Successes and Failures in the Responses to Poverty in Clifden Poor Law Union in 1879/1880

John Doris B.Sc., M.B.A.

(University College Dublin, National University of Ireland)

Submitted for the Open University M.A. in History

January 2023

Word Count: 14,726
Abstract

Title: Successes and Failures in the Responses to Poverty in Clifden Poor Law Union in 1879/1880

The sequence of poor summers in Ireland from 1877 to 1879 led to serious reductions in crop yields and potato blight, at a time when agricultural prices were already severely depressed. The crisis was greatest in the traditionally distressed areas along the west coast, where Clifden Poor Law Union was located. In addition to a poor potato crop, a collapse in the kelp trade and seasonal emigration hit the poor severely in Clifden Poor Law Union. This study examines the responses to the poverty and distress there and asks if they were adequate or appropriate. The roles of the Poor Law, landlords, Catholic clergy, and charities are considered.

The study finds that 70% of the holdings in Clifden Poor Law Union were too small to be viable without other sources of income and that these sources of income virtually disappeared in 1879/80. Despite this, the numbers receiving Poor Law relief remained low, and relief committees were formed to alleviate distress. This study reconciles the numbers reported to be in need by relief committees with the numbers living on unviable holdings and concludes that the numbers reported to be in need by relief committees were a better measure of distress than the numbers receiving Poor Law relief. It also finds that the Duchess of Marlborough’s Relief Fund tried to bypass existing relief committees, was heavily influenced by Local Government Board thinking and appears to have been partially designed to avoid the need to make the Poor Law less restrictive during the crisis. This study concludes that the Poor Law failed to meet the needs of the poor in Clifden Poor Law Union during this crisis, and some landlords tried to help tenants, whereas others ignored their plight. It also concludes that the charitable funds, aided by the work by the Catholic clergy, prevented death and starvation in Clifden Poor Law Union during this crisis.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. The Crisis in Clifden Poor Law Union in 1879/80</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. Landlords and Tenants</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3. Response of Clergy and Charities</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Table 1.1. Potato Crop in Clifden PLU from 1876 to 1879
Table 1.2. Population Change in Clifden PLU from 1841 to 1881
Table 1.3. Size of Holdings in Clifden PLU in 1881
Table 1.4. Numbers in Clifden Workhouse at Various Times during 1878, 1879 and 1880
Table 1.5. Outdoor Relief at Clifden PLU
Table 1.6. Reports of Distress in Clifden Poor Law Union Districts in Early 1880
Table 1.7. Estimate of Number of People on Unviable Holdings
Table 3.1. Grants Given to Relief Committees in Clifden PLU by the Mansion House Fund

Maps

Figure 1. Map of Ireland Showing Location of Clifden PLU
Figure 2. Map of Clifden PLU showing Established Church Parishes circa 1890
Figure 3. Map of the Catholic Parishes in Clifden PLU
Abbreviations Used

CT      Connaught Telegraph
BG      Board of Guardians
DMRF    Duchess of Marlborough Relief Fund
FJ      The Freeman's Journal
IT      Irish Times
LGB     Local Government Board
LGBI    Local Government Board Inspector
LL      Land League
LLRF    Land League Relief Fund
PLU     Poor Law Union
MHRF    Mansion House Relief Fund
Personal Statement

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work and that I have not submitted it, or any part of it, for a degree at the Open University or any other university or institution. The material from the first year of the master’s End of Module Assessment, part II (A825), has not been used in this dissertation.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Dr Jane Adams for her invaluable help and encouragement in supervising this dissertation
**Introduction**

There was a sequence of poor harvests in Ireland in the three years from 1877 to 1879, and while the agricultural sector had managed to cope with the adverse conditions until 1878, the crop failure in 1879 brought a new crisis, with the traditionally distressed rural areas along the west coast suffering more than the rest of the country.¹ Clifden Poor Law Union (‘PLU’) was in such an area, covering the barony of Ballynahinch on the west coast of Ireland in Co. Galway in the western province of Connaught. Clifden PLU was in a region called Connemara, but when writing about Connemara some writers mean the Clifden PLU only, while others also include Oughterard PLU and the western half of Galway PLU, all of which shared similar physical, social and economic characteristics. This study seeks to add to Moran’s work on Connemara, who uses the wider definition of Connemara, by focusing on Clifden PLU in detail. It sets out to examine if the responses to near-famine conditions in Clifden PLU in 1879/80 were adequate or appropriate. It considers the responses of the Poor Law system, landlords, the Catholic clergy, and charitable funds.

Clifden PLU was practically surrounded by the ocean on three sides. On the west and south side, it was bounded by the Atlantic Ocean; and on the north side it was bounded by the Atlantic Ocean and Killary Harbour. Its eastern boundary with Oughterard PLU ran from Kilkieran Bay to the western slopes of Maumturk Mountains and northwards from there to Killary Harbour. Figure 1 shows the location of Clifden PLU on the map of Ireland.

---

The population of Clifden PLU in 1881 was 24,260, the most of whom lived on the peninsulas along the coast, as most of the inland region consisted of ‘wild mountain and bog’, large tracts of which were let to grazing tenants who lived elsewhere.\(^3\) James Hack Tuke, the Quaker philanthropist, when investigating conditions in Clifden PLU in February 1880, described the coastal area as a

wild stony desolate region covered for many miles with boulders and large granite slabs along the shores of little bays, near which were scattered little villages and houses scarcely discernible from the large rocks against which they are sheltered.\(^4\)

---


Figure 2 shows a map of Clifden PLU.

Figure 2. Map of Clifden PLU showing Established Church Parishes circa 1890.

Manufacturing industry was negligible in Clifden PLU and the Agricultural Statistics for 1879 show that over 57% of the land was barren mountain or bog and marsh, 30% was grassland, and only 5.4% was under crops. The largest town was Clifden, at the western end of the PLU, which had a population of 1,287 in 1881, and the workhouse was located there. The second largest town was Roundstone, which had a population of 318. The road

---


7 House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1882, C. 3268.I, Census of Ireland, 1881. Part I. Area, Houses and Population also the Ages, Civil or Conjugal Condition, Occupations, Birthplaces, Religion, and Education of the People, Vol. IV, Province of Connaught, p. 7.
structure was underdeveloped and the nearest railway station to Clifden was Galway, approximately forty miles away. Parts of the PLU, such as the villages of Kilkieran and Carna, were located about twenty-five miles from the workhouse. Poverty and hardship were a regular feature of life in this remote location with its poor rocky land and lack of industry.

Chapter I examines the size of holdings in Clifden PLU and argues that 70% of them were too small to be viable without other sources of income. It finds that these other sources of income failed in 1879, but that the multiple failures did not lead to a significant increase in the numbers receiving Poor Law relief. It contrasts the low numbers receiving Poor Law relief with high numbers reported to be in need by relief committees. It reconciles the numbers reported to be in need with the numbers living on unviable holdings and concludes that the numbers reported to be in need were reasonably realistic. It concludes that the Poor Law failed in Clifden PLU during this crisis, which is line with Crossman’s finding that as the Poor Law system had proved to be an inadequate mechanism for the distribution of relief during the Great Famine, and it was to do again in 1879-80. Chapter 1 uses government reports, the minute book of Clifden PLU and the report of the Mansion House Fund for evidence.

Chapter 2 considers the response of landlords and tenants to the crisis and considers two estates in the Letterfrack area where the experiences of tenants were very different. It also considers the Berridge estate which was owned by an absentee landlord. It finds that in some cases, landlords reduced rents and in other cases they did not. It argues that the thesis, put forward by historians such as Bartlett and Lee, that tenants refused to pay rents until conditions improved because they were resisting the loss of economic gains since the Great Famine, did not apply in Clifden PLU as conditions had not improved in Clifden PLU.

Chapter 2 uses newspapers and contemporary publications as primary sources.

---


Chapter 3 examines the responses of the Catholic clergy and charitable organisations to the crisis. Moran has concluded that this crisis had the potential to be as devastating as that of Great Famine, but a few factors prevented this: ‘the role of relief organisations, the speed with which the outside world reacted to the threat of famine and the contribution of the Catholic clergy.’  

This chapter considers the role played by the clergy in highlighting the distress, their role in the local tenant movements and on relief committees. It also examines the structures and operations of the charitable funds in Clifden PLU, as few historians have looked at their structures and operations at local level, and it adds to Moran’s work on the funds. The chapter shows that the Duchess of Marlborough’s Relief Fund planned to by-pass existing relief committees and build a landlord-controlled local committee structure. The parallels between its structures and those of Local Government Board are highlighted and the chapter concludes that part of the reason for setting up the fund up was to compensate for the deficiencies in the Poor Law. The chapter also deals with Land League Relief Fund and reports that this fund assisted in relieving distress in Clifden PLU and concludes that this facilitated the setting up of Land League branches in Clifden PLU and enabled the Catholic clergy there to overcome reservations about the Fenian leadership of the Land League and participate in the movement. It concludes that the charitable funds, whatever their political motivations, and the Catholic clergy played a key role in preventing starvation and death.

Chapter III uses newspaper reports, contemporary publications, and the records and report of the Mansion House Fund as primary sources.

This study concludes that response of the Poor Law to the crisis was inadequate, the responses of landlords was mixed but many of them were under pressure themselves, nearly all tenants were unable to pay their rents and efforts of the charitable funds and the Catholic clergy played an important role in preventing starvation and death.

---

Chapter 1. The Crisis in Clifden Poor Law Union in 1879/80

Chapter I considers the factors that made the impact Irish agricultural crisis of 1879-1880 more severe in the western coastal regions and in Clifden Poor Law Union (‘PLU’) in particular. Historians have tended to pay more attention to conditions in Co. Mayo and north Galway as the Land League (‘LL’) started there and grew to become a national movement that contributed to the political rise of Charles Stewart Parnell. For example, Lee has highlighted agricultural difficulties north Galway, Mayo and Roscommon, without focussing on the western coastal regions.\(^1\) However, Moran has examined the western coastal regions in many studies of Galway and Mayo and this chapter seeks to add to his work by focussing on Clifden PLU in particular, and by considering the small number receiving Poor Law relief compared with the large number seeking aid from relief committees in Clifden PLU. The chapter establishes that approximately 70% of the holdings there were too small to be viable without additional sources of income and it finds that, despite the poor potato crop and other sources of income disappearing, the numbers receiving poor relief from Clifden PLU did not increase dramatically. It reconciles the numbers reported to be in distress by relief committees applying to the Mansion House Relief Fund (‘MHRF’) with an estimate the numbers living on unviable holdings and concludes that the numbers reported to be in need were realistic. It contrasts these numbers with the low numbers receiving poor relief from Clifden PLU and concludes that Clifden PLU did not meet the needs of the poor during this crisis. It uses minute book of Clifden PLU, the report of the MHRF, government reports, and contemporary newspapers and publications as evidence.

Agricultural Crisis of 1879-80

Following two years of poor harvests, continuous wet weather during the summer of 1879 damaged the harvest again, encouraging the spread of potato blight and reducing potato yields.\(^2\) Dr W. Neilson Hancock of the State Social Enquiry Society likened 1879 to the peak year of potato blight during the Great Famine when he reported ‘The past year was more like

---


1846 than any year since. In Clifden PLU, the potato crop fell from 14,392 tonnes in 1878 to 7,221 tonnes in 1879, a drop of 50% and was approximately one third of that of 1876. Table 1.1 shows the potato crop in Clifden PLU from 1876 to 1879.

Table 1.1. Potato Crop in Clifden PLU from 1876 to 1879

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1876</th>
<th>1877</th>
<th>1878</th>
<th>1879</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tons</td>
<td>21,158</td>
<td>14,158</td>
<td>14,392</td>
<td>7,221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The impact of poor harvests was greater along the western seaboard because it was wetter, the land was poorer, and the land-holding structure was different from the rest of the country. After the Great Famine, farm sizes across most of Ireland increased, improving their viability, but this did not happen in the poor lands of the west. In these regions, social patterns remained largely in a pre-Famine mode and holdings continued to be subdivided when being passed from one generation to the next, there was a high birth rate, and the population did not decline as it did elsewhere in Ireland, outside of the cities. The population of Clifden PLU had declined by a third between 1841 and 1851 due to the Great Famine, but then it grew by 7.7% from 1851 to 1871. Table 1.2 shows that the population in Clifden PLU grew between 1851 and 1881.

Table 1.2. Population Change in Clifden PLU from 1841 to 1881

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1841</th>
<th>1851</th>
<th>1861</th>
<th>1871</th>
<th>1881</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>35,077</td>
<td>23,427</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>25,231</td>
<td>24,260</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unviable Holdings in Clifden PLU

In addition to having to contend with bad harvests, Clifden PLU faced structural problems. There was no industry there and most of the holdings were too small to be viable without another source of income. Table 1.3 shows the distribution of holdings in 1881 based on size.

---


Table 1.3. Size of Holdings in Clifden PLU in 1881

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Holding</th>
<th>Under 5 acres</th>
<th>5-15 acres</th>
<th>15-30 acres</th>
<th>Over 30 acres</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Holdings</td>
<td>848</td>
<td>1,784</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>3,753</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Holdings</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost a fifth of the holdings in Clifden PLU were five acres or less in size, and around 70% of the holdings were fifteen acres or less. Rev. John Doherty, a parish priest from Donegal, reported to the Bessborough Commission that families with only five acres of land would not be able to make a living on their holding, even if it was gifted to them rent-free. The Richmond Commission reported that it was satisfied that, when the slightest failure of crops occurred, the very small holders in the western districts of Ireland would be unable to exist on the produce of their farms, even if they paid no rent. Both James Hack Tuke, from the Society of Friends and the representatives of the Liverpool Relief Committee, who came to investigate the destitution in early 1880, concluded that holdings under 15 acres in Clifden PLU were not viable. As 70% of the holdings in Clifden PLU were under fifteen acres, they were unviable without some other means of support. In this unpromising environment, the tenants needed additional sources of income in a makeshift economy to survive.

**Kelp Harvesting**

One such source of income was the harvesting of kelp from the sea. Kelp was burnt seaweed and its ash was used the manufacture of iodine. In 1880, the LGBI (‘Local Government Board Inspector’) for Galway and Mayo, reported that most of the population of Connemara resided along the sea, and that they had earned a considerable income of £10,000 to £12,000 per annum by burning kelp. (He understood Connemara to consist of Clifden PLU only). The parish priest of Carna reported that his parishioners had never depended on

---

11 *Eighth Annual Report of the Local Government Board*, p. 84.
his parish’s barren soil for survival and that their chief means of subsistence came from the harvesting of kelp from the sea. Becker attributed the high population density on the Renvyle estate near Letterfrack to the kelp trade, noting that when this trade was prosperous, coastal landlords had encouraged evicted tenants from other estates to settle on their estates so that they could earn royalties on the kelp that the tenants harvested, dried and burnt. Becker comments that the landlords ‘made a good thing of it’, noting the kelp harvesters paid about £3 a year or a little more for a cottage with a small plot no bigger than a garden; about 11s. a year for the "right to gather seaweed," and one-third of the sales proceeds of the kelp as "royalty" to the landlord. He estimated that a family could produce about 2 tonnes of kelp in a year and when kelp was selling for £6 or £7 per tonne, the landlord ‘drew in rent and royalty about half of his tenant’s summer earnings. On 17th December 1879, H. A. Robinson, the temporary LGBI for Clifden PLU, reported that this trade had now been discontinued. The money earned by kelp harvesting that had enabled tenants to pay their rents was now no longer available.

Seasonal Labour

Another source of income was seasonal migratory labour. In 1870, the LGBI for the area reported that the labouring population of Clifden PLU and the adjoining Oughterard PLU went to England and Scotland in considerable numbers as seasonal workers, leaving in the month of May and returning at the start of autumn, bringing home amounts averaging four pounds per man. The earnings from seasonal migration helped to pay the rent for their small holdings. The downturn in agriculture in Britain, and increasing mechanisation of farms there, reduced demand for migrant labour, and Irish small holders were unable to get the usual seasonal work on British farms. Smallholders of the west also migrated to other regions of Ireland for seasonal work on the larger farms, but this work also dried up in 1879. The two sources of income; seasonal labour and kelp harvesting, that helped people to survive on holdings that were too small and too infertile to be viable, had now disappeared.

12 Patrick Grealy, 'A Famishing People', Nation, 10 January 1880, p. 21.
14 Ibid., p. 102.
16 Reports from Poor Law Inspectors in Ireland as to the Existing Relations between Landlord and Tenant in Respect of Improvements, 1870, p. 53.
**Other Issues**

Dr Roughan, LGBI for the area, reported that falling livestock prices had an adverse impact on the poor in Connemara, noting that the poorest tenants were heavily dependent on income from rearing mountain cattle and sheep, and that prices were lower in 1879 than in the previous year. Livestock purchased in the previous year were now being sold at prices below the purchase price or were failing to sell.¹⁷

**Exhaustion of Credit**

As a result of all these factors, the tenants in Clifden PLU had no money. They were unable to pay their rents and they were heavily indebted to shopkeepers and moneylenders, who charged exorbitant interest rates. On 10th January 1880, Mr. Simpson who investigated the distress in on behalf of the Liverpool Relief Committee reported from Clifden,

> I bring home with me undisputable proofs of beds, blankets clothes etc having been carried twenty miles to a pawnshop. These shops are now full to bursting. Every peasant in heavily in debt; credit is entirely stopped, there is no work, no means of obtaining a single shilling honestly. The present state of Connemara is hunger, the future famine."¹⁸

Sources of credit had dried up during 1879 and credit with shopkeepers for Indian meal as a source of cheap food was now exhausted.

**Numbers Receiving Relief**

Despite the drying up of income and credit, there was no dramatic increase in the number of people availing of indoor relief in 1879 and 1880. Table 1.4 shows the numbers receiving indoor relief at various times during 1978, 1979 and 1980.¹⁹

---


¹⁸ Mr. Simpson, ‘Irish Distress: Telegram from Mr. Simpson’, *Liverpool Daily Post*, 9 January 1880, p. 5

¹⁹ Figures extracted from Minutes of Meetings of Clifden Board of Guardians, Clifden PLU Minute Books accessed at Galway County Council Digital Archive.
Table 1.4. Numbers in Clifden Workhouse at Various Times during 1878, 1879 and 1880

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week ending</th>
<th>Able Bodied Males</th>
<th>Able Bodied Females</th>
<th>Total Able-Bodied</th>
<th>Aged and Infirm Males</th>
<th>Aged and Infirm Females</th>
<th>Total Aged and Infirm</th>
<th>Children under 15</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>07/09/1878</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09/11/1878</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04/01/1879</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08/03/1879</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05/04/1879</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14/06/1879</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13/08/1879</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/10/1879</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03/01/1880</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07/02/1880</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05/05/1880</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/07/1880</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/09/1880</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Total</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost 80% of the inmates of the workhouse consisted of the old and infirm, and children, and able-bodied people only accounted for slightly more than twenty percent. Although it varied, able-bodied females generally outnumbered able-bodied males by a factor of about four to one. Crossman and Burke have both noted that the outnumbering of able-bodied males by females was a general phenomenon, citing an observation by the Poor Law Commissioners in 1861 that able-bodied female pauperism was then, ‘as at all times, more considerable’ than able-bodied male pauperism and was then in the proportion of more than three to one.\(^{20}\) The female paupers were generally widows or unmarried mothers.\(^{21}\)

However, the number receiving outdoor relief increased from 117 people or 3rd January 1880 to 1,529 on 10th July 1880. Table 1.6 shows the number receiving outdoor relief at times during 1879 and 1880.\(^{22}\)


\(^{21}\) Virginia Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland*, p. 135

\(^{22}\) Figures extracted from Minutes of Meetings of Clifden Board Guardians, Clifden Poor Law Union Minute Books.
These figures do not reflect the reported levels of distress, with no dramatic increases in number until February 1880. A reporter from the *Daily Telegraph* who visited Clifden, in early January 1880, reported that the pressure of distress around Clifden was extreme. He concluded, ‘I will go further and declare that the people at the moment are starving.’ He visited the workhouse and was amazed that ‘in the midst of dire distress as now obtains’ there were only 155 people in the workhouse and only 117 were in receipt of outdoor relief.23 The availability of outdoor relief was severely restricted by the Local Government Board (‘LGB’) and able-bodied males were not allowed to receive it, but the LGB eased the restrictions in Clifden PLU from 17th April 1880 to 14th August 1880, which explains why the numbers availing of outdoor relief jumped between these dates. Under the relaxed restrictions, the Board of Guardians (‘BG’) were allowed to provide food to able-bodied adult males, and in return, the recipient had to work eight hours per day carrying out a task specified by the BG.24 After 31st August 1880, the numbers on outdoor relief declined again as the normal restrictions returned. The numbers of people getting outdoor relief under the Poor Law was not a good measure of the distress in the PLU as it depended on LGB rulings rather than the distress experienced.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week ending</th>
<th>No. of People Relieved Outside Workhouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>04/01/1879</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08/03/1879</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05/04/1879</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14/06/1879</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13/08/1879</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/10/1879</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03/01/1880</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07/02/1880</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05/05/1880</td>
<td>675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/07/1880</td>
<td>1,529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/09/1880</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Low Numbers getting Poor Law Relief

In general, the poor were reluctant to enter Irish workhouses, partially arising from an association of workhouses with disease and deaths during the Great Famine. Crossman attributes the general reluctance to enter the workhouse in many PLUs in the west of Ireland in 1879-80 to have been as much due to more practical issues such as distances from the workhouse and difficulties in travelling there.\(^{25}\) These practical difficulties were a factor in seeking either outdoor or indoor relief in Clifden PLU. The parish priest of Carna reported that, on Christmas Day 1879, several poor women approached him begging for the price of one meal for their starving children as they had no food or money to buy food, and their husbands had gone to England or Scotland to try to earn something to support their families at home. He described the ability to get poor relief in Carna as a ‘forlorn hope, a mere mockery’ as the workhouse was over twenty miles away and there was not a relieving officer within sixteen miles.\(^{26}\) The parish priest of Roundstone, whose parish included some isolated hamlets in the mountains, reported to James Hack Tuke that there were hamlets in his parish that were so remote that the relieving officer of Clifden PLU had never heard of them and the people there ‘were equally innocent of the Union or the Board of Guardians.’ When the relieving officer visited these people, he found them to be very much in want.\(^{27}\) H.A. Robinson reported an incident that occurred late in 1879 before he was appointed Temporary LGI for west Galway and Mayo. The incident highlights the issues of remoteness and the reluctance to enter the workhouse. H.A. Robinson had challenged Fr Connolly, the Catholic curate in Roundstone, that a newspaper report of the distress was grossly exaggerated. In response, Fr Connelly took him into the mountains to the scene of starvation in a place called Derryvoreda. He described what he saw

> I never got such a shock before or since. The people were living skeletons, their faces like parchment. They were scarcely able to crawl, and so far as I could see, there was not a house with any food in it. It was appalling.\(^{28}\)

---


\(^{26}\) Patrick Grealy, 'A Famishing People', *Nation*, 10 January 1880, p. 21.


He went on to say that he asked Fr Connolly to send a messenger to get a relieving officer, who would get the people into the workhouse and who would give them temporary relief until they could be moved. Fr Connolly agreed to do this, but he added that he believed that ‘they would die at home rather than enter the workhouse.’

Robinson reported that the Under-Secretary for Ireland had requested him to report on how he had ‘found things were in the west’ and he wrote to him reporting what he had witnessed. The newspaper report that Robinson had disputed had already been sent the LGBI for Galway and Mayo who had replied that he had been unable to locate the hamlet reported upon; he knew that there were isolated villages in the mountains but that he did not believe the state of things as described in the newspaper report existed in Connemara. However, in response to queries arising from H.A. Robinson’s letter, he later said that he would try to make his way to these places and would furnish a report. H.A. Robinson noted ‘This report was duly forwarded to the Castle authorities by the Local Government Board and created much perturbation.’

A meeting was held in Dublin Castle to discuss it and the attendance included Sir Randolph Churchill, son of the Duke Marlborough, the Lord Lieutenant and Henry Robinson, Vice-President of the LGB. At this meeting it was agreed to appoint additional Temporary LGBIs, one of which was H.A. Robinson, who was appointed to cover the PLUs of West Galway and Mayo instead of Dr Roughan. HA Robinson’s report on Clifden PLU in the Annual Report of the LGB for 1879 on 17th December 1879 stated, ‘that actual distress exists is not the case.’ and ‘I do not think that there is much distress here at present.’ The Derryvoreda incident had either been expunged or forgotten.

**Distress or Not?**

Local leaders, including Clifden BG and the clergy, and newspapers were highlighting distress in Clifden PLU, local relief committees had been set up, there were appeals for charity, and yet there was no increase in people obtaining Poor Relief and the LGI for the PLU was denying the existence of distress. The disappearance of the kelp trade and migratory labour in a PLU where most of holdings were unviable without supplementary income indicated that there was likely to be distress. The answer to this apparent conundrum can be found in the records of a charitable fund set up to alleviate hardship in the distressed areas of

---

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., pp. 9-10.
Ireland, the Mansion House Relief Fund (‘MHRF’). As a result of appeals, several charitable funds were set up to relieve distress in Ireland, including the MHRF. These funds will be considered in more detail in Chapter 3, but this chapter considers the number reported to in distress according to appeals from local relief committees to the MHRF. Table 1.6 shows the number of people reported to be in distress by local relief committees in the districts of Clifden PLU in early 1880, and it includes extracts from their appeals to the MHRF.\textsuperscript{32}

Table 1.6. Reports of Distress in Clifden Poor Law Union Districts in Early 1880

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>No. of Persons in Distress First Local Estimate</th>
<th>Latest Returns of Numbers in Distress, 1st March 1880</th>
<th>Extracts from Appeals of Local Committees Duly Authenticated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inishbofin and Inishark</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,255</td>
<td>Failure of fisheries and potato crop. Distress intense and widespread.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clifden (Rural Parish)</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>Will be greatly increased</td>
<td>Principally depending on work in Scotland and fisheries, both sources unproductive last year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clifden (Town District)</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>6,230</td>
<td>With few exceptions, the entire population is reduced to the same level of poverty, caused by bad harvests, insecurity of tenure and utter collapse of credit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carna</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>4,720</td>
<td>Many hundreds would have died of starvation but for the aid of the Mansion House Committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashel</td>
<td>1,750</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Huge distress exists here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clifden Convent</td>
<td>320 children, 20 families in which there is sickness, 30 families of respectable people.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>These children are fed and clothed and the sick and other families are in great distress and entirely dependent on charity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errismore</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>Small farmers and fishermen, failure of crop and kelp making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letterfrack</td>
<td>1,750</td>
<td>3,540</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oney</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roundstone</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>Struggling small farmers: failure of potato and other crops for past few years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recess</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>Terrible distress: deaths from starvation will take place among mountain villages unless immediately and generously assisted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimate of Total</td>
<td>18,898</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number reported to be in distress was almost 19,000, which was over 10 times the number that received outdoor relief on 10th July from Clifden Poor Law Union, at a time when the restrictions on outdoor relief were relaxed. At first glance, the number looks very high as the population of the PLU was 25,220 in 1871 and was 24,259 in 1881. The numbers
imply that over three quarters of the population of Clifden Poor Law Union were in a state of distress. While high, this figure appears credible when cognisance is taken of the fact that seventy percent of the population lived on holdings that were too small to be viable. Table 1.7 estimates the number of people living on holdings that were too small to be viable. Table 1.7 estimates the number of people living on holdings of under 15 acres, which can be considered unviable without another source of income, and it estimates that there were approximately 17,000 people living on holdings that were too small to be viable.

Table 1.7. Estimate of Number of People on Unviable Holdings

| Population of Clifden Poor Law Union in 1881 (Table 1.2) | 24,259 |
| No. of Holdings in Union (Table 1.3) | 3,753 |
| Average Number of Persons per Holding | 6.46 |
| No. of Holdings less than 15 Acres (i.e., not viable) (Table 1.3) | 2,632 |
| Estimate of number of People on Unviable Holdings | 17,012 |

When the crop failure and the lack of alternative means of subsistence are taken into account, the numbers in want, as reported to the Mansion House Fund, appear to be a better representation of the hardship in the PLU than the numbers receiving Poor Law relief and are unlikely contain a significant level of exaggeration. The Poor Law on its own would have been unable to cope with this level of destitution and the charitable funds made up the shortfall.

**Conclusion**

Approximately 70% of the holdings in Clifden PLU were too small to be viable without additional sources of income. Despite the poor potato crop and the absence of additional sources of income in 1879, the numbers receiving poor relief from Clifden PLU did not increase dramatically in 1879/80 and it remained very low with less than 200 receiving indoor relief and a similarly low number receiving outdoor relief. Even when the restrictions on outdoor relief were eased from 17th April 1880 to 14th August 1880, the number receiving outdoor relief peaked at just above 1,500. This chapter estimated that there were approximately 17,000 people living on unviable holdings where additional sources of income had disappeared and it compared this number with the totals of the first local estimates of the numbers reported to be in distress by relief committees applying to the MHRF for relief. These totals amounted over 18,000, which was not significantly different from the numbers
living on unviable holdings and were likely to be realistic. The low number that received Poor Law relief during this crisis indicates the Poor Law was ineffective in dealing with the crisis.

The outlook for the poor tenants of Clifden Poor Law Union in 1879/80 was not encouraging. Their holdings were too small to be viable, they were heavily indebted to the merchants and shopkeepers, and they could get no more credit, their rents were in arrears, and they faced the continual threat of eviction. The response of landlords and tenants will be considered in Chapter 2.
Chapter 2. Landlords and Tenants

Introduction

Chapter I gave an account the distress in Clifden PLU in 1879-1880, identified the factors causing its severity, and it reviewed its negligible impact on the numbers receiving poor law relief. It also reported that 70% of holdings were too small to be viable, tenants were heavily indebted to the merchants and shopkeepers and could get no more credit, their rents were in arrears, and they faced the continual threat of eviction. This chapter will consider how landlords and tenants dealt with the crisis, paying special attention to two estates in the Letterfrack area of Clifden PLU where the experiences of tenants were very different. It will also consider the Berridge estate which was owned by an absentee landlord. It argues that the thesis that tenant farmers refused to pay rents until conditions improved because they were resisting the loss of economic gains since the Great Famine did not apply in Clifden PLU. because the gains experienced elsewhere in the country did not occur in Clifden PLU.

Tenant Militancy

Bartlett has attributed tenant militancy to the coincidence of general depression and harvest failures that threatened to wipe all the economic gains that tenant farmers had achieved since the 1850s so that when they were faced with potential ruin, they refused to pay rents until their circumstances improved. He noted that in prior crises, the tenants had turned to their landlords for relief; but when the harvests failed in 1877-1879, they turned on them, blaming them as the architects of their misfortune.1 On the other hand, Comerford reports that some landlords granted rent reductions in the summer of 1879, usually ‘in response to respectful petitions drawn up under priestly guidance.’2 Lee shared Bartlett’s view about tenants resisting falling incomes, noting that there was a revolution of rising expectations from 1860s in Co. Mayo, where the militant tenant movement called the Land League (‘LL’) was founded, as living standards had improved there and there was a

---

determination not to return to the old state of privation. Donnelly, who studied the position in Co. Cork, agreed that larger farmers joined the agrarian agitation in an attempt to preserve their accumulated gains at a time when their incomes were reduced, but he pointed out that small farmers and cottiers had only shared marginally, if at all, in the improvement, and in their case, they were drawn to the LL by the fear or threat of destitution and eviction. Most of the holdings in Clifden PLU were small and the tenants had not shared in the agricultural gains and also suffered additional difficulties due to the collapse of the kelp business and seasonal labour, and so they do not fit into Bartlett and Lee’s generalised picture.

There were agrarian outrages before the formation of the LL called ‘ribbonism’, the name given to the sporadic ineffective and usually violent peasant combinations which had preceded the LL. Ribbonism usually flared up when crops failed and the usual outlet for surplus male labour of emigration was closed off. The American slump for 1873 to 1879 removed this outlet and the collapse of agriculture in both Ireland and England reduced the opportunity for seasonal labour, so conditions were right for an outbreaks of ribbonism. The LL harnessed this phenomenon and created a highly effective well-organised tenant movement that initially campaigned against evictions and for rent reductions. It brought together tenant activists, Fenians and Home Rulers to seek land reform and self-government. The driving force behind the movement was Michael Davitt, a member of the revolutionary Fenian movement that sought complete independence from Britain and used violence to achieve its ends. He invited Charles Stewart Parnell, an ambitious Home Rule M.P. to become its president, and his profile as LL president helped him to become leader of the Home Rule party in Parliament in 1880. The linking of political and economic grievances enabled the leadership of the LL to build a mass movement and an organisation with the ability to promote significant levels of agitation throughout the country. Although its

---

6 Lee, p. 68.
7 O’Brien, p. 3.
leadership claimed that it was a non-violent movement that used boycotts and refusals to pay rent as its methods, elements within the LL used intimidation and violence to enforce these instruments. Boycotts and intimidation were not only used against landlords and their agents, but also against graziers and tenants that took over land from which another tenant had been evicted. Intimidation was also used against tenants that paid rents during a rent strike or against anyone who provided services to a boycotted person. In seeking rent reductions, the LL claimed that rents should be reduced to the level of Griffith’s valuation. This valuation had been carried out in Co. Galway in 1855 for property taxation purposes and but Solow has argued that it was based on abnormally low prices and totally different agricultural conditions, and so was an irrelevant standard for rents in 1879, but she regarded its adoption was a brilliant political tactic.9 However, while agriculture may have changed in the rest of Ireland, but it was little changed in the western coastal districts and contrary to Solow’s generalisation, the use of Griffith’s valuation was reasonable in Clifden PLU.

Renvyle Estate

The Renvyle estate was an encumbered property consisted of 4,682 acres near Letterfrack on a peninsula nearly 14 miles north of Clifden under the management of Mrs. Blake, who took over the running of the property on the death of her husband in 1872.10 When Agnes E. Eyre of Clifden Castle wrote to Irish Times on 30th June 1879 appealing for funds to relieve the destitution in Connemara, Mrs. Blake responded by asserting that the picture painted was not universal in Connemara and that the Renvyle estate did not experience the distress described, claiming ‘we have had fair harvests generally’11 This letter received a sharp rebuttal from the local Catholic parish priest, Fr. McAndrew, who insisted that there had been two or three bad years rather than ‘fair harvests’ claimed by Mrs. Blake, and

---

11 Agnes E. Eyre, IT, 30 June 1879, p.4, Caroline J. Blake, 'Distress in Connemara', IT, 8 July 1879, p.2.
universal distress prevails throughout the entire of this extensive parish, and on no property within the limits of my duty are to be found evidence of distress so numerous and as unmistakable as on the property of Mrs. Blake.12

Fr. McAndrew’s claim of two or three bad years seems reasonable; the harvest failure of 1879 has been well documented, and it had followed a ‘disastrous harvest in 1887’ and ‘an inadequate recovery in 1878’.13 Mrs Blake’s denials of distress were also undermined when John Kane, a herd on her property, told the Parnell Commission ‘He never saw such poverty from the time of the famine as existed in 1879’.14 Kane’s evidence is consistent with James Hack Tuke’s observation in Spring 1880 that Renvyle was a townland that was in ‘very great poverty’15 The local Catholic curate reported that Mrs. Blake had around three hundred tenants and all except five were recipients of meal from the local relief committee.16 When Bernard H. Becker was investigating Connemara for the Daily News in November 1880, he referred to the ‘utterly wretched cabins’ of which, a large number were built on Renvyle Mountain, also known as Lettermore Hill, or Letter Hill, which was part of the Renvyle estate. He highlighted a ring of villages on this hill and singled out one out for special mention, Coshleen, which he described as ‘wretched a place as any in the world’, noting that it was unapproachable by a wheeled vehicle. He felt that the condition of the tenants on Renvyle estate was ‘a reproach to the Empire.’17 He attributed the congestion in Renvyle to the kelp trade, noting that when this trade was prosperous, coastal landlords had encouraged evicted tenants from other estates to settle on their estates so that they could earn royalties on the kelp that the tenants harvested. It must also be noted that the collapse of the kelp trade not only affected tenants but also led to a dramatic decline in Mrs. Blake’s income, and as her estate was heavily mortgaged, she was under severe financial pressure.18 Becker also reported that tenants supplemented their kelp earnings by renting a conacre potato plot at a high rent, or by a member of the family going to England to work in the harvest. The seasonal labour market

12 B. McAndrew, ‘Distress in Connemara: To the Editor’, IT, 15 July 1879, p. 3.
16 Michael O’Connell, ‘Mr. Foster and the Renvyle Tenants’, FJ, 27 June 1881, p. 6
was gone and when the kelp business collapsed, the population originally attracted by kelp, remained there, ‘to starve on the rocks of Renvyle.’

Kylemore Estate

The tenants of Kylemore were luckier than those in Renvyle, their landlord, Mitchell Henry was an improving landlord, a rare type of landlord in Connemara, and his estate was well-managed. On inheriting substantial wealth, he purchased the Kylemore estate, on which he built a magnificent castle with beautiful gardens. It was described ‘a rose in the desert.’ Most of it was mountainous but he set about reclaiming the lower-lying portion from bog, and by March 1880, 600 acres of former bog had been brought under cultivation and approximately 60 acres were being reclaimed per year. He assisted some tenants to drain their land, paying them wages for the work done. He was wealthy enough to do this, and the Daily News believed that the only other landlord in Clifden PLU that could afford to undertake this type of work was Richard Berridge, who owned the Berridge estate which will be examined later. Tenant holdings in the Kylemore estate varied in size from twelve to forty or fifty acres in size and tenants were allowed ‘the run of the mountain.’ This was a sort of an ancient right under which landlords had allowed tenants to graze a few cattle or sheep on a mountain owned by the landlord, but this privilege had been removed in most estates and the mountain was now let to graziers, who generally did not reside in the area, and whose livestock replaced those of tenants on the mountain. Tenants had regarded the privilege being able to graze ‘their cow or two, or their half-dozen sheep’ on the mountain as ‘as the most valuable part of their holding, in as much as it paid their rent, clothed them, and supplied them with milk to drink with their potatoes.’ Tenants greatly resented graziers in Connemara and this led to agrarian crimes against their livestock. In Renvyle, there was no ‘run of the mountain’ and Mrs Blake complained to the Parnell Commission about having to

---

19 Our Special Commissioner, ‘Disturbed Ireland’.
22 Tuke, Irish Distress, p. 73.
24 Becker, Disturbed Ireland, p. 93.
drive trespassing livestock off graziers’ farms and highlighted cases of agrarian crimes against their livestock.25

It is worth noting that most of the holdings on Kylemore were above 15 acres but in common with other tenants in Clifden PLU, the Kylemore tenants had suffered from the sequence of bad harvests. In early September 1879 Mitchell Henry wrote to them, noting that although the rents were already low, and many of them were employed by him, he felt that it was his duty as a landlord to share in the losses arising from the bad years and he granted them remission of half year’s rent to those that paid the overdue May instalment rent.26 Despite the excellent conditions enjoyed by the Kylemore tenants, in March 1880, James Hack Tuke noted that the houses of some tenants that had paid their rents ‘had been slightly injured as a mark of displeasure from those who had combined not to pay theirs’.27 This was likely to have been ‘ribbonism’, the name given to the sporadic ineffective and usually violent peasant combinations which had preceded the Land League, as there wasn’t a branch of the Land League in that area until December 1880.28 Other local landlords also reduced rents, and it was claimed at a tenant meeting that ten out the eleven landlords in the parish of Ballinakill had reduced tenants’ rents; the single exception being Mrs Blake of the Renvyle estate.29 This claim was later corrected to two landlords in the parish not reducing the rents.30

Berridge Estate

Richard Berridge was the landlord for the Roundstone and Carna areas of Clifden PLU and, according to Bateman, was the largest landowner in Ireland, owning 170,517 acres, of which 160,152 acres were in Co. Galway spread across Clifden and the adjoining Oughterard PLU.31 He was an absentee landlord, a brewer living in London, and the Clifden estate was

27 Tuke, Irish Distress, p. 73.
the largest in Connemara. Some of his lands were let in large acreages to graziers and the poor rocky coastal land was in let in small units to tenants that depended to kelp harvesting and seasonal labour to survive. As far as James Hack Tuke could ascertain, Mr. Berridge did nothing for his tenants and he described the estate as ‘neglected’.32 That being said, in early January 1880, Mr. Mecredy, who had set up the relief committee in Recess, reported that he had heard on reliable authority that Mr. Berridge had given directions to his agent for work to be done on his estate to alleviate to some extent the distress among his tenants, and that he was sending contributions to various persons to dispense his gifts.33 In early December 1879, the tenants of the Ballinahinch estate part of the Berridge Estate sent a letter to the Berridge agent, George Robinson J.P, chairman of Clifden PLU, demanding remission of half a year’s rent and a 25% rent reduction, saying what already had been offered was insufficient.34 While the increased demand was unlikely to have been acceded to, it reflects increased militancy on the part of these tenants and it indicates that an offer had been made, and that they had turned to their landlord for help before coming militant. This does not fit into Barlett’s model of tenants turning on landlords instead of to them.35

Evictions on the Renvyle Estate

In common with other tenants in Clifden PLU, the tenants on the Renvyle estate were in arrears with their rents and Mrs Blake took proceedings to eject them. On 29th December 1879 an ejectment process backed up by 50 armed constables on the Renvyle estate was abandoned because of protests from tenantry.36 A few days later, on New Year’s Day 1880, despite poor weather, an open air tenant meeting, attended by two to three thousand people, was held where the eviction had been attempted, with the parish priest Fr. McAndrew, the curate Fr. O Connell, the dispensary doctor, Dr Gorham, three Clifden PLU guardians and few others on the platform. This meeting was not organised by the Land League as there was no branch in the area at the time. Some of the people that attended were barefooted and

35 Bartlett, p. 318.
most of them were wretchedly clad, braving the pitiless rain and the howling tempest.\(^{37}\)

Fr. McAndrew took the chair at this meeting and spoke, highlighting the destitution of the tenantry and called for public works to help them. He also called for reductions in rents, citing holdings on the estate where the rents were multiples of Griffith’s valuation and holdings where the rents had been increased in recent years.\(^{38}\) Mrs Blake challenged these claims in the press, while conceding that they were above the level of Griffith’s valuation, she claimed that they had been valued by independent valuers around 1860 and that they had not been increased since then, except to new tenants.\(^{39}\) Fr. Maloney replied to Mrs. Blake’s letter by supplying all the details supporting his claims. The highest example that he gave was a holding on the island of Innishbroon, where the Griffith’s valuation was £2 10s and the rent was now £12, having been increased from £6 to £12 in the previous year.\(^{40}\) Mrs Blake contradicted the claims again but the matter died when Fr. McAndrew replied saying that he had the receipts given to the tenants when the rents were paid.\(^{41}\) In relation to Mrs. Blake’s claims that the rents were set by independent valuers in 1860, this valuation was made only five years after Griffith’s valuation and in normal circumstances there should not have been be a significant difference between 1860 valuation and that done by Griffith. The local curate, Fr. O’Connell, claimed that the 1860 valuation had been carried out by two men, well-disposed to the landlord in order to swell the rent-roll to negotiate a mortgage. He also claimed that another man, ‘who appears not to have been in the secret’ was asked to value the land at that time, but ‘after walking the land’ he refused to raise the rents.\(^{42}\)

In November 1880, the tenants of the Renvyle estate presented Mrs. Blake with a memorial drawn up by Fr. O’Connell, seeking a rent reduction, which was rejected. In December 1880 they then approached Fr. McAndrew and asked him to set up a branch of the LL in the district and he became chairman of the branch and Fr. O’Connell became its


\(^{38}\) Ibid.


\(^{40}\) B. McAndrew ‘To the Editor: The Renvyle Estate’, \textit{FJ}, 12 January 1880, p. 6


\(^{42}\) Michael O’Connell, C.C.,’ Landlords and Coercion: To the Editor’, \textit{FJ}, 5 March 1881, p. 2
secretary.\textsuperscript{43} This was a classic example of poor tenants joining the LL due to fear of eviction. In early March 1881, the tenants of the Renvyle estate presented another memorial to Mrs. Blake seeking a reduction in their rents, directing her attention to other parts of the country where under ‘comparatively thriving circumstances’ landlords had either accepted Griffith’s valuation or given a considerable reduction in rents. They made an offer to pay Griffith’s valuation or accept ‘such an abatement as will reduce our rents to a just and tolerable standard.’\textsuperscript{44} Mrs. Blake rejected their offer and on 15\textsuperscript{th} March 1881, ejectment orders were successfully served on the tenants in the village of Tully by a party of eighty policemen and soldiers including a detachment from the Rifle Brigade. No resistance was offered by the tenants.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{Other Evictions and Land League Activity}

The Renvyle estate was not the only estate in Clifden PLU where tenants suffered evictions; tenants were served ejectment notices in Bunowen in 1880 and tenants were evicted in Carna, Clifden and Recess in 1881/1882.\textsuperscript{46} The landlord in Bunowen reported that that tenants on his properties rented their holdings at Griffith valuation or below, he granted rent reductions of 25% and he had taken action only against those that he believed to be in a strong position to pay their rents.\textsuperscript{47} The evictions in Recess and Carna were of tenants in the Berridge estate. Overall, the LL was not particularly strong in Clifden PLU and branches were formed in Clifden PLU on account of fears of eviction and the grants of relief from the LLF helped the clergy to overcome their reservations about it. This will be considered in Chapter 3.

\textbf{Conclusion}

This chapter examined two neighbouring estates near Letterfrack, the Renvyle and the Kylemore estates in detail and showed very different treatments of tenants by landlords during the crisis. It also looked at the Berridge estate, a neglected estate owned by an absentee landlord. It highlighted that the thesis that tenant farmers refused to pay rents until

\textsuperscript{43} ‘The Parnell Commission: Father O’Connell’, \textit{Northern Whig}, 10 October 1889, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{44} Michael O’Connell, C.C., ‘Landlords and Coercion: To the Editor’, \textit{FJ}, 5 March 1881, p. 2.


\textsuperscript{47} ‘Process Serving in Galway’, \textit{Leinster Express}, p. 9, 25 September 1880.
conditions improved because they were resisting the loss of economic gains since the Great Famine did not apply in Clifden PLU, because the gains experienced elsewhere in the country did not occur in Clifden PLU. It also noted that Clifden PLU’s tenants initially approached their landlords for rent reductions which does not fit in with Bartlett’s view that tenants turned on their landlords rather than seeking relief from them. It can be concluded Clifden PLU was different from national picture. It also demonstrated the role of the clergy in Letterfrack in highlighting distress and high rentals and in chairing meetings to protest against attempted evictions. The response of the clergy and charities will be considered in Chapter 3.
Chapter 3. Response of Clergy and Charities

Introduction

According to Moran, the crisis of 1879-80 had the potential to be as severe as that of the Great Famine except for work of relief organisations, speedy assistance from the outside world and the contribution of the Catholic clergy, who played a key role in highlighting the distress and organising relief. This chapter examines the responses of the Catholic clergy and charitable organisations to the crisis in Clifden Poor Law Union (‘PLU’). It considers the role played by clergy in highlighting the distress, their role in local tenant movements and relief committees. It investigates the close links between the Local Government Board (‘LGB’) and the Duchess of Marlborough’s Relief Fund (‘DMRF’) and the failure of this fund to achieve its political objectives. It examines the local structures and operations of the funds, as evidenced in Clifden PLU, and it argues that the DMRF was set up to compensate for the deficiencies in the Poor Law. It explores how the Land League Relief Fund (‘LLRF’) helped the Land League (‘LL’) to set up local branches in Clifden PLU. It uses newspaper reports, contemporary publications, and the records of the Mansion House Relief Fund (‘MHRF’) as evidence.

Response of the Catholic Clergy

Moran has examined the role of the Catholic clergy in highlighting 1879/80 crisis, and their involvement in relief operations. He pointed out that landowners along the western seaboard were often absenteeees and did little to assist their tenants to overcome their destitution and this led to a vacuum, which was filled by the Catholic clergy. The clergy were active in highlighting the difficulties of their parishioners through letters to newspapers and appeals to relief organisations for support for their parishioners. As the Catholic parishes in Clifden PLU were slightly different from Established Church parishes and had different names, Figure 3 shows a map of the Catholic Parishes in Clifden PLU.

In Clifden PLU, the clergy were actively involved in the tenant movement, they drafted petitions for rent reductions, they highlighted the distress, formed and led relief committees. The clergy provided information to many sources on the severity of the crisis during the spring of 1880. Chapter 2 has already reported on the Catholic clergy in Letterfrack parish highlighting the distress and high rents, drafting a petition for a rent reduction and participating in a protest against an attempted eviction. Fr. Moloney, parish priest of Roundstone, proposed the setting up of the Connemara Tenants Defence Association in Clifden in January 1879, a few months before the tenant meeting held in Irishtown in Co. Mayo that led to the foundation of the Land League (‘LL’). The objective of the Connemara Tenants Defence Association was to protect the people of Connemara from ‘unjust landlords and worse agents.’

93 It held a public meeting in Clifden on 10th September 1879 which was chaired by Dean McManus, parish priest of Clifden. Five resolutions in support of tenants were approved; one was proposed by Fr Moloney of Roundstone, another was proposed by Fr. McAndrew of Letterfrack and a third one was proposed by Fr Fahy, the curate in the Ballyconneely part of Clifden parish.94 When the Carna Tenants Defence was set up in early 1880, Fr. Grealy of Carna became its chairman.95 The clergy’s motivation for their

---

93 ‘Clifden Meeting - A Tenants Defence Association for Connemara’, CT, 1 February 1879, p. 2
94 ‘The Rent Question: Clifden Demonstration’, FJ, 11 September 1879, p. 6
95 ‘Carna Tenants’ Defence Association’, Nation, 07 February 1880, p. 7.
involvement in the tenant movement was the same as their motivation for setting up relief committees and appealing for aid; they were local leaders; they lived among their parishioners and experienced their distress first hand. They generally led the local relief committees that were set up throughout Clifden PLU during 1879. They highlighted the distress and appealed for public works. Fr. Fahey, of Ballyconeely wrote to the Freeman’s Journal (‘FJ’) asking the government to come to the assistance of the destitute in Connemara by providing public works.96 Dean McManus, wrote to the Lord Lieutenant, saying, that, while appreciating the generosity of public and private charities, nothing short of public works could cope with the present calamity.97 Appeals for charity by the clergy received generous responses from varied sources and in early December 1879, Dean Mc Manus was acknowledging donations from Ireland and abroad to relieve the poor in Clifden parish.98 After the charitable funds were set up to relieve the distress, the clergy, as leaders of local relief committees, were very active in seeking relief from them. For example, Fr. Grealy, of Carna, wrote to the MHRF on 23 January 1880 warning about the distress in his parish, ‘If not relieved before the end of this week, I fear that we will have many deaths.’99 This highlights the dependence of relief committees on grants from the charitable funds.

Charitable Funds

. On 18th December 1879, the Duchess of Marlborough wrote to The Times appealing for donations to a fund to alleviate the distress in the west of Ireland:

…in most western districts of Ireland, there will be extreme misery and suffering among the poor……unless a vigorous effort of private charity is got up to supplement the ordinary system of Poor Law Relief.100 Her letter could be interpreted as an implicit acknowledgement by the Government that that the Poor Law was unable to deal with the poverty in the west of Ireland. Her plea was generously supported in England, and the Fund raised £135,000.101 On 19th December 1879, the citizens of Adelaide, Australia, set up an Irish relief fund to be forwarded to the Lord

---

96 D.W Fahy. ‘To the Editor: A Ail from the West’, FJ, 8 October 1879, p.7.
97 'Petition To The Lord Lieutenant’, FJ, 6 January 1880, p.7.
100 F. Marlborough, ‘Distress in Ireland: To the Editor of the Times’, The Times, 18 December 1879, p. 8.
Mayor of Dublin, for ‘equitable distribution’ and this was the genesis of the MHRF. At a meeting to deal with the matter, Sir Arthur Guinness proposed the setting up of the MHRF, stating that there was need for every penny that could be raised; there was ample room for two funds; noting that the DMRF would appeal in quarters ‘where an Irish committee might fail of influence’ and ‘a committee representing all ranks and sections of Irish opinion could possibly command readier access to unbounded fields of Australian and American assistance.’ All shades of political and religious opinion were represented at the meeting and the Lord Mayor emphasised that the movement was non-political and non-sectarian. While the DMRF raised most of its money in Britain, the MHRF was able to raise money throughout the world, with over half of its subscriptions coming from Australasia. Its fund-raising in America was damaged by a blistering attack on it in America by Charles Stewart Parnell, the president of the LL, who had gone to America to raise funds for the LL. In this action, Parnell was not acting in the interests of the poor in distressed areas. Nevertheless, Americans were willing to donate generously to assist the poor in Ireland and Parnell raised £70,000, of which approximately £60,000 was for the relief of distress, as distinct from the purposes of the LL. In this way, the LL unintentionally became a relief agency, and this led to the establishment of the LLRF. Other amounts donated by Irish Americans went to the New York Herald Fund and the Philadelphia Fund, but the largest share of the amounts raised in America, estimated at £200,000, was forwarded directly to the Irish Catholic bishops for distribution by them. The diocese of Tuam, in which Clifden PLU was located, received £26,530. Fr McAndrew of Letterfrack received £50 from the Archbishop of Tuam in early January 1880, and used it as a nucleus for setting up a local relief fund. There were other relief funds set up, including the Canadian Fund and the Liverpool Relief Fund. James Hack

102 Mansion House, Proceedings, p. 25.
104 Reuters Telegram, ‘Mr Parnell in America’, IT, 3 February 1880, p. 5.
106 Mansion House, Proceedings, p. 73.
107 Ibid.
Tuke, the Quaker philanthropist privately subscribed for the relief of distress.\textsuperscript{109} Altogether, the charitable funds provided £480,000 in total to the relieve of the destitution.\textsuperscript{110}

While not doubting the humanitarian intentions of the Duchess of Marlborough and her donors, Comerford described the launch of DMRF as ‘the culmination of a campaign to win “hearts and minds”’ in support of the Union that characterised the Marlborough viceroyalty. He went on to say that the political implications of the DMRF contributed to the promotion of the MHRF which drew on the sensibilities of those unwilling ‘to give the Duchess a free run for the title of chief benefactor of Ireland’.\textsuperscript{111} In relation to the LLRF, Moran has highlighted that the LL was a reluctant participant in relief activities but Comerford noted that ‘even relief money could be allocated in such a way as to promote the cause,’\textsuperscript{112} Whatever their motivations, these funds provided relief to the poor that was not provided by the Poor Law.

\textit{Duchess of Marlborough’s Relief Fund}

Consistent with Comerford’s comments on the political dimension of the DMRF, the Duchess declared at a meeting of the fund’s central committee on 29\textsuperscript{th} January 1880 ‘the work that we are now engaged on will cement the bonds of union between the two countries, and encourage good feeling between all classes.’\textsuperscript{113} The day-to-day management of the fund was carried out by Lord Randolph Churchill, the Lord Lieutenant’s son and it was administered from Dublin Castle which was the centre of Government administration, highlighting its closeness to the Government.\textsuperscript{114} The fund decided to set up one local committee in each PLU that it chose to assist, which could apply to the central organisation for funds. It invited the chairman of the board of guardians of the PLU to chair the local committee and to select as his ‘assistants some of the resident proprietors and the clergy of all denominations’.\textsuperscript{115} The obvious intention was to restrict membership of the local committees to landlords and clergymen. This decision was likely to have been influenced by the LGB, as

\textsuperscript{110} Mansion House, \textit{Proceedings}, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{111} Comerford, \textit{Politics of Distress}, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{114} ‘The Duchess of Marlborough’s Relief Fund’, \textit{FJ}, 9 January 1880, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
Henry Robinson was strongly in favour of relief being controlled by landlords.\textsuperscript{116} The fund appointed George Robinson, chairman of Clifden PLU, as chairman of the Clifden committee, and under the proposed structure he was able to select his own committee. He was land agent for a number of landlords including Richard Berridge, an absentee landlord, who owned extensive lands both in Clifden PLU and its adjoining PLU, Oughterard.\textsuperscript{117} The Special Correspondent of the \textit{Daily Telegraph} commented:

\begin{quote}
I am bound to state that the nomination as chairman of a person who is also chairman of the Board of Guardians and the agent of some neighbouring estates does not show much respect for the feelings of the people.\textsuperscript{118}
\end{quote}

When Dean McManus of the Clifden relief committee wrote to the Marlborough Fund seeking assistance on 28\textsuperscript{th} December 1879, he was dismissed with a reply, telling him that a Clifden committee had been set up under the chairmanship of George Robinson and ‘I have to request that you will be good enough to bring all cases within your knowledge under their notice.’\textsuperscript{119} The local committee structure of the DMRF had all the characteristics of an attempt to bypass existing relief committees. The fund also recommended that, for the more effectual relief of distress, its local committee could be divided into districts in line with PLU dispensary districts and the chairman could nominate a sub-committee for each district, composed of members of the dispensary committee, the clergy of all denominations and the medical officer, which again mirrored the Poor Law structure, except for the participation of clergy. The fund also appointed ‘gentlemen to visit the distressed localities as travelling commissioners’ to report back on ‘the workings of our committees.’\textsuperscript{120} This position mirrored that of the LGB Inspector, and it was one of the many parallels between the administrative structure of the Marlborough Fund and the LGB. However, there was one major difference; the fund was designed to give relief to those that were excluded from getting relief under Poor Law regulations. Henry Robinson, the vice-president of the Local Government Board, was always reluctant to allow outdoor relief, and in 1865 had declared himself opposed to it, except in cases of sickness.\textsuperscript{121} The DMRF had the appearance of a mechanism to enable the LGB minimise the relaxation of its rules on outdoor relief at this time of great distress. The

\begin{footnotes}
\item[117] John Bateman, \textit{The Great Landowners of Britain and Ireland}, 4\textsuperscript{th} ed. (London: Harrison, 1883), p. 39.
\item[119] ‘The Duchess of Marlborough’s Relief Fund’, \textit{FJ}, 9 January 1880, p. 5
\end{footnotes}
rules of the DMRF excluded the giving of relief to anyone who under ordinary circumstances would be entitled to avail of outdoor relief. It stated that it was its intention to relieve small-holders who were excluded from outdoor relief because they held more than a quarter acre of land. It also intended to relieve:

artisans and skilled labourers dwelling in the small country towns, who in ordinary circumstances would be able to support themselves independently, and to whom recourse for relief from the poor rates would be a source of great and undeserved humiliation.  

These people were not entitled to outdoor relief and could only be relieved by entering the workhouse but the DMRF enabled them to get relief without entering the workhouse. The fingerprints of the LGB are visible on the DMRF’s structures and approach, and the fund appears to have been designed to reduce the demands for relaxation of the rules regarding outdoor relief. Historians have not examined this aspect of the DMRF before now. George Robinson must have invited Dean McManus to join the Clifden dispensary sub-committee because the DMRF Committee meeting held on 16 January 1880 voted £50 to G. Robinson for distribution in the Roundstone district and £50 to Dean McManus for distribution in the Clifden district. On 22 January, the DMRF approved another grant of £50 to Dean McManus.

Religious Tensions and Relief Committees

One of the conditions required for a relief committee to receive aid from both the MHRF and the DMRF was that clergy of all denominations should be represented on relief committees. A problem arose in Clifden because the Protestant clergymen there happened to be members of the Irish Church Mission Society, a proselytising organisation, and Dean McManus of Clifden and Fr. McAndrew of Letterfrack refused to serve alongside them on relief committees unless they gave a guarantee not to proselytise. They refused to give this undertaking, which caused a problem for both funds. The DMRF resolved the dilemma by forwarding £500 to the Catholic archbishop of Tuam and £150 to the Protestant archbishop of Tuam, to be divided among their flocks in the distressed areas of Clifden PLU. As a result, the Marlborough Fund Relief Committee in Clifden PLU ceased functioning in early

122 ‘The Duchess of Marlborough’s Relief Fund’, FJ, 30 January 1881, p. 6
123 The Duchess of Marlborough’s Relief Fund’, FJ, 17 January 1880, p. 5.
125 ‘The Duchess of Marlborough’s Relief Fund’, FJ, 9 January 1880, p. 5.
February 1880.126 Moran, mistakenly, concluded that both Clifden and Letterfrack relief committees were refused relief from the MHRF on account of this.127 The MHRF took the view that a ‘a union of these conflicting elements’ was impossible and that ‘it was equally impossible to withdraw grants from places threatened with famine’ and it resolved the difficulty by making grants to two committees in the same neighbourhood where it proved impossible to have a committee embracing all religions.128 As a result, the Omey Clifden relief committee was set up in Clifden and the Ballinakill relief committee was set up in Letterfrack.

Mansion House Relief Fund

Unlike the DMRF, the MHRF used the parish as its primary local structure, as it felt that a PLU was too large an area for a single committee. To overcome the difficulties posed by large, scattered parishes, the fund used local committees and worked with existing committees within parishes. In an area, clergy of all denominations, the dispensary doctor and several prominent laymen within the parish were invited to join the local committee. In Clifden PLU, the MHRF assisted 12 local committees. The Letterfrack committee was the top beneficiary of the fund, and the second highest beneficiary was Carna, where the parish priest had described the ability to get Poor Law relief as a ‘forlorn hope, a mere mockery’ because the workhouse was over twenty miles away and there was not a relieving officer

local committees in descending order.

Table 3.1 ranks the grants given by the Mansion House Fund to the local committees in descending order. The Letterfrack Committee received the highest amount of grants, followed by Carna. Both areas had been heavily dependent on the kelp business and their parish priests were very active in seeking relief. Over 91% of the money raised by the Mansion House Fund was spent on the provision of 'the humblest and cheapest' food possible; Indian meal. This enabled the fund to spread its resources as far as possible, but the unpalatable nature of this diet was likely to tempt those who were not reduced to the direst pitch of destitution. It did not provide clothing, blankets and footwear except to people on the remote western coast or islands, as other charities covered this need. 132

Table 3.1. Grants Given to Relief Committees in Clifden PLU by the Mansion House Fund

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relief Committee</th>
<th>Number First Stated to Need Assistance</th>
<th>Amount of Grants Paid £</th>
<th>No. of Grant Payments Made</th>
<th>Average Amount per Grant £</th>
<th>Maximum Number Helped in a Week</th>
<th>Payment per Person for First Stated to Need Assistance</th>
<th>Date of First Grant 1880</th>
<th>Date of Last Grant 1880</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letterfrack</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>1,250</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>73.53</td>
<td>3,394</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>25 January</td>
<td>5 August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carna</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>1,025</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>60.29</td>
<td>4,750</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>29 January</td>
<td>22 July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ennismore Clifden</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>54.71</td>
<td>3,759</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>29 January</td>
<td>29 July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clifden Town</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>830</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>39.29</td>
<td>6,230</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>29 January</td>
<td>22 July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roundstone and Castel</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>46.23</td>
<td>3,497</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>25 January</td>
<td>29 July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clifden Rural</td>
<td>2,300</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>43.57</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>31 January</td>
<td>29 June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inishbofin and Inishark</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>41.67</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>18 January</td>
<td>23 July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recess</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>36.67</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>31 January</td>
<td>23 March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballintull</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>17 February</td>
<td>3 July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clifden Convent</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>15 January</td>
<td>17 February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omey Clifden</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>17 February</td>
<td>17 February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total/Average</td>
<td>18,850</td>
<td>5,175</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>34.47</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relief by the LLRF was generally distributed through local LL branches and where such branches did not exist, it was distributed by means of the local Catholic clergy. In 1879 and early 1880, the higher Catholic clergy were generally apprehensive about the LL because of its connections with the Fenian movement, but the use of the clergy to distribute assistance helped them to overcome their reservations. In early January 1880, Michael Davitt, the driving force of the LL, toured Connemara to learn about the condition of the people there, and as a result, some of the first £500 sent by Parnell from New York to the LLRF was distributed to areas in Clifden PLU. As there were no LL branches in Clifden PLU at the time, the money was given to the local clergy for distribution and the following clergy received £25 each for distribution of aid; Fr Connelly, Carna and Cashel, Fr Flannery (and Mr. Mathew Coneys), Errismore and Ballinaboy, Fr Rhatigan, Clifden, and Fr McAndrew, Letterfrack. A week later, on 23 January, a membership subscription was received from ‘Branch of the Land League Cashel Recess Defence Fund’, and from Fr Flannery of Errismore. The Cashel branch became the first LL branch in Clifden PLU and at its meeting on 9th February, it thanked the LL for its assistance and Fr Connelly was its treasurer. At its meeting on 10th February 1880, the LLRF made a grant of £100 to Clifden. By mid-June there were branches in Errismore and Inishbofin. When a branch of the LL was formed in Letterfrack around December 1880, Fr McAndrew became its chairman, and his curate became the secretary. There were no LL branches formed in Clifden PLU in 1879, but they were formed in 1880 when the LLRF led to the establishment of relationships with local clergy who led the relief committees. The local clergy in Clifden PLU were active in the tenant movement and so it was not a big transition to move to the LL, despite the reservations of their bishop, Archbishop McHale.

Views on the Role of the Charities

134 Ibid.
139 ‘The Parnell Commission’, Northern Whig, 10 May 1889, p. 5.
Fr Grealy of Carna stated that in his parish, the people would have been ‘decimated by famine only for the timely assistance of the Mansion House Committee’. When the Liverpool Relief Fund delegates investigated the distress in Connaught in February 1880, they reported that they met no absolute destitution, except for a few isolated cases, and they attributed this to the work of the relief committees. They came across ‘not infrequent cases of imposition’ people, that did not need relief, applying for it and getting it, but these were ‘very exceptional cases’ and concluded that ‘the great bulk of the relief was administered very judiciously to most needy, and in many instances, only in limited quantities.’ Comerford noted that there were deaths in 1880 from diseases arising from malnutrition, but that there was a ‘successful aversion of threatened calamity through practical and sensible efforts on many fronts.’ He then concluded ‘The poor law system as the last line of defence came under pressure but was able to take the strain.’ However, this study shows the Poor Law system was not the last line of defence in Clifden PLU and that it failed to take the strain. It finds that the charitable funds were the last line of defence and that they prevented starvation. This is consistent with Moran’s conclusion that ‘widespread famine and death’ would have occurred in 1879-80 except for the work of the charitable funds. Palmer agreed, concluding that the distress of 1879/80 did not approach the results of the Great Famine, largely due to the great outpouring of charity.

Conclusions
This chapter found that Catholic clergy played a key role in dealing with the crisis in Clifden PLU through highlighting distress, appealing for help, assisting tenants to seek rent reductions, and organising and running relief committees. The charitable funds were set up because the Poor Law system was unable to deal with the distress adequately in 1879/80. And charitable donations were required to prevent famine and death. The chapter has argued that the Marlborough Fund was set up to offset the inadequacies of the Poor Law. While this fund may have set out to win “hearts and minds”, it diminished its ability to do so by setting up landlord dominated local committees and by bypassing existing relief committees. These relief committees were able to provide relief due to grants from both the MHRF and

140 Patrick Grealy, ‘To the Editor of the Freeman: The Rates in the West’, *FJ*, 2 March 1880 p. 6.
142 Comerford, *Politics of Distress*, p. 38
the LLRF and they played an important role in preventing starvation. The DMRF did not win ‘the hearts and minds’ of these committees and the people that they assisted, but instead they were further alienated from the Government. While Parnell did not act in the interests of the poor when he damaged the fund raising of the MHRF in America, the LLRF provided valuable relief to the poor. The assistance from the LLRF helped the clergy to overcome their reservations about the LL and become involved in its branch network, which was important in its expansion. As a result of its landlord-oriented approach, the DMRF unwittingly gave the LL an easier entry into Clifden PLU, when its intention was the reverse. Despite being a reluctant entrant into the charity arena, the LL used its fund win ‘the hearts and minds’ and attract people to its cause. Whatever their political motivations, all the relief funds must get credit for preventing starvation and death.
Conclusion

This study has examined if the responses to near-famine conditions in Clifden PLU in 1879/80 were adequate or appropriate. It has considered the responses of the Poor Law system, landlords, the Catholic clergy, and charitable funds. It found that 70% of the holdings in Clifden Poor Law Union (‘PLU’) were too small to be viable without other sources of income. In 1879, the potato crop was severely damaged, the tenants had run out of credit with shopkeepers and the other sources of income had dried up, but despite this, there was not a significant increase in the numbers receiving relief under the Poor Law. Relief committees were set up to deal with distress, relying on charity for funding, and the numbers receiving Poor Law relief were only a fraction of the high numbers reported to be in need by the relief committees. This study reconciled the numbers reported to be in need with the numbers living on unviable holdings and concluded that the numbers reported to be in need were reasonably realistic. It found that the Poor Law failed in Clifden PLU during this crisis, which was line with Crossman’s finding that as the Poor Law system had proved to be an inadequate mechanism for the distribution of relief during the Great Famine, and it was to do again in 1879-80.

The response of landlords and tenants to the crisis on two estates in the Letterfrack area and on the Berridge estate were examined. In some cases, landlords reduced rents and in other cases they did not, but in any case, most tenants were not in a position to pay them. The thesis put forward by historians such as Bartlett and Lee that tenants refused to pay rents until conditions improved because they were resisting the loss of economic gains since the Great Famine did not apply in Clifden PLU as conditions had not improved in Clifden PLU.

The Catholic clergy played a key role in dealing with the crisis in Clifden PLU through highlighting distress, appealing for help, highlighting high rents, assisting tenants to seek rent reductions, and organising and running relief committees. The Duchess of Marlborough’s Relief Fund (‘DMRF’) failed in its campaign to win ‘hearts and minds’ because it tried to bypass existing relief committees by setting up a committee in Clifden PLU under the control of the landlord interests. Its structures mirrored those of the Local Government Board (‘LGB’) and it was designed to give relief to those that were excluded

---


from getting relief under Poor Law regulations, which highlights the limitations of the Poor Law. It appears to have been a device designed to enable the LGB avoid making the Poor Law less restrictive during the crisis. The Mansion House Relief Fund (‘MHRF’) worked with existing relief committees and was the chief donor to them in Clifden PLU. The president of the Land League (‘LL’), Charles Stewart Parnell, damaged its fund-raising in America and did not act in the interest of the poor when he did this, but, on the other hand, the Land League Relief Fund (‘LLRF’) provided much needed relief to the poor in Clifden PLU. The LLRF facilitated the setting up of LL branches in Clifden PLU and enabled the Catholic clergy there to overcome reservations about the Fenian leadership of the LL and become active in its local branches.

This study has highlighted how the local structure of DMRF, its bypassing of existing relief committees and its Poor Law approach reduced its effectiveness and its ability to win ‘hearts and minds’ in Clifden PLU. Further research could be done in other PLUs to investigate if the result was similar. The LLRF assisted the LL to set up branches in Clifden PLU and enabled it to gain acceptance with the local Catholic clergy. Further research could be done to investigate if this occurred in other PLUs. Assisted emigration schemes were to set up to help the poor and deal with the issue of unviable holdings in Clifden PLU and Moran has written extensively about this topic. The schemes were initially welcomed by the local Catholic clergy in Clifden but opposed by the nationalist movement, and then they were opposed by Catholic bishops with the result that the local Catholic clergy withdrew their support. Further research could be done on the development of opposition to assisted emigration schemes in Clifden PLU and its impact.

Overall, response from landlords was mixed, with Mitchel Henry setting the example as a good landlord but others were less sympathetic to the plight of tenants. The Catholic clergy acted as local leaders and assisted the poor in highlighting their distress, seeking funds to to give them relief and by being active in relief committees. They also assisted the poor in

---

their dealings with landlords. The Poor Law was found to be ineffective during this crisis and did not assist the poor in any meaningful way. Famine and death were prevented in Clifden PLU by the charitable funds and the work of local relief committees.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Manuscripts
Minutes of Meeting of Clifden Board Guardians, GPL3/ Clifden Poor Law Union Archive
Collection 1849 – 1921, Galway County Council Digital Archive
Dublin City Archives, Mansion House Fund: Grants Books, Ch1/3 and Ch 1/37

Government Sources
Agricultural Statistics of Ireland for 1876, HC, 1877, C1749
Agricultural Statistics of Ireland for 1877, HC, 1878, C1938
Agricultural Statistics of Ireland for 1878, HC, 1879, C2317
Agricultural Statistics of Ireland for 1879, HC, 1880, C2594.
Agricultural Statistics of Ireland for 1881, HC, 1882, C3332.
Annual Report of The Local Government Board for Ireland, being the Nineth Report, HC, 1881, C2926.
Reports from Poor Law Inspectors in Ireland as to the Existing Relations between Landlord and Tenant in Respect of Improvements, HC, 1870, C31.
Royal Commission on Depressed Condition of Agricultural Interests: Preliminary Report (Richmond Report), HC, 1881, C2778.

Newspapers
Connaught Telegraph
Derby Daily Telegraph
Daily Telegraph
Freeman's Journal
Galway Vindicator and Connaught Advertiser
Irish Times
Leinster Express
Liverpool Daily Post
London Evening Standard Nation
Northern Whig
The Times

Other Printed Sources
Secondary Sources

Articles

Chapters in Books

Books
Burke, Helen, *The People and the Poor Law in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Dublin: Women’s Education Bureau, 1987).


Moran, Gerard, "In Search of the Promised Land": The Connemara Colonisation Scheme in Minnesota,1880', *Éire-Ireland*, 31.3 (1996), 130-149.


**Internet Sources**
