Begging and Alms-Giving: Perceptions and Motivations

Introduction

The English novelist William Makepeace Thackeray was among the numerous visitors to Ireland who commented on the prevalence of beggary and their own personal encounters with Irish mendicants. Thackeray’s description of beggars in Ballinasloe is illustrative in this regard:

I think the beggars were more plenteous and more loathsome here than almost anywhere. To one hideous wretch I was obliged to give money to go away, which he did for a moment, only to obtrude his horrible face directly afterwards half eaten away with disease … and as for the rest of the beggars, what pen or pencil could describe their hideous leering flattery, their cringing, swindling humour!

This short piece from Thackerary usefully highlights many of the perceptions of beggary which ran through public discourse on the question of the poor: the author mentioned the extent and unpleasantness of the town’s beggars; he felt compelled to give alms merely to be rid of this nuisance; one mendicant is presented as being disease-ridden and ‘as for the rest of the beggars’, who utilised skills of the trade (‘hideous leering flattery, their cringing swindling humour’) to procure alms, they were simply beyond description. As a counterpoint, more benign portrayals of Irish beggars and the practice of mendicancy were provided by the Presbyterian army surgeon John Gamble, who travelled around Ireland throughout the 1810s. Many of Gamble’s references to soliciting mendicants note the ‘poetical and animated’ address of Irish beggars, in contrast to their English counterparts, while the number

of beggars in Dublin proved not the extent of poverty in the city but the abundance of benevolence and charity among its inhabitants.\textsuperscript{2} Thackeray’s beggars were disease-ridden nuisances while Gamble’s were characters who evoked curiosity and compassion.

Gauging perceptions of mendicancy in early nineteenth-century Irish society is far from a simple task. Attitudes towards beggars and beggary varied greatly, yet most accounts portrayed mendicancy and its practitioners in a negative light. Beggars propagated disease, sedition and all manner of moral evils in a community. However, mendicants could also be viewed with sympathy and as ‘deserving’ persons; their fellow men pitied the plight of the poor and looked upon their woes as an opportunity to follow Christ’s example in relieving the sick and the distressed. Meanwhile, for some, beggars could be merely ubiquitous figures, always part of the physical and social landscape, and whose presence was not necessarily benign nor malevolent but merely constant.

This analysis will first consider contemporary arguments that begging was a natural resort for people in distress, with some commentators speaking of an innate right to beg and the harmonious social relations which were fostered by the solicitation and giving of alms. The analysis will then shift to consider how, like many other social problems such as prostitution and juvenile delinquency, beggary was largely deemed to be a threatening presence due in large part to its visibility. In urban centres, authorities and various interested parties went to great lengths to shield the citizenry from the unsightly spectacle of mendicancy. But, those same ‘respectable’ middle classes also came to appreciate and use the visibility of beggary in campaigns to promote charitable initiatives. Many commentators spewed out a litany of threats that beggars posed to communities and this chapter will concern itself with two of these dangers: begging as a means of spreading disease and as a threat to economic activity. In the former case, a case study will be presented of the 1816–19 typhus fever epidemic in Ireland, during which disease was spread throughout the country by itinerant mendicants, resulting in localised systems of expulsion, parliamentary legislation and the emergence of the Irish mendicity society movement. In the latter case, the prominence of shopkeepers in efforts to curtail – or at the very least, to manage – mendicancy will be studied in the context of this group’s particular vulnerability to nuisance and inconvenience caused by beggars. On a more popular level, attitudes towards begging and beggars were widely influenced by superstition, which, together with the figure of the ‘boccough’, facilitated among the lower classes a system of judgement as to the deservedness of mendicants.

\textsuperscript{2} Gamble, \textit{Sketches of history, politics, and manners}, pp. 48, 90.
The Right to Beg

The act of begging was considered by some to constitute an unquestionable right; the solicitation of assistance from one’s fellow man was seen as a natural resort for those in distressed circumstances. In early 1826, a gentleman was walking across Carlisle (now O’Connell) Bridge in Dublin city when he observed a woman being dragged away by two watchmen for public begging. The woman had an infant and two other ‘half-starved’ children with her. In the eyes of the gentleman, the woman constituted a truly deserving case and had a legitimate reason to beg. Writing a letter to a Dublin newspaper the man commented bitterly: ‘Now, Sir, is it not heart-rending to think, that a poor mother who sees her children starving at home, and steals out in the dark of the evening to implore some sustenance for their support, is to be thrust into a dungeon with the vilest characters that the guardians of the night arrest’.  

Yet, the question ought to be asked as to whether the writer was offended by the removal of a beggar from the street or the apparently heavy-handed removal of a woman with young children. If the watchmen had dragged away an able-bodied male mendicant, would the observer have been sufficiently disgusted and exercised to write his public letter?  

In an 1830 pamphlet addressing the proposed establishment of a Poor Law system in Ireland, the author, a Henry Flood, championed an individual’s right publicly to seek alms. ‘There is no right more clearly recognised by God and nature, than the right of suing for the sympathy of our fellow-creatures’, Flood asserted. ‘We have peculiar tones of voice, and our features particular muscles, to give expression, as in a universal language, to our wants; … an appeal in public, decent and modest, should not, however frequent, be denied’. His argument was not unqualified, however, and carried the stipulation that ‘such beggars as offend, by violent importunity, or by infectious and disgusting exhibitions, should be removed’. Flood did not deny that some beggars were undeserving of assistance. In his opinion, begging and alms-giving benefited both the supplicant and the solicited passer-by. For the former, the exchange exposed them to individuals whom they should aspire to emulate – the sober, the clean, the industrious, the charitable: ‘The mind of the sufferer, by enjoying the light of heaven, even by the view of others in health and spirits, and by the hopes of receiving alms, acquires a train of cheerful thoughts which cannot exist in workhouses, or in the society of wretches like himself’.

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3 Cited in Cork Mercantile Chronicle, 27 Feb. 1826.  
4 The author is not to be confused with the well-known late eighteenth-century parliamentarian Henry Flood.  
5 Henry Flood, Poor Laws: arguments against a provision for paupers, if it be parochial or perpetual (Dublin, 1830), p. 15.
The ability of charitable deeds to foster harmonious relations between the different social classes was a common theme in the moralising language of charity in this period. For example, to James Digges La Touche, of the famous Dublin Huguenot banking family, a Sunday School education for the poor promoted many beneficial effects for all classes in society: ‘it brings them in contact together, and tends considerably to harmonise the different ranks of society’. On the other side of the exchange, beggars reminded the givers of charity of their Christian duty to the poor, whose penury was regularly hidden away in slums which wealthier citizens rarely witnessed. Flood asserted:

If misery exists, it ought to be known and to be seen; the presence of the poor, at the entrance of places of worship, disposes our minds to God, who has exempted us from the sufferings we see inflicted on others, perhaps more meritorious, perhaps our former companions and friends. The presence of the poor in the thoroughfares of pleasure or businesses, are living lessons of prudence and moderation to the young and the presumptuous.

This view depicted mendicancy as a binary, reciprocal exchange, in which both the alms-seeker and the alms-giver performed social and moral roles. Each party reminded the other of their responsibilities and their expected conduct. Near Monaghan town John Gamble met an elderly beggar woman who sought alms from him. Satisfied with the woman’s ‘judicious’ appeal for assistance, Gamble gave her some money and they parted company ‘mutually satisfied with each other’.

This perception of the alms-giving transaction was succinctly expressed in the first report of the Edinburgh Mendicity Society, which asserted that in removing importunate beggars from the city streets it did not wish ‘to interfere with the exercise of private charity. They have no intention of robbing the benevolent of this highest privilege which affluence can give; who, in relieving the wants of virtuous and unobtrusive poverty, will find abundance of room for gratifying the best feelings of the human heart’. The language here was similar to that used by the Dublin Mendicity Society five years later, when it expounded on the act of alms-giving, but, crucially, noted the flawed logic inherent in an act of indiscriminate assistance:

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6 First report of the commissioners on education in Ireland, p. 65, H.C. 1825 (400), xii, 69.
7 Flood, Poor Laws, p. 15.
8 Gamble, Sketches of history, politics, and manners, pp. 184–5.
9 The first report of the society, instituted in Edinburgh on 25th January 1813, for the suppression of beggars, for the relief of occasional distress, and for the encouragement of industry among the poor. With an account of receipts and disbursements from 27th February to 1st November 1813 (Edinburgh, 1814), p. 15.
It is indeed a custom founded on a prejudice hard to overcome. The benevolent mind will naturally follow the ready impulse; the heart, perhaps, is warmed with the idea of extending relief to apparent misery, and waits not for the slow and needful process of inquiry which can alone insure its right application: but, be it remembered, this is not charity.\(^\text{10}\)

Here, the mendicity society implicitly advertised and extolled its own system of enquiry into and clarification of paupers’ true condition before assistance was provided – if provided at all. Criticism of ‘mistaken benevolence’ ran through numerous reports and studies on the problem of street begging, exposing the folly of indiscriminate alms-giving.\(^\text{11}\)

In recording apparently verbatim testimonies by members of all social classes, the reports of the Poor Inquiry shed light on the immeasurable sense of Christian charity, solidarity, and sociability among the poorer classes which was utterly distinct from, in Ó Ciosáin’s words, the ‘instrumentalist principles which had dominated discussions of poor relief within the elite for a century or two before the 1830s’.\(^\text{12}\) This ‘older view of charity’, which can be associated with the pre-Famine period, is typified in testimony recorded in Inishannon, County Cork, wherein one witness (seemingly, an innkeeper) asserted that he would rather continue giving alms directly to beggars at his door than pay less in monetary terms in a poor tax: ‘We would much rather give as we do at present; we do not feel it going; … if I was forced to pay it as a tax, it would not be charity, it would not be my own act; … I would not feel the pleasure of relieving a poor creature with my own hand’.\(^\text{13}\) Throughout all ranks of society – from County Cork innkeepers to the middle-class philanthropists of the Dublin and Edinburgh mendicity societies – people placed significant importance on the personal encounter between the giver and receiver of charity. In Headford parish, in County Galway, a William King spoke at length on why he gave alms to mendicants:

I consider that I would be in greater want if I gave none away than if I gave a great deal away, for I think charity never shortens the quantity … If a meal was going on, and a beggar called, you would never miss

\(^{10}\) Report, Dublin Mendicity Society, 1818, p. 17.

\(^{11}\) Report of the general committee of the Association for the Suppression of Mendicacy in Dublin. For the year 1820 (Dublin, 1821), p. 25; The fifth report of the general committee of the Mendicity Association, instituted in Londonderry, 13th May, 1825; with a statement of the accounts, and a list of the subscribers for the last year (Derry, 1830), p. 7; Report on the state of the poor in Waterford, 1834, f. 28r.

\(^{12}\) Ó Ciosáin, Ireland in official print culture, p. 83.

\(^{13}\) Cited ibid.
what you would give away. I gave away, myself, part of the cake made
of a quart of meal to a beggarman, and at the time I had no more
victuals in my house, nor the hope of getting it to earn the next day;
but I hoped that as God gave it to me that day he would some more the
next day … When I give I do so for the good of my soul, the honour
of God, and for their benefit.\textsuperscript{14}

Elsewhere in Galway, Kilchreest schoolmaster Patrick Cassidy (most
likely a Catholic) explained:

When I give alms I am actuated by a sense of gratitude towards my
Saviour, who gave his life as a ransom for my soul, not vainly hoping
that I am performing a meritorious deed for ‘man’s righteousness is but
as filthy as rags,’ and the inspired Apostle writes, ‘though I give all my
goods to feed the poor, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.’\textsuperscript{15}

It was important for people not to be seen as being niggardly in their
alms-giving. According to Rev. Thomas O’Connor, Catholic priest in
Tracton, County Cork, ‘A farmer will not let a beggar go from his door,
because he does not like it should be said of him that he is unlike his
neighbours; that he does not treat the poor like other people.’\textsuperscript{16}

The Ubiquitous Beggar

Mendicants were ubiquitous figures in pre-Famine Irish towns and cities,
as well as in rural areas. The biblical teachings, ‘The poor shall never cease
out of the land’ (Deut. 15:11) and ‘For ye have the poor always with you’
(Matt. 26:11) were taken to heart by contemporaries, and regularly cited by
polemicists, social commentators, preachers and charitable societies.\textsuperscript{17} Some,
though, drew distinctions between the poor and beggars: the former were
to be tolerated, the latter suppressed. Similarly, poverty was distinguished

\textsuperscript{14} PI, Appendix A, p. 477.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 479.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 677.
\textsuperscript{17} Annual report of the Strangers’ Friend Society; (founded in 1790) for visiting and
relieving distressed strangers, and the resident sick poor, at their habitations, in Dublin and
its vicinity: with an account of some of the cases relieved, and a list of subscribers, for 1823
(Dublin, 1824), p. 5; Report, Dublin Mendicity Society, 1820, p. 9; Michael Fitzgerald,
Wickedness and nullity of human laws against mendicancy, and the anti-Christian
character of the Irish Poor-law, proved from the consideration of alms-giving, mendicancy,
and Poor-laws, on Christian and Catholic principles … (Dublin, 1843), p. 17.
Figure 3.1
James Malton, ‘View from Capel Street, looking over Essex Bridge, Dublin’ (1797) (reproduced courtesy of National Library of Ireland)
from pauperism, which were seen respectively as the result of misfortune and depravity.\textsuperscript{18} Referring to the passage quoted above from Deuteronomy, Catholic priest Rev. Thaddeus O’Malley asserted: ‘But that blessed Providence, as benvolent as it is wise, has nowhere decreed that amongst those poor there shall be a class of beggars without any other security for the morsel that sustains life in them than the chance pity of the passer-by’.\textsuperscript{19} O’Malley drew on this biblical passage in his argument in favour of a statutory Poor Law, which, he believed, while not extinguishing poverty, ought to curtail habitual mendicancy.

While most accounts depicted the beggar as a deviant figure, mendicants were treated by some commentators as merely ubiquitous characters, a constant part of daily life and in such accounts the description of beggars reflected a desire neither to denigrate nor to romanticise these individuals but merely to acknowledge and record the fact that they were an ever-present part of society. According to Tim Hitchcock, beggars were ‘a normal part of every street scene’.\textsuperscript{20} James Malton’s 1797 painting, ‘View from Capel Street, looking over Essex Bridge, Dublin’ (Figure 3.1) captures this sense of the ubiquity of mendicancy. The painting, part of a set published in the 1790s, was intended to showcase the grandeur of late eighteenth-century Dublin, particularly the Georgian architecture framing Parliament Street and drawing the eye as far as the Royal Exchange, two recently completed civic developments. Included in Malton’s depiction, however, is a ragged, seemingly indigent beggar, cap in hand and soliciting alms from a gentleman on horseback. Even within the splendour of pre-Union Dublin and in this sanitised representation of the streetscape, the beggar was a ubiquitous part of life.\textsuperscript{21} According to William Laffan, ‘topographical artists patronised by the Dublin elite and middling classes deliberately ignored this marked contrast between splendour and poverty. Consistently in the visual tradition, beggars, and indeed the majority of the city’s more unsightly inhabitants, were either excluded from show or else rendered generically picturesque and hence acceptable for inclusion in depictions of the city’.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21} A beggar is also portrayed as an inconspicuous character in Malton’s \textit{The west front of St Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin} (1793).
The Visibility of Begging

The visibility of ragged and dirty mendicants offended the sensitivities of the middle classes who increasingly esteemed and expected respectability in one’s conduct and appearance. The removal of these eyesores from public spaces frequented by the respectable classes was an important motivating factor behind initiatives to suppress street begging; writing of contemporary welfare cultures in Oxford, Dyson and King have observed that ‘the nineteenth century was to see both an increased awareness of beggars and a determination to do something about them’.23 As Jacinta Prunty has observed, ‘it was the visibility of such persons that led to public concern’,24 while, addressing the related urban problem of prostitution, Maria Luddy has argued that the ‘most common concern … was its visibility’.25 In the first report of the Londonderry Mendicity Society, the public was reminded of ‘how great has been the improvement effected by the removal of so many miserable objects from public view’.26 However, for some commentators, initiatives to remove the visibility of poverty and beggary were overzealous and unjustified. One anonymous author went so far as implicitly to criticise legislative attempts to suppress the visibility of mendicancy as mere measures to protect the interests of the urban commercial classes. Referring to the beggars and vagrants who were criminalised under the 1847 Vagrancy Act, the author, aiming his acerbic comments at the supporters of the statute, wrote: ‘They [beggars] may crawl along the by-ways or through the fields – they may pine in the prison – they may die in their desolate homes – but they must not drag their gaunt frames and ghastly visages into “The marts where merchants most do congregate”’.27

The ability of beggary to shock the wealthier classes partially drove opposition to the relocation of the Dublin Mendicity Society’s premises from Copper Alley in the city centre to Usher’s Island on the capital’s western outskirts. Householders from St Audeon’s parish, where the institution was

23 Dyson and King, “The streets are paved with beggars”, p. 62.
24 Prunty, Dublin slums, p. 196.
26 The first report of the general committee of the Mendicity Association, instituted in Londonderry, 13th May, 1825; with a statement of the accounts, and a list of the subscribers for the last year (Derry, 1826), pp. 6–7.
27 Anon., ‘Tenant right, repeal and Poor Laws: dangers and duties of the Conservative Party and landed interest in Ireland’ in Dublin University Magazine, xxxi, no. 181 (Jan. 1848), pp. 142–3. The final phrase in this quote is from William Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice.
to be relocated, complained that Usher’s Island was ‘the principal entrance to the City from the West of Ireland’ and feared the concentration of ‘such a mass of pauperism & wretchedness’ at this prominent location. To allay these worries the society assured the parishioners that access to the institution from Usher’s Island, which fronted onto the quays and the main thoroughfare:

will only be made use of by the gentlemen of the Committee and the Visitors of the Institution, and in that respect it will not at all differ from a private house. The entrance for the poor will be altogether from Island Street [a back lane to the rear of the property] and so cannot in the least degree be a nuisance to any one.

A later minute explicitly stated that the purpose of erecting a ‘proper wall’ at the front of the premises was ‘so as to prevent the Mendicants being seen at work from the quay’. These arrangements ensured that the beggars’ access to and egress from the institution would be kept out of sight of the main thoroughfare.

The importance of the spectacle of mendicancy is evident in the Dublin Mendicity Society’s decision in September 1818, and again in September 1828 and August 1839, to parade beggars through the streets of the city. The motivation behind these bizarre exhibitions, usually held at times of diminished income due to falling subscriptions and donations, was to exert pressure on those ‘most callous and thoughtless’ inhabitants of Dublin who refused, yet had the means, to contribute financially to the society. The initiative also implicitly threatened inhabitants with the consequences of the institution’s failure if sufficient public support was not

29 Ibid., 25 June 1822.
31 Woods, Dublin outsiders, pp. 21, 84, 116. See also FT, 21 Sept. 1826. A similar instance of an unidentified mendicity society ‘of a commercial town’ parading paupers to the houses of non-subscribers is cited by an anonymous pamphleteer, but it is not clear whether the author was referring to the Dublin society and one of the aforementioned instances: Anon., A letter to the Right Hon. Lord Goderich, on the deplorable condition of the helpless poor in Ireland, with a plan of relief, as at present partly in operation in several districts of the province of Ulster. By a member of a parochial poor relief committee (Dublin, 1827), p. 21.
32 Twenty-second annual report of the managing committee of the Association for the Suppression of Mendicity in Dublin. For the year 1839 (Dublin, 1840), p. 8. The parading of beggars was discussed in the summer of 1836, at a time of ‘alarming emergency’ for the society, but postponed: Dublin Mendicity Society minute book, 13 June 1836 (NLI, DMSP, MS 32,599/5); ibid., 14 June, 14 July 1836.
forthcoming. Householders were subjected to verbal aggression and ‘shout[s] of execration’. A newspaper report claimed that the mendicity society ‘sent the starving paupers to besiege the houses of non-subscribers, with incessant applications for assistance, and the consequence was, that their funds for the ensuing year were amply sufficient for the demands that were made upon them’. Such a policy was justified, and indeed encouraged, by the paper’s editor, who argued that ‘itinerant beggars should be allowed to infest the doors of such characters as these’, who absconded from their duty in contributing to the suppression of mendicancy in their city. With crowds of mendicants congregating and shouting outside their home, the besieged householders undoubtedly felt much pressure and intimidation to financially support the institution in future. The Dublin parish of St James’s also experimented with this unorthodox practice, arranging for a procession of the parish’s ‘starving poor’ from the city to the southern suburb of Stillorgan, in the hope of intimidating a householder into parting with overdue rates. The Coleraine Mendicity Society deployed a different tactic, in threatening to publish the names of those who did not subscribe to the charity. The Dublin society came under pressure in 1830 to cancel its proposed parade of beggars due to the ‘determined opposition’ of the Lord Mayor and the government, although the reason for this opposition is not recorded. Through gritted teeth the charity consented to the request but not without expressing its belief that previous parades had proved ‘both harmless & beneficial’.

The Threatening Beggar

Beggars and the Spread of Disease
The association between mendicancy and disease pre-dates any scientific understanding of the latter. Disease, while being no discriminator between different social classes, nonetheless impacts the poor disproportionately. Consequences of poverty, such as an insufficient diet and wretched living conditions, increase one’s susceptibility to infection, and in pre-Famine Ireland, the onslaught of illness could rapidly propel a once-industrious and independent family into a life of dependency and even destitution.

34 BNL, 10 Jan. 1832.
35 FJ, 9 Oct. 1838.
36 OSM, xxxiii, p. 73. For the Belfast House of Industry, see BNL, 16 Nov. 1810.
The connection between beggars and the dissemination of plague was appreciated by societies in medieval and early modern Europe when stigmatisation and expulsion of the vagrant poor was common.\textsuperscript{38} In Ireland in the same period similar associations can be identified. The enforcement of punitive measures against vagrants and beggars intensified at times of plague: ‘The beggar was not merely a nuisance, an idler and an annoyance; he was a definite source of danger to the community, from whom the shadow of plague was never very far distant’.\textsuperscript{39} The spread of fever during the 1739–41 famine led to increased punitive measures against vagrants and beggars,\textsuperscript{40} while throughout the nineteenth century beggars were blamed for introducing and disseminating disease – most commonly typhus fever, cholera and smallpox – to both rural and urban areas across Ireland.\textsuperscript{41} Indeed, the very language deployed in public discourse on the topic of mendicancy was grounded in the imagery of disease and pestilence, with areas being commonly described as being ‘infested’ with ‘swarms’ of beggars.\textsuperscript{42}

While the identification and understanding of the distinct diseases of typhus, typhoid and relapsing fever dates from the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish population had for generations appreciated the contagiousness of fever. According to Laurence Geary, ‘the exposure of the Irish people to centuries of fever left them with an unrivalled knowledge of the symptoms and consequences of the disease’.\textsuperscript{43} Lice-ridden rags worn by the wandering beggars of the pre-Famine period were ideal vehicles for the safe breeding of febrile organisms, while the insanitary habits, overcrowded dwellings and transient lifestyle of such individuals ensured the spread of the disease. The \textit{Freeman’s Journal}, in September 1817, echoed these views, stating that ‘it is ascertained that contagious infection is retained a long time in the foul rags of these miserable outcasts, and has been too frequently scattered by

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\item \textsuperscript{38} Jütte, \textit{Poverty and deviance}, pp. 22–3.
\item \textsuperscript{40} David Dickson, \textit{Arctic Ireland: the extraordinary story of the great frost and forgotten famine of 1740–41} (Belfast, 1998), p. 56.
\item \textsuperscript{41} In the case of typhus, see Barker and Cheyne, \textit{Account of the rise, progress, and decline of the fever epidemic in Ireland}, i, pp. 66, 141. For cholera in 1832, see PT, Appendix A, p. 560; Robins, \textit{The miasma}, p. 76. For smallpox in the 1880s, see J.P. Murray, \textit{Galway: a medico-social history} (Galway, [c.1993]), p. 107.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Examples of the use of such language throughout this period include: \textit{Leinster Journal}, 17 July 1819; Cooke, \textit{Sermon preached in aid of the Belfast House of Industry}, p. 24; Binns, \textit{Miseries and beauties of Ireland}, ii, p. 323.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Laurence M. Geary, \textit{Medicine and charity in Ireland, 1718–1851} (Dublin, 2004), p. 75.
\end{itemize}
them through the country, with general and baleful effects’.\textsuperscript{44} The first report of the Dublin Mendicity Society, founded in 1818 at the height of a fever epidemic, asserted that ‘crowds of unfortunate and clamorous beggars’ frequently carried about ‘in their persons and garments the seeds of contagious diseases’.\textsuperscript{45} In a similar vein, Dr Francis Barker of the Cork Street Fever Hospital, Dublin asserted that ‘fever and mendicity, like many other evils, are reciprocally productive, and the suppression of either must tend to that of both’.\textsuperscript{46} Through the spread of disease, the mendicant’s nomadic habits led to increasing demands on the limited resources of the country’s medical institutions and charities. In a report of a sub-committee of the Kilkenny House of Industry, it was stated that the claims on the funds of the city’s fever hospital and dispensary ‘must diminish when the beggar is prevented from strolling about, and spreading where he goes the seeds of contagion’.\textsuperscript{47}

**Case Study: Beggars and the 1816–19 Fever Epidemic in Ireland**

The end of the Napoleonic Wars in June 1815, just weeks after an unprecedented meteorological disaster, ushered in what John D. Post famously termed ‘the last great subsistence crisis in the western world’.\textsuperscript{48} Throughout Europe, hundreds of thousands of demobilised men returned home to societies shaken by a post-war economic downturn, agrarian distress, a prolonged period of inclement weather (owing to the worldwide distribution of ash from the eruption of the Tambora volcano in Indonesia) and consecutive bad harvests. Social disorder also prevailed and in parts of north-western Europe food riots and popular disturbances developed into large-scale acts of rebellion.\textsuperscript{49} Added to this distress was a severe typhus fever epidemic that proved particularly destructive in Ireland, always ‘a fever-ridden country’ (serious epidemics were also recorded in the Hapsburg lands south of the Alps, Italy and Switzerland),\textsuperscript{50} and the widespread migration of poor persons in search of food, employment and other survival options. The ranks of beggars swelled accordingly and throughout the continent 1817 became known as ‘the year of the beggars’.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{44} *FJ*, 10 Sept. 1817.
\textsuperscript{45} Report, *Dublin Mendicity Society, 1818*, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{46} Barker, *Medical report, Cork-street Fever Hospital, Dublin*, pp. 43–4.
\textsuperscript{47} Leinster Journal, 19 Apr. 1820.
\textsuperscript{49} Post, *Last great subsistence crisis*, pp. 75–86.
\textsuperscript{51} Post, *Last great subsistence crisis*, p. 86.
crisis resembled parts of pre-industrial Europe, such as eastern France and central Europe, owing to the lower levels of economic development and less rationalised administrations. On the other hand, while Britain in the mid- to late 1810s was affected by a flooded labour market, demographic dislocation and increasing levels of unemployment and poor relief, the country was not subjected to the extraordinary levels of mendicancy that marked Ireland, Switzerland, south-western Germany, Italy, the Habsburg Empire and the Balkan peninsula in these years.\textsuperscript{52} A notable exception to this pattern was London, which as an urban centre and port town attracted large numbers of mobile poor from the provinces, and the swelled numbers of beggars in the metropolis influenced the establishment of a parliamentary committee (1815–16) on mendicancy in the city and also of the London Mendicity Society in January 1818.\textsuperscript{53}

In Dublin, another factor, singular to the city, contributed to the deepening of the demographic, social and medical crisis. In 1816, the city’s House of Industry, a state-funded institution which for more than 40 years had been the main place of confinement for street beggars, ceased admitting mendicants through compulsion into its premises in the north city, upon the orders of the Chief Secretary, Robert Peel. Instead, the House of Industry’s resources were to be focused on relieving various categories of the sick poor, whom Peel described as ‘the proper objects of admission into the House of Industry’.\textsuperscript{54} The continued admission of ‘vagrant and refractory beggars, constituting that class which is called the compelled’ would, it was believed, stretch the institution’s resources beyond its capacity.\textsuperscript{55} In this light, Jacinta Prunty has perceived the decision, taken following overcrowding crises in 1815 and 1816 and the ‘anarchy’ involved in indiscriminate admissions of the vagrant poor, as revealing the institution determining ‘to wash its hands of the troublesome classes’.\textsuperscript{56} Ironically, while the House of Industry governors could proudly assert in their annual report for 1818 that the ‘aged and infirm now fill the places formerly preoccupied by the vagrant and healthy’ resulting in ‘more health, cleanliness, sobriety and order’ inside the institution,\textsuperscript{57} they

\textsuperscript{54} Copy of letter (original dated 14 Sept. 1816) from Robert Peel to the House of Industry governors, n.d. (NAI, CSORP, CSO/RP/1820/688).
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Prunty, \textit{Dublin slums}, p. 203.
\textsuperscript{57} Quoted ibid.
appeared to have ignored the fact that on the city streets outside the walls of the House of Industry the consequences of their actions were to be seen in horrific reality. Large parts of the Dublin outside those walls, the Dublin of 1818, were anything but healthy, clean, sober and orderly.

The fever epidemic raged in Ireland for three years and the most reliable contemporary estimate placed the total number of fatalities at up to 65,000, while 1.5 million people were believed to have been afflicted with disease at some point during the outbreak. While other factors contributed to the spread of the disease, the significance of beggary in this regard was such that the government (belatedly) passed a fever act in May 1819 empowering local authorities to confine, wash and clean, or remove beggars from a parish. As various national and local authorities struggled, and in many cases failed, to cope with the level of distress, attempts were made by well-placed observers to identify the causes of the epidemic. A number of histories of the outbreak were published in the decade or so after its demise and all highlighted the role that mendicants played in spreading the disease. In their comprehensive history of Dublin, Warburton et al. stated that ‘through Dublin it [typhus] was supposed to be propagated by 5,000 beggars who conveyed the contagion in their clothes from street to street and from house to house’. The authors echoed the widely held view that contagion was introduced into the city by wandering mendicants from rural areas and once the epidemic established a footing amongst Dublin’s population its progress through the overcrowded, unsanitary dwellings of the city’s poorer classes was unrelenting. Medical practitioners were the most prominent commentators blaming the epidemic’s dissemination on vagrant beggars. Doctors Francis Barker and John Cheyne, physicians in the Cork Street Fever Hospital and House of Industry respectively, attributed the spread of contagion to wandering mendicants and their ‘filthy and neglected clothing’, while the custom among the poor, particularly in rural areas, of providing lodging to strange beggars was seen as contributing to ‘this evil’. The physicians of the Cork Street Fever Hospital claimed confidently in January 1818 that they were ‘satisfied by accounts received from every part of the Country that Beggars have contributed greatly to extend infection’.

59 59 Geo. III, c. 41, s. 9 (14 June 1819).
61 Barker and Cheyne, *Account of the rise, progress, and decline of the fever epidemic in Ireland*, i, p. 141; ‘A table of the population of Church and Barrack Street’, [c.late 1817] (NAI, CSOOP, CSO/OP474/8).
62 St Catherine’s parish, Dublin, vestry minute book, 24 Jan. 1818 (RCBL, St Catherine’s parish vestry minute books, P 117.05.7).
In a separate, self-penned report, Dr Cheyne expanded on this matter and placed the blame for the spread of disease squarely at the feet of Ireland’s wandering mendicants. While noting the role played by other social factors, such as the holding of wakes and gatherings at fairs and chapels, Cheyne continued by stating:

\[\text{it is probably not known to what extent the vagrant habits of many of the poor and the migratory movements of the beggars prove injurious by disseminating contagion. These are chiefly observable in the South and West of Ireland, but the North is not altogether exempt from the evil; indeed it is generally thought that the beggars were the great carriers of contagion during the late epidemic, and that to them it was owing that the disease spread so rapidly all over Ireland.}\]

Cheyne based his analysis on correspondence with medical practitioners from across Ireland and his notes attest to the strength with which the association between beggars and disease was held by medical men at this time. Table 3.1 reveals the locations where doctors, in correspondence with Cheyne, attributed the spread of disease to the wandering habits of mendicants. This table is not comprehensive and not every county is represented. However, the table does demonstrate that across Ireland, indeed in each of the four provinces, the introduction of typhus fever into a particular area was attributed by local experts, especially medical men, to wandering beggars. The findings are supported by a similar but independent contemporary report by Dr William Harty, physician to the King’s Hospital in Dublin, based on accounts from each of the thirty-two counties.

In the first-hand accounts of authorities throughout Ireland, the dangers inherent in the mobility of large numbers of fever-stricken, poor people figure prominently. A Dr Galway, writing from Mallow, observed that his locality had witnessed an increase in migrating mendicants from County Kerry, and claimed that ‘every farmer’s pig sty and out hovel was occupied by groups of squalid creatures, who were still seen crawling … [and] begging alms, in all lapses of typhus fever’. At the far end of the country, in Ballyshannon, a local gentleman commented that ‘fever has been kept up and widely spread by the hospitality of the people allowing lodgings to mendicants and poor travellers’. In the east, a Dr Johnston in Athy stated

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64 William Harty, Historic sketch of the causes, extent, and mortality of contagious fever, epidemic in Ireland in 1741, and during 1817, 1818, and 1819: together with a review of the causes, medical and statistical productive of epidemic fever in Ireland (Dublin, [1820]), unpaginated, see tables at rear of text.
Table 3.1  Reports from medical practitioners across Ireland, in which the spread of disease was attributed to beggars, 1817

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Date of report</th>
<th>Reference to beggars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cavan</td>
<td>Cavan</td>
<td>19 September 1817</td>
<td>Disease spread by ‘beggars’; ‘beggars expelled [from the town]’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donegal</td>
<td>Ballyshannon</td>
<td>17 September 1817</td>
<td>‘spread by beggars’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down</td>
<td>Downpatrick</td>
<td>3 September 1817</td>
<td>Outbreak ‘preceded by smallpox which was introduced by vagrant beggars’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fermanagh</td>
<td>Enniskillen</td>
<td>18 September 1817</td>
<td>‘propagated by beggars’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyrone</td>
<td>Omagh</td>
<td>18 September 1817</td>
<td>‘propagated by beggars’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlow</td>
<td>Bagnelstown</td>
<td>18 September 1817</td>
<td>‘spread by mendicants’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King’s County (Offaly)</td>
<td>Tullamore</td>
<td>12 September 1817</td>
<td>‘contagion introduced by stranger beggars’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King’s County (Offaly)</td>
<td>Parsonstown (Birr)</td>
<td>15 September 1817</td>
<td>‘disease introduced by beggars’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kilkenny</td>
<td>Durrow</td>
<td>21 September 1817</td>
<td>‘caused by misery of every kind — despondency, idleness, but particularly by contagion carried about by beggars from house to house’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longford</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>17 September 1817</td>
<td>‘communicated by mendicants’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wicklow</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1 September 1817</td>
<td>‘many cases of fever were traced to strolling mendicants, who were taken in from motives of charity’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>Mallow</td>
<td>20 September 1817</td>
<td>‘disease spread by migrating beggars’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galway</td>
<td>Loughrea</td>
<td>undated</td>
<td>‘infection from poor beggars who came from Galway’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roscommon</td>
<td>Elphin</td>
<td>12 September 1817</td>
<td>‘contagion spread by beggars’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that ‘fever was brought into this neighbourhood by itinerant beggars and labourers. The inhabitants of the cabins where they lodged all took the fever’. While mendicants were held to be carriers of contagion, it was only through their interaction with other people that disease could be disseminated through the population. Intercourse between the general population and beggars was strongly discouraged, a most difficult proposition given the widespread practice in rural areas of admitting wandering vagrants into one’s home, where food or a place to sleep would be offered. In Galway city, members of the ‘lower orders’ were advised to be ‘particular in the admission of strange beggars to their houses’, while a printed notice from 1817, for an unspecified Ulster location, advised the public: ‘do not lodge Beggars, unless in an outhouse’. In counties Wicklow and Wexford, the practice of giving shelter to mendicants was admonished from the altar by several priests.

Fears of the introduction of disease into localities became heightened in response to the increased migration of large numbers of the mendicant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Date of report</th>
<th>Reference to beggars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roscommon</td>
<td>Roscommon</td>
<td>22 September 1817</td>
<td>‘In May, disorder formidably spread by legions of beggars, who traversed the whole face of the country’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 ‘Four provincial reports by Drs Perceval and Cheyne on the state of the public health in Ireland’, 1817 (NAI, CSOOP, CSO/OP474/22). While other factors, such as the poor quality of food, chronic poverty and poor lodgings, were also presented as factors determining the virulence of the epidemic, this table identifies those reports where mendicants were cited as the propagators of contagion.

2 This townland is not to be confused with the large post-town of Durrow in Queen's County (Laois).

65 Report of Dr John Cheyne on the fever epidemic in Ireland, [c.1819].
66 Evidence of this practice is to be found in First report from the select committee on the state of disease and condition of the labouring poor, in Ireland, p. 42 (County Galway); ibid., p. 70 (Wexford town); ibid., p. 74 (Ballitore, County Kildare). In 1826, a public notice issued in Roscrea, County Tipperary advised householders: ‘Don’t let strolling Beggars enter your homes as they frequently carry infection from one house to another’: Poster entitled ‘To the public!! Advice to prevent fever’, 1826 (NAI, CSORP, CSO/RP/1826/15206).
68 First report from the select committee on the state of disease and condition of the labouring poor, in Ireland, p. 71.
poor, escaping localised outbreaks of disease and in search of relief. Contemporary reports invariably commented on the significant movement of poor people during this crisis: in Limerick, it was observed that ‘the whole country appeared to be in motion’, while the travel writer John Gamble wrote of Strabane:

Hords [sic] of wandering beggars, impelled by the cravings of hunger, carried the distemper from door to door; and, from their wretched habiliments, wafted contagion far and wide. Almost the entire mountain population, literally speaking, took up their beds and walked; and, with their diseased blankets wrapped round them, sought, in the low lands, the succour which charity could not give, but at the hazard of life.

Systems of expulsion were enforced, thus reviving a practice which had operated across Europe since medieval times. Authorities in Vienna expelled outsiders, while non-native vagrants in Bavaria were whipped and confined in compulsory workhouses (with a tiered system of punishments for repeat offenders); other authorities passed ordinances that prohibited public begging. In a number of locations in Ireland, guards were stationed at the perimeters of the town, with strict orders to prevent mendicants entering. In Tullamore, ‘sickly itinerants’ were intercepted by guards and were prevented from entering the town, which shut down trade and other interactions with neighbouring areas and was described as being ‘thus in a state of blockade’. Similar measures were adopted in Roscommon town, while in Coleraine public notices were issued which urged ‘that all foreign Beggars should, if possible, be put out of town’. This policy of expulsion and prohibition was praised by the Freeman's Journal as being as ‘justifiable as that first law, or self-preserving duty, that allows the depriving a fellow creature of life, if it shall become indispensably necessary for the protection of our own’. The warding off of beggars was seen as a matter of self-defence, justified by resort to natural law. An appreciation that itinerant beggars were spreading

70 For a consideration of what Robert Jütte has termed ‘the ancient remedy of expulsion’, see Jütte, Poverty and deviance, pp. 165–9.
71 Post, Last great subsistence crisis, pp. 88–91.
72 Barker and Cheyne, Account of the rise, progress, and decline of the fever epidemic in Ireland, i, p. 60.
73 First report from the select committee on the state of disease and condition of the labouring poor, in Ireland, p. 46; Notice regarding fever epidemic in Strabane, 18 Dec. 1817 (PRONI, Abercorn papers, D623/A/131/4).
74 FJ, 10 Sept. 1817.
disease was not limited to authorities and wealthier members of society; the poor also made connections between the movement of vagrant paupers and the dissemination of contagion and responded accordingly. ‘So convinced were the poor of the disease being infectious that their conduct in many places towards itinerants, and in particular itinerant beggars, from being kind and hospitable, had become stern and repulsive; they drove all beggars from their doors, charging them with being the authors of their greatest misfortunes, by spreading disease through the country’.75

Beggars and Shopkeepers

For the trading community in towns and cities the prevalence of hordes of mendicants threatened their businesses. Having ‘frequently observed [customers] … go to other Shops, rather than suffer such a Persecution’ in 1730s Dublin city, Jonathan Swift described shopkeepers as ‘the greatest Complainers’ of street mendicancy.76 The first report of the Waterford Mendicity Society complained of the doors of shops being crowded ‘by persons whose clamours impeded the transaction of business, and often obliged the intending purchaser to make a precipitate retreat to some other place, where he vainly expected to experience less annoyance’.77 An 1820s guide to Dublin recalled that just a few years previously ‘whenever a well-dressed person entered a shop to purchase anything, the door was beset by beggars, awaiting his egress’.78 As noted in Chapter 1, a common response by shopkeepers was to provide regular alms (‘allowances’) to mendicants, either to be rid of the immediate nuisance or as part of an understanding that the traders’ customers would not subsequently be solicited.

Traders’ fears were reflected in the first two annual reports of the Dublin Mendicity Society, which carried on their title pages the Spectator’s assertion of a century earlier that ‘Of all men living we Merchants, who live by buying and selling ought never to encourage Beggars’.79 The prominence given to this quote in the founding literature of the mendicity society signifies that the commercial classes were the main economic grouping that constituted the membership of the organisation, and also that this cohort of

75 First report from the select committee on the state of disease and condition of the labouring poor, in Ireland, p. 76.
76 [Swift], Proposal for giving badges to the beggars, p. 13.
77 First annual report, of the Association for the Suppression of Mendicity in the City of Waterford (Waterford, 1822), p. 4.
79 This assertion is from The Spectator, no. 232 (26 Nov. 1711), quoted on the title pages of Report, Dublin Mendicity Society, 1818 and Second report, Dublin Mendicity Society, 1819.
merchants perceived themselves and their economic interests to be acutely vulnerable to the ‘evil’ of beggary. The first report of the Dublin Mendicity Society bemoaned the fact that ‘the doors of carriages and shops, to the interruption of business, were beset by crowds of unfortunate and clamorous beggars, exhibiting misery and decrepitude in a variety of forms’,\textsuperscript{80} while the \textit{Freeman’s Journal}, commenting that the capital was ‘already overcrowded with groupes [sic] of mendicants’, editorialised at the commencement of the 1816–19 fever epidemic: ‘one can’t stop in the streets for a moment without being encircled and obtruded on by them; all the markets are dreadfully infested with beggars; and most of the shop doors are completely stopped up by them’.\textsuperscript{81} As Jacinta Prunty has observed, ‘because of the proximity of the city slums to the wealthy residential districts and the commercial heart of the city, the scandal of the famished and desperate readily spilled over to the very hall-doors and shop-fronts of respectable society, even at times of apparent “normality”’.\textsuperscript{82} For the inhabitants of Dublin city at this time, mendicants were a ubiquitous presence on the streets where they lived, worked, shopped and worshipped.

The plight of Dublin’s shopkeepers and merchants was raised with the authorities in Dublin Castle by Dr Robert Perceval of the Hardwicke Fever Hospital in December 1817, when the post-war typhus fever epidemic was raging through the city. In a letter to Chief Secretary Robert Peel, Dr Perceval stated that ‘trading people must be aware of the loss they sustain by the desertion of their shops (from apprehension of infection from Beggars) and by the regulations of quarantine’.\textsuperscript{83} Two months later, Perceval returned to the subject of the threat posed by disease-ridden mendicants to the business community, in a proposal to check the progress of contagion in the city primarily by suppressing street begging. The plan centred on, first, proposals to establish an office where beggars, once their claims of destitution were confirmed, could attend and have their clothes washed, and, secondly, a public declaration calling on the citizenry not to give alms in the street. Perceval referred to ‘the interest which shopkeepers must feel in keeping their doors clear of filthy mendicants, who it is well known deter their customers from frequenting their shops’.\textsuperscript{84} In presenting his plan to

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Report, Dublin Mendicity Society, 1818}, p. 2.
\item\textsuperscript{81} \textit{FJ}, 10 Sept. 1817.
\item\textsuperscript{82} Prunty, \textit{Dublin slums}, p. 201.
\item\textsuperscript{83} Robert Perceval to Robert Peel, 12 Dec. 1817 (NAI, CSOOP, CSO/OP474/44). The text within the brackets is contained in a hand-written footnote, inserted by Perceval into the manuscript letter.
\item\textsuperscript{84} ‘Plan for the cooperation of the health subcommittee in preventing the causes of disease & checking the progress of contagion in the city, by Robert Perceval’, 19 Feb. 1818 (NAI, CSOOP, CSO/OP474/56).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Dublin Castle, Perceval was acutely aware of how sensitive the commercial classes were to the threat posed by street begging and also their power in mobilising public opinion against this practice.

By the 1830s, frustrated by the failure of the state to curtail street begging through the police, the magistrates and the House of Industry, the Dublin business community and private householders resolved to take the matter into their own hands and employed extra-legal street inspectors for the sole purpose of removing mendicants from outside their respective shops and premises. These inspectors possessed no legal powers and appear to have been enabled in their endeavours by the street beggars’ ignorance of the inspectors’ powerlessness. The employment of street inspectors was undertaken by merchants and traders who combined into small collectives, and the average cost to a business owner was between £4 and £5 a year. The principal areas where these inspectors were deployed were Westmoreland Street, Castle Street, Dame Street, Sackville Street, College Green, Parliament Street, High Street, Christchurch Place and Wellington Quay. These streets, located in either the medieval city core or the later eastern area of development, represented the largest commercial thoroughfares in the city.

Among the Dublin shopkeepers who employed extra-legal street inspectors was W. Mitchell of No. 10 Grafton Street. Mitchell, a pastry cook and confectioner, told the Poor Inquiry that he and some neighbours employed ‘at our own expense, a street-inspector, who parades all day up and down on one side of the street, from Nassau-street to No. 16, a distance of about 12 or 14 doors’. For this service, which had operated for the previous two years, Mitchell paid 1s. 6d. a week, which totalled £3 18s. 0d. annually. Before he combined with his neighbours, Mitchell employed a person, ‘solely at my own expense, to keep my own shop-door clear [of beggars]’. The trader’s frankness regarding the extra-legal nature of the practice is striking:

These inspectors are not constables, nor are they authorized to apprehend beggars, they are only instructed to remove beggars as much as they can from the doors of shops, and keep them from besetting carriages. This plan has operated beneficially, the beggars generally not being aware that the inspectors are not constables, and have not legal powers.

85 PI, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin, p. 29a*. For more on this practice, see Sixth report of the general committee of the Association of Mendicity in Dublin. For the year 1823 (Dublin, 1824), p. 21.
86 PI, Appendix C, Part II, Report upon vagrancy and mendicity in the City of Dublin, p. 42a*.
87 Ibid., p. 44a*.
In assessing the merits of this initiative, one must consider the context of this undertaking. The city’s shopkeepers’ resort to such a draconian measure is to be seen in light of the fact that no satisfactory initiative was forthcoming from the civil authorities for the suppression of mendicancy. Traders thus felt obliged to implement this unique strategy for dealing with an alarming social problem which threatened their economic survival.

These fears on the part of the commercial classes of urban areas were not confined to the capital. In a charity sermon in 1811 for the benefit of the Belfast House of Industry, which was established two years previously for the purpose of suppressing street begging, the town’s inhabitants were reminded of ‘the numerous groups of beggars which beset their shops’ prior to the activities of the charity.\(^88\) One week later, complaining of what he considered to be the meagre £140 raised at this charity sermon, a ‘Paddy Driscoll’ wrote a letter to the editor of the *Belfast News-Letter*, criticising the citizens of Belfast for their alleged ‘apathy’. His first targets were members of the town’s business community: ‘Are the shopkeepers unwilling to pay a small contribution towards preventing their shops being crowded with beggars, to the great annoyance of themselves and their customers?’\(^89\) In Drogheda, it was observed that the most common form of begging was ‘for the mendicants to go from door to door, chiefly to the shops, as these are open, and the tradesman when engaged in serving a customer will often give something to a beggar in order to be rid of his importunity’.\(^90\) For traders, the short-term solution of giving alms superseded any consideration of the long-term impact of the pernicious practice of indiscriminate alms-giving; economic survival trumped moral principle. In late 1823, the *Connaught Journal* called for the establishment of a mendicity society in Galway by members of the city’s commercial classes, ‘whose shops are beset, and whose profits must be considerably diminished by the droves of beggars that haunt every part of this Town’.\(^91\) One year later, and some months after the establishment of a mendicity society in the western city, another paper, the *Galway Weekly Advertiser*, elatedly reported: ‘our doors that used to be infested by a horde of vagrants were left unmolested, and strangers could pass in and out of our shops, and make their purchases, without having their eyes offended by the squalid filth, or the ears shocked by the horrid imprecations of mendicants of the worst description’.\(^92\) The impact in this regard of the Galway Mendicity

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88 *BNL*, 12 Feb. 1811.
89 *BNL*, 19 Feb. 1811.
90 *PI, Appendix C, Part I*, p. 49. See also *Drogheda Journal*, 4 Sept. 1840, cited in McHugh, *Drogheda before the Famine*, p. 46 n. 30.
92 *Galway Weekly Advertiser*, 13 Nov. 1824.
Society was ‘immediate and palpable’. This perception of shopkeepers being subjected to irrepressible waves of mendicants was conveyed by Dr John Milner Barry of the Cork House of Recovery, who claimed that ‘swarms of beggars, which infested our streets … stormed every door and shop’. Another Cork gentlemen described the southern city as being ‘inundated with them’, adding: ‘They blocked up the doors of the principal shops, or attended the public conveyances at their arrival and departure, cursing or praying with equal fervour, as their application was granted or refused’.  

Superstitious Beliefs and the Beggar’s Curse

Superstition pervaded daily life among the labouring classes in pre-Famine Ireland. The persistence into the nineteenth century of belief in fairies, magic, changelings and witches, operating outside the realms of official religion, is well recorded. Beggars were among the ubiquitous characters of pre-Famine life that were frequently associated with the Christian and non-Christian supernatural. Many mendicants claimed to possess supernatural powers, and practices such as fortune-telling were practised by such individuals. Legislation associating fortune-telling and palmistry with vagabondage dated back at least to the 1630s and continued into the nineteenth century. Associations between wandering mendicants and the supernatural appear also in nineteenth-century literary sources. In William Carleton’s ‘Phelim O’Toole’s courtship’ a ‘poor mendicant’, also described as a ‘boccagh’, provides advice to a childless couple on a folkloric cure to their ‘great affliction’. The advice offered by the mendicant is to visit a particular holy well on the appropriate pattern day, kiss a ‘Lucky Stone’ while saying the Rosary, and circle the well nine times, before leaving behind a piece of material and then departing. The prescribed method demonstrates the frequent intermixture of folk practices – such as lucky

93 Ibid.
95 Denis Charles O’Connor, Seventeen years’ experience of workhouse life: with suggestions for reforming the Poor Law and its administration (Dublin, 1861), pp. 9–10.
97 PI, Appendix A, p. 549.
98 10 & 11 Chas I, c. 4 [Ire.] (1635), cited in George Nicholls, A history of the Irish Poor Law, in connexion with the condition of the People (London, 1856), p. 30; William Alex Breakey, Handbook for magistrates, clerks of petty sessions, solicitors, coroners, &c., being a comprehensive index and synopsis of the common and statute law in Ireland. (Dublin, 1895), p. 275.
100 Ibid., p. 191.
charms – with Christian traditions, as demonstrated by the holy well and the pattern day.

There are also numerous references in the pre-Famine period to a fear of the ‘beggar’s curse’. Author and Poor Law commentator James Ebenezer Bicheno, who served on the Poor Inquiry, recorded that Irish peasants believed ‘that a curse will be upon him who turns a beggar from his door’, while Poor Law Commissioner George Nicholls asserted that ‘there is a superstitious dread of bringing down the beggar’s curse, and thus mendicancy is sustained in the midst of poverty’. These assertions, however, require deeper consideration. First, references to belief in the ‘beggar’s curse’ almost invariably arise in rural areas. For example, in a letter to a Dublin physician in May 1822, a County Cork clergyman expressed his opinion that many poor people gave alms to beggars to prevent some disaster falling on the household and noted that ‘these abuses originate in superstition’. He continued: ‘I have often known them to say when a cow has died, that was such a beggar’s curse’. An anonymous Anglican clergyman in the south of Ireland identified a similar practice in the mid-1820s: ‘The farmers, universally, dread the curse of the beggar; and, therefore, seldom deny a few potatoes’. The proliferation of these instances in rural areas and the contrasting scarcity of references to the beggar’s curse in urban centres points to the wider prevalence of superstitious beliefs among rural peasant communities, yet rare examples of the existence of belief in the ‘beggar’s curse’ in an urban setting do arise. One such instance is provided by the Dublin Mendicity Society’s street inspector, George Rogers, who told the Poor Inquiry that ‘many persons are induced to give from a fear of the “poor man’s curse”’. The same inquiry heard that servants in Carrickfergus frequently gave assistance to vagrants for fear of the beggar’s curse.

Secondly, the work of Niall Ó Ciosáin demonstrates that in many parishes people did not heed a beggar’s curse, on the grounds that a virtuous person would not issue a curse; a beggar’s prayer, on the other hand, was

101 J.E. Bicheno, Ireland, and its economy: being the result of observations made in a tour through the country in the autumn of 1829 (London, 1830), p. 251.
102 Nicholls, History of the Irish Poor Law, p. 206.
103 ‘Letter from Reverend Richard Woodward, Glanworth Glebe, Fermoy, County Cork to Dr William Disney, regarding relief of local poor’, 27 May 1822 (NAI, CSORP, CSO/ RP/1822/441/2).
104 Anon, The real grievance of the Irish peasantry, as immediately felt and complained of among themselves, a fruitful source of beggary and idleness, and the main support of the Rock system … (London, 1825), p. 39.
106 PI, Appendix A, p. 711.
widely regarded and cherished.\textsuperscript{107} Such viewpoints served as a means of distinguishing between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ claimants of alms. As a counterpoint to the malevolence of the ‘beggar’s curse’, wandering mendicants also promised to say prayers for the givers of alms and this was a regular trade for some beggars. Prayers could be offered for the living or the dead, a practice frequently carried out by a ‘voteen’, one who swapped prayers for alms.\textsuperscript{108} An anonymous contributor to the \textit{Dublin Penny Journal} in 1833, possibly William Carleton, presented to his readers the character of Darby Guiry, ‘the Ballyvoorny beggarman’ who ‘took care to leave his best benefactor beads, which if not made of the true wood of the cross, were, at least, of the same species of timber, crucifixes procured at Lough-derg’.\textsuperscript{109} In his early published writings, William Carleton railed against the ignorance of the Catholic lower orders – his former co-religionists – whose belief in the virtue of indiscriminate alms-giving was such that ‘a man who may have committed a murder overnight, will the next day endeavour to wipe away his guilt by alms given for the purpose of getting the benefit of “the poor man’s prayer”’.\textsuperscript{110} In the parish of Moore, County Roscommon, the Poor Inquiry was told by a weaver, J. McNamara, about the manner in which one local beggar carried out this transaction:

[There is] a very old man, who is called ‘Forty bags’; he has been begging since he left his service, 15 years ago. His plan is to say prayers for the people of each house he comes to; he repeats them in Irish, and it generally takes him a full quarter of an hour to go through them. The woman of the house can never understand the half of what he says, and I think they are mostly his own invention; and as to the quality of them, at least they are good for him.\textsuperscript{111}

Arriving in the town of Castleblaney, County Monaghan, John Gamble was bestowed with ‘a world of blessings’ in return for ‘some trifling change’. He added:

Ireland is the best country in the world for an economical man to be charitable in; for he always gets the full value of his money in praises,
to say nothing of the prayers put up for his future happiness: whether or no[t] the people have more religion in the heart, they certainly have more on the tongue, than any other people in the universe.\textsuperscript{112}

Physician Denis Charles O’Connor, writing in 1861, recalled the regular inflow of beggars offering prayers two decades previously in Cork city. ‘Another class, chiefly from the country, walked from door to door in the outskirts, giving prayers in return for potatoes, both parties thinking they had got a fair equivalent for what was given.’\textsuperscript{113} The giving of alms in return for prayers was seen by many as a truly equitable transaction. In this exchange, the beggar’s prayer was an intangible commodity available for purchase, and one which was highly valued.

‘Boccoughs’

Just as the topic of beggars’ curses and prayers served as a means of distinguishing between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ claimants of alms at a popular level, the figure of the ‘boccough’ can also be considered in this light. Beggars known as ‘boccoughs’ or ‘bacachs’ represented the archetypal class of imposters, who resorted to fraud and intimidation to solicit alms from the public. Boccoughs, also known as ‘fair beggars’ or ‘trading beggars’, were professional mendicants.\textsuperscript{114} Originally referring to a crippled beggar (bac being the Irish word for lame), the term boccough had evolved by the 1830s to carry connotations of dishonesty and imposture. One account presented boccoughs as belonging to a ‘mysterious brotherhood’ and a ‘Bacach tribe’, with its own language, marriage customs and initiation practices, and which was unchristian, insular and somewhat organised.\textsuperscript{115} According to the 1851 census, the third largest category of occupation among the ‘lame and decrepit’ in Ireland, after labourers and servants, were mendicants.\textsuperscript{116} The prominence of the lame poor among mendicants can also be seen in a sample study of physical disabilities among beggars in early modern Europe, which demonstrates that the lame constituted the largest category among identifiable cases.\textsuperscript{117} In Ireland, the term boccough was

\textsuperscript{112} Gamble, Sketches of history, politics, and manners, pp. 165–6.
\textsuperscript{113} O’Connor, Seventeen years’ experience of workhouse life, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{114} Geary, ‘The whole country was in motion’, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{115} William Hackett, ‘The Irish bacach, or professional beggar, viewed archaeologically’ in Ulster Journal of Archaeology, 1st series, ix (1861–2), pp. 262, 265.
\textsuperscript{116} The census of Ireland for the year 1851. Part III. Report on the status of disease, p. 68, H.C. 1854 [C 1765], lviii, 72. The census report also lists others’ versions of the term, such as bacach or losg denoting lameness; bacaighe meaning a hindrance; clarineach meaning ‘going on stools’, ibid., pp. 69, 113.
\textsuperscript{117} Jütte, Poverty and deviance, p. 25.
applied ‘to sturdy, wandering beggars who feigned disease or deformity or who mutilated or impregnated their children in order to excite compassion’, Geary has observed.\(^\text{118}\) The use of this term seems to have been limited to western Ireland and by far the majority of references contained in the Poor Inquiry reports were by individuals from counties Roscommon, Sligo and predominantly Clare.\(^\text{119}\) The popularity of this categorisation of a certain class of beggar extended into south Munster and was evident in County Cork in the 1830s, where the Poor Inquiry’s assistant commissioners noted that ‘there was a sort of beggars called “boccoughs”, who used to make themselves appear lame, but there are very few of them now’.\(^\text{120}\) In Clonakilty, County Cork, the inquiry officials heard that ‘boccoughs, who are or were guilty of various knavish tricks … are becoming comparatively scarce, except at fairs … they constitute quite a distinct class of mendicants’.\(^\text{121}\) Rev. Patrick Mullins, a Catholic priest in Kilchreest parish in County Galway, told the Poor Inquiry that ‘they frequently assume the appearance of being crippled or maimed for the purpose of exciting pity; none do it but the fair beggars’.\(^\text{122}\)

Occasional references to the boccough were recorded in urban centres. The assistant commissioners who carried out examinations in St Finbar’s parish in Cork city noted the former prevalence of boccoughs who made ‘a regular trade of begging’, ‘attended fairs and weddings, where they got a great deal of money, but were sometimes detected in their false sores and lamenesses’.\(^\text{123}\) Another use of the term outside the rural, western region is the recollection of writer Anna Maria Hall (1800–81) of witnessing a crowd of beggars surrounding her carriage upon entering Wexford town, wherein she makes reference to ‘a bocher, or lame man [who] succeeded in clearing a space that he might give my honour a dance’.\(^\text{124}\) The boccough also appeared in the travel writings of a mid-century French writer, who noted the similarity between this Irish figure and the character Edie Ochiltree in Walter Scott’s *The antiquary*.\(^\text{125}\)

The image of the boccough was not unique to Ireland but must be seen in an international context. ‘As a representation, the boccough shares many aspects of the classic image of the undeserving poor in early modern

\(^{118}\) Geary, ““The whole country was in motion””, p. 123.

\(^{119}\) *PI, Appendix A*, pp. 510, 527, 608, 618, 621, 636. See also Ó Ciosáin, ‘Boccoughs and God’s poor’, p. 95.

\(^{120}\) *PI, Appendix A*, p. 652.

\(^{121}\) Ibid., p. 655.

\(^{122}\) Ibid., p. 478.

\(^{123}\) Ibid., p. 671.

\(^{124}\) Hall, *Tales of Irish life and character*, p. 92.

\(^{125}\) Amédee Pichot, *L’Irlande et Le Pays de Galles, esquisses de voyages, d’économie politique, d’histoire, de biographie, de littérature, etc., etc., etc.* (2 vols, Paris, 1850), i, pp. 379–81.
Europe’. In the works of novelists such as Carleton and the Banim Brothers, travel writers such as Thomas Crofton Croker and ethnographers such as John Windle, boccoughs make frequent appearances but are rarely quoted directly. Irish people had voluminous information about the boccoughs but, seemingly, very few people had ever met one. Niall Ó Ciosáin has suggested that by the mid-nineteenth century the boccough constituted ‘very much a figure of speech’, a trope created and utilised, in the case of folklorists, to salvage some aspect of that disappearing society of pre-Famine Ireland. Furthermore, the image of the boccough validated prevailing notions of charity and reciprocity among the Irish lower classes which complicated distinctions between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. ‘Instead of stigmatizing informal charity, however, this image functions within the evidence as a reinforcement of the virtue of almsgiving. There were certainly beggars, organized and fraudulent, to whom one should under no circumstances give anything, but they were always somewhere else’.

Conclusion

There is no doubting the complex nature of begging and alms-giving in pre-Famine Ireland. Attitudes towards begging and beggars varied greatly, and these perceptions were subject to variation, depending on wider social and economic conditions. Most givers of alms to mendicants were poor, but during the typhus fever epidemic of 1816–19, many among the labouring classes refused to provide lodgings to itinerant beggars for fear of contracting disease. Beggars’ curses and prayers were part of the vocabulary of rural Ireland and these oral interactions were used by the poor as a means of judging who was or was not deserving of alms. The figure of the boccough also served as a lightning rod for judgements of the undeserving poor, yet by the 1830s appears to have evolved into a cultural trope, a category of pauper rarely if ever seen, yet constantly present in popular culture.

Mendicants exerted a ubiquitous and very visible presence in pre-Famine Irish society: they were inevitable (and at times indispensable) figures within travel narratives and were also useful props in contemporary paintings of both urban and rural locations. Some commentators spoke of the natural right of those in distress publicly to solicit alms and framed this practice as a necessary survival strategy in a Christian land; others developed this sentiment and emphasised the fundamental inviolability of the relationship between the giver and receiver of alms, a cherished exchange with defined

126 Ó Ciosáin, *Ireland in official print culture*, p. 95.
127 Ibid., p. 107.
roles and behaviours, and one which was worth preserving in the face of civic anti-begging initiatives. Yet, it is clear that for many in this society beggars posed a real threat: they spread disease throughout the country, aggravated at times of crisis when mobility among this class of persons increased, and they intimidated customers away from the doors of shopkeepers and merchants. Trading communities perceived themselves to be acutely vulnerable to this threat and resorted to various initiatives to mitigate the problem, whether through employing street inspectors, as in Dublin, or the establishment of mendicity societies, as evinced throughout the country (and indeed western Europe and the Atlantic world). Having so far focused on defining, on the measurement and on the disparate perceptions of the issue of mendicancy in pre-Famine Ireland, attention will now turn to the responses to this social phenomenon from civil parishes, charities and the main churches and religious societies.