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NINETEENTH-CENTURY NIMBYS, OR WHAT THE NEIGHBOUR SAW? POVERTY, SURVEILLANCE, AND THE BOARDING-OUT OF POOR LAW CHILDREN IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BELFAST

By Olwen Purdue

Nineteenth-century Ireland saw the emergence of a campaign to have orphaned and abandoned children ‘boarded out’ from workhouses to live with families in return for payment. Despite growing anxiety about the unsuitability of workhouses for children, communities could show resistance to having these children, particularly those from urban workhouses, living in their own neighbourhood. Using the case of alleged abuse towards three children boarded out from Belfast workhouse to a family living in a remote rural townland, this paper explores the experience of, and attitudes towards, workhouse children boarded into rural communities. Using testimonies of neighbours and poor law officials at the resultant 1872 Poor Law inquiry, it examines the relationship between the children, their foster family, and the wider community and reveals the extent to which those families who took in workhouse children became subject to surveillance not just from welfare authorities but also from members of their community.

KEYWORDS: Boarding-out; urban; poverty; children; workhouse; surveillance

Introduction

In April 1872 a Poor Law inquiry was held in the boardroom of Belfast workhouse to investigate allegations regarding the ill-treatment of three workhouse children who had been ‘boarded out’ to a family in Hannahstown, a small, remote settlement in the hills to the west of Belfast. The three boys - two brothers aged nine and seven and a third, described in the Belfast Newsletter as ‘a scrofulous little child aged nineteen months’ - had been sent to live with a Mr and Mrs Fletcher two years previously, and now came to the attention of the poor law authorities due to concerns raised by neighbours that the three children were being neglected and possibly beaten. In response to these allegations, two poor

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law officials visited the house unannounced. They found the children alone in the house and observed that the boys were thinly dressed, that there was no sign of a fire having been lit in the house, and no evidence that there was any food available. A number of locals later testified that the children regularly went round the other houses in the area begging for food and ate what they were given voraciously, as though they were starving. Some also reported having seen bruising on the children and heard them express fear of being beaten.\(^2\)

This particular incident, widely reported in the local press, highlights the precariousness of destitute children who ended up in the care of the Irish Poor Law, and the limitations of the welfare infrastructures that were in place for the purpose of protecting those children, particularly in an urban context. The media reports of the subsequent inquiry and the records of Belfast’s poor law authorities also reveal some interesting and quite complex societal attitudes that existed towards the placing of pauper children in private homes, some of which have echoes of the twentieth-century phenomenon known as NIMBY (or ‘Not in my backyard!’). While this term generally refers to the opposition, particularly of affluent middle-class communities, to the development of infrastructure or large-scale projects in their neighbourhood, it also implies a resistance, based on class or race, to the location of social-service facilities or affordable housing.\(^3\) Papers relating to the development and administration of the nascent system of fostering workhouse children in late nineteenth-century Belfast provide occasional glimpses into similar class-based tensions as local communities reacted to receiving these children into their neighbourhoods. This was against a backdrop of growing concern about the practice of keeping orphaned and abandoned children in metropolitan workhouses and an increasing demand for a change in legislation to facilitate the boarding out of such children into these same neighbourhoods. In the context of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Belfast, these class tensions were overlaid by deep sectarian divisions that ran perpendicular to those of class, thus complicating the landscape of boarding out and the reception of workhouse children into homes and communities.

The incident referred to at the outset of this article occurred at a time of urban and social transition in the north east of Ireland. It was a period of transition in the economic and social structures of Belfast which between 1850 and 1914 grew rapidly from being a large mercantile town into a major industrial city at the heart of a global trade network, and with a population that had trebled in just a few decades to make it, briefly, Ireland’s largest city.\(^4\) It was also a period of transition in societal attitudes towards the welfare of destitute children and the role that welfare authorities in the social and moral regulation of the lives and domestic spaces of the poor. This was a time of intense public debate over how the Irish Poor Law should deal with destitute children – whether they should be kept in workhouses where they could be monitored and trained, or be boarded out to families where they would be removed from the negative physical and moral influences of workhouse life.\(^5\) It was also a period when the development of child
welfare practices facilitated increasing state and societal intervention in family life, particularly the families of the poor. By the end of the nineteenth century there was a growing belief that, in many cases, needy children were best brought up away from the corrupting influence of parents, and philanthropic groups and the state alike seemed to be increasingly willing to extend their transforming mission into the home. The boarding out of workhouse children into poor and working-class families, in necessitating close monitoring of these children and their surroundings, gave welfare authorities a route into the domestic spaces of the poor, thus facilitating a close surveillance of these families and a rationale for laying down regulations about what a ‘decent’ home and family environment should look like.7

Taking the Hannahstown incident in 1870s Belfast as a case study, this article explores some of the challenges of effectively administering and monitoring the welfare of boarded out children, particularly in the context of a rapidly-growing industrial city deeply divided along religious and ethno-political lines. It also sheds light on some of the ways in which the development of boarding out facilitated the surveillance of the domestic spaces of the urban poor not only by middle-class philanthropists and welfare authorities but by the communities themselves, as they adopted middle-class ideas of ‘respectability’ in making value judgements on their neighbours. Using reports of the poor law inquiry into the case, it provides a rare glimpse into the lived experiences of boarded-out children of the state. And, despite all the public support behind the boarding out of workhouse children, it reveals some of the negative attitudes that existed at local level towards workhouse children and the families that took them in.

Removing children from the workhouse

By the latter decades of the nineteenth century, cities were widely held to represent a dangerous environment for the children of the poor, with many individuals and organisations campaigning to have them removed from urban environments. But the dangers facing young children who ended up confined in metropolitan workhouses was seen as representing an even greater threat. As Alysa Levene has demonstrated, this had been a cause of concern in England since the late eighteenth century.8 The introduction a nation-wide system of workhouses under the New English Poor Law of 1834 further increased the institutionalisation of pauper children in England; however, as Hugh Cunningham has demonstrated, the large residential institutions for children that had proliferated during the early part of the nineteenth century had, by the 1870s, largely been replaced by alternative systems.9 In Scotland, the boarding-out of orphaned and abandoned children to foster parents was the norm, having been practiced since at least as early as the late eighteenth century. As Lynn Abrams has shown, by the mid-nineteenth century large urban areas such as Glasgow were using boarding out to rural Scotland as the primary means of providing welfare for Poor Law children.10
Poor Law, however, made little or no provision for children outside the workhouse. Like the New English Poor Law on which it was largely modelled, the Irish Poor Law was predicated on the principle of the ‘workhouse test’ – the idea that relief would only take the form of admission into the workhouses which were built in towns across the country for the reception of paupers. Amending legislation in response to the intense pressure of the Great Famine of 1845-49 had allowed some relaxation of these strict rules for certain groups but once the worst impact of the Famine passed many boards of guardians, particularly in the north, quickly reverted to imposing the strictest of limitations on outdoor relief. Crossman writes that ‘once the workhouse system was established, local poor law authorities proved reluctant to look beyond it or to countenance the additional expenditure that specialist services would involve’. This reluctance to grant outdoor relief in any form contributed to concerns regarding the wellbeing of destitute children, particularly motherless infants, and pressure mounted to have legislation passed to permit poor law guardians to send infants out to nurse. This led to the passing of a Poor Law Amendment Act in 1862 which authorised poor law guardians to board out abandoned or orphaned children up to the age of five to families in return for a small payment.

While this piece of legislation was generally welcomed, many felt that it was only a start, and that the upper age limit of the provision needed to be extended to prevent boarded-out children from being returned to the workhouse at an early age. A public campaign built across the country, led by philanthropists, social reformers and medical practitioners. A letter sent by the Dublin College of Physicians to the Chief Secretary for Ireland several months after the passing of the Act, for example, put forward strong medical arguments for keeping children out of the workhouse until they were much older than five. It argued that by the age of five children’s second teeth were just developing, their bones, muscles and organs were not fully formed, and damage to delicate tissue such as eyes and glands could lead to a significantly increased chance of developing disease such as ophthalmia. ‘No cause is more likely to injure the constitution’, it argued, ‘than removal at too early an age from the pure air of the country to the atmosphere of a workhouse’. In their annual report of 1869 the Poor Law Commissioners recommended that the boarding out of orphaned and abandoned children in workhouses should be extended to children aged up to ten, at the discretion of Boards of Guardians. This recommendation was adopted by an act of Parliament that same year, and in their report of the following year the commissioners were pleased to report that the daily numbers of children boarded out in Ireland had risen from 689 to 1207, due both to the extension in the age limit and to the increased numbers of boards of guardians willing to adopt the scheme.

The late nineteenth-century system of family cottages which developed for poor law children in England never took off in Ireland, so in many cases education and industrial training was provided within the workhouse. For parentless children who remained in the system, there was therefore no escaping the confines of the
workhouse. The demand to have such children fostered out to private homes grew, with social reformers such as Isabella Tod campaigning vigorously throughout the 1860s and 70s for legislation which would actually compel guardians to remove older orphaned and deserted children from the workhouse and have them fostered with families in rural areas. Tod claimed that the keeping of children in institutions represented ‘an outrage on nature’ the result of which was ‘seen in stunted frames and weakened minds’. She and others argued that the removal of children from the workhouse was necessary not just for their physical good, but also for their moral welfare, and for the physical and moral health of the next generation, a reflection of the growing preoccupation across Britain with healthy children as vitally important for the future of the nation. Eventually legislation in 1889 extended the age at which Irish poor law guardians had responsibility for orphaned and abandoned children, giving them control over deserted children up to the age of 16 for boys and 18 for girls. Further – and quite significant - legislation passed a decade later extended this control beyond parentless children to those children whose parents were deemed unsuitable to care for them, something that marked a sea-change in just how interventionist welfare authorities were becoming. This, and other pieces of legislation were extended and formalised by the Children Act of 1908; however the difficulties surrounding fostering out continued to present a significant barrier to the effective development of boarding out in many parts of the country.

Practicalities

It was one thing for poor law guardians to have the legislative authority to remove children from the workhouse and place them in suitable homes; however, to have either the will or the capacity to do so effectively was another matter, and some Irish poor law unions seemed very reluctant to take advantage of the increasing powers vested in them for this purpose. The adoption and application of the practice of boarding out was a local decision, the slow take-up of boarding out being, as Crossman puts it, ‘a consequence of the misgivings of local guardians, not the poor law commissioners’. In 1871 the Irish Poor Law Commissioners reported that, while there was some increase in the numbers of children being boarded out, many boards of guardians were still not engaging with the process in any way. Reports in 1873 from regional inspectors to the newly-established Local Government Board for Ireland (which had replaced the Poor Law Commission in 1872) indicated that uptake was patchy at best. The more urbanised parts of the country tended to have embraced it more fully than overwhelmingly rural regions and in parts of the south and west only a small minority of unions were boarding out a handful of children. One of the strongest arguments put forward against the boarding out of children regarded the monitoring of their wellbeing – that, once outside the workhouse, it would be very difficult to ensure that they were being adequately fed
and clothed. In general, children tended to be boarded out to poorer families in return for a small stipend – an important source of income for many of the families that took children in. The rate of payment varied greatly from one region to another, and could range from £4 per year in parts of rural Ireland to £7 per year in north Dublin Union; according to one poor law inspector’s report, the persons selected as nurses are the wives of small farmers and labourers, and in some cases of tradesmen and jobsmen, but the great majority of the children are placed in the families of labourers or persons holding a small portion of land.  

This, however, raised concerns that poor families would take in a workhouse child purely as a source of additional income or of labour, and reinforced the importance of ensuring adequate supervision, something that appears to have been lacking in the early days of the scheme. The Relieving Officer of each union had responsibility for visiting each child monthly and reporting back to the guardians on their physical state. Beyond this, it was up to each board of guardians to put measures in place. Some boards asked that the children be brought to the workhouse for inspection two or three times each year; most required their Relieving Officer to provide a monthly written report on each child, while others were content with a verbal report at the board meetings. Dr Roughan, Poor Law Inspector for the Sligo area, where some children had been boarded in very unsuitable homes and where they were found to be scantily dressed and poorly nourished, was very sceptical of the value of the Relieving Officers’ reports, stating that he placed no value whatever on the inspection of Relieving Officers. They think they acquit themselves of all responsibility by the payment of the weekly or monthly stipend. If practicable, the duty of inspection once, at least, in two months should be discharged by the Medical Officer of the district, the result of which to be reported quarterly to the Board of Guardians, offering such suggestions as he may deem necessary for the welfare, physical and otherwise, of each child.

As the case of the Hannahstown children demonstrates, there were particular issues around finding suitable families – and ensuring that they were adequately inspected – in large towns and cities. When city children were boarded out to families living in rural areas beyond the city, it was difficult to ensure regular monitoring other than the often cursory inspections of the Relieving Officers. The difficulty of finding suitable homes for boarding out poor law children from Belfast workhouse was exacerbated by physical geography. Under Poor Law regulations children were to be boarded out in rural areas as the whole idea was to remove them from the corrupting influences of the city – therefore families had to be identified who lived within the union but beyond the city boundaries. As Belfast is closely bounded on all sides either by mountains or the sea, most of the rural areas within its poor law union were situated, like Hannahstown, in upland areas where the land was rough and the housing poor, often lacking in the basics such as sanitation and access to fresh water, and where families remained well beyond the
supervisory gaze of Poor Law officials. Even as late as 1904, a Poor Law Inspector would comment that

The Boarding Out committee continues to carry out its work in a careful and thorough manner. Its numbers are somewhat increased so that all the children, with perhaps the exception of those in Hannahstown [italics mine], are now regularly visited.28

The situation in Belfast was further complicated by the city’s landscape of sectarian division, and by the requirement of the Poor Law that children should be boarded out to co-religionist families. It was generally easier to find suitable families for Protestant children as the rural areas to the east of the city such as the Craigantlet and Holywood hills, where the land was good, tended to be occupied by better-off farmers and labourers most of whom were Protestant. In the case of Catholic children, boarding out presented much more of a challenge as beyond the city boundaries Belfast’s Catholic population tended to occupy the poorer upland areas to the north and west and where the quality of housing and the environment was often considered unsuitable for poor law children. Catholic children made up a sizeable proportion of the workhouse population – on census night 1901, for example, of the 376 children aged 15 and under in Belfast workhouse, 139, or just under 37 percent, were registered as Roman Catholic – and yet it was much more challenging to find them homes that were deemed suitable.29

This particular issue, and also the strength of local resistance to receiving workhouse children, was highlighted in 1901 when Belfast Board of Guardians raised the possibility of sending some to families in the rural Catholic parish of Holywood and Sydenham, to the east of the city. In a letter to the Local Government Board, the parish priest, Father James O’Laverty, expressed his strong opposition to the scheme, highlighting the difficulty of finding suitable Catholic families in the rural areas around Belfast. His objections reveal prevailing middle-class ideas regarding both the type of families who should be accepting children, and those who in all likelihood would end up receiving them; but also reveal a general objection to the reception of workhouse children in his parish. In particular, he played on fears of ‘baby-farming’ which were rife at the time. The practice of women taking in infants, in some cases in large numbers, for financial reward had gained notoriety in public imagination through a number of high-profile and highly-sensationalised scandals which had dominated the British press in the 1870s and 80s. This practice had long represented an important strategy for survival for many unmarried mothers, or working mothers with too many mouths to feed, but by the second half of the nineteenth century had developed into something of an underground industry in Britain’s larger cities.30 The most notorious case involved Margaret Waters, dubbed the ‘Brixton Baby-Farmer’, who was executed in 1870 for having taken in and killed infants for a one-off fee.31 The very public profile of the Waters case galvanised public opinion and led to the implementation of the 1872 Infant Life Protection Act, which required paid
nurses receiving more than one infant into their care to register with local authorities. However, while Sarah-Ann Buckley shows that there is little evidence that large-scale baby-farming took place in Ireland, the possibility that it might take place certainly seems to have lingered in popular imagination.\textsuperscript{32} O’Laverty certainly had no qualms about using the threat to bolster his case: ‘There are in these places’, he wrote, ‘no respectable Catholics who would become foster parents for such. Persons would however be found who for the money given would enter into the business of baby farming’. He also drew on a common but dubious historical narrative of dispossession to emphasise the general difficulty of finding suitable Catholic families in the rural areas around Belfast.

It would be desirable that such children should be boarded out by farmers – now there is not in this parish … even one Catholic farmer, nor is there in the Poor Law Union of Belfast, outside a very small district at the base of the Belfast Mountains, half a dozen of Catholic farmers. Such are the effects of the clearance of the native Irish made by the Scotch plantation nearly 300 years ago.

While it is clear that there were difficulties in finding homes that matched the ideals that both Poor Law authorities and society held as being suitable for receiving workhouse children, there can be little doubt that these arguments played a supporting role to O’Laverty’s strongest and most straightforward objection to the scheme which was the undesirability of having poor law children living in his parish. ‘Formerly,’ he declared, ‘such children were boarded here and in almost every case they turned out very unsatisfactorily’.\textsuperscript{33} This resistance to bringing ‘disreputable’ children into respectable middle-class areas was once again echoed in 1912 when a group of residents of the affluent suburb of Malone close to Queen’s University objected to the opening of a ‘Home for Babies’ as a shelter for infants born to unmarried mothers. One writer to the \textit{Northern Whig} expressed his ‘outrage’ in no uncertain terms:

Surely they could easily have got a house for their purpose, a most laudable purpose, and for many reasons more suitable in the outskirts of the city, away from private residences, schools etc. Owners of property in Botanic Avenue, University Street, and immediate neighbourhood are under obligation to Mr McConnell for his timely intervention. I am not personally interested, but as a trustee for the owner of property likely to be seriously affected I will gladly join in any concerted action which may be necessary in order to hinder the carrying out what looks like being little short of an outrage upon a respectable residential community.\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{The Hannahstown inquiry}

As the poor law inquiry into the case of the children boarded out in the rural townland of Hannahstown almost thirty years earlier demonstrates, resistance to housing the children of the poorest classes in particular neighbourhoods was not confined to middle-class residential areas, but also seemed to have manifest itself among poorer communities. This particular case provides some insights into the social dynamics of the communities in which these children were placed, and
demonstrates the extent to which the poor families who took in workhouse children were not just subjects of surveillance by the state in the form of poor law authorities, but also by the communities of which they were a part. The report of the case also offers some rare and interesting glimpses of the lived experience of poor law children and the families that took them in as seen through the eyes of neighbours rather than welfare authorities or middle-class philanthropists. Records documenting the experiences of poor law children, particularly those who have been sent out to live with families, are generally difficult to find but particularly so in an Irish context where so many valuable records were destroyed in the early twentieth century. Even without these particular challenges, it is difficult to reconstruct the lives of boarded-out children - the poorer classes rarely left written records of their experiences, but poor children hardly ever so. Workhouse records at least offer evidence of children’s existence: indoor registers show when they entered and left the workhouse, while children may occasionally appear in the minute books of boards of guardians’ meetings due to particular problems regarding, for example, behaviour and punishment. Once they leave the workhouse and enter a private home, however, they all but disappear from view, particularly in this period before regular inspections and reports on boarded out children became a regular feature of poor law children.

This inquiry, reported in the pages of the *Belfast News-letter*, briefly shone a spotlight on three workhouse children, the home into which they were boarded out, and the wider community of which they were a part, with evidence from neighbours, members of the wider community, and poor law officials providing tantalising, and often conflicting, glimpses of these children’s lives. The inquiry, held in April 1872, was sparked by an unannounced visit to the home of Mrs Fletcher, ‘nurse’ or foster parent to these children, by Mr Watt, master of the workhouse, and Mr Thomas Gaffikin, linen manufacturer, town councillor, chairman of the Water Trust, and poor law guardian. Their visit was in response to a complaint which the board of guardians had received from a Mr McCance, ‘a gentleman who resided in that neighbourhood’, who had apparently heard from some local people that the workhouse children boarded out with Mrs Fletcher ‘were not properly cared for and that they were begging about the neighbourhood’.

Gaffikin and Watt testified that they had found the children alone in the house. The door had been opened by the younger of the brothers, aged around seven, who was carrying an infant in his arms. An older girl, Mrs Fletcher’s daughter, was also present, and the workhouse boy seemed to be quite afraid of what she might tell her mother about the visit. Another small child, who had also been boarded out to the family, and who was described as ‘very delicate’, was sitting beside the empty fire grate. Gaffikin’s own impression was that the house was cold, untidy and devoid of food, but that the children appeared healthy enough. On asking the boy if he had been begging around the neighbourhood, the boy became distressed and admitted that he had asked neighbours for food, but also that stated that he had been fed that morning.
Closer analysis of the testimony of those connected in various ways with the family and Hannahstown community, reported in the *Belfast Newsletter* and in the Board of Guardians minute, throws up some interesting questions.\(^38\) Those who testified could be divided into a number of groups. First there were the poor law medical professionals: Dr Johnston, the workhouse medical officer; and Dr McConnell, dispensary doctor for the Hannahstown district. There were the local gentry and middle-class professionals: Finlay McCann, local magistrate and the Fletchers’ landlord; Patrick Troddyn, the schoolteacher who taught the boarded-out brothers; Rev Samuel Morrison, the Church of Ireland clergyman of whom the Fletchers were parishioners; and the local Catholic curate. Finally there were the family’s neighbours and other members of the community: Mrs Hatton, Hugh McCaul, George Linn and Owen Mullan, Mr Burrows, gamekeeper to McCann, and Isabel Maloney who at one time had stayed with the Fletchers. So what did these various groups and individuals have to say about the children and the Fletchers? Both of the medical men spoke positively about the physical health of the three children. Dr Johnston thought their condition was ‘very favourable’. When he had asked the boys about food they said they got tea and bread in the morning and porridge and milk for supper and they seemed very upset at the idea that they might have to return to the workhouse. The dispensary doctor likewise stated that they were healthy: when the two brothers were sent to live with Mrs Fletcher they had been suffering from a skin problem, which he treated, and which had since cleared up. The local gentry and professional classes were also fairly favourable in their assessment of the family. Their landlord, McCann, had only heard about the children third-hand and therefore couldn’t really comment. Their clergyman had only good things to say:

> I have seen the two workhouse children from time to time at the Sunday School and also at the day-school ... The children always struck me as being the neatest and healthiest in the school. Their clothes were trimmer than those of the other children and their general condition was above the average. I often wished the other children were as tidy.\(^39\)

The schoolteacher also commented on their neat appearance and that they were fairly regular in attendance. Only the Roman Catholic priest, Father Conway’s curate, thought otherwise, having told Gaffikin that the children were in the habit of begging, that he had had to send them home from the school on account of them not being clean, and, tellingly, that he would have reported then to the School Board ‘but that he felt a delicacy on account of the children being of another religion’.\(^40\)

Then, there were assorted inhabitants of the Hannahstown neighbourhood, many of whom had quite different things to say, testifying that the children appeared ill-treated and under-fed, that they roamed the neighbourhood begging for food, and that they lived in fear of being beaten by Mrs Fletcher. Burrow, the gamekeeper, said that the children frequently visited his house begging for food and eating as though they were hungry. He also said that the boys occasionally
bore bruises and a black eye, the result of beatings by Mrs Fletcher. He concluded that

from the appearance of the children and from what they told me I considered them badly treated. The children appeared destitute, dull in spirits and from what I saw, together with what they told me, I considered they were not well treated. They appeared to be healthy enough looking.41

McCaul testified that the older boy had a black eye, which he said had been given him by Mrs Fletcher; while Mullan, a local farmer, said one of the children once asked him for something when they met on the road and that he had given him a few coppers. Mrs Hatton said that they regularly came to her for food and that she was in the habit of giving them bread and milk. That they sometimes asked for meat, that she told them to come to her house every day after school, and that when she asked them if they wanted to leave Mrs Fletcher’s (a leading question if ever there was one) they said they did. On the other hand, Linn, a friend of the Fletchers, said that he was in their house regularly and that the children were well fed. And Isabel Maloney, who had lived with the Fletchers while working as a cook in the police station, said she never knew of the children being treated badly

So far as I saw there was no difference in the treatment of her own and the workhouse children. They had a nice little bed in which the child Sands slept and at night the foot of it was partially put under another bed. I never saw any of the children with a black eye. I have seen the children beaten with a switch, but I have seen their own family get twice as much.42

The minutes of a Board of Guardians meeting held several weeks earlier, the day after the boys had been removed from the Fletcher’s home, shed further light on the matter. One of the guardians, Mr Macrory, who had accompanied the workhouse officials to Hannahstown to bring the children back to the workhouse, reported that they found Fletcher’s house ‘clean and tidy and the children well clad, clean in person, and apparently well cared for’. He added that he had examined nine other children in the neighbourhood, and the children with Mrs Fletcher ‘as far as health and cleanliness would bear a fair if not a superior comparison with any of the others visited. Mrs Fletcher was also questioned, and stated that the children were always treated in the same way as her own children. She added that

If the committee thought proper to ask for an inquiry on oath she would be most happy to attend to disprove the statements made and clear her character with the public and especially with her own neighbours where the matter is much talked of. 43

The medical staff in the workhouse confirmed that the children’s health had definitely improved under Mrs Fletcher’s care. The workhouse nurse testified that the younger child, Sands, had been ‘very feeble and unable to walk and had a sore on its back’ when he originally left the workhouse. When the child arrived at Mrs Fletcher’s he had been suffering from a sore on his back which had ulcerated. The child was treated for a three-month period by one of the Dispensary Medical
Officers and was now described as being ‘in much better health than when [Mrs Fletcher] received it and is now able to walk’. The Poor Law Resident Surgeon, on examining the children, declared that the two brothers were both in good health and seem to have been properly cared for, and the child Sands, while ‘scrofulous and otherwise constitutionally delicate’, had no longer any sores on his body. While the emphasis on all these reports was on the physical, outward appearances – the cleanliness of the house and of the children, and the state of their physical health - it should be noted that McCrory, the guardian who went to fetch the children, also commented on the apparent emotional attachment that existed between Mrs Fletcher and the three boys, stating that the children ‘appeared to have been very attached to Mrs Fletcher and that they had to be removed from her by force’.

Finally, and interestingly, the children themselves got to speak, providing a very rare moment in which the voices of boarded-out workhouse children appear in the records, even if they have been filtered by the recording clerk’s reporting of proceedings. All three boys were brought before the committee, but it was the older of the two brothers who spoke on their behalf. They stated that he got the same food as Mrs Fletcher’s own children: ‘tea to their breakfast and supper and sometimes porridge and sweet milk for supper, potatoes and milk for dinner and sometimes broth and beef’. Importantly he also stated that ‘they would rather be with Mrs Fletcher whom they term their Ma [italics mine] as in the workhouse’. The end result of the inquiry was that the children were returned to the Fletchers on the basis that the children’s health had improved under their care and that the children themselves had formed an attachment to Mrs Fletcher in particular.

As in all such situations, it is clear that much of what was said regarding the treatment of these workhouse children was a matter of personal interpretation: what one person considered to be abuse was, to someone else, reasonable physical chastisement; one person’s neglect was another’s freedom. Those who testified do, however, seem to have been broadly divided into two types of attitude shown towards the Fosters and the workhouse children, and seem to have been roughly divided along the lines of how they were connected to the family – whether they encountered them in a professional capacity or as neighbours. They were also broadly divided by both class and denominational identification. None of those who encountered the children in a professional capacity, for example, felt there was any particular cause for concern about how the workhouse children were cared for. Rather, the observations of workhouse officials and medical staff was that the children appeared clean, well-fed, that their physical health had improved under the Fletchers’ care and that they were happier living with the Fletcher family than being returned to the workhouse, while the school teacher and the family’s clergyman both commented on the regularity of their attendance at school and on how favourable their appearance was. On the other hand, many of the Fletcher’s neighbours and those who lived in the wider community of Hannahstown were very forthright in their condemnation, pointing to the fact
that the children regularly begged for food, that they appeared ill-treated and frightened of their foster parents, and that one of them was seen with bruises. Only the two local people who were friendly with the family testified that the children appeared to have plenty to eat and to be treated as well as the Fletcher's own children. This division of opinion raises a number of possibilities.

Firstly, it brings into question the motives of some of the neighbours. While some of their insistence on the fact that the children were ill-treated arose out of concern for the children, it seems clear that some of it, at least, was driven by a desire to get these workhouse children sent back to the workhouse. There certainly seems to have been local resistance to the housing of workhouse children in the community. Owen Mullan, the local farmer, finished up his statement with the telling observation that ‘there are a good many of the people object to these children being at Hannahstown and that the proper place for them would be the poorhouse. They consider that the school is crowded enough without these children being sent to it’. Meanwhile, Finlay McCann, the magistrate, in the middle of his testimony, made the seemingly incongruous and unprompted comment that ‘I have no reason to suppose that there exists at Hannahstown a desire to get these children out of the place’. The very thought that he felt the need to deny this suggests that there was a possibility that the people of Hannahstown did not want these workhouse children living in their neighbourhood. Whether part of a deliberate campaign or, as is more likely, driven by a more subconscious dislike of having these workhouse children in their community, it seems possible that the accounts of bruises, beatings, and starving children, even if grounded in some truth, were exaggerated with the purpose of getting the children sent back to the workhouse.

It is also possible that the neighbours’ disapproval was aimed at the Fletchers rather than at the workhouse children. There are certainly hints that a degree of sectarian feeling lay behind some of the negative reports of the Fletchers and their treatment of the children. The Fletchers were Protestants living in an overwhelmingly Catholic area - in the 1901 census, for example, all the families living in the parish of Hannahstown were registered as Roman Catholic. In the context of the sectarian tensions of these times, particularly in outlying areas of the city that experienced an influx of people from rural Ulster who brought with them the divisions of towns and villages, it is possible that sectarian sentiment influenced the way in which the children, and the family they lived with, were regarded. Even the Catholic curate, for whom the Fletchers were clearly among the very few families living in his parish but not of his denomination, was quick to volunteer the information that the children had been begging round the neighbourhood and had come to school dirty, something which contrasted sharply with the opinion of the Church of Ireland clergyman that the children were always clean and neatly turned out. The curate’s further comment that he would have reported them to the School Board ‘had he not felt a delicacy on account of the children being of another religion’ further indicates the tensions that may have existed in the neighbourhood over the Fletchers’ religion.
Finally we need to consider the viewpoint of the children themselves. That they clearly lived in some fear of Mrs Fletcher’s wrath is demonstrated by the older boy’s tears on thinking that their conversation at the door might be reported back to her. The testimony of neighbours that the boys lived in fear of being beaten was probably not without foundation in truth. However, when the boys were questioned by various workhouse officials, they stressed how much food they were given – milk, bread, porridge and meat – possibly exaggerating in order to ensure that they would be allowed to stay with the Fletchers. There was also evidence of emotional attachment as demonstrated though the tears when the guardians tried to remove the boys to the workhouse. Whatever their situation in their foster home, it was evident that these boys infinitely preferred their life with the Fletchers, with freedom from supervision, and the ability to roam around the neighbourhood, to the prospect of being returned to the confines of the workhouse walls.

**Conclusion**

For the historian of the Irish Poor Law, this case demonstrates some of the challenges in seeking to better know and understand the lived experience of boarding out, and the difficulty of making general judgements about value of the scheme as it was practiced. The Hannahstown case seems to have highlighted valid arguments on both sides of the debates which raged at the time regarding the welfare of poor law children – on one hand, children did seem to be better off away from the confines of the workhouse, living with families where they could experience some freedom and semblance of normal childhood. On the other hand, this left them vulnerable and open to abuse by foster parents who might exploit or neglect them, and to rejection from local communities where they may be stigmatised and isolated. It certainly suggests the value of seeking out and exploring, where possible, local and individual cases in our attempt to better understand the practical operation and lived experience of boarding out under the Irish Poor Law. Even this single case, one of thousands of individual such cases, is a complex, multifaceted human story with many layers of emotions, perspectives and motivations. Furthermore, it emphasises the need to explore the emotional landscape of boarding out, challenging though that might be; to get beyond the terse official reports on boarded out children, which simply record how boarded-out children looked - their physical appearance, how they were dressed, the apparent state of their health - to get some sense of how they felt – how happy, lonely, isolated they were, or the nature of the emotional connection between the foster parent and a boarded-out child. While this case study reveals a range of emotion, it does suggest that children could and did develop emotional bonds with their foster parents and that, given the choice, children would absolutely prefer to remain with their foster family.
The case also demonstrates something of the extent to which these families, in taking in poor law children, became subject to surveillance not just by welfare authorities, but, perhaps more insidiously, by neighbours. Whatever the motives of groups and individual for wanting to see the children removed, the reports of the testimonies made at the poor law inquiry provide a clear indication of the infrastructure of surveillance that poor families came under when they took workhouse children into their homes. Relieving Officers were tasked with inspecting the houses of those wishing to register as foster parents and report back on what they found. Clear guidelines were published as to what was expected of a ‘respectable’ home, one suitable for the reception of poor law children. And poor law inspectors visited the homes into which children were boarded out in an effort to ensure that those standards of respectability were adhered to. By the opening years of the twentieth century, Belfast had a team of Lady Inspectors who visited houses regularly, providing detailed reports on the cleanliness of the house, living and sleeping arrangements, the nature of the foster parents and their families, and the physical state of the boarded-out children. Through the bodies of workhouse children, therefore, welfare authorities gained access to the homes of the poor, and exercised a considerable degree of influence over what those homes should look like. The behaviours of these families also became more visible to social elites and professional middle classes, in this case judged and commented on by landlord, doctor, priest and schoolmaster. But what this case reveals in particular is the extent to which this family was subject to the surveillance of their neighbours. The presence of a workhouse child in a household drew attention to that household, giving neighbours and members of the wider community, it seems, ample opportunity to make judgements on the suitability or otherwise of that family to care for a child of the state.

Finally, the case provides interesting insights into some of the ways in which poor law children were received into local communities. Clearly this was only one case, and cannot be taken as typical, but it does raise a number of questions. In the case of the Hannahstown boys, why was the family reported to the poor law authorities in the first place, and why was the local community so keen to have the children sent back to the workhouse? Was it because they believed the children were unhappy and uncared for? The children themselves certainly seemed to relish their relative freedom, and were very upset about being sent back to the workhouse. Or was this concern to have the children returned to the workhouse driven more by a desire to have them removed from their community than about any real concern for their wellbeing? For all the perceived desirability of the boarding out scheme, and the growing social pressure to have children removed from the workhouse and sent to live with families, this case seems to suggest that some communities, at least, did not want workhouse children in their backyard.

Notes

1 Belfast News-letter, May 1, 1872.
2 Belfast News-letter, April 11, 1872.
Alana Semuels, ‘From “Not in My Backyard” to “Yes in My Backyard,”’ The Atlantic, July 5, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/07/yimby-groups-pro-development/532437/ (accessed March 22, 2018).

4 W.A. Maguire, Belfast: a history (Keele: Ryburn Press: 1993).

5 For a discussion of these debates see Virginia Crossman, “Cribbed, Contained and Confined? The Care of Children under the Irish Poor Law 1850–1914,” Eire-Ireland 44, nos. 1–2 (Spring/Summer, 2009): 57–61.

6 Harry Hendrick, Child Welfare: Historical Dimensions, Contemporary Debate (Bristol: Policy Press, 2003), 19–21.

7 Lydia Murdoch, Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 43–66; Hendrick, Child Welfare, 40–44.

8 For a discussion of children in metropolitan workhouses in late eighteenth-century England see Alysa Levene, The Childhood of the Poor: Welfare in Eighteenth-Century London (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

9 Hugh Cunningham, ed. Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500 (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2005), 148; further scholarship on children and the New Poor Law in England includes Lynn Hollen-Lees, The Solidarities of Strangers: the English Poor Law and the people 1700 – 1948 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Jane Humphries, “Care and Cruelty in the Workhouse: Children’s Experiences of Residential Poor Relief in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England,” in Childhood and Child Labour in Industrial England: Diversity and Agency 1750–1914, ed. Nigel Goose and Katrina Honeyman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

10 Lynn Abrams, The Orphan Country: Children of Scotland’s Broken Homes, 1845 to the Present (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd, 1998); for boarding out in Scotland see also Helen J. MacDonald, “Boarding-Out and the Scottish Poor Law 1845–1914,” Scottish Historical Review 75, no. 2 (1996): 192; for Wales see Lesley Hulonce, “Imposed and Imagined Childhoods: The Making of the Poor Law Child, Swansea 1834–1910” (unpublished doctoral thesis, Swansea University, 2013).

11 For an overview of the Irish Poor Law see Virginia Crossman, Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland 1850–1914 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013); As Helen J. McDonald shows in “Boarding Out and the Scottish Poor Law 1845–1914,” The Scottish Historical Review 75, no. 200, Part 2 (October 1996): 197–220, the Scottish system encouraged boarding out from an early stage; for an overview of the English system see H. Cunningham, The Children of the Poor: Representations of Childhood since the Seventeenth Century (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

12 Crossman, “Cribbed, Contained and Confined,” 39–40.

13 Ibid., 40.

14 The Poor Relief (Ireland) Amendment Act 1862, 25 & 26 Vict. c. 83.

15 Children in workhouses (Ireland). Copy of a letter addressed to the Chief Secretary for Ireland, and other members of the government, by the Dublin College of Physicians, on the physical effects of rearing children in workhouses. 1862 (348).

16 Twenty-second Annual Report of the Commissioners for Administering the Laws for the Relief of the Poor in Ireland, 10 & 11 Vic. c 90 (1868), p. 14.

17 Twenty-third Annual Report of the Commissioners for Administering the Laws for the Relief of the Poor in Ireland, 10 & 11 Vic. c 90 (1870), p. 13.

18 For a discussion of barrack schools and family cottages, see Murdoch, Imagined orphans, pp. 43–66.

19 Crossman, “Cribbed, Contained and Confined,” p. 47.

20 Isabella M. S. Tod, “Boarding-out of Pauper Children,” Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland 7 (1878): 297.

21 Hendrick, Child Welfare, 19–21.

22 Poor Law Act 1889, 52 & 53 Vict. c.56; Poor Law (Ireland) Amendment Act 1890, 61 & 62 Vict., c 30.

23 Children Act 1908, 8 Edw. 7, c.67

24 Crossman, “Cribbed, Contained, and Confined,” 50.

25 Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland, being the first report under ‘the Local Government Board (Ireland) Act 35 & 26 Vic. C. 109 with appendices. (18730 pp. 58–76.

26 Ibid., 59.

27 Annual report, Local Government Board for Ireland (1873), p. 80.

28 Letter from Local Government Board to Belfast Board of Guardians, 30 Feb 1904, PRONI, BG/7/A/78.

29 Census of Ireland 1901. The fact that the proportion of Catholics in the workhouse was higher than that of Catholics in the city as a whole is a reflection of their poorer economic status at this time, many poor labouring
families having migrated into the city from predominantly Catholic parts of rural Ulster in the previous two decades. For a fuller discussion of this, see Hepburn, A Past Apart: Studies in the History of Catholic Belfast, 1850–1950 (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 1996).

30 Margaret L. Arnot, “Infant Death, Child Care and the State: The Baby-Farming Scandal and the First Infant Protection Legislation of 1872,” Continuity and Change 9, no. 2 (1994): 271; see also Ruth Ellen Homrighaus, “Wolves in Women’s Clothing: Baby-Farming and the British Medical Journal 1860–1872,” Journal of Family History 6, no. 3 (2001).

31 Jim Hinks, “The Representation of Baby-Farmers in the Scottish City 1867–1908,” Women’s History Review 23, no. 4, (2014): 561.

32 Sarah-Ann Buckley, “Found in a Dying Condition: Nurse-Children in Ireland 1872–1952,” in She Said She Was in the Family Way: Pregnancy and Infancy in Modern Ireland, ed. Elaine Farrell (London: Institute for Historical Research, 2012), 145–62.

33 Local Government Board for Ireland to Belfast Board of Guardians, 6 February 1901, PRONI, BG/7/BC/26.

34 Northern Whig, 9 Feb 1912.

35 Gaffikin’s lecture to Belfast Working Men’s Institute on the history of Belfast in 1875 was subsequently published as Belfast fifty years on.

36 Belfast Newsletter, April 11, 1872; McCance was descendent of a long line of linen merchants and proprietor of Suffolk House, one of the ‘Big Houses’ built by the up-and-coming linen mercantile elite of the city on the city’s peripheries

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.; Belfast Board of Guardians Minutes, 26 March 1872, PRONI, BG/7/1/35

39 Belfast Newsletter, April 11, 1872.

40 Belfast Newsletter, April 11, 1872.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Belfast Board of Guardians Minutes, 26 March 1872, PRONI, BG/7/1/35.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Belfast Newsletter, April 11, 1872.

49 Ibid.

50 Census of Ireland, 1901.

Biographical Note

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