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

June Cooper

Published by Manchester University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/51521

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1965943
Conclusion

In 1928 at the centenary meeting of the Protestant Orphan Society in Dublin, Revd Canon Thompson remarked that it would be the job of the ‘future historian’, ‘to estimate the social influence of the work done by the Protestant Orphan Society’.¹ What legacy did the charity, founded in 1828 and developed on a country-wide basis, leave behind? The answer lies primarily, as Revd Thompson suggests, and as the author has emphasised throughout this study, in its social influence.

From its foundation the DPOS was a highly significant vehicle for moral reform. As the parent body it was more important than the later local PO Societies; it was responsible for the development of the boarding-out system and the implementation of imperative safeguards, which were adopted and modified to suit local needs. While PO Societies sent children to ‘decent’, ‘respectable’ families, this did not necessarily mean that their standards of care matched those set by committee members. There was often a class conflict between the committee members and nurses mostly related to the committee’s perception of appropriate child care and the nurses’ inability to meet such high standards, which were often impractical particularly with respect to hygiene, given the labour intensiveness of cleaning.

The nursing ideals and values promoted by PO Societies, essentially a form of nurse training, took hold gradually – over generations – and were likely to have influenced nurses’ treatment of their own children as well as boarded-out children. Those who managed PO Societies – doctors, clergymen and their wives, laymen and women – raised awareness and imparted knowledge on issues such as public health, hygiene, containment and prevention of disease, prompt medical care, diet and nutrition, the health benefits of ‘good milk’, a change of air, sea air, fresh air, and the importance of education, recreation, and moderate punishment. The Societies expected nurses to treat every child in their care as one of the family for however long their placement lasted: children spent from months to years on the Society roll depending on individual
circumstances. The institutional model did not afford the same opportunity as the boarding-out system to reach into the wider community. Women also shaped these standards: many were appointed as nurses because the local superintendents had observed the excellent care they had taken of their own children. Various POS committees held up their work as an example for others to emulate. At a time when respectability meant everything, women no doubt competed for the coveted title of ‘good nurse’, and thus ‘good mother’, which elevated their status in their church and parish.

Despite the religious rivalry and bitter divide that overshadowed their respective work, both Protestant and Catholic charities shared the same aim of improving the moral and physical condition of the poor. Moreover, Margaret Aylward, the founder of St Brigid’s Outdoor Orphanage, and PO Societies agreed on the merits of the ‘family system’. The DPOS had decades of experience and unmatched insights into the workings of an extensive boarding-out scheme. Mr Greig’s implementation of a boarding-out scheme in Scotland in the 1840s, which was based on the POS plan, established the Society’s reputation as an authority on boarding out. Its system, which boasted consistently low mortality rates, represented an incredibly significant blueprint for Irish workhouse reforms in the early 1860s. St Brigid’s, which reported impressively low mortality rates, and St Joseph’s boarding-out scheme were noteworthy examples of the system in practice. Subsequently, in the 1870s, Scottish boarding out served as a paradigm for English workhouse reforms.

The DPOS system became the template for the Presbyterian Orphan Society which was founded in 1866 and the Methodist Orphan Society formed in 1870. Boarding out also became the answer to other social ills such as the accommodation of the insane. In Ireland, Dr Connolly Norman, whose name features in the list of donors to the DPOS, advocated boarding out for lunatic asylum inmates in the 1890s.

Middle and lower middle-class widows in reduced circumstances often became destitute in an instant. These women could avoid the stamp of ‘pauper’ by staying out of workhouses, referred to by most as the ‘poor house’ and by instead admitting their children to PO Societies. Many widows were obliged to send their children to unregulated nurses in the country or to leave their children with neighbours while they worked – the POS system was regulated. Moreover, PO Societies provided widows and elder siblings with the freedom to find work, at home or abroad, and re-establish themselves, for example, through remarriage or until such time as their elder children contributed enough to enable the younger children’s re-entry to the household, or until the younger
children were themselves economically productive. There is ample evidence to support the view that PO Societies preserved family ties in the long term through short-term separation. Typically, family reunions were facilitated in every way possible; full or partial payment of fares abroad was regularly made.

Were the Societies child and family oriented? The ‘family system’ was a more humane method of care than the institutional model for a number of reasons: the children were not subjected to a mechanical and artificial environment; they grew up with their siblings and as a member of a family; they were raised to become independent rather than dependent and ‘fit for the battle of life’; children were supervised by local superintendents and subject to regular inspections. Moreover, boarded-out children often retained kin ties which to some extent at least eased the pain of bereavement. Widows, extended kin and elder siblings also watched over the children from a distance.

Throughout the nineteenth century local PO Societies appointed a combination of nurses as well as widows and extended kin to care for their own children with paid allowances. While with hindsight, various PO Societies considered the separation of children from widows harmful, widows had often requested the admission of their youngest dependents in order that they could work or emigrate with a view to reuniting the families when re-established. The introduction of a paid allowance for widows, which was adopted at different times by Monkstown, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Monaghan and most other PO Societies, was a forward-thinking approach which predated state policy by decades. From its foundation, the DPOS allowed children to remain with their mothers at different times – during bouts of illness and in infancy – until it took a more official line in the late nineteenth century. However, even after its rule change, it continued to express concerns that children were not always better off with their own kin. These concerns were reinforced by NSPCC reports of parental cruelty and exploitation of children.

In the twentieth century the DPOS and PO Societies provided widows with targeted assistance. Mothers, elder siblings and extended kin found work and apprenticeships for their children and the DPOS generally supported their endeavours as long as they were confident that it would serve the children’s best interests. The DPOS provided mothers with respite if ill and additional support if they required superior housing. It was responsible for the placement of children in foster care, cottage homes, or with their mothers, inspection of orphans at all locations, primary education, secondary education, apprenticeship management, further training, marriage portion distribution, and, most importantly,
medical care. The DPOS, which was in many respects a micro-social welfare system, aimed to provide children with an excellent start in life. Consecutive committees responded to every case of neglect with a corresponding reform measure; for example, stricter inspections regulations were introduced and nurses’ instructions amended. The founders of the DPOS had enshrined such reformative thinking in the original rules devised in 1828. While the majority of children appear to have been treated well, there were cases of mistreatment and exploitation of boarded-out children and apprentices which was a bleak reflection of children’s precarious position in wider society. If placements were not vetted thoroughly or monitored vigilantly, children suffered.

Many of the clergymen who managed the DPOS and local PO Societies were also actively involved in other related social service initiatives such as the Social Service Union, the Country Air Association and other Protestant cottage homes. PO Societies represented a social service which was shaped by the laity it served. Religious polarisation was a major feature of life in nineteenth-century Ireland. The Ne Temere decree led to further Protestant insularism. PO Societies became more relevant following the decree when increased efforts were made to discourage mixed marriages. With support from prominent figures such as Dr Ella Webb and Douglas Hyde whose relatives had supported the Fermanagh POS and Leitrim POS respectively, it is not surprising that the DPOS retained its good reputation for so long and remained resilient in the midst of decline and social and political upheaval.

Preservation has been a key theme of this book: the founders of the DPOS viewed the Society, which aimed to preserve children’s religion, health, physical and moral, widows’ respectability, and the family, as a solution to the economic distress experienced by fellow artisans in Dublin. In addition to its significance as a benevolent cause and moral reform agency, in the broader context the charity also became regarded as a means of preserving Protestant posterity and the Church of Ireland, the future of which was dependent on the welfare of its rising generation. The Church of Ireland was perceived to be under threat from the time of emancipation and it was in this context that the children of the church – Protestant orphans – became worthy of investment to a nation within a nation.

Notes