Surviving the industrial city: the female poor and the workhouse in late nineteenth-century Belfast

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ABSTRACT: In common with many British cities, but unlike the rest of Ireland, late nineteenth-century Belfast experienced rapid industrialization and physical expansion. Women formed a significant proportion of the city's workforce, attracted by the employment opportunities represented in the burgeoning textile industry. Many of them were economically vulnerable, however, and could find themselves destitute for a number of reasons. This article sets Belfast's Poor Law workhouse in the landscape of welfare in the city, exploring how its use reflected the development of the city and the ways in which the female poor engaged with it in order to survive.

In May 2010, a life-sized cast bronze statue of a young female millworker was unveiled on the corner of Cambrai Street and Crumlin Road in north Belfast. The statue, affectionately known as 'Millie', was deliberately located just off the Crumlin Road in what was one of the poorest parts of the city next to the Brookfield Mill and close to where three other major spinning mills once stood, and has been billed as a 'celebration of the contribution that Belfast's female mill-workers made to the city's success'.[1] Several years earlier, a statute of two bronze female figures, *Monument to the Unknown Female Worker*, was erected in Belfast city centre as a tribute to the city's poorest workers, those women whose grinding labour had contributed so much to the city's economic prosperity but yet had been forced to draw on a range of strategies in order to survive.[2]

Each of these pieces of public art stands as a permanent reminder of the reality of the economic precariousness, poverty and destitution faced by the tens of thousands of women who flocked to Belfast in search of

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[1] *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 May 2010.

[2] '"Monument to the unknown female worker" by Louise Walsh', About the Art, Arts Council of Northern Ireland website, www.artscouncil-ni.org/publicart/tour/tour8.htm, accessed 16 Jul. 2013.

work during the late nineteenth century. Most found employment in the city's linen mills; others resorted to a wide variety of strategies for survival. All were vulnerable to poverty, sickness and destitution, many struggled and sometimes failed to achieve economic independence and often existed on the margins of society. Even for those in employment, there was no guarantee that work would continue to be available and often no economic safety net if it did not. The development of welfare in the city was, therefore, of crucial importance to those who sought relief, in some cases, providing short-term shelter in a crisis, in others, providing a more long-term solution. While, in common with most Irish and British cities, philanthropic organizations proliferated throughout the nineteenth century, the landscape of welfare provision was dominated by the workhouse set up under the Irish Poor Law of 1838. In a city facing the social challenges presented by rapid industrialization and inward migration, overlaid with communal tensions and sectarian division, the provision of welfare presented particular challenges. This article will examine the ways in which the particular growth of Belfast contributed to social problems and shaped its welfare provision before going on to explore the importance of the workhouse for the city's female poor, using institutional records to shed light on urban poverty and revealing some of the ways in which the female poor of this divided and industrial city engaged with the Poor Law.

Industrial Belfast

A.C. Hepburn has estimated that between 1841 and 1901 Belfast was the fastest-growing city in the United Kingdom.[3] Industrialization and rapid population growth, and the related problems of urban poverty, were something Belfast shared in common with many similarly industrializing British cities; however, it was unique within an Irish context. While many parts of England and lowland Scotland experienced the technological and manufacturing expansion of the industrial revolution with its attendant urban growth, most of Ireland underwent de-industrialization and de-urbanization, becoming even more rural and dependent on an agrarian economy. Only in the very north-eastern corner of the country, in Belfast and its hinterland, was the opposite trend observed.[4] By the end of the nineteenth century, Ulster was the most urbanized province in Ireland, the proportion of the population living in towns having grown from less than 10 per cent in 1861 to almost 40 per cent in 1911.[5] Most of this growth was concentrated in the east of the province around Belfast,

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[3] A.C. Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland in the Era of Joe Devlin 1871–1934* (Oxford, 2008), 8.

[4] See L. Kennedy and P. Ollerenshaw (eds.), *An Economic History of Ulster* (Manchester, 1985).

[5] L. Clarkson, 'Population change and urbanisation 1821–1911', in Kennedy and Ollerenshaw (eds.), *An Economic History of Ulster*, 137–9.

which between 1841 and 1911 had expanded from being a town with a population of 75,308 to a city with a population of 386,947.[6] This was also the most industrialized region in the country, with textile manufacturing, shipbuilding, engineering and rope-making all being conducted on a world-leading scale. The rate of expansion in the linen industry was particularly breathtaking: between 1850 and 1861 the number of spindles almost doubled, while the number of power looms rose from 100 to almost 5,000.[7] In 1850, a third of the flax spinning mills, producing over half of the linen output for all of Ireland, were located in the Belfast area. According to Aiken and Royle, Belfast's linen industry was 'conducted on a vast and comprehensive scale . . . the York Street Mill was claimed as both the largest spinning mill and weaving factory in the world. In 1894 alone Belfast mills spun 644,000,000 miles of yarn.'[8] This rapid growth in linen manufacture led to the development of Belfast's port which, in turn, facilitated the emergence of a world-leading shipping industry with the resultant growth of heavy and light engineering.

If Belfast resembled other industrializing British cities in its rapid growth of population, it was very different in other regards, most notably the ethnic and religious lines along which the city developed. The employment opportunities offered by Belfast's bourgeoning industries attracted a steady stream of people from across rural Ulster, but predominantly from the neighbouring counties of Antrim and Down. By 1901, only 39 per cent of Belfast's population had been born in the city.[9] Belfast, however, was not just a growing city; it was also a divided city. The growth of Belfast coincided with the rapid growth of nationalism, and the resultant emergence of unionism as the position of Ireland within the United Kingdom came to dominate political and popular consciousness and led to deepening divisions along sectarian lines. As people moved to Belfast they brought these tensions with them, resulting in 'recurrent, communal rioting of a sectarian nature to a much greater extent than ever before'.[10]

Periods of violence encouraged an even greater concentration of communities based on a single ethnic and religious identity and already by the second half of the century, inner-city wards such as the Falls and Smithfield were overwhelmingly Catholic while others such as Shankill, St George's and Ormeau were predominantly Protestant. The 1901 census shows the population of Smithfield ward as being just under 90 per cent Catholic, while St George's was around 85 per cent

[6] S.A. Royle, 'Workshop of the empire 1820–1914', in S.J. Connolly (ed.), *Belfast 400: People, Place and History* (Liverpool, 2012).

[7] D.L. Armstrong, 'Social and economic conditions in the Belfast linen industry 1850–1900', *Irish Historical Studies*, 7 (1951), 237.

[8] E.J. Aiken and S.A. Royle, 'Markets and messages: Linenopolis meets the world', in O. Purdue (ed.), *Belfast: The Emerging City 1850–1914* (Dublin, 2012).

[9] Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast*, 9.

[10] I. Budge and C. O'Leary, *Belfast: Approach to Crisis: A Study of Belfast Politics 1613–1970* (London, 1973).

Protestant. This segregation of the poorest parts of the city undoubtedly influenced the development of welfare provision, shaping the landscape of voluntary activity and creating particular issues for the administration and experience of the Poor Law.

Belfast also differed from many industrial cities in the gender balance of its workforce. While the simultaneous growth of the shipping industry and related heavy engineering attracted the more typical male labour force to the city, the mechanization of weaving and the replacement of the home-based handloom by these great factories persuaded many young women to leave homes, families and communities and move to Belfast in search of work. Belfast's labour force, therefore, included a high proportion of women, many of them young and single. Census figures show that in 1881 there were 24,245 people employed in the textile industry in the city. Out of these, 17,600 (73 per cent) were women, of which just under a third were under the age of 20.[11] This number continued to rise: 10 years later, in 1891, the overall figure working in textile production had risen to 31,901, or 39 per cent of those engaged in industrial production in the city. Again, around two-thirds of these were women, a third of these under 20 years of age.[12] The 1901 census shows Belfast having the highest proportion of women (53.7 per cent) of any Irish city, of which a much higher proportion were employed in industry – just under 30 per cent of all women aged over 20, compared to only 13 per cent for the country as a whole.[13]

Women in Belfast

For many of the women who had migrated to the city from rural Ulster, often detaching themselves from the support structures of family and community, life could be nasty, brutish and sometimes short. Working conditions were harsh and wages minimal; indeed, women's wages were generally much lower than men's, in some cases as much as two-thirds less than what a man would receive for work of comparable value. Mary E. Daly has estimated the weekly wage for a female millworker as being around 11*s* in 1875 rising to 12*s* in 1906.[14] James Connolly, in his 1913 manifesto, 'To the linen slaves of Belfast', described the city's mills as 'slaughterhouses for the women and penitentiaries for the children'. He went on to declare to the women of Belfast that

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11 *Census of Ireland, 1881, Pt. I. Area, Houses, and Population: Also the Ages, Civil or Conjugal Condition, Occupations, Birthplaces, Religion, and Education of the People. Vol. III, Province of Ulster* (Dublin, 1882).

12 *Census of Ireland, 1891, Pt. I. Area, Houses, and Population: Also the Ages, Civil or Conjugal Condition, Occupations, Birthplaces, Religion, and Education of the People. Vol. III, Province of Ulster* (Dublin, 1892).

13 *Census of Ireland, 1901. Part II. General Report with Illustrative Maps and Diagrams, Tables, and Appendix*, HC 1902 [Cd 1190].

14 M.E. Daly, *A Social and Economic History of Ireland since 1800* (Dublin, 1981), 105–7.

the conditions of your toil are unnecessarily hard, that your low wages do not enable you to procure sufficiently nourishing food for yourselves or your children, and that as a result of your hard work, combined with low wages, you are the easy victims of disease, and that your children never get a decent chance in life, but are handicapped in the race of life before they are born.[15]

Although many of the women who worked in the mills came from households where a husband and possibly children were also bringing in an income, it was sometimes the case that women were the main or even the only breadwinners in their families, thus adding to their economic vulnerability. A brief look at two electoral wards to the west of the city where many of the linen mills were situated – the predominantly Protestant Shankill and the predominantly Catholic Smithfield – demonstrates that this was the case. In the household returns from the 1901 census, around a third of households in each of these two wards have a female listed as head of the household, three-quarters of these having been born outside of Belfast.[16] About a third of these female heads of households were millworkers, the vast majority of whom were either single or widowed. Many of the single women listed lived with younger siblings or relatives. Susan W., a 24-year-old linen folder originally from Co. Londonderry, lived in Shankill ward with her younger sister who also worked as a linen folder. Annie D., 25, lived in Smithfield with three younger sisters, all linen weavers, and a younger brother who worked as a groom.

Those who had sole responsibility for young children, some unmarried mothers but mainly widowed women with young families, were particularly vulnerable, as were older women who lived alone. Mary C., a 70-year-old widow who gave her occupation as reeler, lived alone in Curry Street in Smithfield while Margaret M., a 58-year-old weaver lived alone with her sister, aged 56. Mary Ann McG., a widow, lived in Smithfield with her three sons and four daughters, their ages ranging between 19 and 4 while Margaret D., a 30-year-old weaver and a widow, lived with her older sister and three children aged 9, 7 and 5. Maggie S., a 29-year-old linen weaver, lived alone with her 8-year-old daughter and a boarder. These women, and thousands like them, depended on their own work and sometimes the work of their older children to provide the most basic of incomes. While women such as these were more fortunate than many others in having work, that work was never guaranteed. Should they find themselves unable to work, whether through injury, illness, pregnancy or the vagaries of economic fluctuation, there was no economic safety-net in place for them and their dependants. Absolute destitution was therefore a very real possibility for the city's women and the families who often depended on them.

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[15] J. Connolly, *Manifesto of Irish Textile Workers' Union, 1913* (Belfast, 1913).
[16] Household abstracts, *Census of Ireland, 1901*.

Other women in the city found work in some form of domestic service, the 1901 census listing 8,767 women, only 17 per cent of the working female population of Belfast, employed in this way.[17] This represents a much smaller proportion of women thus employed than in other Irish towns and cities, reflecting the extent to which industrial labour dominated.[18] Domestic service was poorly paid and insecure and tended to be a common form of employment in the poorest parts of the city, with Catholic women being overrepresented in this sector.[19] For many women, casual domestic work formed just one strand in their 'economy of makeshifts' (see below). Contemporary writings demonstrate the importance of casual jobs such as sewing and cleaning, through which many sought to provide for their families. The pawning of their very limited possessions represented another lifeline for many, allowing them to feed their families until such times as a little money came their way; however, the fact that their own and often their children's clothes had been pawned was a cause of shame, something identified by many as a reason not to leave the house. Other women turned to prostitution as a means of survival.[20]

Landscape of welfare

People moved in and out of destitution depending on the availability of or their capacity to work and adopted a variety of strategies in order to survive during these times; others found themselves in a more permanent state of destitution and, for them, the options were often more limited. Olwen Hufton, in her important 1974 study of the poor of eighteenth-century France, introduced the concept of the 'economy of makeshifts' as the means through which many of the poorest groups within society adopted a range of strategies in order to make ends meet.[21] More recent scholarship on poverty and welfare in England and, latterly, in Ireland has highlighted the extent to which the role of voluntary and statutory welfare must be seen as strands within that wider 'economy of makeshifts'.[22]

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[17] *Census of Ireland, 1891, Pt. I. Area, Houses, and Population: Also the Ages, Civil or Conjugal Condition, Occupations, Birthplaces, Religion, and Education of the People. Vol. III, Province of Ulster*, HC 1902 [Cd 1123].

[18] R.J. Morris, 'Urban Ulster since 1600', in L. Kennedy and P. Ollerenshaw (eds.), *Ulster since 1600: Politics, Economy, and Society* (Oxford, 2013), 129.

[19] Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast*, 19–20.

[20] Diary of Rev. Anthony McIntyre, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), D/1558/2/3.

[21] O. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France 1750–1789* (Oxford, 1974).

[22] See for example L. Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People 1700–1948* (Cambridge, 1998); S. King and A. Tompkins (eds.), *The Poor in England: An Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester, 2003); D. Green, 'Pauper protests: power and resistance in early nineteenth-century London workhouses', *Social History*, 31 (2006), 137–59; S. Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Lifecycle under the English Poor Law 1760–1834* (Woodbridge, 2011); L. McCormick, *Regulating Sexuality: Women in Twentieth-Century Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 2009).

As Virginia Crossman has demonstrated in her most recent work on the Poor Law in Ireland, statutory welfare in the form of the workhouse remained a key strand in this economy throughout much of the nineteenth century, with a wide range of different sections of the poor using the institution in different ways to meet different needs.[23] Up until the beginning of the century, welfare in Ireland, as in many parts of Europe, was very much on an *ad hoc* basis, provided mainly by religious orders, civic institutions or individual charity. In England, for example, a system of Poor Laws had been in existence since the sixteenth century, the exact nature and application of these varying from one parish to another. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, social and economic changes were placing these local or informal systems under great strain and new solutions were being sought, which generally led to legislative reform and a movement towards centralized, state-sponsored welfare systems. In Ireland, this began with the passing of the Irish Poor Law of 1838 which saw Ireland being divided into Poor Law administrative 'unions', in each of which a workhouse was to be erected for the reception of paupers and each of which was to be administered locally by a Board of Guardians.[24]

Although the Poor Law dominated the landscape of welfare provision in late nineteenth-century Belfast, charitable and philanthropic organizations also proliferated, many of them directed at young women. Most of these were associated with one of the religious denominations in the city; not surprisingly, then, voluntary welfare tended to develop along parallel lines with little co-ordination between Protestant and Catholic philanthropic organizations. This period saw the expansion of organizations associated with the Catholic church in the city, a result of the increased organization and expansion that was taking place in the church across Ireland.[25] The 1865 edition of the *Belfast Directory* listed for the first time 'Schools etc. in Belfast under Roman Catholic patronage', which included the Convent of Mercy on Crumlin Road and a Bankmore Penitentiary on the Dublin Road 'for the reception of fallen and penitent females . . . under the care of the Sisters of Mercy'. The 1860s also saw the founding of a refuge at the Good Shepherd convent, Ballynafeigh. This was much larger, there being accommodation for 140 women, many of whom were unmarried mothers or prostitutes.[26] By the end of the century, religious orders were very active in providing welfare for Belfast's needy Catholic population.[27] This work, particularly that aimed at women, was largely carried out by

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23 V. Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland 1850–1914* (Liverpool, 2014).
24 For a full discussion of the debates and controversies surrounding the introduction of the Irish Poor Law, see P. Gray, *The Making of the Irish Poor Law, 1815–43* (Manchester, 2009).
25 See E. Larkin, 'The devotional revolution in Ireland', *American Historical Review*, 77 (1972), 625–52; S.J. Connolly, 'Cardinal Cullen's other capital: Belfast and the "devotional revolution"', in D. Keogh and A. McDonnell (eds.), *Cardinal Paul Cullen and his World* (Dublin, 2011), 289–307.
26 *Belfast and Province of Ulster Directory, 1865* (Belfast, 1865).
27 A. Jordan, *Who Cared? Charity in Victorian and Edwardian Belfast* (Belfast, 1993).

religious orders and, as Maria Luddy has shown, remained very much under clerical control.[28]

Belfast also experienced an evangelical revival which swept across Britain and parts of Ulster during the 1850s and which manifested itself most powerfully among Protestant denominations.[29] This gave rise to large numbers of organizations formed for both the spiritual and social improvement of society, what Simon Gunn refers to as the 'philanthropic offensive of the mid-Victorian years . . . a religious and philanthropic enterprise of an unprecedented scale and intensity, lasting some thirty years'.[30] Many of the organizations that emerged in Belfast during this period were directly connected with Protestant churches and religious organizations and were reformist in nature. The Magdalene Asylum, opened in 1849 'for the benefit of women who could be reclaimed from the course of prostitution and who were willing to work', was run by nine trustees – five clergy and four lay members of the Church of Ireland – and, although attached to and run by the established church, was open to and used by women of all denominations.[31] In fact, the annual report for 1887 shows that in that year the asylum housed 39 Roman Catholics, 31 Episcopalians and 15 Presbyterians.[32] The Ulster Female Penitentiary was closely associated with the city's Presbyterian churches, the numbers of inmates ranging between 40 and 50 in any one year.[33] The 1854 *Belfast Directory* also lists the Provident Home for Friendless Females in Henry Street, the Night Asylum for the Homeless Poor in Arthur Square, the Ladies' Industrial School for girls, the Malone Protestant Reformatory on the Lisburn Road, the Protestant Orphan Society, the Presbyterian Orphan Society, Mrs Wilson's Bequest for Widows and Lady Johnston's Bounty, which paid £12 a year to 'unmarried females, being Protestants, of sober, honest, moral life above fifty years of age and resident in Belfast for at least five years prior to application'.[34]

By the time Belfast formally became a city at the end of the nineteenth century, a proliferation of voluntary societies and organizations had emerged for the relief of poverty and the reform of the city's female poor. Active and ubiquitous as these organizations were, however, the reality was that they were never going to reach more than a tiny fraction of those who lived on the city's social margins and who were most vulnerable to

[28] M. Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy* (Cambridge, 1995), 27.
[29] For the Ulster Revival, see D. Hempton and M. Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society 1740–1890* (London, 1992); J. Holmes, *Religious Revivals in Britain and Ireland, 1859–1905* (Dublin, 2000).
[30] S. Gunn, 'The ministry, the middle class and the "civilizing mission" in Manchester 1850–80', *Social History*, 21 (1996), 33.
[31] *The Belfast and Province of Ulster Directory, 1854* (Belfast, 1854).
[32] Jordan, *Who Cared?*, 177.
[33] *Ibid.*, 74; for a full discussion of the work of this organization, see J.N.I. Dickson, 'Evangelical religion and Victorian women: the Belfast Female Mission, 1859–1903', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 55 (2004), 700–25.
[34] *Belfast Directory, 1854.*

poverty and destitution. Reports of all the main philanthropic groups reveal that their work was hindered by lack of funding and lack of physical space. Leanne McCormick has also suggested that Protestant-run organizations in particular preferred to retain a smaller, home-like environment, although the Catholic-run institutions tended to be larger in scale. She points to census night 1911 on which the Good Shepherd Convent housed 135 inmates while the two main Protestant-run homes – the Edgar Home (formerly Ulster Female Penitentiary) and the Magdalen Asylum – housed 47 and 20 inmates respectively, and the new Salvation Army rescue home housed 24.[35] There can also be little doubt that the strict reforming ethos of many of these institutions rendered them unappealing to some of those living on the margins of society; the requirement of some that unmarried mothers or single pregnant women give up their illegitimate child as part of renouncing their past ways would have prevented many from seeking help.

Although records for philanthropic organizations during this period are extremely limited, we can assume that the effective development of voluntary welfare in the city was also hindered by sectarian divisions. Oonagh Walsh has revealed the problems that sectarianism caused among philanthropic groups in Dublin during this period.[36] In Belfast, where sectarian tensions were intensified by the close proximity of densely populated Catholic and Protestant working-class areas, voluntary welfare provision reflected the fractured and divided nature of the city's religious and political landscape. Those in need of help had fewer concerns about the denominational affiliation of an organization that offered help. Although Catholic-run institutions and organizations, in particular, ministered overwhelmingly to their co-religionists, Protestant or non-denominational organizations, particularly rescue homes for women, had a more denominationally mixed range of inmates. McCormick observes that 'for many women who were in desperate straits . . . the religious affiliation of a particular home was not necessarily the most important consideration'.[37] From an organizational point of view, however, there seems to have been little co-operation across the sectarian divide. The increasing physical presence of the Catholic church and its related orders in Belfast undoubtedly heightened Protestant suspicions and, in some cases, hostility towards its growing influence in the city, while the very pro-active role of Protestant missionaries and charity workers in visiting houses and using public space for open-air meetings was regarded with similar suspicion and hostility by sections of the Catholic church who saw in it attempts to proselytize and thus undermine the authority of

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[35] McCormick, *Regulating Sexuality*, 45.
[36] O. Walsh, 'Protestant female philanthropy in Dublin in the early twentieth century', *History Ireland*, 5 (1997), 29.
[37] McCormick, *Regulating Sexuality*, 48.

the church.[38] As was the case throughout most of Ireland, this binary development of the voluntary sector prevented a coherent and structured approach to welfare provision throughout the nineteenth century. It was only with the establishment of the Belfast Charity Organization Society in 1903 that a movement towards the co-ordination of voluntary welfare began to take place.[39]

Belfast Union workhouse

The workhouse stood in contrast to the small voluntary run charities across the city, in terms of its scale, its ethos and the ways in which the female poor of the city engaged with it. From its introduction in 1838 right through to the end of the 1930s, the Poor Law dominated welfare provision in Belfast with the workhouse representing the most easily accessible option for people seeking relief for either temporary or more permanent destitution. By the closing years of the nineteenth century, the population of workhouses across most of Ireland had dwindled away to a small number of semi-permanent inmates, generally the elderly or infirm, supplemented by a steady stream of 'casual' paupers who tended to stay for one or two nights, and some workhouses began closing and amalgamating. Not so in Belfast, however, as the numbers of people being admitted to the city's single workhouse, opened in 1841 to hold 1,000 paupers, continued to rise significantly over the period. From the 1850s through to the mid-1870s, the annual number of admissions had remained in and around 10,000. By 1880, the annual intake was 18,187, while in 1913 over 25,800 people were registered as having been admitted.[40] Large numbers seeking admission each day led to the occasional breakdown in the normally highly regulated system of recording admissions, while inspectors regularly commented on the overcrowded nature of many parts of the workhouse. Medical officers, in particular, complained that the health of the inmates was put at risk by the lack of space, while in October 1881, an inspector noted the fact that the numbers in the infirmary exceeded the maximum permitted by 181, with 95 of the patients sleeping on the floor.[41]

This rapid increase was partly due to the increasing importance of the workhouse hospital as a provider of medical welfare for the city, but also reflected the importance of the workhouse as a source of relief for a vulnerable urban population and the changing ways in which that

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[38] For a full discussion of this, see J. Holmes, 'The role of open-air preaching in the Belfast riots of 1857', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 102C (2002), 47–66.

[39] N. Acheson, B. Harvey, J. Kearney and A. Williamson, *Two Paths, One Purpose: Voluntary Action in Ireland North and South* (Dublin, 2004), 20–2.

[40] Annual reports of the Irish Poor Law Commission 1855–75; eighth annual report of the Local Government for Ireland, HC 1880 [C. 2603] [C. 2603-I], xxviii.1, 39, 220; forty-second annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland, HC 1914 [Cd 7561], xxxix.595, 266.

[41] Local Government Board to Belfast Board of Guardians, 17 Jan. 1881, PRONI, BG/7/BC/3.

population engaged with it over the period in question. Through a close analysis of surviving records from Belfast workhouse, in particular the indoor registers, the remainder of this article will explore the ways in which the women of Belfast used the workhouse as a means of survival at the end of the nineteenth century, a time when industrial production and population growth was at its peak.

Women in the workhouse

Surviving Poor Law records, extensive though they are for many northern unions, tend to adopt a top-down approach, focusing largely on administrative aspects of the Poor Law. Inmates or applicants for relief make rare appearances in minute books or correspondence, and then generally only when they are the brief focus of attention due to an issue of discipline, complaint or even death. Other than that, those on the receiving end of relief are largely absent from the records. The exception is in the indoor registers in which the details of everyone admitted to the workhouse were recorded. A detailed analysis of these can at least provide some sense of who used the workhouse and how they used it.

These records reveal the extent to which young, single women in particular were vulnerable to destitution. Looking at all those admitted to the workhouse in the month of January 1865, 1878 and 1901, for example, we see that throughout the period women were admitted to the workhouse in similar numbers to men; however, the proportion of women admitted who were aged between 16 and 30 was significantly higher than that of men in the same age bracket (Figure 1). In January 1865, 40 per cent of the women admitted, most of them single, were aged between 16 and 30, compared to only 20 per cent of the men.[42] In January 1901, 227 women, or 30 per cent of all women admitted (compared to only 18 per cent of the men), were aged between 16 and 30, again the majority of these being single.[43] Almost half of these young women gave their occupation as being connected with textile manufacturing (Figure 2), thus reinforcing the impression that young, single women represented a particularly vulnerable group in late nineteenth-century Belfast, the attraction of employment in the booming linen industry drawing many of them to the city, but the absence of support networks leaving them exposed to the vagaries of the employment market, or to the impact of illness, injury or pregnancy. A comparison between the women admitted to Belfast workhouse in four sample months in 1900–01 and the census figures for the city as a whole confirms the importance of the workhouse for women employed in this sector. According to the census, 29.7 per cent of all women aged 20 and over living in Belfast in 1901 were employed in

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[42] Belfast workhouse indoor registers 1864–65, PRONI, BG/7/1.
[43] Belfast Union workhouse indoor registers Jan. 1901, PRONI, BG/7/52.
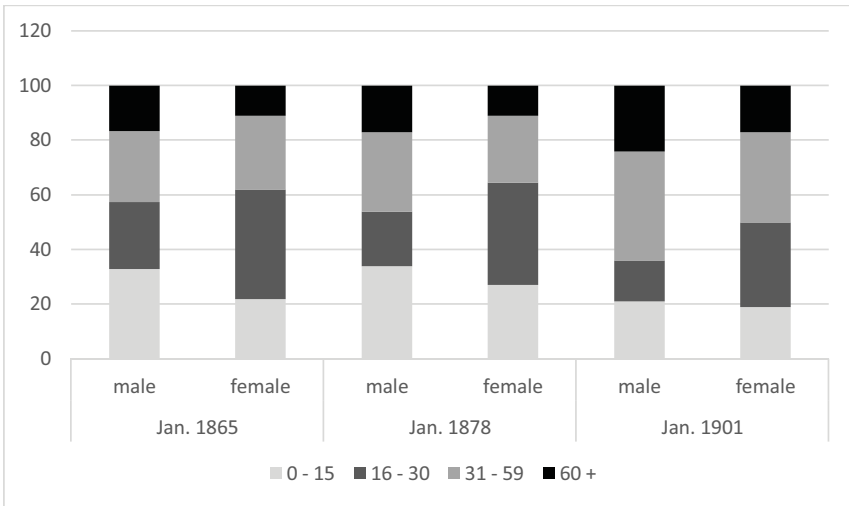
Figure 1: Ages of men and women admitted to Belfast Union workhouse in January 1865, January 1878 and January 1901
Source: Belfast Union workhouse indoor registers 1865, 1878 and 1901, PRONI BG/7/1, 2 and 54.
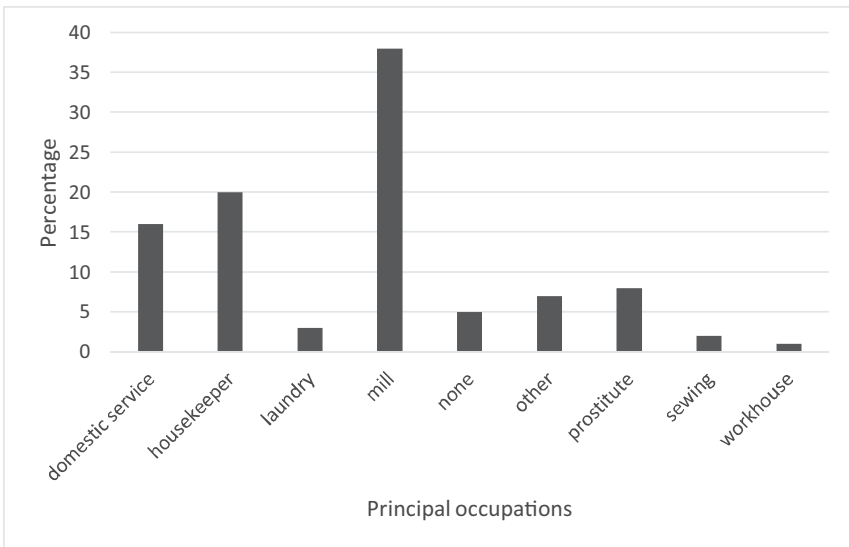
Figure 2: Occupation of women admitted to Belfast workhouse in January 1901
Source: Belfast Union workhouse indoor registers Jan. 1901, PRONI, BG/7/53.

industry; in the workhouse registers, 39.5 per cent of women admitted in the four months analysed gave their occupation as something connected to the textile industry.[44]

A closer focus on the 229 female millworkers admitted to Belfast workhouse in January 1901 can provide some insight into the conditions of some sections of the city's female workforce who had fallen on hard times.[45] Unlike most able-bodied men and women admitted to Irish workhouses at the turn of the century, only a small proportion of these women used the workhouse as casual accommodation, just 10 per cent of them staying in the workhouse for one or two nights. A much higher proportion of them (30 per cent) stayed for up to two weeks while a further third stayed in the workhouse for between one and two months. Nearly half of the female millworkers admitted in this month gave destitution rather than illness or injury as their reason for admission to the workhouse, compared to just over a third of the adult men admitted. This suggests a greater economic vulnerability on the part of the female labouring class and also, perhaps, that they had fewer options and therefore, once in the workhouse, had to remain there for longer periods. Cross-referencing these women with the census, taken just three months later, might have provided some more information on their background, but the very fact that the majority of them cannot be traced in the census further reinforces the extent of their destitution. While this could have been partly a result of poor record-keeping on their admission to the workhouse, it does suggest that homelessness, or at best a rootless existence taking a bed in lodgings when it could be afforded and moving out, often to the workhouse, when it could not, was clearly a reality for many of the women who had moved to Belfast in search of economic independence and a better life. The registers also reveal the impact their labour had on their health, particularly among the younger women. Out of 112 millworkers aged between 16 and 30 admitted during this period, five died in the workhouse, two of general debility, one of fever, one of chest-related illness and one of phthisis or pulmonary tuberculosis. All were single. A further five were admitted with bronchitis while twelve were admitted with some kind of injury.[46]

Another occupational group that features prominently in the workhouse registers is the category of domestic service. A total of 474 women, or 21 per cent of the women admitted to Belfast workhouse in four sample months in 1900–01, give their occupation as servants, char women or doing laundry.[47] This is a particularly high figure given the low proportion of the city's female population engaged in this category of work and, again, reinforces the extent to which women engaged in these occupations were vulnerable

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[44] *Census for Ireland, 1901*; Belfast workhouse indoor registers 1900–01, PRONI, BG/7/G/51–3.
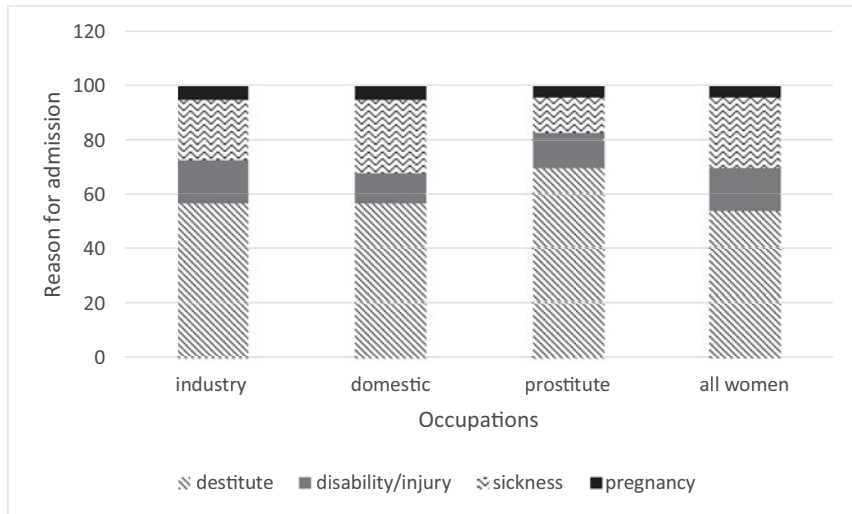[45] Belfast workhouse indoor registers Jan. 1901, PRONI, BG/7/G/52.
[46] *Ibid*.
[47] *Ibid*.

Table 1: *Length of stay of those admitted to Belfast workhouse in January 1901*

	Men	%	Women	%	Millworkers	%	Domestic service	%
1–2 days	80	**13**	56	**9**	22	**8.5**	5	**5**
3–6 days	82	**13**	69	**11**	33	**12.7**	10	**10**
1 week–1 month	179	**29**	214	**36**	99	**38**	38	**37**
1–6 months	203	**33**	198	**33**	83	**32**	40	**38**
6 months +	14	**2.5**	15	**2.5**	3	**1**	5	**5**
Died	56	**9**	46	**8**	19	**7.5**	5	**5**

Source: Belfast Union workhouse indoor registers Jan. 1901, PRONI, BG/7/53.

Figure 3: Conditions of women of different occupations admitted to Belfast workhouse in January 1901 (percentages)
Source: Belfast Union workhouse indoor registers Jan. 1901, PRONI, BG/7/53.

to destitution – or took on work in an *ad hoc* manner as one strand in their economy of makeshifts, having to resort to the workhouse when these options were no longer available. Looking at admissions for January 1901, those employed in domestic service tended to stay in the workhouse for longer periods than other inmates (Table 1) and were also more likely to be admitted due to ill health (Figure 3), suggesting a higher degree of economic vulnerability among these women. Hepburn has shown that Catholic women were overrepresented among the poorer-paid domestic jobs in the city.[48] This is reflected in the workhouse, where Catholics made

[48] Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast*, 19.

up half of the women admitted with occupation listed as domestic service, despite making up only 24.3 per cent of the population as a whole.[49]

As McCormick has shown, Catholic women were also significantly overrepresented among those inmates designated 'prostitute'. This was the third highest occupational group to feature in the workhouse registers in the four sample months in 1900–01, highlighting the extent to which the city's poorer Catholic women were more likely to experience destitution and demonstrating the importance of the workhouse for those at the lowest end of the socio-economic scale.[50] Compared to the other women admitted to the workhouse, a much higher proportion of these women were destitute – 70 per cent compared to 54 per cent of all women admitted in January 1901. There was also a much higher return rate among these women, something which partly explains the high numbers being admitted.[51] Some of them used the workhouse as semi-permanent accommodation, leaving and returning at will or as the need arose and generally taking their children with them. During the month of October 1900, for example, one woman, Mary-Ann S., her occupation given as 'prostitute', was admitted to Belfast workhouse with her one-year-old daughter six times, each time both of them remaining in the workhouse for several days. In total that month, they spent 25 nights out of 31 in the workhouse. Likewise, in the same month, Mary-Ann C., also recorded as being a prostitute and who also had one child, was admitted four times but for longer periods at a time. She was first admitted on 8 October 1900 and, from then on, each time she and her child were discharged, they returned the following day and stayed for at least another five or six days. Bridget T. likewise was admitted eight times during the same period, sometimes being admitted and discharged on the same day, other times staying for a month.[52]

Belfast workhouse also offered a temporary place of shelter for those who had recently migrated into the city. The granting of poor relief in Ireland did not depend on the petitioner having lived in the union where they sought relief since the Irish Poor Law had no rules regarding settlement. This meant that Belfast workhouse was accessible to, and used extensively by, the city's large migrant population, something that drew regular complaints from some of the Poor Law guardians and which contributed in no small measure to the escalating numbers of admissions. Many of those who appeared in the workhouse registers for the first time gave their address as somewhere in rural Ulster, some reappearing again at regular intervals from an address somewhere in the city.[53] For example, 60-year-old Joseph A., arrived at the workhouse in October 1900, giving his address as the village of Castlewellan in south Co. Down. He remained

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[49] *Ibid.*, 9.
[50] McCormick, *Regulating Sexuality*, 19.
[51] *Ibid.*, 17.
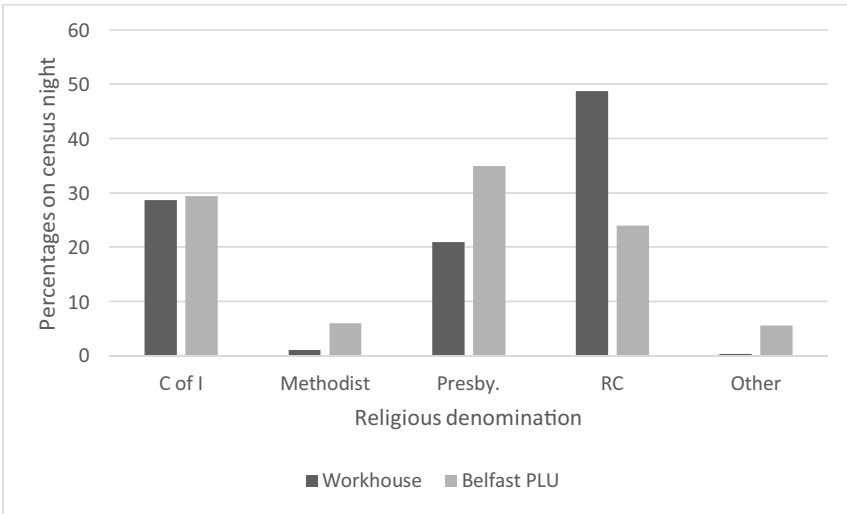[52] Belfast workhouse indoor registers Sep. 1900, PRONI, BG/7/G/51.
[53] *Ibid.*

in the workhouse for three months, being discharged on 3 January 1911. The next few months saw him re-admitted several times, often from 12 Great Edward Street, which the 1901 census indicates as having been a boarding house for men and from which men were admitted to the workhouse on a fairly regular basis. Annie T., a 29-year-old millworker from Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim, was admitted in April 1901, staying for several days. Three months later, she was admitted again, this time her address given as Millfield, a particularly poor part of the city dominated by millworkers.[54]

The workhouse registers also reveal the extent to which the city's poorest classes tended to move from one place to another, using the workhouse as an important stop-gap. While the vast majority of the women admitted appear only once or a very small number of times in the admission registers, thus seeming to have used the workhouse as a form of short-term emergency relief, there were a considerable number of women for whom the workhouse represented a much more regular place of shelter. Some remained in the workhouse for short periods each time but kept returning. Catherine M., for example, a 20-year-old from the Millfield area of Belfast, was admitted three times in January 1901 alone, each time only remaining in the workhouse for one or two nights. Maggie F. was a 30-year-old widow with a seven-year-old son, her occupation given as millworker. In the sample months of October 1900 and January, April and July 1901, she appears a total of 10 times, each time along with her son and each time remaining in the workhouse for three or four nights; there is no reason to believe that this pattern of use did not also continue before and after the period examined as well as during the intervening months. Mary McA., a 36-year-old widow who also worked in a mill and was described as 'destitute', was admitted four times in the three months referred to but stayed for longer spells. Admitted early in October 1900, she remained in the workhouse for just over a month; in January 1901, she was admitted once and remained for three weeks; she was admitted in April 1901 and remained for two weeks. Finally, she was admitted on 12 July 1901 and remained there until her death on 23 October 1901.[55] The picture revealed through an examination of just a small fraction of the admissions to Belfast workhouse is thus one of extreme hardship, with the workhouse providing shelter and basic food for women who clearly had little or no means of support and no fixed address. Some gave a different address each time they were admitted; some came from one of the other institutions in the city; and some gave no address at all. At the same time, it demonstrates the important place that the workhouse played for many women either as a short-term stop-gap when other means of support failed, or as a long-term place of accommodation for those with few other options.

54 *Ibid.*
55 *Ibid.*

Figure 4: Religious denominations of inmates in Belfast workhouse compared to Belfast Poor Law union on census night 1901 by percentage *Source: Census of Ireland, 1901*; Belfast Union workhouse indoor registers Oct. 1900 – Sep. 1901, PRONI, BG/7/52–4.

In contrast to many rescue homes and charitable organizations, the workhouse represented a melting pot for those of all religions and none. The 1901 census shows that on the night the census was taken there were 3,080 inmates in Belfast workhouse, of whom 48.8 per cent were Roman Catholic, 28.7 per cent were members of the Church of Ireland and 21 per cent were Presbyterian (Figure 4). A comparison of these figures with the religious breakdown for Belfast Poor Law union as a whole confirms the extent to which different denominational groups in the city experienced poverty. The proportion of members of the Church of Ireland in the workhouse was almost equivalent to that in the union as a whole, a reflection of the fact that members of the Church of Ireland in Belfast tended to occupy the lower-paid jobs and dominate the working classes. In contrast, the proportion of Presbyterians in the workhouse was much smaller than that in Belfast as a whole, again reflecting the fact that Presbyterians dominated the wealthier middle classes in the city. The extremely high proportion of Catholics in the workhouse (given that they only made up 24 per cent of the city's population as a whole) confirms the extremely vulnerable position of many Catholics in the city, and the extent to which the workhouse represented an important refuge for those who could no longer support themselves.[56]

[56] *Census for Ireland, 1901.*

Belfast workhouse, like all workhouses under the Irish Poor Law, was run by the state on a non-denominational basis. Indeed, from the outset, the Poor Law was structured in such a way as to avoid allegations of undue religious bias or influence; ministers of religion were not allowed to act as Poor Law guardians and strict regulations governed the teaching of religion to workhouse children. Article 49 of the Rules for Governing Workhouses stated that

no order of the commissioners, nor any bye-law, shall oblige any inmate of any workhouse to attend or be present at any religious service which may be celebrated in a mode contrary to the religious principles of such inmates; nor shall authorise the education of any child in such workhouse in any religious creed other than that confessed by the parents or surviving parents.[57]

This was considered necessary given the sensitivities surrounding religion in Ireland as a whole – issues surrounding the religious registration of children, for example, occurred in workhouses across the country – but was of particular importance in Belfast where the issue of religion was never far below the surface.

Belfast's Poor Law guardians seem to have made a serious effort to maintain a non-denominational environment. In 1857, for example, they turned down a request by the Protestant workhouse chaplain for permission to leave religious tracts for the workhouse children. Regardless of this, sectarian issues did come to the fore from time to time, particularly with reference to teaching of children and accusations of proselytism. In May 1878, scandal was caused by a letter written by the Catholic chaplain, Rev. McCann, to the *Ulster Examiner* in which he hinted at serious abuses in the workhouse school. After some investigation, it transpired that his concerns largely centred on the fact that female inmates were missing Sunday mass, instead taking cups of tea to the children's wards, and that religious tracts were being distributed in the workhouse. To his letter of complaint regarding the distribution of tracts, the Local Government Board responded that

With regard to the charge concerning the distribution of what are called 'tracts' it is to be observed that nearly two-thirds of the inmates of the workhouse are not of the Roman Catholic persuasion, and the right of reading bible extracts or any other tracts they may desire cannot be denied to inmates professing a different religious belief. If tracts were forced or even given to Roman Catholics there might be grounds for complaint; but the Local Government Board are assured that such is not the case and that no attempt whatsoever is made to interfere with the religious views of Roman Catholics in the Belfast Workhouse.[58]

Problems occasionally arose where children of a mixed marriage were admitted to the workhouse with their mother, who wanted them registered

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[57] Article 49, An Act for the More Effectual Relief of the Destitute Poor in Ireland, *Compendium of the Irish Poor Law* (Dublin, 1872), 36.
[58] McCann to the Local Government Board for Ireland, 18 Apr. 1879, PRONI, BG/7/BC/1.

in her religion, as the law stated that a children's religion was that of its father. Religious registration would, of course, determine not only the religious services that children attended in the workhouse, but also the religious education they received at the workhouse school. Belfast's Poor Law guardians appear to have been particularly conscious of the sensitivities surrounding this issue and, as individual cases arose, sought to conform strictly to the letter of the law. One case in 1868 serves to highlight some of the difficulties surrounding the matter. A Presbyterian woman married to a Catholic man was being admitted to the workhouse along with her three children. She requested to have them registered as Presbyterian as they regularly attended her place of worship, apparently with the full sanction of the father who was not present at this time. The guardians seemed fully aware of the difficulty of their position, one stating that 'We are a Board Protestant with two exceptions. We should be careful to give no cause of complaint to people of a different way of thinking.' Another stressed the need to stick to the letter of the law, in which the word 'parent' meant 'father', adding that 'we need to be very careful about introducing religious affairs there'.[59]

This issue of the religious registration of children was also something which could serve to deter women from seeking relief in the workhouse, regardless of their need or that of their children. In debating another similar case, the difficulty of the situation was again agreed on by all present. All concurred that, regardless of the expressed wishes of the mother, they were obliged by law to register the children as being of their father's religion. 'The mother', said one guardian, 'may do what she likes with them so long as she keeps them out of this house, but when they come in here we must see that the law is obeyed.'[60] It was pointed out that this legislation actually served to keep many women out of the workhouse 'lest their coming in should have the effect of having the children registered as of a religion contrary to their own'. One guardian observed that the issue of religion in the case of a mixed marriage actually acted as a different manifestation of the workhouse test, something designed to deter all but the most desperate from seeking relief.[61]

If strict legislation occasionally served to keep women out of the workhouse, the lack of concern with moral reform undoubtedly rendered it a less unattractive option than some of the asylums in the city. Belfast workhouse proved to be a particularly important place of refuge for those women perceived to be on the margins of society or outside the bounds of 'moral decency': unmarried mothers, large numbers of whom spent time in the workhouse often with their children, or single women who were pregnant on admission and who sometimes remained in the workhouse until their child was born. Under the Poor Law the workhouse

[59] *Belfast News-Letter*, 13 May 1868.
[60] *Ibid*.
[61] *Ibid*.

was supposed to be available to all who were truly destitute, regardless of their background. The fact that the perceived moral character of those seeking relief was not to act as a barrier to admission increased the accessibility of the workhouse to women who might have been ostracized by the communities in which they lived and who found in the workhouse somewhere to receive shelter and, if required, medical treatment. Pat Thane has commented with regard to England that the Poor Law administration 'insisted throughout its history that its function was to relieve destitution, not to correct morals';[62] the same line was taken by Belfast's Poor Law guardians on the many occasions when the institution was criticized by both Catholic and Protestant commentators for what was perceived to be its lax moral stance. In 1879, for example, the nationalist *Freeman's Journal* carried a front-page article about allegations made by the Roman Catholic chaplain to Belfast Union workhouse about conditions within its walls, quoting him as saying that 'portions of its wards are hotbeds of immorality. Women of bad character . . . are freely admitted into the house.' He went on to say that

the really deserving poor . . . prefer to endure hunger and cold outside to entering such a place, while the class whom the Poor Law never intended sheltering or cherishing are enabled to hibernate comfortably, are provided with nurses and have every want supplied, only to enable them, with the return of health and fine weather, to start afresh upon their career of dissipation and vice.[63]

Meanwhile, a speech by a Belfast magistrate, reported in the unionist *Ulster Examiner*, condemned the workhouse as 'a den of immorality, drunkenness and vice'. Women of ill-repute, he announced, were mixing freely with other inmates, while many young unmarried women had given birth in the workhouse.[64] The chairman of Belfast's Board of Guardians, responding to these criticisms, made it very clear that the workhouse was open to all who were destitute, regardless of what led to their state of destitution. 'I am aware', he declared to a public inquiry,

that there are large numbers of ill-conducted women admitted from time to time into the house. The only ground upon which they or any others are admitted is that of destitution. My impression, and that, I believe, of the board, is that we have nothing to do with character in considering the granting of relief, but simply to consider the question of destitution.[65]

As Rachel G. Fuchs and Leslie Page Moch have stressed in their work on female poverty in nineteenth-century Paris, women migrated to many

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[62] P. Thane, 'Women and the Poor Law in Victorian and Edwardian England', *History Workshop Journal*, 6 (1978), 32.

[63] *Freeman's Journal*, 14 Mar. 1879.

[64] Quoted in minutes, Belfast Board of Guardians, Feb. 1879, PRONI, BG/7/1/43.

[65] Belfast workhouse, *Copies of Minutes of Evidence Taken at the Recent Inquiry Held at the Belfast Workhouse by Inspectors Bourke and Brodie, together with their Report thereon*, HC 1881, lxxix.69, 123.

European cities in at least as many numbers as men but, in addition to the dangers of exploitation shared by both sexes, were also vulnerable to the risk of pregnancy – 'the biological manifestation of their economic and social vulnerability'.[66] Most workhouses across Ireland had a proportion of single pregnant women who would use the workhouse as a place to give birth, or single mothers who sought refuge for themselves and their children; but Belfast, with its high levels of female economic migration into the city, saw large numbers of young single women either with children or in various stages of pregnancy being admitted throughout the period. In October 1900, for example, of the 205 millworkers admitted to the workhouse about a third were aged under 30, of whom 12 were unmarried mothers and a further 7 were single and pregnant and gave birth in the workhouse within a short time of being admitted. In total, during the same month, 28 young, single, pregnant women were admitted to Belfast workhouse and a further 51 were admitted with illegitimate children.[67] In January 1901, 14 of the women admitted who were aged under 30 were single and pregnant and a further 38 were unmarried mothers.[68]

For young single women who had fallen pregnant, perhaps having already left the security of home and community in rural Ulster and moved to the city, or having moved with family, had been deemed 'immoral' and ostracized by family and community, the workhouse represented one very important option as a source of shelter, healthcare and food. Perhaps the shelters run by churches or philanthropic organizations may have been better-run and less threatening than the chaotic and deeply unpleasant environment of a large city workhouse, but they only ever reached a tiny fraction of the female poor of the city. Furthermore, many women may have chosen not to engage with some of these organizations either because of their overtly religious ethos or their attempts to exert moral control. The workhouse therefore appears to have been an easier option, particularly for those who just needed short-term relief for themselves and their families, or who needed somewhere to give birth to a child and who lacked the necessary means to hire the services of a midwife.

Conclusion

Like most late Victorian industrial cities, a network of statutory and voluntary welfare provision developed in Belfast during the nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries. It was a network that closely reflected the nature of the city itself: much of it was aimed at a growing female migrant population, seen to be particularly vulnerable to the physical and moral dangers represented by the city, and much of it,

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[66] R.G. Fuchs and L. Page Moch, 'Pregnant, single and far from home: migrant women in nineteenth-century Paris', *American Historical Review*, 95 (1990), 1009.

[67] Belfast workhouse indoor registers Sep. 1900, PRONI, BG/7/G/51.

[68] Belfast workhouse indoor registers Jan. 1901, PRONI, BG/7/52.

particularly in the voluntary sector, reflected and reinforced the sectarian divisions within the city itself. Within this network, the city's workhouse formed a very important strand in the economies of makeshifts adopted by the female poor. Despite the harsh conditions that prevailed, and the stigma attached to being a 'pauper', these women continued to seek refuge in the workhouse for themselves and their children in large numbers. In contrast to the relief offered by most voluntary welfare institutions in the town, rescue and reform of the inmates was not part of the remit of the workhouse and, unlike many of the philanthropic organizations, as an institution it had no association with any particular religious denomination in the city. Women with illegitimate children came and went more or less as they pleased, taking their children with them when they left. Single pregnant women could and did avail themselves of the medical facilities offered by the workhouse hospital in order to have their babies delivered. The inmate's religion, or lack of it, was not an issue; indeed, the Poor Law authorities made a considerable effort to ensure that religious activity was avoided other than by the workhouse chaplains in a carefully controlled manner, something that was particularly important in the increasingly religiously charged environment of Belfast.

A detailed analysis of the role of the workhouse in the Victorian city, of which this is but a drop in the ocean, has the potential to shed light on a wide range of social issues, in particular relating to the ways in which women behaved. It reveals much about the public roles offered to middle-class women by their involvement in charity and in the administration of the Poor Law. Perhaps more importantly, it can tell us something of the experiences and the behaviours of the city's poorest women – the conditions they experienced, their responses to social conditions and the strategies they adapted for survival. The options open to them may have been limited but the evidence would suggest that even within such constraints, these women did make choices affecting their own lives. For many women who found themselves in a state of destitution, ostracized by their community and with no means of support, the workhouse clearly represented an important means of surviving the city.