Letters of the Catholic Poor: Poverty in Independent Ireland, 1920-1940

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The cover of Lindsey Earner-Byrne's brilliant new book, *Letters of the Catholic Poor: Poverty in Independent Ireland 1920–1940*, features a collage of letters. One details a husband's illness, another is a postcard of the Wellington Monument from Dublin's Phoenix Park with 'very urgent' underlined on its face. A further letter pleads for assistance from Fr. Dunne, an annotation of '£4' in red ink marking that writer's success in their plea for material aid. These letters are exemplars from the sizeable collection of 4,343 'charity cases' stored in the Dublin Diocesan Archive, produced during the episcopacy of the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Edward Byrne (1921–40); documents which now serve as the source base for Earner-Byrne's persuasive, compelling, and sympathetic examination of poverty in post-Independence Ireland.

Heretofore, the body of historiography on poverty in the years following the state's political independence in 1922 has remained relatively limited in its scope.⁽¹⁾ This absence is particularly notable given the broad body of work conducted on poverty in 19th-century Ireland, which ranges from Jacinta Prunty's examination of the permeable social boundaries around life within inner-city tenements (*Dublin's Slums 1800-1925: A study in urban geography*, 1998) to Ciara Breathnach's analysis of statutory efforts to alleviate chronic deprivation in the rural west of Ireland (*The Congested Districts Board of Ireland, 1891-1923*, 2005).⁽²⁾ Regardless of this lacuna, the topic of poverty in 20th-century Ireland remains particularly significant for understanding the development of the state, as Catherine Cox reminds us how Ireland's 'history of health and welfare is intimately linked to its history of poverty and charity'.⁽³⁾ Recent regional studies like Una Newell's *The West Must Wait: County Galway and the Irish Free State, 1922-32* and Donnacha Seán Lucey's work on Munster in *The End of the Irish Poor Law?* similarly underline the persistence and scale of poverty across Ireland in the first decades of the state.⁽⁴⁾

Alongside this relative lacuna within historiography, the past 20 years has seen a significant growth in the publication of literary memoirs that detail life within the 'Irish free state' (1922–37). Descriptions of poverty abound in these books, so much so that they have been frequently derided as a catalyst in the rise of 'misery literature' as a genre. Frank McCourt's now infamous depiction of a 'miserable Irish Catholic childhood' in

inter-war Limerick for *Angela's Ashes* (5) is the emblematic book of this trend, although the severity detailed in McCourt's account remains contested. Some texts, like Angeline Kearns Blain's account of Dublin tenement life in *Stealing Sunlight: Growing up in Irishtown* describe daily experiences growing up within impoverished communities, while others like Peter Tyrell's harrowing *Founded on Fear* highlight the role played by poverty in admissions to the Industrial School system.(6) Considered together, these varied accounts present a clear opportunity for greater historical engagement with issues around deprivation and memory, while the popularity of these books among the general public underline a broader desire for substantive engagement with issues of poverty and deprivation in the post-Independence period.

Earner-Byrne's book is a magisterial engagement with the issue of poverty in Ireland from 1920–40, an effort which endeavours to 'people the past' under the rubric of Tim Hitchcock's 2004 call for a 'new history from below'.(7) Building upon a body of innovative international scholarship around letter writing and charity, including the work of David Fitzpatrick on migrants' letters and Thomas Sokoll on the Essex Pauper Letters, Earner-Byrne uses the Archbishop's seven boxes of 'charity cases' to examine a range of issues relating to poverty and letter writing in early to mid-20th-century Ireland, including: the use of rhetoric in charity appeals, the power of self-definition for a disenfranchised subject, and the enactment of shared cultural scripts among those who wrote to the Archbishop in search of assistance.(8) These are undeniably ambitious aims, which seek to bring the reader into close contact with 'the reality of poverty and how it was perceived and negotiated by those who struggled permanently in its embrace or drifted in and out of its clutches' (p. 1). Yet, Earner-Byrne more than surpasses her goal to 'people the past' with stories of individual struggle and survival during this formative period of Irish history, as the book imparts an almost visceral understanding of what it meant to be in need during these years. There is the case of Charles F., whose letter to the Archbishop detailed the various shoe sizes needed within his household and described how 'I had a child very ill [and] to some extent this was caused by insufficient clothing' (p. 173). While others, like Eamonn K., discuss how his family 'had no food or fire for the past 4 days only dry bread and a small drop of tea' (p. 173). The reader is left with the rare sense of having understood the lives of these correspondents, an effect that can only arise from the author's sensitive management of the text's varied body of correspondence.

The book's first chapter, subtitled 'Is this a civilised country?', outlines the broader context around poverty and the poor during the first decade of the Irish state, while under the administration of successive Cumann na nGaedheal governments (1923–32). The image it presents is an undeniably bleak one, in which 'tight books were balanced, unforgiving ideology was cemented in legislation and limited welfare provision was pruned' (p. 20). Each issue provides an ample reason to answer the chapter's subtitle in the negative, as Earner-Byrne describes the often uncertain actions of the fledgling 'Free State' government, as well as the inclement climate brought about by these policies to those most in need. The chapter is an admirably lucid detailing of these early challenges encountered by the newly independent state, during which issues around poor housing, widespread unemployment, and a patchy network of welfare provision ensured that the Archbishop's body of correspondence grew apace.

The text's remaining chapters focus on the extensive body of correspondence sent to Archbishop Byrne, examining these letters under five themes. Chapter two, 'Artefacts of poverty', explores the use of 'charity letters' as source, interrogating a variety of issues around their provenance, composition, and 'truthfulness'. Engaging with the established body of research around 18th century 'begging letters' from both the UK and Germany, Earner-Byrne demonstrates the many continuities that link this Irish collection to its international counterparts (p. 90). Yet, the letters, in the many varied examples used, can also be characterised by their variety of obviously Irish idiosyncrasies, including Hiberno-English phraseology and the frequent deployment of Catholic rhetoric. The issue of 'truthfulness' is also addressed in this chapter, as Earner-Byrne emphasised how the appearance of rhetorical flourishes within a correspondent's letter should be considered as an exemplar of how the letter writers 'engaged with the world they lived in and used what was at their disposal to improve their position in that world' (p. 90). Using Sokoll's idea about the value of rhetoric for understanding the writers' self representation, Earner-Byrne effectively highlights the way in which these deeply mediated texts can be handled effectively by the historian.(9) The third chapter

progresses to the cases presented by these writers, examining how the correspondents represent themselves and their circumstances, as well as how they 'make their case' in appeals to the Archbishop's office (p. 91). Using a significant number of the often detailed appeal letters, correspondents are shown to have clearly utilised popular tropes around 'deserving' poverty to shape the presentation of their cases, although Karen M. from Cork may have been exceptional in her blatant self-description as 'one of Almighty God's destitute deserving poor' (p. 92). This chapter underscores how the Archbishop's letter writers were acutely aware of their limited range of options, while the chapter's images of individual letter pages serve to highlight some of the basic interpretative challenges associated with these handwritten sources. Indeed, *Letters of the Catholic Poor* is at its very best when it evokes the archival experience, allowing the reader to imaginatively sit in front of the collected missives and survey the appeals 'on letter-paper, copybook page, the backs of envelopes, postcards, and bill paper; in ink, pencil and crayon' (p. 1).

Chapter four, by contrast, is a fascinating insight into appeals from the 'temporarily embarrassed'; looking at letters from middle-class correspondents who, the writers underline, would not normally seek assistance from the Archbishop. This chapter's stories of once prominent figures, like 'fallen' businessman and disabled civil servants, describe a 'hidden' constituency of need in the state. Earner-Byrne highlights how these writers sought to differentiate themselves from those inured to the daily privations associated with poverty, deploying a distinctly class based language around shame, discretion, and misfortune (p. 168). When held in comparison to the preceding chapters, this section is a particularly enlightening examination of correspondents' understanding of class in Irish society, as well as a vivid demonstration of the inherent precariousness of all correspondents' lives, as 'a run of bad luck could dry up even a comfortable family's resources relatively quickly' (p. 169).

The book's final two chapters engage with issues relating to the negotiation of poverty, alongside the vetting process deployed by the Archdiocese to 'weed out' the 'undeserved' pleas for assistance. Building upon ideas raised throughout the text, Chapter five's examination of 'The cost of poverty' demonstrates how the experiences of poverty were consciously negotiated and shaped within appeals to the Archdiocese; as writers highlighted the effect of privation on both their physical and mental health. The account of Henry G, for example, foregrounded the many challenges he faced to cover his wife's medical bills. He described the indignities imposed upon him within daily life, including how 'I had even to come so low as to have to pawn my clothes ... which leaves me unfit as a christian to attend mass' (p. 186). What arises for this chapter is a clear understanding of the constant issues faced by a significant proportion of the population in early 20th-century Ireland. Letters bear witness to a haphazard existence, during which individuals had to rely on 'pawning to survive', while the constant 'fear and reality of unpaid rent, [and] the necessity of breaking up the family in order to survive' hung over them (p. 210). The chapter's analysis remains adept to the way in which the strictures of the charity market could have contributed towards these accounts, but still retains a central empathy with the many challenges associated with keeping the proverbial wolf from the door. The final chapter looks at the approval process operated by the Archdiocese. Appeals to the Archbishop's office required a local priest to 'vouch' for necessitous applicants, providing a document that can reveal both individual prejudices and the broader priorities of the Catholic Church during this period. Earner-Byrne's cogent analysis demonstrates how these reports further contributed to the broader discriminating culture seen around poverty in the early 20th century, highlighting cases where 'caution, misunderstanding, or raw prejudice' had shaped a priest's willingness to show support (p. 248). Cases which can, admittedly, overshadow the cases of compassion and empathy displayed by other members of the clergy (p. 230).

The book's conclusion invites an intriguing supposition, which asks: would these correspondents to Archbishop Byrne have fared better if the state remained under British jurisdiction? The initial administrations of the 1920s were an undeniably harsh experience for the country's poor. Referring to measures by Cumann na nGaedheal deputies, Mel Cousins described them as 'souls without remorse', noting their unpopular reduction of old age pensions in 1924.⁽¹⁰⁾ The Fianna Fáil governments of the 1930s, by contrast, did introduce a number of new social welfare measures, including unemployment allowances and widows and orphans' pensions. Earner-Byrne, however, demonstrated the limited nature of these new payments, which constituted a further element in the broader 'economy of makeshifts' (p. 204), as the poor

had to continue to ‘routinely engage with the full gamut of provision options in order to survive’ (Ibid). Indeed, she notes, some of the population would have ‘fared better with the emergence of an earlier and more comprehensive welfare state’ like that seen in the UK (p. 254), to say nothing of post-war British innovations in healthcare like the foundation of the NHS.

If this reviewer is to quibble with any element of the book, it is with the inherent geographical bias contained within the Diocesan archive used for this study. Charity appeals written to the Archbishop of Dublin are, inevitably, overwhelmingly produced from within Dublin city and county. The collection does contain 698 letters from beyond this area, which are utilised effectively throughout the text, but this represents only 16.1 per cent of the total collection of charity cases. Earner-Byrne both acknowledges and actively engages with this disparity, using the rural accounts as a tool to explore both the commonalities and geographic differentials involved in the construction of poverty in an independent Ireland. This bias is encoded within the archive’s papers, and to do any more than mention it risks falling into that perennial reviewer trap of recommending the writing of an entirely different study. Indeed, it is a minor issue within what is an incredibly informative, persuasive, and elegantly written text. *Letters of the Catholic Poor* has spotlighted a rich body of sources from early 20th-century Ireland, engaged with a broad body of international historiography, while forging multiple new research avenues for Irish social historians.

In doing so, Earner-Byrne both leads the way and challenges other historians of 20th-century Ireland to ensure that they ‘people their pasts’ with a comparable level of aplomb.

Notes

1. There have been some attempts to engage with issues around poverty in Independent Ireland, including *Poverty and Welfare in Ireland 1838–1948*, ed. Peter Gray & Virginia Crossman (Dublin, 2011) and Mel Cousins, *The Birth of Social Welfare in Ireland 1922–52* (Dublin, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Jacinta Prunty, *Dublin’s Slums 1800–1925: A Study in Urban Geography* (Dublin, 1998); Ciara Breathnach, *The Congested Districts Board of Ireland, 1891–1923* (Dublin, 2005).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Catherine Cox, ‘Health and Welfare 1750–2000’, in *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 261.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Úna Newell, *The West Must Wait: County Galway and the Irish Free State* (Manchester, 2015); Donnacha Seán Lucey, *The End of the Irish Poor Law? Welfare and Healthcare Reform in Revolutionary and Independent Ireland* (Oxford, 2015).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Frank McCourt, *Angela’s Ashes* (London, 1996).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Angeline Kearns Blain, *Stealing Sunlight: Growing up in Irishtown* (Dublin, 2000); Peter Tyrell, *Founded on Fear* (Dublin, 2008).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Tim Hitchcock, ‘A new history from below’, *History Workshop Journal*, 57 (1), 2004, 294–8.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (New York, NY, 1994); Thomas Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters 1731–1837* (Oxford, 2001).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Thomas Sokoll, ‘Writing for relief: rhetoric in English Pauper Letters, 1800–1834’, in *Being Poor in Modern Europe: Historical Perspectives 1800–1940*, ed. Andreas Gestrich, Steven King and Lutz Raphael (Bern, 2006), p. 81.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Mel Cousins, *The Birth of Social Welfare in Ireland, 1922–52* (Dublin, 2003), p. 55.[Back to \(10\)](#)

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