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‘Growing up poor’: child welfare, motherhood and the State during the First World War

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Abstract

In the history of child welfare in Ireland and other western countries, the period during the First World War coincided with a time of international attention on poor and working-class families and children. As this occurred at a time of ‘revolution’ as well as a time of war, the efforts of voluntary and state services were often driven by a variety of motives, including genuine concern for poor mothers and children, sectarianism, class bias and international child welfare developments. This paper will address the extent to which the lives of working-class and poor mothers in Ireland were affected by the war – primarily through concern expressed by child protection agencies (such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children), directly connecting the history of child welfare with the history of motherhood.

Keywords

Child welfare; motherhood; First World War; Ireland; Great Britain; poverty; legislation.

Introduction

The title of this article is taken from the seminal work by Anna Davin on childhood in London from 1870-1914. Together with Ellen Ross’s account of motherhood during the same period, *Love and Toil*, we are given a fascinating insight into the experiences of working-class mothers and children at home, school and work prior to the outbreak of the First World War.¹ This article seeks to concentrate on the same three sites of intersection in relation to the experience of working-class mothers and child welfare during the period 1914-18 in Ireland. Addressing Dublin primarily, it argues that the First World War was a turning point in the history of child

protection and welfare. This argument has been put forward by numerous scholars internationally, however, in Ireland wartime also coincided with a period of revolution, culminating in the events surrounding the 1916 Easter Rising and the subsequent War of Independence.² How the revolution impacted women and children before and after the war will therefore remain a central focus.

The lives of working-class women and children during the First World War have received welcome attention in recent years. Research examining ‘separation women’; the history and geography of the Dublin Slums; child welfare; infant mortality, disease, social work and motherhood, have all added to the narrative. Similarly, studies of philanthropic and charitable organisations have added nuance to the relationship between mothers, charitable organisations and the State – examining the power relations which existed and the importance of class and gender. In her work on Dublin, Lindsey Earner-Byrne has examined the agency of working-class mothers, portrayed in their begging letters to Archbishop John Byrne and how women pleading for assistance developed particular narratives and approaches that were sensitive to contemporary socio-political circumstances. Previous work has also illuminated the situation for ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ mothers – a significant aspect of this discussion.³ More broadly, Jacinta Prunty has mapped out the development of the Dublin slums, and the multiplicity of ways in which poverty could be viewed – from the streets, to the court and back to the slums in a perpetual cycle. In her work on Dublin prior to 1914, Mary Daly has looked at the differences between urban and rural poverty, demonstrating how poverty was exacerbated by the large number of families dependent on casual labour, the influence of migrants on employment and the chronic underemployment of many workers.⁴ With regard to infant mortality, Daly cites figures from the Annual Reports of the Register General that show an average infant mortality rate of 147.4 per 1,000 live births for Dublin from 1910 to 1914 (infants who died before their first birthdays).⁵ Prior to 1910 infant mortality rates are not disaggregated in the ARRGs so Ciara Breathnach and Brian Gurrin have examined death registers for Dublin to establish urban trends they have found persistently high rates.⁶ In 1988, Janet Dunwoody examined the context in Ireland for changes to child welfare legislation in a short piece entitled ‘Child Welfare’. She argued that while the First World War saw benefits for British mothers and children, in Ireland authorities were slow to take up measures and tackle the high infant mortality rate.⁷ This article aims to develop Dunwoody’s contention by will develop this point using the records of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (hereafter the NSPCC). It also contends that an examination of the distribution of the

separation allowance and other welfare measures shows that the State relied on voluntary and charitable organisations to deal with fundamental problems. This article exposes the tension that existed between voluntary and State bodies. With regard to education, Caitriona Clear has pointed to the impact of the introduction of compulsory education on families from 1892 up to the age of 12 years. She argues that while long term benefits may have governed the implementation of compulsory education it posed immediate and very real financial difficulties for parents who could ill-afford to lose a working contribution to the family budget.⁸ Building on Clear's work, this article will discuss the large number of parents prosecuted for not sending their children to school, and the differences between work and childhood in rural and urban Ireland.

From the beginning of the First World War, efforts in Britain and Ireland to combat high infant mortality rates and other moral, medical and social concerns surrounding children were driven by a variety of motives including genuine concern for poor mothers and children, sectarianism, class bias and international child welfare developments. This article seeks to illuminate the history of child welfare and motherhood during the period of the First World War, comparing the situation with that of Britain. It uses legislation, parliamentary debates, court records, records of societies dealing with poor mothers (primarily the NSPCC) and concerns expressed in the press to argue that the First World War was a turning point in the history of child welfare. The argument is foregrounded with a discussion of key legislation surrounding maternity care, child welfare, child labour and education, all of which greatly affected the lives of working-class mothers. Legislation made little distinction between urban and rural Ireland, despite the fact that both presented with very different problems and both will be addressed. However, for child protection agencies and reformers, poverty-related criminality and neglect came to be seen as urban problems, with the slums of Dublin receiving particular attention.

Tenement life in Dublin

The following is an account from a home visitor to a family in the tenements in 1914 and like others from the time is an apt explanation and description of tenement life:

These houses were never intended for one-bedroom tenements. They are the old houses belonging to the rich people of Dublin. Formerly one family inhabited the entire house; now there is one family and often more in each room, using the same staircase, hall and

yard. There is no water laid on in the houses; therefore the women have to carry every drop from the street or yard up to their rooms...there is no sanitary accommodation in these houses . . . the whole house smells of dirt and close air . . . bread and tea are what people principally live on, and what they bring their children up on . . . When a man comes in from work in the evening, he often does not find a comfortable home. The washing is drying, the wife tired, and there is often a fretful baby. Is it any wonder that he goes to the nearest public house, where, at any rate, it is warm and comfortable.⁹

The alcoholism, the pawn broker, the price of buying coal by the lump, the hygiene – every account of Dublin tenement life touches on all or most of the above. From the Dublin Housing Committee's report in 1914, to observations by social reformers and philanthropists throughout the decade, the above account has become almost a stereotypical description – the profiteering landlords; the price of food; the children begging; the wretched 'handy woman', Dublin tenement life. Yet it continues to deserve investigation, both for the lengths to which women had to stretch their meagre budgets, to the way in which they had to negotiate everyone from the St. Vincent De Paul, to the poor law guardians, to the landlord.¹⁰

For unemployed men and women or those in casual employment, the family budget could change weekly leaving women to make do with whatever was available. In 1914, the minimum living wage in London was cited by one author as £1, but in the case of Dublin many people lived on 18s per week.¹¹ The following addresses how this budget was spent and with regard to diet outlines the three meals and insufficient dietary needs of the family: 'two of these meals would be tea, bread and butter, with the third being stewed beef or similar, with potatoes, onions and the beef being bought as remnants at five pence a pound. Everything had to be fried, stewed or broiled, with herrings being another common choice. The husband receives the major portion, a pint of milk for the family per day ... The women eat last and least'.¹² The emotional effects of the First World War in particular were addressed by some within the child welfare movement. Dr Ella Webb commented that 'Some of the poor mothers to which she had spoken complained of being very upset by the war', expressing concern over the emotional toll.¹³

In 1917 for example, a series of seven lectures were held by the WNHA and others interested in child welfare during what was titled 'Baby Week' in Dublin. The topics discussed were, infant welfare; medical inspection of school children and medical treatment; education of the blind, deaf, 'defective' and 'mentally abnormal'; tuberculosis in children; dental disease and treatment; open air education and playgrounds, and finally the provision of school meals. Dr Oliver Gogarty lamented the slum problem, stating:

While public opinion merits the return of a single tenement owner to the Corporation, what hope is there for improvement . . . The masters of the slums are also masters of the Medical Officers of Public Health. Hence, various housing schemes in overcrowded areas, and no proposals for suburban cottages. Take, for example the 75 houses on Spitalfields area. . . The rent for each house is 5s3d weekly; the economic rent is 15s weekly. Thus we have a bad scheme physically that will not remedy loss of life and will cause a loss of 10s weekly on each house. If the 20,000 families who live in one-roomed tenements are to be rescued by similar means, the result will be a charge of £500,000 in rates.¹⁴

The awareness of class, capitalist landlords and the poverty of families is important. The situation in Dublin by 1914 lent the slums the title of the worst in Europe. While the housing Committee made a number of suggestions, profiteering landlords were a central focus of the solution needed. Wages and employment were another critical issue. One paper entitled ‘Economic Conditions Affecting Child Welfare’ reflected that ‘the difficulty was that the masses of the working classes were not paid wages which could enable them to feed and clothe their children properly.’¹⁵ The author continued to refer to the male bread-winner model, arguing for ‘improvement in the earning power of fathers’. The press and societies’ such as the WNHA were quick to realise other problems unique to Ireland – the insufficient outdoor relief, the problems with the National Insurance Act; the problems with the Midwives’ Act – and the provision of school meals. In 1916, a letter appeared in the *Irish Times* regarding the inadequacy of outdoor relief for widows. The author cites a mother with four children whose husband had been ill for three years before his death and therefore left them without any savings. Her rent was 3 shillings per week, and the relief provided was 10 loaves of bread, 1/4lb tea and 2lbs sugar weekly. No money for coal, rent, clothing or any other expenses. In England the writer states that this was regularly 15 shillings per week.

Legislation, child welfare and motherhood

Legislatively, the period during the First World War saw an increasing emphasis and focus on working-class mothers, and infant and child mortality and the professionalization of child birth. As documented by Harry Hendrick, from 1889 to 1914, fifty-two acts relating to child welfare and child protection were passed in Britain.¹⁶ In the following section, a sample of legislative measures will be investigated with the chief focus being from 1914-1918. Throughout, the benefits for mothers and those for the State must be addressed, as must the question of parental rights. As numerous scholars have documented, the devastation of the First World War in

regard to the loss of British citizens, focused legislative attention on infant and maternity care as the British government expressed increasing concern over high infant mortality rates.¹⁷

Not every legislative measure passed in Britain applied to Ireland, and some adopted a peculiar optional element. In some instances, compliance and uptake by local authorities was extremely low. For example, the 1907 Notification of Births Act, applied to England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland, delineated that fathers or birth attendants should notify the local medical officer of health of a birth in writing within 36 hours. But it was an unusual piece of legislation in that it was configured as a voluntary scheme for local authorities. Belfast took up the act in 1908, Dublin in 1910, but other districts chose not to engage with it. In areas that chose to engage, lack of enforcement became a concern. In 1910, the Medical Superintendent Officer of Health in Ireland, Charles A. Cameron, posted a letter in the *Irish Times* informing readers that under the act, penalty for failing to give notice of a birth within thirty-six hours was a fine of up to twenty shillings.¹⁸ In a further letter in 1913, he advised readers that in a recent case of non-notification, 'the defaulters chiefly belonged to the upper and upper-middle classes'.¹⁹ Cameron chose this example to dispel the notion that working-class mothers were being unduly targeted by the act. However, as Earner-Byrne has shown, when the act became compulsory, it was used by authorities in Ireland to observe and monitor working-class mothers. This is not to detract from the benefits of the act, but to point out the tension between the rights of working-class mothers and the State's increasing presence in working-class homes.

In 1915 a new act made it compulsory for local authorities to implement the notification of births scheme and provided funding for the work of public nurses. Fifty per cent of the costs of this scheme (to a maximum of £5,000) could be recouped by local authorities. However, the funding of public nurses only applied to urban districts. The urban/rural divide in service provision for maternity and child welfare is a significant one throughout this period and beyond and will remain a theme throughout this discussion. The act brought many benefits to women in urban areas. They would now have access to a public nurse, who could advise them on hygiene, diet, disease and breastfeeding. They would have advice and assistance during and after their pregnancies; and they would be visited by female nurses who could perhaps counsel them on other health matters in the home. For the State, accurate figures of births could now begin to be accumulated, and local authorities could also influence mothers in poorer areas, and draw attention to conditions in their homes.

Overall, the act was received with enthusiasm in the Irish and British press. In the *Irish Times*, the author of the column ‘Women’s Work in Ireland’ stated, ‘it is beyond doubt that the death-toll of the war makes the preservation of child life imperative’.²⁰ References to the war were common in the debates surrounding the compulsory notification of births. While advocates for the act could point to lower infant mortality rates in England and Wales than in Ireland, there were also concerns in these areas. The uptake had been slow in some parts of rural England, and the compulsory extension under the 1915 Act was welcomed by those in the medical profession and charitable arena particularly. It increased the visibility of public health problems and deprivation in urban areas and made enforcement a much simpler affair. In rural areas problems associated with pregnancy and child birth also raised issues for authorities but infrastructures for safeguarding mothers and infants were not comprehensive. With regard to prosecutions under the act, fathers, mothers and nurses could all be charged with failure to provide notification of a birth. For example, there were two cases in 1916 in which a father and a mother had to appear after a complaint was made by Mrs Nally of the Dublin Corporation. In both cases the magistrate imposed a fine of five shillings out of a possible twenty.²¹ A nurse involved in one of the cases was summoned but had moved to Manchester and the case was subsequently dropped. This case and others raise interesting concerns regarding the motives for non-registration. While outside of the scope of this article, the births and deaths of children under the age of one year were often left unregistered, and legal obligations were simply ignored. Fears of infanticide, the need to observe poor and working-class mothers and to advise them regarding the health and care of infants were all paramount.²²

In 1918, the Midwives (Ireland) Act was introduced, and although it did not garner the same public attention as the Notification of Births Act, it was widely welcomed by medical professionals in Dublin’s maternity hospitals. Aside from the benefits of the act for the women affected, one of the significant results was that local authority committees were now allowed to include female members. In her study of Dr Kathleen Lynn and the Women’s National Health Association (WNHA), Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh discussed how Lynn and other women in the medical profession, recognised the potential for women in public health, became very involved in initiatives such as the Babies’ Clubs.²³ The act had its roots in the professionalization of nursing, which had taken its cue from the professionalization of medicine, as authorities believed it was no longer appropriate for the ‘local handy woman’ to act as a midwife. It ensured that any mother who did not qualify for free treatment under the

medical charities scheme was entitled to free medical aid in an emergency. The Act had initially been introduced in England in 1902, and when asked in 1910 as to whether he would introduce similar legislation in Ireland, Mr Birrell responded: 'there is not the same urgency in the matter in Ireland as in England, having regard to the powers the Board of Guardians in Ireland already possess.'²⁴ However, the Master of the Rotunda hospital at this time disagreed, and claimed '400 preventable deaths occurred' due to the lack of regulation in the case of midwives.²⁵

The act raised issues surrounding the tension between modernity and tradition, especially in rural Ireland. The handy woman, a local woman who delivered children in exchange for goods or a small payment, was a trusted figure within rural Ireland especially. While the local doctor would only have been called in an emergency, the handy woman delivered most children within the town and the removal of this figure from power was a topic of discourse up to the 1930s. At numerous conferences surrounding the 1911 Insurance Bill and 1918 Midwives Act, the 'handy woman' was referred to in derogatory terms.²⁶ While there is no doubt that Irish infant mortality rates were high, the idea that the professionalization of maternity would automatically mitigate this did not take into account the reasons why pregnant women chose local women to deliver their babies, particularly in rural areas. The debate centred mostly on urban districts and was guided by organisations like the WNHA, public health nurses and maternity hospitals. For many women in rural areas, handy women would have delivered previous children, accepted payment in kind, and were believed to be both knowledgeable and practical. The elimination of handy women would take more than the Midwives Act, as debates in the 1920s and 1930s demonstrated. While outside the scope of this article, the resistance to ending the role of the handy women in many areas, demonstrated the pervasiveness of traditional medicine and a very real aversion to professional and often urban medical practices in rural areas, as well as a lack of professional services in rural Ireland.²⁷

Lastly, as Lindsey Earner-Byrne has documented, in 1906 the Provision of School Meals Act was not extended to Ireland due to protests by members of the Catholic clergy, and government officials who, in the face of abject poverty, contended that it would take the responsibility of feeding children away from parents. The measure would have ensured school-children the receipt of at least one substantial meal per day. Even in England, the objections to the 'socialistic' nature of the act were strong with one commentator pointing to a pilot programme in London in which parents were supposedly sending their children to school 'breakfastless' in order to avail of the free meal. Yet it appears the suspicion of Irish families

and opposition in Ireland was so strong the act was not extended. This demonstrates a class bias, but also an inherent mistrust of Irish parents. In response to this, Maud Gonne set up the Ladies' School Dinner Committee in Dublin. Gonne, an Irish nationalist, referred to impoverished Irish children to highlight the failings of the British government. She implied that children would be better cared for and raised under a national Irish government.²⁸ In 1914 a compromise act, the Education (Provision of Meals) (Ireland) Act was introduced. It allowed Urban District Councils to take over the responsibility of feeding starving children and is arguably one of the most important acts during this time. However, it was only introduced in urban areas, and parents were charged a small fee to subsidise the scheme. Debates surrounding the provision of school meals continued throughout the twentieth century, but during the First World War in urban areas at least, this scheme provided some relief in the school day to children and parents.

As this article has shown so far, legislation during the First World War surrounding infant and child welfare was not devoid of class, regional or gender bias. As many of the reforms were emanating from Britain, there were obvious differences in the application of the measures in Ireland and there were problems specific to Ireland. Directed at working-class mothers in urban areas, benefits would be observed in future years with the reduction of infant mortality, efforts to tackle disease and education in health and hygiene. Ireland also had specific differences with other areas in Britain. In 1917, Dr Coey Bigger's Carnegie Report on infant mortality and child welfare in Ireland illuminated many of these issues.²⁹ Bigger was the Medical Commissioner of the Local Government Board at the time and he highlighted the importance of the Notification of Births Act, the need for free milk schemes, and the fact that the principal cause of infant mortality was destitution. He also drew attention to the differences between rural and urban Ireland. That this report commissioned by the Carnegie Trust was published during the wartime was of course no coincidence as 'the children of the nation' were a very real concern for the British State, even if those children were in Ireland. The war as an instigating factor in raising awareness about the plight of infants is undeniable, but it failed to identify or tackle the cause of many cases of neglect and mortality – poverty. Many reports located the cause of infant suffering in maternal ignorance rather than impoverishment. Whether parents should be prosecuted or assisted became the domain of the child protection services which will now be addressed.

Case study: The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and development of child protection

'It is now universally accepted that neglect of the physical welfare of young children is a social crime'³⁰

The first branch of the Society in Ireland, the Dublin Aid Committee, was elected on 12 June 1889 at a meeting in the lecture theatre of the Royal Dublin Society. In September, it began its work in Dublin and in 1890 became known formally as the NSPCC. Following the opening of branches in Cork and Belfast in 1891, Waterford in 1893, Derry in 1896, Kilkenny and Carlow in 1897, Clonmel in 1899 and Athlone and Wexford in 1901, the branches reached fourteen in number by 1904. Yet it was not until 1956 that the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) gained autonomy from the NSPCC and took control of the assets and responsibilities of the Society in the Republic.³¹ The following statement is taken from the first report of the first branch of the NSPCC in Ireland:

The Society differs in its aim from all other Societies seeking the welfare of unhappy children, in that, whilst others seek to house and provide for the wanderer, homeless, destitute, it seeks to punish those worthless parents who make children wanderers, homeless and destitute, and to render other provision than their own home less necessary.³²

From its foundation, the Society was the principal child protection agency operating in Ireland. By the 1880s, child protection had moved past previous attempts at reform and relief towards active lobbying for legislative change in the British parliament.³³ In short, the NSPCC was attempting to utilise legislation to effect change within the home. The NSPCC played a key role in the international 'child-saving movement', and therefore studying its strategies and archives are important in understanding the changing treatment of children and families by the State and its agencies. Although the Poor Law questioned parental power (particularly that of fathers) from the 1830s, it had limited legislative capacity and ability. In contrast the NSPCC lobbied intensely for legislative reforms that increasingly involved the State in the private lives of families. Clearly the Society was primarily concerned with the welfare of children in poverty, as were other Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children internationally. This was, however, a difficult task, as the effects of poverty could not be addressed purely through punitive measures. As Mary Daly has demonstrated, in Dublin in 1914, casual labour was an increasing problem.³⁴ Many families were dependent on charity for survival, and the NSPCC

did not factor this in when assessing cases of neglect. As previous work has shown, voluntary agencies and the State viewed mothers as responsible for the upkeep of their homes and of the children in them; therefore when charges of neglect were investigated prior to the First World War, mothers were the target.³⁵ In this period, men were usually better positioned to pay fines, so in cases where fathers were prosecuted, they could often avoid prison sentences where women could not. In addition, middle-class judges were also less inclined to send the primary breadwinner to prison in this period. While a mother's work in the home could be done by an older daughter, extended family, or a paid nurse or local woman, without a father's wages, a family would have to rely on poor relief. Of principal concern to the Society and authorities was to penalise working-class parents but without any burden on rate-payers to support impoverished families.

From 1889–1921 the NSPCC grew steadily and were involved in a wide range of tasks primarily involving families living in poverty. Following Irish independence in 1922, the Society adjusted its focus as it had lost some of its support base in the early years of the Irish Free State. Changes were also occurring internationally in regard to child welfare, as the concerns voiced during the First World War brought change and the emergence of a discourse on the rights of the child. In Ireland, parliamentary support for the Society was reflected in the press and, in short, the ethos and moral perspectives of those involved in the setting up and running of branches chimed with national and international child welfare aspirations. Although poverty was acknowledged to be a major concern, the Society, through its work, fervently differentiated between the deserving and undeserving poor. Intemperance and particularly 'intemperate mothers' were at the crux of this differentiation in the early years, and there was little sympathy for families in situations of poverty seen as being within their control. Single mothers were the most obvious and targeted example of this type of family. From the beginning of the twentieth century, western States had made mothers the focus of social and medical policy, as the health of 'the children of the nation' became paramount. With regard to the NSPCC and motherhood, both of these phenomena can be observed. In the early years, mothers were criticised for the physical condition of home and children, as inspectors compared working-class living conditions to their own middle-class ideals of cleanliness and order. From 1922, this situation shifted, as did discussions about mothers in the NSPCC reports. Whether this was a result of the actions of mothers in utilising the Society for material aid, or a changing attitude to mothers from within the organisation is difficult to assess. Previous work on the NSPCC in Ireland has argued that it was a mixture of both.³⁶ What can be ascertained is that

before 1922 mothers were the principal target for authorities as can be seen in the number of prosecutions. After independence, this shifted.³⁷

In statistical terms the NSPCC used the courts to great effect, from 1914-1918, there were twenty-five prosecutions for the more serious crime of cruelty to children recorded in the courts. Of those prosecuted nineteen were women and six were men (table 1.1). Aside from cruelty to children, many more parents, mothers in particular, were prosecuted for the lesser offence of child neglect. In November 1915 for example, 119 cases were dealt with involving 314 children.³⁸ The figures had decreased during the war as the NSPCC and other societies were drawn into different roles. Mothers receiving the separation allowance as their husbands were in the British Army, and the case of deserted wives, were frequently mentioned, echoing moral panics and fears expressed in the press, as explored by Holly Dunbar and Leanne McCormick in this special issue.

Table 1.1: Prosecutions for Cruelty to Children broken down by total, female and male.

Year	Total	Female	Male
1914	8	6	2
1915	9	8	1
1916	2	2	0
1917	6	3	3

Source: Figures taken from the *Criminal and Judicial Statistics for Ireland*, House of Commons Parliamentary Reports, 1914-1918

Some of the cases of ill-treatment and wilful neglect prosecuted were quite severe. In 1915, a case of death by burns of a young child was heard at an inquest in Dublin's Adelaide Hospital. The child had died after her clothes caught fire. The mother had gone downstairs with two other children, and left the four and a half year old child who died and a one and a half year old in the room. The court established that it was six o'clock when the child caught fire, it not eaten

since 2.30 pm and so it had reached for some food near the fire. The judge stated the mother had been very careless and neglectful, but the jury decided it was an accidental death and recommended fireguards.³⁹ The jury's leniency is important to note. Firstly, the family were obviously living in impoverished conditions since the child had not eaten for some time. Secondly, the hazardous conditions in Dublin's tenement buildings can be observed. Accidents involving burning were a common occurrence at this time, and there were numerous other hazards in the slums – as can be observed in the court records and accounts from home visitors, NSPCC inspectors and other external observers. After the collapse of two tenements on 2 September 1913, numbers 66 and 67 Church Street, Dublin Corporation set up a Housing Committee whose report was published in February 1914. In the aftermath of the collapse, an NSPCC inspector John Cooke, who was chair of the Dublin branch, took a number of photographs. The photographs represent part of a small but significant collection: 'The Darkest Dublin' collection held at the Royal Society for Antiquaries in Ireland (RSAI).⁴⁰ Cooke submitted the collection to the Housing Committee who published some of the images in their report published in February 1914. He himself gave the collection the title 'Darkest Dublin'. They represent a key source in examinations of childhood, poverty, class and gender, a rare glimpse of the living conditions for many in Dublin's slum areas.⁴¹

The court records also represent a unique, albeit biased source examining the interactions between parents, children and the State during this time. There were numerous cases of child neglect addressed in the courts, many involving the wives of soldiers. In one such case in March 1915, a soldier's wife and mother of two in Dublin was summoned by the NSPCC and the courts for neglect. She was described as 'an idle woman who spent most of her time about the streets'.⁴² Reference was made to her allowance, the fact that her husband was away fighting and her lack of responsibility in caring for her family. She was sentenced to three months imprisonment. Aside from the 'filthy condition' of the children as described by Inspector Kerriss of the NSPCC, no cruelty was reported. Soldier's wives were common figures in the prosecutions, as the position of those in receipt of the separation allowance was a precarious one. The arguments made in this case regarding the allowance were to some extent stereotypical. As Holly Dunbar has outlined in this volume, discussion of the allowances intersects debates on class; feminism; citizenship; State versus voluntary assistance; the surveillance of immorality and the family wage. During the First World War, the scale of the payment of the allowances was unprecedented – half a billion pounds being paid to wives in Britain and Ireland - and at the height of the war, 1.5 million wives and several million children

were receiving allowances. As Susan Pederson states 'The British State became a surrogate husband'.⁴³ While the legacy of the allowances would affect the development of the welfare State in Britain and many other issues around gender and class, in Ireland many of the women receiving the allowances were targeted by nationalists, and recorded in very disparaging terms in the press. While outside of the scope of this article there are numerous reasons for the depictions of separation women as drunk, immoral and frivolous and the antagonism expressed towards them. The allowance drove up the industrial wage, represented the first regular income for many of these women and provided them with a security few had known due to the high levels of unemployment and underemployment.

In another case in December 1915 a twenty-two-year old woman in Belfast was prosecuted for leaving her three-year old and one-year old alone while she travelled to Larne. The prosecutor pointed to the fact that the woman was in receipt of 23s per week separation allowance. It emerged, however during the court case that the woman had left the children with her younger sister to whom she gave sixpence for minding them. When the police officer called to the house he claimed that the children were crying and the bedding was filthy. The prosecutor stated that the woman's actions were 'deplorable' going off for an evening while her husband was away fighting in the war. They pointed out that she had purchased herself a hat and jacket and the condition of the home was much neglected. It was decided that she would be placed under supervision and imprisoned if this behaviour was repeated.⁴⁴ The case highlights the suspicion surrounding young mothers receiving the allowance, the use of their children to criminalise them and the surveillance of these women in regard to their purchases. The money received was not under the control of the authorities and could be spent as they wished, yet it was in the realm of child protection legislation they could be prosecuted for apparent misdemeanours.

Lack of support by breadwinners was the primary offence investigated involving men, or 'neglect to provide'. In 1915, a horse-trainer from Kilkenny was sentenced to three months imprisonment for neglecting to support his family. Over the previous two years he had sent only £2 to his wife to support her and their children.⁴⁵ In a more unusual case, in 1915 a couple were charged with the neglect of their four children aged between fourteen months and seven years. The children had been found huddled on a street corner after the family had been evicted. The father claimed that he was in constant employment earning nineteen shillings per week but had not been aware that the rent was in arrears. It appears his wife had been spending the money on alcohol and they were both remanded on bail for a week with the mother promising to 'take

the pledge’, referring to the pledge to not drink alcohol again.⁴⁶ The topic of mothers and drunkenness was a significant one for the NSPCC and the authorities from 1889 to the end of the First World War. An investigation of offences against children in the courts from 1880-1940 suggests a number of interesting patterns and gender differences with regard to the treatment of mothers and fathers. Prior to 1922, mothers were significantly over-represented in both convictions for offences against children and transfers to the State Inebriate Reformatory in Ennis, as well as the other three private-run reformatories. There are a number of reasons for this over-representation. The connection between drunkenness, entry to Ennis Inebriate Reformatory and child neglect cases has been alluded to by a number of scholars, and more recent work by Conor Reidy has shed further light on this aspect of Ireland’s history of institutionalisation and reformation.⁴⁷ The NSPCC was central to many of the admissions to all four reformatories, and in 1914 a report from the governor at Ennis State Reformatory highlighted that in many admissions of mothers, child neglect ‘was a material factor leading to their trial and incarceration’.⁴⁸ However, this mentality did not last long and the project of coercive ‘reformation and rehabilitation’ in the reformatories was set aside during the First World War in Britain, probably due to the fact that women were needed in the home and at work. In Ireland, the last reformatory closed in 1920. This is a major watershed in the context of the NSPCC in Ireland, as from this period onwards the Society attempted to adjust its role in post-independence Ireland and the issue of intemperance was replaced with other concerns. The focus shifted to a less punitive approach, with the category ‘advice sought’ emerging from reports, as well as a more sympathetic attitude to mothers emerging in the sample cases and annual reports. In order to maintain the support of the State and Catholic agencies, the Society had to be seen to follow State policy. The most important area in which this can be observed was in the Society’s involvement in placing children in industrial schools. This was far from the policy of ‘protecting children within the home’ as had been expressed in the Society’s early years.

There were of course positives to the Society’s work during this time – for mothers and for women more generally. In Britain, the war signalled the entry of women to the NSPCC as inspectors. In Ireland, that did not occur until the 1920s. Women were, however, heavily involved in fundraising and during the war additional street collections were organised in Dublin in particular to try to raise the funds needed to support families through the provision of material assistance. Committees such as the NSPCC Clothing Guild handed out clothes to families, while some inspectors attempted to tap into public funds by requesting home

assistance and other welfare payments from local authorities. The philanthropic work undertaken by middle class women also added to their politicisation, and would play a part in their involvement in the suffrage campaign. The highlighting of medical neglect was also critical. Throughout 1917, fears were expressed about the spread of smallpox from the continent. The issue of vaccination of children was highlighted by Coey Bigger and mentioned at numerous Board of Guardian meetings.⁴⁹ The neglect of compulsory vaccination laws was of huge concern to the authorities, particularly as the choice not to vaccinate was being linked to hysteria surrounding ‘instances of children who had been seriously injured from the effects of vaccination.’⁵⁰ The NSPCC was involved in prosecuting certain parents for medical neglect, and in the case of vaccination this would have been beneficial to those outside the family also.

Compulsory education and work

The intersection between compulsory education, child labour and child welfare is another significant aspect during this time period. As Davin points out with regard to London, ‘Girls . . . were more likely to miss attendances than boys’,⁵¹ a fact which is supported by Tony Fahey’s research and which could be a factor in the consistently higher number of girls being sent to industrial schools on court orders for school non-attendance.⁵² There is, however, a difference in regard to rural and urban Ireland, as is addressed by Caitriona Clear. Clear argues that after the introduction of compulsory education in 1892, daughters were more likely to be sent to school in rural areas. If money allowed, boys from poorer families would have been apprenticed, while girls could receive the necessary skills to enter domestic service. In regard to parents, Clear highlights the pressures they were under to send children to school.⁵³ Davin also discusses the pressures, especially on mothers, to sacrifice children’s help in the home, but also to send children to school clean, clothed and sufficiently equipped.⁵⁴ So, not only were mothers and fathers expected to do without children’s help, they were also expected to present them in a way that most could not afford to do. The bulk of this pressure fell on mothers, an issue that was addressed in the Irish suffrage paper the *Irish Citizen* in 1915:

“Stay at home and mind the children” is the stock rule of the anti-suffragist. But one cannot mind the children at home when our male Government has decreed that the said children are to be out of the home for the best part of the day. In country places, the long walk to school – often meaning damp boots and clothes, is a cause of consumption according to some experts . . . We believe that with the spread of the women’s movement, the idea will become known, even to our masculine protectors, who have

hitherto failed so lamentably to do their chosen work of looking after the children outside the home.⁵⁵

With children now attending school until the age of twelve (fourteen after 1926) notions of childhood were also being altered and extended, and a new category, adolescence, was emerging. Interestingly, compulsory primary education had come into being in Ireland in 1831 – earlier than other parts of the United Kingdom with the setting up of the national primary school system. However, as Mary Daly has argued, school non-attendance was not enforced until after the extension of compulsory schooling in 1926 to fourteen years. From 1892, children were required to attend up to the age of twelve years. However, as Mary Daly states in regard to the act, it ‘required attendance for a mere seventy-five days a year, and the measure, which was poorly enforced, only applied to county boroughs and to a limited number of local authorities that adopted the legislation; the act did not apply in rural Ireland’.⁵⁶

Overall, compulsory schooling offered a variety of benefits to the State. It created an educated workforce, kept children off the streets and kept children out of the workforce. It also provided a mechanism to control poor families and bring working-class children into line with middle-class behaviour. Hendrick’s dualism of children as ‘victims and threats’ can be applied to this discussion.⁵⁷ If working-class children were in schools, they were perceived to be less of a threat than when they played, worked and lived on the streets and in the fields. School offered structure, discipline and an opportunity to invest in the nation’s future through educating its citizens. While prosecutions for school non-attendance were beginning to creep up in this period, it would not be until after 1926 that transferals to industrial schools and school non-attendance would become synonymous. From 1926-1940, over 100,000 cases of school non-attendance were recorded, a staggering figure but one which demonstrates this particular policy measure took time to be accepted culturally. For children, compulsory education provided an opportunity to learn and play and a move away from the often horrific work conditions and exploitation. However, due to common but varied use of corporal punishment in schools, the experience of schooling was not always a pleasant one.

What then of the work in which children were engaged? With regard to the work being carried out in Galway at the time, John Cunningham states ‘the majority of working children, of both sexes, were employed as servants. Many were agricultural labourers, engaged no doubt at hiring fairs. Some were messengers, while others worked with their parents at tailoring and dressmaking, or helped at brush-making or bag-making outwork’.⁵⁸ The issue was, children had to work to support the family, as the wages of unskilled labourers or workers would barely

stretch to feed a small family. The work differed greatly in rural and urban contexts. In Dublin for example, children were employed as newsboys, chimney sweeps, domestic servants, and messengers. Young girls looked after younger children, often the eldest girl staying at home and forfeiting school. For many, gaining a qualification, entering a profession or undertaking an apprenticeship could be the only route out of poverty for families, both in rural and urban areas. In 1903, the issue of children and work was addressed by the Employment of Children Act, as has recently been documented by Gillian McIntosh.⁵⁹ McIntosh explains how, throughout the period leading up to the war, the issue of children and begging remained in the press and was of concern to moral reformers, voluntary organisations and the State.⁶⁰ In 1910, Etta Tolerton wrote ‘We are all more or less perturbed, distressed, annoyed, or worried by the epidemic of begging, mainly by children, either openly or under pretence of selling.’⁶¹ One suggested remedy to the issue was the establishment of Day Industrial Schools, a suggestion that had been addressed by the NSPCC in the late nineteenth century.⁶² Attention was paid to the international context where this had proved successful as children were fed, clothed, educated and kept off the streets. In the case of Dublin, money remained the main obstacle as did the onset of the war. It would not be until the 1920s when fears for male unemployment rose that women and children would be nudged back to the home and to school in order to ensure enough work was available for men as male unemployment became an increasing theme of the post-war era.

Conclusion

Most scholars agree that the period during and directly after the First World War saw dramatic changes in child welfare legislation, as the focus on infant mortality and working-class children’s health increased.⁶³ In Ireland, this coincided with a time of upheaval and revolution, with fears of socialism and sectarianism often trumping the needs of children in poverty. Dunwoody argues that unlike Britain, authorities in Ireland were slow to react and implement legislation during this period.⁶⁴ While there were significant delays in implementation, overall, it signals a time of change, of professionalization and of increasing interaction with working-class mothers. The NSPCC would change their tack with regard to mothers and prosecutions after this period. This did not mean that women trusted the NSPCC to any greater extent, but that they themselves became adept at using the society, as they had so many others in the past. For working-class women, negotiating services, dealing with school-going children and

surviving on very meagre resources kept them in a constant battle for survival. While legislation surrounding child welfare was in theory beneficial, as with compulsory education it could add pressure to an already pressured day. Visits from the nurse of other home visiting committees and the NSPCC inspector were intrusive and threatening to some. While court records have demonstrated that neglect was a very real occurrence, the measures that were being implemented did little to address the root causes: poverty, profiteering landlords and other threats to family survival.

Endnotes

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⁴ Daly, *Dublin The Deposed Capital*.

⁵ Ibid.

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⁷ Dunwoody, 'Child welfare'.

⁸ Caitríona Clear (2007) *Social Change and everyday life in Ireland, 1850-1922* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp.50-51. For a discussion of education and compulsory schooling see Tony Fahey (1992) 'State, Family and Compulsory Schooling in Ireland,' *Economic and Social Review*, 23, 4, pp.375-78.

⁹ A.M. Stoney, 'Life in Single-Room Tenements', *Irish Times*, 3 Jan 1914.

¹⁰ See Earner-Byrne, "Dear Father my Health has Broken Down": Writing Health in Irish Charity Letters, 1922-1940'.

¹¹ 'The Living Wage', *Irish Times*, 28 April 1914.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Taken from a series of articles on Baby Week in Dublin, *Irish Times*, July 1917.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ For a discussion of infant mortality and infant protection services before the war see Earner Byrne, *Mother and Child*, pp.8-23.

¹⁷ For a discussion of Britain see Jane Lewis (1980) *The Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare in Britain, 1900-1939* (London: Croom Helm) and internationally Gisela Bock & Pat Thane (eds.) (1991) *Maternity and Gender Policies: women and the rise of European welfare states* (London full reference).

¹⁸ 'Notification of Births Act 1907', *Irish Times*, 13 October 1910.

¹⁹ 'Early Notification of Births', *Irish Times*, 6 May 1913.

²⁰ *Irish Times*, 24 July 1915.

²¹ *Irish Times*, 13 Oct 1910.

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²⁵ *Ibid.*

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³¹ The Irish Free State became the Republic of Ireland or Éire in 1949.

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³³ For a discussion of the NSPCC in Britain see sentence incomplete

³⁴ Daly, *Dublin The Deposed Capital*, p.77.

³⁵ Buckley, *The Cruelty Man*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Of the cases, 115 were child neglect, two were ill-treatment, one immoral surroundings and one of other wrongs

³⁹ *Irish Times*, 2 April 1915.

⁴⁰ See Christiann Corlett (2008) *Darkest Dublin* (Dublin: Wordwell).

⁴¹ See also Prunty, *Dublin Slums, 1800-1925*.

⁴² *Irish Times*, 8 March 1915.

⁴³ Susan Pederson (1990) 'Gender, Welfare and Citizenship in Britain during the Great War', *The American Historical Review*, 95, 4, pp. 983-1006.

⁴⁴ *Irish Times*, 29 December 1915.

⁴⁵ *Irish Times*, 12 January 1915.

⁴⁶ *Irish Times*, 28 October 1910.

⁴⁷ Conor Reidy (2015) *Criminal Irish Drunkards: the Inebriate Reformatory System 1900-1920* (City, The History Press).

⁴⁸ George Bretherton, 'Ireland's Inebriate Reformatories, 1900-1920' (2003) full reference?

⁴⁹ *Irish Times*, 26 Feb 1914.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Davin, *Growing Up Poor*.

⁵² Fahey, 'Compulsory education', p.

⁵³ Clear, *Social Change*, pp.42-54.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, introduction.

⁵⁵ *Irish Citizen*, 28 August 1915.

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⁵⁷ Hendrick, *Child Welfare*.

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