The Protestant Orphan Society and its social significance in Ireland 1828–1940

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‘The Protestant Orphan Society became a social bridge that linked together throughout the Church of Ireland the humble poor and the wealthy and the great’. Founded in Dublin in 1828 by three Protestant artisans, and later managed by laymen and Church of Ireland clergymen, the Protestant Orphan Society in Dublin (DPOS) developed a carefully regulated large-scale boarding-out and apprenticeship scheme for the benefit of Protestant orphans. Its influence grew by degrees until the 1870s, by which time auxiliaries to the DPOS and separate county PO Societies had been set up throughout Ireland. Though not subject to the authority or direction of the parent body, local PO Societies were governed by the same guiding principles, particularly investment in children’s education and, if necessary, long-term care. In 1868 the Antrim and Down POS stated, ‘from the moment that the child is placed under the charge of the directors and guardians to the moment he sets out in the world, he is cared for by the Society’. PO Societies endeavoured to ‘stand in the place of a parent’, to be a ‘father to the fatherless’, and to preserve the health, morals, respectability and religion of Protestant orphans, the rising Protestant generation.

This study examines the pioneering work and social service legacy of the DPOS, one of the most significant Protestant charities in nineteenth-century Ireland, against the background of over a century of political, religious and social upheaval from Catholic emancipation, the Great Famine, social reforms to Independence. While the Society’s work pertains to the broader discourse on religious rivalry which merits attention, this study is intended primarily as an exploration of its immense social significance particularly given that, as Caroline Skehill suggests, ‘statutory child welfare and protection social work’ has its origins in boarding out. There are two main aims: firstly, to uncover the true extent of the Society’s social influence, reputation and contributions to the field of child and family welfare and the prominent figures who supported its work from Douglas Hyde to Ella Webb; secondly, to frame
the experiences of the bereaved families, widows and orphans, whose lives it undoubtedly shaped, analysis which yields important insights into the social composition of the Church of Ireland, most significantly the Protestant poor, as well as aspects of childhood and family including the significance of siblings. The history of siblings and kinship is underdocumented, particularly in the Irish context, despite the ‘importance of sibling and cousin relationships, as well as the notion of friendship as a major component of both economic and domestic middle class life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’. Local PO Societies are discussed in relation to the charity’s development and variations in management and rules, as well as applicant profiles and individual case histories. However, given that it was the parent body, the most respected and well-known PO Society and served all of Ireland prior to the formation of local PO Societies, the work of the DPOS warrants the most detailed analysis.

Evangelicalism was a key motivating factor for the founders and later supporters of PO Societies and central to the broader construction of the concept of childhood, particularly in the context of this study. The first PO Societies were founded at a time when few child welfare measures were in place. Regarded as specially connected to God and a sign of the fragility of life, orphans were viewed as distinct from other children and considered most deserving of charity. (Children were referred to as orphans or half orphans if only one parent was deceased.) In the years prior to the introduction of the Poor Law, 1838, orphans were found in gaols and Houses of Industry and after in workhouses, reformatories, industrial schools and orphanages. Lay Catholic orphan societies boarded out children from the late eighteenth century and continued to provide for orphans on a relatively small scale in the nineteenth. Margaret Aylward founded St Brigid’s Outdoor Orphanage, or boarding-out institution, in 1856. Religious competition generated greater interest in the welfare of orphans – the children of the church – who in the case of the Church of Ireland became symbols of strength, vitality and the future.

Given the predominance of the institutionalisation of children, PO Societies’ support of the ‘family system’ differentiated it from public poor relief provisions and many other charities aimed at orphans, a system which attracted the attention of social reformers in the 1860s. Anti-cruelty legislation was introduced in the second half of the nineteenth century as reformist women such as Rosa Barrett, founder of the Dublin Aid Committee (later the NSPCC), advocated change. Children’s health became an issue of national importance in the late nineteenth century amid high infant and child mortality rates which caused increasing concerns for the rising generation. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, PO Societies expressed similar fears as the
preservation of the Church of Ireland became ‘inextricably linked’ with the preservation of the rising Protestant generation.

The history of childhood, child welfare and the family in Ireland remain largely unexplored fields of research; however, there are several studies which serve as a foundation for scholars, such as Joseph Robins, *The Lost Children*,7 Kenneth Milne, *The Irish Charter Schools*,8 and Jane Barnes, *Irish Industrial Schools*.9 In later studies such as Mary Raftery and Eoin O’Sullivan’s *Suffer the Little Children*,10 and Caitriona Clear’s *Growing up Poor*,11 greater attention is paid to children’s experiences and perspectives. Maria Luddy devotes one chapter to child welfare in *Women and Philanthropy*, and observes that, ‘the history of the child in Irish society has yet to be written’12 – a view reiterated by Luddy in more recent years.13

So far, however, the main focus has been on the placement of children in institutions; there has been less discussion of boarding out. In her biography of Margaret Aylward,14 Jacinta Prunty examines St Brigid’s boarding-out institution. Moire Maguire’s *Precarious Childhood*15 investigates the lives of poor, illegitimate and abused children and the state’s role in child welfare provision in post-independence Ireland. Maguire’s study draws much needed attention to state foster care systems, and the history of the family. Nevertheless, the existing accounts do not present a comprehensive history of the origins and development of ‘modern boarding out’.

The history of childhood has also been examined through the lens of illness and medical care. Alice Mauger and Anne MacLellan’s *Growing Pains*16 surveys the history of childhood illness and medical care over two centuries. These studies represent an important basis for an emergent body of scholarly work which delves further into children’s experiences of growing up in nineteenth and twentieth-century Ireland.

To date, historians have overlooked the social significance of PO Societies. Luddy and Raftery both refer briefly to the POS system of boarding out; Robins offers slightly more detail on the Westmeath and Dublin PO Societies; Prunty considers the Society’s work in terms of religious rivalry; and Oonagh Walsh, *Anglican Women*,17 examines the work carried out by the Dublin POS in the early twentieth century in the broader context of women’s philanthropy. Clergymen have written short histories of the Meath and the Armagh PO Societies, and the Cork, Limerick and Westmeath PO Societies have been the subject of three unpublished theses.

The greater part of the research material used for this study was sourced from the DPOS archival collection held in the National Archives of Ireland. DPOS annual reports include invaluable accounts of the
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charity’s development, from the numerous auxiliaries which fundraised on its behalf to the foundation of separate local PO Societies. Minute books contain more in-depth discussion of the day-to-day management of the Society including orphan placement, inspections and transfers, mothers’ requests to reclaim their children, and the treatment of sick children. The Society also kept a number of registers to document bouts of serious illness, deaths of surviving parents and emigration. A small collection of letters from orphans, widows, clergymen and DPOS supporters offer rare personal testimonies of widows’ reduced circumstances and children’s transitions into adulthood.

The photographs that feature in this study offer the reader an extraordinary visual record of DPOS orphans at various stages of their lives, as young children, with their nurses, as adolescents and as adults. To a certain extent, these images also give some indication of the children’s health at the time they were taken. They are mostly undated; however, the photographer, W. G. Moore, worked from a studio located at 11 Upper Sackville Street, Dublin from 1885 to 1900 which provides an approximate time line for the portraits; registers of case histories also act as a guide. Moore was the successor to Nelson and Marshall who advertised from 1860 to 1884. Additional portraits were taken by E. J. Lauder, Artists and Photographers, 22 Westmoreland Street, Dublin, in operation from 1880 to 1890. Photographs of the Clio industrial training ship and Clio boys were sourced from the Gwynedd Museum, Bangor, Wales.

The private collections of Monaghan and Cork PO Societies, annual reports of the Kilkenny, Tyrone, Westmeath, Cavan PO Societies; minutes and annual reports of the Tipperary POS; short histories of the Meath and Armagh PO Societies; annual reports of the Limerick, Donegal, Antrim and Down, and Kerry PO Societies cast light on the variations of rules, management structures and the extent to which PO Societies worked autonomously. St Brigid’s annual reports provide opposing views of PO Societies and highly significant insights into Catholic approaches to boarding out. Additional sources include the Clio Industrial Training Ship papers, which are held in the National Archives, Kew, Surrey, the Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland, parliamentary papers, census returns, the Church of Ireland Gazette, Richmond District Lunatic Asylum registers and Church of Ireland parish registers and vestry minutes.

The overall structure of the study takes the form of eight chapters. Chapter 1 identifies the founders and supporters of the DPOS and their motivation for doing so. It also asks why the Church of Ireland invested in the children of the church at this time. Chapter 2 analyses the
Society’s development, the grounds for support of private versus public poor relief for Protestant widows and children and stresses the crucial role that women played in the Societies’ work. Chapter 3 examines the child welfare system implemented by the DPOS, and the extent to which its policies were forward thinking and child and family centred. Chapter 4 highlights the opposing views of the extensive social service carried out by PO Societies and the meaning of the charity for the Church of Ireland laity, particularly women. Chapter 5 examines applicant profiles, widows’ reduced circumstances and health, attitudes to children’s health, and bereavement and the attendant emotional effects. Chapter 6 questions whether in practice the POS apprenticeship system was one of effective child training or enforced child labour. Chapter 7 examines the marked shift in the Dublin POS approach to child welfare in the late 1890s and assesses the outcomes of these changes. Using individual case histories it also examines applicant case histories which include Sean O’Casey’s sister. The final chapter uncovers the eminent public figures who supported PO Societies in the twentieth century, from Dr Ella Webb to Douglas Hyde, and the extent to which the decline in the Protestant population in the south had a corresponding effect on the status of PO Societies.

Notes

2 *Belfast News-letter* (7 March 1868).
13 MacLellan and Mauger (eds), *Growing Pains*, p. 4.
16 MacLellan and Mauger (eds), *Growing Pains*.