



As far back as one can go in the tortuous history of our city there is abundant evidence of snobbery and sectarianism. Even today, in this enlightened age, we are living in a class society. Perhaps the best example of this intolerance is to be seen in the treatment, in times past, of those who were landless, homeless and penniless - the pariahs of our class society - the paupers. The strength of this class lay only in their numbers, and if this circumstance proved an encumbrance to the authorities, it caused little embarrassment to those who preached on the 'dignity' of poverty, though there were those among the clergy who made great sacrifices on behalf of the poor.

It was a vicious circle. The very poor were looked down on by those who had a little more than them, and they in turn suffered the same fate at the hands of their more fortunate neighbours, and so on - and they were all 'Christians'!

Thus the paupers of the last century, who had left their impoverished hovels for the workhouses in search of enough food to keep them alive, were denied a covering of earth in the local parish churchyards. Even where there was space for new graves in some of these places, objections to the interment of paupers were made by the owners of adjacent graves. There were, of course, exceptions to this practice.

The Irish Poor Relief Act was declared on 20 December, 1838. This was the forerunner of the divisions of the whole country into unions, each having a workhouse governed by a board of guardians.

A site was procured on the Lansdowne property in the North Liberties of the city, and in 1841 the Limerick Union Workhouse was opened for the reception of paupers. This building, with its grandiose cut stone facade, was to become one of Limerick's best known and talked about institutions for more than a century.

The House of Industry

Before the 'Union' was built, there were great numbers of paupers around who had to settle for the more primitive comforts of the House of Industry (later known as the Strand Barracks), and a free grave in the abandoned graveyard around the ruins of Old Church (Little Kilrush), in the parish of St. Munchin.

The House of Industry was founded in 1774 by Grand Jury presentments of Limerick and Clare. Though this foundation was a revolutionary humanitarian exercise, intended to help the very poor and the insane - there were 13 cells for the latter, provided for mainly through a generous donation of £200 from Dr. Edward Smyth of Dublin - conditions there, by modern standards, were downright barbaric. The only qualification required of the lunatic keeper was his 'strength of wind and limb'.

After a government Select Committee

The Workhouse

by Kevin Haman

was set up in 1817 to report on the state of pauper lunatics in Ireland, a witness, after visiting the lunatic cells in the House of Industry: "... found the accommodation such as we should not appropriate for our dog kennels. The usual mode of restraint consisted of passing the patient's hands under their knees, fastening them with manacles, securing their ankles with bolts, passing a chain overall and lastly attaching them firmly to the bed. In that state", he assured the committee, "they continued for years and the result had been that they had so far lost the use of their limbs that they were utterly incapable of rising".

Likewise the treatment of prostitutes, young women convicted at the Mayor's court, or courts of petty sessions, with 'annoying the street' was equally barbaric. They were usually sentenced to a week or a fortnight in the House of Industry, where they were 'logged', that is having heavy logs of wood chained to their ankles. They were also kept at hard labour for the duration of their sentence.

With her brother, Joseph John Gurney, the renowned prison reformer, Elizabeth Fry, visited the House of Industry in 1827, and reported: "... we are much pleased with it. It appears extremely desirable that the worthy Alderman Watson's efforts should be more extensively supported by the liberality of the citizens".

One can only conclude that the lunatics were unchained and the prostitutes unlogged for the visit of Mrs. Fry, or that these practices were not regarded as inhumane at that time. Before the founding of this institution, the destitute starved to death in their hovels.

In an article, reprinted in the *Old Limerick Journal* No. 7, summer, 1981, P.J. Meghen, described how the 130 workhouses came to be built:

The Poor Law Commissioners decided to place one of their members, George Nicholls, in charge of Irish operations. He was given the assistance of four Assistant Commissioners, who had worked on the British scheme, and four Assistant Commissioners were recruited in Dublin. Mr. Nicholls reached Dublin on 4 September, 1838, and by 11 September had set up an office in that city. He then dispatched the English Assistant Commissioners to make a quick survey of the four provinces and to see what buildings were likely to be available. On 9 October, 1838, they were back in Dublin and conferred with the Commissioner and their Irish colleagues, who had taken up duty. From their reports it was obvious that not many existing buildings would become

available for workhouses and the decision was taken to employ an architect to prepare plans for new buildings. The Commissioners had experience of a number of architects in England and it was decided to employ one of these, George Wilkinson, at that time practising in Oxford. Wilkinson reached Ireland on 11 January, 1839, and agreed to take on the work at a salary of £500 per annum. He asked for the appointment of an assistant, "an experienced person of active habits familiar with drawing and possessing a good practical knowledge of building", whom he thought could be obtained for £150 per annum. He also looked for an office clerk or draftsman at a salary of £100 per annum. Thus the technical staff were to cost £750 per annum and when the building of workhouses started, a clerk of works would be needed for each building at a salary of 2 guineas per week. His proposals were agreed to and he started work on 1 February, 1839. In the following year, on 25 March, 1840, Wilkinson was able to report that 64 workhouses were under construction and 10 were ready for tenders.

His report states that Sir Thomas Deane & Co. of Cork were contractors for the Limerick, Rathkeale and Newcastle West workhouses and Alexander Deane contracted for Kilmallock. Generally two years seems to have been allowed for the building of the larger workhouse. In a return given in the 1840 report, the contract for Limerick Workhouse to house 1,600 inmates was for £10,000. The contract was signed in September, 1839, and it was to be finished by June, 1841. The contract for Rathkeale was for £6,686 and as it was a smaller workhouse for 660 inmates, it was to be completed by December, 1840. The terms for Newcastle were much the same, while the Kilmallock contract was for £7,000, to be finished by September, 1840.

The contractors do not seem to have had much difficulty in complying with the terms of the contracts. The Limerick Workhouse was opened on 18 May, 1841, before the contract time expired; Newcastle West was opened on 15 March, 1841, and Rathkeale on 26 March, 1841. These were a little over their time but weather conditions probably accounted for that.

With the Limerick Union came a new era in relations with the poor. During the Great Famine and the years that followed, those who struggled in from the rural hinterland in their thousands lost their identities as they underwent the process of subjugation by the Poor Law bureaucratic juggernaut, and ended up as numbers on a ledger.



'Attack on potato store'. Engraving from the *Illustrated London News*.

The Curry Lane Tragedy

The authorities were so hard pushed to accommodate the large numbers of famished and desperate people crowding into Limerick seeking food and shelter that a number of auxiliary workhouses were opened up in the city in a desperate effort to house as many as possible, even in conditions altogether unsuitable for human habitation.

Hundreds huddled in the dark and floury interior of Russell's grain store in Mount Kennett, and in Lord Edward Street an old barrack building was turned into a place of refuge. In the Irishtown a very old building, reputed to have been the home of the Capuchians from 1686 to the Treaty of Limerick, was taken over for the accommodation of women only. Judging from what remains of this structure today it must have been a dismal abode, and suggests that the tragedy that occurred there in 1849 may not have surprised the authorities.

On one occasion, at that time, when the old building was crowded, and in darkness, one of the women shouted "Fire!" after which there was a stampede for the only exit. During this mad rush forty women were trampled to death or suffocated. It was a needless panic - there was no fire.

The Sisters of Mercy

The Sisters of Mercy were introduced into and given charge of the administration of the Union Workhouse in 1861. The amount of charitable work performed there by the sisters will never be known, though the treatment of the many young unmarried mothers who had to remain there with their babies was said to be sometimes cruel and un-Christian. The

well known cliché, 'holding the baby' was said to have originated from the practice of the sisters in compelling the unmarried mothers to stand with babies in arms in a railed off corner of the famous long hall - the main corridor to the hospital - during visiting hours on Thursdays and Sundays, and thus suffer the humiliation of a public exhibition of their 'sin'.

The appointment of Sisters of Mercy to Limerick Workhouse followed prolonged correspondence by the Board of Guardians and the Commissioners, who had originally opposed the appointments. The guardians pointed out that out of over 1,300 paupers in the workhouse, there were 400 in the hospital section, that there was no hospital matron to exercise direction and control, that the sick were cared for by only three nurses and thirty-six pauper attendants, and that there appeared to be an entire absence of moral control over either nurses or patients. At one stage, the three Sisters of Mercy proposed for appointment even offered to donate their salaries of £20 per annum each to improve the condition of the patients. Eventually the Commissioners yielded to the insistence of the guardians and conveyed their approval to the appointments in January, 1861.

This resulted in the single most important reform in workhouse administration as regards nursing. The arrangement whereby any female inmate of the workhouse could be employed in the sick wards was phased out. From then on no inmate could be employed in the sick or lying-in wards except by special permission of the medical officer.

In due course, the nuns became matrons and were an active force in improving conditions in the workhouses. The authorities were not slow to react. Eleven years later there was a glowing reference to them in an official report:

Their devotion to their work, care of the patients and the whole tone of the wards left a most favourable impression. With the full sanction and approval of the highest ecclesiastical authorities, the nuns have been allowed to adopt, in lieu of their black dress of the Mercy order, a suitable washing habit of white drill with a plain white coif. This change is most welcome.

A circular was issued to all Boards of Guardians in 1881 recommending that Sisters of Mercy be engaged as nurses in all workhouses.

The Registrar

The registrar's office was at the front of the building and was well known to many people in Limerick and East Clare. At some time or other, most citizens paid a visit here for a certificate of birth, marriage or death. The wrought-iron railing that once surrounded the office is now enclosing the little garden at the gable of the Claughaun Bar in Clare Street.

Francie Hanrahan

The 'City Home,' as the workhouse later became known, lived up to its name for many of our impoverished citizens who sought refuge there down the years. Many decent, respectable men, beaten by every kind of adversity and reduced to penury, found a home there. Among these were some colourful characters who contributed to the folklore of the city. Chief among these was Francie Hanrahan, author of the grand satire; 'Dundon's Hotel', Mr. Dundon was Master of the Union, hence the title of the composition. Francie, who had a fair education, spent some years in the monastic life as a lay-brother before his longing for alcohol forced him to quit. He was a well known client in the pubs of the older parts of the city where he was always kindly treated, especially after he had recited his *magnum opus*. Thomondgate, where he was well known and respected, was his happy hunting ground.

Whatever the conditions that evoked Francie's tirade, he certainly would have something more to say about the conditions there during the famine years. As late as 1882, at a meeting of the Board of Guardians, a member of the board said: "It would save a great deal of expense and be a benefit to the ratepayers if the children in the Union were boarded out. It costs", he said, "£9 per year to support each child in the workhouse, while a labourer in the country was able to support his children at £3.10 each".

The old names of the institution are seldom heard nowadays - the 'Workhouse', the 'Poorhouse' and the 'Union'; even the most appropriate name, 'City Home', has given way to 'St. Camillus', a name that has spread a blanket over the stigma associated with all the others, and is likely to last into the future.