they felt, would not undergo the hardship and shame of begging unless they were forced by circumstance. The undeserving, the boccoughs, were often known to the witnesses, and were said to have a fixed abode in a town or village, even though they travelled from fair to fair. Broadly speaking, one might say that these represent almost diametrically opposite ideas of what constituted the two types of beggar. The difference would correspond to that between urban and rural conceptions of the undeserving poor. The attempted substitution of the former for the latter would constitute an ideological counterpart to the way in which the construction of workhouses in the 1830s and 40s represented the extension of urban modes of relief into the countryside.

The existence of a well-defined category of undeserving poor within popular culture and within Gaelic culture implies that the gap between official and popular views was not as complete as the commissioners themselves imagined or as a historian might assume. Whether this category was newly introduced or long-established is difficult to know. It may have been a response to growing numbers of poor and greater demands on charity in the early nineteenth century, but if that were the case, it might be expected to stigmatise the rural food beggars rather than town beggars, since it was the former who were increasing in numbers. Some witnesses in west Co. Cork, moreover, maintained that boccoughs had been more numerous in the past than in the 1820s or 30s.

In this respect, the fact that the undeserving were described by an Irish-language term is inconclusive. It could mean that the Gaelic culture had evolved or adopted the concept of undeserving poor as a category, or it could be that the retention of the term as pejorative after a language shift indicates the stigmatisation of an earlier Irish-language conception of poverty. The fact that the term was used almost exclusively by witnesses in the western, Irish-speaking areas would suggest the former.

There was one influential group in rural Ireland who may well have introduced or reinforced the idea of undeserving poor. This was the Catholic parish

10 T.S. Ó Máille, *Seanfhocla Chonnacht* (Dublin, 1952), p. 81.

clergy who, like the commissioners, were keen to discourage gratuitous relief, and who favoured the establishment of an institutionalised Poor Law system. There was an emblematic story in the testimony of Father Sheehy, parish priest of Kildysert, Co. Clare:

About six weeks ago a woman, the lower part of whose face was enveloped in a cloth, apparently saturated with a serious discharge, was very successful in collecting alms from the congregation as they came out from mass. In the course of the day I had reason to suspect that she was an imposter, from the rapidity with which she devoured a very abundant dinner, which was given to her by a charitable individual. I had the bandage forcibly removed from her face, and she was found not to labour under any disease whatsoever. As a caution to the bystanders, I pointed out the deceit which had been practiced on them, and I had the greatest difficulty in preventing them laying violent hands upon her. (p. 614)

One of the mistakes this particular beggar made was to beg at the church gates, a practice which was discouraged by clergy of all denominations. In Granard, Co. Longford:

[beggars] are not permitted to attend the doors or avenues of places of worship. Those who do generally present some disgusting spectacle and are regarded as imposters. (p. 568)

In the case of the Catholic clergy, this was partly because priests were themselves soliciting contributions at mass to fund church poor relief structures or other church expenditure. The most explicit statement came from Michael Comyn, parish priest of Kilkee, Co. Clare:

Notwithstanding the influx of beggars to this place in the summer, I never saw more than two of them begging at the chapel; this is because I beg myself for the chapel to pay for its building, and the people give to me in preference to them. If I were to stop there would be plenty of them. (p. 625)

The introduction of the Poor Law system, therefore, was not a straightforwardly acculturating process, since one of its most basic categories was shared by most groups in Ireland by the 1830s. The state, moreover, as in the case of the establishment of the national school system a few years earlier, had had its path smoothed by the Catholic church, which by the early nineteenth century was beginning to function as a powerful hegemonic institution, both inside and outside the state structures.