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## Introduction

**B**egging was a ubiquitous feature of life in pre-Famine Ireland. Accounts of social conditions in the country invariably refer to the prevalence of mendicants, while travellers' narratives inevitably present descriptions of the colourful and menacing beggars they encountered. Urban streets and country roads were frequently described as being 'infested' with 'swarms' of mendicants and the use of such language affirmed the widespread association of mendicancy with disease. Indeed, beggary was seen as a threat to society on a number of fronts. Yet, the practices of mendicancy and alms-giving were also framed by a universal sense of Christian obligation amongst all classes of society to assist those poorer than themselves. The example and teaching of Christ, as expounded in the New Testament, was intrinsic to the language of private and public charity in this period and deeply influenced how individuals and corporate bodies perceived and responded to begging. Indiscriminate charity was widely believed, especially by members of the 'respectable' middle classes who drove the philanthropic impulse of this period, to constitute a considerable evil, undermining industry, thrift and self-help, and encouraging idleness and pauperism. The long-held distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor coloured approaches to beggary. Begging and alms-giving were central features of the public discourse on the question of the poor of Ireland and their relief. This discourse was shaped by wider social and economic factors, and in line with these fluctuating forces societal perceptions and responses varied. The emergence of mendicity societies – charities with the specific purpose of suppressing public begging – in Irish and British towns and cities in the first half of the nineteenth century arose from middle-class concerns over the extent of mendicancy and the deleterious effects of urbanisation, while also reflecting the emerging associational culture of middle-class life.

## Contexts

Public discourse on Ireland in the early nineteenth century was almost invariably concerned with the pervasive impoverishment of the population. Increasing inquiry into the condition of the lower classes was not unique to Ireland, and social reformers and commentators who held forth on the unremitting problem of Irish penury drew upon parallel debates and initiatives regarding poor relief in Britain, continental Europe and throughout the Atlantic world. Numerous reports and social surveys were undertaken by private individuals, corporate bodies and parliamentary committees, unanimously agreeing on the exceptional extent of Ireland's poverty and the prevalence of beggary in a society lacking a statutory system of poor relief.

The century after 1750 witnessed significant levels of population growth throughout Europe, but the rate of increase in Ireland (quadrupling from *c.* 2 million to more than 8 million) was unparalleled. This demographic growth was heavily weighted at the lower end of the social ladder, particularly among the labouring classes of rural Ireland. Furthermore, this population surge had regional patterns, being concentrated in the relatively impoverished western seaboard counties.<sup>1</sup> Declining access to a limited supply of land for a growing population entrenched Ireland's structural poverty, driving many into either habitual or occasional beggary. The half century or so before the Great Famine was a period marked by immeasurable levels of mobility among the Irish population, both within and beyond the island. For large numbers of the poor in pre-Famine Ireland, mobility was a central part of their subsistence, and this was true of both the rural and urban poor. An estimated 1.5 million people emigrated permanently to Britain, Canada and America between 1815 and 1845, a scale unprecedented until that point.<sup>2</sup> Among the factors facilitating this emigration were the cessation of the French Wars, which opened up continental Europe for travel, and also the advent of steam ships providing cheaper, quicker access to movement across the Irish Sea. By the 1830s, tickets to Britain could be purchased for as little as 5*d.* or 6*d.*, opening up cross-channel travel to large swathes of the poorer classes.<sup>3</sup> Seasonal migration to Britain for harvest work formed a significant part of the yearly cycle and household income for countless numbers of landless or semi-landless agricultural labourers (*spailpíní*), and during their

- 1 Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland before and after the Famine: explorations in economic history, 1800–1925* (2nd edn, Manchester, 1993), p. 7.
- 2 Cormac Ó Gráda, 'Malthus and the pre-Famine economy' in *Hermathena*, no. 135 (Winter 1983), p. 88.
- 3 David Fitzpatrick, "'A peculiar tramping people": the Irish in Britain, 1801–70' in W.E. Vaughan (ed.), *A new history of Ireland*, vol. 5, *Ireland under the Union, I, 1801–70* (Oxford, 1989), p. 626.

absence their wives and children wandered the Irish countryside, supporting themselves through begging. Decades before the unprecedented levels of emigration that were witnessed during the Great Famine Irish paupers constituted large proportions of the destitute classes of British towns and cities, forming an estimated one-third of London's beggars in the 1820s.<sup>4</sup>

Countless multitudes of non-local poor also flocked to Irish urban centres in search of work, relief or an emigrant's ticket abroad. In a sermon in aid of the Belfast House of Industry in 1814, Presbyterian minister Rev. Henry Cooke observed that 'To every commercial town there is a great influx of strangers and their families, seeking employment. When calamity overtakes them, they have no friend to whom they can look for comfort or relief'.<sup>5</sup> Port towns and cities were magnets for rural migrants, both poor and otherwise. The lax implementation of anti-vagrancy laws in Dublin, in comparison with other towns and cities, led many people to look upon the city as a sort of 'haven' for the idle and vagrant. A report for the year 1818 of the Association for the Suppression of Mendicity in Dublin<sup>6</sup> claims that 'persons with large families have stated that they were induced to come to town from distant parts of the country, having heard of the good treatment which the poor received in this city and that they had ever since supported themselves by begging'.<sup>7</sup> A civic report from 1837 notes that 'there is no other place where the needy, or the famishing, will be sustained', so that 'nearly the whole tide of wretchedness and want must of necessity pour in upon Dublin'; to one charity official, the city was 'the derrier resort of those reduced to the lowest ebb of poverty'.<sup>8</sup> This influx of non-local poor was reflected in the fact that 56 per cent of the paupers in the city's House of Industry in 1837 were not natives of Dublin city or county; in the mendicity asylum, this figure was smaller but still

4 London Mendicity Society minute book, 29 Apr. 1820 (BL, Add. MS 50136); *ibid.*, 27 Feb. 1822, 26 Feb. 1823; Copy of letter, W.H. Bodkin, London Mendicity Society secretary, to the Mayor of Cork, 10 May 1822 (TNA, Home Office Correspondence, HO 44/11, f. 183); *Report from committee on the state of mendicity in the metropolis*, pp. 6–7, H.C. 1814–15 (473), iii, 236–7.

5 Henry Cooke, *A sermon, preached in the meeting-house of the Third Presbyterian Congregation, Belfast, on Sunday, the 18th December, 1814, in aid of the funds of the House of Industry* (3rd edn, Belfast, 1815), pp. 21–2.

6 Hereafter referred to as the Dublin Mendicity Society.

7 [*First*] *Report of the Association for the Suppression of Mendicity in Dublin. For the year 1818* (Dublin, 1819), p. 2.

8 Quoted in Jacinta Prunty, *Dublin slums, 1800–1925: a study in urban geography* (Dublin, 1998), p. 211; Thomas Wright to Lord Melville, 29 Oct. 1830 (National Records of Scotland, Dundas family (Viscounts Melville) papers, GD51/9/498). See also *Second report of Geo. Nicholls, Esq., to Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department, on Poor Laws, Ireland*, p. 17, H.C. 1837–8 [C 104], xxxviii, 673. For Cork, see Gerard O'Brien, 'The new Poor Law in pre-Famine Ireland: a case history' in *Irish Economic and Social History*, xii (1985), pp. 43–4.

significant at 35 per cent.<sup>9</sup> Town-dwellers experienced high levels of mobility and upheaval in their daily lives, owing to the uncertainty of their tenures. Throughout Europe many slum dwellers subsisted on short leases, oftentimes renting their lodgings by the week or even by the day.<sup>10</sup> The uncertainty of tenancy is reflected in the regular change of addresses of poor persons, with women and children being particularly vulnerable to domiciliary upheaval. An examination of a relief register of the Dublin Strangers' Friend Society for the 1790s reveals high levels of changes of address by poor persons.<sup>11</sup> In both rural and urban areas lax rental arrangements were frequently aggravated by uncertain and limited employment opportunities, and in this regard women were acutely vulnerable. For such individuals begging was a natural resort as a feasible survival strategy.

Economic trends in pre-Famine Ireland stood in stark contrast to those in rapidly industrialising Britain. Large-scale manufacturing was only successfully introduced into Belfast and its hinterland, while most of the island remained largely agricultural. The decline in the Irish domestic industry sector from the 1810s was aggravated by the economic downturn of the mid-1820s, when British manufacturers 'dumped' their superfluous goods onto the Irish market, undercutting Ireland's already-struggling cottage industry manufacturers. Many artisans and their families, categorised by contemporaries as the industrious poor, found themselves unemployed and with little alternative but to resort to beggary, a shift reflected in the increasing proportion of former textile workers among the mendicants of Irish cities from the mid-1820s onwards. Localised downturns also impacted on rates of poverty and mendicancy. In 1809, a manufacturing collapse in Belfast and its hinterland, where 2,000 calico looms 'were struck idle in five weeks', led directly to the establishment of a House of Industry, a voluntarily funded charitable society designed to suppress street begging.<sup>12</sup> As will be discussed in Chapter 5, most of the Ulster mendicity societies were founded in the mid- to late 1820s, arising from the impact of the manufacturing decline on foot of the depression of 1825–6. The downturn, which disproportionately impacted on the textile industries, led to increased

9 *Second report of Geo. Nicholls, Poor Laws, Ireland*, pp. 40–1.

10 Prunty, *Dublin slums*, pp. 340–1; Prunty, 'Mobility among women in nineteenth-century Dublin' in David J. Siddle (ed.), *Migration, mobility and modernization* (Liverpool, 2000), p. 153; *Appendices B. to F. to the eighth annual report of the Poor Law Commissioners*, p. 185, H.C. 1842 [C 399], xix, 197; Robert Jütte, *Poverty and deviance in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 62, 66.

11 Strangers' Friend Society register of relief recipients, 1794–9 (Methodist Historical Society of Ireland Archives, Belfast, IrBe.MS.OS42.02).

12 John Dubourdieu, *Statistical survey of the county of Antrim, with observations on the means of improvement; drawn up for the consideration, and by direction of the Dublin Society* (Dublin, 1812), pp. 410–11.

levels of poverty among the labouring classes (both skilled and unskilled), with increased numbers, unable to emigrate or failing to find alternative employment, resorting to begging.

The system of landholding in rural Ireland was characterised by widespread landlord absenteeism, subdivision of land, uncertainty of tenure, and a lack of capital investment, trapping many of the rural labouring classes into subsistence agriculture, surviving on a few acres of land and utterly dependent on the potato. An estimated half of Ireland's population was either completely or largely dependent on this single crop. This dietary dependency, as well as other factors, exposed the poor to harvest failure and starvation, and famines (and accompanying disease epidemics) were relatively common in pre-Famine Ireland. A number of crises occurred in the eighteenth century, most devastatingly in the early 1740s and in the early 1780s, and nationwide and localised famines and epidemics struck in 1799–1801, 1822, 1826–7, 1830–1 and 1832–3.<sup>13</sup> The most significant nationwide crisis in this period was that of 1816–19, in which an estimated 65,000 people died. Of significance to this book is that this post-1815 crisis, which was part of a wider transnational 'perfect storm' of aggravating factors, drove many into destitution and swelled the numbers of beggars moving throughout Ireland, in search of employment or relief. This famine and epidemic witnessed a hardening in attitudes towards beggars by both corporate authorities and individuals and led directly to the rapid growth of the mendicity society movement in Ireland and Britain.

The question of Ireland's prevalent beggary was never far from the heart of the decades-long debates on Irish poverty, which by the 1830s constituted a major and contentious political issue in Ireland and Britain. This was driven by increased demands from Irish lobbyists that Irish landed proprietors be forced to contribute their fair share towards the relief of poverty, as well as British concerns over the influx into British towns and cities of impoverished Irish migrants and the apparently generous tax benefits enjoyed by Irish landowners and farmers. The political debate, centring on the question of whether a statutory, rates-based system of relief should be introduced into Ireland, exercised the leading political figures and social reformers of this period; as Peter Gray has observed, 'The question of poverty in Ireland ... was intensely politicized'.<sup>14</sup> With the replacement in 1834 of the

13 Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine* (London, 1995), pp. 16–33; Cormac Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine* (Basingstoke, 1989), pp. 12–32; Timothy P. O'Neill, 'Poverty in Ireland 1815–45' in *Folk-Life*, xi (1973), pp. 22–33.

14 Peter Gray, *The making of the Irish Poor Law, 1815–1843* (Manchester, 2009), p. 6; Virginia Crossman and Peter Gray, 'Introduction: poverty and welfare in Ireland, 1838–1948' in Virginia Crossman and Peter Gray (eds), *Poverty and welfare in Ireland, 1838–1948* (Dublin, 2011), pp. 1–6.

Elizabethan-era system of parochial outdoor relief in England and Wales with the workhouse-centred ‘New Poor Law’, the debate shifted to the applicability of this system to the Irish context. Among the most significant developments in the prolonged Poor Law debates was the establishment in 1833 of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland (hereafter referred to as the Poor Inquiry), chaired by the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, Richard Whately. The Poor Inquiry examined approximately 1,500 witnesses in selected areas across Ireland on the social and economic conditions of their respective localities. The subsequent reports, totalling more than 5,000 pages, provide an unequalled insight into the lives of and societal attitudes towards the poor in Ireland in the years immediately prior to the establishment of the workhouse system, and a decade before the catastrophe of the Great Famine. Almost 800 pages of Appendix A of the inquiry’s reports comprise verbatim, first-hand testimony from members of all social classes – from landlords, their agents, merchants and clergymen to farmers, shopkeepers, labourers and beggars – as to the social conditions in their locality. The topic of begging is considered in Appendix A under the heading ‘Vagrancy’ and comprises the largest single section in the Poor Inquiry’s entire published output. As Niall Ó Ciosáin has observed, ‘it is rare to be able to listen to the voices of people anywhere in the past with the clarity that this report allows and it is particularly rare for the “hidden Ireland” before the Famine’.<sup>15</sup>

### ‘Deserving’ and ‘Undeserving’

Whether or not one was deemed ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ of alms was based on the causes of their penury. Self-inflicted poverty, through idleness, drunkenness, profligacy or other immoral behaviours, regularly warranted a stern refusal of alms, whereas a more benign view was taken towards the traditional categories of worthy supplicants, such as the elderly, the sick, widows and children, and temporarily unemployed, yet typically industrious, workers. The application of categories of moral classification was common across all denominations and, as demonstrated by Ó Ciosáin, throughout all social classes.<sup>16</sup> Public concern regarding the extent and nature of poverty and mendicancy fluctuated according to wider social and economic

15 Niall Ó Ciosáin, ‘Introduction’ in Maureen Comber (ed.), *Poverty before the Famine, County Clare, 1835* (Ennis, 1996), p. iii.

16 Niall Ó Ciosáin, ‘Boccoughs and God’s poor: deserving and undeserving poor in Irish popular culture’ in Tadhg Foley and Seán Ryder (eds), *Ideology and Ireland in the nineteenth century* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 93–9.

factors; as destitute beggars became more prevalent and increasingly mobile (thus, crucially, more visible), fears of the dangers of mendicancy became heightened. Those who publicly sought alms without shame in public places were distinguished from those who suffered silently in their wretched dwellings: the provision of assistance to the ‘shamefaced poor’ was a virtuous act, as it would not corrupt the recipient or the giver, while alms-giving to the idle ‘common beggar’ only served to encourage this practice. The bonds of community also informed how the poor were perceived: local paupers were known and more trustworthy than unknown, ‘strange’ beggars who ‘could not but create suspicion’.<sup>17</sup> Dean of Clogher Richard Woodward’s outline of his proposed scheme for poor relief in Ireland, which influenced the Houses of Industry legislation in 1772,<sup>18</sup> drew a distinction between the ‘Poor ... who though willing to work, cannot subsist by Labour’ and ‘those idle Vagrants who are a Pest to Society’.<sup>19</sup> The virtue of honourable poverty was extolled by the mayor of Cork city John Besnard in 1833 in a letter to the Chief Secretary Edward Stanley. Writing to highlight the plight of the poor of Cork city, Besnard suggested that those who warranted most sympathy were:

the lower orders of resident industrious tradesmen and labourers – persons who willingly use all their efforts to gain a livelihood, and submit to any privations, however great, rather than become beggars in our streets ... those who unceasingly devote their time, and unsparingly give their labour, for the maintenance of their families, and yet find their efforts unequal to the attainment of any thing like even moderate comfort.<sup>20</sup>

For some, beggars of all descriptions were ‘undeserving’ and were to be distinguished from the ‘respectable’ poor who did not beg. In a sermon in aid of the Protestant Colonisation Society in Dublin around 1840,<sup>21</sup> Rev. J.B. McCrea drew on the words of Moses: ‘For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine

17 Brian Pullan, ‘Charity and poor relief in early modern Italy’ in Martin Daunton (ed.), *Charity, self-interest and welfare in the English past* (London, 1996), pp. 66–7; Stuart Woolf, *The poor in western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries* (London and New York, 1986), pp. 17–20.

18 11 & 12 Geo. III, c. 30 [Ire.] (2 June 1772).

19 Richard Woodward, *An argument in support of the right of the poor in the kingdom of Ireland, to a national provision ...* (Dublin, 1768), p. 11.

20 *Cork Constitution*, 28 Nov. 1833.

21 This society, founded in 1830, settled Protestant families on uncultivated land in the west of Ireland and engaged in scriptural teaching.



hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land' (Deut. 15:11). To McCrea, the category of poor spoken of here was not 'the wretched, abject, and mendicant', whose support would merely encourage 'that evil which we understand by pauperism', but, instead, 'that portion of society which we call the working classes, or the industrious poor, whether pastoral, agricultural, and the manufacturing, the labour of whose hands is necessary to their maintenance and the comfort of their families ... and which are an essential part of every happy and prosperous nation'.<sup>22</sup> Poverty was an indispensable part of society, sanctified by God and ought to be assisted; beggary and pauperism, on the other hand, were evils which must be eradicated.

The application of this binary model shaped the perceptions of alms-givers, but it may be questioned as to the extent to which it influenced their judgement on whether or not to relieve a mendicant. Certainly, there are accounts of individuals ranking supplicants according to a hierarchy of merit, with the amount of relief given, whether in cash or in kind, depending on the specific circumstances of the begging party. In County Antrim, it was observed: 'The quantity usually given depends upon the compassion excited. The blind get most; widows and children and cripples rank next; the females with children, and then the aged. Single persons not incapable of work are not encouraged'.<sup>23</sup> Yet, the Poor Inquiry confirms that throughout Ireland indiscriminate alms-giving, without investigation into the character of beggars, was widespread, the practice being explained by the sheer number of paupers calling at dwellings and shops. Practicalities outweighed principle.

In speaking of the distinction between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor, it is important to note that these terms are not anachronisms imposed by historians in their retrospective analyses. Rather, the descriptions 'deserving', 'undeserving' and related derivatives were employed regularly by various commentators across all religious and political divides in their consideration of poverty and beggary.<sup>24</sup> The trope of the importunate street beggar was regularly contrasted with the silent suffering of the honest poor, resigned to their wretched abodes, out of sight, and the work of Brian Pullan on

22 J.B. McCrea, *Protestant poor a conservative element of society; being a sermon preached in Ebenezer Church, Dublin, for the Protestant Colonisation Society of Ireland* (Dublin, [c.1840]), p. 8.

23 *PI, Appendix A*, p. 715.

24 For a small sample of instances, see Thomas Dix Hincks, *A short account of the different charitable institutions of the city of Cork, with remarks* (Cork, 1802), p. 35; Last will and testament of Fr Paul Long, 14 July 1836 (DDA, DMP, 33/9/21); *Annual report for the year 1818, of the Benevolent or Strangers' Friend Society (originated in the year 1790)* (Dublin, 1819), p. 5.

poor relief in early modern Italy demonstrates that such frameworks, distinguishing the ‘public poor’ from the ‘shamefaced poor’, were pan-European in nature.<sup>25</sup> In 1811, the Belfast House of Industry contrasted what it termed ‘the disgusting importunity of the habitual beggar’ with ‘the more affecting claims of silent unobtrusive distress’,<sup>26</sup> while a decade later, the Roman Catholic bishop of Limerick, Charles Tuohy, praised the city’s poor committee for their ‘wise discrimination’ between those poor who resisted the urge to solicit assistance and ‘the common vagrant beggars, mendicant by profession, born so, and will live and die so’.<sup>27</sup>

For some, begging was their sole source of income, while for others begging was just one part of what Olwen Hufton termed the ‘economy of makeshifts’ – that is, the disparate survival strategies drawn upon by the poor. While Hufton centred her conceptual ‘economy of makeshifts’ around the practices of migration (for the sake of employment) and localised begging, subsequent historians have subsumed other strategies into this informal amalgamation of survival strategies, including petty theft, pawning, prostitution, resort to parochial or charitable relief, and kinship networks.<sup>28</sup> Hufton portrayed mendicancy as a life-skill taught in youth and drawn upon in times of acute distress:

From early infancy, in fact, the children of the poor learnt to cadge a living, learnt about the viability of an economy of makeshifts, learnt the knack of presenting a cogent case, and the places and situations under which they would receive the most sympathy. This apprenticeship, for it was no less, occurred long before any other formal service as domestic servant, labourer, or textile worker. Should work run out, should they find themselves in later life between jobs or unable to support themselves on the proceeds of their labour, begging was their natural recourse.<sup>29</sup>

Hufton’s concept has proved influential and lasting in capturing the desperate and disparate methods by which poor individuals and families scraped out a basic existence. It is a model which has shaped how social historians have approached the question of poverty and poor relief in

25 Pullan, ‘Charity and poor relief in early modern Italy’, pp. 66–7.

26 *BNL*, 8 Feb. 1811.

27 *Leinster Journal*, 15 June 1822.

28 Steven King and Alannah Tomkins, ‘Introduction’ in Steven King and Alannah Tomkins (eds), *The poor in England 1700–1850: an economy of makeshifts* (Manchester, 2003), pp. 1–38.

29 Olwen Hufton, *The poor of eighteenth-century France, 1750–1789* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 109–10.

Britain and, more recently, in Ireland.<sup>30</sup> Historiographical developments later focused attention on households as heterogeneous units, with family members playing different roles according to their respective stage in the life-cycle.<sup>31</sup> In more recent years, Rachel Fuchs has discerned the ‘cultures of expediencies’ of the poor, in response to the constant ‘climate of calamities’ in which the poor lived: ‘[they] sought creative and expedient ways to manage situations, adapting behaviour as they went along, usually within the larger cultural parameters of ethics, morality, economics, and the law’.<sup>32</sup> A common theme running through the present book is the fact that the poor in pre-Famine Ireland, including those who engaged in begging, deployed agency in their engagement with individuals and relief mechanisms. Paupers are not to be seen as powerless dupes but as individuals who weighed up consequences and made decisions, based on the most advantageous anticipated outcome.<sup>33</sup>

### Nature of Charity

In an age of religious revival and restructuring among all the major denominations in Ireland, religious sentiment universally coloured acts of charity, whether carried out on an informal, individual basis or through corporate and organised means. Individual and communal concepts of poverty and charity were shaped by confessional teachings, drawing on a universal relevance of the life and example of Christ. Religion was significant ‘both in terms of individual inspiration and organisational structures’.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the performance of public charity was coloured by confessional characteristics: inflamed sectarian tensions, especially from the 1820s onwards, infiltrated the realms of philanthropy and charity, with Virginia Crossman

30 Steven King, *Poverty and welfare in England, 1700–1850: a regional perspective* (Manchester, 2000); King and Tomkins, *The poor in England 1700–1850, passim*; Donnacha Seán Lucey, ‘Poor relief in the west of Ireland, 1861–1911’ in Crossman and Gray, *Poverty and welfare in Ireland*, pp. 37–51.

31 Laurence Fontaine and Jürgen Schlumbohm, ‘Household strategies for survival: an introduction’ in *International Review of Social History*, xlv (2000), pp. 1–17.

32 Rachel Fuchs, *Gender and poverty in nineteenth-century Europe* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 5.

33 Recent studies which consider how the poor exerted agency include King and Tomkins, *The poor in England 1700–1850*; Fuchs, *Gender and poverty*, pp. 1–19. For recent Irish angles to this question, see Georgina Laragy, ‘Poor relief in the south of Ireland, 1850–1921’ in Crossman and Gray, *Poverty and welfare in Ireland*, pp. 53–66; Virginia Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland 1850–1914* (Liverpool, 2013), *passim*.

34 Maria Luddy, ‘Religion, philanthropy and the state in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Ireland’ in Hugh Cunningham and Joanna Innes (eds), *Charity, philanthropy and reform from the 1690s to 1850* (Basingstoke, 1998), p. 154.

noting ‘the almost totally segregated nature of philanthropy in Ireland’.<sup>35</sup> The potential that religious tensions held out for intra-denominational disharmony was most vividly seen in the charity work of women with poor children, particularly from the 1840s onwards.<sup>36</sup>

In an era marked by the prolonged debates and campaigns for or against a national Poor Law, in which doctrinal thinking and the personal zeal of clergymen and the laity were key influences, each of the main churches and religious societies in Ireland contributed to the discourse on beggary and alms-giving, with the nuances of each denomination’s world view and organisational structure carrying through to the negotiation of mendicancy, despite the fact that moralising middle-class philanthropists of all denominations shared similar views and deployed an almost homogeneous language of condescending charity. A key consideration of this book will be whether Catholics and Protestants (of various denominations) perceived and responded to beggary and alms-giving in different or similar ways. Can Roman Catholic approaches, for example, be distinguished from those of Anglicans or Presbyterians? In considering this fundamental question, an important assertion from the pioneering social historian of nineteenth-century Ireland, Timothy P. O’Neill, warrants attention:

To the Protestant moralist the effects on the recipient and the result of almsgiving on the economy and society were of the greatest importance and so all charity had to be carefully examined to ensure that it did not create a new class of beggars or endanger the economic framework. The Irish poor had different values and held different notions about charity. They regarded charity as a duty for the donor and all beggars were recognised as objects worthy of help.<sup>37</sup>

Here, O’Neill draws distinctions between Protestant and Catholic attitudes to labour, industry and poor relief in nineteenth-century Ireland. The reader is presented with the attitudes of what O’Neill describes as, on the one hand, ‘the Protestant moralist’ and on the other, ‘the Irish poor’. While not explicitly stated, this latter category is implicitly pigeon-holed as being homogeneously Roman Catholic, an assumption which is problematic,

35 Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland*, p. 21.

36 Maria Luddy, *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 68–96; Jacinta Prunty, ‘Battle plans and battlegrounds: Protestant mission activity in the Dublin slums, 1840s–1880s’ in Crawford Gribben and Andrew R. Holmes (eds), *Protestant millennialism, evangelicalism and Irish society, 1790–2005* (Basingstoke, 2006), pp. 119–43.

37 Timothy P. O’Neill, ‘The Catholic Church and relief of the poor 1815–45’ in *Archivium Hibernicum*, xxxi (1973), p. 133.

particularly if one is to consider the working-class Presbyterian poor in the towns of eastern Ulster or the substantial Church of Ireland distressed working classes of Dublin city.<sup>38</sup> In differing from O'Neill's argument, Seán Connolly has demonstrated that aversion to indiscriminate alms-giving was not unique to any one denomination, stating that 'in this, as in other matters, the real line of division was social class rather than religion'.<sup>39</sup> More recent contributions to this historiographical discussion by Maria Luddy, Margaret Preston and Virginia Crossman have stressed the importance of class, race and gender in understanding the dynamics of welfare provision in this period,<sup>40</sup> while Niall Ó Ciosáin has recently determined that, 'the distinction is not between denominations but between the clergy of all denominations and the representatives of the state on the one hand, and the laity of all denominations on the other'.<sup>41</sup> The later chapters of this book will ask of nineteenth-century Ireland what Brian Pullan has asked of early modern Europe: can certain traits of Catholic and Protestant theory and practice pertaining to poor relief be discerned as being distinct from each other? Religion, however, was not the only determinant in how charity was practised, and the giving and soliciting of alms was also influenced by gender and social class, while the peculiarities of rural and urban life also influenced the prevailing cultures of mendicancy.

While this study is largely concerned with the solicitation by beggars of individuals in a public place, what was arguably the most common avenue of relief resorted to by the destitute poor requires acknowledgement – namely, the networks of informal support provided by kin, neighbours and friends. The poor did not live in a social vacuum but resided, laboured and struggled within communities comprising multitudes of families living similar experiences. In a period prior to a statutory relief network and when corporate support, through parishes and charities, was largely ad hoc and

38 For studies of these significant urban Protestant working-class communities, see Jacqueline Hill, 'The Protestant response to repeal: the case of the Dublin working class' in F.S.L. Lyons and R.A.J. Hawkins (eds), *Ireland under the Union: varieties of tension. Essays in honour of T.W. Moody* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 35–68; Ronnie Munck, 'The formation of the working class in Belfast, 1788–1881' in *Saothar*, xi (1986), pp. 75–89.

39 S.J. Connolly, 'Religion, work-discipline and economic attitudes: the case of Ireland' in T.M. Devine and David Dickson (eds), *Ireland and Scotland 1600–1850: parallels and contrasts in economic and social development* (Edinburgh, 1983), p. 244 n. 4.

40 Luddy, *Women and philanthropy*; Margaret H. Preston, *Charitable words: women, philanthropy and the language of charity in nineteenth-century Dublin* (Westport, CT and London, 2004), pp. 41–65; Virginia Crossman, 'Middle-class attitudes to poverty and welfare in post-Famine Ireland' in Fintan Lane (ed.) *Politics, society and the middle class in modern Ireland* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 130–47.

41 Niall Ó Ciosáin, *Ireland in official print culture, 1800–1850: a new reading of the Poor Inquiry* (Oxford, 2014), p. 118.

subject to strict moralising from wealthy benefactors, seeking assistance from family and friends was the first avenue of choice for many poor people. Bishop James Doyle, in testimony to an 1830 parliamentary committee on the state of the poor in Ireland, gave evidence of this type of support: 'In visiting a poor creature in a hovel where distress and misery prevail, we find the creature surrounded by poor neighbours, one of whom brings him a little bread or meal, another a little meat, or prepares a little broth or soup, and they all comfort him with their conversation and society'.<sup>42</sup> Due to the scarcity of appropriate sources, this is an avenue of poor assistance which remains largely unexplored by Irish historians.<sup>43</sup> Some efforts have been made in recent years by historians of England, among whom Colin Jones has reasonably suggested that the provision of assistance through informal avenues was more common than through formal structures.<sup>44</sup> The fact, however, that the drawing upon of informal support remains largely irrecoverable for historians does not warrant the exclusion of this topic in any analysis of the experiences of the poor in this period. It was a support mechanism that, at the very least, merits acknowledgement in the absence of detailed analysis.

In examining the roles played by various parties in the giving and receiving of alms and assistance in Ireland, this book will focus on informal, private alms-giving, as well as the dynamics of welfare provision by non-state bodies, such as charitable societies and the main denominations. In doing so, this book is departing from the most common approach taken by historians of poverty and welfare in Ireland, whose works largely explore the 1838 Irish Poor Law Act, the Great Famine and the post-Famine decades: for instance, a recent edited

42 *Report of the select committee on the state of the poor in Ireland; being a summary of the first, second and third reports of evidence taken before that committee: together with an appendix of accounts and papers*, p. 33, H.C. 1830 (667), vii, 33.

43 To date, only brief references to the familial and neighbourly support have been presented by historians of Ireland: Mary Cullen, 'Breadwinners and providers: women in the household economy of labouring families, 1835–6' in Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy (eds), *Women surviving* (Dublin, 1990), p. 107; Virginia Crossman, *The Poor Law in Ireland, 1838–1948* (Dundalk, 2006), p. 4. The informal and mutual support provided among prostitutes has been considered in Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish society, 1800–1940* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 61–70.

44 See for instance, Anne Digby, *British welfare policy: workhouse to workforce* (London, 1989), pp. 58–93; Heather Shore, 'Crime, criminal networks and the survival strategies of the poor in early eighteenth-century London' in King and Tomkins, *The poor in England, 1700–1850*, pp. 137–65; Sam Barrett, 'Kinship, poor relief and the welfare process in early modern England' in King and Tomkins, *The poor in England, 1700–1850*, pp. 199–227; Richard Dyson, 'Welfare provision in Oxford during the latter stages of the Old Poor Law, 1800–1834' in *Historical Journal*, lii, no. 4 (2009), pp. 958–9; Colin Jones, 'Some recent trends in the history of charity' in Daunton, *Charity, self-interest and welfare*, pp. 51–63.

collection of articles exploring poverty and relief mechanisms commences with the passing of the Poor Law Act.<sup>45</sup> The cataclysmic impact that the Famine exerted on Irish society was such that historians' emphasis on this event and its legacy is understandable. By comparison, the pre-Famine decades remain relatively neglected. Moreover, the specific topics of begging and alms-giving, ubiquitous throughout pre-Famine Ireland, have been largely overlooked. The institutional shadow of the workhouse looms large over the historiography of this period.<sup>46</sup> However, the role of the main churches and religious societies in framing how individuals perceived and responded to poverty, begging and alms-giving remains largely omitted from historians' studies.

Crucial to understanding how contemporaries addressed begging and alms-giving is an analysis of the wider debates on poverty, the poor and welfare initiatives. The most significant contribution to the historiography of nineteenth-century Irish poverty is Peter Gray's *The making of the Poor Law*, which examines the long and fraught ideological debates and campaigns which preceded the 1838 Irish Poor Law Act. Gray demonstrates that mendicancy, vagrancy and alms-giving were never too far from the centre of the discourse on the condition of the Irish poor. Fresh outbreaks of distress, such as those of the late 1810s and the mid-1820s, 'created new classes of paupers who were neither 'casual' nor 'professional' but structural'.<sup>47</sup> These periods of crisis witnessed renewed zeal among Irish and British elites to address the problem of Irish poverty. The cultural nuances that shaped the practices of mendicancy and alms-giving are the subject of important studies by Laurence M. Geary and Niall Ó Ciosáin.<sup>48</sup> Drawing on the voluminous testimony recorded in the mid-1830s by the Poor Inquiry, both Geary and Ó Ciosáin concluded that distinctions between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor were not limited to moralising middle-class philanthropists and commentators but were also to be found among the lower classes of Irish society. Their work correctly argues that approaches to beggary were inherently complex, with perceptions being coloured by religion, social class and gender.

The corporate bodies which were most active in responding to beggary were parish vestries, the historiography of which has been largely confined

45 Crossman and Gray, *Poverty and welfare in Ireland*.

46 John O'Connor, *The workhouses of Ireland: the fate of Ireland's poor* (Dublin, 1995); Helen Burke, *The people and the Poor Law in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Littlehampton, 1987); Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland*.

47 Gray, *Making of the Irish Poor Law*, p. 17.

48 Laurence M. Geary, "'The whole country was in motion": mendicancy and vagrancy in pre-Famine Ireland' in Jacqueline Hill and Colm Lennon (eds), *Luxury and austerity*, Historical Studies XXI (Dublin, 1999), pp. 121–36; Ó Ciosáin, 'Bocoughs and God's poor', pp. 93–9; Ó Ciosáin, *Ireland in official print culture*, pp. 73–107.

to their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century incarnations. In his search for the 'old Irish Poor Law', David Dickson placed the parish vestry at the centre of corporate initiatives to alleviate poverty prior to the introduction of the Poor Law and workhouse system in the late 1830s.<sup>49</sup> Yet, the records of parish vestries, especially the vestry minute books which are rich in social history, remain unexplored by historians of poverty in nineteenth-century Ireland, and this book will attempt to fill that lacuna, placing the parish's evolving role in welfare provision in the post-Poor Law period into the context of the declining civil role for parishes in Irish society. The multiplication of charitable societies across Ireland and Britain from the late eighteenth century forms a crucial context for this book's analysis of begging and alms-giving. James Kelly has stressed the importance of the emerging associational culture among the rising middle classes to the growth of charities in this period, while noting features peculiar to the Irish context, especially the lack of any national state system of poor assistance. Kelly also makes the important point that contrary to parish bodies, charities founded in the late eighteenth century targeted their resources at specific categories of the distressed poor, and 'were more selective both in the numbers they targeted and in the assistance they provided'.<sup>50</sup> In his study on British voluntary societies, Robert Morris argues that these bodies, of which charities formed a substantial proportion, shared three distinct traits: they were urban-based, were formed and driven by the elites of the middle classes, mainly from the professional and commercial classes, and their goal was to improve the condition of the labouring classes with minimal state assistance or interference.<sup>51</sup> Adopting Kelly's argument about selectivity and discrimination in voluntary charity provision, this book will present a case study of the mendicity society movement which flourished across Ireland and Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century. Mendicity societies were voluntarily funded charities founded in cities and towns with the primary purpose of suppressing street begging. To date, the historiography of Irish mendicity societies has been limited. Brief case studies of the Dublin, Galway, Drogheda and Belfast societies are

49 David Dickson, 'In search of the old Irish Poor Law' in Rosalind Mitchison and Peter Roebuck (eds), *Economy and society in Scotland and Ireland, 1500–1939* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 149–59.

50 James Kelly, 'Charitable societies: their genesis and development, 1720–1800' in James Kelly and Martyn J. Powell (eds), *Clubs and societies in eighteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2010), p. 103. For more on this associational culture, see Colm Lennon (ed.), *Confraternities and sodalities in Ireland: charity, devotion and sociability* (Dublin, 2012), and R.V. Comerford and Jennifer Kelly (eds), *Associational culture in Ireland and abroad* (Dublin, 2010).

51 R.J. Morris, 'Voluntary societies and British urban elites, 1780–1850: an analysis' in *Historical Journal*, xxvi, no. 1 (Mar. 1983), pp. 95–118.



provided in the works of Jacinta Prunty, John Cunningham, Ned McHugh and Alison Jordan.<sup>52</sup> These accounts all stress the financial embarrassment which underpinned these institutions' (almost invariably brief) existence and their eventual supplanting by the Poor Law union workhouses, yet the stark concentration of these societies in relatively small towns in Ulster has gone without analysis. Audrey Woods's administrative history of the Dublin Mendicity Society is admirable in its extensive use of source material but fails sufficiently to locate this important charity within the context of wider voluntary charitable provision in Dublin city and also in the context of the international mendicity society movement.<sup>53</sup>

### Human Element

The historian of poverty in pre-Famine Ireland is inevitably left frustrated by the dearth of accounts from the poor themselves – this is more so with studies of those who engaged in begging, either habitually or on occasion. While a detailed analysis of the lives, backgrounds, motivations, emotions and decisions of individual beggars is desirable, it largely remains aspirational; as such, beggars and vagrants are given 'at best, walk-on parts in Irish social history'.<sup>54</sup> Whereas historians of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain are well served by collections of paupers' or beggars' letters to parochial authorities<sup>55</sup> – since 1601, the parish performed a statutory function in welfare provision in England and Wales – there are no bodies of similar sources for Ireland. The available source material for Ireland simply precludes any such analysis; as social historians of any country in any period appreciate, accounts of poverty and the poor most often come to us from the viewpoints of wealthier members of society. Published reports of parliamentary committees inquiring into poverty and distress, the memoirs of middle-class social campaigners, the registers and minute books of charitable societies, preachers' sermons and the records of church relief initiatives give insights into the experiences of poverty; however, when the poor appear in

52 Prunty, *Dublin slums*, pp. 205–9; John Cunningham, *'A town tormented by the sea': Galway, 1790–1914* (Dublin, 2004), pp. 47–54; Ned McHugh, *Drogheda before the Famine: urban poverty in the shadow of privilege, 1826–45* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 46–51; Alison Jordan, *Who cared? Charity in Victorian and Edwardian Belfast* (Belfast, [1992]), pp. 20–4.

53 Audrey Woods, *Dublin outsiders: a history of the Mendicity Institution, 1818–1998* (Dublin, 1998).

54 Caitriona Clear, 'Homelessness, crime, punishment and poor relief in Galway, 1850–1914: an introduction' in *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, 1 (1998), p. 118.

55 For instance, see Thomas Sokoll (ed.), *Essex pauper letters, 1731–1837* (Oxford, 2001).

such records, they are generally observed at a remove. As Rachel Fuchs has stated, 'the poor often become visible to historians only when they meet the literate middle classes in the workplace or public arenas. As a result, historians have largely observed the lives of the underprivileged through middle-class eyes that viewed them from a safe distance through lenses distorted by fear, distrust, and disgust'.<sup>56</sup> In a similar vein, Niall Ó Ciosáin has commented that 'most of the archives and material objects which survive were produced by rich and powerful minorities, and deal with their immediate concerns. When the majority are described, it is usually by hostile or uncomprehending observers'.<sup>57</sup> An effort has been made in this book to mitigate this unevenly weighted base of primary sources, by presenting the perspectives of a broad range of individuals, both rural and urban, from all social classes, and also by examining the experiences of women, as both the givers and receivers of alms. Each chapter begins with a vignette, depicting the attitudes and experiences of different people in the giver/receiver exchange and in some instances these words are those of mendicants in pre-Famine Ireland. Virginia Crossman, writing of post-Famine Poor Law records, reminds us that 'The voices of the poor are faint, but they are not absent',<sup>58</sup> yet within our earlier period such voices are only audible through the voluminous transcriptions of testimonies to the Poor Inquiry.

### Outline

The book is divided into three sections. Section I (encompassing Chapters 1–3) examines the issue of mendicancy, noting the significance of location, visibility, gender and employment opportunities in framing explanations of what was begging and who engaged in this practice. Chapter 2 will move this discussion of beggary from definition to measurement, analysing the importance to many contemporaries of calculating estimates of the amount of beggars, on either a national or local level, and the amount doled out in alms. Chapter 3 will explore the many ways in which begging was perceived in the early nineteenth century. Mendicancy was seen as a threat on many levels and a number of these perceived threats will be analysed as case studies. Due consideration will also be given to perceptions of begging as a natural right of the poor, while the common association of mendicants with superstitions in popular folk culture will be explored. In the second and third

56 Fuchs, *Gender and poverty*, p. 154.

57 Niall Ó Ciosáin, *Print and popular culture in Ireland 1750–1850* (new edn, Dublin, 2010), p. 1.

58 Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland*, p. 9.

sections of the book, comprising Chapters 4–7, the focus will shift towards the responses of charities, vestries and the major churches and religious societies in pre-Famine Ireland to begging. The evolving role of parish vestries in managing local responses to fluctuating levels of mendicancy throughout Ireland is the subject of Chapter 4, which will place the vestries' declining position in welfare provision in the second quarter of the century into the context of a wider diminution of parishes' civil functions. Chapter 5 presents a case study of the mendicity society movement, which flourished across Ireland and Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century, and will contrast the mendicity societies with the earlier Houses of Industry, which also had a remit of suppressing mendicancy, before concluding with an analysis of the rapid decline of these charities in the late 1830s. Chapter 6 considers Roman Catholic perceptions and responses, commencing with an analysis of Catholic teaching pertaining to good works and alms-giving, as spelled out in contemporary catechisms. The apparent flaws found in these teachings by numerous Protestant polemicists will be considered alongside the refutation of such polemical utterings by senior Catholic clerics. The views of the long-neglected figure of Archbishop of Dublin, Daniel Murray (1768–1852), will be closely analysed, as will those of Mary Aikenhead (1787–1858), foundress of the Religious Sisters of Charity. As a counterpoint to the study of Catholic approaches, Chapter 7 analyses Protestant discourses on and responses to beggary in Ireland. The impact of evangelicalism in shaping perceptions of mendicancy and the influence of clergymen-cum-political economists, such as Richard Whately and Thomas Chalmers, will be explored, as will the disparate internal mechanisms by which Protestant denominations responded to beggary.