The Vagrant In Victorian Limerick

Introduction

"It is not a tramp here and there, such as we have at all times, but it is an army of tramps, that can be brought together on the slightest occasion, for any deed of rassally and blood, which may please them to engage in!" — A 19th Century Observer.

Despite, relatively recent moves, towards rights-based policies, as exemplified by the 1988 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, the history of Vagrancy in Ireland has placed a heavy emphasis on ‘care and control’. Indeed, while the collapse of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ has left many in fear of ‘Jack Frost’ our housing policies in relation to Vagrancy continue to be a schizophrenic mix of pity and revulsion. What the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper referred to as, “the dead hand of the past” continues to shape the policies of the living.

A Social History Of Vagrancy

The feudal state was a remarkable network of dependence, organized along hierarchical lines, which lasted for a thousand years. Typically, early feudal society, in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, was ruled over by a King whose powers were divinely sanctioned.

Certain Lords controlled estates or ‘iefs’ at the King’s discretion, with a hapless peasantry working the land. The efficiency of the productive system came not from competition but from discipline. Despite this, for both men and women of the road, the system remained largely favourable with regard to their labour needs. Indeed, even the poorest casual labourer could find work on the land during the summer, and at harvest time.

Many such transients lacked permanent homes and were content to travel from town to town in search of seasonal work. Indeed, in many European states the landless labourer remained a reality well into the Twentieth Century.

Such people might be employed as reapers, binders or stackers at harvest time, while poaching was vital for survival during the winter months. However, ‘cleaning’ was left solely, “unto the poor and the strangers”.

by John Rainsford

In those times life expectancy was as low as 30 years and most people took for granted that their world was one of catastrophes, epidemics, starvation and pain. As a result, spontaneous outbursts of violence were common in the peasants' world; often ignited by the collapse of false hopes or the effects of malicious rumours.

Under Capitalism, however, the harshest treatment awaited those, who were disabled psychologically or physically, and who were classified as feckless or idle as a result.

For Laissez-faire Liberals; all were agreed that the road to equality and prosperity should be paved with a maximum of free markets and a minimum of state interference.4 In Ireland, by 1881, therefore, in the midst of agricultural depression, there were 364,000 people living in workhouses with another 226,000 receiving relief in their homes.5 Committees inquiring into the conditions of the Irish poor recorded some 2,385,000 people destitute for at least 30 weeks of the year, in the period 1883-1886.6

The Limerick Leader in an article entitled ‘Emigration’ recorded the economic situation existing in 1886. The statistical tables relating to emigration and immigration from and into the United Kingdom in the year 1885 were published with a report of the Board of Trade on Wednesday. The tables show that there was an increase in the number of British and Irish emigrants to places out of Europe of nearly 30,000, though the number for 1885 (185,181) was more than 25,000 below the figures for 1883. Twenty-nine per cent of those in 1885 were Irish. This is a serious fact when it is compared with Ireland’s percentage of population to the United Kingdom, which is only 12 per cent. Ninety-six per cent of the Irish emigrants went to the United States — that is to say 52,047, out of a total of 54,349-21,882, male and 28,584 female adults, with only 3,883 children.

Accounts of evictions were common and in the following year the same paper recorded one ‘Near Rathkeale’.

On Friday last Mr. Lucas, County Sub-Sheriff, accompanied by some bailiffs and an escort of police, under Sergeant Short, evicted a man named Smith and his two sisters from a holding on the Wallace estate. Two years’ rent was due by the Smiths, who offered no opposition to the Sheriff, and gave up pace.
able possession. The Sub-Sheriff also evicted a Mrs. Walker, who was tenant of a small holding on the same estate at Cloagh. Sergeant Morrison and a number of police were present, but in this instance no peacable possession was given. Much sympathy is felt in the district for the poor people who were evicted at short notice.

Tramps were increasingly seen as a threat to society such as this case entitled 'Kilmallock Union - The Tramp Nuisance (Taken from the weekly meeting of the Board of Guardians)' which appeared in The Limerick Leader in 1898.

Mr. [P.] Coll (Board Member) observed that the number of casuals who visited the workhouse for the past week was 36, and he would like to hear from the Master how long was it since there had been a prosecution under the Vagrancy Act. The Master said [that] he had not one for about three months.

In 1895 The Limerick Leader provided another example, this time from the Ennis Petty Sessions. John Breen, a tramp, was sentenced to one month's imprisonment for the larceny of a pig's head from the establishment of Mr. Pat Roughan, Church Street.

Two years later, the same paper recorded a similar conviction for Vagrancy, again at the Ennis Petty Sessions. Mary Hogan, James Hogan, Ellen Gallagher and James Gallagher, all of the tramp class, were charged in custody with vagrancy. They were each sentenced to 14 days' imprisonment.

The Limerick Leader recorded a similar case from the City Police Court in 1893.

Mr. J. B. Irwin and Mr. G. W. Bassett, were the magistrates presiding at the City Police Court this morning. John Hassett, a tramp from Clare, was charged under the Vagrancy Act with being at large on a limekiln off Edward Street at an early hour this morning. The accused was sentenced to be imprisoned for one calendar month with hard labour, having received a bad character from the police. A charge of drunkenness was dealt with by the imposition of a nominal fine.

**The Danger Of Lime Kilns**

Limekilns were a death trap for Vagrants, as a series of articles on 'Vagrancy' in The Limerick Leader recorded, such as this one from 1894.

Acting Sergeant O'Rourke charged Owen Lyddy, James Casey, Frank Nash and Stephen Keane with vagrancy. The Constable stated he found the four defendants sleeping in a limekiln on the 22nd of the present month. They seemed to have no viable means of support. There were twenty-four convictions against Lyddy since the year 1890. The magistrates sent the prisoners to jail for one calendar month with hard labour.

In an article entitled 'Found in a Limekiln', The Limerick Leader recorded the following sad tale in 1894:

At the Police Court today before Mr. Irwin, R.M., John Sheehy and John Fitzgerald of the near-to-do-well class were charged by Sergeant Sheridan with being found sleeping last night in a limekiln at the rear of the Limerick Clothing Factory. They were remanded to the Petty Sessions.

The terrible injuries that could be sustained in such accommodation could be seen in an article entitled 'Horrible Death in a Limekiln' that appeared in The Limerick Leader of 1897.

An inquest was held to-day in Little Frederick Street on the body of a dock labourer named Michael O'Brien, which was found on yesterday in a limekiln, in a field near by. The Coroner, Mr. M. J. DeCourcy, attended and a respectable jury was sworn.

[Head-Constable Feeeney was present on behalf of the police and Sergeant Flynn conducted the examination of the witnesses].

The night was very wet and it was then raining very heavily. Head-Constable Feeeney was sworn. He stated that this matter had been reported to him on yesterday by Sergeant Flynn; he went to the limekiln, where he found the...
body of Michael O’Brien lying on his back between both kilns; the left side was about a foot from the brink of the kiln; the left arm was slightly bent with the fingers on the left hand; the back of the right hand was burned, and there was also a burned mark with the skin peeled off the forehead; he found the cap (produced) convenient to the head, with the peak burned; what appeared to him to be the lining of the cap, a piece of old wadding, was in the kiln; the deceased had his coat off, and was lying on the end of it, covered with two bags; he presented the appearance of having gone to sleep in that position, first having been burned; his clothes were quite wet... The burns of themselves would not be sufficient to cause death... The jury returned a verdict that the death was caused by suffocation by carbonic acid gas.

Violence associated with tramps was recorded in an article under the heading ‘Using a Knife In the City: A Man’s Throat Gashed’ in The Limerick Leader in 1895.

A ‘trick of the loopman’ named Patrick Murphy was brought before the Mayor to-day charged by Head Constable Feeney of the John-street station with having last night attempted to cut the throat of a young man named Wallace, about 21 years of age belonging to the Irishtown. The implement he used for his purpose was a knife or razor with which he gave Wallace a gash across the neck, from the effects of which he had to be treated at Barrington’s Hospital. The wound, we are informed, is not very serious in nature. The accused was remanded to next Friday’s Petty Sessions.

In 1895 The Limerick Leader recorded another such ‘Assault’.

On Saturday evening the John-street Police arrested a rough-looking individual for a serious assault on a woman in the Irishtown district named McCarthy. Subsequently, Head-Constable Feeney had the prisoner conveyed to the Workhouse Hospital where the depositions of the injured woman, who belongs to that hard race of ‘luckers’ taken before J. E. Erwin, R.M., who remanded the prisoner to next Petty Sessions. The woman, who is ancienne (sic) [pregnant], is said to be progressing favourably.

An Ideology Of Isolation

The nature of tramps was scrutinised in this satirical article entitled ‘Hes Very Tired-A Tramp’s Extraordinary Act’ from The Limerick Leader in 1896.

[At the home of the President of the New York Ladies’ League for the Suppression of Vice]... the premises were invaded by a drunken tramp, who walked into the basement and proceeded to take off one of the various articles of his clothing. When the last vestige of apparel had been cast aside, the intruder calmly walked upstairs, and appeared, an unhallowed guest, in the midst of the gathering. The ghost of Banquo could not have startled them more. The fifty ladies engaged in devising ways and means of reforming the wickedness of a degenerate age set up a succession of shrieks that drowned the whistling of the locomotives on the Elevated Railway. The tramp, saying that he was very tired and only needed sleep, calmly stretched himself upon the carpet and prepared for rest. A policeman was promptly upon the scene and the tramp will be haled before a magistrate to explain, if he can, the inconsistency of his conduct.

In 1897 The Limerick Leader, in an account entitled ‘Tramps’ by CANAK, published a critical insight that was repeated again as, ‘Mr. Muldoon on Tramps’, in the September 11, 1899 edition of the paper.

I have come to the conclusion that the modern tramp is a grossly misrepresented individual. The comic papers reap an unfailing harvest from the por-trayal of his absurdities; not a week passes but in some one of them he is presented to our disgusted observation as the subject of one or two archaic chestnuts.

[Name]

He is endowed with a name which is but a feeble attempt at humour; if not called Weary William, he is known as Tired Tim; if not Meandering Mike, his appellation is Dusty Rhodes. We have got enough of this. I intend to hold-up to your notice the Irish tramp in his true guise, not in the guise of an improbable or utterly impossible individual, but as he really and truly exists in the flesh. Pardon this error. I should scarcely have said “in the flesh” as the genuine tramp very rarely possesses much of that commodity. Let me begin with his name. He is called a “tramp.” I appeal to all persons who possess the powers of observation if they ever saw one of those solitary wayfarers doing what might honestly be called a tramp. “Tramping” suggests immediately what I may term as a vigorous motion of the pedal extremities, and this is an offence of which no tramp ever was, or probably ever will be, guilty. He would consider it as a decidedly unprofessional act to do anything but slouch, and so, in the very name which has been given to this much-maligned being, there has been a flagrant, I may say a malicious, breach of truth.

[Appearance]

We next come to the question of his apparel. Our comic papers represent the tramp as decked out in a most extraordinary medley of rags and tatters, adhering to his person in complete defiance of all the laws of natural science. They make him appear as though he had been subjected to the transatlantic amusement commonly known as being tarred and feathered. And the truth? It is quite the opposite of this audacious libel. I do not wish you to suppose that he appears resplendent in silk hat and frock coat, or that he pays undue attention to the state of the polish of his boots. I will even grant that his coat, waistcoat, and other garments scarcely ever match. But this much I will say, that I do not believe anyone ever saw a tramp who was not as well dressed as an average labourer. Why? The reason does credit to the head as well as to the heart of the tramp; it is all owing to his long and varied experience in the difficult art of successful theft! [Meal Sensibility]

We all know the proverbied joke of the tramp who returned the cake presented to him by the young lady-pupil of a cooking school, when he tells her, with tears in his eyes, that it reminds him of his boyhood years spent in a glue factory. Now, not to hash matters in the lease, this is all bunkum. I think I am perfectly correct in the inculcation that the digestion of the normal tramp is as impervious to culinary obstacles as that of the ostrich is to glass or nails. His
meals are so precarious, so few and far between, as to eliminate any super sensitivity that might be a part of his character. If anyone has the hardiness to dispute this oracular statement, let them get their sisters or aunts to prepare their best Sunday cake or apple tart, and I solemnly affirm that the first tramp they give it to will devour it without turning a hair.

The Bull-Dog Libel

The tramps experience of the bull-dog usually consists of a smarting sensation in the rear, often accompanied by the total loss of a necessary component of his garments. I ask whether under such circumstances a little wholesome fear is not a permissible quality? And yet the comic (save the mark!) journalists love to dwell at length on the cowardice shown by the tramp in beating a hasty retreat from an infuriated canine of the bull-dog species. Now, I don't intend to review all the jokes (which are perpetrated on this hackneyed subject, but there are one or two foxes which I must extract from the would-be comic publications.) There is nothing of which the tramp has such an inordinate dread as a strong-minded woman armed with the family sweeping brush. This, I declare, is a foul slander. I believe that next to that fierce, varacious (Sic) and utterly untameable animal, the common mouse, there is no greater object of terror to a woman than a tramp's tramp.

[Finance]

As regards his financial condition I will venture to say that the tramp is better situated than many gentlemen who devote their lives to art, literature, or the learned professions. My name will go down to posterity as the apostle of the tramp, as the defender of the homeless vagrant...[sic] part and parcel of our growing civilisation. I have shown him to be conscientious, picturesque and brave.

However, underneath this ridicule lay some very real human tragedies, as this account in The Limerick Leader of 1895 recorded, under the heading 'A Clouded Honeymoon'.

At Ennis Board of Guardians on Wednesday, it transpired, during the ruling of Relieving Officer Carmody's book, that Moloney, an inmate who on coming in for a small legacy had married one of the nurses, a Mrs. Hackett, last week, and taken his departure from the house, had returned on Tuesday night in a most woe-begone plight. The loving pair had left for Glasgow, from which place the woman Hackett had been originally deported as a pauper to the Ennis Union, and within a day or two of their landing, the bride, who is a matron of very mature years, took French leave of her lord and master, and cleared out with, as alleged, most of his available cash, watch, chain, etc. The lamenting Benedict, whose time of dilliance [sic] came to an end so suddenly and unexpectedly, made his way back to Ennis as best he could, to take up his old quarters. Chairiman [sic] was the shortest honeymoon I ever heard of (Laughter). Mr. Carmody, R.O. He is all right, but the watch, chain and his twenty notes are gone (Laughter). We have him to the good, though.

Tenement Housing

If we are to analyse the reasons for Vagrancy we need look no further than the conditions pertaining in the tenement houses of the working classes during the Nineteenth Century. Earlier, in the Eighteenth Century Ireland had prospered and Dublin was the second largest city in the British Empire. However, beneath this apparent prosperity lay instability. The Act of Union (1800) put an end to an Irish parliament which had been set-up largely to represent the Protestant ascendancy. This demise led to the exile of those same Protestants to new centres of power abroad. At first, the old mansions of the gentry were taken over by the professional classes composed chiefly of doctors and lawyers; however, the Great Famine caused them to move on, also. A new breed of unscrupulous landlord, who sub-divided the old mansions into tenement shuns, now came to prominence. Typically, the once grand fireplaces and fittings were ripped out and sold on to the Flats elsewhere. It was not uncommon, then, to have many large families cramped together in freezing conditions. As a result, the inhabitants wore heavy coats all day long, in order to try and stay warm, while the search for wood to burn was a daily necessity.

Often, there was only one outdoor toilet, and with little maintenance, diseases like Typhoid, Cholera and Diphtheria, prospered. The old Georgian houses, which were designed for wealthy families and their servants, now became hell holes that would hardly change at all under the Irish Free State. Local Corporations did little to address these issues and were, often, deeply mired in controversy and corruption. Many of the tenements were, in fact, run by Councillors, and their establishments were, sometimes, even condemned by their own Sanitary Officers.

In 1894, The Limerick Leader® recorded this tale entitled 'Fatal Accident In The City: A Woman Killed-Inquest Today'.

This morning the City Coroner, Mr. [M.J.] DeCourcy, held an inquest in Barrington's Hospital, touching the death of a beggar woman named Catharine O'Connell, aged 62, who died in the Hospital, on yesterday morning. Deceased met her death in very peculiar circumstances. It appears that on Saturday she was standing outside Mr. O'Donnell's Leather Establishment in Upper William-street; while there a loose brick fell from the archway over the third story [sic] window on the unfortunate woman's head, falling her to the ground instantly. The terrible force with which the brick came in contact with the poor woman's head may be learned from the fact that it broke in three pieces. The injured woman was immediately conveyed to Barrington's Hospital by Constable McGillic, who happened to be standing near her at the time of the accident. Dr. Mulcahy, the resident medical officer, attended her at once. He pronounced her suffering from the shock of the brain, from which she succumbed on yesterday morning.

In 1897, The Limerick Leader® recorded one of the worst cases of a tenement collapse under the headlines Buried Alive! Fall of a House in the City. Frightful Death of a Boy. Who is Responsible?

On Monday evening an old house fell in Nicholas-street. A boy named Martin Wallace was buried beneath the debris, and, shocking to relate, met a slow and terrible death. Who can realize the agony of the poor lad waiting upon death to relieve him from his torture, and probably, for hours conscious, that no effort was being made to release him from his awful imprisonment?

The circumstances attending this tragic event, as detailed at the inquest today, are almost incredible, and it would seem that grave responsibility for the lamentable accident and attendant fatality rests upon the shoulders of the Corporation of the Corporation, or at least, responsible officers. The house commenced to fall on Monday about three o'clock, and some daring spirits entered the toppling ruins to carry away a portion of the timber. Amongst these was a woman named Palmer, who was rescued about five o'clock. When the building collapsed the front wall only remained, and the sides of two adjoining houses were carried away in the crash.

Notice of the fall of the house was immediately conveyed by the police to the Corporation, but up to a late hour on Monday night there was no report that anyone was missing. The parents of the boy Wallace did not much notice his absence till bed time. The matter was reported to the police between 11 and 12 o'clock by his friends, who concluded that he must be crushed in the cellar, as he was seen in the vicinity of the house in the evening. Great alarm prevailed as to the fate of the boy, but not withstanding this the work of clearing away the refuse was not undertaken till ten o'clock on Tuesday morning. Eighteen hours after the poor lad had been enclosed in his awful prison; and even after the work of removal was commenced, it proceeded at a very tardy rate indeed.

Just a few Corporation men patiently performing the task, while numbers of anxious people offered to lend a hand to expedite the work. Their proffered assistance was refused, even though it was not impossible that the poor young fellow might be still living. What stupi-
An early Nineteenth Century cartoon confirming that robery was not confined solely to the 'Tramp Class'.

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**State Church Farmer Merchant Lawyer Doctor Baillie**

I Pray

I shall get you Three

I shall set you Free

I Work for Both

I shall set you Free

I shall set you Free

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The March of Robbery

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ity, incompetence—aye, we had almost said, criminality! We hear about the brutal Turk placing burning brands on the bare breasts of wounded Greeks. In point of humanity, he is equally heartless who would refuse assistance to hasten the discovery of a poor wretch situated as was young Wallace. A policeman who was on duty at the place in the morning stated that he never experienced anything slacker than the manner in which the work was proceeding—an observation which indicates the tardiness with which the work was being executed, notwithstanding the necessity for promptness. [There was no authority according to the City Surveyor to hire additional workers to shift the wreckage even though they knew, at that stage, that a boy could be buried there. 'Municipal Redtapeism' screamed the Leader!] Not until half-past seven was the dead body of the boy discovered. The remains were found embedded in the debris, a few feet from the entrance to the cellar. The body was partly in an upright position, and it would appear as if the little fellow was trying to make his escape from the basement when he got blocked up and apparently crushed by the heavy weight of material which descended into the cellar. There is no reason to believe that death was immediate, and it is probable that if discovered soon after the accident, his life might have been saved.

The condition of the house indicates an extreme decay, and the same description applies particularly to one of the two houses which adjoin it at either side, and public safety demanded that these structures should have long since been demolished. A report of its condition was made to the Corporation very recently, but unfortunately that report was unheeded, though it might be expected that the zeal of the Corporation would have been quickened by the fact that eight persons had a most miraculous escape recently from another of these wretched and rotten dwellings in John-street.

The same article concluded with an account entitled: 'The Inquest-Stirring Revelations about Dilapidated Houses, Corporate Officials and Their Duties'.

Mr. W.E. Counihan appeared as the solicitor for the City Engineer Mr. W.E. Corbett.

Mr. [James] Delaney remarked that so long as old houses in the city were owned by members of the Corporation it would be impossible to get the officials to do their duty.

Mr. Counihan: That does not hit me. It is a pity you have not a few houses of your own and you would not be so hard on them.

Mr. [W.E.] Corbett, in answer to further questions, said he never went to inspect a house until he got notice from some one to go there. As soon as he received notice he would go and see any house.

Coroner: Whose duty is it to report to you when a house is in a dangerous condition?

Mr. Corbett: The neighbours (Laughter).

Mr. McNamara said he had knowledge of the fact that there was a number of houses in this district in a dangerous condition. He thought that some steps should be taken to protect the lives of the public.

Mr. Counihan: Mr. Corbett must first get notice that they are in a dangerous condition.

Mr. Delaney: Who is to notice him but his own sub-salubrious officer [Denied by Mr. Corbett].

Accidents could occur with dilapidated housing at any time such as this account...
Despite the caricature a vagrant's lot was not a happy one

taken from The Limerick Leader in 1899 entitled: 'Death Traps: Inquest on the Victim of the Broad-Street Accident - The Condition of the Houses'.

On yesterday morning the death occurred at Barrington's Hospital of Christina McNamara, aged 18 years, lately resident in John-street, who succumbed to injuries received on Saturday night by the falling of a parapet of a house in Broad-street. An inquest was held into the death of deceased by Mr. M.J. DeCourcy, Coroner, in the City Courthouse to-day.

Acting-Sergeant Doherty swore he was on duty with Constables Brennan and Gilchrist in Broad-street on the 18th inst; he remembered passing by Michael Shane's house, where there was a crowd of boys blocking the footpath; he ordered them away, and some ran up Broad-street and others up the laneway by Shane's house; when they had gone about ten yards beyond the house he heard a loud crash; he was taken so much by surprise that he turned round suddenly and he saw a cloud of dust rising in the air; at the same time he saw bricks falling from the top of Shane's house on to the flags; he ran immediately to the place and saw a girl on the ground partly covered with bricks, and the large stones from the coping of the house lay across her legs; he pulled her out assisted by some civilians; the girl was unconscious, and witness thought she was dead; this was the girl who was identified by Mrs McNamara as her daughter; witness then rescued a boy named Edward Sheehan from the heap, and he was also lying down unconscious; he saw other people being taken up, and witness shouted to have them taken to Barrington's Hospital immediately.

Alternative forms of accommodation for Vagrants were thin on the ground in the Nineteenth Century. However, conditions inside were hardly any better, as this case from The Limerick Leader in 1899, entitled 'Death in Limerick Jail' recalled.

An inquest was held today on a woman of the unfortunate class named Margaret Blackmore, who died on yesterday [sic] in prison from acute peritonitis, the effect of premature delivery. The usual verdict was returned.

Conclusions

The history of Ireland's policies towards the homeless show, that while we may feign sympathy, in fact our policies reveal a deep historic unease and hostility towards them. This schizophrenic approach reached its climax with the advent of the 1988 Housing (Homeless persons) Act. Although Vagrancy was de-criminalised Local Authorities were still not legally obliged to house the homeless leaving the single person in a particularly vulnerable position.

This apparent bias stems from the legacy of the old 'Poor Law' and from more contemporary Catholic Social teachings. Such influences, also, permeated the 1937 Constitution which put 'families' on a pedestal to the detriment of the more isolated individual a position which still remains in operation today. In effect, the 1988 Act succeeded in placing some very old wine in relatively new legislative bottles but, as we have seen, an ancient ideology permeated both!

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