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Printed by JustPrint.ie

History Studies Journal, History Department, University of Limerick

in collaboration with

History Department, Mary Immaculate College

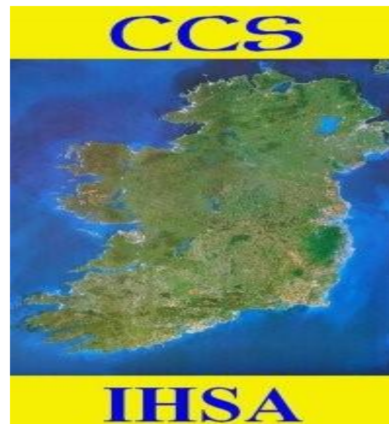
in association with

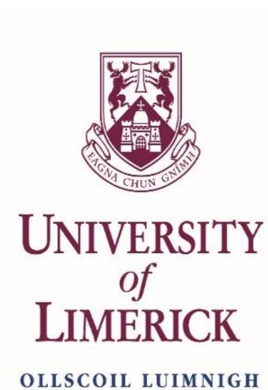
Irish History Students' Association

present:

Proceedings from the 70th annual Irish History Students' Association conference

held on 1-3 March 2019, Mary Immaculate College





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'A hopeless case:' the representation of mothers and the workhouse in Irish newspapers (1870-1910)

Judy Bolger

The historical study of Irish motherhood offers invaluable insight into the wider spheres of contemporary society. It allows for an investigation into the way in which gender and class were inherently linked and formed the basis of social norms during distinctive periods of the past. Sandra Ryan has argued that 'when motherhood is used as a mystique, it becomes an instrument of oppression.'[1] Indeed, Ryan's sentiment holds significance with regard to twentieth-century Ireland when the idealised version of motherhood was juxtaposed to that of the 'deviant' mother whose behaviours were being intensively regulated and controlled by the aligned Church and Free State through institutions such as the Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes.[2] Nevertheless, the social emphasis upon idealised motherhood predates the twentieth century and warrants further historical analysis, especially given our contemporary and timely reappraisal of society's historical treatment of Irish mothers. Furthermore, while the construction of idealised motherhood during the twentieth century has received attention from historians, particularly through the framework of gender and through the lens of the Free State and Catholic Church, the significance of class within these social prisms has yet to be fully disentangled.

[1] Anne Byrne and Madeleine Leonard (eds), *Women and Irish society: a sociological reader* (Belfast, 1997), p. 250.

[2] For scholarship relating to twentieth-century motherhood, see: Maria Luddy, 'Unmarried mothers in Ireland, 1880-1973' in *Women's History Review*, xx (2011), pp 109-26; and idem., *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940* (Cambridge, 2007); Lindsey Earner-Byrne, *Mother and child: maternity and child welfare in Dublin, 1920s-1960s* (Manchester, 2007).

This intersection of class into the depiction of 'good' or 'bad' mother can be traced through the institutional scaffoldings of nineteenth-century Ireland. More specifically, this trajectory of social conventions regarding the adequate and appropriate versions of motherhood can be tracked through the mothers' engagements with the workhouse. During the period between the end of the Great Famine (1847-1852) and the establishment of the Free State (1922), the Irish Poor Law granted relief to thousands of paupers through a system that provided both institutional relief in the workhouses, and outdoor relief to individuals in their own homes.[3] This system of welfare, which has only recently gained considerable historical analysis in relation to its administrative and institutionalised histories, also provides a valuable framework for an assessment of both poverty and motherhood that can be used to enrich our understanding about the significance of class and gender in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland.[4]

Institutionalisation in Ireland gained increasing momentum during the early nineteenth century when sites of containment, health care and poor relief in the form of institutions such as prisons, lunatic asylums and workhouses transformed the Irish landscape.[5] The impact of such institutions on the lower-classes of Irish society, especially women, cannot be overestimated. Maria Luddy has noted that 'one of the most significant features' to emerge from the historiography of Irish women during the nineteenth century is the 'level of institutional care that developed to assist or

[3] Georgina Laragy, 'Poor Relief in the South of Ireland, 1850-1921' in Virginia Crossman and Peter Gray (eds), *Poverty and welfare in Ireland, 1838-1948* (Dublin, 2011), p. 53.
[4] Catherine Cox, 'Health and Welfare, 1750-2000' in Eugenio F. Biagini and Mary E. Daly (eds), *The Cambridge social history of Modern Ireland* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 261.
[5] Institutionalisation was not unique to Ireland. In fact, it was a commonality throughout Europe and the United States. See: Catherine Cox, 'Institutionalisation in Irish History and Society' in Mary McAuliffe, Katherine O'Donnell and Leeann Lane (eds), *Palgrave advances in Irish History* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp 169-190.

confine women.'[6] As historians, we often depend on these records to assess the social attitudes towards women of the past. However, these records have yet to be fully assessed in relation to mothers. Within the workhouses, unmarried, married, and widowed mothers received poor relief under the mechanisms of the Poor Law and their ability to mother their children was regulated.[7] Tracing the experiences of these mothers and their engagements with the workhouses will determine what relevance class and/or marital status had on women's mothering experiences during the period. Together with the records of the workhouses, contemporary newspapers offer tangible evidence pertaining to the public discourse surrounding lower-class mothers. Using two particularly noteworthy cases reported in the contemporary newspapers, this analysis seeks to highlight that poor mothers utilised the workhouses in their mothering responsibilities. However, their ability to do so was not necessarily universal.

With the growth of social history, the significance of class in our understanding of the construction of social attitudes towards various groups of society have been demonstrated albeit broadly. In relation to motherhood, especially during the late nineteenth century, class divides influenced the way in which the ruling upper-classes designed their appropriate version of parenting. For example, Anna Davin in her investigation into imperialism and British motherhood, argued how during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, 'middle-class conventions took for granted that the proper context of childhood was the family, and the person most responsible

[6] Maria Luddy, 'Women's History' in Lawrence Geary and Margaret Kelleher (eds), *Nineteenth-century Ireland: a guide to recent research* (Dublin, 2006), p. 56.
[7] 55 & 56 Vict. c. 10 [Ire.] (1838). The introduction of the Poor (Ireland) Relief Act, 1838 saw all previous systems of localised poor relief abolished in favour of one single institution - the workhouse. These institutions were erected into newly designed districts with 130, and later 163, such establishments created throughout the country. See: Dympna McLoughlin, 'Superfluous and unwanted deadweight: the emigration of nineteenth-century Irish pauper women' in Patrick O'Sullivan (ed) *Irish Women and Irish Migration* (London, 1997), p. 66.

was the mother.'[8] For lower-class women, such a responsibility was deeply challenged as her ability to mother was jeopardised by her financial position. In Ireland, Sarah-Anne Buckley's work into the establishment of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), a society distinctively managed, administered and funded by the upper-classes, and the subsequent increase in child welfare provisions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, highlighted the significant role which class and gender played in societal outlook towards adequate experiences of childhood, childrearing and childcare.[9] She argued that the increase in state-led initiatives, especially the growing role of the NSPCC in State policy-making, sought to punish destitution and inherently linked the mistreatment of children to poverty, rather than making any substantial attempt to alleviate the aetiology of the impoverishment.[10] As such, middle-class ideologies about parenting fuelled the NSPCC's construction of motherhood, an outlook that was both reflective and reactionary of the wider society's views regarding lower-class mothers.

Social constructions of motherhood are not unique to the period and the concept is worth exploring further as the evaluation of a society's 'social construction' of motherhood allows for an investigation into what were considered virtuous and deviant ways of mothering. As Rima D. Apple and Janet Golden put it:

> 'social construction' refers to the process by which motherhood is culturally defined… by saying that motherhood is socially constructed we are rejecting biological determinism – the ideal that motherhood is a natural phenomenon. Instead we argue that idealised maternal roles and the relations of mothers to

[8] Anna Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood' in *History Workshop*, v (1978), p. 12.
[9] Sarah-Anne Buckley, ''Growing up Poor': child welfare, motherhood and the State during the First World War' in *Women's History Review* (2016), pp 1-17; and idem., *The cruelty man: child welfare, the NSPCC and the state in Ireland, 1889-1956* (Manchester, 2013).
[10] Buckley, *The cruelty man*, p. 102.

> other social actors, to social structures, and to systems of belief are created and re-created by individuals and by society.[11]

Apple and Golden's edited collection regarding the history of American motherhood offered various assessments of the social constructions of motherhood gathered from the contemporary medical literature and pamphlets. A similar methodology will be employed here to assess the social construction of Irish mothers through an analysis of two case-studies from contemporary newspapers. The significance of newspapers as a source of social commentary is deeply relevant to any discussion of the social attitudes towards the lower-classes. As Crossman, Laragy, Lucey and Purdue explained, the reporting of workhouse affairs in the local press 'offers crucial insights into the motivations and opinions of guardians, popular discourses on poverty and prevailing notions of entitlement for relief among the poor.'[12] As such, the historical value of newspapers in de-constructing society's outlook towards mothers during the period is immense.

In the decades after the Great Famine, the role of the workhouse within the mechanisms of the poor law system began to alter as issues surrounding public health were increasingly falling under the control of the local boards of guardians whose municipal powers were steadfastly expanding. Likewise, this period saw a shift in the type of individuals who utilised the workhouse as far less able-bodied paupers were admitted in contrast to the increasing number of sick or infirm inmates.[13] Another feature of the mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth century workhouse admission records

[11] Rima D. Apple and Janet Golden, 'Introduction to social constructs of motherhood' in Rima D. Apple and Janet Golden (eds), *Mothers and motherhood: readings in American history* (Columbus, 1997), p. 3.
[12] Virginia Crossman, Georgina Laragy, Seán Lucy and Olwen Purdue, 'Sources for the history of the Irish poor-law in the post-Famine period' in Ciara Breathnach and Catherine Lawless (eds), *Visual, material and print culture in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2010), p. 200.
[13] Cox, 'Health and Welfare, 1750-2000', p. 265.

was the increase in night-lodgers who challenged the very essence of the workhouse means-testing system. Initially, admission into the workhouses was designed to assess applicants by a test of destitution.[14] The basis of this system was to ensure that only those in absolute dire conditions would use the workhouse, while also preventing paupers from abusing the system. However, as the nineteenth century closed, more and more individuals were frequenting the workhouse on an ad hoc basis and in incidents where short-term relief was warranted and this was also reflective of the wider shifts in attitude towards poverty and unemployment.

One specific inmate, Catherine Smith (born c. 1872), who often utilised the workhouse in this night-lodger capacity, appears throughout the records of the North Dublin Union (NDU) workhouse between the years 1898 and 1905.[15] As we know, during the early years of the twentieth century, Dublin boasted some of the worse living conditions and levels of poverty throughout Europe. Mary E. Daly stated that the issues of poverty which plagued Dublin during the period, mirrored the problems of other poor urban locations. Such concerns, according to Daly, included experiences of 'disability, drunkenness or simple misfortune [which] plunged many families into distress.'[16] To cope with such experiences of poverty and poverty-related distress, the workhouse was often a lifeline for impoverished families, especially for Catherine Smith and her young children. This is evident in the fact that by 1907, Catherine had visited the NDU workhouse at least seventeen times.[17] Together with this reliance on

[14] Virginia Crossman, *Poverty and the poor law in Ireland 1850-1914* (Liverpool, 2013), p. 113.
[15] Catherine Smith arrears in the North Dublin Union Workhouse's admission records and board of guardian minute books on various occasions during the period 1898-1905. See: Admission and discharge records of the North Dublin Union Workhouse, 1898-1905 (National Archives of Ireland (N.A.I.), BG 78/G75; ibid., BG 78/G76; ibid., BG 78/G77; ibid., BG 78/G94).
[16] Mary E. Daly, *Dublin: The deposed capital, a social and economic history, 1860-1914* (Cork, 2011), p. 77.
[17] *Evening Herald*, 23 Jul. 1907.

the workhouse and her apparent abuse of alcohol, Catherine's inability to mother her children gained attention in the local press through her acts of neglect.

The *Evening Herald* reported in July 1907, that 'hopeless case' Catherine Smith, was 'charged with grossly neglecting her four children, one of them an infant aged nine months.'[18] In this newspaper article, we are informed that Catherine and two of her children had entered the workhouse on 9 July 1907 and stayed for around two weeks.[19] After being discharged from the workhouse, she was found under the influence of alcohol at around 11pm and the workhouse officer subsequently charged her with neglect of her family, which he then found to consist of four children. At the time he met her, she was returning to the workhouse. The newspaper reported that Catherine's husband, Thomas Smith, was a soldier stationed at Malta and when he returned home, he found his room broken up and his children in the workhouse. Smith was sentenced to six weeks imprisonment for this particular offence.[20]

Upon further research, and as this newspaper alluded to, it is clear that during the early years of her children's lives, Catherine spent much time in and out of the workhouse, often as a night-lodger basis. For example, in May 1898, Catherine and her family were admitted to the NDU on six separate occasions, usually only staying for one night.[21] Interestingly, her husband Thomas was only admitted with the family on one occasion during the month of May.[22] On the next admission, it was just Catherine and her children who were admitted, staying for eleven nights.[23] Upon

[18] *Evening Herald*, 23 Jul. 1907.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21]Admission and discharge records of the NDU workhouse, 1898 (N.A.I. BG 78/G75).
[22] Like his wife, Thomas Smith also was arrested for drunken disorderly on various occasions. See: Richmond Prison general register, 1885-6 (N.A.I., 1/13/39); ibid., 1887-8 (N.A.I., 1/13/41).
[23] Admission and discharge records of the NDU workhouse, 1898 (N.A.I., BG 78/G 75; ibid., BG 78/G76).

closer inspection, these admission records demonstrate that Catherine's use of the workhouse reflected her marital problems, abuse of alcohol and possibly even experiences of domestic abuse. An excerpt from a relieving officer of the NDU in December 1904, insinuated that Catherine and Thomas's domestic relationship was deeply troubled and their children were subsequently neglected:

> Last night at 12.31 am woman named Catherine Smith, aged 31 and her two children, Anne aged 11, May aged 7 years, applied for admission to the Workhouse, she stated that her husband kicked her and inflicted several cuts to her head, she was dressed in Jervis St hospital, at the time she was recovering from the influence of drink, from inquiries I have made I am informed that both husband and wife were drinking since Saturday last, the children are in a wretched state barefooted and bare headed, the children informed me that they had got nothing to eat from early in the day. As this is not the first time for Mrs Smith to seek shelter of the Workhouse at late hours I request that the board will order that both husband and wife will be prosecuted.[24]

Indeed, it is undoubtedly discerned that much of Catherine Smith's reliance on the workhouse was related to her abuse of alcohol and her children suffered as a result. Such behaviour from women was regarded very negatively by society and the punitive measures put into place reflect the wider concerns around female's abuse of alcohol. Conor Reidy's work into the inebriate reformatory in Ennis between 1900 and 1918, has highlighted the gender imbalance of inmates with 126 males and 204 female inmates being detained there.[25] Reidy argued that 'there appears to have been little outward concern for the well-being of women as individuals or the physical and physiological dangers posed to them by a drunken lifestyle.'[26] Furthermore, the over-representation of women reflected the contemporary views regarding the mental state and abilities of men and women. As Reidy's work further distinguished, though as many 'as three quarters of those apprehended for drunkenness were men and more

[24] NDU, *Board of guardian minute books* (1904-5), p. 181.
[25] Conor Reidy, 'Prostitution and the female criminal inebriate' in Jennifer Redmond, Mary McAuliffe, Sandra McAvoy et al. (eds), *Sexual politics in modern Ireland* (Dublin, 2015), p. 57.
[26] Reidy, 'Prostitution', p. 57.

likely to qualify as habitual drunkards, late-Victorian society conceptualised the problem as a gendered one, associated mainly with women.'[27]

Consequently, women (or mothers such as Catherine), and their dependence on alcohol represented the period's contradictory outlooks towards femininity. As Reidy put it 'in somewhat of a contradiction, women were seen as dangerous *and* vulnerable, corrupting *and* corruptible.'[28] Mothers abusing alcohol were frequently noted upon in the case-studies of the NSPCC, where Reidy noted, 'drinking was the principal cause of child neglect and women in particular were singled out for their alcoholism with many labelled 'confirmed drunkards'.'[29] Though there appears to be no direct linkage of Catherine and the NSPCC or the inebriate facility in Ennis, she very much fits into the demographic of mothers who found themselves under inspection by the NSPCC, and were confined to the reformatory. Her appearance in the newspaper is evidence of societal angst during this period towards mothers who abused alcohol as she was directly challenging the perceived perception of femininity by neglecting her children, disrespecting her husband, using profane language and inappropriately relying on alcohol.

Catherine's interaction with the workhouse continued after the newspaper article and she was arrested quite a few times for drunken disorder and use of profane language which resulted in various sentences to Mountjoy Prison.[30] However, one of the last records of Catherine Smith is from the 1911 census which listed her as the thirty-eight year old wife of labourer Thomas Smith living at Nerney Court, North Dublin, the address listed in almost all of her records, with their now five children.

[27] Reidy, 'Prostitution', p. 57.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., p. 66.
[30] Mountjoy Prison index general register, female, 1901-14 (N.A.I., 1/44/2-5; 1/48/6; 1/49/4).

This record is relieving as it appears that Catherine's inappropriate behaviours subsided, and she had more children.[31] Through these records, and the experiences of the Smith family with the workhouse, we can begin to trace together what family life was like for some poor and distressed families in twentieth-century Dublin. Luddy insisted that 'the complexity of family formation and relationships are shaped by social, economic and religious concerns' and the 'shifting relationships of dependence, physical, emotional, economic and social.'[32] The Smith family are an apt example of this. Though little work has yet to be achieved on the history of the Irish family, especially from the period of the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth centuries, through the records of this individual family we receive a glimpse into the ways in which institutions such as the workhouses played a significant role in a young family's daily life.[33]

Together with the insight gleaned about family life, what this case has significantly shown is that the workhouse provided a space of refuge for Catherine during her early years of motherhood and may have also acted as a place to escape from an abusive marriage. It highlights that some women were capable of utilising the facility when needed and that the overrepresentation of women in the admission records does not necessarily signify that the workhouse was a place of containment. Rather, it was a place of refuge for women in need in a patriarchal society which provided little or no other alternatives for women in distress. This case supports Dympna McLoughlin's view that we must acknowledge the ability of these women

[31] Census of Ireland 1901/11 and census fragments and substitutes, 'Residents of a house 1.8 in Nerney's Court (Rotunda, Dublin).' (http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Dublin/Rotunda/Nerney_s_Court/32314/).
[32] Maria Luddy, 'Marriage, sexuality and the law in Ireland' in Eugenio F. Biagini and Mary E. Daly (eds), *The Cambridge social history of Modern Ireland* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 344.
[33] Luddy, 'Marriage and sexuality', p. 344.

to strategically use the workhouse system to provide for their families.[34] Likewise, Virginia Crossman's work which has examined many aspects of the workhouses, also reflects much of McLoughlin's analysis regarding women's agency when visiting the workhouses.[35] Indeed, women, or more specifically mothers, were often agents of their circumstances in relation to their ability to use the workhouse.

Mothers such as Catherine, accused of neglect in this period, often gained the attention of the press and were often associated with the workhouse. This next case, reported in the *Leinster Leader* in May 1903, discussed the death of a 15-month-old child named Patrick O'Brien, who, with his mother Mary, was admitted into the Naas workhouse a few days previously. The mother was discharged from the workhouse one day after arrival but later returned with the child dead in her arms. The newspaper reported that 'the proceedings were of more than ordinary interest by reason of the fact that the mother alleged that the officials at the moment of her discharge stated that if she came back to the Workhouse she would be prosecuted.'[36] As the article unfolded, it is clear that Mary's own understanding of her entitlement to seek relief in the workhouse was clouded and judged by her position as a 'tramp'.

The lengthy article then presented the different perspectives to the events that occurred in the days before the child's death. The newspaper reported that Mary O'Brien came to the ward with her three children and 'an old woman that the children called granny.'[37] The family were fed and left the house the following morning. When

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[34] Dympna McLoughlin, 'Workhouses and Irish female paupers, 1840-1870' in Maria Luddy and Clíona Murphy (eds), *Women surviving: studies in Irish women's history in the 19th and 20th centuries* (Dublin, 1990), p. 138.
[35] Virginia Crossman and Peter Gray, 'Introduction: poverty and welfare in Ireland, 1938-1948' in Virginia Crossman and Peter Gray (eds), *Poverty and welfare in Ireland, 1838-1948* (Dublin, 2011), p. 1.
[36] *Leinster Leader*, 30 May 1903.
[37] Ibid.

questioned, Mary stated that she and her children had left her husband and that her son had been sick for a few months. She reported that when she left the workhouse, she was informed by a workhouse official, that should she come back again, she would be prosecuted. Her family continued on their way to Celbridge and spent the night on the side of the road. At daylight, the child began to moan and was dead by 6am.[38]

At this point, questions were raised about O'Brien's conduct during her time in the workhouse. When asked if she had contributed to the laundry work she replied that she had been unable as her child was so sick. She was questioned as to whether she brought the child's illness to the attention of the matron, to which she replied yes. But the workhouse staff portrayed O'Brien in a different light. Specifically, witness Anne White reported that on Wednesday morning, when all the other women were at the laundry, the child's mother did not present for work. When asked why the mother was not working, the witness stated: 'She belongs to the class who do not care to work.'[39] Here, Mary's actions were judged in relation to her ability to work and not necessarily on her duty as a mother or her responsibilities to her son.

The coroner reported that when he examined the little boy, 'there was very little food in its stomach. He believed his death was caused by bronchitis aggravated by exposure.'[40] The coroner was questioned if he thought the child seemed delicate, to which he replied that 'it appeared to be fairly well nourished.'[41] He emphasised that none of the workhouse staff were responsible for the child's death. He argued that it was 'quite possible that the child might have lived if it were not exposed during the

[38] *Leinster Leader*, 30 May 1903.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

night.'[42] The coroner repeatedly defended the workhouse staff and claimed 'the woman never informed the Matron that the child required medical attendance.'[43] Furthermore, he stated that 'the whole matter was one of the results of the tramp nuisance and one of the gloomiest aspects of the tramp system was the hawking about of children by women like O'Brien.'[44] The coroner than used his influence and directed the jury to find a verdict in accordance with his medical testimony. The newspaper then reported that after the inquest Sergeant Boyle took Mary O'Brien into custody 'presumably on the charge of neglecting her child.'[45]

While it is certainly difficult to know whether Mary and her family were told not to return to the workhouse, Crossman's work outlined that though it was unusual for anyone to be refused entry into the workhouses, admission procedures were often stricter in certain unions.[46] Such strictness was certainly circumspective and often based on morality or reputations, especially in regard to women. The period saw great attention placed upon the maternal responsibility of women to ensure their children's physical and moral wellbeing. Women were often deemed maternally ignorant, especially those of the lower-classes and therefore responsible for the high rate of infant mortality during the period.[47] Melanie Reynolds's research into the experience of working-class English mothers and child care during the period questioned this maternal blame and the popular analysis of lower-class mothers as 'irresponsible child carers.'[48] This emphasis upon the well-being of the children of the lower-classes had

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[42] *Leinster Leader*, 30 May 1903.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Crossman, *Poverty and the poor law*, p. 113.
[47] Buckley, 'Growing up Poor', p. 2.
[48] Melanie Reynolds, *Infant mortality and working-class child care, 1850-1899* (Basingstoke: 2016), pp 1-2.

various agendas. As Buckley's work demonstrated, from the period of the First World War, efforts to eradicate infant mortality in Britain and Ireland were intensified and 'other moral, medical and social concerns surrounding children were driven by a variety of motives, including genuine concern for poor mothers and children, sectarianism, class bias and international child welfare developments.'[49] As such, the social construction surrounding impoverished mothers was deeply related to their ability to provide adequate care for their children regardless of the wider social constrains that affected such mothers' vulnerable social and financial position.

While it is difficult to know what exactly occurred when Mary O'Brien left the Naas workhouse with her children and whether or not she was in fact told to not return, the various references to her status as a 'tramp' signify that her child's death was deemed as a result of her irresponsible mothering. However, her ability to act upon her maternal responsibilities were constrained by the apparent reputation she held as a 'tramp' and her interactions with the workhouse staff signify that such mothers and their children's access to relief was not an entitlement. Anne Coakley has pointed out that, 'motherhood generates varying levels of dependency in the form of care and nurturing over the life-course of a woman. The way a society constructs motherhood and caring is linked to some mothers' vulnerability to poverty.'[50] This dependence can be seen through Mary's case but also, more broadly, through the records of the workhouses during the latter half of the nineteenth century when women dominated the admission records.[51] This was for many reasons, most of which pertained to the

[49] Buckley, 'Growing up poor', p. 2.
[50] Anne Coakley, 'Mothers and poverty' in Patricia Kennedy (ed.), *Motherhood in Ireland: creation and context*, (Cork, 2004), p. 207.
[51] McLoughlin, 'Workhouses and Irish female paupers, 1840-1870', pp 117-20.

social and economic difficulties faced by women, but also to the mechanisms of the poor law system.[52]

In her study, McLoughlin pondered why pauper women succumbed to such institutions 'considering the physical hardship of the workhouses, the food scarcity, unremitting discipline and instances of cruelty and abuse.'[53] Her study argued that such an answer lay in the fact that 'the workhouse system, despite all its limitations, did provide a buffer between life and death for the destitute.'[54] For mothers, with the excess burden of ensuring their children's survival, the workhouse was most certainly a viable option when faced with destitution, desertion and poverty. However, as Mary O'Brien's case demonstrated, when she sought the assistance of the workhouse for her and her children, her perceived status as a tramp appears to have threatened such relief and demonstrates the uncertainly of impoverished motherhood during the period. For those considered to be a tramp, their access to relief within the workhouse was not a certainty as they were deemed as those who desire not to work, rather than those who could not work. The 'tramping system' was seen as professional begging, and therefore abhorrent to the notion of a stable family home life as is evident in this case. Crossman noted that newspapers were keen to report on tramping during the period. She argued that the language used by the newspapers in their 'reports of tramps 'infesting' parts of the country' and their complaints about 'the tramp system' were 'calculated to instil fear.'[55] As with mothers who abused alcohol, tramp mothers deeply disregarded the perceived 'gendered certainties' of motherhood and their

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[52] Crossman, Laragy, Lucy and Purdue, 'Irish poor-law in the post-Famine period', p. 205.
[53] McLoughlin, 'Superfluous and unwanted deadweight', p. 67.
[54] Ibid., p. 67.
[55] Crossman, *Poverty and the poor law*, p. 206.

ability to access relief to provide for their children was crucially determined by their social status.

As mentioned, not all scholarship relating to workhouse women presents them as victims of their circumstances, but rather, historians such as Crossman, McLoughlin, and Clear argue that many women strategically utilised the workhouses to assist in their mothering roles.[56] Such a verdict is certainly relevant to Catherine Smith and her reliance on the workhouse in times of domestic uncertainty. However, with the case of Mary O'Brien, her ability to utilise the workhouse to assist in her maternal responsibilities was not as straight forward. What these cases demonstrate is that when analysing a cohort, such as mothers, who have never been a monolithic group, we cannot overgeneralise about the nature of which social provisions such as the workhouse were used. Furthermore, for those reliant on relief, the line between private and public assumptions regarding motherhood were blurred as their ability to mother was often construed under the lens of the poor law mechanisms and the society which administered such regulations. Both Catherine and Mary, the drunk wife and mother and the idle neglectful mother, did not conform to the appropriate ideals of motherhood which resulted in their dependence on the workhouse. As their cases have shown, the period's social construct of motherhood often vilified poverty through its association with child neglect without attempting to dissect the wider issues about mothers and the inherent link to impoverishment.

[56] Caitriona Clear, *Social change and everyday life in Ireland, 1850-1922* (Manchester, 2007), p. 114.