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Maria Luddy

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Introduction

‘The great and weighty business of life’, preached the Rev. John Gregg in 1856, ‘devolves on men, but important business belongs to women.’ ‘Women’, he proclaimed, ‘have the honourable employments of instructing childhood . . . [their] labours may be in the sickroom, the chambers of affliction, in the haunts of misery [and] amongst the struggling poor.’¹ Few individuals, either Catholic or Protestant, would have disagreed with him. In fact, by mid-century it was widely agreed that women had played a major role in providing charity to the poor and outcast. The tradition of benevolence which middle and upper-class women had developed by mid-century became even more pervasive as the century progressed. Asserting their moral and spiritual right to engage in charitable work, women’s social activism was to have a profound influence on Irish life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Although limited by society’s expectations to the home in the early years of the century, middle-class Irish women increasingly made use of their given spiritual and moral influence to justify their entrance into society, especially through philanthropic work. They developed institutions and societies on a local and national scale, to deal with the problems of the poor, the outcast and deviant, and neglected and orphaned children. Their philanthropic work took many forms, from mere almsgiving, to the provision of employment for women and girls, the building of institutions to house the homeless and outcast, the initiation of schemes to make the poor less dependent on charity, the development of programmes to facilitate moral reform, work in public institutions such as workhouses, hospitals and prisons, and the provision of orphanages. By the end of the century women had played a major role in developing a com-

¹ Rev. John Gregg, *Women: A Lecture* (Dublin, 1856), pp. 4–5.

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paratively humane and all-embracing welfare system and in the process had broadened their sphere of action and influence from the private to the public sphere.

The world of the nineteenth-century middle and upper-class woman was limited, it has been claimed, by the ideology of separate spheres which functioned to prescribe certain roles for both men and women.² Whether the dichotomy between the public and private worlds was as sharp as has been declared by historians is open to question.³ The Irish case is particularly interesting in this respect. Irish women were reminded of their maternal and nurturing role through secular and religious teachings, and yet although the world of work was extremely limited for middle and upper-class women, their activities in the philanthropic sphere brought these women into the public world without any great tension.

The overwhelming importance of religion in the lives of nineteenth-century Irish women cannot be overemphasised. Voluntary effort was the response of women to their Christian duty to help the deprived of society, but it was also, in many instances, an expression of the desire of philanthropists to control and reform the behaviour of those considered to be the outcasts of society, which essentially meant those who did not conform to ideas of middle-class respectability, such as prostitutes and others deemed to be moral degenerates. The attempt to impose a middle-class sense of morality on the poor is one of the major elements in this study of charity work. The philanthropy of Irish women was also suffused with religious rhetoric and imagery, particularly that of female religious. Religion decided the membership of philanthropic organisations, it targeted those who were considered most in need, it divided and separated women's organisations from each other.

² The 'cult of domesticity' and the 'separate sphere' theories have been used by American and British historians to describe the position of upper and middle-class women in nineteenth-century American and British societies. The ideologies developed from the removal of women as an economic power with the development of industrial society. To legitimise this removal women were urged to devote their energies to the family, the 'private sphere', and to cultivate the virtues of submissiveness, piety and domesticity. See Barbara Welter, 'The cult of true womanhood, 1820–1860', *American Quarterly*, 18 (1966); Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Women's Sphere in New England, 1780–1835* (Yale University Press, 1977); Carroll-Smith Rosenberg, 'The female world of love and ritual: relations between women in nineteenth century America', *Signs*, 1:1 (1975), pp. 1–29.

³ See, for example, Linda Kerber, 'Separate spheres, female worlds, woman's place: the rhetoric of women's history', *Journal of American History*, 75:1 (1988), pp. 9–39; Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public* (Baltimore, 1990).

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Without doubt women's involvement in philanthropy provided them with personal and group authority and power. Above all philanthropy was a business undertaking which required judicious use of resources, whether material or monetary, the keeping of accounts, in some instances the payment of individuals, and in many cases the maintenance of buildings. These practical functions and the power women wielded is often obscured in the trivial sentimentality of the annual reports which in some sense deny the very difficult and often arduous tasks that faced philanthropic women. Women's activities in the charitable sphere also added considerably to the welfare infrastructure of the country. The most lasting institutions were those established and maintained by female religious, seen in the myriad of hospitals, refuges, reformatories, industrial schools etc. that they managed. Women's charitable work and its suffusion with religious idealism also placed women in the vanguard of the fight for souls which was such an important part of formal religious consolidation by various denominations in the nineteenth century.

A tradition of philanthropy led a number of women to an understanding of the economic and social causes of poverty. This resulted in some women becoming politicised by their philanthropic involvement and organising reform societies to agitate for legislative changes to improve the condition of the poor and also the condition of women. Women involved in reform movements such as the Dublin Aid Committee (later the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children), and the Irish Workhouse Association, lobbied, successfully, for political action to be taken with regard to child protection and workhouse management. Many of these reformist women came to believe that it was only when women were granted the franchise, at local and national level, that they could properly influence government policy with regard to the poor. From the 1870s such women began to campaign for the right to vote.

While most philanthropic women, and particularly nuns, would never have judged their actions in political terms there is no doubt that their work had political implications. In determining the nature of 'respectability' philanthropic women were also tremendously influential. Their attempts to mould and often recreate the characters of individuals who entered their refuges (for example, prostitutes and ex-prisoners), helped to define what type of behaviour was acceptable in society. Their role in consolidating

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church power, whether Catholic or Protestant, by evangelising on a vast scale bolstered and strengthened those churches' positions within society. The 'devotional revolution' identified by Emmet Larkin as occurring in post-famine Ireland, where a more entrenched Catholicism came to be practised by an apparently more devout population, probably owed more to the influence of nuns than has ever been acknowledged.⁴ Philanthropic women thus had a powerful and diverse impact on nineteenth-century Irish society.

Much has been written in the area of women's philanthropy over the last ten years and this study is informed by the findings of other historians. F. K. Prochaska's pioneering work, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England*,⁵ covers all the major areas of female philanthropy such as their financial importance to charity work, their role in rescue work, visitation and public institutions. What emerges from Prochaska's study is the pervasive nature of women's charitable activities in England during this period, a fact that is echoed in the Irish experience. The work of American historians Mary P. Ryan, Nancy Hewitt, Anne Boylan and Lori D. Ginzberg has also been influential.⁶ All of these historians argue for the relationship which existed between women's philanthropic work, the development of middle-class culture and politics, and an understanding and consolidation of gender identity amongst philanthropic women, particularly after the American civil war. What emerges is a complex picture of women's benevolence which spanned the entire political spectrum from conservative to radical, where ideology differed amongst groups of women and where internal group dynamics was shaped by family ties, race and social class. Boylan argues for three different types of organisational tradition developing in America from the early years of the nineteenth century, a benevolent, reformist and feminist tradition, and notes that these traditions 'remained essentially separate'.⁷

In contrast, the evidence which emerges from this study shows that Irish women developed two strands in their philanthropic

⁴ See the work of Emmet Larkin, 'The devotional revolution in Ireland, 1850–75', *American Historical Review*, 77:3 (1972), pp. 625–52.

⁵ F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1980).

⁶ Anne M. Boylan, 'Women in groups: an analysis of women's benevolent organisations in New York and Boston, 1797–1840', *Journal of American History*, 71 (1984), pp. 497–523; Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822–1872* (Ithaca, 1984); Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence* (New Haven, 1990).

⁷ Boylan, 'Women in groups', p. 514.

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activity, and using Boylan's terms, these were a benevolent and reformist tradition. The dominant tradition was that of benevolence. Voluntary benevolent institutions were expressions of a desire on the part of the majority of philanthropic women to do good within a specific organisation which limited both the scope and recipients of its charity. The second tradition, which developed in the latter half of the century, can be described as reformist. In a limited number of voluntary associations a minority of women attempted to improve the plight of the poor and outcast generally through public and political action. In membership, organisation and methods of operation both the benevolent and reform societies were quite distinct. It is also significant that women in reformist societies were most often to be found in organisations working alongside men to secure their desired ends. These latter organisations redefined the terms of benevolence to some extent. While still arguing for a greater sense of morality amongst the poor, they also developed scientific approaches to the problems of poverty. Whereas most benevolent organisations were separatist in the sense that women alone generally managed and worked for their own societies, reformist organisations were based on gender alliance.

There are obvious similarities between philanthropic organisations of the different countries, particularly in areas of fundraising, structural organisation and the recipients of charity. There are always some women who are more concerned with political reform than with 'mere' acts of benevolence. There are also clear signs of development in women's philanthropic societies over the century and there is the obvious mushrooming of such organisations by the end of this period. However, for all the similarities that appear there are very obvious differences. In Ireland the impact of religion on women's charitable work is of major significance. The expansion of Catholic convent networks and their impact upon limiting the involvement of lay Catholic women in philanthropic work is a major area of concern within this study. It is an aspect which appears unique to the Irish situation and as yet no parallels have been revealed for other European countries. The sectarian nature of women's benevolence is also a feature which seems especially strong in Irish philanthropy and this is revealed most clearly in work carried out with children.

This study focuses on a number of specific issues. Chapter 1 outlines briefly the social and economic position of women in nine-

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teenth-century Irish society. In chapter 2 the important role religion played in women's lives and its impact on the development of their philanthropic activity is examined. The work of female religious and the extent to which their involvement in charity work obviated the need for lay Catholic women to engage in philanthropic enterprises is examined. All charities were sectarian in the sense that they were established on a religious basis and many dealt only with the destitute of their own persuasion. Many did not intend to be so and were willing to help any who sought aid, but in practice the poor of the various denominations sought help from philanthropists of their own religious persuasion. Religion allowed women to exercise their maternal and moral skills in the service of the poor on a broad scale and religious support validated women's work in this area. Religious difference was also the main force which separated various philanthropic groups and prevented a critique of social institutions. Through their evangelical and philanthropic work women were a primary force in the consolidation of church power in the last century.

Chapter 3 examines the role women played in organising charitable societies to look after the needs of children. It is in the area of child care that the most determined and aggressive work of philanthropists took place. Here also is seen the extensive impact that religion had on such organisations. Enormous numbers of orphanages and poor schools were established to deal with destitute and orphaned children, and their regimes reflected women's attitudes towards the parental abilities and responsibilities of the poor and their concept of parenthood in general. It was also in work with children that religious tensions between voluntary organisations surfaced most frequently.

Chapter 4 outlines the work of women with prostitutes. The 'fallen woman' was the most feared outcast of society. Women pioneered work with prostitutes and attempted to reform and remould them in the image of the ideal wife and mother. In this chapter an attempt is made to examine the extent of prostitution in Irish society and to analyse how these outcast women used the institutions and societies set up for their reformation. Here we can see that the poor and outcast must not always be viewed as victims but could exercise some control over their own lives. The operation of the Magdalen asylums in reforming outcast women is particularly important for what it reveals about the women who ran them as well as those who were the focus of reforming zeal. While the work of

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reformation was generally undertaken by benevolent women the implementation of the Contagious Diseases Acts brought some of these women into the reformist fold. The involvement of Irish women in the campaign to repeal the Acts shows that some women actively questioned the existence of a sexual double standard. Chapter 5 continues on the theme of the 'fallen woman' by looking at the woman prisoner, the extent of female criminality and women's efforts to bring about reform not only in the prison system but also through the establishment of refuges and homes for these 'outcasts'.

In chapter 6 the general variety of women's charity work is examined to reveal that charity was selective and it was both class and gender biased. There were distinct differences between the charity allowed to the destitute poor, the 'respectable' poor and the 'genteel' poor. The provision of charity within rural communities is also examined and here a picture of personal and organised charity emerges. The development of women's reformist activities is considered against the background of almost a century's philanthropic work. The importance of the temperance movement and of a tradition of philanthropy in encouraging women to demand access to formal political power, and subsequent campaigns to enable women to become poor law guardians and to participate in local and national elections are the subjects which round off this study.

This work relies heavily on printed annual reports of various charitable organisations. For many of the societies studied even such material is incomplete and there is rarely a full sequence of consecutive reports. For those societies which are still in existence the source material is much more varied and the information in the annual reports can be supplemented by that in minute books and registers detailing receipts and expenditure and the number of people to whom relief was given. These also provide case histories of those helped. Annual reports, and even minute books, also give a very good picture of the perceptions of those who provided the charity but they tell us little or nothing about those who received it. However, there are some means available to gauge how the poor viewed the system of charity. By analysing the registers of the various Magdalen institutions, for example, we can arrive at some picture of the life of a prostitute and we can see them as people who often used the system for their own ends. Convent archives contain collections of annals, registers and other miscellaneous documents

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which are generally rich in detail and provide a fascinating insight into convent life of the nineteenth century. Diocesan archives proved to be a tremendously rich source of material. Here are letters from the poor seeking relief and favours from the bishops, a voluminous correspondence between various religious congregations and the bishops and most interesting of all copies of many of the annual reports of Protestant organisations, particularly those which were considered to be proselytising agencies.

The information gleaned from annual reports, minute books and registers has been supplemented by numerous articles penned by women in the newspapers and journals of the time. Both the *Englishwoman's Journal* and the *Englishwoman's Review* proved to be invaluable sources of information on nineteenth-century Irish women, with numerous articles about their philanthropic and political activism. There were also a number of contemporary journals which were concerned with the social issues of the day, the chief amongst these being the *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland* and the *Irish Quarterly Review*, the latter being especially informative about the provisions made for prisoners, juvenile delinquents and the outcast women of society, and the *Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science*, which from mid-century debated major issues of social concern including various aspects of women's rights.

This study is in one sense a work of recovery, revealing the extent to which women shaped nineteenth-century Irish society. It is also a study of the moral power of middle and upper-class women and their attempts to use that power to define their own social and political base in Irish society.

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CHAPTER 1

Women in Irish society: 1800–1900

The history of women in nineteenth-century Ireland is the history of millions of women of different classes, different opportunities and different expectations. During the nineteenth century population expansion and contraction, partial industrialisation, the overwhelming agricultural nature of the country, urbanisation, famine, emigration and political upheaval changed the structures of Irish society and affected the role of women in social, economic and political life. Women themselves acted individually and collectively throughout the century to bring about changes in their lives and in so doing were instrumental in shaping Irish society and its values, though the forms of individual and collective action were influenced by the economic circumstances in which women found themselves. This chapter provides a brief outline of the circumstances of women's lives in the last century. It considers, in particular, the issues of employment, education and poverty. The contraction of employment opportunities for women had a profound influence on the extent of female poverty. Such poverty was a problem that was of primary concern to women philanthropists.

WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT

There is no reliable quantitative data on the employment patterns of women and men in the period 1800 to 1840. We must rely very much on contemporary evidence, often anecdotal, and on various surveys and reports to provide us with the detail necessary to build up a picture of women's economic activity. The evidence available makes it clear that women of the poorer classes contributed to the family economy in an essential way, both by performing unpaid work within the home and by providing additional sources of income, and their contribution often made the difference between

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survival and destitution. Mary E. Daly has noted that women's earnings in the pre-famine period were used to pay the rent or to purchase necessities and the employment opportunities of women, particularly in home industry, was a factor in allowing early marriage.¹ Contemporary evidence suggests the essential role women played in economic life. One investigation, conducted in 1818 and 1819, noted that 'at Skibereen females are employed in manufacturing flax . . . and are represented to contribute materially to the support of the family'.² At the same time in Cork city it was noted that women could find employment as 'workwomen [in] mantua making, and straw bonnet making; as fruit women, vegetable women, charwomen, and washer women, at the rate of 10d per day'.³ Agricultural work also provided women with an income. In Ennis it was noted that they 'have little employment, except in the latter part of spring, in spreading potatoes, manure, and afterwards in weeding; during harvest time in binding corn and gathering potatoes'.⁴ The loss of income from any of these sources could plunge a single woman or family into destitution. For Irish women homes were places of work where spinning and weaving, amongst other occupations, were carried out and were vital for the support of the family. The decline of the linen, cotton and woollen industries, experienced from the 1830s, caused hardship to families who depended on the supplementary income this employment brought.

Further evidence from the Poor Law Inquiry of the 1830s adds to the picture of the continual labour of the peasant woman. The evidence collected by the commissioners, from all strata of society, paints a vivid portrait of work, destitution and poverty. In County Mayo, for example, the Rev. Peter Ward informed the commissioners that women 'occasionally assist during the spring and harvest, there being no employment for them since the destruction of the linen trade. I have minutely inquired as to what a woman could earn at spinning linen or woollen, and find that the most attentive spinster could earn would not exceed 4d per day; a female servant will, when so fortunate as to get service, obtain wages, sometimes 5s per quarter, sometimes 6s'.⁵ In County Cork, the Rev.

¹ Mary E. Daly, 'Women in the Irish workforce from preindustrial to modern times', *Saothar*, 7 (1981), pp. 74–82.

² *First Report of the General Board of Health in the City of Dublin* (Dublin, 1822), p. 64.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 69. ⁵ *Poor Inquiry* (Ireland), appendix D, HC 1836 [36], xxxi.