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The Lives of the Poor in Fethard in 1821

by Maria Luddy

In 1817, 1818 and 1819 severe fever epidemics raged through the country. K. H. Connell estimated that deaths from these fevers may have been as high as 44,300¹. In an attempt to prevent their re-occurrence, and to promote public health, the Government set up the General Board of Health in Dublin in 1820. This permanent Board, which included amongst its members the famous John David La Touche and Peter La Touche, bankers and philanthropists, provided the Government with information and advice on matters relating to public health.

The first Board was set up particularly to examine those conditions which might give rise to fever. As was the usual custom regarding government enquiries at this time, a list of questions was forwarded to people of substance — landowners and clergymen, for example, in each county. The information was returned and then collated. Although the enquiry of the first Board of Health covered the entire country, only a summary of information relating to the province of Munster was actually published.

The information provided, however, went far beyond examining the health of the poor. The Rev. Henry Woodward, who made the return for Fethard, was especially diligent in acquiring answers to all the questions asked. Through his evidence we get a unique look at the lives of the poor in Fethard in the second decade of the nineteenth century.

It is obvious that Woodward knew his people well. Their dress, living conditions, eating habits, employment opportunities and many other details of their lives are described by him in some detail. The following extract is a prime source for an examination of the social, cultural and economic life of nineteenth-century Fethard².

Dwellings

1. *Are the dwellings of the poorer classes so situated, in general, as to be not unfavourable to health? Is there much bog, or marsh, strictly so called, in your neighbourhood?*
 - A. The dwellings of the poor in this neighbourhood are not generally built in situations unfavourable to health, nor are they frequently sunk with the floor underground. Not much bog or marsh.
2. *Is the sub-stream or rock of the country limestone, slate, granite, or of what other material is it composed?*
 - A. Almost universally lime stone, and lime stone gravel. A small proportion of granite, and no slate.
3. *Does the custom prevail of forming deposits of putrefying vegetable or animal matter near the dwellings of the inhabitants? Have means been employed, with success, for the prevention of such nuisances?*
 - A. This injurious custom prevails here to about its average extent in Ireland. In the town of Fethard some exertions have been used, by which the evil has been mitigated; but real difficulties lie in the way of its complete removal.
4. *Do any facts evince the unwholesomeness of the effluvia proceeding from water in which flax has been steeped, contiguous to the inhabitations of the poor?*



- A. There is very little flax in this country to make observations from. The general notion here is that the effluvia from steeping it is not unwholesome.
5. *Of what materials are the cabins mostly constructed? Are they often built in part below the ground? What apertures have they for the admission of air and light? If provided with windows, are these so constructed as to admit of being occasionally opened? Are the dwellings of the poor in general constructed with chimneys?*
- A. Partly of mud, and partly of stone with mud mortar. The cabins are often built in front below the ground. Frequently they have no windows. When there are any, they consist of one or two panes of glass, and these very rarely are made to open. It may, however, be considered rather as an advantage, that these panes are frequently broken and seldom replaced by which air is admitted. A great proportion of the poorer cabins have no chimneys, but in this respect, there has been, I believe, some improvement of late years.
6. *What improvements in the construction of their dwellings conducive to dryness, ventilation, and light are practicable? Are the poor disposed to adopt such improvements? Be so good as to describe the general internal state of their dwellings.*
- A. I know of no plan to be suggested here but the obvious one of recommending to the poor to adopt, and assisting them in every way, to construct windows and chimneys to their dwellings. Some small premiums given by landlords, might, perhaps, be useful. I think the poor are not generally interested about these matters, but this rather from indolence than prejudice. The general state of such dwellings, is, I regret to state, very comfortless; often consisting of one small room, about 12 feet by 16, in which the whole family and a pig are contained, the floor of common earth and very filthy, and the whole list of furniture, an iron pot, some kind of dresser, two or three straw bosses, (or stools), or wooden chairs, and table.
7. *Are their cabins much crowded, particularly in the night time?*
- A. The numbers in each cabin must of course be very variable. In some instances, they are in Fethard crowded to a very unwholesome excess; the people very glad to admit lodgers in order to pay the rent.
8. *Do the inhabitants lie promiscuously, and are cattle sheltered in their dwellings?*
- A. This habit, of lying promiscuously, is very indecently practised, and is owing very much to the scarcity of bedclothes; many trying to crowd under one blanket. Cows, and even horses, in some few instances, are inmates of the same cabin, but very commonly pigs, and this more frequently of late from the fear of pig stealers.
9. *What is the condition of the poor inhabitants as to bedding? Do they sleep on straw, heath, rushes, or dried leaves?*
- A. The general bedding is straw, made on the ground; the want of blankets in this country, I consider as one of the greatest privations of the poor.

Clothing

1. *Of what materials does the clothing of the poor generally consist? Is much of any attention bestowed on its renewal or cleansing?*
- A. Instead of frieze, which is both a warm and durable clothing, which afforded employment to the females in domestic manufacture, and which some years ago was much worn in this country, the poor have of late got into the use of a coarse bad English cloth. This is owing, I believe, to the comparative scarcity of sheep. The women chiefly wear stuffs, which do not wash well; and on the whole very little attention is paid to the renewal or cleansing of apparel.

2. *Can you adduce any facts in proof of the opinion, that disease is extended among the poor by infected clothing?*
- A. Much experience leaves the fact unquestioned here that disease is spread by clothing. But as instances are called for, I shall state two. A child now lies ill of a fever in Fethard, who had been removed on the appearance of that disease in his family. In three weeks after he became ill of fever, and his medical attendant is convinced, from all the circumstances, that he brought the disease from home in his clothes. The other fact is that of a poor man who died of fever in Fethard, and left a part of his clothing as a legacy to his brother. The latter had in no other way come in the way of the contagion, but caught it from the clothes left to him.
3. *Are the habits of the lower classes in your neighbourhood cleanly? If not, what methods are most likely to introduce cleanliness? Has any plan for this purpose been put in practice in your neighbourhood with success?*
- A. I know of no plan for this purpose which would not necessarily connect itself with more than the query points at, considering the want of cleanliness as merely the effect of causes not easily removable.

Diet

1. *Is the diet of the lower classes sufficient as to quantity, and is it of good quality? Does it give origin to disease, or further its progress?*
- A. Though this is a year of remarkable plenty, I am convinced that, from the want of means to purchase it, many families have not sufficient quantity of food. The quantity of provision is, I think, far from good. Dry potatoes are very commonly the food of the poor; and the kind of potato now in use is far inferior to what it used to be. The people have of late cultivated a white soft species of potato, which is productive and requires little manure; but it is a watery, relaxing, unwholesome food, I have no doubt that it generates and increases disease. It is peculiarly ill suited to a climate which is of itself relaxing, and amongst other evils I believe forms an additional temptation to the use of spirits. I am told that these potatoes produce effects on the bowels for which whiskey is considered as the remedy.
2. *Be so good as to state the price of bread, potatoes, oatmeal, milk and salt, generally in your neighbourhood, with the average price of each of these articles throughout the year.*
- A. I have employed an intelligent person to make these inquiries, and he has furnished me with the following statement:

	Present Prices	Average of last year	Average of last ten years
Potatoes	1d to 1 ¹ / ₂ per stone	2d per ditto	2 ¹ / ₂ per ditto
Bread	2d per 16 ounces	2d per 14 ounces	
Oatmeal	10s 6d to 12s 6d per cwt.	15s per ditto	18s per ditto
Salt	8s to 8s 6d per cwt.	little or no variation	
Milk	2d per quart	ditto	ditto

3. *Does fish form a considerable article of diet among the poor people? Are fisheries encouraged? Do any and what obstructions exist to further the extension of the fisheries, and by what means are these obstructions likely to be removed?*
- A. A considerable quantity of salt herring are used by the poor in lent.

Fuel

1. *Is turf the only fuel in your neighbourhood, or is there any considerable and regular supply of coal?*
- A. Culm (that is the small coal or slack of the Kilkenny Killenaule coal mines) forms a considerable part of the fuel of the poor; but it is so dear a rate, as to leave them very ill provided. They burn also cow dung, and various kinds of rubbish. Culm is the only species of coal which the lower classes consume.
2. *Are the poor well supplied with fuel? Has the want of this article favoured the extension of disease?*
- A. On the whole there is very great distress in this particular; and considering how much fire is wanted as a corrective of damp and impure air, there can be no doubt that this privation in our cabins must promote the extension of disease. Such is the opinion in point of fact of medical Gentlemen in this neighbourhood.
3. *In the mode of burning their fuel are any changes practicable likely to diminish its consumption and promote ventilation?*
- A. The adoption of chimneys must, of course, promote ventilation, but I can suggest nothing as to economy in the use of firing.

Employment

1. *What are the wages of labour in your neighbourhood? Is there sufficient employment for the poor? Can you propose any means of employment productive to the community or to individuals, suggested by the locality of your district?*
- A. The average rate of wages is 8d per day. There is not sufficient employment for the poor. The latter of these three queries is so important, that I submitted the whole to the better judgement and superior local experience of a number of the most intelligent inhabitants of Fethard and its vicinity. I take the liberty of sending herewith the result of their deliberation, and also a letter from Mr. Palliser on the subject. The leading wish of the inhabitants of this district, is that inquiry may be set on foot, as there has been long a general persuasion that such a line of navigation as they suggest would be great public benefit.
2. *How are females employed, and what are the daily benefits which may accrue to a family from such employment? State also the effects of different kinds of employment on the health of the poor?*
- A. Much of the women's time is of course occupied in the business of their families; and at particular times of the year they assist in setting and gathering potatoes and in harvest work, etc. But where so many men want regular employment, females can find only occasional occupation of this kind. Of industry within doors there is very little; there being no manufacture carried on in this district. A woman may earn by spinning from 4d to 6d per day, but there is nothing that can be called regular demand for such work. There are no manufactures here, or any kinds of employment particularly injurious to health.

Contagion

1. *Do any customs contributing to extend febrile or other infection, at present exist among the poor? If so, can these be opposed or coneracted with any probability of success?*
- A. The custom of making sinks and heaps of filth at the doors of the cabins, is perhaps, the great



source of fever in small towns. Some pains have been taken in this respect in Fethard, but there are real difficulties in the way of success. In many instances, the back ground to cabins is so small, that though the heap may be removed from the street, yet the evil is only shifted from one door to another. But in many cases there is no back ground at all, and if you seize the heap as a forfeiture, you almost ruin the family. For the heap of manure is the means on which the poor man often entirely depends to provide his potatoes; the farmer being in the habit of giving potato ground rent free, in consideration of its being manured. It has been suggested that if the landlords of small towns would allot some public space of ground for depositing heaps of manure, it might serve to remove this evil. Large assemblages of people at wakes in infected houses, have, it is well known, done much mischief.

2. *Are mendicants numerous? Can you state any facts in proof of the communication of disease, by strolling or other beggars? Can you point out any causes which produce or promote mendicity?*
- A. Mendicants are very numerous. In proof of their being sometimes the vehicle of infection, I copy a report sent to me by the apothecary of the Fethard Dispensary. "A strolling beggar was attacked with fever about two months ago, and took refuge in a cabin in this town. The owner of the house discovering in a few days that his lodger was infected, turned him out, but the precaution was useless, as his entire family caught the distemper. I have traced this same beggar, in six different families, and in each house the infection was communicated; some of them still remain in considerable danger". The most obvious causes are (1) general distress; (2) indiscreet marriages; (3) the tendency of this evil to increase itself by taking off the shame attached to mendicity when less frequent; (4) the disposition of those, whom temporary pressures have forced to beg, to continue in that course once begun.
3. *Is fever now prevalent in your neighbourhood? If so, does it spread through families? State what has been the general prevalence of fever, within your memory, among the poor.*
- A. There are about thirty now on our dispensary list in fever, which certainly does spread through families. I have nothing to remark of the recollection of fever in this place during eight years of my acquaintance with it, but that it has been prevalent pretty much in its average proportion to other complaints. In the late epidemic we had from a hundred to a hundred and fifty patients at a time, but this forms a remarkable exception.
4. *Are persons attacked with fever speedily removed to an hospital: and are measures employed to purify the clothing and bedding of such patients, or of their families? And if this is the case, be so good as to state, particularly, these or other preventive measures. Also, if any mode of cleansing the walls and furniture of infected houses has been resorted to with success?*
- A. There is no hospital here. The committee of our dispensary every week appoint two visitors, whose office it is to take charge that the sick are provided with necessaries. These persons make what arrangements the Institution can afford, and they can admit of, to remove infected members of families into separate lodgings, to procure changes of clothing, to cleanse the houses and burn the infected straw, and particularly to encourage and to promote whitewashing both within and without doors.
5. *Have the lower classes readily concurred in the measures of prevention, which were generally recommended for adoption, during the progress of the late Epidemic Fever?*
- A. The lower classes have been frequently indolent and remiss in this particular, but have not seemed to oppose through any perverted principle.
6. *What means appear to you most likely to remove their prejudices, and to convince the sufferers, that cleanliness of all kinds, free admission of air and light to houses and cabins, warm and dry clothing, the avoiding excessive fatigue and night air, and the immediate separation of the sick from the healthy during*



the prevalence of epidemic disease, are their best and surest preservation from danger?

- A. I know of none but giving advice of this subject, and putting some short tract into their hands which sets forth the particulars specified in this Query.

Endemic & General Diseases

1. *Are any other diseases prevalent in your vicinity, and from what causes do they chiefly originate?*

A. Among the most prevalent disorders of this place are dropsy, scurvy, rheumatism, and herpes, but above all impair digestion, arising, there can be no doubt, from poor diet. Want of cleanliness and of comfortable clothing at night occasion much disease; besides this, I fear, that a sedentary life, occasioned by want of employment has contributed much to injure the health of the poor; this keeps them in a damp cabin brooding over their misfortunes, instead of being out in the fresh air, engaged in cheerful occupation.
2. *Does the smallpox often make its appearance? Does it prove fatal to a large proportion of those whom it seizes? Is vaccine inoculation generally and successfully practised?*

A. Small pox does not often appear here; when it does it can generally be traced to some quack who commences inoculation. The disease often proves fatal to those who contract it naturally. Vaccine inoculation has been practised here to some extent, and, with success, except in a few cases, in which I regret to hear that the small pox has afterwards appeared. There is considerable prejudice against vaccination with many of the poor. Since the above was written a young gentleman in Fethard, vaccinated many years ago, has taken the natural small pox, and lies severely ill. He is about 19 years of age, and was vaccinated at Portsmouth.
3. *Do any manufacturers, peculiarly injurious to health, exist in your neighbourhood? How do they operate, and how are their bad effects to be remedied?*

A. There are no manufacturers.
4. *Are spirituous liquors consumed to excess by the middle and lower classes in your neighbourhood? To what extent is malt liquor in use amongst them? Do you think that the habit of intoxication gains ground among the poor? If you can devise any practicable means of checking so serious an evil, state them in detail.*

A. There has been a considerable decrease in the quality both of spirits and beer consumed in Fethard of late. I cannot learn that the proportion of beer is greater than it used to be. I should be glad to think that the decrease in intoxication which the diminished consumption in beer and spirits implies, was owing to a more satisfactory cause than the want of means to purchase them, but I should be afraid to say it is.
5. *Do any charitable societies exist in your neighbourhood for the relief of the poor during sickness, and for the encouragement of good and healthful habits? Can you suggest any mode of extending these societies, or rendering their operations more efficacious?*

A. There are none but the committee of the Dispensary, and the plan of visiting the poor engrafted on the Institution. There is also a charitable loan in Fethard, conducted on the usual plan of such charities.
6. *Please to supply any information which may not be connected with the foregoing queries, but which you shall judge to be material.*

A. It is impossible for any one, who in this neighbourhood feels anxious for the best needs of the people, to be insensible to the various evils effecting health and everything valuable, which flow from the profanation of the sabbath. The best observation I can give, convinces me, that this is in a great measure owing all the avoidable evils (to speak of the inevitable pressure of times is useless) to which the poor are exposed. When some efforts were lately made in Fethard to



suppress the sale of spirituous liquors on Sundays, the publicans pleaded, and I am sure with truth, that if so restricted, they would be unable to pay their rent. Here is a plain admission that on the Lord's day is the great market for intoxicating liquor. I believe that Sunday is the great means of keeping up the habit of drinking with many who but for the recurrence of that day would wholly give it up. For numbers who drink when in the way of it, would never think on working days of leaving their business, and going some distance on a premeditated plan of carousing. And though fairs may offer occasional temptation, yet these do not occur often or regularly enough to keep up the habit. One day in seven was the portion allocated by the Almighty for religious purposes, perhaps for this reason, that such a frequency of recurrence is precisely sufficient to prescribe the habit of religion in communities. When this is perverted to evil, how dreadful is the consideration that it brings all the wisdom of a diving plan into the service of sin!

Keeping open public houses on Sundays is certainly one of the best facilities for carrying on treasonable and rebellious plots. This has been ascertained by experience in this place; besides, it tends to impoverish the lower classes, many of the small farmers being allowed to run up bills of long standing at the whiskey shops. In short, it can hardly be necessary to urge that converting God's day eminently into a day of profligacy must be the source of evils too numerous to dwell on here.

One thing more I would observe, that the general system of selling ordinary goods on Sunday in Fethard, acts most unfairly on shop-keepers (and some there are) who in principle abstain from that practice. Sunday after Sunday they witness the sale of articles, in a great proportion to the whole business of the town in their several lines, and suffer this unfair advantage to be taken of them sooner than go against their conscience.

7. *To conclude . . .*

- A. Efforts have been made in Fethard to remove this grievance but without success. A vestry was held in the parish church, and overseers of public houses appointed, according to Act of Parliament, but they could not carry their point, in the prevention of selling spirits. The great difficulty which they found arose from the permission, which the law allows to publicans of selling malt, though not spirituous liquors, on Sunday. No vigilance could prevent deception as to the kind of liquor people were drinking when suffered to carouse in these places; and besides, if men get drunk and turn a village Sabbath into noise and uproar, does it signify, in a moral point of view at least, whether they are drunk with beer or whiskey?

The churchwardens felt particular difficulty, in endeavouring to prevent the sale of butchers' meat, in ascertaining the right line of conduct where a shop was the only passage into a dwelling house, in knowing what constituted the exposure of things to sale in many instances; in short, after no small struggle made by many of the well minded inhabitants of Fethard, to enforce the due observation of the Sabbath, the impression left on their minds was that where a disposition to oppose existed, the law did not bear them out.

Henry Woodward,
Rector of Fethard.

FOOTNOTES

1. For an account of the extent of epidemics, inoculation and dispensaries in Ireland, see K. H. Connell: *The Population of Ireland, 1750-1845* (Oxford, 1950).
2. *First Report of the General Board of Health* (Dublin, 1822).

