

The End of the Irish Poor Law? Welfare and Healthcare Reform in Revolutionary and Independent Ireland by Donnacha Seán Lucey. Manchester University Press, 2015, 218 pp. ISBN: 978 0 7190 8757 8, Hardback, £70.00.

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In this monograph, Donnacha Seán Lucey tackles Irish welfare policy and administration in a transitional period, examining the reform of the poor law during the Irish revolution and the early years of independence. He argues that ideas of respectability and divisions between deserving and undeserving poor endured in the Free State, despite revolutionary criticisms of the 'British' poor law. Portraying welfare policies as often coercive and controlling, Lucey also attempts to show that such harsh social attitudes were not always dominant, and that recipients of public assistance were often active agents within welfare systems. Although these latter attempts are not always successful, this remains a useful addition to scholarship on Irish poverty and welfare.

This is a regional study, focusing on county Kerry and Cork city. Lucey's source base incorporates both national and local records, most significantly those of the South Cork and Kerry boards of public assistance, and the Commission on the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor and the Insane Poor, which was held in 1925-26 and reported in 1927. However, he uses the 1927 Relief Commission on particular issues as a jumping-off point into his case studies, exploring the extent to which the evidence provided to, and recommendations given by, the Commission matched welfare administration in Kerry and Cork. This is not necessarily a criticism. Lucey argues that "regionalised poor law regimes necessitate in-depth local examinations", which is certainly a strategy widely pursued by poor law scholars, although therefore not as innovative an approach as the author tries to suggest (p. 8).

The book begins with an exploration of the ways in which revolutionary politics and social attitudes influenced relief policies, and the following chapters examine how these policies developed during the Free State. Lucey demonstrates the longevity of moralistic attitudes towards paupers among republican welfare reformers, who were often as unsympathetic towards those perceived as undeserving as the poor law could be. He convincingly argues that the abolition in the 1920s of the workhouse test and a new emphasis on outdoor relief (renamed 'home assistance') for the able-bodied could have transformed the poor law into a system rooted in support rather than deterrence, but this opportunity was largely missed, as a variety of measures included in home assistance policy continued to foreground deterrence and the concept of less eligibility.

The most absorbing section of the book is the chapter on unmarried mothers and institutionalisation. This topic has a rather urgent contemporary relevance, given the 2013 McAleese report on the treatment of women in Magdalene Laundries. Indeed, this relevance has only increased since the book's publication; in March 2017 a mass grave containing the bodies of young children was uncovered on the site of a former mother and baby home in Tuam, county Galway. This confirmed the suspicions of local historian Catherine Corless, whose research prompted a government inquiry began in 2014, while Lucey was writing this book. This chapter examines the strategies of welfare authorities in dealing with unmarried mothers in the 1920s

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and 1930s, focusing particularly on county homes (formerly workhouses) and religiously run voluntary mother and baby homes. Lucey's approach is cautious, acknowledging that accessibility problems regarding records held by religious orders makes drawing conclusions on these institutions difficult, and that more witness testimony is needed. He also recognises that his particular source base, generated by and from the perspective of central and local authorities, rarely features the voices of institutionalised women themselves. Despite these limitations, the chapter does shed light on the institutional systems developed for unmarried mothers, showing that mother and baby homes proliferated instead of the nationally integrated and financed network of local authority institutions that was recommended by the 1927 Relief Commission, and that 'both central and local government were widely involved in the committal of women' into these homes. County homes are presented as more flexible institutions, with Lucey making a clear effort to demonstrate that although women had little control over their committal to or removal from mother and baby homes, there was more opportunity for inmate agency in county homes, where "notions of victimhood were not always applicable" (p. 106). This is a welcome adjustment away from the assumption of female passivity in these scenarios, although the focus is largely on inmates' sexual behaviour, provoking the question of whether there was much room for manoeuvre in other areas of life in county homes.

Ideas of agency and influence among the poor are more convincing in relation to child welfare, where the examples provided of families threatening to commit children to county homes if they did not receive a boarding-out allowance suggest that relief provision could be negotiated between recipient and official. Lucey also highlights evidence of flexibility or of resistance to harsh social attitudes, in relation to other areas of welfare provision. The punitive welfare policies of republicans in Cork were contested, and the Kerry authorities were often willing to side-step conceptions of 'ideal' family conditions in order to board out children, rather than commit them to industrial schools or have them languishing in county homes. Such flexibility can even be perceived in the case of unmarried mothers – despite the central authorities' attitude that such women should be passed on to specialised institutions rather than remain in county homes, this only occurred in a minority of cases, with most remaining in the former workhouses.

This study contains much that is interesting and valuable, and although certainly somewhat local in scope, provides a solid baseline for further work on this period in other parts of Ireland. If Lucey's arguments were to be tested in other localities, a more comprehensive picture of welfare reform in revolutionary and Free State Ireland could be developed.