

Cribbed, contained, and confined?: The care of children under the Irish poor law, 1850-1920.

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Cribbed, Contained, and Confined?: The Care of Children under the Irish Poor Law, 1850–1920

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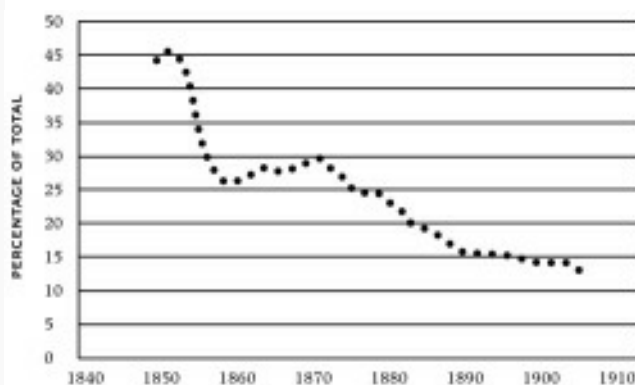
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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Cribbed, Contained, and Confined?
The Care of Children under the Irish Poor Law, 1850–1920

Virginia Crossman (bio)

In July 1890, the Cork poor law guardian and philanthropist William D'Esterre Parker wrote to the Irish chief secretary, Arthur Balfour, lamenting the government's refusal to extend the system by which destitute children were supported outside the workhouse in the homes of foster parents. He expressed his deep regret "that the innocent children in our workhouses are to continue by the act of the Irish Local Government Board to be 'cribbed,' 'contained,' and 'confined' in Irish workhouses."¹ Despite the concerted efforts of philanthropists such as Parker, the majority of children maintained under the Poor Law continued to be cared for within workhouses until the abolition of the workhouse system in independent Ireland in the early 1920s. The proportion of children within the total workhouse population declined from over 45 percent of inmates not in hospital in January 1852 to 14 percent in 1900 (see [figure 1](#)).² Even in the second decade of the twentieth century, however, when official policy was to keep children out of the workhouse, many [End Page 37] union workhouses contained substantial numbers of children.³ This article examines the efforts of campaigners to remove children from workhouses and considers why these efforts were not more successful. In so doing, it explores attitudes to children and child care and to poverty and welfare more generally.



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Figure 1.

Children in Irish Workhouses.

The Poor Law was intended to reform as well as relieve, and the desire to mold workhouse children into useful citizens remained a central preoccupation of both poor law officials and philanthropists throughout the post-Famine period. Thus, while little explicit provision was made for children under the Poor Law Act of 1838 beyond providing for separate accommodation for different age groups, workhouse rules specified that boys and girls who were inmates of the workhouse "shall, for three of the working hours at least every day, be instructed in reading, writing and arithmetic, and the principles of the [End Page 38] Christian religion, and other such instruction shall be imparted to them as shall fit them for service and train them to habits of usefulness, industry and virtue."⁴ Within the ranks of the needy, children were regarded as a special category, and over the course of the nineteenth century there was a growing sense that, unlike poor adults, poor children should be regarded as victims, not agents of their circumstances. However, as Harry Hendrick has argued, while children were frequently presented as victims, they were also seen as threats, with the potential to undermine public health, family cohesion, social stability, and economic progress.⁵ Poor children needed to be rescued, but society also needed to be protected from the dangers they posed. Responses to child poverty in Ireland reflected the combination of fear and concern implicit in this dual perception.

Developments in Ireland need to be understood within the context of wider debates over the care of pauper children. Throughout the United Kingdom, philanthropists and social activists sought to remove children from workhouses and to provide specialist services for them. By the end of the century, moreover, there was growing pressure to actively intervene by removing children from criminal or abusive parents.⁶ However, whilst very similar arguments were put forward in favor of specialist services for children throughout the United Kingdom, very different policies were pursued in different regions. Despite official acknowledgment of the benefits of boarding out, the majority of poor

law children in England and Ireland remained in some form of institutional care. In Scotland, the majority of children were boarded out.⁷ The enthusiasm of Scottish poor law authorities for boarding out was in keeping with the generally low level of institutional provision within the Scottish poor law system, especially compared to Ireland, where up until 1847, relief **[End Page 39]** could only be obtained within the workhouse; and even after this date indoor relief accounted for a substantial majority of recipients. Prior to the introduction of the Poor Law in 1838, there was no statutory system of poor relief in Ireland...

VIRGINIA
CROSSMAN

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1. Parker to Balfour, 8 July 1890, National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI), Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers (hereafter CSORP), 1892/2457.

2. Source: Classified Return of the Number of Inmates of Workhouses on the 1st Saturday in the Year, *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, 1884–85 [C. 4400], xxxiv, 16; 1900 [Cd 338], xxxv, 18.



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