

Children in Kilrush Union during the Great Famine

IGNATIUS MURPHY

Both contemporary reports and later works on the Great Famine make very little reference to its effects on children. Using the available contemporary evidence, this article will look at children in Kilrush Union, particularly those who went to the Workhouse. Through an analysis of lists of deaths in Kilrush and Ennistymon Workhouses it will also try to calculate the proportion of children among those who died.

In the early days of the Great Famine the situation in Kilrush Union did not attract much attention. From the spring of 1847 deaths from starvation began to be recorded. Before the end of that year, as government aid through relief works and soup kitchens came to an end, it was clear that the Union was one of the most hard-hit in the country.¹ By this time mass evictions were taking place and over the following two and a half years about one fifth of the population was affected by them.² These evictions and the resultant pressure on the resources of Kilrush Workhouse have been described elsewhere.³

MEALS FOR SCHOOLCHILDREN

Only one relief organisation appears to have made specific provision for children. This was the *British Association for the Relief of the extreme Distress in the remote parishes of Ireland and Scotland*, founded in January 1847. Early in 1848 Captain Mann, a coast-guard officer in charge of relief at Kilrush, applied for aid to Count Strzelecki of the *British Association*. The result was a grant of £100 for relief in Kilrush Union, together with a promise of £500 for the purchase and making of children's clothes. Captain Mann was delighted at this, as it would provide a market for homemade serge together with giving employment to destitute widows. The cloth was then bought in the market at Kilrush and a house was rented in which the clothes were made under the supervision of some local women. Employment was given there to 150 poor women. The end products were distributed among the children of the district.⁴

Although further cash grants were made by the *British Association* to Kilrush Union, its most important project was the provision of food for children attending national schools in this union and elsewhere in the West of Ireland. Between 1st October 1847 and 25th April 1848, 3,362 national school children in Kilrush Union received meals. And in a five month period from December to April nearly half a million meals were served. Captain

¹ The situation in Kilkee and neighbouring parts in Kilrush Union is described in I. Murphy, "Kilkee and its Neighbourhood during the First Year of the Great Famine, 1845-1846" in *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 21 (1979), 15-24; and *ibid.*, "Kilkee and its Neighbourhood during the Second Year of the Great Famine, 1846-1847" in *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 23 (1981), 77-87.

² In a submission to a Select Committee on Kilrush Union in 1850 Mr. Francis Coffee, C.E., calculated that 12,000 people had been affected by evictions. His detailed list is in *Parliamentary Papers* 1850 XI(529), 247-249. Mr. Coffee's figures were regarded by some as conservative.

³ Cf. I. Murphy, "Captain A. E. Kennedy, Poor Law Inspector, and the Great Famine in Kilrush Union 1847-1850" in *The Other Clare*, 3 (1979), 16-25.

⁴ *Limerick & Clare Examiner*, 15 April 1848; *Trevelyan Papers*, Mann to Trevelyan, 12 Jan. 1848, T64/367C(1); *Ibid.*, Mann to (probably) Trevelyan, 11 Feb. 1848, T64/370C(4). (The *Trevelyan Papers* are in the Public Record Office, London).

Mann commented: "It is impossible to estimate too highly the value and importance of feeding the destitute children at the schools."⁵

In mid March 1848 Captain Kennedy, Poor Law Inspector at Kilrush, pointed out a difficulty in the *British Association* relief scheme. In Kilkee National School the teachers demanded the payment of one penny a week from each pupil in accordance with National Board policy that portion of the teachers' salaries should come from weekly contributions by the pupils. As a result the really destitute children in Kilkee and elsewhere were excluded from the schools and were therefore outside the scope of the relief scheme. However, when informed about the situation in Kilkee the National Board changed its policy and ordered that children receiving *British Association* relief were not to be charged for instruction.⁶

On 1st July 1848 the funds of the *British Association* finally dried up but Lord John Russell promised that the relief it was giving to 200,000 school children would be kept up by the Government. But a little over two months later, despite this promise, the free distribution of food in the schools of Kilrush Union came to an end.⁷

CHILDREN IN KILRUSH WORKHOUSE

Kilrush Workhouse was built to house 800 people. During 1847 its capacity was increased to 1,100. Then, as the numbers entitled to admission soared, other buildings were taken over until eventually there was accommodation for 5,000 people. The workhouse system made no attempt to keep families together. Husbands were separated from wives and both might be accommodated separately from their children. In Kilrush children between the ages of two and nine were placed in Behan's Hotel and Store, which had room for 674. Older children over nine and under fifteen were kept in the auxiliary workhouse at Leadmore and adjoining Russell's Store, which had an official capacity of 1,851.⁸ At any given time a majority of the inmates of Kilrush Workhouse were children as can be seen from the statistics which follow.

At an early stage in the Famine, 16th January 1847, the total number in the workhouse was 723. These were listed under the following headings:

Able-bodied	82
Males and females aged 15 and upwards	106
Sick	60
Children under 15	475

Making the conservative assumption that 50% of the sick were children, we arrive at a total of 525 children (72.6%). Seven weeks later, on 5th March 1847, the proportion of children had dropped by over 10% but they were still a significant majority.⁹

Four years later, on 18th January 1851, when the workhouse population had increased enormously, the Minute Book of Kilrush Union gives the following numbers:¹⁰

⁵ *Ibid.*, T64/367B(1); *Ibid.*, Mann to (probably) Trevelyan, 11 Feb. 1848, T64/370C(4).

⁶ *National Schools Register, County Series, Co. Clare*, Vol. 1 (Public Record Office, Dublin).

⁷ Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger, Ireland 1845-9*, London 1962, p. 367; *Limerick Chronicle*, 13 Sep. 1848.

⁸ *Parliamentary Papers* 1851 XLVIII(279), 92.

⁹ *British Parliamentary Papers* (I.U.P. series), *Famine (Ireland)* 1, p. 32 (2nd series); p. 64 (3rd series).

¹⁰ *Minute Book* No. 8, 10 Aug. 1850—17 May 1851 (at present in the author's possession).

Boys and Girls over 9 and under 15	2,040
Children over 5 and under 9	527
Children over 2 and under 5	124
Infants under 2	53
	<hr/> 2,744
Ablebodied Adults	1,858
Aged and Infirm and Adults above 15 but not working	354
	<hr/> 2,212
Total	<hr/> 4,956
Proportion of Children	55.4%

Taking another date at random, 19th October 1850, there were 2,007 children aged fourteen and under in a total workhouse population of 3,563 (56.3%).

The condition of many of the children on arrival at the workhouse offered little hope for their survival. The well-known humanitarian, Rev. S. G. Osborne, on a trip to Ireland in 1850, arrived in Kilrush on "admission day" at the workhouse and his first impression caused him to ask himself why many of those seeking admission had not applied "before famine, nakedness and exposure had so defaced and degraded their humanity". The children had aged beyond their years—"Infants at the breast of mothers, with the skin and visage of advanced, careworn childhood; children, whose sores and dirt and squalid famished looks, told of the loss of all the elasticity of their age, of their premature acquisition of that stolid care-blunted nature, which years of common suffering alone can give."¹¹ In April 1848 Captain Kennedy reported of "panicstricken and unnatural parents" frequently sending in a donkey-load of children in fever a distance of fourteen or fifteen miles for admission. "How to dispose of them I do not know." His big criticism of the parents was their delay in sending their children until nothing could be done for them. "The medical officer uncovered about 20 children in the fever hospital a few days ago to show me the hopeless objects he had to practise upon. They were merely animated bones; I have seldom seen anything more fearful."¹²

Practically all the children who entered the workhouse were clothed in filthy rags and sometimes there was not enough money available to provide them with adequate clothing. A report from Mr. Briscoe, temporary Poor Law Inspector, on 22nd May 1850 stated:¹³

The guardians are unable to clothe a great number that come into the house; many of the children are only half clad; the entire clothing of the inmates is in bad condition, and no change of linen garments; children placed in bed while their clothes are washing....

Neither shoes nor stockings were provided¹⁴—but few of those in the workhouse would have been accustomed to wearing them.

Normally the children had to sleep three to a bed. However when an inspector visited Leadmore in November 1850 he found a shortage of bedding with the result that four and five had to share the same bed. Three months later Dr. R. R. Madden, the noted historian, found 846 boys at Leadmore crowded into four dormitories which were only

¹¹ The Hon. & Rev. S. Godolphin Osborne, *Gleanings in the West of Ireland*, London 1850, pp. 14-15.

¹² *British Parliamentary Papers* (I.U.P. series), *Famine (Ireland)* 3, pp. 817, 824.

¹³ *Parliamentary Papers* 1851 XLVIII (279), 110.

¹⁴ Thomas More Madden (ed.), *The Memoirs (Chiefly Autobiographical) from 1798 to 1886 of Richard Robert Madden, M.D., F.R.C.S.*, London 1891, p. 251.

seven and a half feet high. But this was much better than the situation in the store where the roof was only four or five feet high.¹⁵ It would appear that control in the dormitories was maintained through the use of monitors. On 4th March 1847 the *Clare Journal* reported that a fifteen year old monitor in the sleeping quarters of the Kilrush Workhouse had flogged to death a seven and a half year old boy.

WORKHOUSE SCHOOLS

Both in Behan's Hotel and at Leadmore schooling was provided for the children. In the Hotel three hundred younger children were being taught by an assistant schoolmistress in November 1850. A trained teacher had been appointed in the previous May but, having seen the living conditions, returned to Dublin. Captain Kennedy commented: "I do not think the inducements offered are sufficient to ensure the services of a respectable or efficient officer."¹⁶

In Leadmore there were separate boys' and girls' schools. The boys were taught by a schoolmaster and assistant, while the girls were looked after by a schoolmistress and assistant, who was a pauper.¹⁷ Dr. R. R. Madden made the following comments on the school at Leadmore:¹⁸

Several hundred children were present. The teacher, Mr. Mahony, evidently had taken great pains with the children, and some of the classes did great credit to the efforts of their instructor The clothing of a vast number of these boys was so bad that it might be supposed their old rags had not been taken from them. Such, I believe, was not the fact There is the same want here that exists in all the Irish Poor-houses—the want of all opportunity for air and exercise in places fit for children's amusement out of doors. The children, from the want of suitable day sheds in wet weather, are cooped up all day in the school-room; but every morning they are sent down to the river-side at the rear of the premises to wash their feet

Madden was particularly concerned about the almost complete lack of industrial training or industrial employment. A few children were kept busy mending clothes and about twenty others were occupied making up small heaps of manure. Some time previously the master of Leadmore auxiliary had persuaded the Guardians to advance thirty shillings for materials—and as a result ninety-four girls were employed at knitting. However, he had to give up the experiment because no buyers could be got in the town for the stockings they produced.

DEATHS

Rev. S. G. Osborne noted a few characteristics which were common to very many starving children whom he met.¹⁹ The hair became very thin, often leaving the head in patches. Where it still remained it stood up from the head. Meanwhile a thick downy hair grew over the temples and, in many instances, over the whole brow. The skin over the chest bones and upper part of the stomach was stretched so tight that every angle and curve of the sternum and ribs stood out in relief. From below the elbow the arms seemed to be stripped of every atom of flesh.

¹⁵ *Parliamentary Papers* 1851 XLVIII (279), 77; Madden, *Memoirs*, p. 252.

¹⁶ *Parliamentary Papers* 1851 XLVIII (279), 78-79, 68.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁸ Madden, *Memoirs*, pp. 251-252.

¹⁹ Osborne, *Gleanings*, pp. 17-18.

In the midst of all the suffering which he witnessed Osborne got some consolation from the fact that the children did not seem to have pain. "It has never been my lot to hear one single child, suffering from famine or dysentery, utter a moan of pain; I have seen many in the very act of death, still not a tear, not a cry. I have scarcely ever seen one endeavour to change his or her position. I have never heard one ask for food, for water—for anything; two, three, or four in a bed, there they lie and die, if suffering, still ever silent, unmoved."

Our main source of information about deaths in Kilrush Workhouse is a list published in the Parliamentary Papers²⁰ which gives the name, age, sex, date of admission, date of death and cause of death of all who died in the workhouse from 26th March 1850 to 25th March 1851. A similar list was published for Ennistymon Workhouse²¹ and is used here for comparative purposes.

Our first table, based on an analysis of these lists, shows the number of deaths in different age groups, taken in ten-year blocks.

TABLE 1
Deaths: 26th March 1850 — 25th March 1851

Age in years	0-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89
Kilrush Workhouse	761	360	69	46	98	121	136	43	8
% of total	46.3%	21.9%	4.2%	2.8%	6.0%	7.4%	8.2%	2.6%	0.5%
Ennistymon Workhouse ..	706	270	53	30	101	112	83	31	8
% of total	50.6%	19.4%	3.8%	2.2%	7.2%	8.0%	6.0%	2.2%	0.6%
Totals	Kilrush Workhouse.....								1,642
	Ennistymon Workhouse.....								1,394

Table 1 has shown that nearly half the deaths in Kilrush and over half in Ennistymon Workhouse were of children aged nine and under. Our second table is a breakdown of the totals for the 10-19 age-group. In the breakdown it becomes clear that there was a far higher number of deaths among those aged 10-14 than in the 15-19 group.

TABLE 2
Analysis of deaths among 10-19 age-groups

Age in years	10-14	15-19
Kilrush Workhouse.....	287 (17.5%)	73 (4.4%)
Ennistymon Workhouse.....	211 (15.1%)	59 (4.2%)

Our third table is a summary of findings with regard to children aged fourteen and under.

TABLE 3
Deaths of Children aged 14 and under

	Total Number of Deaths	Deaths of Children aged 14 and under	% of total
Kilrush Workhouse.....	1,642	1,048	63.8%
Ennistymon Workhouse.....	1,394	917	65.8%

²⁰ *Parliamentary Papers* 1851 XLVIII (279), 2-26.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 26-47.

Table 4 gives a breakdown of the deaths in each year-group up to the age of fourteen. No obvious pattern emerges.

TABLE 4
Number of deaths in each year-group up to age 14

Age in years	—1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Kilrush Workhouse.....	77	56	65	63	90	82	97	75
Ennistymon Workhouse.....	34	30	43	65	61	83	103	127
Age in years	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
Kilrush Workhouse.....	83	73	97	44	72	21	53	
Ennistymon Workhouse.....	72	88	62	32	58	31	28	

In Table 5 there is an analysis of the seventy-seven deaths of children under one year. It is clear that very few of these died soon after birth and one gets the impression that there were very few births in the workhouse.

TABLE 5
Deaths of Children under 1 year in Kilrush Workhouse

Under 1 week 3	1 week to 3 weeks 5	1 month to 6 months 53	7 months to 11 months 16	Total 77
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In the context of his visit to Kilrush Workhouse, Rev. S. G. Osborne made the general comment that men and boys died sooner of famine than women and girls.²² "In the same workhouse, in which you will find the girls and women, looking well, you will find the men and boys, in a state of the lowest physical depression; equal care in every way being bestowed on both sexes." In Table 6 the children who died in Kilrush and Ennistymon Workhouses are divided into male and female. Although there were more male deaths in both the difference is not significant and the figures for Kilrush simply reflect the fact that during 1850-51 there were consistently more male than female children in this workhouse.

TABLE 6
Deaths of Children aged 14 and under
Breakdown into Male and Female

	Kilrush Workhouse	Ennistymon Workhouse
Males	547 (52.2%)	470 (51.3%)
Females.....	501 (47.8%)	447 (48.7%)

Dysentery was the most common cause of death in Kilrush Workhouse. However, particularly between March and July 1850, measles was a major cause of death among children, either on its own or in conjunction with dysentery. During these months 31% of children's deaths were attributed to it. Diarrhoea was particularly prevalent among very young children. In analysing the causes of death, as presented in Table 7, an attempt has been made to get a clear overall picture. To achieve this, for example, "smallpox" is

²²Osborne, *Gleanings*, p. 19.

presented as one category, whereas some of the smallpox victims are described as dying of smallpox and dysentery. In fact dysentery appears in combination with many other illnesses.

TABLE 7
Causes of Death among Children aged 14 and under in Kilrush Workhouse

Dysentery	358 (34.2%)
Fever	25 (2.4%)
Dysenteric fever, dysentery after fever	143 (13.6%)
Dysentery with pock, after pock	50 (4.8%)
Measles	164 (15.7%)
Dysentery after measles.....	57 (5.4%)
Smallpox.....	63 (6.0%)
Debility	36 (3.4%)
Diarrhoea	79 (7.5%)
Consumption	26 (2.5%)
Bronchitis	15 (1.4%)
Whooping Cough.....	10 (0.9%)
Croup	6 (0.6%)
Miscellaneous.....	16 (1.5%)
Total	1,048

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In this article we have dealt almost exclusively with the children who entered the workhouse. We have little evidence about the fate of the children who were discharged from Kilrush Workhouse—2,366 between mid-August 1850 and 17th May 1851.²³

²³ Statistics calculated from *Minute Book*, No. 8.