

Introduction

A History of the Experience of Poverty 'It is hard to state my case in writing'

I take the liberty to write & put my case before you, but am only doing so as a last resource. It is hard to state my case in writing but will do so as well as I can.¹

This book owes its life and spirit to the thousands of people like Mrs H. who found themselves in a position where their only recourse was to write to the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Edward Byrne (1921–1940) to ask for help. In seven large archival boxes, tucked away in the abundant Dublin Diocesan Archives, lie over four thousand letters labelled 'Charity Cases' written by the Roman Catholic laity of Ireland between 1922 and 1940. On letter-paper, copybook page, the backs of envelopes, postcards, and bill paper; in ink, pencil and crayon, the unemployed, widowed, under-paid, in debt, temporarily 'embarrassed' and dispossessed composed their poverty. In immaculate script or poorly formed letters, in fluid prose or sub-literate stuttering, these people have left one of the few traces in history of the *experience* of poverty, and collectively they illuminate the lives of so many during the foundation decades of Irish independence. They offer insights into 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. Their letters articulate the hard edge of rage, the debilitating reality of impotence, the humiliation of need, the sour taste of failure, the unflagging spirit of hope, the tenacious sense of fight, the stirrings of entitlement, along with love and a sense of responsibility. They are also acts of testimony describing in highly personal ways the realities of living in appalling conditions, of having to beg, of losing the chief breadwinner and of

¹ Mrs H., X Leinster Rd., Rathmines, Dublin, 15 July 1939. Dublin Diocesan Archives, Archbishop Byrne Papers, AB7, Charity Cases, Box 7 [hereafter DDA, AB 7 CC, Box 1 etc.]. Please note all letters in this collection were addressed to either Archbishop Byrne or his secretaries unless otherwise stated.

being exposed to physical and sexual exploitation.² By committing their reality to paper, these people carried from the private to the public domain, from the powerless to the powerful, a record of the hidden realities of poverty and in so doing complicated the boundaries between those domains.³

These Irish charity letters were created in the dynamic context of encounter, when the poor or those in need negotiated with those in control of the purse strings. Peter Mandler and other historians of poverty and charity have noted that it is particularly difficult for the historian to find sources that allow a penetrative analysis of this 'site of encounter'.⁴ These letters, and the responses they elicited, provide an important and rare window into the cosmology of poverty in early independent Ireland. Hence, this is not an empirically based social history, but rather a history of the 'socio-cultural experiences of the poor' through the prism of their begging letters – their poverty stories.⁵ A central focus of this research has been how, in these letters, the poor reworked their experiences of poverty, not only in terms of their own self-perception and sense of identity, but also in response to their understanding of the mentality and values of the universe they shared with their church and wider society.⁶ It is this interplay between self and social knowledge that is the heart of the charity engagement; on occasion this was conscious, for example, when a threat of apostasy was made to extract assistance, but often it was unconscious, a social reflex that the historian must decode.

The story of poverty is all too often told solely from the perspective of those who encountered the poor through charity or social work. This book offers a history told from the perspective of those who lived as 'the poor'.

² For a discussion of this historiographical trend, see, S. Bhattacharya, 'History from below', *Social Scientist*, 11 (April 1983), 3–20, 24.

³ Rebecca Earle has argued that to define letters as sources of the public or private domain is to impose an 'artificial clarity'. R. Earle, 'Introduction: letters, writers and the historian' in R. Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 1999), pp. 1–12, 3.

⁴ P. Mandler, 'Poverty and charity in the nineteenth century metropolis: an introduction' in P. Mandler (ed.), *The Uses of Charity: The Poor on Relief in the Nineteenth-Century Metropolis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), pp. 1–37, 23.

⁵ S. King, 'Negotiating the law of poor relief in England, 1800–1840', *History*, 96 (2011), 410–35, 410; Bailey also describes her examination of English pauper letters as a cultural history rather than an empirically based social history. J. Bailey, "'Think wot a mother must feel": parenting in English pauper letters', *Family & Community History*, 13 (2010), 5–19, 5.

⁶ On letter writing, identity and 'narrative impetus', see K. Holmes, *Between the Leaves: Stories of Australian Women, Writing and Gardens* (Crawley: The University of Western Australia, 2011), pp. 61–81.

Negotiating charity was an intrinsic part of the experience of poverty in modern Ireland; as Chapter 1 outlines, the limited state relief was inadequate to sustain the majority of recipients without supplementary assistance from charity. Thus having to 'compose' and tell a story that explained and justified poverty was an essential part of being poor. In his work on poverty, Mark Peel has explored the way the poor used the conventions of storytelling to explain their poverty; he noted that their 'autobiographies must be produced on demand' for the social worker or the police officer.⁷ In many respects the letters written by the Irish poor in the 1920s and 30s fulfil the criteria of storytelling and autobiographical writing, confirming Toby Ditz's argument that the context of a letter could become a part of the experience.⁸

The driving force of this book is to explore both poverty as it was experienced, with a particular emphasis on individual strategies of survival, and how 'the poor' shaped and perceived their own identity when seeking charity. Mrs H. wrote to the archbishop in 1939: 'I could not explain how heart broken I am or even the extent of my troubles for I am honest & like to be able to pay my way.'⁹ She characterised herself as honourable and someone for whom it was important to be financially independent. The identity she shaped in her letter was based on reinforcing these characteristics which had powerful social resonance in a society endlessly debating the boundaries of legitimate poverty. As Andreas Gestrich, Elizabeth Hurren and Steven King have noted, 'it is unthinkable that the conditions making for a re-evaluation of self – of a new interiority – did not also percolate down to the very poorest and shape both whether they wrote but also the standards by which they judged their conditions and thus how and about what they wrote.'¹⁰ Nowhere more than in the letters of the poor is the quest for the individual voice so central, for this was a fundamental purpose of the letters. They wrote to differentiate themselves from the rest of the poor – they sought to say: I am genuine, I need help, I deserve help, I cannot be ignored. As Mrs H. explained to the archbishop: 'that is why I write to you, to see if you could help me over this trouble, I could not tell you what it has cost me to write this letter of appeal only that I am in such

⁷ M. Peel, *The Lowest Rung: Voices of Australian Poverty* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 6, 12; Caroline Steedman refers to this as 'autobiographical narration'. C. Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 48.

⁸ T. Ditz, 'Formative ventures: eighteenth-century commercial letters and the articulation of experience' in Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves*, pp. 59–78, 62.

⁹ Mrs H., X Leinster Rd., Rathmines, Dublin, 15 July 1939.

¹⁰ A. Gestrich, E. Hurren and S. King (eds.), *Poverty and Sickness in Modern Europe: Narratives of the Sick Poor, 1780–1938* (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 14.

terrible trouble I would not do so.' Here I am, I place myself before you; it was both a challenge and a plea – hear *me*. Mrs H. could not afford her plea to fall on deaf ears, therefore she had to converse with a world her reader(s) knew. She was writing a letter seeking assistance, but she was also having a conversation with her society and constructing a relationship with her church, both of which involved a 'performance of self' that created an identity which would explain and elicit a favourable response.¹¹ Letters do not just 'record or describe', they 'inscribe' and 'rework'.¹² Mrs H. and all those who wrote to the archbishop recorded their poverty, but they also reworked it into a narrative that reinterpreted poverty as a personal experience and gave space for the individual.

The majority of authors in this collection were involved in a form of anti-correspondence; they were not beginning a writing relationship with the archbishop, and it was made clear that they could write only once. Therefore, they had one chance to get it right, to establish the *persona* and story that would gain them the help required. In the quest to read and hear these voices this book owes much to Peel's study of social work and the story of poverty, in which he argued: 'In a broad sense, the task of social and cultural history must always be to account for what people made of themselves, not just what others made of them.'¹³ The majority of those who wrote to the archbishop were underemployed, unemployed, underpaid, widowed or generally those who were never asked about poverty and the many policies adopted to relieve it. In these letters the people who so rarely set the record in their own words, spell out word after word, page after page, what it meant *to them* to be poor.

Text and Context

In order to explore both this creation of self and the experience that led to writing in the first place, these Irish letters will be read both 'textually and contextually': examined both as texts constructing poverty *and* as texts embedded in a particular world and time that they explain and that helps to explain them.¹⁴ The letters were subject to a complex set of cultural norms and by placing them in their social context it is possible to explore

¹¹ L. Stanley, 'The epistolarium: on theorizing letters and correspondences', *Auto/ Biography*, 12 (2004), 201–235, 212.

¹² Ditz, 'Formative ventures', p. 61.

¹³ M. Peel, *Miss Cutler and the Case of the Resurrected Horse: Social Work and the Story of Poverty in America, Australia, and Britain* (The University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 18.

¹⁴ L. Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World 1600–1850* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), p. 93; S. King, 'Pauper letters as a source', *Family & Community*, 10 (2007), 167–170.

their tremendous value to our understanding of how the normally silenced voiced their concerns and articulated their struggle for survival in a world so frequently hostile to the dependent. Therefore, the way in which these people sought to beg, bargain and sell their lives, reveals much about their room for manoeuvre and how they understood and negotiated the power structures that confined them. Their words, use of language, repetitions, and reference-points provide us with evidence of the contemporary understandings of class, family, gender and religion. Mrs H. was a convert to Catholicism writing at a time when that made her 'a case of concern', particularly as a mother of several children. She knew this and waited only until her second sentence to clarify her status: 'I am a convert to the Catholic Church married & have had 4 children.' Her text – how she arranged her story, what she told first and how she linked one facet of her life to the next – speaks to her context and her identity within that universe. In this book, the rhythm and details of the letters are considered inseparable in the quest to reach a better understanding of the history they convey. It is argued that how, for example, Mrs H. punctuated the details of her life – her dead and sick children, underpaid husband and bad tenants – with an image and sense of her 'self' – 'I was able to manage & was very happy, until last year' and a few lines later 'I am distracted & heart broken' – is an essential part of the truth she wished to communicate about her identity that legitimised her request. Thus, while these letters provide raw material for an analysis of the experience of poverty and the art of begging, they are also artefacts in their own right.¹⁵

In order to explore their textual and contextual potency large sections of the letters have been cited throughout this book. It is not possible to recreate the topography of the page – the readers of this book do not hold in their hands the yellowed page penned in fading pencil, or the beautiful joined script on family headed paper. The impact of a writer's desperate need to use every square inch of the page, writing up the sides, in the top and bottom margins or the stark three lines on torn paper – simple, nude, in its insistence – cannot be recreated. However, the texts have been respected insofar as is possible and thus mistakes have not been silently corrected, spellings and punctuation remain as they appear in the originals and any alterations are clearly indicated.¹⁶ In fact, it is argued in Chapter 2 that the punctuation, erratic capitalisation and structure of these letters are intrinsic to our understanding of them as sources. In order to respect

¹⁵ See Earle's discussion of letters as sources and artefacts. Earle, 'Introduction: letters, writers and the historian', pp. 1–12.

¹⁶ See Editorial Rubric, p. 3.

the privacy of the individual authors, however, the first names have been changed and surnames have been initialised with the exception of priests or others who were writing in a professional capacity; house names or numbers have been removed.¹⁷

The collection is not catalogued; however, by the author's count there are 4,343 letters of which 1,747 (40.4 per cent) were written by women and 1,365 (31.5 per cent) by men and only 15 (0.3 per cent) were signed by a husband and wife, although in reality many were probably joint enterprises.¹⁸ Almost a quarter of the collection was written by priests – 1,032 (23.8 per cent) – usually in relation to a parishoner's letter. While Dublin predominates in this collection, because the letters were written to the head of the Catholic diocese in Dublin and the city was the site of the greatest amount and degree of poverty, there are letters from most counties in Ireland and from as far afield as India and Australia. In total there were 698 (16.1 per cent) letters from outside Dublin and they allow an exploration of the commonalities in the experience of poverty and supplication, while pointing to some of the differences.

Stanley has astutely pointed out, the ethics of the selection process by its very nature involves the *deselection* of some letters.¹⁹ This was an unavoidable dilemma faced in writing this book, as there were simply too many to include the entirety of the collection. It was not productive to adopt a structured selection process whereby every fifth or tenth letter was included as this would have resulted in divorcing a series of related correspondence and rendering only a partial telling of certain cases. The letters cited in this study are 'exemplar narratives' that reflect the most prominent styles and themes found throughout the collection.²⁰ While individual letters offer particularly vivid personal stories, taken together they represent a collective experience and shed light on the status and meaning of poverty in twentieth-century Ireland. Thus the book is organised thematically; a strictly chronological structure made little sense as it is argued that change during this period was less of a reality than the

¹⁷ The collection is not catalogued and there are no clear reference codes identifying each letter, therefore, initials have been maintained to allow future researchers follow the archival trail.

¹⁸ 103 (2.3 per cent) letters are deemed as 'other' either because the gender was unidentifiable or because they were written by an organisation, for example, the Vincent de Paul or Council of the Unemployed.

¹⁹ See Stanley for an interesting discussion of this selection process. Stanley, 'The epistolarium', 201–235.

²⁰ I borrow this phrase from King, who also based his analysis of pauper letters on a large collection of 2,842 of which only a small sample could be cited or reproduced. See, King, 'Negotiating the law of poor relief', 414.

constancy of the experience of poverty lived in the light of shared values that changed little in real terms.

Irish History and Irish Poverty

While poverty is an undeniable constant in the story of Ireland, the pages of its history run relatively dry after political independence in 1922. Historians of modern Ireland have accepted poverty's ubiquitous shadow after independence, but there has been no detailed analysis of its history.²¹ Undoubtedly, the history of poverty has suffered due to the strong emphasis on political history in Ireland, but also because of a general reluctance to offer a class analysis of Ireland's history since independence.²² When poverty enters the historical narrative after 1922 it has tended to do so sideways, for example, in relation to how it impacted on the history of women and sexuality,²³ motherhood,²⁴ religion, social

²¹ This is all the more curious since the history of poverty prior to independence is very well served. See, for example, J. Prunty, *Dublin Slums 1800-1925: A Study in Urban Geography* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998); M. E. Daly, *Dublin – The Deposed Capital, 1860–1914* (Cork University Press, 1984); M. H. Preston, *Charitable Words: Women, Philanthropy, and the Language of Charity in Nineteenth-Century Dublin* (London: Praeger, 2004); V. Crossman and P. Gray (eds.), *Poverty and Welfare in Ireland 1838–1948* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011). For studies with a particular focus on popular attitudes to poverty and the strategies of the poor themselves, see V. Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland, 1850–1914* (Liverpool University Press, 2013); C. Breathnach, *The Congested Districts Board of Ireland, 1891–1923* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005); N. Ó Ciosáin, 'Boccoughs and God's poor: deserving and undeserving poor in Irish popular culture' in T. Foley and S. Ryder (eds.), *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), pp. 93–99;

²² There are a few exceptions: P. O'Dea (ed.), *A Class of Our Own: Conversations about Class in Ireland* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1994); F. Lane and D. Ó Drisceoil (eds.), *Politics of the Irish Working Class, 1830–1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 1–5; F. Lane (ed.), *Politics, Society and the Middle Class in Modern Ireland* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); M. Silverman, *An Irish Working Class: Explorations in Political Economy and Hegemony, 1800–1950* (University of Toronto Press, 2001). In his history of Fianna Fáil, Richard Dunphy incorporates a strong class analysis of the party's ideology and policies. R. Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power in Ireland, 1932–1948* (Oxford University Press, 1995). See, also, T. Garvin, *Preventing the Future: Why was Ireland so Poor for so Long?* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2004); Newell has a chapter considering poverty in Galway during the 1920s. U. Newell, *The West Must Wait: County Galway and the Irish Free State, 1922–32* (Manchester University Press, 2015).

²³ D. Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (London: Profile Books, 2009); M. Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800–1940* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); J. M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Manchester University Press, 2007).

²⁴ L. Earner-Byrne, *Mother and Child: Maternity and Child Welfare in Dublin, 1922–1960* (Manchester University Press, 2007); C. Rattigan, *'What Else Could I Do?' Single Mothers and Infanticide, 1900–1950* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012).

welfare,²⁵ housing,²⁶ or emigration and population decline.²⁷ These studies all provide insights into various aspects of poverty, policy and charity, but neither poverty nor its protagonists are the focus of attention in their own right. Collectively these works point to the fact that we cannot understand twentieth-century Ireland without considering the impact of economic power and class.²⁸ Virginia Crossman, in her work on poverty and the Poor Law in nineteenth-century Ireland, argues that 'the ideological roots of these debates lay as much in class and religion as in politics and ethnicity.'²⁹ Her study of the Poor Law in Ireland, while focused on 'the system', succeeds in providing a sense of how the poor interacted with and experienced statutory relief. She convincingly demonstrates that 'the concept of the deserving and undeserving poor became deeply rooted in Irish popular culture.'³⁰ While Finola Kennedy, in her work on the Irish family, argues that 'at the start of the twentieth century the factors that most differentiated families were economic and class factors.'³¹ This book will go some way to establishing that these observations remain pertinent in relation to Irish society until at least 1940. It was not religion, or gender, but economics and class that most shaped each individual's life experience in modern Ireland.

It is oral history and autobiographies that have taken up the challenge of exploring the history of Irish poverty. In fact, autobiographies that seek to come to terms with the experience of poverty in modern Ireland, which include the many documenting abuse in the various orphanages and industrial schools of Ireland,³² rival, in terms of quantity, any other

²⁵ Cousins and Kennedy offer particularly useful historical analyses of poverty in relation to the development of the welfare state and family policy. M. Cousins, *The Birth of Social Welfare in Ireland 1922–1952* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003); F. Kennedy, *Cottage to Crèche: Family Change in Ireland* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2001); F. W. Powell, *The Politics of Irish Social Policy, 1600–1990* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

²⁶ MacManus points out that in 1911, 22.9 per cent of Dublin city's population lived in one-room tenements. R. McManus, *Dublin, 1910–1940: Shaping the City & Suburbs* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), p. 32 and p. 41; J. Brady, *Dublin, 1930–1950: The Emergence of the Modern City* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), pp. 46–51.

²⁷ M. E. Daly, *Slow Failure: Population Decline and Independent Ireland* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

²⁸ For some interesting reflections on the relationship between class/status, gender and employment see, E. Kiely and M. Leane, *Irish Women at Work 1930–1960: An Oral History* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012).

²⁹ Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland*, p. 3.

³⁰ *Ibid*; See also, Ó Ciosáin, 'Boccoughs and God's poor'.

³¹ Kennedy, *Cottage to Crèche*, p. 57.

³² I would include these in this category as almost all of them identify poverty as the main reason for their incarceration in one (or more) of these institutions. See, for example, D. Whelan, (ed.) Peter Tyrrell, *Founded on Fear* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), which provides a harrowing account of poverty in 1920s Ireland.

form of Irish autobiography. This phenomenon indicates a burning desire to open this topic to analysis and an insistence that it finds its place in the historical record. This motivation is explicit, for example, in Máirín Johnston's *Around the Banks of Pimlico*. She begins her story with a detailed historical context, she refers constantly to historical sources, and embeds her knowledge of history in the personal narrative of her family: 'All during the recession of the late 1920s, when unemployment was very high and getting worse, we were almost destitute.'³³ For Johnston the rest of Irish society looked at her 'type' from behind 'protective wire' giving the 'impression that all the poor . . . were there under false pretences'.³⁴ Other memoirs are less explicit, but equally insistent about the idea of literary inclusion to compensate for historical exclusion. The title of Angeline Kearns Blain's account of growing up in Irishtown in Dublin in the 1930s and 40s, *Stealing Sunlight*, hints at the complex motivations behind these autobiographies: she 'stole' her childhood by siphoning little bits of what was good (sunlight) in order to survive in a hostile society. Through her writing she reclaimed a place in the narrative of 'growing up' in Ireland for the poor and dispossessed.³⁵ She wanted her life and the story of poverty to see the light of history, to come out from the shadows of denial. She opens up her story with an image of dirty sheets, hinting at how the poor were consigned to the darkness yet they lived in plain view: 'We were born and raised, my three brothers and I, in a single room in one of the dilapidated whitewashed tenements which were strung along O'Brien's Place like dingy bed-sheets.'³⁶ Elaine Crowley sought to resurrect a world where 'pawning was no disgrace' and the goal was to join the propertied side of life: 'My mother had two ambitions. To be on the pig's back and to have a private house.'³⁷ If you owned property you became one of those who *belonged* in Irish history; in the Irish project of self-determination, private property was king. In these stories the characters 'waged constant war' on their surroundings and on the limitations of their 'place' in society.³⁸ They may have been relatively powerless, but they were never portrayed as passive. These memoirs deserve our attention and they challenge us to

³³ M. Johnston, *Around the Banks of Pimlico* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1985), p. 54.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁵ A. Kearns Blain, *Stealing Sunlight: Growing up in Irishtown* (Dublin: A & A Farman, 2000).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁷ E. Crowley, *Cowslips and Chainies: A Memoir of Dublin in the 1930s* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1996), p. 2;

³⁸ I borrow this image from Crowley who refers to her mother as 'waging constant war' on vermin, but it is representative of the portrayal of many of the families in these autobiography/memoirs, particularly the women. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

find a way to include them and the story they tell in the history of modern Ireland.³⁹

Projects such as the development of a women's oral history archive and the work of Mary Muldowney on women's experiences during the Second World War, reveal the potential of oral history to help flesh out and enrich the narrative of ordinary people's experiences in the past.⁴⁰ The recent oral history project by Elizabeth Kiely and Máire Leane explores aspects of how class distinctions were experienced and conveyed, revealing that notions of 'respectability' were profoundly important and often associated with one's employment.⁴¹ The oral historian Kevin Kearns has produced several books using oral history to discover how the 'other half lived' in modern Ireland.⁴² Kearns grounds his studies in historical research, but his ultimate achievement is in exploring how working-class Dubliners *recall* surviving poverty. While many of his subjects vividly recapture aspects of life in the poorest parts of Dublin, they also obscure or downplay more painful or complex aspects of 'being poor' filtering, as people inevitably do, life through the lens of time and contemporary sensibilities. However, Alistair Thomson has done some interesting work exploring the differing accounts that emerge from present centred letters during the migration process and oral history recollections of those letters. He has shown quite convincingly that both sources include and omit and that neither can be regarded as a 'superior source'.⁴³ Thus, in this study a rich array of official sources have been drawn upon that track contemporary attitudes

³⁹ Liam Harte makes a similar point. L. Harte (ed.), *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). There are numerous childhood memoirs relevant to this period. The main ones drawn upon for this study are: P. Bracken, *Light of Other Days: A Dublin Childhood* (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1992); Crowley, *Cowslips and Chainies*; E. Newman Devlin, *Speaking Volumes: A Dublin Childhood* (Belfast: The Blackstaff, 2000); P. Galvin, *Song for a Poor Boy: A Cork Childhood* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1990); Johnston, *Around the Banks of Pimlico*; Kearns Blain, *Stealing Sunlight*; C. Kenneally, *Maura's Boy* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1996); F. Kennedy, *Three Storeys up: Tale of Dublin Tenement Life* (Dublin: Marino Books, 1997); F. O'Connor, *An Only Child* (London: Macmillan, 1961); S. O'Connor, *Growing Up So High: A Liberties Boyhood* (Dublin: Hachette Books Ireland, 2013); P. O'Keefe, *Down Cobbled Streets* (Dingle: Brandon Publishers, 1995).

⁴⁰ A Women's Oral History Archive is a Clare County oral history project directed by Jacquai Hayes. See, www.oralhistorynetworkireland.ie; M. Muldowney, *The Second World War and Irish Women. An Oral History* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007).

⁴¹ Kiely and Leane, *Irish Women at Work 1930-1960*.

⁴² K. Kearns, *Dublin's Lost Heroines: Mammies and Grannies in a Vanished City* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2004), p. 16; See, also, K. Kearns, *Dublin Tenement Life: An Oral History* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994).

⁴³ See, A. Thomson, *Moving Stories: An Intimate History of Four Women Across Two Countries* (Manchester University Press, 2011).

to poverty and the poor, from governmental reports to parliamentary debates, as well as charitable reports, various commissions and more general sources such as newspapers, periodicals and journals. However, the level of textual analysis in this book may make some historians uncomfortable as it pushes the boundaries of what constitutes historical methodological analysis by placing a close reading of these texts at the centre of the narrative.⁴⁴ This is also a conscious act of counterbalance; so much of Irish history is driven by the narratives of official voices and this book challenges the implicit hierarchy often afforded to certain source material. Like the poor themselves, the sources they created have been distrusted, or regarded as inherently unreliable. However, these letters were created in a particular context for a particular purpose – like all other sources – and once this is factored into any analysis they pose no greater challenge to our historical skills than a governmental report into the housing crisis of the 1930s.

A 'New' History from Below

In 2004, Tim Hitchcock wrote of the need to write a 'new history from below' that draws predominantly from the voices of those at the bottom of the social universe.⁴⁵ Martyn Lyons quite consciously responded to this idea in writing his history of the writing culture of ordinary people, explaining that this 'new history from below' is different for four reasons: it re-evaluates individual experience, it seeks out the 'personal and private voices of ordinary people', it explores how 'dominant discourses were actually consumed' by these people and finally, it regards these ordinary voices as active agents (however constricted) in 'shaping ... their own lives and cultures'.⁴⁶ Each of these four components is woven throughout this study of the voices of ordinary Irish Catholics in need in twentieth-century Ireland.

This book draws on the imaginative scholarship of historians like Thomas Sokoll, whose pioneering working on Essex Pauper letters of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has, in many senses, set

⁴⁴ For a beautiful example of this use of letters in relation to history see, Holmes, *Between the Leaves*.

⁴⁵ In Hitchcock's review of Sokoll's *Essex Pauper Letters* he argued that the 'old' history from below had generated a faceless collective approach to the history of those subordinate to the main power structures. T. Hitchcock, 'A new history from below', *History Workshop Journal*, 57 (2004), 294–298.

⁴⁶ M. Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c. 1860–1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 252–255.

the gold standard for dealing with such vibrant and complex source material.⁴⁷ The English pauper letters were generated in the particular context of the English Poor Law, when the pauper needed to write (or have written) a letter to their parish of settlement seeking assistance.⁴⁸ However, Sokoll presents these pauper letters as first-hand accounts of living conditions during the period and as sources that provide accounts from 'below' of the Old Poor Law.⁴⁹ Steven King similarly argues that they offer 'a unique window on the lives, experiences and feelings of the poor'.⁵⁰ These historians have revealed the potential of historical textual analysis for examining the power of rhetoric, the process of self-definition, the contours of shared cultural understanding and negotiation.⁵¹ Although the Irish charity letters were constructed in a very different context, they are nonetheless, like the English pauper letters, 'forms of written evidence created when the poor confronted, and were confronted by, the hierarchies and institutions of authority'⁵² and thus afford similar potential for understanding the experience of seeking charity and living as 'the poor' in early twentieth-century Ireland. Hence, this study explores the writing skills of these Irish petitioners and the degree to which the letter liberated or constrained these authors. It is argued that the relatively safe confines of letter etiquette enabled powerless people to say powerful things. The writers drew on deep cultural understandings of honour, gender, charity and faith to extract a small space for their telling of poverty and, often, an insistence upon their innocence. As Rab Houston has argued, petitions allow us to see 'how cultural scripts were enacted or amended in everyday life'.⁵³

The research and analysis of Sokoll, Joanne Bailey, Jeremy Boulton, Peter Jones, Steven King, Alison Stringer and others on English pauper letters, written over a hundred years before the Irish begging letters to

⁴⁷ T. Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters 1731–1837* (Oxford University Press, 2006); See also, T. Sokoll, 'Negotiating a living: Essex pauper letters from London, 1800–1834', *International Review of Social History*, 45, Supplement 8 (2000), 19–46; T. Sokoll, 'Writing for relief: rhetoric in English pauper letters, 1800–1834' in A. Gestrich, S. King and L. Raphael (eds.), *Being Poor in Modern Europe: Historical Perspectives 1800–1940* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 91–111.

⁴⁸ S. King, 'Pauper letters as a source', *Family & Community*, 10 (2007), 167–170, 167.

⁴⁹ Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters*, pp. 3–4.

⁵⁰ King, 'Pauper letters as a source', 170.

⁵¹ David Fitzpatrick has done something similar for the history of emigration in his analysis of emigrant letters. See, D. Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994).

⁵² T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe (eds.), *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640–1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), pp. 3–5.

⁵³ R. A. Houston, *Peasant Petitions: Social Relations and Economic Life on Landed Estates, 1600–1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 271.

Archbishop Byrne, raise many questions about the degree to which the essences of the poverty narrative crossed temporal and geographical boundaries.⁵⁴ This book will explore the ways in which this Irish collection conforms and/or differs from these earlier English letters and other European examples such as the more formal *Bittbriefe* (petition letters) written in Austria in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵⁵ While accounting for the different time, location and context, there are remarkable similarities between these various collections of 'strategic writing' from below with regard to how their authors 'told' poverty and negotiated within the confines of their respective societies.⁵⁶ Chapter 2 places these Irish letters in this international context and provides a detailed analysis of the Irish letters' main historical and literary features from composition to writing, provenance and representativeness.

The second chapter concludes with a consideration of these letters as sources for the experience of poverty, and addresses questions regarding authenticity and 'truthfulness'. It argues that these letters are authentic insofar as they were almost certainly written by the hand of the sender and for various reasons can be considered representative of those living in poverty, even those that did not write seeking charity. However, with regard to the more controversial issue of truthfulness, the aim of this study is to examine not just what these authors wrote, but how and why they chose to do so, and therefore a distinction is made between notions of truth and fact. It is argued that these letters were attempts at 'self-representation', and for each author poverty had a personal meaning they needed to communicate, even if to do so they had to engage in common tropes, motifs, and possibly, untruths.

⁵⁴ J. Bailey, "'Think wot a mother must feel!"; J. Boulton, "'It is extreme necessity that makes me do this": some "survival strategies" of pauper households in London's West End during the early eighteenth century', *International Review of Social History*, 45, Supplement 8 (2000), 47–69; S. King, 'Regional patterns in the experiences and treatment of the sickpoor, 1800–1840: rights, obligations and duties in the rhetoric of paupers', *Family & Community History*, 10 (2007), 61–75; King, 'Friendship, kinship, and belonging in the letters of urban paupers 1800–1840', *Historical Social Research*, 33 (2008), 249–77; King, 'Negotiating the law of poor relief in England'; King, 'Welfare regimes and welfare regions in Britain and Europe, c. 1750–1860', *Journal of Modern European History*, 9 (2011), 44–67.

⁵⁵ See also, P. J. Jones, "'I cannot keep my place without being deascent": Pauper letters, parish clothing and pragmatism in the South of England, 1750–1830', *Rural History*, 20 (2009), 31–49; C. Hämmerle, 'Requests, complaints, demands. Preliminary thoughts on the petitioning letters of lower-class Austrian women, 1865–1918' in C. Bland and M. Cros (eds.), *Gender and Politics in the Age of Letter Writing, 1750–2000* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 115–134.

⁵⁶ Sokoll, 'Negotiating a living', 29.

This study also enters the increasingly 'lively debate over the character, execution and limits' of the agency of the poor in Europe between the 1700s and the 1900s.⁵⁷ The idea that the poor had some room for negotiation is not new in either history or historiography.⁵⁸ However, recent scholarship based on sources constructed by the poor has added considerable nuance to our understanding of how that space for negotiation was created, mediated and controlled.⁵⁹ While it is essential to appreciate the limits of any agency the poor may have managed to extract, in examining the letters of the poor as places where power was contested we can gain a much deeper understanding of the reality and limitations of that power. Chapter 3, therefore, investigates the ingredients of the 'deserving case', how unemployed men wrote about their sense of failure, mothers bartered faith for food, and the raped, beaten and abused chose their words. It is important to hear as much as possible of what the letter writers were saying, in other words, to allow multiple readings to co-exist thus reflecting the real complexity of writing self and experience in these letters. For example, a letter-writer may have stressed their conversion to Catholicism, as Mrs H. did, as part of a rhetorical strategy because she knew how the hierarchy fretted over such mothers, but she may also have done so because the fact of her conversion made her more vulnerable both within her adopted church and to the manipulation of those outside it. Mrs H. expressed the co-existence of her vulnerability and power within this society of religious wrangling thus:

I have no parents & nobody to help me, owing to the changing of my religion, there is one who I put my trouble to & has offered to help me an Aunt who is a protestant, a sum of money has been offered but I would in return have to return to her faith & also to take what children I could with me, I am 8 years in the Catholic faith & was so happy for I love the only true religion. I am sorry to say that at times I have been tempted to accept this offer, but I pray hard for God to give me strength not to yield to this temptation & that is why I write to you, to see if you could help me over this trouble.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ A. Gestrich, E. Hurren and S. King, 'Narratives of poverty and sickness in Europe 1780–1938: Sources, methods and experiences' in Gestrich, Hurren and King (eds.), *Poverty and Sickness in Modern Europe*, pp. 1–33, 2.

⁵⁸ See, for example, O. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750–1789* (Oxford University Press, 1974); Digby noted that the stereotype of the female applicant as powerless and passive has obscured the potential for empowerment. See, A. Digby, 'Poverty, health, and the politics of gender in Britain, 1870–1948' in A. Digby, and J. Stewart (eds.), *Gender, Health and Welfare* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 69.

⁵⁹ David Gerber provides a very thought-provoking discussion about this 'space' in immigrant letters and how it can be explored. D. Gerber, 'The immigrant letter between positivism and populism: American historians' uses of personal correspondence' in Earle (ed.), *Epistolary Selves*, pp. 37–55.

⁶⁰ Mrs H., X Leinster Rd., Rathmines, Dublin, 15 July 1939.

Mrs H. portrayed herself as both a victim and someone who had the power to decide, however, she wrote to place the ultimate responsibility of her decision at the archbishop's feet. She also demonstrated that a threat of religious defection could, without any apparent contradiction, lie beside a declaration of loyalty. Particular attention is paid to exploring these letters as acts of individual protest embedded in a value-system that the poor actively engaged with allowing them to make calls upon it and their rights within it. These letters are littered with examples of constrained defiance, from argument to everyday resistance, whereby people refused to 'act poor' or threatened defection.⁶¹

This book examines not only how the poor made their case but also what they considered to be the cost of poverty. Chapter 5, in particular, analyses how those in need recorded the impact of want and dependence on their lives. In examining the ways the poor documented the impact of poverty on their lives, this chapter also investigates the various survival strategies employed by these writers beyond the letters, which often exacted their own toll of suffering. These ranged from the remarkable tenacity of the family economy, the pawning and bartering of goods, the ability to play a myriad of relief agencies off one another, to the daily reality of family break up and emigration. Crucially, these letters underscore how these strategies were understood as damaging and were (on these pages) eloquently resented.

It is important also to be attuned to the inherent silences in these sources. These may have been influenced by a multitude of factors: from reticence of the writer, to the cultural emphasis on 'discretion' with regard to certain topics, to the perception of the writer regarding the recipient's bias or priorities. As Peel advocates, this study seeks to read these letters 'against the grain, for their silences and their strategies, and for what lies half-spoken on their edges'.⁶² An Irish Catholic mother writing to her archbishop was unlikely to lament her repeated pregnancies, for example, in the same way as the hundreds of British women in the 1930s who responded to a questionnaire about their lives organised by the Women's Health Enquiry Committee.⁶³ However, there were oblique ways of

⁶¹ J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 233.

⁶² M. Peel, *Miss Cutler*, p. 18.

⁶³ M. Spring Rice, *Working-Class Wives: Their Health and Conditions* (London: Virago, 1981 [1939]). There is no Irish example of the frankness displayed in the letters of French Catholics to Abbé Viollet of the Association du Mariage Chrétien [Christian Marriage Association] between 1924 and 1943. In that collection the strain of unlimited fertility is vividly recorded. See, M. Sevegrand, *L'Amour en Toute Lettres: Questions à l'Abbé Viollet sur la Sexualité (1924–1943)* (Paris: Albin Michel Histoire, 1996).

underscoring that burden. Many Catholic mothers expressed relief when God took their children and thus spared them further poverty, or they referred to being 'burdened with' a large family. The authors of these letters were seeking something and how they framed their narrative was ultimately shaped by that request. All historical sources are mediated by a variety of factors relating to their creation, environment and objective, and begging letters are no exception. The historical debate will lie in how we interpret the impact of these various mediating forces.⁶⁴

This study also uses this specific collection of letters to explore how the Catholic clergy and hierarchy administered charitable relief. It was a requirement of the Archbishop of Dublin's charity that all applicants should have a priest's reference and, as already noted, the priests' letters constitute 23.8 per cent of this collection. Chapter 6 analyses what cases and categories of need were most successful and how the priests interpreted their role as advocate. Unfortunately, the archbishop's rationale is more difficult to discern; the only evidence of his thought process are the notes, often scribbled by his two secretaries, Fr. Patrick Dunne⁶⁵ and Fr. Thomas O'Donnell,⁶⁶ on the top left hand corner of the applicant's letter. However, even this rather rudimentary paper trail has afforded a fairly good map of where the money went revealing the power of the class rationale behind charity in action. While both distrust and compassion underlay the relationship between the Catholic Church and 'its poor', it is essential to understand the human element of both sides of the charity equation, in order to honour the responsibility we have as historians to all protagonists of the past. Some priests were empowered by the quest to hunt out the 'genuine case', others were stressed and demoralised by the process, and yet collectively they perpetuated the system that accepted and depended on the existence of poverty.

Who Were the Poor?

This book is concerned with knowing the poor and understanding their version of poverty, hence Richard Dyson's 'holistic definition of poverty' has been adopted, which includes those dependent on relief and/or charity constantly, intermittently and those who experienced once-off

⁶⁴ In fact, Peter Jones wonders if historians will in time be criticised for implying the poor dissembled and strategised to extract assistance. Jones, "I cannot keep my place without being deascent", 41.

⁶⁵ Patrick Dunne, born 1891, ordained 1913 and died 1988. J. A. Gaughan, *The Archbishops, Bishops and Priests who served in the Archdiocese of Dublin 1900–2011* (Dublin: Kingdom Books, 2012), p. 94.

⁶⁶ Thomas Harris O'Donnell, born 1893, ordained 1917 and died 1973. Gaughan, *The Archbishops, Bishops and Priests*, p. 219.

encounters with poverty.⁶⁷ This is effectively the approach advocated by Gestrich, King and Raphael who argue that there is no such thing as a 'clear cut poverty line in any given society, but that poverty takes place when a situation of penury combines with social practices of assistance and categorization'.⁶⁸ Thus, this book explores the letters written to the archbishop from the categorically impoverished, scraping together every source of income or relief and still failing to pay rent or secure adequate food, and letters from those who lived in 'nice homes' with good pensions, but through accepted social pressures required assistance to avoid losing their social status. These two criteria of need represent opposite ends of a broad spectrum of poverty; in the middle were the many, many families struggling with the daily hazards of life from bereavement to domestic violence, all requiring financial assistance of some kind.

Crudely, the hierarchy of those at risk of poverty ran something like: widows, mothers with large families with absent or unemployed fathers, children, the sick and single elderly women.⁶⁹ In fact, the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers provided a revealing list of its main clients, in order of priority: widows with children, families in which the breadwinner is unemployed, invalids requiring extra nourishment, those in need of attire to seek employment and petty dealers in need of new stock.⁷⁰ While it was generally accepted that people were more susceptible to poverty at certain vulnerable phases of the life cycle, this too was highly gendered⁷¹: women were more exposed to such hardship by pregnancy, childbirth, while caring for young children, when faced with the loss of a spouse and in old age.⁷² The idea that poverty's greatest victims were women and children was universally accepted and borne out by the figures on Home Assistance. In 1931 there were 77,474 people in receipt of Home Assistance; of these, 15,339 were men, 24,786 were women and 37,349 were children.⁷³ By the end of the decade (despite the

⁶⁷ R. Dyson, 'Who were the poor of Oxford of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries?' in Gestrich, King and Raphael (eds.), *Being Poor in Modern Europe*, pp. 43–68.

⁶⁸ Gestrich, King and Raphael (eds.), *Being Poor in Modern Europe*, p. 31.

⁶⁹ The observation regarding widows' vulnerability to poverty is often made regarding other periods and places. See, for example, Boulton, 'It is extreme necessity that makes me do this', p. 53.

⁷⁰ D. Lindsay, *Dublin's Oldest Charity: The Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers Society, 1790–1990* (Dublin: The Anniversary Press, 1990), p. 81.

⁷¹ S. Williams, *Poverty, Gender and Life-Cycle under the English Poor Law 1760–1834* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011).

⁷² Dyson, 'Who were the poor of Oxford of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries?' p. 50; S. Woolf, *The Poor in Western Europe in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 3.

⁷³ *Department of Local Government and Public Health: First Report, 1930–31* (Dublin: The Stationary Office, 1932), p. 124.

introduction of more comprehensive Unemployment Assistance (1933) and a Widows' and Orphans' Pension (1935)), there were 89,511 on Home Assistance; of these, 19,791 were men, 29,120 women and 40,600 were children.⁷⁴ While men were by no means immune to poverty, they were less likely to be the primary carers of either children or elderly relatives and they had more social options at their disposal (like seasonal migration). Women with dependent children also constituted the majority of those who wrote to the Archbishop of Dublin seeking assistance, in fact, if you had no family it was often quite hard to be considered for charity or relief.⁷⁵ This is borne out by the profile of writers to the archbishop with one caveat: as the 1930s dawned the unemployed breadwinner began to feature more prominently in the charitable hierarchy of concern. This was both because of the introduction of the Widows' and Orphans' Pension in 1935 (in reality too small to stave off anything but the sharpest edge of need) and the deepening crisis of male unemployment. This shift is also reflected in applications to the Saint Vincent de Paul and the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers.

The shame attached to the label 'poor' drove many people to hide their poverty and has resulted in a significant underestimation of those who were actually in need at any given time. Chapter 4 considers the correspondence of those who were in the process of 'becoming poor' or who had fallen temporarily from their relatively privileged perch in society. These people did not swell the statistical ranks of the poor. Instead, they struggled beneath the surface of Irish society, trapped by their own understandings of the stigma of being identified as poor. This tendency to hide their poverty has also skewed our historical understanding of poverty itself. It was often a much more transient experience than has been previously thought, touching people's lives temporarily or periodically.⁷⁶ Stuart Woolf noted in his study of the poor in Western Europe that sources imply a 'static state of being poor, which tends to ignore or mask the fluidity and gradualness of the process by which people decline,

⁷⁴ *Department of Local Government and Public Health: First Report, 1939–40* (Dublin: The Stationary Office, 1941), p. 72.

⁷⁵ This is a common finding across time and geography, for example, Boulton also found that the elderly and widows with children were most likely to receive assistance in eighteenth-century England. Boulton, "It is extreme necessity that makes me do this", 53; Dyson, 'Who were the poor of Oxford of the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries?' p. 50; T. Sokoll, 'Old age in poverty: the record of Essex pauper letters, 1780–1834' in Hitchcock, King and Sharpe (eds.), *Chronicles of Poverty*, pp. 127–154.

⁷⁶ Dyson raised these issues when arguing for a more holistic interpretation of poverty. See Dyson, 'Who were the poor of Oxford of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries?' pp. 43–68.

sometimes more than once, into a condition of poverty.⁷⁷ This idea of decline and the sense of the perpetual threat of poverty hanging over people's head permeated the letters written to the Archbishop of Dublin well into the twentieth century. While theirs was a relative poverty – relative to the profound and long-term deprivation of the slum dwellers – it was nonetheless real and altered, fundamentally, people's life choices resulting in considerable stress and mental anguish. This chapter considers the role ideas of character, charity, gender and social status played in the construction of these poverty stories. It also provides two detailed case studies – one of a solicitor's widow and the other of an erstwhile businessman struggling to regain his social and financial footing – in order to probe the construction of a middle-class narrative.

Conclusion

Olwen Hufton has argued that writing the history of the poor is 'predominantly a qualitative not a quantitative exercise'. She urged the social historian to consider evidence relating to how poverty was experienced, however 'fragmentary or impressionistic' it might be, and to make it the 'very heart of the matter'. If this was not done she warned that we could have no idea or understanding of 'the way the poor maintained their tenuous grip on life'.⁷⁸ In this study the letters and voices of the poor do not constitute the 'hidden underpinnings' of historical research, they are the focus of research.⁷⁹ By using the words of the poor to provide the narrative thrust, the book keeps the human element central, which is often lost when the framework of the history is policy and legislation. Thus this is in many senses a history of *mentalité* in which an understanding of behaviour, values and negotiation strategies of the poor take centre stage. While this study runs the risk of privileging 'the noisy poor' or those with the ability to write for charity,⁸⁰ it is a calculated risk and one based on a conviction that these letters, in their essence, represent many features of living in poverty in modern Ireland that were universal for much of the period. In many ways these letters allow us to create an alternative narrative of the history of Irish independence, one in which the lost and forgotten tell the story. This is a history of poverty written through the letters of the poor.

⁷⁷ Woolf, *The Poor in Western*, p. 4.

⁷⁸ Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, pp. 7–8.

⁷⁹ Earle, 'Introduction: letters, writers and the historian', p. 1.

⁸⁰ S. King, "'Stop this overwhelming torment of destiny": negotiating financial aid at times of sickness under the English Old Poor Law, 1800–1840', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 79 (2005), 228–260, 239.