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5. Parenting, poverty and the NSPCC in Ireland: 1889–1939

Sarah-Anne Buckley

This chapter addresses a number of key questions surrounding parenting, poverty and the state in Ireland from 1889 to 1939.¹ Concentrating on the period from the opening of the first Irish branch of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) to the beginning of the Second World War, it highlights international concerns involving child protection, parenting, and the state, as well as specific Irish anxieties surrounding class, gender, emigration, sexuality and the family. This was an era in which parenting was increasingly seen as national duty, and, as Harry Hendrick has asserted in a broader history of child welfare and the NSPCC in Britain, “‘Civilised’ parenting, especially by the Irish and the poor, was testimony to progress.”²

From its foundation, the NSPCC was the principal child protection agency operating in Ireland. From the 1880s, child protection had moved beyond previous attempts at reform and relief, such as the operation of orphanages and ‘ragged schools’, towards active lobbying for legislative change. Although the Poor Law had restricted and questioned parental power (particularly that of fathers) from its introduction in 1838, the NSPCC lobbied intensely for legislative reforms that increasingly involved the state in the private lives of families. From 1889–1921 the NSPCC’s expansion and increasing influence was notable. 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.

From 1922, the Society had to adjust its focus to survive in an independent Ireland. A notion of ‘crisis and change’ was not unique to the Irish Society, as Christine Anne Sherrington’s examination of the NSPCC in Britain has shown.³ In the aftermath of the First World War, many states engaged in a discourse on the rights of children, the role of the state in child welfare and interventions in the family. In Ireland in 1924, eighteen signatories signed the League of Nation’s Declaration of the Rights of the Child, including the *Taoiseach* W.T. Cosgrave, future *Taoiseach* and President Eamon de Valera, and other prominent politicians. While responding to this change in focus, however, the Irish branches of the NSPCC also faced challenges due to the Catholic Church’s increasing influence in child welfare; a loss in the earlier financial support provided by Anglo-Irish subscribers; and stretched resources due to the increasing numbers of families approaching it for material assistance. As will be shown below, the Society’s response was to redefine its role: now providing advice and material assistance instead of solely threatening and prosecuting parents.

Sidney and Beatrice Webbs’ image of ‘parallel bars’ has been employed by some scholars to describe the relationship of statutory and voluntary services, particularly in the nineteenth century.⁴ However, during the early part of the twentieth century in Britain, an ‘extension ladder’ relationship between statutory and voluntary services became more prevalent.⁵ As the state assumed increasing responsibility (albeit in an *ad hoc* manner) to provide a basic minimum standard of living, voluntary agencies began to play a more supplementary role. In Britain, this assumption of responsibility by the state continued between the wars, and the introduction of ‘cradle-to-grave’ welfare legislation after the Second World War was regarded by

many as heralding the demise of voluntary welfare there.⁶ However, legislative changes relating to issues such as adoption, fostering, and incest were implemented considerably later in independent Ireland, and women's rights were also more restricted.⁷ The role of voluntary agencies such as the NSPCC therefore arguably remained much more important as mediators between poor families and the state.

Indeed, throughout this period, the NSPCC in Ireland functioned as a semi-state body until the development of a more professional child care system in the 1970s. An inspectorate kitted out in the Society's uniform provided it with the hallmarks of an official body, while its association with the police and its role as lobbyist in political matters both made it an effective force within the apparatus of government. Its collaboration with the state was demonstrated most significantly in its involvement in the prosecution of parents and, in the most extreme cases, its power to overrule parental authority and force the removal of children from their homes to state-run industrial schools. The Society might also use its association with the state to act in more benevolent ways. Correspondence in the files between the Society, the various Boards of Health, the Catholic Church and the courts shows that inspectors regularly acquired state subsidies for families, despite the warning in a 1927 report that it was undesirable for private charities to administer public funds.⁸ In a letter to the Board of Health in 1928, for example, an NSPCC inspector in Wexford asked if the board would be following up a particular case of neglect and desertion and, if not, could the Society do so.⁹ Whether other similar organisations acted in a like manner is worthy of further investigation; it may be that, due to the assumed semi-state status of the NSPCC and its professionalisation by the 1920s, it acted a major medium of state funding.

This chapter uses the surviving case-files and annual reports of the NSPCC, in conjunction with legislation and court records, to explore three key issues: the Society's attitude to parents; its approach to child neglect and poverty; and the use of the Society *by* parents.¹⁰ It demonstrates that the interactions between parents, the NSPCC and the state were not clear-cut in terms of power. Assessments of working-class parents were central to investigations conducted by the NSPCC, and such parents were frequently referred to in dismissive terms. However, while the balance of power always remained uneven, parents were not passive recipients of the Society's actions. Particularly in the post-independence era, the chapter shows how parents began to utilise the Society's resources to seek advice, track deserting husbands, place children in institutions and gain some state welfare assistance.

Here the connections between this study and other studies in this volume are relevant and revealing, particularly in drawing similarities to parental attitudes to and uses of child welfare, as explored in relation to Finland by Kaisa Vehkalahti. Other historians have also charted similar uses of state welfare by the poor in different eras and geographical contexts. Lydia Murdoch, for example, has demonstrated how parents in Victorian London used state and charitable apparatuses to improve their children's lives – even if the state inevitably retained power in most cases.¹¹

The literature on the history of Irish children and childhood is in its infancy in certain areas, and the proceedings of the first major interdisciplinary conference on the history of childhood in Ireland were published only in 2014.¹² In Britain, the history of the NSPCC has been written and challenged, but in Ireland the story of the 'cruelty man' or the role of what Robert J. Parr, director of the NSPCC from 1905-27, termed the 'children's man' has only recently been investigated.¹³ Several historians have, however, addressed the role of the state in the development of child welfare,

schooling, family life and institutional care, both before and after Irish independence in 1922.¹⁴ In the history of the Poor Law in particular, recent historiography has shown how families utilised the workhouses to access temporary accommodation; while more recent scholarship on institutionalisation has considered the role of society and families in the placement of children, providing a more nuanced discussion of institutionalisation, intervention and agency.¹⁵

The NSPCC's attitude to parents

From its foundation, a preoccupation with the role and suitability of parents was central to the philosophy of the NSPCC. As the first report of the first Irish branch stated in 1889:

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.¹⁶

This statement paved the way for how the Society would approach its work in the early years of its existence, with the emphasis on the threat of prosecutions for parents as opposed to encouraging better behaviour or assisting parents with material conditions.

The report also contains figures for the year 1889–90, in which 120 cases were investigated by the Dublin committee involving 158 children. Overall, six parents were prosecuted by the Society, thirty-six by the police, and six children ‘under notice’ died.¹⁷ While a genuine concern for the children involved in investigations can be seen in the inspectors’ writings, this was not the case with regard to the parents being scrutinised. Although poverty was acknowledged to be a major concern, the Society 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. Throughout the files, descriptions of poor and working-class ‘clients’ as ‘careless’, ‘useless’, ‘lazy’, ‘immoral’, ‘excitable’, ‘foolish’, ‘indifferent’, ‘fond of drink’ and ‘quarrelsome’ (to name but a few of the adjectives employed) depict images of degenerate, incapable and abnormal individuals. In contrast, the inspectors’ personal writings project an aura of righteousness associated with their self-perception as saviours of the poor.¹⁸ Class often coloured inspectors’ perceptions of acceptable child-rearing practices.¹⁹ Class differentiation possibly even increased, as by the 1930s the pay provided a middle-class income – although, as Dr Noel Browne’s description of his own father’s work as an NSPCC inspector in Dublin shows, the job also contained an element of risk with his father suffering at least two severe assaults during his career.²⁰ The language utilised by the Society after 1922 in post-independence Ireland also changed, encouraging parents to seek advice and discussing the penalties and threat of prosecution to a lesser extent.

There were some regional variations. There are marked differences in the tone and content between the reports of the Dublin branch, for example, and the other regional branches.²¹ While each year similar issues were highlighted by all branches, the Dublin branch was more detailed in its requests for legislative and welfare changes, and in the examples given to illustrate specific issues. As it was the principal branch in the country, with five inspectors, this is not surprising. The urban/rural divide in Ireland during the period of examination is a significant consideration when looking at annual figures. Conditions in Dublin, and to a lesser extent Cork and Limerick, were very different from those in rural areas, in the west of Ireland

particularly, with regard to such issues as accessibility to schools, medical aid and other services.

Gender is also a significant factor in assessing attitudes. Many of the early inspectors were male, ex-policemen, over six feet tall and dressed in the Society's uniform. This show of male authority was perhaps particularly intimidating for working-class women. From the 1920s, gender divisions broke down somewhat as female inspectors became more prominent.²² In discussions of the NSPCC in Britain, it has been argued that the inspectors focused primarily on women as the principal culprits of child neglect, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s when international trends in child-rearing tended to place responsibility solely with mothers.²³ In Ireland prior to 1922, cases were taken against mothers in 70 per cent of instances. However, as Figure 5.1 demonstrates, in the 1920s and 1930s, court cases were taken primarily against fathers.

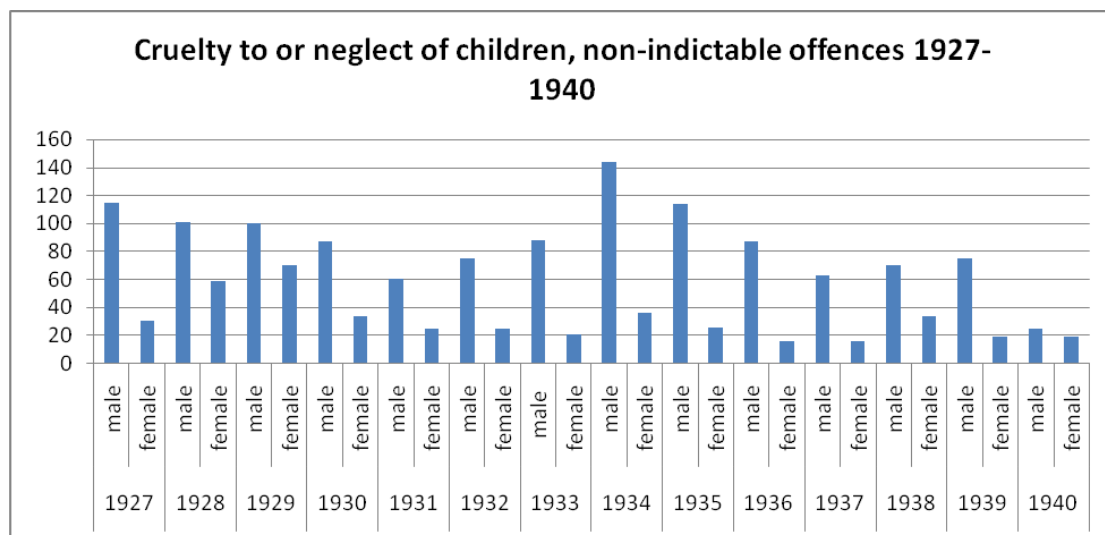


Figure 5.1: Number and sex of persons proceeded against for non-indictable offences, 1927–1940. Figures taken from I. O'Donnell, E. O'Sullivan and D. Healy (eds) (2005) *Crime and punishment in Ireland, 1922–2003: A statistical sourcebook* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration), Table 1.4, pp. 82-5.

Similarly, of the 527 prison sentences for cruelty handed down from 1924–45, only 23 per cent were to women.²⁴ Whether this was due to some notion that women were better off in the home, or that a father should be culpable for not providing financially for his family, is an area worthy of further study, and the different way in which British men and women were treated by the courts in cases of alleged infanticide is the subject of Daniel Grey's chapter below. While recent years have seen various analyses of gender inequalities and discriminatory legislation with regard to women in the first two decades of the Irish Free State, a broader focus on the family and child neglect brings both gender and class inequalities to the fore.²⁵ It acknowledges not only the struggles of women and children, but the conditions and stresses of poor and working-class men.

In order to further investigate the treatment of parents, this chapter will refer to one particular branch, the NSPCC Wexford District Branch, as it represents the most complete set of records. From 1919 to 1929, a sample of seventy cases taken from the branch contained four requests for advice, three investigations for ill-treatment, and one for indecent assault. The remainder were categorised as neglect, but involved a range of issues concerning poverty, wife-beating, emigration and desertion, nurse-children, physical neglect, 'moral' neglect, and the eligibility of children for British army pensions.²⁶ Many of the cases categorised as neglect would initially have been requests for advice by families. Overall, eight cases resulted in the removal of children to industrial schools and investigations of five babies in mother-and-baby homes were recorded. In the same district from 1929–39, of the 177 files examined, there were 28 requests for advice, seven cases of ill-treatment, five 'other wrongs', and two cases of criminal assault.²⁷ One hundred and thirteen cases were investigated

under the category of neglect and 22 others resulted in removal of children to industrial schools and reformatories.

The number of cases categorised as neglect throughout the 1920s and 1930s is striking compared to the early years of the Society. In comparison to the first report in 1890, for example, in which only 17 per cent of the total number of cases were for child neglect, in 1933 this figure was 67 per cent. This issue of a shift in focus from child cruelty to child neglect was arguably due to a variety of factors.²⁸ Central to the Society's re-categorisation and focus on neglect was the Society's own survival. Not only did the issue of neglect expand the areas into which the Society could intervene, it also provided it with a place in the state's child welfare apparatus. The NSPCC would continue to identify neglectful parents, obtain Home Assistance for some, and facilitate institutionalisation for others. It continued to champion particular issues, such as maintenance for widows and single mothers (from fathers, not the state), changes to the Children's Court and the treatment of juvenile delinquents, and improved housing for families in poverty. However, this allowed it to be less visible in the press, and allowed it to work with the religious orders and state bodies rather than against. George Behlmer has also claimed that by the early twentieth century the Society's increasing emphasis on neglect as opposed to assault or cruelty was the result of the Society's increasing professionalisation.

Harry Hendrick, however, maintains that neglect, which was primarily associated with the working-class, was easier to 'treat' as a social problem than cruelty, which could implicate parents across all social classes and which could also be complicated by issues such as corporal punishment; an explanation which again confirms the status of children's parents as central to the NSPCC's actions.²⁹ In the Irish context, less than forty years after the first Irish report in 1890, the Clonmel

Branch of the Society declared that ‘cruelty to children in its grosser form was common in the Society’s earlier years, but, thanks to the amended laws and the active and widespread operations of the Society, it is not so frequently met with to-day as then.’³⁰ In total, of the 160 investigations in 1933, all were cases of child neglect. As will be further addressed below, the type of neglect most frequently investigated was neglect to provide.

The NSPCC’s attitude to child neglect and cruelty to children

The Society initially focused on three types of cruelty: intentional (beating, starving, systematic persecution), which all came under the law; unintentional (allowing children to suffer by want of personal body attention, sour and improper food), which did not come under law; and accidental/careless (drunkenness, gossiping, neglect of overlying of babies, falls, burns, scalds, runovers), which could be amenable to the law.³¹ Yet when neglect became the principal focus, it could take a variety of forms, including physical neglect and poverty; neglect and desertion, and moral neglect. What was deemed neglectful also differed according to individual inspectors. As one wrote in 1908,

No word picture, however complete, can accurately portray a case of real ‘Neglect’ as our men discover by the thousand every month . . . Each will accept the description in a comparative way, and each determine the depth of the evil by his or her own experience – just because we cannot put the things that count into words. The yearning of the child for mother- and father-love, the aching pangs of hunger, the bitterness of the cold wind upon the shivering form, the ‘smell’.³²

Nevertheless, despite such vague definitions, almost all cases involved people living in poverty; the few exceptions related to family situations deemed inappropriate by the Catholic Church and/or society at large.³³ The category of neglect also often

included other issues such as desertion, illegitimacy, alcoholism, mental illness and wife-beating.

In August 1928 the case of a 42-year-old father of four children, aged between four and ten years, was recorded by the Wexford inspector. The family was described as living in one room on the ground floor and all sleeping in one double bed. The conditions in the room were depicted as 'deplorable' and the bedding 'dirty and scanty'. Upstairs in the attic room another family, two parents and their nine children, aged between one and sixteen years, also lived in one room. The room was described as consisting of 'two double beds' and the roof was 'three feet at its lowest and six at its highest point'. They ate upstairs and had been evicted from the County Home eight months previously. They were under investigation due to their living conditions, but what is notable is that the families themselves had invited the inspector into their homes. Both sets of parents had sacrificed privacy by allowing the inspector to record every detail of their children's appearance and had invited his judgement in the hope of receiving some material relief. In this instance the inspector did not record whether they received Home Assistance.³⁴

The files contain many such examples of the horrendous conditions in which many were forced to live. The majority are urban, but there are also a number of rural cases. In 1939 the inspector described the conditions in which one family were living outside Wexford town:

Found family occupying an outhouse, walls of mud and roof in danger of collapse. The place is unfit for human habitation and is infested with rats and vermin. All the children are clad in rags and infected with vermin, one room used for sleeping by entire family. Children sleep on floor covered with straw which was mushy and foul smelling. The child Nora is very delicate and anaemic. The remaining children are fairly healthy but very dirty and ill cared. I advised mother to vacate house and go into the Co. Home. She promised to do so.³⁵

He continued by describing the parents as ‘lazy, dirty, unfit, useless and indifferent’, condemning the mother in particular, who ‘smokes most of her husband’s earnings’.³⁶ The case file continued for a further two years, with letters from the inspector to the Board of Health requesting the family to be re-housed. The file ends with the inspector noting that they could not be located.

While the cases referred to above relate to neglect in the context of poverty, the Society continued to investigate situations of cruelty and ill-treatment, albeit less frequently. In 1928, the case of a ten-year-old boy and his six-year-old sister was investigated by the Wexford inspector. Both were living with a guardian, a local shopkeeper. Their father lived nearby. When their mother died it had been suggested by the local priest that the shopkeeper and his wife would provide a much better situation for the children and the father agreed. With no formal adoption policy in Ireland until 1956, informal adoptions and foster care arrangements were not subject to procedures common in other countries and many children suffered as a result. In this instance, the file describes the children’s appearance on the inspector’s first visit:

Children fairly well clad but poorly nourished and neglected, Sean more so than Kate. Sean suffering from sores left buttock large patches 6 inches square septic. 2 sores dried lower down. Boy stated they were caused by the steam of kettle. Highly improbable. Guardian stated he was not aware of instance of sores when pointed out to him. Kate was then ill nourished. Saw father later he agreed to move children to their home in Wexford on Monday but stated the sore on Sean’s hip was due to beating by schoolteacher which was not probable or possible.

After the child was examined by a doctor, it was discovered that he had been burned on the stove by his guardian, in the presence of his wife. Other instances of cruelty were also outlined, including one incident when the young girl had been forced to smoke a pipe until she was sick, as the guardian and his friend jeered. The children were removed by the inspector and placed in industrial schools, but no case was

brought against the guardian, his wife or the children's father – more than likely due to the guardian's social status as the local shopkeeper.³⁷

While 'neglect and starvation' was the only neglect offence investigated by the Society up to 1921, from this time on five specific types of child neglect emerged – neglect to provide, neglect and starvation, moral neglect, medical neglect and neglect to provide proper guardianship. It would not be until the mid-twentieth century that emotional neglect would be added, with the acceptance of psychological explanations for social problems and a focus on 'the mind' of the child (although the inspector from 1908 quoted at the beginning of this section suggests that an unofficial awareness of emotional needs was present much earlier). Medical neglect represented another aspect of physical neglect, defined on the basis of class-specific expectations and standards of living. Many of the untreated health problems found by the NSPCC were infected sores, lice, tuberculosis, colds and eye and ear infections. Parents often claimed ignorance, but it is probable that many could not afford treatment or hoped it would not be necessary. It could also be speculated that some did not completely trust modern medical practices, continuing to administer folk remedies for ailments.

Parents attitudes to the Society

The fact that parents might actively seek advice from the Society, and invite its representatives into their homes, has already been noted above. Records from the Wexford Branch demonstrate that this was not unusual. In 1937, 29 out of 203 cases investigated by the branch were initiated by parents seeking advice, and this increased to 38 out of 206 in 1938 and 45 out of 204 in 1939.³⁸ In fact, cases of 'advice sought', was a new category to be included in the case files from the 1920s, and in 1931 the Dublin branch stated: 'it is gratifying to see that these have again increased this

year.’³⁹ In order to address how parents, especially mothers, used the Society after 1922, this section will look at two themes – desertion and institutionalisation. In post-independence Ireland many men and women left their families in Ireland out of economic necessity or in search of a new beginning. Those they left behind became a major focus of the Society’s neglect investigations, as mothers, fathers, grandparents and other family members, as well as nurses and others, used the Society to locate relatives. The following excerpt, taken from a letter sent by an Irishman in England to his wife in 1938, demonstrates the position of both the emigrant husband and the deserted wife. It was sent by the husband after he had been tracked by the NSPCC in Britain following a complaint by his wife and her parents:

Received your threat which hasn’t had any affect (sic) on me as you know yourself neither you nor the Cruelty man can do anything to me. I have offered you a home here and you have refused thereby putting yourself in a position that favours me in not maintaining you . . . Better people than you have lived in one room.⁴⁰

In a letter written a year earlier he had written:

My darling. Just got your lovely letter. I have only one fault to find with you that is you don’t write often enough . . . I wouldn’t like to rear children in this hole. I would like to give them a memory of Ireland until they reach about 12 so my dear when you are coming over, if you do you’ll have to leave one behind.⁴¹

The file concludes with an inspector noting that the man was being traced with a view to prosecution.

In one of the earliest surviving files for the Wexford branch, from March 1919, a woman wrote to the Society asking for relief for her two young children and requesting that her husband be ‘arrested and dealt with for his cruel neglect.’ It was 1921 before she received outdoor relief.⁴² With regard to prosecutions for neglect through desertion, perhaps one of the greatest benefits of the Irish branches remaining

under the NSPCC umbrella, as evidenced in the 1938 case above, was the co-operation between inspectors in Ireland and elsewhere, which occasionally secured prosecutions and maintenance, or relief in the case of a husband's return.⁴³ In a case in 1940, one of the inspectors at the Cork District Branch was in correspondence with the New York SPCC regarding a deserting husband. The letters demonstrate the inspector's persistence in pursuing the husband to pay for his wife, who at the time was being supported by 'public funds'. The Society might even be contacted in regard to siblings. In 1929 there are a number of letters from a girl in Chicago on behalf of her mother, asking the Society to look after her two small sisters back in Ireland: 'if you can take Catherine and Aine to school until such time as we have a little money saved to pay their passage out here . . . We would also greatly appreciate it if you would keep a watch over my brother Paul.'⁴⁴

As many poor Irish women became proficient in maintaining households through utilising different societies and charities, the 'cruelty man' was often called in. However, even after welfare initiatives were finally introduced, such as the introduction of the children's allowance in 1944, inspectors received numerous letters claiming that fathers were withholding the allowance, a situation many mothers might have predicted.⁴⁵ In 1934, for example, the local inspector received a letter from the mother of a woman with two children explaining how her daughter was 'very sick, needs nourishment and cannot provide for herself as her husband is in England'. When the accused was questioned by an inspector in England, he asked if his wife had made the complaint. When the inspector answered no, the father was 'glad to hear that, it puts my mind at ease.' A later letter to his wife highlights both his embarrassment and anger at the involvement of the inspector:

When you or your mother sent the cruelty man on me on Monday you would like to see me in Gaol but never will that happen when I go to work. I will

send you the money Rose but never again will I go home after what you did and your Mam done on me. I got a big drop when he came to me and told me off before a crowd. I looked very small I will never forgive you or your mother for that. I have no more to say Bye Bye and good luck.

Following this letter, 'Rose' wrote to the NSPCC inspector as no money had been sent: 'I cannot get any relief when my husband is not with us. I cannot live as I am now . . . I have been advised that if he was here with us we would get relief of some kind. If he will not keep us here he will have to take us with him.' The file contains another letter from her mother and father stating that they could not afford to keep her and the children. These letters induced another visit by the inspector and another letter from an even more indignant husband:

I got your letter safe and glad to hear that you have sent the cruelty man on me again, as you cannot do any more harm to me than you have done...you need not think of coming over here as I do not intend to have anything to do with you ever again after what you did and your people have do to me and the show you have made of me what do you think I am . . . and when I catch – I will break his neck. I will always send money to keep you and the children but I don't want to see you any more.

The file concludes with various letters from the husband claiming to be injured and out of work, and the wife's attempts to get the children into an industrial school.⁴⁶ As with all these cases, it was rarely the children that benefited from the interventions.

The purpose of highlighting these cases is not to attribute any blame to those that emigrated or those left behind, but to highlight the nuances and complexities in how parents interacted with the NSPCC; the importance of the Society to parents; and the relationship between the NSPCC, the welfare system and parents. They also demonstrate the peculiar nature of Irish problems with social welfare, a situation that led to the changing function of the NSPCC in Ireland particularly in the 1930s and 1940s. Specifically, this can be seen in the sample cases cited in the Society's annual

reports from the early 1930s, which increasingly focused on individual instances of desertion in which the Society was successful in either prosecuting fathers and gaining financial assistance, or reuniting families.

The way in which parents might approach the Society as a resource can be seen even in cases in which children were removed from their parental home. While the removal of children from parents may not have been the Society's intention in the early years, it came to represent a large part of its work, particularly in the 1930s. Throughout the files, some of the most emotive letters are those sent by mothers asking if their children could be taken into industrial schools and reformatories as they could not provide for them. As one mother stated in 1939, 'I am doing the best I can for my children, my earnings are small and I find it hard to make ends meet'.⁴⁷ Whether they believed the schools would afford a better future for their children, as many women did at the time, or they were coerced by members of the clergy or the NSPCC inspector, the letters are heartrending pleas which were intended to spark sympathies.

However, these cases could also serve to demonstrate the impotence of parents when faced with the powerful alliance of NSPCC and state. Children could be removed following court orders or inspectors' requests, and despite parental objections. One case from 1938, for example, resulted from a letter written by a Garda [policeman] in Wexford (following pressure from the local priest) to the NSPCC inspector regarding a man who had recently been widowed and had a young daughter and son to look after. The letter stated that:

the man appears to be a type who will make good if given a chance. Fr. McCarthy seems to think the children would be better in schools. The father is opposed to this...in so far as I am concerned, I cannot see my way in taking any steps in this connection and I am just reporting the facts to you to satisfy Fr. McCarthy. I think his idea is the Moral side of the question, which in my mind does not presently arise.⁴⁸

This 'Moral side of the question' is a theme that reverberates in many neglect cases, particularly in reference to widowers, single mothers and illegitimate children, and increasingly so in the 1930s when the separation of church and state became more difficult to decipher. In comparison to the compassion and understanding offered to widows and deserted wives by inspectors and society at large, widowers and single mothers received little sympathy.

In recent years, the figure of the single mother in the Irish Free State has received much-needed attention by historians, and she is a recurrent feature of the case files. In 1929, a 26-year-old woman wrote to the NSPCC regarding maintenance for her child:

I know Morris McCarthy, he was our next door neighbour and is the father of my child Sean McCarthy and he has never given me anything toward its support. He visited my house on Friday before Accession [sic] Thursday 1928 and had connection with me. A month afterward he promised to marry me. He again had connection with me at the back of the house, I consented again on this occasion. He left Ireland on Monday to go to Fishguard and make arrangements for our marriage but never returned. I believe he is now in Scotland.

In the file, 'Morris McCarthy' (42) is recorded as denying paternity of the child. The file also includes a supporting letter from a priest claiming the accused 'never kept company with her in that way'.⁴⁹ The last detail recorded by the inspector was the admission of the child to an industrial school; there the matter appears to have been dropped. A woman needed to prove the paternity of a child to secure maintenance payments, and this letter from the priest seemed definitive in this regard in this case. In 1939, a fourteen-year-old girl became pregnant after she was assaulted by a local neighbour. Instances of criminal assault are very unusual in the case files, but in this instance the NSPCC inspector was approached by the girl's mother regarding an

application she had made to the Board of Health to have the girl sent to Sean Ross Abbey, Roscrea, for her confinement. While the man received four years penal servitude, the victim was also confined, in this case to a mother and baby home.⁵⁰

Not only do the files contain requests for admittance of children, but also for their return. In 1938 one mother wrote numerous letters to the New Ross Industrial School, the government and the local NSPCC inspector requesting the return of her ten-year-old boy. Following this she employed a solicitor whose letters are included in the file. As with many similar cases, her 'bad' character was cited as the reasoning for the rejection of her requests.⁵¹

In 1937 alone, 12 per cent of the all cases investigated at Wexford District branch resulted in removals, a statistic that demonstrates how far the Society had moved away from its initial policy of protecting children within the home. Of these, the number of girls outweighed those of boys.⁵² While this is not a criticism of the Society in isolation, as it was enforcing a policy supported by the state, an examination of the files reveals much about the families involved in these situations and the biases of the inspector. In 1929, a Sister in St. Michael's industrial school wrote to the inspector regarding a mother 'who had turned up at her doorstep' looking for her daughter:

the mother of K is here, just crossed from Wales – wants to take K back this evening. She, the mother has not seen her husband. What is to be done? Would it be well to ask one of the Guards to call up and explain the law to her. She seems reasonable but wants the child.⁵³

It was, however, not always the convents and schools who did not agree to the return of children. In one particular letter from a NSPCC inspector to a nun regarding a request for the return of a child to her family, he wrote:

The parents of Mary detained in your school are well known to me. The father is a man of very low mental standard and has neglected his family for years.

The mother is not morally good. In my opinion it would be a grave error to discharge or release on licence the said client.

In an even more revealing case, the following extract reveals not only the inspector's distrust of the boy's parents and relatives, but the idea of the child being a commodity of the state:

The boy, who is now 10 years old, is due to be transferred to Carriglea Industrial School and with the necessary training at the end of six years he will be an asset to the State. In view of the information disclosed by the inquiry I cannot recommend that the boy be discharged from School (at this stage) and returned to the relatives . . . who are said to be mentally deficient.⁵⁴

The extent to which the church, the state and the NSPCC collaborated in the removal of children deserves further study. However, the following letter reveals one particular aspect and attitude to the placement of children in religious institutions. The letter, written by a sister in St. Michael's, Wexford, to the local inspector demonstrates not only her attitude to the welfare of destitute children, but to their religious denomination and faith:

My messenger, Miss O'Callaghan had some business in the Co Home Enniscorthy on Monday last. She said something of the women and children of that institution and from her description of the place and inhabitants, I could not think of sending the little Maher children there – if permitted to keep them we shall keep them in the school without any renumeration [sic]. The Almighty will provide the means. A few years ago we took in two English Protestant children who were abandoned by their step-mother, the father being dead. They were brought over from Wales and left in an old shed near Wexford – We were asked to admit them. We did so and kept them for some years. They are now Catholics and work in a Convent Laundry . . . Since that time we have not known want in this Institution so we shall trust to the Grand God to help us in the Maher case also – Thanking you very much for many favours and for your letter of Thursday.⁵⁵

Conclusion

In 1939, the year of its Golden Jubilee, all NSPCC branches in Ireland began to use the changed caption 'National Society for the Protection and Care of Children',

instead of the former National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. The reasoning was addressed in the Dublin report:

This will undoubtedly please many friends who have felt too much prominence has hitherto been given to the word Cruelty in our work. After the prevention of cruelty, all who take an interest in social work know how many other ways the Society is helping children who are suffering and being deprived of the simplest needs in life.⁵⁶

The Society that was founded for the prevention of cruelty had officially begun to acknowledge this was no longer its principal aim, indicating yet a new premise for its interaction with parents and the state. Over the course of two distinct periods in the Society's history, 1889-1921 and 1922-1939, the relationship between the Society, parents and the state had undergone profound change. While the prosecution of mothers and fathers for child neglect characterised its activities in the early phase, by 1922 many parents were approaching the Society for assistance, using its inspectors to track husbands, place children in industrial schools and acquire material assistance. Whilst ultimate power may have remained with the state and the Society, parents were exercising their own agency in utilising these resources for what they hoped would be to the benefit of their children.

One of the most critical changes that affected the manner in which parenting was evaluated during this period was the recategorisation of child neglect. Neglect constituted both the largest and the vaguest offence investigated. Poverty, desertion, alcoholism, illegitimacy, mental illness and wife-beating were all included under the umbrella of neglect, an expanding category that manifested fears about changes in family life. As Linda Gordon has emphasised, 'the notion of neglect itself was like an empty vessel', as it encompassed so many different social anxieties involving issues of class, gender and specific historical events.⁵⁷ In Ireland, these fears are evident in

the shift in focus from physical to moral neglect in the 1930s, encouraged by both the Catholic Church and the state.

Despite the objectives to alleviate material hardship as outlined in the Society's founding charter, as the Wexford case study demonstrates, the reality of its work was very different. Although the Society did undoubtedly help many families to acquire financial assistance from the state, the positive results were limited and the focus on neglect only served to perpetuate class and gender inequalities. In post-independence Ireland, both rural and urban poverty was rampant, resources were restricted and much of the Society's work concentrated on the alleviation of poverty. The placement of children in industrial schools was often requested by parents in acute poverty for whom the institutional care of their children represented a short-term relief measure. As many found out, however, once surrendered, reasserting parental control and rights proved difficult. As for the children who were sent to industrial schools, many learned a trade, but, for most, their time in the schools led to more unpaid labour in local farms or in domestic service. The class from which many of these children had come dictated their future.

¹ Sections of this chapter were printed in a 2008 journal article and have been reproduced with the journal's permission. See S.A. Buckley (2008) 'Child neglect, poverty and class: the NSPCC in Ireland, 1889–1939 – a case study', *Saothar: Journal of the Irish Labour History Society*, 33, pp. 36-49.

² H. Hendrick (2003) *Child Welfare: Historical Dimensions, Contemporary Debate* (Bristol: Policy Press), p. 33.

³ C.A. Sherrington (1984) 'The NSPCC in transition, 1884–1983: a study of organisational survival', unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, p. 3.

⁴ J. Rekart (2011) *Public Funds, Private Provision: The Role of the Voluntary Sector* (Vancouver: UBC Press), p. 39.

⁵ See Sherrington, 'NSPCC in Transition', p. 2.

⁶ H.A. Mess, writing in 1948, warned of the dangers of social institutions continuing when the need for them was gone. Cited in Sherrington, 'NSPCC in Transition', p. 3.

⁷ For a discussion of social legislation focused on health and welfare, specifically maternity and child welfare, see L. Earner-Byrne (2007) *Mother and Child: Maternity and Child Welfare in Ireland, 1922-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

⁸ *Report of the Commission of the Sick and Destitute Poor*, cited in Earner-Byrne, *Mother and Child*, p. 70.

⁹ W/1928/04, (Limerick: ISPCC).

¹⁰ Of the 247 files available from 1919-40, the majority are from the Wexford branch, with a small number from the Cork and Waterford branches. Statistical evidence and sample cases were taken from the annual reports, examined from 1889-1950. The NSPCC archive is held in the Limerick office of the NSPCC. In order to protect the anonymity of those involved, I have applied new case-file numbers to all cases. I have also used pseudonyms.

¹¹ L. Murdoch (2006) *Imagined Orphans: poor families, child welfare and contested citizenship in London* (New York: Rutgers University Press).

¹² M. Luddy and J. Smith (eds) (2014) *Children, Childhood and Irish Society: 1500 to the Present* (Dublin: Four Courts Press).

¹³ For an examination of the NSPCC in Britain see G.K. Behlmer (1982) *Child abuse and moral reform in England, 1870–1908* (Stanford: Stanford University Press); T.

Cockburn (1995) 'Child Abuse and Protection: The Manchester Boys' and Girls' Refuges and the NSPCC, 1884–1894', *Manchester Sociology Occasional Papers* (Manchester: University of Manchester); S. Creighton (1984) *Trends in Child Abuse* (London: NSPCC); Hendrick, *Child Welfare*; Sherrington, *The NSPCC in transition*; S. Wise (1991) *Child Abuse: The NSPCC Version* (London: Feminist Praxis); NSPCC (1984) *NSPCC: The First Hundred Years* (London: NSPCC). In the Irish context, the setting up of the NSPCC Dublin Aid Committee is discussed by M. Luddy (2014) 'The early years of the NSPCC in Ireland' in Luddy and Smith (eds) *Children, Childhood and Irish Society*. For a history of the NSPCC in Ireland see S.A. Buckley (2013) *The Cruelty Man: Child Welfare, the NSPCC and the State in Ireland, 1889-1956* (Manchester: Manchester University Press). In R.J. Parr (1912) *The Cruelty Man: Actual Experiences of an NSPCC Inspector* (London: NSPCC) Robert Parr describes himself as the 'Children's Man', p.10.

¹⁴ See Buckley, *The Cruelty Man*; S.A. Buckley (2014) "'Saver of the Children": The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in Ireland, 1889-1900', in L. Geary and O. Walsh (eds) *Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press); C. Skehill (2004) *History of the present of child protection and welfare social work in Ireland* (London: Lampeter); M. Maguire (2009) *Precarious childhood in post-independence Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press); M. Raftery and E. O'Sullivan (2009) *Suffer the Little Children: The Inside Story of Ireland's Industrial Schools* (Dublin: New Island Books); H. Ferguson (2007) 'Abused and Looked after Children as "Moral Dirt": Child Abuse and Institutional Care in Historical Perspective,' *Journal of Social Policy*, 36:1, pp. 123-39; M.E. Daly (2014) "'The primary and natural educator?' The role of parents in the education of their children in independent Ireland' in Luddy and Smith, *Children, childhood and Irish society*; Earner-Byrne *Mother and child*.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the Poor Law in Ireland see V. Crossman and P. Gray (2011) *Poverty and Welfare in Ireland 1838-1948* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press). Institutionalisation can be examined in E. O'Sullivan and I. O'Donnell (2012) *Coercive confinement in post-independence Ireland: Patients, prisoners and penitents* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

¹⁶ Dublin Aid Committee (1890) *Annual Report Report of the Dublin Aid Committee 1889-1890* (Dublin: NSPCC) p. 9.

¹⁷ At this time, parents were prosecuted under the *Children's Act*, 1889. Children 'under notice' were those under investigation by the Society.

¹⁸ See for example Robert J Parr (1908) *The Cruelty Man* (London: ISPCC).

¹⁹ For more details on this see Buckley, *The Cruelty Man*. For a discussion of the Scottish inspectors see G. Clapton (2008) "'Yesterday's Men': The Inspectors of the Royal Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 1888–1968", *British Journal of Social Work Online*, DOI 10.1093/bjsw/bcn031. Sherrington discusses how there was a belief amongst certain NSPCC inspectors that their promotion prospects depended in part on the size of their case-load and the number of cases prosecuted. Sherrington, 'NSPCC in Transition', p. 30.

²⁰ N. Browne (1986) *Against the Tide* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan), p. 14. Noel Browne was a government minister who infamously resigned after the ill-fated 'Mother and Child Scheme' in 1951.

²¹ This is the authors own observation from reading all surviving case-files and annual reports from the NSPCC archive.

²² Buckley, *The Cruelty Man*, p. 138.

²³ In Ireland, Earner-Byrne discusses the focus on the mother and mothercraft philosophies from the beginning of the twentieth century, and how the theories were 'stretched by the realities of working-class poverty', *Mother and child*, p. 59.

²⁴ I. O'Donnell, E. O'Sullivan and D. Healy (eds) (2005) *Crime and punishment in Ireland, 1922–2003: A statistical sourcebook* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration), pp. 82–5.

²⁵ For a discussion of women in the Irish Free State in the 1920s and 1930s, see C. Clear (2003) 'Women in de Valera's Ireland, 1922–48: A Reappraisal', in G. Doherty and D. Keogh (eds), *De Valera's Irelands* (Cork: Cork University Press), pp. 104–14; C. Clear (2000) *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922–1961* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press); M. Daly (2008) 'Women and the Irish Free State 1922–1939: the interaction between economics and ideology' in N.C. Fleming and A. O'Day (eds) *Ireland and Anglo-Irish Relations since 1800: critical essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); S. McAvoy (1999) 'The Regulation of Sexuality in the Irish Free State, 1929–1935', in G. Jones and E. Malcolm (eds), *Medicine, Disease and the State in Ireland 1650–1935* (Cork: Cork University Press), pp. 253–66; L. Ryan and M. Ward (eds) (2007) *Irish Women and the Vote: Becoming Citizens*

(Dublin and Portland: Irish Academic Press); M. Valiulis (1993) 'Neither Feminist nor Flapper: the Ecclesiastical Construction of the Ideal Irish Woman' in A. Smyth (ed.), *Irish Women's Studies Reader* (Dublin: Attic Press).

²⁶ Nurse-children were children placed 'at nurse' with a local woman who would care for them for a small fee. They were often very ill-treated and became an important issue for child protection workers from the end of the nineteenth century. For a discussion see S.A. Buckley (2012) "'Found in a dying condition": Nurse-children in Ireland, 1872-1952', *'She said she was in a family way': Pregnancy and infancy in modern Ireland*, Elaine Farrell (ed.), (London: Institute of Historical Research).

²⁷ 'Other wrongs' was another vague definition for a range of issues. In this situation, the cases involved an adopted child whose illegitimacy is being alluded to as the reason for his 'out of control' behaviour; three cases of exposure and neglect, and one case of begging.

²⁸ This shift was echoed in changes in legislation and as a result, changes in the type of offences investigated. In 1904 the *Prevention of Cruelty to Children Amendment Act* allowed for the enforcement of maintenance acts against parents and the removal of a child from a home by an NSPCC inspector without a policeman or relief-officer. Following this, the 1908 *Children Act* was a consolidating act, and in general strengthened the law of prevention of cruelty to children, while also legislating against neglect, not only wilful cruelty.

²⁹ Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England*, p. 71; Hendrick, *Child Welfare*, p. 30.

³⁰ *Annual Report of the Clonmel and District Branch, 1933* (Limerick: ISPCC).

³¹ Cited in Sherrington, 'NSPCC in Transition', p. 64.

³² Parr, *Cruelty Man*, p. 24.

³³ One such case involved a nine-year-old girl whose father was a Protestant and mother a Catholic. They had recently moved from England and although she had been baptised a Roman Catholic and was being well cared for, the family was visited four times over a two-year period by the inspector after the case was reported by a neighbour.

³⁴ NSPCC Archive, Limerick, Inspector Book, August 1928, Wexford District Branch.

³⁵ NSPCC Archive, Limerick, W/1939/04.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ W/1938/05, (Limerick: ISPCC).

³⁸ NSPCC archive, (Limerick: ISPCC).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ W/1938/06, (Limerick: ISPCC).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² W/1921/01, (Limerick, ISPCC).

⁴³ W/1940/05, (Limerick: ISPCC).

⁴⁴ W/1929/05, (Limerick: ISPCC).

⁴⁵ As early as the 1880s, reformers in Britain such as Eleanor Rathbone were arguing for the introduction of a family allowance as a means to reduce poverty in large families in particular. Similarly, employers believed it could also reduce the need to increase wages. It was, however, not introduced until after the Second World War. For a discussion of the introduction of the children's allowance in Ireland, see M. Cousins (2003) *The Birth of Social Welfare in Ireland, 1922–1952* (Dublin: Four Courts Press).

⁴⁶ W/1934/05, (Limerick: ISPCC).

⁴⁷ W/1939/143, (Limerick: ISPCC).

⁴⁸ W/1939/021, (Limerick: ISPCC).

⁴⁹ W/1928/02, (Limerick: ISPCC).

⁵⁰ W/1939/09, (Limerick: ISPCC).

⁵¹ W/1938/012, (Limerick: ISPCC).

⁵² Buckley, *The Cruelty Man*, p.135.

⁵³ W/1929/016, (Limerick: ISPCC).

⁵⁴ W/1938/03, (Limerick: ISPCC).

⁵⁵ W/1930/03, (Limerick: ISPCC).

⁵⁶ *Annual Report of the Dublin District Branch, 1939* (Limerick: ISPCC).

⁵⁷ Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives*, p. 118.