I Begging and Alms-Giving: Framing the Issues
Defining Begging and Alms-Giving

From what [weaver Edward] McNally has stated of his neighbourhood, it must be difficult to draw a distinction and institute between the beggar and the labourer, for, as he has already stated, there are labourers or persons willing to labour, holding a patch of ground, whose families beg on all occasions, on which their provisions run short, and this occurs so frequently that McNally has already counted them among beggars. There are others who hold a larger portion of land, and whose families beg only in summer; others holding more land and cheaper are still labourers, and work for hire, but are never reduced to beggary; among the two former cases it is hard to distinguish, for the purpose of comparison where the beggar begins and the labourer ends.

Poor Inquiry report for Aughavale, County Mayo, 1835

Introduction

For the people who lived in pre-Famine Ireland, and subsequently for historians, perhaps the single greatest challenge when considering mendicancy and its extent is defining just who and what is being discussed. This challenge was not unique to nineteenth-century Irish society. Paul Slack’s study of vagrancy in seventeenth-century England considers whether ‘vagrants’ and ‘vagabonds’ – which he rightly describes as ‘emotive, elastic terms’ – were wandering pedlars or minstrels, the archetypal ‘able-bodied professional beggars of the criminal underworld’ or

1 *PI, Appendix A*, p. 494.
‘simply unskilled migrant labourers and paupers’? Differentiating between begging and casual employment regularly proved difficult, as reflected in the quotation above from the mid-1830s Poor Inquiry. In some instances, begging was carried out without resort to other survival strategies, while perhaps in most cases alms-seeking was a practice that individuals resorted to occasionally and in accordance with their fluctuating economic circumstances. Experiences of begging in early to mid-nineteenth-century Ireland were never homogeneous. In Drogheda, the Poor Inquiry commissioners observed that the ‘distinction between the less industrious, honest, frugal, and independent families of the working class, and the mendicants or vagrants, is not very broadly marked, as, in times of sickness or want of employment, having no savings to fall back upon, and being unable to obtain credit, their only resource is to pray for alms’. The circumstances which motivated an individual to go out into the roads and streets and seek alms differed from person to person. Some commentators crudely lumped all beggars and vagrants together and categorised them as the lazy, idle poor who preferred the mendicant life to one of industry; the historian ought to avoid such crude categorisations. If one was, for the sake of argument, to embrace Henry Mayhew’s famous threefold breakdown of the poor of London into those who will work, those who cannot work and those who will not work – into the third of which Mayhew clumsily massed beggars, thieves and prostitutes – it would be evident that street beggars in nineteenth-century Ireland transcended all three groupings.

What Was Begging?

Negotiating the Terminology of Mendicancy

The terms ‘beggar’ and ‘mendicant’, as well as their derivatives ‘begging’ and ‘mendicancy’, were used interchangeably in the pre-Famine period when referring to individuals engaged in the solicitation of alms. Impoverished people were spoken of as being ‘in want’, ‘in distress’ and, in more extreme cases, ‘living in destitution’. These poor persons had numerous survival options open to them, one of which was begging/mendicancy, and for different individuals, households and families, their resort to this strategy varied from regular begging to rare instances. On the other hand, a person

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3 *PI, Appendix C, Part I*, p. 49.
or family could be regarded as being poor and living in destitution but not engaged in mendicancy. An area in which this distinction arises is in the language of charity, which championed the silent suffering of the ‘honest’, ‘deserving’ poor (the ‘shamefaced poor’), in stark contrast to the idle ‘undeserving’. For instance, an 1840s report for the Dublin Strangers’ Friend Society advised its readers (existing and prospective subscribers and donors) that:

[the] worst forms of distress and destitution are not those which are presented on the streets. In the retired and depressed portions of the city, they are to be found, as well as in its dark and narrow lanes, where every house is inhabited by an almost incredible number of families, and every thing congenial to disease and misery is found to exist.

Here, the charitable society was clearly distinguishing between the ‘distress and destitution’ of the ‘deserving’ in contrast to the solicitations of ‘undeserving’ street beggars.

The term ‘vagabond’ is mostly of early modern usage and outside its appearance in the 1770s Houses of Industry legislation the term rarely appears in nineteenth-century sources for Ireland, while the word ‘tramp’ did not become common until the late nineteenth century. The case is rather different, however, regarding the terms ‘vagrant’ and ‘vagrancy’. In sources pertaining to pre-Famine Ireland, and this is also the case with Britain, the labels ‘vagrant’ and ‘vagrancy’ pertained to the criminal acts of wandering, being without the means to support oneself and, in certain scenarios, public begging (criminal acts which were subjected to revised definition in line with the evolution of legislation). Instances of vagrancy were among the most common cases that came before local magistrates at the petty sessions, and magistrates’ manuals for the period usually included substantial sections on the existing vagrancy legislation, listing the relevant statutes, the various categories of persons who could be tried under the

6 Annual report of the Strangers’ Friend Society (founded in 1790) for visiting and relieving distressed strangers and the resident sick poor, in Dublin and its vicinity; with an account of some of the cases relieved, and list of subscribers for 1842 (Dublin, 1843), p. 7.
7 11 & 12 Geo. III, c. 11, s. 13 [Ire.] (2 June 1772); 11 & 12 Geo. III, c. 30, s. 8 [Ire.] (2 June 1772); 13 & 14 Geo. III, c. 46, s. 5 [Ire.] (2 June 1774); 15 & 16 Geo. III, c. 35, s. 1 [Ire.] (4 Apr. 1776).
8 Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland*, pp. 198–203.
vagrancy laws and the requisite punishment. Typically, the defining characteristics of ‘vagrants’ were that they were non-local, work-shy and carried ‘the aura of criminality’. Since the sixteenth century, the term ‘vagrancy’ was used as a catch-all term for the various categories of the mobile poor throughout Europe. Robert Jütte has discerned ‘a new concept of collective crime which is usually summarized under the heading “vagrancy”’, similar to Beier’s description of early modern vagrants representing ‘a new social problem … in being a large landless element with no firm roots and few prospects’. The implication was that vagrants were no ordinary criminals; they were regarded as a major threat to society, and therefore pursued by all authorities and stigmatized as deviants.

Beggars, Begging and the Law

Laws curtailing mendicancy and vagrancy in Ireland dated back to 1542, and in the following centuries numerous acts were passed by Irish and English parliaments dividing the poor between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’, whose resort to begging was to be regulated and punished respectively. In the mid-1630s, the Irish Parliament passed an act for the erection of houses of correction, targeting ‘rogues, vagabonds, sturdy beggars, and other idle and disorderly persons’. The lumping together of beggars and vagrants with ‘tories’ and robbers – illustrating the common association of beggary with crime, sedition and outrage – influenced the passing of the 1703 act, which provided for the transportation of such individuals to British plantations in the Americas.

9 Leonard MacNally, The justice of the peace for Ireland: containing the authorities and duties of that officer … (2 vols, Dublin, 1808), ii, 354–74, 807–12; William Toone, The magistrate’s manual; or, a summary of the duties and powers of a justice of the peace, carefully compiled from the best authorities; with extracts from adjudged cases and the statutes to the 56th George III. 1816 … (2nd edn, London, 1817), pp. 804–34.


12 Jütte, Poverty and deviance, p. 146.

13 This act, 33 Hen. VIII, c. 15 [Ire.] (1542) was based upon an earlier English statute, 22 Hen. VIII, c. 12 [Eng.] (1530–1).

14 Comprehensive accounts of the history of Irish legislation in this field are given in George Nicholls, A history of the Irish Poor Law (London, 1856); Law Reform Commission, Report on vagrancy and related matters (Dublin, 1985).

15 10 & 11 Chas. 1, c. 4 [Ire.] (1635).
America, and four years later this legislation was extended so as to include ‘all loose, idle vagrants’, defined as ‘such as pretend to be Irish gentlemen and will not work or betake themselves to any honest trade or livelihood, but wander about demanding victuals, and coshing from house to house’.

The most significant act pertaining to beggars, prior to the nineteenth century, was a statute of 1771–2 facilitating the establishment throughout Ireland of Houses of Industry, which were multi-faceted poorhouses that simultaneously served as refuges for the ‘deserving’ destitute poor and carceral facilities for idle, ‘sturdy beggars’. The opening sentence of the ‘Act for badging such poor as shall be found unable to support themselves by labour’ stated that ‘strolling beggars are very numerous in this kingdom’, thus outlining the perceived urgency for this new statute’s relief and punitive measures. This act created a visual distinction between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ which went beyond perceptions. The attachment of a badge onto the garments of ‘the helpless poor’ identified them to prospective almsgivers as being worthy of charity. This conveyed the inherent implication that those without such a ‘licence to beg’ were deemed, by the newly formed corporations on whom the powers of relief and punishment of the vagrant poor were bestowed, to be ‘sturdy beggars and vagabonds’. Not only were they not deserving of charitable relief, but their supposed delinquency warranted marginalisation, punishment and institutional confinement.

Upon the establishment of the Dublin House of Industry, the punitive powers of the city poorhouse (founded in 1703–4) were transferred to the new institution. Within a few years, however, the system of granting begging licences was discontinued in Dublin, due in part to the overwhelming number of applicants but also because of ‘the difficulty of discriminating

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19 While the badging of parish paupers in Dublin dated back to the late seventeenth century, it appears that the practice had declined by the 1730s, when Jonathan Swift published his famous proposal for badging the city’s poor: W.A. Seaby and T.G.F. Paterson, ‘Ulster beggars’ badges’ in Ulster Archaeological Journal, 3rd series, xxxiii (1970), p. 96; Raymond Gillespie (ed.), The vestry records of the parishes of St Catherine and St James, Dublin, 1657–1692 (Dublin, 2004), p. 151; [Jonathan Swift], A proposal for giving badges to the beggars in all the parishes of Dublin (London, 1737).
between the meritorious poor and the impostor’, which ‘demonstrated this method to be useless and impracticable’, according to a later report.\textsuperscript{20} Despite being empowered to curtail mendicancy, the governors of the House of Industry exerted these powers only occasionally, usually at times of crisis and in response to public outcry. Thus, in July 1801, in the midst of a prolonged period of inclement weather, food shortages and disease epidemics, the governors informed the public that as they ‘intend in a short time to enforce the Laws against Vagrants, &c. they earnestly request that the Public will not give Alms to Beggars in the Streets, as such a practice must necessarily defeat all their endeavours for that purpose’.\textsuperscript{21} The injection of new blood and administrative reform also renewed authorities’ zeal in suppressing street begging. The accession of Major James Palmer to the governorship of the House of Industry in 1820 was cited by one newspaper as the cause of a renewed initiative to curtail mendicancy, stating that ‘the former apathetical feeling no longer remains’. The provision of additional cells for ‘sturdy beggars and disgusting objects’ and increased vigilance by the police led to ‘several of these sturdy fellows, who were the terror of respectable females when walking unattended’ being apprehended and confined in the institution.\textsuperscript{22}

Cultural representations of the mendicant classes at this time focused on the archetypal able-bodied, idle male vagrant, who represented a substantial threat to the social order. However, criminal records for Ireland reveal that by far the majority of people tried under the vagrancy laws were women. An examination of Irish prison registers for the period 1822–45 identifies 194 convictions for the crime of vagrancy, and amongst this number 130 convicts (67 per cent) were female.\textsuperscript{23} Women also constituted the majority of persons sentenced to seven years’ transportation for vagrancy offences between 1836 and 1868, with the 330 female convicts (62.5 per cent) far outnumbering the 198 males (37.5 per cent).\textsuperscript{24} This research supports Audrey Eccles and David Hitchcock’s recent work on vagrancy in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England wherein the authors undermine the traditional assumption that early modern and modern vagrants were mostly men.\textsuperscript{25} Women were more

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{PI}, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin, p. 18a*.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{FJ}, 7 July 1801.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{FJ}, 21 Nov. 1820.
\textsuperscript{23} Irish Prison Registers 1790–1924, consulted at findmypast.ie (accessed 19 October 2017).
\textsuperscript{24} Australian transportation database, available at National Archives of Ireland www.nationalarchives.ie (accessed 2 Feb. 2012).
vulnerable than men to economic distress and destitution, and took to the road in greater numbers, as ‘out of place’ domestic servants or, in the rural Irish case, as labourers’ wives (and children) wandering the countryside, begging during the ‘hungry months’ while the husband/father was working on the harvest in the eastern regions or in Britain.

Throughout nineteenth-century Europe, social and public order legislation was at times vague and ill-defined, ultimately leaving the definition of crime to the discretion of the police. Writing of Victorian Britain, F.M.L. Thompson observed that some of the relatively minor laws dealing with public order ‘were vague and generic, allowing in practice considerable discretion in their interpretation. Thus, the police could in effect decide what constituted a public nuisance, a disorder, or a threat to the public peace’.  

English vagrancy laws infamously outlined a litany of deviant characters, typically defined by their occupations (if any), who constituted ‘vagrants’, and among this grouping ‘beggars’ (defined simply as those seeking alms) were invariably included. Philanthropist and social inquirer Frederic Eden’s 1797 State of the poor noted the ‘very dubious nature’ of English vagrancy laws, which ‘must frequently require nice legal acumen to distinguish whether a person incurs any, and what, penalty’. However, vagueness in the composition of vagrancy legislation was not the reserve of English laws, and Hitchcock and Shoemaker’s observation of eighteenth-century London – ‘While constables and justices of the peace certainly believed they knew a vagrant when they saw one, the legal definition, while broad, was also obscure’ – was true of vagrancy laws in pre-Famine Ireland. A crucial difference between Irish and English vagrancy laws was that the latter were more complex given the centrality of settlement to the English Poor Laws since the early modern period. The legislative pitfalls in terms of public begging in Ireland were highlighted by the 1830 parliamentary select committee on the poor in Ireland, which criticised the fact that the early eighteenth-century legislation facilitating the transportation of vagrants remained in force. Noting the need for continued vigilance in enforcing anti-begging laws, the committee stated that it ‘cannot but think that a more constitutional and efficient system may be adopted than one which allows

29 Under an English act of 1662, a person was required to possess ‘settlement’ in a parish (typically his/her native parish) in order to receive relief through the Poor Law.
the penalty of transportation to be inflicted upon the mere authority of the presentment of a grand jury, and this, not for an offence defined with precision, but, under contingencies extremely vague and uncertain'.

This view drew the support of Poor Law Commissioner George Nicholls and such sentiment can also be found in the Poor Inquiry’s report on vagrancy and mendicancy in Dublin, wherein the commissioners argued that ‘the whole legal code respecting vagrancy is contradictory, uncertain and but little acted upon’.

While legislation provided for the strengthening of previous provisions and new acts bestowed powers of arrest and detention to the police and certain welfare institutions (such as the Houses of Industry), it is clear that both before and during the nineteenth century the ambiguity surrounding terms such as ‘vagrants’ was used to the advantage of authorities, on behalf of the general public, and to the detriment of the vagrant under suspicion.

A late eighteenth-century statute added the proviso that a ‘stranger’ under suspicion could be detained for not satisfactorily explaining his presence in a particular location. For instance, in Kilcullen, County Kildare in December 1821, local magistrate William Brownrigg detained to Naas Gaol ‘four very suspicious persons as vagrants as they could not give a proper account of themselves’. In two of the cases, the arrested men claimed to be traders in tin ware and linen but had no such materials on their person. In each case, the magistrate commented that the vagrant ‘could not give any satisfactory account of himself’.

It is clear that vague definitions of crimes such as ‘vagrancy’ were being used to detain and subsequently prosecute those deemed by the authorities to be suspicious or deviant. The Poor Inquiry concluded that the word ‘vagrant’:

is now held to apply to persons suspected of great crimes but against whom there is not sufficient legal evidence of such crimes, and who

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30 Report of the select committee on the state of the poor in Ireland; being a summary of the first, second and third reports of evidence taken before that committee: together with an appendix of accounts and papers, p. 23, H.C. 1830 (667), vii, 23.

31 Nicholls, A history of the Irish Poor Law, p. 100.

32 PI, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin, p. 29a*.


34 36 Geo. III, c. 20, s. 15 [Ire.] (24 Mar. 1796). See also 35 Geo III, c. 36 [Ire.] (5 June 1795).

have no ascertained mode of obtaining an honest livelihood, and who are, therefore, presumed to live by dishonest and illegal means.\(^{36}\)

In Dublin city, individuals were occasionally arrested and confined on the suspicion that they may engage in begging. In 1824, the city’s mendicity society directed its street inspectors, in co-operation with the police, to apprehend individuals ‘whom they may find prowling about the streets, without any visible occupation, or means of subsistence, whom they have reason to suspect are there for the purpose of begging, although not in the act of begging at the moment’\(^{37}\). That same year saw the passing of the influential 1824 Vagrancy Act, limited in its scope to England, which codified existing vagrancy legislation and legislatively cemented the rights of policemen ‘pre-emptively’ to arrest an individual on the suspicion that they may have the intention to commit an offence.\(^{38}\)

The situation was not rectified by the passing of the 1838 Irish Poor Law, which omitted vagrancy clauses against the recommendation of Nicholls, the act’s architect.\(^{39}\) Under the 1838 act the newly established Poor Law Union Boards of Guardians were empowered to relieve the destitute poor who could not support themselves. This was carried out through the workhouse system and guardians were explicitly prevented from providing outdoor relief. Yet, against the wishes of Nicholls, the Whig government dropped plans to include vagrancy clauses in the act, leaving the question of beggary unresolved under the new Poor Law system. Wishing to address this defect, Lord Morpeth introduced an ultimately unsuccessful mendicity bill in March 1840, pointing to the failings of the present laws: ‘that their definitions were obsolete and uncertain, or that they subjected the parties to such severe penalties as to defeat their own object; they gave the extreme punishment of transportation for vagrancy; and such was their severity, that, being repugnant to the feelings of the people, they could not be enforced’.\(^{40}\) A similar want of clarification in the Scottish vagrancy laws was held in the 1840s to contribute to localised variations in implementation and, consequently, ineffectual methods for suppressing vagrancy and

\(^{36}\) PI, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin, p. 31a*.

\(^{37}\) Dublin Mendicity Society minute book, 23 Mar. 1824 (NLI, DMSP, MS 32,599/3).

\(^{38}\) Paul Lawrence, ‘The Vagrancy Act (1824) and the persistence of pre-emptive policing in England since 1750’ in British Journal of Criminology, lvii, no. 3 (2017), pp. 513–31.

\(^{39}\) 1 & 2 Vict., c. 56 (31 July 1838).

mendicancy. These ambiguities in the legislation were not confined to the vagrancy laws. The Medical Charities Act of 1851, which transferred responsibility for dispensaries to the Poor Law unions, established a system by which, according to the wording of the legislation, ‘any poor person’ was entitled to receive free medical treatment at their local dispensary. The imprecise definition of just who qualified for free medical treatment led, in one historian’s terms, to ‘gross abuse’ of the system in the post-Famine decades. The inefficacy of the existing statutes pertaining to mendicancy in Ireland was also criticised by political economist Nassau Senior in a comprehensive article on Irish vagrancy laws. ‘There are, indeed, such laws in the statute-book; but defects in their machinery, the severity of their punishments, and the absence in their enactments of any reference to a legal provision for the poor, have rendered them inefficient’. These difficulties were finally addressed and legislated for at the height of the Great Famine with the passing of the 1847 Vagrancy Act, which criminalised public begging, encouraging a child to engage in begging or wandering from one Poor Law union to another for the sake of obtaining relief, crimes liable to one month’s imprisonment with hard labour.

Beggars, Begging and the ‘Pauper Professions’

Begging in pre-Famine Ireland took on more forms than the mere solicitation of alms. At times, begging was cloaked under the guise of the sale of some trivial item, such as flowers or home-made devotional articles, or the provision of a service. A statute of 1774 included unlicensed street sellers within the confines of the definition of ‘vagabond’ and ‘vagrant beggars’, noting that this practice – ‘hawking about small wares, whereby they cannot earn a subsistence’ – constituted ‘indirect begging’. Encompassing peddling and street entertainment, charring and prostitution, shoe-blacking and tin mending, ‘the beggarly professions came in an almost unlimited variety’. In his work on eighteenth-century London street cultures, Tim Hitchcock has

41 Report from Her Majesty’s commissioners for inquiring into the administration and practical operation of the Poor Laws in Scotland, p. lxii, H.C. 1844 [C 557], xx, 68.
42 14 & 15 Vict., c. 68, s. 9 (7 Aug. 1851).
43 Laurence M. Geary, Medicine and charity in Ireland, 1718–1851 (Dublin, 2004), p. 211. For more on the 1851 act, see ibid., pp. 210–16.
46 13 & 14 Geo. III, c. 46, s. 6 [Ire.] (2 June 1774).
noted the importance that, first, these ‘pauper professions’ were unregulated and, secondly, these individuals made use of the public street as a space in which to pursue ‘those innumerable tasks which combined begging and service’. Largely operating outside the formal economy, individuals could enter and leave these ‘professions’ as they wished. Licences for hawking, peddling ‘or other trading … going from place to place’ could be bought but the price of £2 was beyond the means of most people engaged in this type of work.

Authorities were prone to occasional bursts of anti-mendicancy sentiment, driven by perceived rises in the levels of beggary at times of social crisis and economic decline. For instance, in July 1832, when a cholera epidemic was spreading throughout Dublin, access to the Ormond Market on the city’s north side was prohibited to ‘Beggars, Hawkers, and disorderly persons within the precincts of the Market’. Being subject to such proscriptions, street people were required to justify their presence in thoroughfares and public spaces. The notice banning undesirables from the Ormond Market further stated that ‘we will allow no Basket-woman or Porter to loiter or continue within the Market unless actually engaged [emphasis added]’.

The Poor Inquiry of the mid-1830s observed that in Dublin some beggars ‘carry or take some small article for sale as a pretence’, reflecting the advantage to the mendicant of being seen with some goods for sale, giving the impression of industry and self-sufficiency rather than idleness and dependency. Similarly, in rural Ireland, male labourers wandering the countryside in search of employment usually carried a tool, such as a spade or sickle, and enquiries as to the availability of work were usually accompanied by requests for alms, although the latter were oftentimes conducted by his wife and children.

In Ballydehob, labourer Bartholomew Brown told the Poor Inquiry: ‘There was a good strong able-bodied man came to my cabin this morning; he said he wanted employment and could not get it; I gave him the little alms I could spare, two or three potatoes’. Here, the act of seeking assistance was framed, by both the labourer/beggar and Mr Brown, within the wider narrative of seeking employment, implying industriousness and honesty.

49 *Saunder’s News-Letter*, 10 Apr. 1805. This licence covered ‘any hawker, pedlar, or petty chapman, or other trading person going from place to place, carrying to sell or exposing to sale, any goods, wares, or merchandise; also to travelling tinkers, and casters of iron and metal, and to persons hawking about tea or coffee for sale’.
50 *FJ*, 6 July 1832.
51 Ibid.
52 *PI*, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin, p. 42a*.
54 Ibid., p. 667.
In his pioneering work on the poorer classes in mid-nineteenth-century London, Henry Mayhew observed the often-indistinct relationship between informal street trading and beggary, noting that:

petty trading beggars [were] … perhaps the most numerous class of beggars in London. Their trading in such articles as lucifers [friction matches], boot-laces, cabbage-nets, tapes, cottons, shirt-buttons, and the like, is in most cases a mere ‘blind’ to evade the law applying to mendicants and vagrants … The box of matches, or the little deal box of cottons, is used simply as a passport to the resorts of the charitable. The police are obliged to respect the trader, though they know very well that under the disguise of the itinerant merchant there lurks a beggar.\(^{55}\)

The sweeping of crossings on London’s public streets was also widely considered to be ‘a mere cloak for mendicity’.\(^{56}\)

Among the evidence recorded by the Poor Inquiry in Dublin was a return showing the previous occupations of inmates at the Mendicity Society’s asylum, which reveals a wide array of skilled, semi-skilled and, in particular, unskilled trades, wherein street-based professions were prominent. These included ‘Shopkeepers, Pedlars, and Hucksters’, ‘Washerwomen’, ‘Fruit and Cake-sellers in the Streets’, ‘Egg-sellers’, ‘Fish-dealers’, ‘Newspaper and Pamphlet-sellers’ and ‘Scourers, Charwomen, &c.’\(^{57}\) The close connection between street-selling and outright begging is reflected in Hugh Douglas Hamilton’s drawings of mid-eighteenth-century Dublin, *Cries of Dublin*. Throughout the 66 prints, unparalleled in the realistic and sympathetic depiction of Dublin street characters and their daily lives, Hamilton presents the purveyors of a wide range of products and services, together with a number of real and well-known street beggars: sellers of fish, whey, peas, fruit, eggs, perukes and brooms are vividly represented, as are carmen, stocking menders, cobblers and chimney sweeps.\(^{58}\) For providers of such services and goods, the ability to excite compassion and sympathy in

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56 *The first report of the society established in London for the suppression of mendicity* (London, 1819), pp. 20–1.
prospective customers was as important as their salesmanship, thus blurring
the lines between mendicancy and selling. The Poor Inquiry Report upon
vagrancy and mendicity in the city of Dublin noted: ‘At almost every door
your alms are solicited in the shape of a purchase of some little article
by a female, who urges on your attention the claims of a sick husband or
children’. Rural communities were also visited by travelling characters of
all sorts, usually consisting of the same individuals or families, whose stay
in a locality was short-lived. In rural as in urban places, beggary regularly
accompanied, and was indistinguishable from, petty peddling and hawking.
Hugh Dorian’s account of life in a mid-century rural Donegal community
recalled that the ‘newcomers or yearly visitants consisted of tinkers, pedlars,
pipers, fiddlers, show-men and beggars, and many otherwise idle with no
profession’.

The entertainment provided by itinerant musicians and ballad-
singers – the harper Turlough O’Carolan (1670–1738) and the poet Antaine
Raiftearaí (1799–1835), both blinded by smallpox, being the best known
examples – was regularly indistinguishable from outright begging; indeed, as
early as the seventeenth century, anti-vagrancy legislation included vagrant
musicians within its remit.

One form of solicitation which does not appear to have been practised
as much in Ireland as in Britain was the professional writing of begging-
letters. These compositions, invariably claiming respectability, reduced
circumstances and genuine distress, and pleading for monetary sums to
be forwarded to a given address, were seen as the inventions of skilled
impostors, preying on the benevolence of the charitable. The practice was so
widespread that the London Mendicity Society established a Begging Letter
Department to investigate the extent of the problem, while Henry Mayhew
devoted a substantial section of his survey of London’s poor to this category
of beggar. Among the cases investigated by this sub-committee of the
London society was that of an ‘impostor’ writing from Dublin, who claimed
to be the wife of a military man, shipwrecked abroad; in each begging letter
sent to a London address, the note was accompanied by ‘a forged certificate

59 PI, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin,
p. 27a.b.
60 Hugh Dorian, The outer edge of Ulster: a memoir of social life in nineteenth-century
Donegal, ed. Breandán Mac Suibhne and David Dickson (Dublin, 2001), p. 212. For a
later period, see also Mary Carberry, The farm by Lough Gur: the story of Mary Fogarty
61 10 and 11 Chas. I, c. 4 [Ire.] (1635).
Mendicity Society Begging Letter Department, 1838 (National Records of Scotland,
Papers of the Dukes of Buccleuch, GD224/155/1); Quennell, Mayhew’s London
underworld, pp. 345–69.
headed with the royal arms'. While this practice is well recorded in sources pertaining to Britain, there is little evidence that this occurred in Ireland. Yet, occasional Irish instances of this practice are recorded. Rev. Thomas Shore, a Church of Ireland clergyman in the Dublin parish of St Michan’s, recalled the discovery ‘in the house of a noted imposter upon the public charity a list of the most humane and opulent persons in Dublin, and a number of copies of a begging circular, which it was intended to send them, looking for relief for some imaginary distress. In Kilkee, non-local beggars were known to carry ‘recommendations’ and ‘plenty of letters and documents’ with them, but were identified as ‘impostors’ and largely ignored by the local population. In the County Longford town of Ballymahon, a number of persons, supposedly from ‘respectable families’, were known by the parish priest to produce ‘documents and recommendations [which] were forged’.

Various Forms of Alms
Alms solicited or given could take a number of forms and here an important distinction between the provision of private charity in rural and urban contexts requires assertion. The Poor Inquiry evidence reveals that in urban areas cash played a greater part in people’s daily lives and was, therefore, provided as alms more frequently. On the other hand, in rural areas alms were most commonly given in the form of potatoes or lodgings. When doling out alms, people gave what they had to hand, and which would not be too burdensome to relinquish. For labourers and small farmers in rural areas, any cash raised during the year largely went towards the payment of rent and, as such, occasional rummages into the large stockpile of potatoes for passing vagrants were less likely to impact on the household budget. The potato was, according to the surgeon and statistician William Wilde, ‘the circulating medium for the mendicant’.

63 Dublin Evening Packet and Correspondent, 9 Aug. 1845. See also Morning Post, 13 Nov. 1846.
64 Dublin Morning Register, 12 Jan. 1837. For other instances, see PI, Appendix A, p. 691.
65 PI, Appendix A, p. 625.
66 Ibid., pp. 562–3.
67 PI, Supplement to Appendix A, pp. 2–409; Return of answers to queries from the Poor Inquiry, by Rev. William Walsh, Parishes of Clontarf, Coolock and Santry, Dublin, [c.1833], answer no. 30 (DDA, DMP, 32/3/44).
68 [William R. Wilde], ‘The food of the Irish’ in Dublin University Magazine, xliii, no. 154 (Feb. 1854), p. 133. See also Arthur Young, A tour in Ireland: with general observations on the present state of the kingdom. Made in the years 1776, 1777, and 1778, and brought down to the end of 1779 (2 vols, Dublin, 1780), ii, Part II, p. 33.
'Farmers always prefer giving food, because there is no coin of so low a value as to represent a potatoe [sic], and because they always have plenty of potatoes, and often have no money; beggars always prefer money, for they take the raw potatoe [sic] only with the view of converting it into money'.

Many Poor Inquiry witnesses claimed that beggars preferred receiving alms in the form of money as they could spend it on luxuries, such as whiskey and tobacco, yet the practical reality that for transient individuals cash was easier to carry on their person than potatoes should not be overlooked. On his travels throughout Ireland in 1829, James Ebenezer Bicheno stopped and conversed with beggars, inquiring into ‘how they obtained their living. I found many of them going as roundsmen, from cabin to cabin, sleeping in any place that they chose to select; and it seemed to me as if every house was open to a poor beggar; if he was in want, he had only to enter the cabin and relief was afforded him from the potato; the potato appeared to me to be almost a common food; as long as it lasts, it is for the benefit of every man who wants it.’

In rural Ireland, assistance was also given in the form of a night’s lodging, either in the dwelling of a labourer or cottier, or in a farmer’s shed or barn. The provision of lodgings for wandering beggars was an ingrained part of life in rural Ireland, such that in County Mayo, sleeping arrangements in a labouring family’s cabin regularly accounted for the anticipated presence of mendicant visitors:

they [the family] lie down decently, and in order; the eldest daughter next the wall farthest from the door, then all the sisters, according to their ages; next the mother, father, and sons in succession, and then the strangers, whether the travelling pedlar, or tailor, or beggar; thus the strangers are kept aloof from the female part of the family, and if there be an apparent community there is great propriety of conduct.

This account, from the pen of Church of Ireland clergyman and writer Rev. Caesar Otway, suggests that while ‘strangers’ could be welcomed into the dwellings of the poorer classes, they still remained suspicious characters, as evidenced by the need to separate them, as much as possible, from the female members of the family. The widespread practice by poor labourers and cottiers of providing shelter to mendicants contributed to the dissemination of diseases, such as typhus fever, and at times of epidemic, all too often in pre-Famine Ireland, this custom was identified and criticised by middle-class

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69 PI, Appendix A, p. 476. See also ibid., p. 490.
71 [Caesar Otway], Sketches in Erris and Tyrawly (Dublin, 1841), p. 32.
commentators, particularly medical practitioners. A public notice issued in December 1817 informing the inhabitants of an unspecified Ulster town on the best means of preventing the spread of fever advised readers: ‘Do not lodge Beggars, unless in an outhouse. Their clothing and persons are almost always in a very filthy state, and infection is often conveyed in the Blankets they carry with them’.

Where Did Beggars Beg?
As a survival strategy, begging must be visible to be successful. The unseen mendicant, by the very fact of him/her not being observed, is ignored by the prospective alms-giver and remains empty-handed. In nineteenth-century Ireland beggars could maximise their chances of receiving alms by increasing their visibility, whether through importunate solicitation or through frequenting well-travelled locations through which large amounts of people passed. In the 1850s, Caesar Otway recalled hearing the story that some years previously £100 was paid ‘for a beggar’s right to beg on Palmerstown Hill, near Chapelizod’ outside Dublin city. Whether or not £100 was ever paid, or to whom, for the right to beg on Palmerstown Hill is of no significance here; what is important is the perception, passed down orally, that beggars prized prime locations for plying their trade, where their visibility and access to prospective alms-givers were maximised – in this case, the prime patch was located on the main western road to and from Dublin city. Given the importance to mendicants of being seen, the visibility of the problem focused minds and mobilised public opinion. During the construction of Nelson’s Pillar on a prominent site half-way up Dublin’s Sackville Street, the city’s main north-side thoroughfare, it was feared that the new memorial column was poorly sited and ‘promises to be a rallying point for beggars and idlers to gather round, and choke [sic] up a very important opening in the confluence of four streets’. A Mary H. from Rainsford Street in Dublin was known to the city’s mendicity society for exposing her young children at ‘their regular post’ ‘next the wall of the Royal Dublin Society’s lawn in Merrion-Square’; another culprit, Mary M. of Vicar Street, sent out ‘her three little children, the eldest a boy eight

73 ‘Printed notice giving rules to observe for the avoidance of fever’, 10 Dec. 1817 (PRONI, Abercorn papers, D623/A/131/3).
74 Ninth annual report of the Commissioners for Administering the Laws for Relief of the Poor in Ireland, with appendices, appendix A, no. 4, p. 54, H.C. 1856 [C 2105], xxviii, 468.
75 Leinster Journal, 14 May 1808.
In towns and cities an arriving or departing carriage attracted interest, serving as a ‘rallying point for beggars’. Coaches were used primarily by the commercial and professional classes, who were the targets of the ‘swarming’ supplicants. In market and post towns throughout Ireland, carriages attracted supplicants soliciting assistance and travellers’ accounts from this period almost invariably cite instances of being ‘surrounded’ by groups of mendicants. This practice was almost invariably described in negative terms; the traveller/writer usually perceived the gathering of mendicants as most bothersome and the congregated beggars were usually described as being among the most disagreeable category of poor. The beggars of Mullingar were noted as being particularly importunate in their ‘attacks’ upon coach passengers, while a group of as many as 40 beggars were known to ‘obtain a great deal from passengers in coaches, cars, &c.’ in Cork city: ‘There are a regular set of them who attend the conveyances that start from this parish [Holy Trinity]; they are very numerous … They are the most impudent, and annoy and pester the passengers … they are the worst and most dissolute description of beggars, and are regular frequenters of the gin shops’. In the view of one Dublin policeman, such beggars were ‘exceedingly troublesome and importunate. I heard one a few days ago ask a lady in her carriage for a shilling’. The German geographer Johann Georg Kohl recorded how in his 1842 travels in Ireland, his Bianconi car was ‘constantly surrounded on the roads between Limerick and Kilkenny, via Cork, by gangs of beggar children in pursuit and soliciting money. Kohl observed that the design of these conveyances, with passengers sitting unsheltered on the outside, lent itself to the annoyance of beggars’ solicitations:

78 For Drogheda, see PI, Appendix C, Part I, p. 49; McHugh, Drogheda before the Famine, p. 46. For Killarney, see PI, Appendix A, p. 684.
80 PI, Appendix A, p. 582; ibid., p. 649.
81 PI, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin, p. 41a*.
Bianconi’s cars are so constructed as to be of great advantage to these beggars, for the passengers are placed in such a manner as to have them constantly before their eyes, and very close to them ... An alteration in the form of these carriages would, should it ever take place, therefore sensibly affect the poor mendicants of Ireland.  

The image of the child beggar in pursuit of a jaunting car, a primitive version of Bianconi’s model of vehicle, is memorably depicted in Daniel Maclise’s ‘An outside jaunting car in a storm’ (Figure 1.1), which accompanied John Barrow’s *A tour round Ireland through the sea-coast counties in the autumn of 1835*.  

Large gatherings of people also acted as magnets for beggars. Fairs, markets, patterns and sporting events were common places for mendicants to ply their ‘trade’; such events provided opportunities for the seeking of alms, trading, theft, the sale of stolen goods and, in the case of fairs, the hiring of farm labourers, as well as social engagement, entertainment and jovial celebrations. These events were typically fixed points in the calendar, meaning that a day’s begging could be planned in advance. According to one account from County Clare, ‘They [beggars] are well acquainted with the days on which fairs are held, and portions of almanacks containing such information have not unfrequently been observed in their possession’. The use of the contemporary description of this practice as a ‘trade’ is appropriate given that these public occasions tended to attract the fraudulent and professional ‘fair beggars’ rather than the more ‘deserving’ paupers. Among the most common stories was that of seeing impostors at fairs feigning injury or disability, while being later seen drawing on full physical faculties (usually in drunken brawling). The Enniscorthy Races was known to attract crowds of ‘Hawkers, beggars with every imaginable deformity, showmen, players, gingerbread women, ballad singers, and every specimen of the lowest of the human species’. Sites of pilgrimage were popular places for beggars, due to the congregation of large numbers of prospective benefactors who, driven by a heightened sense of Christian devotion, regularly wished to demonstrate

83 A similar scene is depicted in William Turner de Lond’s painting *The marketplace and court-house, Ennis, Co. Clare* (1820).
85 *PI, Appendix A*, p. 620.
86 Ibid., pp. 476, 478–9, 483, 684, 692. For instances of beggars frequenting fairs, see ibid., pp. 486, 502, 588, 614.
87 *Wexford Independent*, 1 Oct. 1842.
their piety through charitable deeds. Beggars’ attendance at pilgrimage sites fluctuated according to seasonal trends and local feast days. William Carleton’s account of his high-season pilgrimage to St Patrick’s Purgatory at Lough Derg, albeit subject to fictional gloss, contains a cast of beggars, cripples and a ‘gipsy, fortune-teller … a tinker’s widow’,88 while the earlier account of his literary mentor Rev. Caesar Otway’s off-season visit to the same location is strikingly void of references to mendicants (or indeed any ‘pilgrims’ at all).89 While only three paupers were believed to be resident in Carne, County Wexford, the parish was ‘abundantly supplied with itinerant beggars from other parts of the kingdom, owing … to our being in the neighbourhood of St. Mary’s Island, commonly called the Lady’s Island, a place of great devotion and pilgrimage’.90 The popularity of Kilkee as a

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89 [Caesar Otway], Sketches in Ireland: descriptive of interesting, and hitherto unnoticed districts, in the north and south (Dublin, 1827), pp. 129–200.
90 William Shaw Mason, A statistical account or parochial survey of Ireland, drawn up from the communications of the clergy (3 vols, Dublin, 1814–19), iii, p. 128.
bathing location in the summer months caused a parallel influx of beggars, who were said to ‘follow … the quality then’.

Throughout Europe since the medieval period, rituals evolved around the practice of alms-giving, frequently centring on significant events in the life-cycle – births, marriages and deaths. The ritualistic regularity of this charitable work, frequently carried out at the local church, reflects, as Robert Jütte has observed, ‘the awareness of the sacred nature of charity’. In the Christian world, the doors and gates to churches and meeting houses long attracted the presence of mendicants, hoping to attract the sympathy and compassion of church-goers, and life-cycle events, such as weddings and funerals, also attracted mendicants as such occasions commonly included an opportunity for the distribution of alms, a practice mirrored in other countries, such as Scotland. The appearance of ragged beggars outside the doors of chapels and churches evoked mixed reactions: to some, the church exterior was an inappropriate place for paupers to ‘prey’ upon respectable church-goers, while to others, it was a suitable site for God’s poor to solicit assistance from their wealthier neighbours. Richard Browning, a Protestant employed to ward off beggars outside the Catholic chapel on Dublin’s Camden Street, estimated that there were typically 30 or 40 mendicants at the chapel on Sundays, ‘and about 50 on great festivals’. In Galway, the yard of the parish church of St Nicholas’s was bemoaned as a congregating place for ‘idle and disorderly persons … during the time of divine Service’, a practice considered to be ‘a discredit to the character of the Town, and highly offensive to such of its Inhabitants as attend the Worship of God in the Church’.

Yet, the Poor Inquiry evidence suggests regional variations in the practice of begging and alms-giving at church doors. Throughout Leinster, Munster and Connaught, witnesses testified that while the practice was largely discouraged, a small number of mendicants received alms (2d. or 3d.) every Sunday, typically at the Catholic chapel. For example, in Newmarket-on-Fergus, four beggars had been relieved at the chapel door the previous Sunday but none were assisted at the Anglican church, as ‘the congregation always put their subscriptions into the poor-box’; in Macroom, there were ‘about 20 beggars who attend the chapel on Sundays; they may get 1d. or 2d. each; they are generally aged or infirm women resident in the parish’. These instances,

91 *PI, Appendix A*, p. 624.
94 *PI, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin*, p. 43a*.
95 Galway Weekly Advertiser, 27 Sept. 1823.
96 *PI, Appendix A*, pp. 644, 661. See also ibid., p. 480.
reflective of wider patterns, suggest that Sunday begging at Catholic places of worship was tolerated to a certain degree. However, in Ulster, especially in the north-east of the province, witnesses’ testimony was more assertive in stating that begging at Protestant church-doors was not countenanced.97 Claims that ‘None are assisted on Sundays at places of worship’ (Ahoghill) and ‘The practice of giving money to mendicants at the doors of places of worship does not exist here’ (Ballymoney) are representative.98 In Carrickfergus, it was stated that ‘Mendicants are driven away from the places of religious worship, if they go there to solicit alms’.99 The parish vestry of Keady, County Armagh issued begging badges to local paupers in 1818, allowing them to solicit alms in public, on the condition that ‘No person to beg on Sundays’.100 In seeking to explain this regional pattern, one may be tempted to attribute it to a stereotypical Protestant antipathy towards beggary – such an assertion is simply too difficult to prove or disprove. Alternatively, this regional trend may be explained with reference to the influence of (largely Protestant) Sabbatarian sentiment in the north-east, emerging from Protestant evangelicalism. Sabbatarians may have viewed begging as an inappropriate practice on the Sabbath, particularly at a place of worship, and this explanation may be supported by the fact that the two instances recorded by the Poor Inquiry in County Antrim where begging was tolerated at a place of worship was at two Catholic chapels (in Ballymena and Rasharkin).101 What may also have driven this regional pattern is the fact that in most of the locations in County Antrim where witnesses claimed that no Sunday begging took place, there was a mendicity society in operation in the town or within a ten-mile radius – that is, within one day’s walking distance. Furthermore, Protestant services, such as the liturgy for the Anglican service, included a poor collection (see below, Chapter 7), thus avoiding the need for congregants to dole out private alms outside the church or meeting house: all local ‘deserving’ cases were to be alleviated through the poor box.

The arrival and departure of well-known public figures also occasioned the distribution of alms. Upon departing Kilkenny city in October 1819, after her successful and acclaimed performance in Othello, the actress Eliza O’Neill distributed ‘a large parcel of silver among the beggars who had collected around [her carriage]’.102 The arrival of Denis O’Conor Don, MP for Roscommon, at his home in the county town ‘brought immense

97 This trend has also been identified in Kathryn Tumilty, ‘The Church of Ireland and the Famine in Ulster, 1845–52’ (PhD thesis, Queen’s University Belfast, 2009), p. 96.
98 PI, Appendix A, pp. 702, 706.
99 Ibid., p. 710. See also pp. 708, 712, 714, 725, 729.
100 Seaby and Paterson, ‘Ulster beggars’ badges’, p. 106.
throng of beggars to the door’, with the ‘news of his arrival … spread[ing] like wildfire’. The congregation of mendicants was further swelled ‘by the intelligence … that his servant was flinging money amongst the people from a bag. Each shower of copper was hailed with shouts from men, women, and children, which echoed from one end of the town to the other; and the distribution continued for a considerable time’.

Who Begged and Why?

By far the majority of mendicants in pre-Famine Ireland were women, reflecting patterns in Europe and Britain. The Poor Inquiry’s report on vagrancy and mendicancy in Dublin city in the mid-1830s stated:

if you frequent the more public and fashionable streets, at every corner your eyes alight upon some young widow; or the deserted wife, with two or three helpless children … At almost every door your alms are solicited in the shape of a purchase of some little article by a female, who urges on your attention the claims of a sick husband or children.

An 1809 report into charitable institutions in Dublin estimated that ‘four-fifths of those who subsist by begging are females’. The reasons for this are manifold but the most important factors in explaining this universal trend is that women and children constituted more sympathetic figures than men and were more vulnerable to destitution than adult men. The ‘classic’ categories of the ‘deserving’ poor included widows, deserted women and young children, as well as the elderly (of both sexes). By the early nineteenth century, many beggars were women and children of military men who had either died, absconded or were serving abroad, and the concentration of these ‘followers’ of regiments was a feature of life in barracks and garrison towns throughout Ireland and Britain. In Athlone, which boasted a large barracks

104 Hufton, *The poor of eighteenth-century France*, pp. 114–15; Matthew Martin, *Letter to the Right Hon. Lord Pelham, on the state of mendicity in the Metropolis* (London, 1803). For Martin’s claim that up to 90 per cent of London’s beggars were women, see ‘Summary of 2,000 cases of paupers’ towards the end of his Letter.
106 A report upon certain establishments in the city of Dublin, which receive aid from parliament (Dublin, 1809), p. 20.
107 See, for instance, Shaw Mason, *Statistical account of parochial survey of Ireland*, iii, p. 67; Prunty, ‘Mobility among women’.
accommodating approximately 2,000 men, it was recorded that ‘a number of soldiers’ wives (and their children) who are left by their husbands when ordered on foreign service, as well as the widows of those who died in the garrison, serve to render that class of the [mendicant] community still more numerous’.\textsuperscript{108}

The proliferation of women among the country’s mendicant classes also arose due to women’s relatively more limited employment opportunities than men, with more women resorting to habitual or occasional begging. These workforce constraints were most acutely felt in rural society, where women’s income was mostly limited to spinning, husbandry and begging. In urban areas, a whole array of service- and street-based employments were available to women. Thirdly, men were more likely than women to feel ashamed of resorting to begging.\textsuperscript{109} For many, such a resort signified personal failure and emasculation. Novelist William Carleton captured this sense of male shame, in his depiction of an exchange between Owen McCarthy, an industrious and honest labourer, and his wife Kathleen, whose family is driven to destitution and beggary during the economic downturn of the post-1815 period:

Beg: that u’d go hard wid me, Kathleen. I’d work – I’d live on next to nothing all year round; but to see the crathurs that wor decently bred up brought to that, I couldn’t bear it, – Kathleen ’twould break the heart widin me. Poor as they are, they have the blood of kings in their veins; and, besides, to see a McCarthy beggin’ his bread in the country where his name was once great – The McCarthy More, that was their title – no acushla; I love them as I do the blood in my own veins; but I’d rather see them in the arms of God in heaven … than have it cast up to them, or have it said, that ever a McCarthy was seen beggin’ on the highway.\textsuperscript{110}

To assert that men were more ashamed than women to ask for alms is not to undermine the latter’s experiences of poverty, charity and mendicancy. Rather, as Laurence Geary rightly asserts, ‘women were no less aware of the social taint, but the responsibility for putting food in their children’s bellies devolved ultimately on them’.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{108} Shaw Mason, \textit{Statistical account of parochial survey of Ireland}, iii, p. 78. For more on ‘soldiers’ wives and followers, with their children’ in Athlone, see Weld, \textit{Statistical survey, county Roscommon}, p. 550.
\textsuperscript{109} Ó Ciosáin, \textit{Ireland in official print culture}, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{110} William Carleton, ‘Tubber derg; or, the red well’ in William Carleton, \textit{Traits and stories of the Irish peasantry} (1844; 2 vols, repr. Gerrards Cross and Savage, MD, 1990), ii, p. 374.
\textsuperscript{111} Geary, “‘The whole country was in motion’”, p. 124.
For mendicant families wandering the roads, however, an appreciation of the gendered roles that shaped cultures of mendicancy helped maximise their potential of successfully soliciting assistance. The reality was that a woman with children was more likely to receive sympathy, and, therefore, alms than if an able-bodied man was accompanying them. Being aware of the greater compassion which a woman and her children could inherently excite, poor families wandering the country regularly travelled separately. Men separated from their families and remained out of sight, while their wives and children entered a town or approached a homestead to engage in direct begging. In Longford town, it was noted ‘that though able-bodied men are rarely found begging the streets themselves, yet they may frequently be found loitering outside towns, waiting for their families who are begging in them, and to whom their presence would be a disadvantage, since they represent themselves generally as widows and orphans’.

In the County Sligo town of Ballymoat, it was stated that ‘the man takes his spade and the woman a bag, and they go along the road. If he can get employment, he will work, if not, his wife goes up to the farmers’ houses to beg, while he loiters behind on the road’. The deliberate absence of the father/husband in alms-seeking was as much a part of the mendicants’ script as the family’s fitting into the guise of the classical ‘deserving’ poor.

Gendered roles also shaped the survival strategies of agricultural labourers and their families from year to year. Many of those labelled as vagrants were able-bodied agricultural labourers (*spailpini* or *spailpini fanach*), traversing the country in search of short-term employment. After planting their potato crop male labourers, particularly those living in the west and south of Ireland, left their homesteads for the spring and summer months and migrated, sometimes elsewhere in Ireland but commonly across to England and Scotland for seasonal harvest work (made easier from 1815 by the advent of steamships). These labourers were typically seen as the deserving, honest, working poor, yet in the event that they could not obtain casual work in rural areas often resorted to begging: Connaught labourers were to be found throughout the island, Carlow labourers would ‘beg their way’ to port towns such as Dublin and Waterford and the north-eastern county of Antrim attracted large numbers of beggars from the western regions of Ulster.

This custom continued, certainly among Connaught labourers, into the post-famine period. In the labourers’ absence, their wives and children spent these months begging and this alms-seeking was carried out

112 *PI, Appendix A*, p. 573.
113 Ibid., p. 526.
114 Ibid., pp. 475, 544, 702.
115 *Ninth annual report, Poor Law Commissioners*, pp. 50–1.
at considerable distance from the home-place and for weeks and months at a
time. Mayo labourers’ wives and children, for example, were known to beg
in parts of Leinster.

The preponderance of women among the country’s mendicants can
also be seen in the level of institutional engagement by female beggars. In
the 1770s, most of the inmates of the House of Industry in Dublin were
female, while half a century later, addressing its members in its second
annual report, the Dublin Mendicacy Society reported that it was to the
female sex that ‘the great portion of your poor belong’. Of the 2,823
admissions into the Mendicacy Society’s institution during 1824, 1,687 (59.8
per cent) were adult women, while the 457 adult males made up just 16.2
per cent of admissions. The remaining 679 (24 per cent) were children.

More stark ratios were seen in the Clonmel Mendicacy Asylum, where there
were only five men among 100 paupers. The proportionately higher level
of female engagement with charities and institutions in the early decades
of the nineteenth century was not witnessed in the Poor Law workhouse
system, where, in some workhouses for which admission records survive,
the numbers of men and women in the workhouses were roughly equal in
the pre-Famine period, although women became more numerous during
the height of the Famine crisis. Analysis by Cormac Ó Gráda demonstrates
that women were more common among those inmates aged between 15 and
49 years, while men predominated among those aged 50 years and older,
suggesting ‘that the gender gap in earnings and material comforts shifted
over the life-cycle’.

116 PI, Appendix A, p. 492. For the wider practice of seasonal migration and begging among
this social class, see First report from the select committee on the state of disease and
condition of the labouring poor, in Ireland, p. 19, H.C. 1819 (314), viii, 383; Dr Galway
to Dr Cheyne, Aug. 1817 (NAI, CSROP, CSO/RP/1819/229); PI, Appendix A, p. 475
(Headford, County Galway); ibid., p. 488 (Tuam, County Galway); ibid., pp. 491–2
(Aughavale, County Mayo); ibid., p. 678 (Cahir (Caher), County Kerry); ibid., p. 762
(Coleraine, County Londonderry); Jonathan Bardon, A history of Ulster (Belfast, 1992),
pp. 276–7. For Irish migration to England in this period, see Frank Neal, ‘The English
Poor Law, the Irish migrant and the laws of settlement and removal, 1819–1879’ in
D. George Boyce and Roger Swift (eds), Problems and perspectives in Irish history since

117 Observations on the state and condition of the poor, under the institution, for their relief,
in the city of Dublin; together with the state of the fund, &c, published by order of the
Corporation instituted for the Relief of the Poor and for Punishing Vagabonds and Sturdy
Beggars, in the County of the City of Dublin, March 25th, 1775 (Dublin, 1775), p. 19;
Second report of the Association for the Suppression of Mendicity in Dublin, 1819 (Dublin,
1820), p. 5.


119 Clare Journal, and Ennis Advertiser, 24 Nov. 1836.

Child Mendicants
Social commentators in the early nineteenth century were increasingly concerned about the number of children engaged in street begging. Invariably the children of the poor, young mendicants represented the rising generation of the labouring classes who had been, or were in danger of being, lost to lives of idleness, vice, intemperance and crime. Begging was seen as a stepping stone in a criminal’s career, leading invariably to thievery and prostitution for boys and girls respectively. As well as being seen as a deplorable nuisance, and constituting in certain circumstances a criminal offence in its own right, street begging represented a stage in the descent of a poor child into delinquency and vice.\(^{121}\) The concept of there being a rung on the social (and moral) ladder lower than mendicancy was embraced by the Poor Inquiry commissioners in Dublin, who referred in stark terms to those who were born and reared into a life of mendicancy, noting that of these individuals, ‘few now pursue the same course of life. They have descended a step lower! – their daughters have become prostitutes, and their sons thieves; they are outcasts even from the “bocough’s” dwelling’.\(^{122}\) In the mid-1830s, a Mr McCarthy, chief constable of Drogheda, opined that some of the town’s prostitutes ‘are the children of mendicants, who have never pursued any course of industry … and appear to be separated by a marked line from even the lowest of the labouring population’.\(^{123}\) A contributor to the *Christian Examiner*, an evangelical Church of Ireland magazine, presented a similar picture in 1831 of the lower orders of the poor, stating that ‘it is a common practice for the ruined labourer to commit some minor crime, in order to get into gaol, while his wife and infants set out to beg, and the elder children become thieves or prostitutes’.\(^{124}\) For many observers, begging was the start

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123 *PI, Appendix C, Part I*, p. 50.

of a ‘downward spiral’ leading to theft and robbery. An editorial carried in the Dublin-based Correspondent in 1818 reflected the views of a large portion of contemporary opinion, which tended to source a range of social evils to the prevailing system of street begging:

[Mendicancy] instructs the young thief to steal from his thoughtless benefactor, and rears the young robber to the perpetration of dexterous burglaries, by means of which the mature villain enters and plunders. It is hardly possible to point out any of the prevalent street-crimes of this metropolis, or any thing foul, filthy, or infectious, which has not its roots in the enormous mendicity, which we shamefully suffer to lay us under all manner of exactions and contributions.

The pernicious influences to which poor children were vulnerable derived not solely from inanimate sources, such as the environment in which they lived, but also from hardened, criminalised individuals preying on these juveniles. Reports of children being mutilated or impregnated for the sake of exciting compassion in passers-by were common. Under the influence of such persons, invariably older youths or adults, the street child was ‘initiated into vice’. This process is captured in Charles Dickens’s portrayal of Fagin initiating Oliver Twist into a gang of thieves through making a ‘very curious and uncommon game’ of pick-pocketing. While the unknowing and naive Oliver merely enjoys what he considers to be a game, the reader is left in no doubt that Fagin is, in modern parlance, ‘grooming’ Oliver for a life of thievery – that is, preying on the child’s vulnerability from an adult’s position of power and influence. While the terminology was different in the nineteenth century, fears of such individuals and their practices influenced

125 Prunty, Dublin slums, p. 196.
126 Correspondent, 13 Jan. 1818.
127 Arthur Dobbs, An essay on the trade and improvement of Ireland (2 parts, Dublin, 1729–31), ii, p. 45; FJ, 26–9 Mar., 26–30 Apr. 1768, cited in Joseph Robins, The lost children: a study of charity children in Ireland, 1700–1900 (Dublin, 1980), p. 103 n. 6; Richard Woodward, An address to the public, on the expediency of a regular plan for the maintenance and government of the poor … (Dublin, 1775), p. 10; Richard Whately, Christ’s example, an instruction as to the best modes of dispensing charity. A sermon delivered for the benefit of the Relief and Clothing Fund, in Doctor Steevens’ Hospital (Dublin, 1835), p. 21. A particularly harrowing case of cruelty is recorded in Full and true account of the trial of two most barbarous and cruel beggar-women, Sarah Mullholland & Maria Burke, who were found guilty of strangling a child, for the purpose of extorting charity!!! Together with various particulars concerning the impostures of other street beggars (n.p. [Dublin?], [c.1830]), broadside held in the RIA library, Dublin (SR 3 B 53–56(561)).
128 Report on juvenile delinquency in the metropolis, p. 32.
middle-class perceptions of poor juveniles. Later in *Oliver Twist*, this corruptive process is vividly narrated:

In short, the wily old Jew had the boy in his toils; and, having prepared his mind, by solicitude and gloom, to prefer any society to the companionship of his own sad thoughts in such a dreary place, was now slowly instilling into his soul the poison which he hoped would blacken it, and change its hue for ever.\textsuperscript{130}

In the pages of the *Belfast News-Letter* in 1851 is to be found evidence of Dickens’s most infamous villain resounding in the popular mind, when the paper referred to boys and girls who engaged in organised theft being ‘regularly hired or supported by “Fagins” of the lowest grade’.\textsuperscript{131} In his examination of the alleys and courts which harboured deviants in mid-nineteenth-century Belfast, Unitarian minister William Murphy O’Hanlon asserted that ‘unwary youth[s]’ were ‘entrapped and drawn into these places as flies into a spider’s web’, where they were corrupted, ruined and primed ‘to plunge headlong on in their career of vice and degradation’.\textsuperscript{132} A specific example which illustrates the reality of such ‘grooming’ by vagrant mendicants in an Irish context is that of Mary Quin, ‘an itinerant beggarwoman’ who was convicted in September 1840 of kidnapping four children from Belfast. Quin wandered through County Antrim pretending to be the widowed mother of the children, ‘whom she treated most unmercifully while training them to the various tricks resorted to by pauper children to impose on the humane’. Quin was also known to have induced girls ‘of very tender years’ to leave their parents ‘and, by introducing them to houses of ill-fame, brought them to a course of prostitution’.\textsuperscript{133} Cases such as Quin’s reminded the public that characters like Fagin were not confined to the pages of fiction.

**Beggars’ Previous Occupations: A Dublin Case Study**

A return depicting the stated previous occupations of 2,099 inmates at the Dublin Mendicity Society’s asylum during 1826 illuminates the study of the backgrounds and experiences of Ireland’s beggars in the pre-Famine

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., p. 134. Fagin later advises his colleagues: ‘Once let him feel that he is one of us – once fill his mind with the idea that he has been a thief – and he’s ours. Ours for his life!’, ibid., p. 141.


\textsuperscript{132} W.M. O’Hanlon, *Walks among the poor of Belfast, and suggestions for their improvement* (Belfast, 1853), pp. 21–2.

\textsuperscript{133} *BNL*, 11 Sept. 1840.
DEFINING BEGGING AND ALMS-GIVING

Unlike most other charitable societies which shunned street beggars, the Mendicity Society catered explicitly for that class of poor; as such, the paupers who passed through its doors were those most likely to engage in mendicancy. Of course, the records of a single institution do not provide a comprehensive picture of the experiences of a largely marginalised, heterogeneous class of people, yet, this source proves illustrative. The return divides the 2,099 mendicants into 69 different occupations. To represent this information visually, the eight most common occupations (representing 72 per cent of the total) have been extracted and presented in Table 1.1 and Figure 1.2 as individual categories. The remaining 28 per cent (consisting of 61 different occupations) have, in the interest of clarity, been amalgamated and presented as ‘Others’. Examining solely the eight most common occupations, it will be seen that these can be split between (largely female) unskilled labourers – scourers, charwomen, washerwomen and day labourers – and (largely male) unemployed textile workers. For many persons in these occupations there was little if any security in their regular income, and at times of under- or unemployment begging was an instinctive resort in the ‘economy of makeshifts’. Criminal records for the middle of the century support the return’s evidence that scourers and charwomen regularly engaged in direct begging, for which they could be (and in some cases were) convicted and imprisoned. In 1850, Ellen Fullerton was described by respectable householders who petitioned on her behalf as a ‘most industrious poor woman, constantly working for charring’; Catherine Maher (60 years old) was also described as a charwoman, as was 74-year-old Anne Farrell, who ‘always earned her bread by charring’.135 In each of these cases of imprisonment on foot of a conviction for public begging, the intervention of respectable inhabitants, typically shopkeepers and merchants, led to the remission of the 14- or 15-day sentence and the early release of the prisoner. The evidence for Dublin supports the findings of Tim Hitchcock, whose work on street begging in eighteenth-century London found that charwomen were not only the most numerous ‘working mendicants’ but also ‘the group who most effectively confused the division between pauper employments and outright beggary’. Charwomen’s pleas for work, as they knocked on the doors of city inhabitants, were frequently indistinguishable from pleas for material assistance (alms). According to Hitchcock, ‘in the end, it is clear


135 Criminal Index File of Ellen Fullerton, Jan. 1850 (NAI, Criminal Index Files, CIF/1850/F/4); Criminal Index File of Catherine Maher, Aug. 1854 (ibid., CIF/1854/M/25); Criminal Index File of Anne Farrell, Dec. 1856 (ibid., CIF/1856/F/27).
that charring made foggy and indistinct the boundary between begging and service.\textsuperscript{136}

While Figure 1.2 is helpful in identifying the typical occupations undertaken by some of Dublin’s mendicants, some problems arise as to the extent to which the statistics are representative. First, it appears that the 69 occupations exclude those of children. This is quite a substantial omission, given that a large proportion of street beggars in nineteenth-century towns and cities were children. Juveniles’ engagement in mendicancy ranged from outright solicitations of alms to the offering of some trivial paid labour. According to a German traveller to Dublin in 1828, ‘the streets are crowded with beggar-boys, who buzz around one like flies, incessantly offering their services.’\textsuperscript{137} Secondly, it is not recorded how the information on the paupers’ previous occupations was ascertained and it may only be assumed that this was through face-to-face inquiry of the mendicants upon their admission to the Dublin Mendicity Society’s asylum. As such, the questions of whether such information is reliable and whether the paupers had an interest in misrepresenting their previous economic activities have to be asked. Thirdly, beggars were admitted into the mendicity asylum on a voluntary basis and the source, therefore, excludes those mendicants who declined to engage with the charity.

Fourthly, and most importantly, in considering the prominence of textile workers in this sample, the subject year (1826) is significant. Late 1825 and 1826 witnessed a severe economic downturn in Britain and Ireland, caused by a British monetary crisis. British manufacturers dumped their goods onto the Irish market, undercutting small Irish manufacturers, which led to the collapse of many woollen, silk and cotton businesses and consequential mass unemployment. In Dublin city, the south-western quarter known as the Liberties, where the city’s textile trade was concentrated, suffered enormous distress, compounded by a typhus fever epidemic. One estimate put the number of destitute at 20,000 in this quarter alone.\textsuperscript{138} Given the impact of this economic downturn and accompanying fever epidemic, it may be suggested that the proportion of textile workers on the books of the


\textsuperscript{137} [Hermann von Pückler-Muskau], Tour in England, Ireland, and France, in the years 1826, 1827, 1828, and 1829, with remarks on the manners and customs of the inhabitants, and anecdotes of distinguished public characters. In a series of letters (Philadelphia, 1833), p. 326.

Table 1.1 Previous occupations of inmates of the Dublin Mendicity Society, 1826

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of previous occupation</th>
<th>Number of cases</th>
<th>Percentage of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Servants</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scourers, charwomen, etc.</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silk weavers and throwsters</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton weavers and spinners</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dressmakers, lacemakers, bonnet-makers and plain workers</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day labourers</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washerwomen</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worsted weavers and stuff-makers</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>587</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>2,099</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.2 Chart showing previous occupations of inmates of the Dublin Mendicity Society, 1826

Source: Poor Inquiry, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin, p. 25a*.
city’s mendicity society increased beyond its usual rate, as newly unemployed individuals and their dependants sought charitable assistance. In 1826, the annual report of the Dublin Mendicity Society noted that unemployed factory workers were ‘the most common and alarming group of beggars’ in the city. The following year, the society reported that the more than 2,000 people on its books included ‘the unprecedented number of 736 tradespeople (including their families)’. The occupational analysis above may, then, be considered to be somewhat skewed in how it depicts the momentary prominence of textile workers among the inmates of the Mendicity Society. On the other hand, the downturn of the mid-1820s dealt a fatal blow to textile industries in the Liberties, as well as to other Irish urban centres. Thousands of artisans never returned to this line of employment, and many emigrated, found alternative employment or took to street begging. The above figure, therefore, may be interpreted not as over-representing textile workers among the beggars of 1820s-Dublin in the short-term but as reflecting the beginning of a long-term shift in the demographics of the city’s mendicant classes, among whom former textile artisans were now more prominent. The Poor Inquiry evidence supports the latter argument that, from the mid-1820s, unemployed and formerly independent textile workers formed a substantial group from which street beggars in large Irish urban centres derived. According to the Assistant Commissioners who carried out examinations in Cork city in the mid-1830s, ‘the majority of the distressed persons in the parish are persons reduced; many, from the decay of the woollen and cotton manufacturers, scarcely any whose parents had been beggars’. The inquiry in Dublin city was told by Richard Browning, the Protestant ‘bangbeggar’, that most mendicants he encountered were women, widows whose husbands had been weavers, or in different branches of trade connected with weaving; they were mostly elderly.

Despite these instances of typically industrious individuals resorting to beggary in circumstances of distress, there was evidently an underclass of professional beggars who refused to work and who survived predominantly through begging. The language of social description in later

140 *Tenth report of the general committee of the Association for the Suppression of Mendicity in Dublin. For the year 1827* (Dublin, 1828), p. 44.
142 *PI, Appendix A*, p. 672. For destitution among Cork city’s former artisan class, see Maura Cronin (née Murphy), ‘The economic and social structure of nineteenth-century Cork’ in David Harkness and Mary O’Dowd (eds), *The town in Ireland*, Historical Studies XIII (Belfast, 1981), p. 146.
143 *PI, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin*, p. 43a*.
nineteenth-century Britain referred to a ‘residuum’, that is a morally toxic layer existing beneath the respectable working class.\textsuperscript{144} This mass of unskilled urban poor offended the sensitivities and challenged the expectations of middle-class society regarding the virtues of industry, providence, sobriety and religious piety; the former’s lifestyles and values were ones of moral degradation. This ‘residuum’ corresponds to Karl Marx’s ‘lumpenproletariat’, which he described as ‘a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds, living on the crumbs of society, people without a definite trade, vagabonds, people without a hearth or home’.\textsuperscript{145} For one English Poor Law commissioner, this class of persons constituted ‘the refuse of society’,\textsuperscript{146} reflecting their marginalisation from ‘respectable’ society. An Irish insight into this ‘residuum’ can be gleaned from the autobiography of novelist William Carleton. Having left his rural County Tyrone home around 1817, Carleton travelled south through Ireland before reaching Dublin some time the following year. Among the most striking images of his autobiography is the account of his one night’s stay in an underground lodging place occupied by multitudes of professional beggars:

There were there the lame, the blind, the dumb, and all who suffered from actual and natural infirmity; but in addition to these, there was every variety of impostor about me – most of them stripped of their mechanical accessories of deceit, but by no means all … Crutches, wooden legs, artificial cancers, scrofulous necks, artificial wens, sore legs, and a vast variety of similar complaints were hung up upon the walls of the cellars, and made me reflect upon the degree of perverted talent and ingenuity that must have been necessary to sustain such a mighty mass of imposture.\textsuperscript{147}

Carleton’s account presents a traditional dichotomous portrayal of the city’s poor, ‘deserving’ living alongside ‘undeserving’, the latter comprising a relatively significant element of the poorer classes and characterised by dishonesty, ‘perverted talent and ingenuity’. An 1840s account of a low lodging house in Ashton-under-Lyne, a Lancaster town to the east of Manchester, recorded a similar scene to that witnessed by Carleton, noting

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{146} \textit{Reports and communications on vagrancy}, p. 2, H.C. 1847–8 [C. 987], liii, 240.
\end{itemize}
the ‘hawkers’ baskets, pedlars’ boxes, musical instruments, and beggars’ crutches’ to be found within.\textsuperscript{148}

Carleton’s memorable description of the cellar scene throws light on the reality that most beggars in this period had dwellings of some kind.\textsuperscript{149} In Irish towns or cities, these were rented lodgings, in tenements and in wretched abodes in back streets, alleys, lanes and courts. Many of the street beggars who received relief from the Dublin Mendicity Society had dwellings, and throughout its early history the Mendicity Society proudly advertised the fact that its paupers did not reside on its premises, but were put to work for the day, provided with food (and the children with rudimentary education) and sent ‘home’ in the evening: the parents and children ‘met again in the evening, and retired together in the evening – not to the ward of an hospital, or a prison, but to their common home, which, humble as it was, served to keep up the social bond of communion between the parent and the infant’.\textsuperscript{150} James Whitelaw’s famous survey of Dublin in 1798 described parts of the Liberties as being, ‘with their numerous lanes and alleys … occupied by working manufacturers, by petty shopkeepers, the labouring poor, and beggars, crowded together, to a degree distressing to humanity’.\textsuperscript{151} Indeed, the Poor Inquiry commissioners visited the dwellings of known beggars in the Liberties, and recorded their detailed and grim descriptions of the wretchedness of these tenement dwellings. The commissioners visited a tenement room occupied by four family units (mothers and daughters and elderly, single women) in Fordham’s Alley, a street formerly occupied by industrious artisans; but now only six families out of 700 individuals supported themselves.\textsuperscript{152}

While much of the begging in rural Ireland was undertaken by migrant labourers who had left their home dwelling (a small cabin), as discussed above, most rural parishes had their own local and known beggars – individuals who lived locally on a permanent basis and whose survival relied on the regular solicitation of assistance from neighbours; local beggars were guaranteed – or at least, were more confident of receiving – alms from neighbours and parishioners to whom they were familiar. Typical of this ‘home-grown’ mendicant was Terence Loughlin, a ‘beggar’ who testified


\textsuperscript{149} Hufton, \textit{The poor of eighteenth-century France}, pp. 48–50.

\textsuperscript{150} \textit{FJ}, 25 May 1826. See also ibid., 10 Jan. 1843.

\textsuperscript{151} James Whitelaw, \textit{An essay on population of Dublin, being the result of an actual survey taken in 1798} … (Dublin, 1805), p. 50.

\textsuperscript{152} \textit{PI}, Appendix C, Part II, \textit{Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin}, p. 27a*. 

before the Whately Poor Inquiry commissioners in Kilchreest parish, County Galway:

I am 73 years of age; I was able to work a little three years ago; I was a labourer and was middling well off, for I had work almost every day. I live in town, and have a cabin and half-a-quarter [acre] of ground from Mr Pearse, for which he charges me no rent … I go amongst my neighbours to get a sup of milk or a lock of potatoes; I carry a bag, and always get from two to three stone at a time; I’d get more than another because I am an old neighbour; I was never refused by any of them yet that I went to … I don’t go far from home.\textsuperscript{153}

Loughlin’s account of his own resort to mendicancy as a survival strategy framed himself as being amongst the ‘deserving’ poor: he opened his account by asserting that he was formerly an industrious labourer with regular work and income, and his dependency on the charity of his neighbours was occasioned solely through his infirmity through old age. His subsistence through mendicancy was supported by local people who provided their ‘old neighbour’ with a rent-free plot of land, milk and potatoes.

\textit{Beggars’ Denominational Background}

To plot a denominational breakdown of beggars in Ireland accurately is next to impossible, and what figures that survive are varied and unreliable. What can be asserted with confidence is that most beggars were from a Roman Catholic background. In the first two years after the opening of the Dublin House of Industry (1773–5), an institution founded ‘for the relief of the poor, and for punishing vagabonds and sturdy beggars’, Catholics comprised 69.8 per cent of inmates.\textsuperscript{154} Of the 388 paupers at the Limerick House of Industry between 1774 and 1793 whose occupation was listed as ‘beggar’ or ‘stroller’, only 24 (6.2 per cent) were Protestants; in the 1830s, it was reported that there were 40 Protestants among the 460 inmates (8.7 per cent).\textsuperscript{155} Historian Donal McCartney provides the statistic – regrettably un referenced – that 1 per cent of vagrants in nineteenth-century Ireland belonged to the Church of Ireland.\textsuperscript{156} Henry Inglis stated that upon his visit to the Dublin Mendicity Society’s asylum in 1834, 200 of the 2,145 paupers

\textsuperscript{153} PI, Appendix \textit{A}, p. 479.

\textsuperscript{154} \textit{Observations on the state and condition of the poor}, 1775, p. 19.


\textsuperscript{156} Donal McCartney, \textit{The dawning of democracy: Ireland 1800–1870} (Dublin, 1987), p. 27.
(9.3 per cent) were Protestants,\textsuperscript{157} while of the 5,322 convicted vagrants imprisoned at the Richmond Bridewell during 1849, 244 (4.6 per cent) were members of the Church of Ireland and none was a Dissenter.\textsuperscript{158} A return for the parish of Urney, County Tyrone submitted to the Poor Inquiry estimated that 14 per cent of the parish’s beggars (that is, 16 out of a total of 116 mendicants) belonged to the Church of Ireland, while the remaining paupers were Catholic and Presbyterian, although the precise breakdown is not provided.\textsuperscript{159}

Who Gave Alms and Why?

Beggars calling at the houses of the wealthier inhabitants of a town or city were usually dealt with by domestic servants, who were frequently criticised in public pronouncements for giving alms, mostly in the form of leftover food (‘broken meat’), to street beggars.\textsuperscript{160} An inhabitant of Mountjoy Square, Dublin was rebuked by the city’s mendicity society because ‘his servants are in the constant habit of giving broken meat to mendicants’ and he was urged ‘to stop a practice so injurious to the objects of this association’.\textsuperscript{161} The Galway Mendicity Society attributed the continued presence of beggars on the streets to ‘the relief that is still given by servants and other mistaken persons, at the doors, and is certainly the greatest abuse of charity that can be conceived’.\textsuperscript{162} In Waterford, it was claimed that the work of the mendicity asylum was undermined by ‘the servants retaining them [provisions] for the strolling beggars’, a practice which encouraged street mendicancy.\textsuperscript{163} Similar sentiments were expressed in Edinburgh, where servants were blamed for assisting beggars at their employers’ homes, ‘bestowing what is, properly speaking, not their own’.\textsuperscript{164} In her advice manual to female servants, the

\textsuperscript{157} Henry D. Inglis, Ireland in 1834. A journey through Ireland, during the spring, summer, and autumn of 1834 (2nd edn, 2 vols, London, 1835), i, pp. 16–17.

\textsuperscript{158} Prisons of Ireland. Twenty-eighth report of the Inspectors-General on the general state of the prisons of Ireland, 1849; with appendices, p. 26, H.C. 1850 [C 1229], xxix, 346. These figures do not allow for cases of recidivism.

\textsuperscript{159} PI, Supplement to Appendix A, p. 409.

\textsuperscript{160} FF, 21 Sept. 1826; An address to the mechanics, workmen, and servants, in the city of Dublin (Dublin, 1828) in DDA, DMP, 30/11/17; Dublin Mendicity Society minute book, 17 Dec. 1822 (NLI, DMSP, MS 32,599/2).

\textsuperscript{161} Dublin Mendicity Society minute book, 22 June 1824 (NLI, DMSP, 32,599/3).

\textsuperscript{162} Galway Weekly Advertiser, 1 Jan. 1825.

\textsuperscript{163} Report on the state of the poor in Waterford city and on the charitable institutions of that city, 5 Apr. 1834 (NLI, MS 3288, f. 28’).

prolific English writer Eliza Haywood (c.1693–1756), who spent some time in Dublin as an actress, warned that ‘tho’ Charity and Compassion for the Wants of our Fellow creatures are very amiable Virtues’, servants ought not to give leftover food to beggars without the permission of their masters.\textsuperscript{165} She further advised her readers not to give alms to mendicants on the streets.\textsuperscript{166}

An important point to be made is that the majority of domestic servants in Ireland – perhaps as much as 80 per cent, according to the 1841 census\textsuperscript{167} – were female, suggesting that most of the alms-giving from this particular source was carried out by women. Servants came from social backgrounds closer to those of the persons they relieved than did their employers and this undoubtedly evoked empathy and sympathy and influenced servants’ willingness to proffer alms.

Accounts of landed proprietors personally giving alms to beggars further reveal the gendered nature of alms-giving; such ‘Big House’ benefactors were almost invariably women. A Mrs Johnston, the proprietor of Glynn parish in County Antrim, personally doled out alms to beggars calling at her home every Friday and also granted ‘a free house … to each of 6 helpless old people’.\textsuperscript{168} In Dublin, a Mrs P\textsuperscript{—} was so well known to give silver to beggars that, according to one Poor Inquiry witness,

\begin{quote}
all her movements are watched, and are well known. One morning, when it was known that she was going out of town, I passed her house, and saw upwards of 50 beggars at her door; and at one glance down the street you may, at any time, know whether she is in town according as there may be a crowd of beggars in the street or not.\textsuperscript{169}
\end{quote}

This Irish situation resembled the gendered dynamics in the provision of assistance to the poor was also evident in eighteenth-century Breton society, where female members of noble families acted as godmothers to local pauper children and provided them with references for domestic positions in urban centres.\textsuperscript{170}

In provincial towns and large cities shopkeepers were among the most regular providers of alms. On the one hand, shopkeepers were most likely

\begin{footnotes}
\item[165] [Eliza Haywood], \textit{A present for a servant-maid. Or, the sure means of gaining love and esteem} (Dublin, 1744), p. 29.
\item[166] Ibid., pp. 44–5.
\item[167] \textit{Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland. For the year 1841}, p. 440, H.C. 1843 [C 504], xxiv, 552.
\item[168] \textit{OSM}, xxvi, pp. 22, 13.
\item[169] \textit{PI, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin}, p. 43a*.
\end{footnotes}
to have disposable income or leftover food items to dole out as charity; on the other hand, for the trading community, the prevalence of hordes of mendicants posed a constant threat to business, a theme analysed in detail in Chapter 3. Street beggars caused a nuisance to passers-by, importunately pushing out a soliciting hand (or, in many instances, a famished infant) to excite compassion. Furthermore, persons having intercourse with such individuals ran the risk of contracting a potentially fatal disease. Business owners feared that their clientele, frustrated with being imposed upon by alms-seekers, would take their custom elsewhere. To avoid this nuisance, shopkeepers frequently gave a regular allowance to mendicants, on the understanding that the latter would not loiter at the former’s premises. In the 1770s, Church of Ireland bishop Richard Woodward referred to the common practice of shopkeepers providing a weekly subvention to beggars ‘on condition of their not molesting their doors, and interrupting their business’. A similar weekly ‘allowance’ was also provided by shopkeepers in the market town of Naas, County Kildare to approximately 100 local beggars in the 1830s. The stated justification for such charity was that the shopkeepers ‘prefer a regular weekly allowance to being annoyed daily’. In Cork city, it was commented that ‘the respectable shopkeepers often give to get rid of a teasing [sic] beggar’. While some shopkeepers opted to give money directly to mendicants, others subscribed (individually or collectively) to mendicity charities, in the hope that their financial support for these initiatives would mitigate the nuisance of street begging and impact positively on the footfall in their shops. For instance, in 1838, the bakers of Dublin contributed £122 to the city’s Mendicity Society.

**Alms-Givers in Rural Ireland**

Turning to rural Ireland, it can be seen that most of the alms-giving was carried out by the families of poorer farmers, cottiers and labourers, whose precarious subsistence left them not far removed from the threat of destitution. It was the inevitable conclusion of social investigators and foreign travellers to Ireland that it was, largely, the poor who supported the poor. There were a number of reasons why the relief of mendicants fell so hard on the shoulders on the poor. Traditional attitudes of charity and reciprocity among the lower

172 *PL, Appendix A*, p. 556.
173 Ibid., p. 673. The Poor Inquiry also identified this practice in County Antrim (ibid., pp. 703, 707) and Mullingar, County Westmeath (ibid., pp. 590–1).
174 *Clare Journal, and Ennis Advertiser*, 30 Sept. 1839.
175 *Third report of the commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 25, H.C. 1836 [C 43], xxx, 1; *Second report of Geo. Nicholls, Poor Laws, Ireland*, p. 24.
social groups coloured responses to poverty and beggary and these beliefs derived from a traditional Christian framework wherein the poor were seen as virtuous beings whose relief could result in elysian rewards. Furthermore, the fact that so many of Ireland’s poor lived on the brink of destitution—which could be brought about through a family illness or a poor harvest—undoubtedly developed in them greater sympathy towards mendicants, thus making them more likely to dole out assistance. In addition to these factors, wealthier landowners, by the sheer extent and design of their farms and estates, were spatially removed from beggars, who did not have access to the former’s residences: ‘the small farmer or cottier is more exposed than the large proprietor to the application of these vagrants, as he has no means of keeping them off, whereas the houses of the rich are usually guarded by an approach through which mendicants do not so easily penetrate’. In Ballymahon, County Longford, the Poor Inquiry was told that ‘The gates and sometimes the dogs of the wealthy secure them against the intrusion of the beggar’. When the commissioners in Kilchreest, County Galway were told that the gates of the gentry were often shut so as to keep out itinerant mendicants, they asked whether anything was left at the gate for the paupers. They were told: ‘Yes, the order to shut them out is left for them’.

Much of the alms-giving in rural homes was the domain of the female members of a household. In Milltown Malbay, in County Clare, the ‘duty of giving alms almost always falls to the share of the woman of the house or her daughters, and their feelings are in favour of those who have families of young children’. In Kildysart, in the same county, the Poor Inquiry was told by a shopkeeper that the farmers, who preferred the prevailing system of casual alms-giving to a rates system, ‘really do not know how much goes out of their houses in charity. If they were to stay at home one long day in summer and watch all that their wives give away, they would soon alter their way of thinking’. Cottier John Casey in Abbeyshrule parish remarked: ‘Many a time a man has to check his wife for having too free a hand, and I am often bad enough to do it myself as well as another’. In larger farms, female servants undertook this role of dealing with beggars and some farmers were known to complain of the ‘constant interruption to which their women servants were liable from beggars’. This gendered practice was reflected

176 Ó Ciosáin, Ireland in official print culture, pp. 79–90.
177 PI, Appendix C, Part I, p. 49.
178 PI, Appendix A, p. 564.
179 Ibid., p. 479.
180 Ibid., p. 619; also p. 636.
181 Ibid., p. 232.
182 Ibid., p. 564.
183 Ibid., p. 616.
in the alms-giving exchange illustrated in William Carleton’s ‘Tubber derg: or, the red well’, a short story about a once-industrious and proud labouring family whose eviction as a result of the post-Waterloo economic and agrarian downturn reduces them to destitution and, ultimately, mendicancy: it is the mother/wife of the newly mendicant family who pleads for assistance at the farmer’s cabin door, ensuring her benefactor that this is ‘our first day to be upon the world’, and she is received by the woman of the house, who instinctively approaches the begging family with a double handful of meal (gabhpaín) even before a word is uttered in supplication (see Figure 1.3).
The father/husband of the beggarly family is depicted as slumped over the host family’s table, head in his hands, and overcome with the shame of their reduced station. In John and Michael Banim’s *Father Connell* (1842), the female ‘potatoe beggars’ are noted as interacting with ‘farmers’ wives … in pursuit of their calling’.

While being regular providers of alms, women did not necessarily distribute alms indiscriminately and were known to form judgements on the moral character and deservedness of the mendicant before them. According to Timothy Gorman, a County Clare small farmer with about twelve acres:

> I saw my wife refuse alms to a woman yesterday; and I asked her why she refused on a Monday (a thing we consider unlucky for the rest of the week); she said the woman had been coming to her for the last three days, and that she had a stout able-bodied son who would not work, but preferred living on the sale of what his mother collected.

The gendering of this role may be due to the traditional female caregiver model (whereby womanhood is associated with compassionate and welfare-based duties), but may also be attributable to the more practical fact that women were more likely than men to be in the house when beggars called to the door, a point illustrated in the words of Pat Curtis in Killaloe, a ‘decent small farmer’ of three and a half acres, who explained that ‘I am not much at home, but the old woman gives a handful to everybody that calls’.

**Conclusion**

It is worth revisiting the Dublin Mendicity Society’s direction to its street inspectors in 1824, to apprehend individuals ‘whom they may find prowling about the streets, without any visible occupation, or means of subsistence, whom they have reason to suspect are there for the purpose of begging, although not in the act of begging at the moment’. Leaving aside the fundamental point this order raises concerning the civil liberties of the poor, it points to a question pertinent to this chapter – namely, what constituted begging and who constituted a beggar? This particular resolution from the capital’s most prominent charitable society tackling the social problems

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185 PI, Appendix A, p. 613.
186 Ibid., p. 623. See Ó Ciosáin on this point in *Ireland in official print culture*, p. 75.
connected with poverty focuses its attention on those engaged in, or believed likely to engage in, what we may term outright begging. Such individuals were to be identified by the absence of any visible means of earning a living. However, as demonstrated in this chapter, the reality of mendicancy and the experiences of mendicants in pre-Famine Ireland were more complex than this. Beggary regularly overlapped with the sale of a good or service, the offering of which was essential for justifying one’s presence in a public thoroughfare, more so in urban than rural areas. Beggars knew which locations, situations, categories of passers-by and stories of distress maximised their chances of receiving sympathy and alms. The ‘swarming’ of carriages by mendicants is a ubiquitous trope to be found in travellers’ accounts of pre-Famine Ireland, while pilgrimages, life-cycle events and sporting occasions also attracted supplicants, reflecting some level of seasonality, regularity and mobility to patterns of mendicancy. Regional variations in the toleration (or not) of church-door begging has been explained by reference to Sabbatarian sentiment among Irish Protestants at this time, while the facts that northern towns and villages were relatively well serviced by mendicity societies and Protestant contributions to poor collections inside their church or meeting house negated the need, for many, to also give alms to beggars.

In answering the question of who were the beggars of pre-Famine Ireland, it has been demonstrated that they were mostly women and children, owing to a mixture of social, cultural and economic factors, all of which were shaped by the gendering of roles within the poor’s ‘economy of makeshifts’. Women and children predominated among supplicants of both formal and informal charity. Destitute or near-destitute independent male labourers were more likely to be guided by their shame of begging, but more significant than this was that women’s vulnerability to spousal desertion and their relatively limited employment opportunities also contributed to this gendered imbalance. Furthermore, the fact that it was women who faced the challenge of feeding their children suggests that pragmatism and urgency overtook any possible sense of female shame. In the Dublin Mendicity Society in the mid-1820s, most inmates – all habitual mendicants – were unskilled labourers or unemployed textile workers, but critical analysis of this particular source suggests that only a skewed picture of the institution’s inmates is possible. What is certain is that large numbers of habitually independent artisans lived perilously close to destitution, and when illness or an economic downturn struck, the resort to alms-seeking, once unfathomable, became a necessary survival strategy – albeit one only for certain members of the family unit. In parts of rural Ireland, begging was a seasonal practice undertaken by many among the labouring classes, but in such instances, also, gendered norms dictated that it was women and children who tramped the roads seeking alms, while the father/husband migrated
for seasonal work. The reason why people begged differed from person to person. For some, beggary was an attempt to relieve short-term distress; for other, alms-seeking was a regular source of income and could be considered as something of an occupation. Beggary carried a varied significance in people’s own ‘economy of makeshifts’.

The solicitation of alms was a dual-role encounter, involving the soliciting mendicant and the solicited (prospective) alms-giver. Just as with the former, the demographic make-up of the latter category reflected prevalent social roles governed by cultural, economic and gender factors. In villages, towns and cities, alms-givers were frequently shopkeepers (and their families) and domestic servants. This is not to ignore the frequency of casual alms-giving on streets by passers-by, a form of alms-giving regrettably beyond analysis. In rural areas, female members of a family typically oversaw the distribution of alms to itinerant beggars. Urban/rural patterns can also be discerned in the nature of alms given: money was most common in towns and cities (while servants commonly doled out leftover food) and potatoes constituted the currency of mendicancy in rural Ireland. The labourer and cottier class also lodged vagrants in their dwellings, representing in many cases the only means of assistance that could be offered by people with little in the way of material possessions, and this custom appears to have been utterly absent from the urban context.

Defining begging, beggars and alms-giving in a pre-Famine Ireland requires a cautious and measured approach, and this chapter has analysed a wide range of inherent complexities which arise from numerous factors in defining the acts of begging and alms-giving, and those people who engaged in these practices: the fluid nature of the poor person’s resort to begging; the multifaceted day-to-day dynamics of alms-seeking; the various forms in which alms were bestowed; and the disparate experiences of men, women and children as street beggars. Chapter 2 will discuss and analyse how contemporaries attempted to measure the problem of beggary and its monetary cost in pre-Famine Ireland.