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THE GREAT FAMINE: A GEOGRAPHY OF DISTRESS AND RELIEF IN COUNTY DONEGAL, 1845-50

JOHN O'CONNOR

Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D.

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FOR MUM AND DAD

He who would learn to fly one day must first learn to stand and walk and run and climb and dance; one cannot fly into flying

~ Friedrich Nietzsche ~

(1844-1900)

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university. Except where otherwise acknowledged, it is entirely my own work. The Library of Trinity College may lend or copy this thesis upon request.



John O'Connor, November 2003

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Summary

The aim of this thesis is to provide an explanatory narrative for the geography of distress and relief in Co. Donegal during the Great Famine. A further critical component seeks to set Donegal within a western seaboard and all-Ireland context. Mindful of a complex historiography, an extensive review of literature charts the study of the Great Famine, noting strengths, gaps and weaknesses, while homing in on the regional dimensions of the crisis.

In setting the scene, the eve of the Famine within Donegal and Ireland is outlined in a cogent series of demographic and socio-economic indices. Then the study assumes tight chronological order, charting a partial potato failure and response in 1845-6, and a dramatic lurch from crisis to catastrophe in 1847, in which the provision of Public Works featured prominently. At the same time, in the spring and summer of 1847, a new departure commanded the relief of distress by way of the provision of soup kitchens. Thereafter, from the autumn of 1847 onwards, the relief of distress was supported mainly through the provision of workhouse and outdoor relief under an extended Poor Law system.

To end, intra-regional patterns of relief and distress in Co. Donegal are outlined and interpreted; the anomalous status of Donegal within Ireland is opened up to scrutiny and exploration; and the adequacy of state relief evaluated.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1. AIM

This thesis has two principal aims. First, to provide an explanatory narrative of the geography of distress and relief during the Great Famine. Second, to set Donegal's experience of the Famine within a western seaboard and all-Ireland context. This work is meant to meet and answer a daunting challenge: to map, analyse and explain for the first time the regional dimensions, within a county, of the greatest disaster in modern Irish history.

1.2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.2.1 The Geography of the Famine

The Famine, as distinct from the impact of the Famine, is a subject which has received little attention from geographers. Enquiry into aspects of the spatial variation of the crisis from 1845-50 has suffered as a result. Much of the work that has been carried out tends to focus on three principal themes, those of demography, emigration/ migration and landscape change. Each of these elements are, of course, absolutely central and crucial to the study of the Famine, and historical geographers are particularly strong in wide-ranging fields of pre-Famine and post-Famine study. It is the actual event itself, and the geography of distress and response in terms of relief, that has been neglected.

Before the emergence of a plethora of publications marking the 150th anniversary of the Famine in the 1990s, the most significant work carried out on the subject was Edwards and Williams pioneering *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52.*[1] Among the most important and frequently cited contributions to the volume is O'Neill's chapter relating to the 'organisation and administration of relief' which offers an in-depth analysis of the various phases of the relief effort put in place by the British governments in the period of Famine distress from 1845 to 1851.[2] Some fifty years after first publication, O'Neill's work cannot be faulted in its accuracy and

[1] Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D. (1956), *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52*
[2] O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52,* pp. 209-54

relevance to the issues of relief and distress and it provides a useful structural blueprint for research into the subject by dividing the Famine years in terms of government legislation from the Labour Rate Act of 1846 (public works), to the Temporary Relief Act of February 1847 (soup kitchens) and the Extended Relief Act (Poor Law) from autumn 1847 onwards. Analysis of the geographical distribution of relief and regional variation in distress is restricted, given that O'Neill's chief concern is with the organisation and administration of the relief effort. On the difficulty of overcrowded workhouses in the early part of 1847, for example, O'Neill's discussion of the geography of the problem is confined to simply stating that '[it] was mainly felt in the establishments in the south and west of the country'.[3] It is hoped that this thesis may build upon O'Neill's solid base of research into distress and relief during the Famine by offering more of an insight into the spatial dimensions of the crisis.

That the shortcomings in spatial analysis have not been addressed in any radical way in the work of a majority of other writers in the fifty years since *The Great Famine* was produced can be demonstrated by reference to a number of prominent recent studies. With regard to precisely the same period and same problem of overcrowding to which O'Neill alludes to, Kinealy's interpretation is that 'with the exception of a handful of unions in the north-east of the country, in January 1847 workhouses throughout Ireland contained more inmates than they were intended to accommodate'.[4] Her diagnosis is particularly relevant to this thesis because she ignores the fact that it was not only in the north-east, but also in the north-west of Ireland that workhouses were not overcrowded and five of the eight Donegal workhouses were nowhere near maximum accommodation capacity.[5] O'Grada's exploration of what he himself terms the 'regional dimensions' to the crisis in terms of distress and relief are largely confined to a comparison between the proportions of the population on Public Works in the province of Connaught and Dublin or east Ulster.[6] Even when an author makes a clearly concerted effort not to overly generalise national trends, they can falter in their exertions. Perhaps the best and most relevant example of this is in Donnelly's excellent recent work in which he writes that 'it is dangerous to generalise about the degree to which the rental incomes

[3] ibid., p. 245
[4] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 111
[5] See, Chapter 4, Section 4.10
[6] O'Grada, C. (1989), *The Great Irish Famine,* p. 51

of landowners were reduced during the famine years'. Three sentences later, however, his verdict on the varying level of financial difficulty experienced by landed proprietors in the period is as follows: 'Whereas many owners of overcrowded estates in the west and south-west were threatened with financial ruin because of unpaid rents, their counterparts in the north-east, the east midlands, and the south-east often escaped with modest or light losses'.[7] Though his analysis is unquestionably correct, we are left to wonder at the situation in the north-west. This thesis aims to complement and add to the existing literature by shedding some light on this frequently ignored region.

Some of the answers to questions posed in relation to the actual extent of distress experienced and scale of relief required in different parts of the country have been answered by Kennedy et al. in *Mapping the Great Irish Famine.*[8] Within this volume are cartographic depictions of data held in the Database of Irish Historical Statistics, which covers the years from 1821 to 1971.[9] The authors provide a valuable resource to the geographer in that a vast array of statistics relating to pre and post-Famine socio-economic change are mapped in over two hundred well-presented illustrations. In terms of agriculture, to use just one example, the number of different sized holdings in 1847, 1852, 1861 and 1871 are mapped on a county basis (and from 1852, at Poor Law union level) for the whole country, along with a separate series of maps relating to changing crop cultivation from 1852 to 1871.[10] Of particular value to this thesis are the maps associated with distress and relief in the years following the initial potato failure in 1845. Kennedy et al. provide Irish county (and occasional union level) maps of Public Works and Poor Law relief in terms of proportions employed, as well as presenting the statistics for soup kitchen relief under the Temporary Relief Act of 1847.[11] Analysis of the information presented in the publication is quite limited, though a broad commentary on national trends gives the reader some insight into the underlying causes of distress and the need for relief on different scales in various parts of Ireland. The authors themselves acknowledge that their 'explanation

[7] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine,* p. 132
[8] Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine*
[9] Developed through the Department of Economic and Social History in Queen's University, Belfast, the database itself now resides in the ESRC Archive at the University of Essex
[10] Kennedy et al. (1999), pp. 164-175, 179-192
[11] ibid., pp. 127, 129, 132-33, 135

of events at a regional level are necessarily tentative' and suggest that more localised knowledge and analysis of the regional patterns presented could build on the foundations laid in their work.[12]

Kennedy et al. are by no means the first authors to utilise the power of the map to illustrate the geography of the Famine. The geographer J.H. Johnson has contributed much to our understanding of population movement in Ireland in the years leading up to the crisis. In one paper alone, he draws together earlier work by Adams[13] and Cousens[14] and uses Mokyr's[15] refined emigration statistics to produce a map of pre-Famine emigration at county level for the period 1821-41.[16] In another study, Johnson's research is conducted at a much more local level when he minutely examines population movement in Co. Derry during 1834, while his work on pre-Famine harvest migration for the whole of Ireland is of particular relevance to this thesis.[17] According to Johnson, the 'problem of travel [to point of embarkation] was probably least for those from north-west Ireland, where the port of Londonderry formed a most important link for harvesters travelling to Scotland'.[18] His view is shared by other writers who also highlight the strong connection between the north-west of Ireland and Scotland in terms of seasonal migration.[19]

Further geographical analysis of emigration and migration before, during and after the Famine has been carried out by a number of writers.[20] The most significant piece

[12] ibid., p. 13

[13] Adams, W.F. (1932), *Ireland and Irish Emigration to the New World from 1815 to the Famine*

[14] Cousens, S.H. (1965), 'The Regional Variation in Emigration from Ireland between 1821 and 1841' in, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* no. 37, pp. 15-30

[15] unpublished material, see Johnson (1998), p. 86; see also, Mokyr, J. & O'Grada, C. (1982), 'Emigration and Poverty in pre-Famine Ireland' in *Explorations in Economic History*, vol. 19, pp. 360-384

[16] Johnson, J.H. (1988), 'The Distribution of Irish Emigration in the Decade Before the Great Famine' in, *Irish Geography*, Vol. 21, pp., 78-87

[17] Johnson, J.H. (1960), 'Population Movements in County Derry During a Pre-Famine Year' in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy,* Vol. 60, Sec. C., pp. 141-162; Johnson, J.H. (1967), 'Harvest Migration from Nineteenth-Century Ireland' in, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* No. 41, pp. 97-112

[18] Johnson, J.H. (1967), p. 102

[19] Kerr, B.M. (1943), 'Irish Seasonal Migration to Great Britain, 1800-38' in, *Irish Historical Studies,* Vol. III, p. 372; O'Grada, C. (1975), 'Seasonal Migration and Post-Famine Adjustment in the West of Ireland' in, *Studia Hibernica*, no. 13, p. 51; O'Dowd, A. (1995), 'Seasonal Migration to the Lagan and Scotland' in, Nolan, W., Ronayne, L. & Dunlevy, M., *Donegal: History and Society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county*

[20] See, for example: Kennedy, L. & Clarkson, L.A. (1993), 'Birth, Death and Exile: Irish Population History, 1700-1921' in Graham, B.J. & Proudfoot, L.J. (eds.), *An Historical Geography of Ireland*

of research from our current perspective is the work of Cousens on the outward movement of population during the years 1846-51.[21] Though Cousens' calculations are essentially based on the a simple subtraction of Famine mortality from 1841-51 population decline, it is unlikely that the broad trends illustrated in his map of emigration numbers as a percentage of county population in Ireland are affected by possible inaccuracies in the data.[22] It is worth mentioning that Donegal is among the counties exhibiting lowest Famine emigration rates at under 7.5 per cent of the 1841 population and thus Cousens' research demonstrates that emigration was not a factor in reducing pressure on relief mechanisms in the county.

Whelan has argued that 'the famine was by no means a universal disaster, and it struck in socially and spatially selective ways'.[23] In a series of compelling and authoritative studies he has gone on to demonstrate the connection between the potato-aided push of settlement to the margins of cultivable land and the disproportionate impact of the Famine on these same areas of intense population pressure.[24] Central to the build-up to the Famine, Whelan argues, is 'the inevitable potato' and crucial to the production of the potato on the poor ground of mountain slope or bog fringe was the lazy bed.[25] Labour intensive cultivation by the spade could be facilitated by the use of local manures like seaweed and the massive labour input into crop growing was absorbed by population growth. Furthermore, the clachan and rundale systems of settlement and agriculture allowed habitation and subsistence (or even relative prosperity) for those who dwelt within the clusters and unenclosed strips of the west. In a summation which conveys as much as another author might elucidate in several pages, Whelan explains the modified pattern of

(Migration before and after the Famine is dealt with, pp. 172-77; Houston, C.J. & Smyth, W.J. (1993), 'The Irish Diaspora: Emigration to the New World, 1720-1920' in Graham, B.J. & Proudfoot, L.J. (eds.), *An Historical Geography of Ireland* (Emigration during and after the Famine is dealt with, pp. 348-9

[21] Cousens, S.H. (1960), 'The Regional Pattern of Emigration During the Great Irish Famine, 1846-51' in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* no. 28, pp. 119-134

[22] Cousens uses the retrospective 1851 census data relating to deaths: *Reports of the commissioners appointed to take the census for Ireland for the year 1851,* H.C. 1856[2087][2134], xxxi, Table xxxiii, p. li

[23] Whelen, K. (1986), 'The Famine and Post-Famine Adjustment', in Nolan, W. (ed.), *The Shaping of Ireland: The Geographical Perspective,* pp. 151-175

[24] ibid., Whelan, K. (1995), 'Pre and Post-Famine Landscape Change' in Póirtéir, C (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine,* pp. 19-33; Whelan, K. (1997), 'The modern landscape: from plantation to present' in Aalen, F.H.A., Whelan, K. & Stout, M. (1997), *Atlas of the Irish rural landscape,* pp. 67-103

[25] Whelan, K. (1995), pp. 19, 22

settlement by writing that 'the spade and the spud conquered the contours'.[26] It is difficult to argue against the persuasive evidence put forward that the blight and the Famine, when it came, would strike first and hardest in these rundale and clachan settlements and among the cottier class at the perimeters of large or medium sized farms. Equally, there is little to add to Whelan's assessment of post-Famine Irish landscape change as a result of the three-tier impact of the crisis on the labourers and cottiers (massive emigration), the landlords (financial difficulty and sale of estates) and in the middle, the farmers (increased stability, control and the expansion of pasture).[27]

Whelan also provides some evidence of the geography of distress and response in terms of relief during the Famine, mapping the Poor Law union population proportions taking up soup kitchen rations in the summer of 1847. On the basis of this illustration he comments on levels of distress in the country, concluding that 'the least affected areas were in the immediate hinterlands of Belfast and Dublin and there is a general north-east to south-west gradient in the intensity of distress'.[28] It is interesting to note that Whelan ignores the fact that the map to which he is referring exposes two other 'least affected areas' illustrated in the same bright green as the hinterlands of Belfast and Dublin. One is the union of Londonderry (a portion of which stretched into east Donegal) and the other is the far northwestern union of Dunfanaghy. In addition, at a county level, there is one in particular which quite clearly upsets the notion of a broadly 'north-east to south-west gradient'. This is Donegal.

The aim of Whelan's work is not to discuss or explain such irregularities in the spatial variation of distress; it is to conduct an analysis of changing landscape, and in doing so, he provides an admirable and often captivating discussion of settlement, land and impact of the Famine on the 'Atlantic littoral' and elsewhere. This is Irish geography at its most insightful. Why, then, do we not take up this baton and embark upon a more detailed regional examination of such issues in relation to that most peninsular of Atlantic peripheries, the north-west of Ireland and Donegal? The

[26] Whelan, K. (1995), p. 24
[27] Whelan, K. (1986) pp. 157-162
[28] Whelan, K. (1997), p. 89

answer to our question will be found between the covers of O'Donnell's excellent work on the estate system of landholding in the county.[29] Though the principal purpose of her work is to focus on landed estate improvement from the 1830s until the eventual demise of the estate system from 1870 to 1923, the study period as a whole includes considerable direct referral to the Famine period and aftermath. From the outset, O'Donnell highlights the importance of the Famine by alluding to the 'period of heightened distress [being] a turning point in terms of viability of many estates' and with stagnant or declining rents, growing indebtedness led to the passing of the Encumbered Estates Act in 1849 and the initial sounding of the death knell for the estate system.[30]

In the main body of the text, O'Donnell examines the wave of agricultural improvements initiated in the 1830s and comprising of both the 'rationalisation of former rundale holdings and the extension of cultivation into wastelands'.[31] In doing so, she places a considerable emphasis on the intra-regional variation in improvement within the county and produces a series of Ordnance Survey maps illustrating the changes in clustered settlement patterns on the landscape up to 1852.[32] In addition, a case study of Inishowen East hones into parish and even townland level in demonstrating that 'there was nothing haphazard in the choice of location of clusters [and] all were strategically placed to take advantage of arable and wasteland'.[33] Though not explicitly stated, we can infer that the impact of the Famine on such settlements in at least some parts of Inishowen was negligible, owing to the fact that rundale, openfield, partnership groups and clusters thrived until the early 1860s.[34] It is not practicable to detail more than a fraction of O'Donnell's contribution to the subject of pre and post-Famine landscape change and though her study tackles the issue chiefly from the landlord and estate perspective, there is little opening left for constructive research from a more directly 'Famine oriented' point of view. Rather than revisiting a considerable tract of ground which has already been covered and

[29] O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), *The Estate System of Landholding in County Donegal, 1830 to 1923: a geographical analysis* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin)
[30] ibid., p. 2, 19; Encumbered Estates Courts, sale and purchase of Donegal estates and the impact of the new owners on land occupation and settlement are dealt with for the period 1850-1885, pp. 157-208
[31] ibid., p. 102
[32] ibid., pp. 117-119
[33] ibid., p. 82
[34] ibid., pp. 82-85

covered well, it is a much more worthwhile exercise to balance the geographical analysis of nineteenth century Donegal through a close examination of distress, relief and the spatial variation of both, during the critical years of the Famine itself.

Much of the existing literature on the geography of the Famine has been shown to tackle the subject from a national perspective and it is understandably impossible to fully address the minute distinctions, similarities and peculiarities of different parts of the country in these broad studies. It is also unquestionably the case that, in general, the areas which bore the brunt of the crisis in 1845-50 were located to the west and south of Ireland and as a result the majority of authors tend to hone in on these regions in their analyses of general patterns of distress. However, it is equally certain that there is a need for good, focused regional studies of the Famine period as a means of fleshing out the already sturdy and multifaceted skeleton of national research which has come to particular prominence in the last ten or fifteen years. Donegal and the north-west presents as something of a blank canvas in terms of Famine research and it is hoped that this thesis may contribute to the existing Irish literature by painting in the void.

1.2.2. The Famine in Regional and Local Context

Before the huge upsurge in interest in the Great Famine from the early 1990s onward, the regional and local dimensions of the crisis were poorly documented. Local and parish histories were quite abundant but tended to utilise the available sources inadequately and lacked in any comparative perspective. O'Grada refers to the almost universal absence of scholarly analysis at county or regional level by 1989, writing that 'the lack of Irish research is well reflected in the paucity of regional studies'.[35] In the nearly fifteen years that have passed, the plethora of Famine related material published has included a vast array of local and regional studies, each in their own way adding to our understanding of the composite tapestry of relief, distress and Famine experience through the 1840s and beyond.

[35] O'Grada, C. (1989), *The Great Irish Famine,* p. 51

One of the pioneering examinations of the Famine at local level is Hickey's work on west Cork, which, in its first incarnation, dealt with four parishes and later with six in Skibbereen Poor Law union.[36] In this body of work, Hickey clearly demonstrates that the popular impression of hardship depicted by the *Illustrated London News* in the early part of 1847 can be confirmed through detailed analysis of the sources available for the area around Schull and Skibbereen during the Famine. The attention devoted to intra-regional variation in distress and mortality between the parishes in the study area provides a good blueprint for quantitative regional analysis. The other value of Hickey's work is that it vividly lays bare the direct consequences of flawed government relief policy and administrative delays on the ground. In one particularly graphic example the author refers to a man who died while labouring on a Public Works scheme because his wages had been delayed for two weeks in the late autumn of 1847.[37] It is of critical importance to complement the cold statistics with actual cases of distress and in studies which tackle the Famine period from a national perspective, this can often be difficult to achieve. It is worth mentioning that the popular appeal of Hickey's superb work has not diminished in the years since it was first produced, as evidenced by the queues of people outside the Mercier Press bookshop at the launch of the most recent version in 2002.[38]

Another useful early regional work on the Famine also relates to Cork, in this case to the whole county. Donnelly's study is not exclusively devoted to the subject of the Famine, though he is alone among contemporaries in providing a separate chapter within a county history.[39] As with Hickey's work, Donnelly's scholarly eye is focused on comparative analysis, combined with a proclivity toward reconstructing the Famine experience. The desperation of the poorer population throughout Cork is elucidated through minute examination of rising crime and violence in the county, particularly in the winter of 1846-7 when the theft of turnips and sheep stealing appear to have been an omnipresent difficulty for farmers in the county. Riotous

[36] Hickey, P. (1980), *A Study of Four Peninsular Parishes in West Cork, 1796-1855* (unpublished MA. Thesis, NUI Cork); Hickey, P. (1993), 'Famine, mortality and emigration: a profile of six parishes in the poor law union of Skibbereen, 1846-7', in O'Flanagan, P. & Cornelius Buttimer, C. (eds.), *Cork: History and Society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county*

[37] Hickey, P. (1993), p. 876

[38] Hickey, P. (2002), *Famine in West Cork: The Mizen Peninsula Land and People, 1800-1852*

[39] Donnelly, J.S. (1975), *The land and the people of 19th century Cork: the rural economy and the land question*

assembly at the gates of workhouses and the doors of relief committee meeting places was very common also, while the destitute and starving took matters into their own hands when bread shops and provision stores were sacked in the towns of Cloyne, Castlemartyr, Midelton and Cloheen during the same winter.[40] In Donnelly's view, the problems of crime, violence and protest had largely abated by the end of 1847, though only due to the fact that the labouring population were 'demoralized [and] shattered in spirit as well in body'.[41]

Other more recent regional and local studies of the Famine have also revealed the increase in crime and protest in some localities during the worst periods of the Famine. In Kerry, for example, Foley notes that 'the county's crime figures... increased substantially as the famine's impact deepened and so one might argue that the people of Kerry did not quite take their fate lying down'.[42] It is interesting to note that Foley's unpublished work remains one of the only in-depth and full-length academic studies of the Great Famine at county level in Ireland.[43] As such, it is of considerable relevance to this thesis as some of the structural considerations and many of the sources for research are similar. In terms of the themes with which we are most concerned, Foley does devote considerable attention to the issues of distress and relief, while the general structure of his work is set along the lines of different government relief periods. His use of the available sources is quite good, though there is a tendency to rely very heavily on newspaper reports from the *Kerry Evening Post* and *Tralee Chronicle* and Poor Law guardian's minutes.[44] Foley also makes an attempt to compare the different localities or regions within his study area. In his chapter on the extended Poor Law after 1847, for example, the author includes a table indicating the maximum percentage of population receiving relief during any one week for the years 1847 to 1851 in four of the six unions in Kerry.[45] In assessing

[40] ibid., pp. 87-91
[41] ibid., p. 91
[42] Foley, K. (1997), *Kerry During the Great Famine, 1845-52* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 159
[43] The other main work being: Cowman, W. and Brady, D. (eds.) (1995), *The Famine in Waterford, 1845-1850: Teacht na bprátaí dubha*
[44] In Chapter 4, for example, there are 63 references to newspapers out of a total of 93 references. Another example of over-reliance on newspapers, which, while unquestionably a valuable and essential source of information, can tend to give a rather one dimensional perspective on the subject is: Ó'Murchadha, C. (1998), *Sable wings over the land: Ennis, Co. Clare, and its wider community during the Great Famine*
[45] ibid., p. 209

potato crop loss for the period 1845-51, Foley provides a table of the total acreage of potatoes in Kerry in each year, compared with the total acreage nationally.[46] This thesis would seek to expand upon such comparative analysis in relation to Donegal by mapping and graphing intra-regional variation within the county along with national trends.

Scally, writing on the townland of Ballykilcline in Roscommon provides quite an interesting adjunct to the study of the Famine in that the residents in the locality had staged what the author describes as a 'rebellion' in the years before the crisis by withholding rents and ignoring eviction notices even though they lived on lands belonging to the Crown. With the onset of hunger and distress in the early part of 1846, they were forced to accept the government's offer of free passage to the New World and the townland had been almost wholly deserted by the spring of 1848. The only danger in Scally's interpretation of events is that he tends to make the experience of around one hundred families stand as a ubiquitous signification of rural Ireland in the pre-Famine and Famine periods.[47]

The issue of Famine eviction is one which has received considerable attention from a number of other authors. With regard to the barony of Boyle in Roscommon, Coleman, like Scally, puts forward the contention that 'starvation and disease had substantially reduced the capacity of the poor to resist eviction' by 1847.[48] There can certainly be little argument that this was the case in much of the country, particularly with the introduction of the 'Gregory Clause' towards the end of 1847.[49] This led to the fairly widespread necessity for cottiers and labourers to give up their land in order to obtain relief from the Poor Law and acted as a stimulus toward the 'clearances' which occurred on some estates, most notoriously in Kilrush, Co. Clare.[50] In Wicklow, Rees notes that 'the clearance programme carried out on the Coolattin estate between 1847 and 1856 was a massive undertaking – and a costly one', owing

[46] Foley, K. (1997), p. 207
[47] Scally, R.J. (1995), *The End of Hidden Ireland: rebellion, famine and emigration*
[48] Coleman, A. (1999), *Riotous Roscommon: social unrest in the 1840s,* p. 51
[49] The clause stipulated that persons occupying more than a quarter acre of land could not be deemed destitute and were therefore exempt from relief under the Poor Law
[50] See: Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine,* pp. 144-156

to the cost to the landlord of assisted emigration for the dispossessed tenants.[51] In his work on Mayo, McManamon considers Lord Lucan to have been the 'most infamous' landlord for Famine eviction, with 'over 3,000 cabins demolished and as many as 2,000 people put out on the roads in the parish of Ballinrobe alone'.[52]

Turning more directly to the issue of Famine relief and distress, we find that quite a large number of authors highlight the considerable delay in putting the government's relief mechanisms in place on the ground. In Kilkee, Co. Clare, for example, Murphy notes the closure of official food depots at the beginning of the second season of potato failure and the subsequent lengthy delay in gaining approval from the Board of Works for employment projects. This created a gulf in the relief support available to the population and according to Murphy, 'the people were thrown back on their own resources, which were practically non-existent'.[53] Murphy's comments are mirrored in the work of other authors with regard to different parts of the country and it was often only through the exertions of local relief committees that greater levels of distress, starvation and mortality were avoided in the period leading up to the opening of Public Works.[54] Even in Armagh, where distress was fairly limited, MacAtasney refers to the slow intervention of the state during the 'worsening conditions of the winter of 1846' and notes that the 'voluntary relief committees proved to be an essential component of attempts to counteract the effects of food scarcity'.[55] In other studies, the continuing problems of the Public Works period are highlighted in relation to the months after the schemes themselves were started towards the end of 1846. Hannigan notes the inadequacy of wages in Wicklow, for example, writing that: 'with food prices continuing to climb relentlessly, the pay of

[51] Rees, J. (2000), *Surplus People: the Fitzwilliam clearances 1847-1856,* p. 127; See also: Duffy, P.J. (1992), 'Assisted emigration from the Shirley Estate 1843-54', in *Clogher Record* 14/2

[52] McManamon, S.P. (1998), 'Landlords and evictions in Co. Mayo during the Great Famine', in *Cathair na Mart,* 18, p. 130

[53] Murphy, I. (1981), 'Kilkee and its Neighbourhood During the Second Year of the Great Famine, 1846-1847', in *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, XXIII, pp. 78-79; See also: Murphy, I. (1996), *A starving people: life and death in west Clare 1845-51*, pp. 94-106

[54] See, for example, Grant, J. (1995), 'Local Relief Committees in Cavan, 1845-7', in *Breifne*, VIII; Dallat, C. (1997), 'Famine in County Antrim', *The Glynnes: Journal of the Glens of Antrim Historical Society*, 25; Clinton, G. (1997), 'Philanthropy: Relief Committees in the Ballina Union during the Great Irish Famine', *Cathair na Mart,* 17

[55] MacAtasney, G. (1997), *This dreadful visitation: The Famine in Lurgan/Portadown,* p. 31

one shilling per day for those on the public works was no longer sufficient to feed themselves and their families'.[56]

The other key relief mechanism, the Poor Law, also receives considerable attention from local and regional commentators on the Famine. Some, like Deegan on Roscrea, Co. Tipperary, Livingstone on Castleblaney, Co. Monaghan, or the incredibly detailed work of O'Cathaoir on Co. Wicklow, focus almost entirely on the organisational and administrative aspects of relief in the workhouses, tending to reveal more about issues such as the hiring of staff or education provision than the actual level of distress or scale of relief required in the unions to which they refer.[57] Others, most notably Kinealy in a number of chapters on the Poor Law in the *History & Society* series, shed a considerable amount of light on the actual extent of distress in particular areas and the individual problems of relief provision experienced by boards of guardians.[58] In Waterford, for example, the guardians allowed illegal admissions of unaccompanied children to the already overcrowded workhouse in the early part of 1847.[59] The illegality arose because the Poor Law did not actually recognise a 'right to relief' for children, but only permitted applications by family units. In relation to Galway union, Kinealy notes the financial difficulties of the board, who were forced to refuse admissions in the same period because they were unable to secure a loan from government to build or rent auxiliary accommodation and believed it would be impossible to obtain additional rates from the overburdened ratepayers.[60] Marnane's work on south Tipperary offers an insight into the desperate measures resorted to by some of those refused admission to the workhouse in Clonmel at the beginning of

[56] Hannigan, K. (1994), 'Wicklow before and after the Famine' in Nolan, W. and Hannigan, K. (eds.), *Wicklow: History and Society; interdisciplinary essays on an Irish county,* p. 805

[57] Deegan, T. (1992), 'Roscrea Poor Law Union: its administration 150 years ago', in *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 5, pp. 96-104; Livingstone, P. (1964), 'Castleblaney Poor Law Union: the early years 1839-49', in *Clogher Record,* 5, pp. 227-250; Ó Cathaoir, E. (1994), 'The Poor Law in County Wicklow', in Nolan, W. and Hannigan, K. (eds.), *Wicklow: History and Society: interdisciplinary essays on an Irish county*

[58] Kinealy, C. (1992) 'The workhouse system in County Waterford, 1838-1923', in Nolan, W., Power, T.P. & Cowman, D. (eds.) *Waterford: history and society*; Kinealy, C. (1996), 'The response of the poor law to the Great Famine in County Galway', in Moran, G. & Gillespie, R. (eds.), *Galway: History and Society;* see also: Kinealy, C. (1986), 'The administration of the Poor Law in Co. Mayo 1838-98', in *Cathair na Mart,* 6/1

[59] Kinealy, C. (1992), pp. 584-85

[60] Kinealy, C. (1996), p. 381

1848, when 'there were many who [were] refused relief and went about the streets, breaking lamps and windows in the hope of being put in goal and thus fed'.[61]

Both Marnane and Kinealy, along with Donnelly and Hickey on Cork and Hannigan on Wicklow, are among the only exponents of an intra-regional comparative approach to the study of distress and relief systems during the Famine. Each of the authors mentioned above, attempts to address the question of regional variation within their particular study area through comparison of different parishes, unions or baronies. In addition, attempts are often made to compare or contrast regional or local study areas with other parts of the country. Marnane, for example, contrasts the relatively good (or less distressed) conditions in south Tipperary to the situation in west Cork.[62] In examining the patterns of relief and distress within Donegal, we should bear in mind that the county did not exist in isolation from the rest of Ireland. In some regional studies, the balance between close examination of the area in question and contextual analysis relating to the situation in other parts of the country is tilted far too much toward the study area itself. It is vitally important to avoid such imbalance in discussing the geography of the Famine in Donegal.

1.2.3. The Famine in Donegal

Literature on the Great Famine in Donegal itself is quite limited, though there have been some useful local studies written in relation to particular areas within the county. In addition, a number of broader regional studies of the Famine in Ulster or the north-west contain references to the subject.[63] In an otherwise thorough and fairly comprehensive examination of the county, we find no specific chapter or segment directly relating to the Famine between the wide covers of *Donegal History and Society,* unlike the sister publications for Down, Galway, Cork, Waterford and Wicklow.[64] At the fundamental level of tackling the subject of the Famine in any shape or form on the basis of the county as a whole, therefore, a wide fissure exists in

[61] Marnane, D.G..(1996), 'The Famine in South Tipperary', in *Tipperary Historical Journal,* 10, p. 132
[62] ibid., p. 134-5
[63] The only actual chapter being: Begley A. & Lally S. (1997), 'The Famine in County Donegal' in Kinealy C. & Parkhill, T. (eds.), *The Famine in Ulster: the regional impact*
[64] Nolan, W., Ronayne, L., Dunlevy, M., (eds.) (1995), *Donegal: History and Society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county*

the literature. Moreover, we shall see that the light cast by historical geographers on the peripheries of the north-west has actually been reasonably bright in terms of mid-nineteenth century landholding, landscape change, estate system and even workhouse establishment and by examining and analysing the course of the Famine itself, this study aims to complement and add to the geographical literature for the county.[65]

The actual geography of the Famine in Donegal is an issue which is often ignored by the authors of the relatively large number of local historical studies of the event. In addition, O'Donnell's observation that 'much of the literature available for nineteenth-century Donegal follows the empirical tradition of regional analysis and documentation of historical detail' is an assessment of local research which is unquestionably true for studies of the Famine period.[66] In what is perhaps the most comprehensive regional work on the subject, Conaghan displays a fairly thorough knowledge of the sources and he reproduces a large number of relevant contemporary quotations and official data. As a starting point for investigation into some of the possible sources for research into the Famine in Donegal, Conaghan's work is useful.

Campbell's *Death in Templecrone* is a straightforward chronological account of the period 1845-50 in the parish, located to the north of Glenties union and including Arranmore Island. Along with Quaker reports and some newspaper accounts, Campbell alludes to testimony from his own family and other evidence from the *Folklore Commission* in what is a personal account of the Famine in the Rosses.[67] More work on this part of the county by Pádraig Ua Cnáimshí concentrates on meal distribution by local committees during 1846-7.[68] In another study, a different author of the same surname looks at the impact of the Famine on Arranmore Island and provides an informative account, particularly in relation to the obstacles in actually getting relief to such a remote location. Breandán Mac Cnáimshí notes that

[65] O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), *The Estate System of Landholding in County Donegal, 1830 to 1923: a geographical analysis* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin); O'Connor, J. (2000), *Finely Focused Vision: Landscape and life on the Cos. Kerry and Donegal Estates of Trinity College in the 1840s* (unpublished B.A. Dissertation, TCD); Crampsie, A. (2003), *The Creation of the Donegal Workhouses: a historical geography* (unpublished B.A. Dissertation, TCD)

[66] ibid., p. 22

[67] Campbell, Patrick (1995), *Death in Templecrone: an account of the Famine years in northwest Donegal, 1845-50*

[68] Mac Cnáimshí, P. (1995), 'The Great Famine in the Rosses' in, *Donegal Annual*, Vol. X, No. 3, p. 242

'Arranmore created insuperable problems for officials who were charged with the responsibility of bringing relief to the stricken islanders' due to the absence of adequate roads to transport meal by land and the difficulty in landing sufficient supplies by water.[69]

Immediately to the north of Templecrone, Arranmore and the Rosses lay the Poor Law union of Dunfanaghy, an area which exhibits remarkably little sign of severe distress in the Famine period. Cox et al. *The Famine in Dunfanaghy* gathers together various pieces of documentary evidence relating to the area.[70] Cannon, one of the editors of the compilation, later wrote an article in *Donegal Annual* which synthesises some of the information in a more readily accessible format.[71] Cannon sets his work in context when he correctly points out that '... the Union of Dunfanaghy survived the Famine much better than many other parts of the country including other parts of Donegal'. He concludes that 'the existence of a concerned resident landlord class was a significant factor' in the remarkably low level of distress and consequent absence of a requirement for government relief measures of any great magnitude.[72]

In contrast to the good state of affairs in Dunfanaghy, MacCuinneagáin's study of Glencolumbcille in the south-west of the county documents generally very poor reports of conditions in a chronologically structured and well-informed account of the Famine in the parish.[73] With reference to the same parish, Manning's recent work offers some linkage between pre-Famine trends and the potential vulnerability of the population to the onslaught of the crisis after 1845. In his estimation there were three principal reasons for the 'endemic poverty' in Glencloumbcille, namely 'inattentive landlords, suffocating rents and natural disasters [famine in 1836]'. In addition, he notes that 'there was no stable industry other than fishing (and even that was hampered by poor equipment) and people attempted to accommodate themselves amidst [a] population explosion by cultivating land that was never intended for that

[69] Mac Cnáimshí, B. (1973), 'Arranmore Island in the Great Famine' in *Donegal Annual*, Vol. X, No. 3, p. 242
[70] Cox, C., Kinealy, C. & Cannon, S. (1992), *The Famine in Dunfanaghy*
[71] Cannon, S. (1997), 'The Famine in Dunfanaghy' *in, Donegal Annual,* no. 49, pp. 69-76
[72] ibid., p. 76
[73] MacCuinneagáin, C. (1995), 'The Great Famine in Glencolmcille and neighbourhood' in, *Donegal Annual,* no. 47, pp. 28-38

purpose'.[74] Much of the remaining local literature is confined to chapters in parish or district histories which tend to cover very long time periods and a series of different themes. The Famine does not occupy a prominent place in the majority of such works and most tend to offer a summary of events in a few pages.[75]

In the realm of regional study beyond the local level, analytical and explanatory investigation into the Famine in Donegal is practically nonexistent, with one notable exception. Grant's authoritative work on the mechanisms of relief in operation during the Famine in Ulster contains a good deal of valuable information and analysis of the period in Donegal, though the evidence relating to the county is understandably very scattered owing to his thematic approach to dealing with the whole province. Particularly useful evidence is presented in relation to the location of some of the local relief committees in operation in the year after the initial potato blight and what Grant refers to as a 'meal mania' which had 'seized the west and south-west of Donegal' by the autumn of 1846.[76] In relation to the Public Works period of 1846-7 and the relief operations under the Soup Kitchen Act he manages to covey some idea of the regional impact of distress by presenting the different county proportions of population relying on the systems of relief in table form.[77] In addition, the conclusions drawn from such evidence are well thought out. In offering an explanation for the relatively low numbers of people on Public Works in Donegal in 1847, for example, he notes the contribution of the resident proprietors in the local relief effort, writing that 'more resident landlords [were] committed to the success of their relief committees [in Donegal] than any other Ulster county'.[78] The other major advantage of Grant's work is that it leads the reader to quite a number of potential sources for further exploration, while the fact that he concentrates on (and offers valuable insights into) the various relief mechanisms put in place to deal with food shortage and distress is particularly relevant to this thesis.

[74] Manning, A. (2002), *Glencolumbcille: A History, 3000BC – 1901AD,* p. 159
[75] See, for example: Brody, L. (1986), *Glenties and Inishkeel,* pp. 96-102; Egan, B. (1986), *Drumhome,* pp. 42-3; McGill, P.J. (1970), *History of the Parish of Ardara,* pp. 90-96
[76] Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), pp. 25, 31
[77] ibid., Appendix 2, p. 459; Appendix 4, p. 461
[78] ibid., p. 129

One hindrance to Grant's work is that he ignores the pre-Famine tapestries of society, economy and culture in Ulster and proceeds directly into an examination of various relief committees at the outset. It would appear that his initial intention had been to conduct such an examination but time presumably limited him solely to exploring the Famine relief systems at the exclusion of important information relating to Ulster before 1845. In addition, there are quite severe limitations to what can be achieved in attempting to tackle the whole province of Ulster and the author readily admits that 'difficulties of generalisation' in relation to specific parts of the province are inevitable.[79] His work on Donegal, while beneficial as a starting point for further research, could not hope to delve deep enough into the intra-regional socio-economic variations that are essential factors in investigating both the general position of the county in a national context (or in Grant's case, the context of Ulster) and the scale and nature of relief required or provided at a local and regional level. Grant himself alludes to such difficulties in relation to an assessment of a county table of relief funds when he writes that:

> The figures have meaning only when set in the context of the distress encountered in each county and, indeed, it must be acknowledged that to discuss famine distress comparatively on a county basis is of questionable value. What would be needed would be a clear delineation of a large number of local economies which might then be examined in detail in order to establish the elements in them which made for proneness or resistance to the famine crisis. This had been one of the early hopes which led to the present study, but it was quickly realised that such an investigation would be impossible...[80]

Grant concludes his thesis with the recommendation that further research into the period 1845-40 in Ireland should be conducted by carrying out 'detailed examinations of how local economies responded to the great famine, so that the abundant generalisations about the famine can be tested and adjusted'.

Another study which deserves mention in the interest of completeness with regard to Famine related literature for Donegal is the work of Clinton on local relief committee membership in Ireland.[81] Her study period runs to the end of the Famine

[79] ibid., p. 109
[80] ibid., p. 108
[81] Clinton, G. (1999), *A Benevolent Society? local relief committee membership in Ireland, 1817-52* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, TCD)

and one of the four sample areas used in her thesis happens to be the union of Inishowen. Her work is understandably of limited direct relevance to the study of the Famine in Donegal considering that only Inishowen lies within her remit and the years from 1845 onward form only a fraction of the period covered. However, she does offer some valuable insights into energetic relief committee activity in the winter of 1846-7 and we can forge a possible connection between these endeavours and the remarkably low proportion of the population forced to seek relief through the government's Public Works system operating at that time.[82]

In conclusion, we turn to the field of historical geography and Famine related literature for Donegal. We have previously noted the considerable contribution made by O'Donnell in her informative and well researched study of the estate system of landholding in the county. Slightly more recently, O'Connor has conducted comparative geographical research into the estates of Trinity College in Donegal and Kerry. Though this study does have a devoted chapter relating to the Famine, it is a fairly restricted and brief comparative outline of conditions in Donegal and Kerry in the period immediately following the first and second years of blight. The real value of this work is that it is based very largely on the incredibly detailed survey of the estates which was conducted by Maurice Collis in 1843, so that it is possible to get a snapshot of at least some parts of the county in the period from the 1841 Census to the initial season of potato failure in 1845. Even more recently, Crampsie's study of the foundation and establishment of the workhouse system in Donegal provides a detailed account of the structure of the boards of guardians as well as an examination of the processes involved in finding a suitable site and actually building the institutions which would come to play so prominent a role in the state relief effort from the autumn of 1847 onward.[83] Even as early as December 1841, Crampsie notes the 'lengthy discussions' conducted by the Glenties guardians in simply deciding on the actual size of the institution required in the union.[84] As we shall see, frequent delays and protracted negotiations on the part of the board of Glenties are also typical during the Famine period and in it was often through such inefficiency that problems arose in relation to overcrowding or the sourcing and provision of meal after 1845.

[82] ibid., 172-74; see Chapter 4, Fig. 4.4. for Public Works statistics
[83] Crampsie, A. (2003), *The Creation of the Donegal Workhouses: a historical geography* (unpublished B.A. Dissertation, TCD)
[84] ibid., p. 35-6

If O'Donnell's fine work were to be imagined as one of the longer sides of a rectangle of geographical research in the county and the smaller-scale studies of Crampsie and O'Connor as the two shorter sides, this thesis would seek to complete the quadrangle, thereby putting a well defined 'shape' on the historical geography of mid-nineteenth century Donegal.

1.3. SOURCES

The principal sources of evidence relating to the geography of distress and relief during the Famine period are contained within the British parliamentary papers. These contain vast amounts of statistical data for the entire pre-Famine and Famine periods, allowing the researcher to build from a solid foundation of facts and figures for analysis. As well as hard data, the parliamentary papers also minutely detail the various government Famine relief policies, while voluminous reports from officials and others on the ground were also recorded for the period 1845-51.

Turning firstly to numerical data, the 1841 Census is the key source of evidence used in examining pre-Famine society and economy.[85] As well as offering demographic information which can be used to extrapolate population change and densities at county, barony and parish levels in the periods before and after the Famine (1841 Census in tandem with 1821, 1831 and 1851)[86], the 1841 Census also provides vital information relating to housing (divided into four classes of dwelling), education (male and female literacy) and migration (on an inter-county basis and emigration to Great Britain). Another extremely useful source of evidence for Famine research are the occupation tables which divide the population into a large number of occupational classifications. Within a parish return, for example, a high density of persons classified as 'dependent on their own manual labour' may provide us with some indication of vulnerability to the oncoming crisis when taken in

[85] *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841*, H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, 1

[86] *Abstract of answers and returns, pursuant to act Geo. 3, for taking an account of the population in Ireland in 1821*, H.C. 1824[577], xxii; *Census of the population, 1831, with comparative abstract as taken in 1821*, H.C. 1833[23], xxxix; *Reports of the commissioners appointed to take the census for Ireland for the year 1851*, H.C. 1856[2087][2134], xxxi

conjunction with other evidence. There are, however, a number of shortcomings in the evidence provided by the 1841 census. Firstly, the data recorded in the parliamentary papers are presented at parish level only and a minute investigation into the circumstances of individuals is not possible. It is unfortunate that data does not exist even at townland level as this detailed matrix would facilitate a more precise comparative analysis of pre-Famine conditions in different areas. Another difficulty is the absence of any detailed information relating to agriculture and landholding. In attempting to ascertain the vulnerability of particular areas to the imminent crisis, holding size and land quality is a most useful measure of poverty or prosperity. The 1841 Census provides data relating only to the extent of cultivated and uncultivated land at county level and comparative analysis at parish level is not possible.

Further statistical evidence for the period before 1845 can be gleaned from a number of other parliamentary reports. Four separate reports on fisheries dating from 1837 to 1845 provide a sound base for investigation into the pre-Famine coastal economy in Donegal and elsewhere. The 1837 report reproduces tables of the numbers of boats and men engaged in fishing activity on a county basis for the period 1821-29 and for 1830 and 1836, while data relating to key locations for fisheries within individual counties in 1836 are also available from the same source.[87] The second, third and fourth annual reports of the commissioners of fisheries (data for 1843-45) allow the researcher to thread the evidence right through to the eve of the Famine.[88] Unfortunately, no later fisheries inquiries were conducted after 1845, making it difficult to determine the significance of fisheries as a source of alternative sustenance for those in coastal areas during the Famine. Another key source of data is the *Devon Commission* of 1844 which contains appendices detailing the number and size of agricultural holdings at county and Poor Law union level.[89] Again, the value of such evidence is that it facilitates the investigation by shedding some light on the densities of those most vulnerable to the imminent crisis (i.e. those holding under one

[87] *First report of commissioners of inquiry into the state of Irish fisheries; with the minutes of evidence and appendix,* H.C. 1837[77], xxii

[88] *Second annual report of the commissioners of fisheries, Ireland,* H.C. 1844[502], xxx; *Third annual report of the commissioners of public works on fisheries of Ireland,* H.C. 1845[320], xxvi; *Fourth annual report of the commissioners of public works on fisheries of Ireland,* H.C. 1846[713], xxii

[89] *Appendix to minutes of evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt iv, H.C. 1845[672], xxii

acre or under 5 acres of land). The *Devon Commission* thus provides data which fills the gap in evidence relating to agricultural holdings in the 1841 census.

In the immediate aftermath of the first appearance of potato blight in Ireland in 1845 an official inquiry into the 'relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop' was conducted and data recorded.[90] The first report provides information regarding the extent of the potato failure in each county, along with the numbers employed on the first public works relief scheme in July 1846.[91] Later reports under the 'board of works series' list the daily average numbers employed on public works by county (December 1846)[92] and by barony (January 1847)[93]. A post-Famine report dated 1852 gathers together all the returns for the period of greatest dependence on public works relief from the winter of 1846 to the early summer of 1847.[94] The value of the 'board of works series' data is that they allow us to make a quantifiable estimate of the need for relief in particular parts of the country, and by extension, provide an indication of the areas where distress was most severe. Other parliamentary papers permit similar deductions to be made in relation to other periods of the Famine. Seven separate reports (with appendix) from the relief commissioners appointed under the Temporary Relief Act of 1847 provide precise data for the number of daily rations issued in soup kitchens in each Poor Law union in Ireland and the numbers of people relieved during the operation of the scheme in the summer of that year.[95]

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[90] *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland,* H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii

[91] ibid., pp. 36, 408

[92] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* H.C. 1847 [764], l

[93] *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* pt ii, H.C. 1847 [797], lii

[94] *Analysis of returns of poor employment under 9 Vic. c.1 and 10 Vic. c.107 from week ending 10 October 1846 to week ending 26 June 1847,* H.C. 1852[169], xviii

[95] *First report of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847[799], xvii, 19; *Second report of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847[819], xvii, 75; *Third report of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847[836], xvii, 109; *Fourth report of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847[859], xvii, 143; *Fifth, sixth and seventh reports of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847-8[876], xxix, 27; *Supplementary appendix to the seventh, and last report, of the relief commissioners,* H.C. 1847-8[958], xxix, 121

Vast quantities of data relating to relief under the Poor Law system are contained in a number of reports dating from 1846 onwards. The number of workhouse inmates in the country was recorded for December of 1844 and 1845 and March 1845 and 1846, giving an indication of dependence on the institutions while they were only auxiliary to other primary relief systems.[96] Later data recorded at the height of the Famine in the winter/ spring of 1846-7 breaks the figures down to union level, providing statistics for numbers of inmates relieved and other information such as mortality rates.[97] The extension of the Poor Law system in the autumn of 1847 marked the beginning of a massive increase in the amount of data relating to inmate admissions and discharges, state of workhouses, collection of the Poor rate, union expenditure and outdoor relief expenditure and numbers relieved outside the workhouses. All of this data is contained in the appendices of Poor Law commissioners annual reports which break down the figures for each of the 163 unions in the country (see Appendices 6.2 to 6.6 for Donegal data).[98]

The research process entails not only the compilation of numerical data but also the collection of relevant contemporary reports and comment. The parliamentary papers also provide a rich reserve from which to extract evidence. For the pre-Famine period, one of the most valuable sources is the Poor Inquiry of 1835. This report presents information collected from various respondents on individual parishes throughout the country. Included in the material are responses relating to subjects including the earnings of labourers and cottiers, employment of women, diet, housing, clothing, agriculture, emigration, taxation and roads.[99] The *Devon Commission* of

[96] *Twelfth annual report of the poor law commissioners for England and Wales,* H.C. 1846[704][745], xix

[97] *Copies of extracts of correspondence relating to the state of the union workhouses in Ireland (first series),* H.C. 1847[766], lv, 1; *Copies of extracts of correspondence relating to the state of the union workhouses in Ireland (second series),* H.C. 1847[790], lv, 89; *Copies of extracts of correspondence relating to the state of the union workhouses in Ireland (third series),* H.C. 1847[863], lv, 219

[98] *First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1847-8[963], xxxiii; *Second annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1849[1118], xxv; *Third annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1850[1243], xxvii; *Fourth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1851[1381], xxvi; *Fifth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1852[1530], xxiii; *Sixth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1852-3[1645], l

[99] *First report from his majesty's commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland, with appendix A and supplement,* H.C. 1835[369], xxxii, pt. i; *First report from his*

1844 offers even more detailed testimony from a variety of witnesses on the eve of the Famine. Witnesses ranging from landed proprietors to agents, farmers, agriculturalists, clergymen and labourers gave evidence to the commission on issues such as land tenure, improvements, rents, employment, crime, communications, diet and fishing. A total of 1,117 witnesses provided testimony before sittings of the commission throughout Ireland, including 48 individuals from various parts of Donegal, making the report a key source of evidence for Famine research. Although the *Devon Commission* evidence is extremely detailed, it is important to bear in mind that the testimony contained within the report is merely the opinion of a fairly limited number of witnesses, the vast majority of whom were placed toward the upper tiers of society. Thus, while this source is most useful in attempting to gain an insight into general agricultural practices and land occupation on the eve of the Famine, it is only very rarely that we hear directly from the small farmers and labourers who were to bear the brunt of the crisis.

During the Famine itself, a colossal quantity of correspondence between government officials and other individuals is preserved among the parliamentary papers after 1845. Weekly reports of the 'scarcity commission' detail the establishment of various relief committees throughout the country in the summer of 1846, when it had become clear that a second and more serious infestation of the potato crop had occurred. This evidence affords us a clear view of the situation on the ground as letters and applications for relief from the chairmen or secretaries of local relief committees are reproduced in full.[100] Extremely helpful accounts of the Famine are also available in the 'commissariat series' of parliamentary papers. These detail the organisation and administration of relief on the ground from July 1846 onward and include the reports of government officials and local landed proprietors

majesty's commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland, with appendix B and supplement, H.C. 1835[369], xxxii, pt. ii; *Poor inquiry (Ireland): appendix D containing baronial examinations relative to earnings of labourers, cottier tenants, employment of women and children, expenditure; and supplement,* H.C. 1836[36], xxxi; *Poor inquiry (Ireland): appendix E containing baronial examinations relative to food, cottages and cabins, clothing and furniture, pawnbroking and savings banks, drinking; and supplement,* H.C. 1836[37], xxxii; *Poor inquiry (Ireland): appendix F containing baronial examinations relative to conacre, quarter or score ground, small tenantry, consolidation of farms and dislodged tenantry, emigration, landlord and tenant, nature and state of agriculture, taxation, roads, observations on the nature and state of agriculture; and supplement,* H.C. 1836[38], xxxiii

[100] *The weekly reports of the scarcity commission, showing the progress of disease in potatoes, the complaints which have been made, and the applications for relief, in the course of the month of March 1846,* H.C. 1846 [201], xxxvii

and clergymen involved in the relief effort. In relation to Donegal, a particularly detailed report on conditions was submitted by Deputy Commissary General Dobree who spent several months in the county in 1846-7, when an attempt was made to establish a network of food depots.[101] Finally, the 'board of works series' papers also include extracts from the journals of inspecting officers (Milward, O'Neill, Marshall and Villiers in Donegal) in 1847[102], while Poor Law inspectors reports (Horsley, D'Arcy and Herbert in Donegal) to the Poor Law commissioners in the period 1847-49 give detailed local accounts of the Famine from the most distressed unions.[103] While reports from government officials such as those mentioned above do contain accounts of individual cases of distress, it is important to bear in mind that we still do not hear directly from those most affected by the Famine on the ground. In addition, it is impossible to imagine that the reports from Donegal of only seven individuals can give more than a general indication of the situation in the county in the critical period 1847-49. These men were employed by the government and had a particular agenda which undoubtedly had an effect on the nature of the information collected. Thus we find that a proportion of their correspondence is concerned with potential abuses of the relief systems (public works or Poor Law) in operation, rather than accounts of localised poverty, distress or starvation.

While the parliamentary papers are unquestionably the most comprehensive and important source of evidence for Famine research, a number of other significant sources complement and support them. For the pre-Famine period, the Ordnance Survey Memoirs for Donegal offer an insight into life in the county *circa* 1834. With information relating to agriculture, tenure, housing, diet, fishing and occupations, the memoirs are an extremely valuable source of evidence for the decade preceeding the

[101] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* H.C. 1847 [761], li; *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* pt ii, H.C. 1847 [796], lii

[102] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* H.C. 1847 [764], l; *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* pt ii, H.C. 1847 [797], lii

[103] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fourth Series,* H.C. 1847[896], liv; *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series,* H.C. 1847-8[919], lv; *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Sixth Series,* H.C. 1847-8[955], lvi; *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Eighth Series,* H.C. 1849[1042], xlviii

Famine.[104] Closer to the onslaught of the Famine itself, we are offered a glimpse of the situation in some parts of Donegal through Collis' survey of the Trinity College estates.[105] Though printed in 1845, the survey was actually conducted in 1843, thus providing a wealth of socio-economic data some two years subsequent to the 1841 census.

Another important source of evidence are the minutes of boards of Poor Law union guardians which are preserved in manuscript form in archives countrywide. We are most fortunate with regard to Donegal, in that complete minute books are available in the Donegal County Archive for six of the eight Poor Law unions wholly contained within the county.[106] As well as detailing the processes involved in the establishment of the workhouses themselves in the early 1840s, the minutes also outline the day-to-day running of the institutions and include such information as inmate admissions, discharges and deaths, Poor rate collection, union expenditure and a variety of other evidence relating to distress and relief during the Famine. It is unfortunate that the minutes contain very little information relating to circumstances outside the institution of the workhouse itself. The Poor Law guardians were all local individuals and their insights into the crisis in their own localities (rather than in the unions as a whole or within the workhouse itself) would assist us in reconstructing the geography of distress and relief at local level.

The record is amplified by newspaper reports which offer an unofficial perspective on the incidence of distress and workings of relief operations. The two main sources reporting for Co. Donegal were the *Ballyshannon Herald* (covering the west and south) and the *Londonderry Journal* (covering the east and north). Agricultural reports detailing the spread of blight are particularly useful, as there is no other source available for this aspect of the Famine at local level. In addition, letters written by landed proprietors, agents, clergymen and other interested parties give a personal

[104] Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol 38, Parishes of County Donegal I, 1833-5, North-East Donegal; Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol 39, Parishes of County Donegal II, 1835-6: Mid, West and South Donegal

[105] *Descriptive Survey and Valuation, 1845,* Muniments/V/Series 78/ 46-61; Muniments/V/Series 79/ 3-11

[106] MS Minute Books of Co. Donegal Poor Law Guardians, 1840-1852 - Ballyshannon, BG/38/1/1-9; Glenties, BG/92/A/1-5; Inishowen, BG/97/3/1-2; Letterkenny, BG/109/3/4; Milford, BG/119/3/1-3; Stranorlar, BG/147/4/1-2

account of the crises from different localities within the county. Contemporary accounts from philanthropic organisations also offer insights into distress as it was encountered locally. Of particular relevance to this thesis are the reports of the Society of Friends from Donegal in 1846-7.[107] Their commentary on local relief committee activity and landlord employment provision facilities the construction of a more rounded perspective by the researcher.

In examining and analysing the interrelated subjects of distress and relief during the Famine in Donegal, we are fortunate to have access to a rich vein of evidence from which to mine. If there is one difficulty with the majority of the surviving source material, it is that the voices that speak from it are those of the upper tiers of society – government officials, the landed gentry, agents and clergymen. The cottiers and labourers who felt the full brunt of the crisis are not entirely voiceless, however. Though we do not have their direct testimony, the reports and correspondence from others do transmit some measure of the horror of starvation, disease and death which accompanied the disaster that was the Great Irish Famine.

1.4. METHOD

This thesis provides an explanatory narrative of the geography of distress and relief in Co. Donegal during the Famine. The structural approach adopted in laying out the thesis is primarily chronological, so as to minimise the possibility of duplication of information. The chronology is constructed on the basis of changing relief policy on the part of the British government (Peel's initial response, 1845-6; Public Works, 1846-7; Soup Kitchens, 1847; Poor Law, 1847-52) and within these time periods a thematic approach is assumed, thereby facilitating an in-depth analysis of both official and private responses to the crisis.

In setting the scene for the Famine period itself, considerable attention is devoted to socio-economic variation within Donegal before 1845, while comparisons and

[107] Society of Friends (1852), *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847;* Tuke, J.H. (1847), *Narrative of the Second, Third and Fourth and Weeks of William Forster's Visit to Some of the Distressed Districts of Ireland; Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847,* reprinted in: Donegal Annual (1973), Vol. X, no. 3

contrasts between the county and the rest of Ireland form an important part of the investigation. Bearing in mind the vast amount of available source data for the pre-Famine period, it is imperative to adopt a methodological strategy which facilitates the presentation of evidence in a clear, concise and structured manner. To this end, the mapping of source data for pre-Famine Donegal and Ireland is deemed vital in exposing pre-Famine socio-economic regional variation. Maps are constructed on the bases of (1) civil parishes, (2) Poor Law unions and (3) baronies (see Figs. 1.1 & 1.2). Parishes yield the most detailed matrix, with 52 divisions within county Donegal and, wherever possible, 1841 Census data is presented at parish level. Under the terms of the Irish Poor Law Act (1838), Ireland was divided into 159 Poor Law unions, which were districts designed for the administration of legislation designed to ameliorate poverty. Donegal was divided into ten unions, seven of which were wholly contained within the county, with three (Ballyshannon, Strabane and Londonderry) crossing the county boundary into counties Sligo, Tyrone and Derry. These units are particularly useful due to the fact that much of the data relating to the relief effort after 1845 is available only at Poor Law union level, making possible spatial comparisons between pre-Famine vulnerability and levels of distress or relief requirement during the crisis. Finally, baronies were used as census enumeration units until 1901 and where data exists only at barony level, they are mapped accordingly. These units are also useful in presenting data for the whole of Ireland as they allow the illustration of both inter-county and intra-county patterns (see, for example, Fig. 2.11, p. 60). In setting pre-Famine Donegal within an all-Ireland context, barony maps are complemented by county maps for the whole country.

The methodology relating to mapping pre-Famine data is maintained through the remainder of the thesis, the emphasis continuing to refer firstly to intra-regional variations in distress and relief in Donegal and secondly to the position of the county relative to the rest of Ireland. In order to accurately represent the actual data spatially, raw numbers are broken down to percentages or to proportions of population (generally per thousand) for each spatial unit (Poor Law union or county) using 1841 Census data as a base for calculation. The key advantage of mapping official relief data is that it facilitates comparison of distress levels in different parts of Donegal and Ireland. The potential weakness of the cartographic approach is that one is restricted

Fig. 1.1. Baronies and civil parishes of Co. Donegal



Source: O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), *The Estate System of Landholding in County Donegal, 1830 to 1923: a geographical analysis* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin)

Fig. 1.2. Poor Law unions in Co. Donegal



to commentary on specific spatial units. Thus, while two Poor Law unions may have had different proportions of population receiving government relief, it is possible that conditions in parts of either union may have varied widely. Similarly, it is important to bear in mind that a line on a map does not indicate radically different conditions on either side. Another difficulty with mapping data is that it is often difficult to effectively illustrate changes over a period of time. The most effective means of overcoming this difficulty is to graph the data and much use is made of this method of representation throughout the thesis.

Maps, graphs and diagrams are useful devices in representing spatial patterns. The analysis of these patterns, however, is lessened without our understanding of the processes that underpin them. This thesis is equally concerned with *pattern* and *process* in constructing the narrative. Historically, the written record often yields the key to unlocking past patterns, and in tracking and explaining what actually happened, recourse is made to a raft of documentation. Thus, exposition of the written record constitutes an essential part of the methodology, threaded chronologically from *circa* 1830 to *circa* 1850.

Chapter Two

The Eve of the Famine: Donegal and Ireland Before 1845

2.1. INTRODUCTION

Charting the course of the Great Famine and its implications in terms of distress and relief in Donegal and in Ireland is an exercise which must begin with a thorough examination of conditions in the years leading up to the first appearance of potato blight in 1845. Our discussion of different relief requirements in different areas could not be carried out in meaningful way without very thorough analysis of the pre-Famine dynamics of society and economy, both within Donegal itself and in the country at large. The central purpose of this chapter is to discuss the various socio-economic factors which combine to make up the composite picture of pre-Famine Donegal. Two principal themes will permeate the bulk of the investigation. The first is the position of the county in the national context in terms of agriculture, housing, occupations, literacy, emigration and population growth and density. Further attention is drawn to the potential importance of fishing and seasonal migration as possible aids to the endurance of the population during the coming crisis. There is considerable evidence to indicate that Donegal was in a relatively strong position in the national context, particularly when compared to the other counties situated along the western seaboard.

The second key issue which will be examined is the regional variation within the county itself in terms of the factors outlined above. Donegal emerges as something of a microcosm of the country as a whole with a marked east-west divide clearly evident. In general, the more prosperous and fertile eastern parts of the county would appear to have been least vulnerable to the effects of the crop failures and food shortages after 1845. Western areas, where agricultural development was slower, exhibit concurrent underdevelopment in terms of housing, occupations, employment and literacy levels, while the west coast was also the most overpopulated zone in terms of arable land area. The critical question to be addressed here is the relative advantages and disadvantages of different parts of west Donegal, as well as a comparison between east and west. In effect, the end result is an attempt to get to grips with the varying geographies which form the fabric of the county before 1845 with particular emphasis on the likely consequences of the Famine in different areas and the ability of the population to survive the crisis.

2.2. FAMINE IN DONEGAL IN THE 1830S

The people of Donegal were no strangers to the horrific effects of famine, having endured two quite severe periods of food shortage and disease in the 1830s. The first of these occurred in 1830-31, when fairly localised potato crop failures in Killybegs and the Rosses left hundreds in severe difficulty. In the summer of 1831, Sir James Dombrain, head of the Coast Guard, warned the Irish Chief Secretary of the severity of the situation, with thousands on the verge of starvation. The potato shortage was not the only problem. With their staple diet removed, the poorer sections of the population turned to a diet of seaweed which inevitably resulted in a rise in numbers suffering from dysentery.[1] There is evidence that the spread of distress progressed along the coast as far north as the parishes of Fahan Upper and Lower on the Inishowen peninsula. In a report to the *Poor Inquiry* of 1835 by Reverend Edward Maginn referring to cases of actual starvation in the area we find reference to the shortages of 1830-31:

> In the years 1830 and 1831, many [people] were badly off. I have myself known many families about that period who were whole days without provisions. If they had only one meal, they would willingly divide it, for God's sake with a distressed fellow Christian. Even the most wretched amongst them, keeping a house, would consider it a crying sin to permit a single beggar to go from their door unhelped.[2]

Such mutual assistance, along with relief measures carried out by a number of landlords, prevented widespread destitution in west Donegal and the recovery of the potato crop in 1832 heralded in a period of relative comfort. However, the improvement in conditions proved to be short lived and a considerably more severe period of distress began in 1835 when much of the potato crop was used before it was fully ripe to meet the needs of that summer. According to T.P. O'Neill, the result of this, together with a crop failure, left the supply short for the following year and marked 'the beginning of a three year period of famine in Donegal which reached its

[1] Meehan, H. (1996), 'The Cholera (1832-33), The Famine and Inver Relief Committees' in, *Donegal Annual,* no. 48, p. 69; Chief Secretary's Office, Registered Papers, 1831

[2] *First report from his majesty's commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland, with appendix A and supplement,* H.C. 1835[369], xxxii, pt. i, p. 1132

climax in the summer of 1837'.[3] By the spring of 1836 memorials for relief began to arrive at Dublin Castle. In a petition dated May 4th, Patrick McKye of Tullaghobegley parish in Kilmacrenan wrote of the 'general prospect of hunger, famine and starvation' which prevailed in the area as a result of 'a rot or failure of the early seed potatoes last year which left [the people] without a potato in the month of August'.[4] Similar reports from Arranmore Island and other areas along the west coast propelled the government into action and relief measures were put into operation.[5] The scale of the calamity is highlighted in a report relating to expenditure on the relief of the 'distressed peasantry on the north-west coast of Ireland', in which it was suggested that the number of people 'saved' by the relief effort in 1836 amounted to some 39,159.[6] Relating this figure to the *1831 Census*, it would seem that almost a third of the population of the three western baronies of Kilmacrenan, Boylagh and Banagh were likely to have been affected by famine in 1836.[7]

The following year saw a further deterioration in conditions due to the fact that the potato crop was once again used early in the summer of 1836. In addition, an extremely wet autumn damaged the already reduced crop in storage, so that the prospects for 1837 looked dreadfully bleak. An investigation carried out by members of the constabulary in April reported a scarcity of provisions in the Glenties area, while the protracted bad season had raised the price of supplies in Ramelton.[8] The final blow came in June with the outbreak of fever in coastal areas from Sheephaven to Rutland. A letter written by Lieutenant Penfold, the Coast Guard Officer at Sheephaven, described the slow death of the Rutland dispensary doctor, while another report referred to the parish priest and curate of Templecrone contracting fever.[9] In response to Penfold's letter, the Lord Justices sent a doctor to the area to provide medical aid and food to the sick. On his arrival Dr. Stephens reported that a large

[3] O'Neill, T.P. (1971), *The State, Poverty and Distress in Ireland, 1815-45* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 34
[4] Chief Secretary's Office: Official Papers, 1836, p. 131; Patrick McKye to Lord Lieutenant, May 4th
[5] ibid., Registered Papers, p. 277; Corneille to Payne, May 17th 1836; Jones to Drummond, June 25th
[6] ibid., *Return of Expenditure in Relieving the Distressed Peasantry on the North West Coast of Ireland in 1836*, p. 5
[7] *Census of the population, 1831, with comparative abstract as taken in 1821*, H.C. 1833[23], xxxix, pp. 244-47
[8] O'Neill, T.P. (1971), *The State, Poverty and Distress in Ireland, 1815-45* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 36-7; Chief Secretary's Office: Official Papers, 1837, *Constabulary Reports to J.S. Kennedy, Inspector General of the Irish Constabulary Relative to the Condition of the Poor and Fuel*, p. 25
[9] Chief Secretary's Office: Registered Papers, 1837, p. 5; Dombrain to Drummond, July 4th

number of people were in a state of great debility through lack of nourishment and some were suffering the effects of fever.[10] An account written by Lieutenant McGladdery, Coast Guard Officer at Inishboffin highlights the plight of the people:

> Almighty God only knows the extent of the wretchedness that surrounds us. A great number of the population are already begging and those who have weak and numerous families (who did not yet leave their houses) have two or more children out begging for what keeps the life in others and the poor generally present such a squalid miserable appearance as would wring the heart of any being possessed of human feelings.[11]

The severity of the 1836-7 famine in coastal areas of Donegal appears to be unparalleled in the national context in the decade leading up 1845. One could argue that people in Kilmacrenan and Boylagh may have thus developed the resourcefulness and ingenuity to overcome periods of acute food shortage. Equally, it could be suggested that the famine of 1836-7 would have served only to weaken the population and leave them even more vulnerable to the dire crisis that was the Great Famine. However, at least one possible connection between the distress of 1830s and increased likelihood of survival in the 1840s can be made. It would appear that the potato shortages of 1836-7 encouraged the poorer inhabitants to turn to plentiful resources of fish for sustenance leading to a marked rise in the proportion of cottiers and small farmers who also fished.[12] The scale of increase in numbers, twice the national average, at precisely the same point as difficulties began in 1836 is surely not entirely coincidental and the burgeoning growth in the size of the fishing population seems likely to have played at least some part in survival after 1845. The omnipresent potato did, however, remain the staple diet and its cultivation in west Donegal continued unrelentingly, while agriculture continued to dominate as the chief mode of subsistence.

2.3. AGRICULTURE & LANDHOLDING

Any examination of the socio-economic background to the Great Famine must begin with allusion to agriculture and landholding. In many ways Donegal represents something of a microcosm of the national picture in relation to agriculture, exhibiting

[10] Chief Secretary's Office: Registered Papers, 1837, p. 5; Stephens to Barker, July 11th & 12th
[11] ibid., McGladdery to Dombrain, May 5th
[12] See Fig. 2.20a, Fig. 2.20b

a marked east-west divide in terms of land quality, valuation, improvements and productivity. The relative backwardness of agriculture in the west of Ireland is a subject which has been well documented in the past and for the purposes of this study it is not necessary to go over this old ground.[13] However, given the importance of pre-Famine agricultural development in terms of vulnerability to the effects of the coming crisis, it is essential to conduct a brief examination of Donegal's position in the national context.

Since it was the tenants who occupied the smallest and most unproductive plots of land in the early 1840s who were most likely to feel the full brunt of the potato failure in the second half of the decade, an examination of holding size is necessary in assessing the relative development or backwardness of Donegal in relation to the rest of the country. One of the difficulties which arises in doing so is the absence of reliable agricultural data in the 1841 Census. The work of P.M.A. Bourke has done much to clarify the ambiguities of this source in relation to holding size and it is generally accepted that the statistics recorded are inaccurate owing to inconsistencies in definitions of what constituted an 'acre' in different parts of the country.[14] In light of this, the data graphed in Fig. 2.1 are taken from the considerably more reliable report of the *Devon Commission* in 1844.[15] This charts the percentage of total holdings in Donegal which were under 1 acre, between 1 and 10 acres, from 10 to 20 acres and over 20 acres and compares the proportions with the national average in each classification. The results indicate a significantly lower number of smaller holdings in Donegal than was the case in the majority of other counties – only 8.99 per cent of the total being under 1 acre and 32.94 per cent between 1 and 10 acres, compared with figures of 14.47 per cent and 39.54 per cent nationally. In the 10-20 acre category, the proportions are quite similar, while holdings of over 20 acres accounted for only 24.5 per cent of the total in Ireland, compared to a figure of 34.8

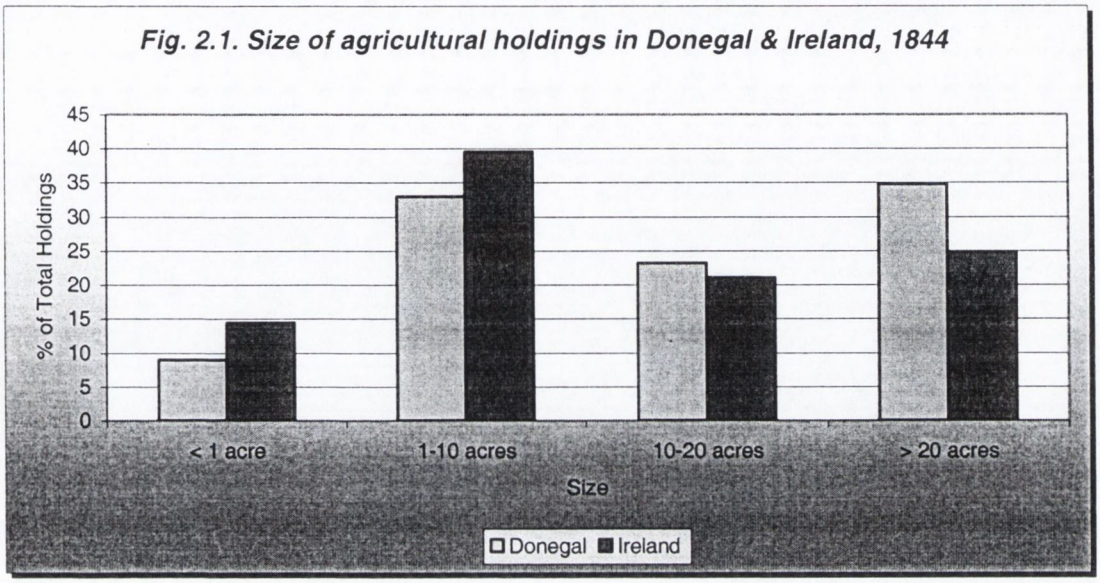
[13] See, for example: Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, pp. 7-11; Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* pp. 3-4; O'Grada, C. (1989), 'Poverty, Population and Agriculture, 1801-45' in, Vaughan, W.E. (ed.), *A New History of Ireland, v: Ireland Under the Union,* pp. 122-135;

[14] Bourke, P.M.A. (1965), 'The Agricultural Statistics of the 1841 Census: a Critical Review' in *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, xviii, no. 2, pp. 376-391; Bourke, P.M.A. (1965), 'Notes on Some Agricultural Units of Measurement in Use in Pre-Famine Ireland' in, *Irish Historical Studies,* Vol. XIV, No. 55, pp. 236-245

[15] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt ii, H.C. 1845[672], xx, App. 94, pp. 280-83; App. 95, p. 288

per cent for Donegal. The implications of such a situation in light of the looming crisis are pointed out by J.S. Donnelly who refers to the 'strong correlation between excess mortality and the occupation of holdings of less than twenty acres'.[16]

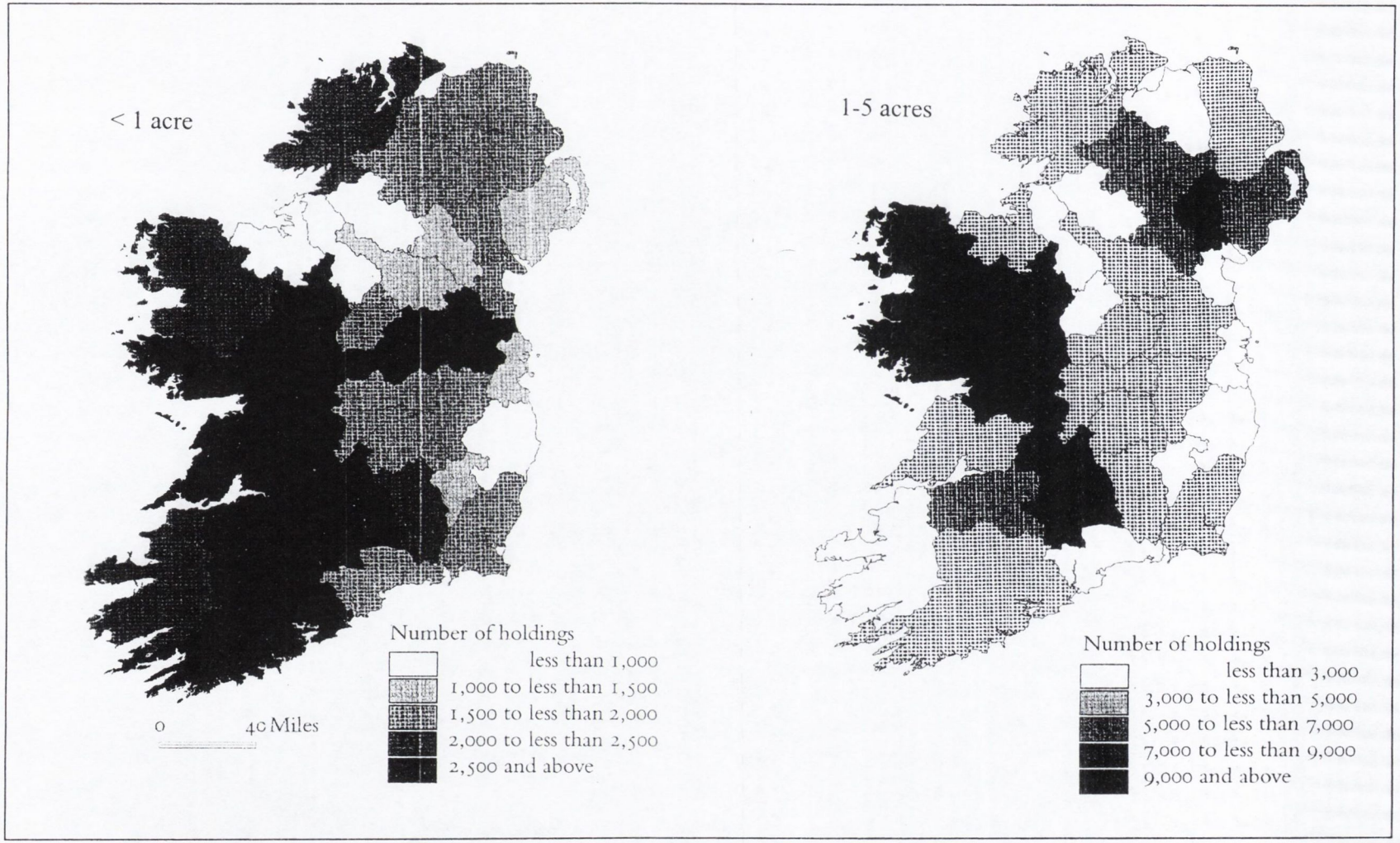
Fig. 2.1. Size of agricultural holdings in Donegal & Ireland, 1844



Further confirmation of Donegal's strong position in terms of holding size is provided in Fig. 2.2, which maps the number of holdings of less than one acre in each county in Ireland, along with the number between 1 and 5 acres. The figures upon which these maps are based have been taken from the 1847 agricultural returns and do not reflect the precise numbers of pre-Famine holdings in the under 1 acre and 1 to 5 acre categories.[17] However, they should broadly reflect the patterns which were in existence on the eve of the Famine and do indicate a pronounced tendency for smaller holdings to be located on the poorest agricultural land in the west. For much of Ulster and Leinster, along with the two western counties of Leitrim and Sligo, the number of holdings under one acre amounts to less than 1,500 per county, with a further three to five thousand holdings between 1 and 5 acres. In contrast, in the majority of counties in Connaught and Munster farms of less than an acre number more than 2,500, while Cos. Mayo, Galway and Tipperary also had very high numbers in the 1 to 5 acre category. Donegal, along with Leitrim, Sligo and Kerry were the counties along the western seaboard with lowest numbers of farms under five acres in 1847. The position in 1845 is not likely to have been radically different.

[16] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 8
[17] *Returns of agricultural produce in Ireland in the year 1847, pt I, Crops*, H.C. 1847-8[923], lvii

Fig. 2.2. Number of holdings not exceeding 1 acre and between 1 and 5 acres at county level in Ireland, 1847



Source: Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine,* pp. 164-65

What does this actually tell us about Donegal agriculture and landholding, or indeed the prospects of the county in relation to the coming Famine? Apart from the fact that there were relatively low numbers of very small holdings in Donegal and the link between farm size and mortality was thus less clear-cut, Fig. 2.2 cannot be taken as an indication of any significant advantage to the county as a whole over others along the west coast. While the small farmer in Donegal may have had a larger holding than his counterpart in Mayo or Galway, the quality of his land was not likely to have been any better, apart from in eastern parts of the county. It would appear, however, that Donegal tenants had a considerable advantage over those in other western counties in relation to agricultural improvements, indicated by an increase of over 76 per cent in arable acreage in the period 1841-51. The importance of this statistic is not the extraordinary 76 per cent rise in area of arable land, which is very likely to be inaccurate.[18] Rather, it is the fact that Donegal recorded an increase which was by far the highest of any county in Ireland, indicating a considerably higher level of reclamation and improvement activity than was the case nationally. As we shall see, there is evidence that significant improvements in agriculture, spearheaded by Donegal landlords and their agents, were taking place in the decade leading up to the Famine and continued during the course of the crisis.[19]

The vast majority of land in Donegal was divided into very large estates. The chief landowners in the most fertile part of the county in Strabane and Londonderry unions (Raphoe barony) were Sir Samuel Hayes who held 22,825 acres with an annual valuation of £6,356 and the Duke of Abercorn, whose 15,952 acre estate (£10,382 valuation) covered most of Taughboyne parish at the eastern county boundary. To the north and south of the Abercorn holding lay the other two most extensive estates in the barony, held by the Earl of Wicklow (6,440 acres, £4,818 valuation) and the Earl of Erne (4,826 acres, £4,324 valuation). Elsewhere in the county, similarly impressive tracts of land were in the hands of individual proprietors such as John Leslie (28,827 acres, £3,473 valuation) in the eastern portion of Donegal union, while the Earl of Leitrim (54,352 acres, £9,406 valuation) and A.J.R. Stewart

[18] Bourke, P.M.A. (1965), 'The Agricultural Statistics of the 1841 Census: a Critical Review' in *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, xviii, no. 2, p. 387
[19] See Chapter 4, Section 4.9

(39,306 acres, £6,356 valuation) were the immediate lessors of large estates in Kilmacrenan to the north.[20]

No part of Donegal bore greater testimony to the plantations of the seventeenth century than the western portion of the county, where the vast holdings of only three landowners covered most of Glenties union and indeed much of the baronies of Boylagh and Banagh.[21] Marquis Conyngham was the largest non-institutional landowner in the county with some 122,300 acres (£15,166 valuation), concentrated mainly in the parishes of Templecrone, Inishkeel and Inver. Thomas Connolly, whose property consisted mainly of lands leased from the established church and Trinity College, held 68,633 acres scattered among the parishes of Lettermacaward, Glencolumbcille and Killybegs Upper, while the Murray Stewart estate (50,818 acres, £6,500 valuation) covered the greater proportion of the remainder of Banagh barony.[22]

Resident and improving landlords made an important contribution to the socio-economic fabric of pre-Famine Ireland. It is reasonable to assume that a resident proprietor would be more likely to provide employment for tenants on his estate or to encourage agricultural improvements. In this respect, Donegal was at a disadvantage in comparison to the majority of counties in Ireland with a very high rate of absenteeism, particularly among the largest landholders. Donegal's peripheral location, combined with the fact that the majority of the more prominent gentry held more valuable lands elsewhere in Ireland or in England and Scotland, resulted in a situation where proprietors who were 'resident on or near their property' held less than a third of the value of land in the county.[23] A considerably lower level of absenteeism existed nationally with around 47 per cent of landlords resident on, or in the vicinity of their estates. Within Donegal, the greatest numbers of absentees held properties in Banagh and Boylagh baronies and showed little interest in the proper

[20] O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), *The Estate System of Landholding in County Donegal, 1830 to 1923: a geographical analysis* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 59; *Landowners in Ireland; Return of Owners of Land of One Acre and Upwards in the Several Counties, Counties of Cities, and Counties of Towns in Ireland,* (Repr. 1988)

[21] For discussion see: Simms, J.G. (1972), 'Donegal in the Ulster Plantation' in *Irish Geography*, vol. vi, 4, pp. 383-93

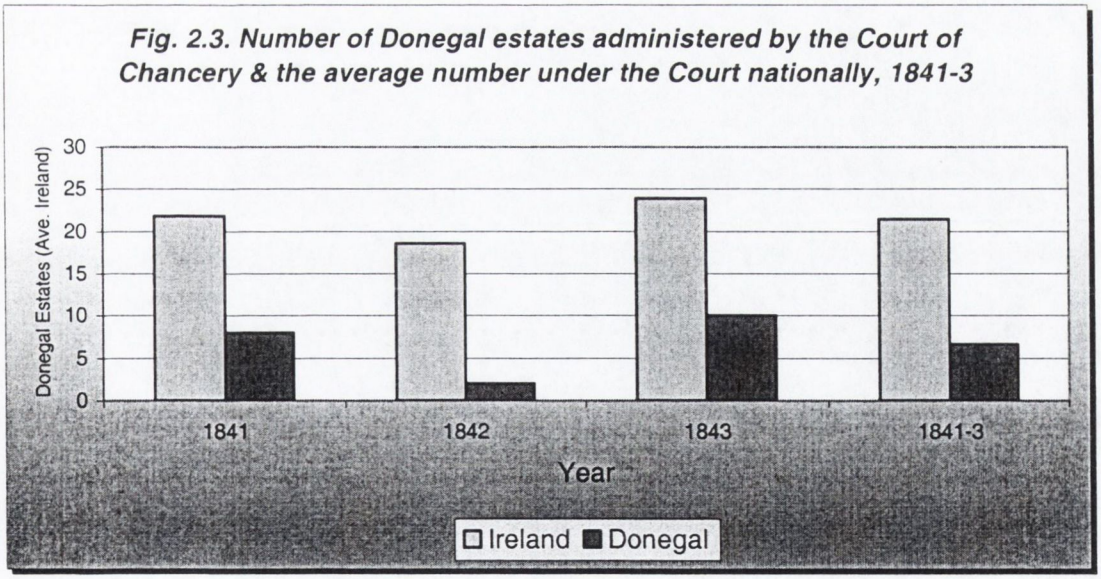
[22] *Landowners in Ireland,* op cit

[23] Estimate based on: *Return for 1870 of the Number of Landed Proprietors in each County Classed According to Residence,* H.C. 1872 [107], xlvii, p. 775; see: O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), p. 67

management of their Irish estates. A much better state of affairs existed further north in Kilmacrenan, where resident landlords Lord George Hill, Reverend Nixon, Wybrants Olphert and Reverend Charles Stewart held much of the land to the west of the barony in Dunfanaghy union. Despite the relatively low number of resident gentry in Donegal compared with the national average, it will be demonstrated in Chapter 4 that the majority of those who did reside on their estates proved to be the architects of a uniquely robust local response to the crisis after 1845 and it was through their unfailing energy in the relief effort that innumerable lives were saved at critical times in the course of the Famine.[24]

Of course, in the pre-Famine context, Irish tenants in general were not necessarily better off if their landlord was resident, particularly in cases where the estate was under the courts or heavily in debt. Fig. 2.3 charts the percentage of estates on which receivers accounted to the Court of Chancery in the period 1841-3 for Donegal and Ireland. Since the majority of such estates were in a state of bankruptcy, it would appear that Donegal landlords were in a considerably more stable financial position than their counterparts elsewhere, with around seven estates annually administered by the Court, compared to a national average of 21.4 *per annum*.[25]

Fig. 2.3. Number of Donegal estates administered by the Court of Chancery & the average number under the Court nationally, 1841-3



[24] See Chapter 4, Sections 4.8 & 4.9

[25] *Appendix to minutes of evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt iv, H.C. 1845[672], xxii, App. 98, p. 291

The absence of any severe financial strain among the Donegal gentry, combined with the fact that many of the absentee landlords employed efficient agents, would appear to have stimulated improvements in agricultural methods and land occupation in the years leading up to the Famine. The best example of successful implementation of improvements by an agent is the case of Alexander Hamilton who managed some 110,000 Cunningham acres in Donegal, comprising chiefly of the Connolly, Foster and Brooke estates.[26] Almost all of this property had been surveyed in the early 1830s and by 1844 Hamilton had squared the farms and placed the occupiers as centrally as possible upon them. As well as the abolishment of the rundale system on these estates, the programme of improvement also provided landlord contributions of £2 10*s* to £7 10*s* towards the construction of new cottages on the holdings. On the Connolly estate in Ballyshannon union, some £21,000 was spent in this manner in the fifteen years before the Famine.[27] As well as 'squaring' and house building, Hamilton also improved communications, purchased agricultural implements, distributed seed at reduced prices and assisted the tenants in thorough drainage and the building of embankments.[28] It is likely that the resulting increased efficiency in agriculture had a major role to play in the considerable quantities of grain, wheat and potatoes which were exported from Ballyshannon harbour. In 1835 alone, grain exports from Ballyshannon were valued at £11,000.[29] This productivity is reflected in the increase of Connolly's rental from £8,000 to £14,000 in the period 1830-44.[30]

Landlords themselves also made a significant contribution to improvements in pre-Famine Donegal, particularly after the death of George IV in 1830, which caused the expiry of leases for royal lives. In many cases, this meant that proprietors regained control of their holdings, allowing them to embark on programmes of modernisation. Such schemes were put into operation on the estates of Thomas Dougerty in Redcastle, James Johnston in Kilmacrenan and Raphoe and the earl of Erne on his

[26] For full discussion see: *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt ii, H.C. 1845[672], xx, pp. 175-182, evidence of Alexander Hamilton
[27] ibid., p. 179
[28] ibid., p. 177
[29] McDaid, M. (1994), 'History of Land Ownership and Agrarian Structure of the Estate of William Connolly' in *Donegal Annual*, no. 46, p. 59
[30] Begley A. & Lally S. (1997), 'The Famine in County Donegal' in Kinealy C. & Parkhill, T. (eds.), *The Famine in Ulster: the regional impact,* p. 78

estate near Lifford.[31] Other examples include George Cecil Wray in Letterkenny and John Hamilton of Brownhall, whose improvements were to become of even greater significance during the coming Famine, when the employment afforded to his tenants became vital to survival of the crisis. On the neighbouring Glenfin estate of Sir Thomas Charles Style, one of the most vigorous programmes of improvement in the pre-Famine years was supervised by Captain John Pitt Kennedy from 1838 onwards.[32] The mode of agriculture up to that point had been dominated by small tenants who 'split and subdivided their farms into the most minute rundale ribbons, or detached stripes'.[33] With the establishment of an agricultural school on the estate, as well as Kennedy's efforts to encourage thorough-draining and sub-soiling of holdings, farming practices had improved dramatically by the time of the Famine. In addition, the rationalisation of holdings and extensive reclamation works resulted in some 502 cunningham acres of waste land being brought into use by 1843, along with the subsidised construction of 246 'new and substantial' cottages.[34]

To the west of the county, the most ambitious improvements carried out on any holding were on the Gweedore estate of Lord George Hill. Here, the consolidation of holdings aroused opposition from many tenants on the estate who were reluctant to abandon traditional clustered settlements, while the loss of their rights to non-arable land provoked further resistance. In spite of this, consolidation of much of the estate was achieved in less than four years from 1840 to 1843. The positive impact of his improvements were highlighted by Hill in later years when he claimed that no-one had died of starvation on his estate during the Famine.[35] While the efforts of Lord George Hill, Alexander Hamilton and others in the coastal parts of Kilmacrenan, Boylagh and Banagh baronies had certainly led to significant progress in agriculture and landholding by the 1840s, this section of Donegal did remain by far the most

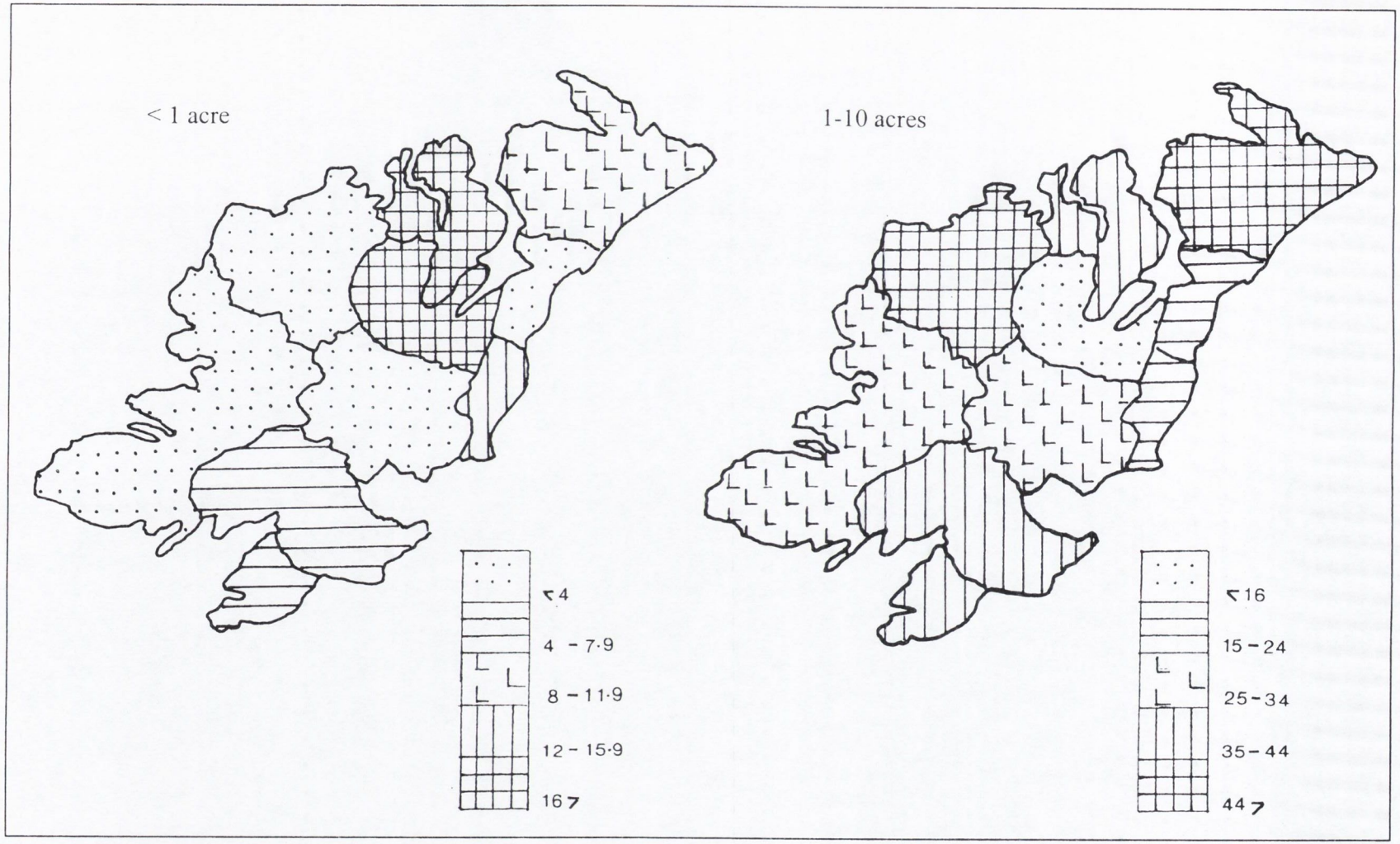
[31] *Londonderry Journal,* December 5th, 1846
[32] O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), *The Estate System of Landholding in County Donegal, 1830 to 1923: a geographical analysis* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), pp. 106-08
[33] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt i, H.C. 1845, xix, p. 977
[34] ibid., App. 14, p. 60
[35] O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), *The Estate System of Landholding in County Donegal, 1830 to 1923: a geographical analysis* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 110; *Facts from Gweedore compiled from the notes of Lord George Hill, M.R.I.A., A facsimile reprint of the fifth edition (1887) with an introduction by E. Estyn Evans,* Queens University Belfast, Institute of Irish Studies, pp. 40-41

backward in the county. This was particularly the case in the parishes which made up Glenties union, where there were no resident proprietors at all.

Determining the regional variation in agricultural development within Donegal in terms of holding size and land quality is a difficult exercise, made all the more complicated by the absence of reliable pre-Famine data. As we have seen, the proportion of holdings under 1 acre and under 10 acres in Donegal was significantly lower than the national average. Within the county, there also considerable regional variation in the size of holdings. Fig 2.4 maps the percentage of total holdings under 1 acre and between 1 and 10 acres by Poor Law union in 1845. Somewhat surprisingly, the western unions of Glenties and Dunfanaghy return figures of only 3.9 per cent and 2.04 per cent respectively for holdings under 1 acre. In contrast, the highest concentrations of such farms occurs in Letterkenny and Milford, both of which show proportions exceeding 14 per cent. Mapping the percentage of total holdings which lay in the 1 acre to 10 acre range does not help our cause in any dramatic way either, though it does highlight the absence of small holdings in the fertile unions of Londonderry and Strabane.

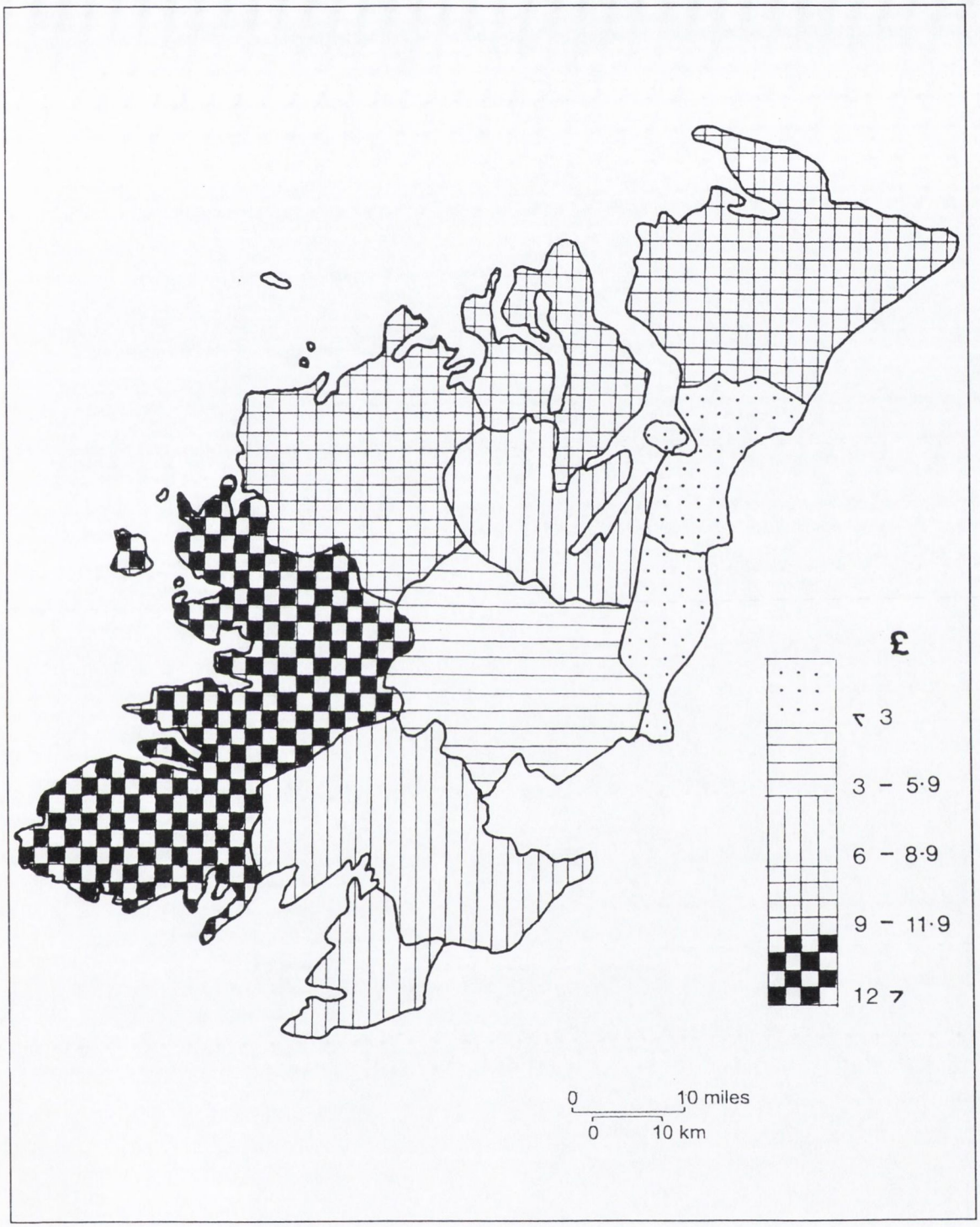
The implications of this situation require deeper investigation. In contrast to the national tendency for greatest concentrations of small holdings to occur in the poorest agricultural areas of the west of Ireland, farm sizes in the least productive parts of Donegal were not necessarily the smallest. It is reasonable to assume that the various improvements undertaken by Alexander Hamilton, Lord George Hill and others had contributed to this in some way. The fact remains, however, that the quality of land in west Donegal was far inferior to that in eastern areas. In order to gain an accurate insight into the prospects of different regions in the county during the coming Famine, a calculation which relates Poor Law valuation to persons holding land should reveal a lot more about land quality and the state of agriculture than simple reference to farm size. Fig. 2.5, which maps valuation as a percentage of the total number of persons holding land in each union in 1845, reveals a western coastal zone where land quality was poor and agriculture was likely to have been less developed. Of the four coastal unions, Glenties had the lowest valuation per person holding land at just over £2.

Fig. 2.4. Farm size in Donegal: percentage of total holdings under 1 acre and between 1 and 10 acres by Poor Law union, 1844



Source: *Appendix to minutes of evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt iv, H.C. 1845[672], xxii, App. 94, pp. 280-283

Fig. 2.5. Poor valuation as percentage of total number of persons holding land in Donegal: £ valuation per person holding land by union, 1845



Source: *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 418-421; *Appendix to minutes of evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt iv, H.C. 1845[672], xxii, App. 93, pp. 278-79

The evidence of a number of *Devon Commission* witnesses goes further in confirming Glenties' position as the poorest part of Donegal in relation to agriculture. One difficulty was the fact that attempts at improvement were often hampered by the absence of a crop rotation system in many areas.[36] Another was the survival of the rundale system in some parishes. James Walker, commenting on the state of agriculture in Killaghtee and Killybegs Upper and Lower, referred to the 'very many' holdings still in rundale, where 'one man will have his different pieces of land in twenty different spots'.[37] A similarly gloomy report came from Glencolumcille, where 'all the country [was] in a state that they [had] neither cow nor calf' because of the 'extraordinary rent' on unproductive holdings.[38] The evils of the continuing practice of subdivision in south-west Donegal were highlighted by another witness:

> The subletting or subdividing [of] farms is carried out almost indefinitely, for the purpose of providing for the marrying of the occupier's family. The result of it is that it impoverishes them, it rather increases production, but gives no employment, save to the occupier, and generally has the effect of raising the rent.[39]

The other unions of low valuation per person highlighted by Fig. 2.5 would appear to have been in a slightly better situation than was the case in Glenties. In Inishowen, for example, the termination of a large number of leases in 1837 had a very positive effect on the mode of agriculture in parts of the peninsula. Thomas Douglas Bateson, the agent for a number of estates in Inishowen union, seized the opportunity to end the rundale system by dividing the land in a similar fashion to the earlier programmes of 'squaring' carried out by Alexander Hamilton and others. Bateson's evidence to the *Devon Commission* in 1844 also alludes to the 'very extensive improvements' made in terms of reclamation of waste land, stating that: 'In the last four years there have been between 300 and 400 acres reclaimed' on one property.[40]

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[36] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt ii, H.C. 1845[672], xx, p. 147, evidence of John O'Donnell

[37] ibid., p. 157, evidence of James Walker

[38] ibid., p. 155, evidence of James McCunningham

[39] ibid., p. 157, evidence of James Walker

[40] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt i, H.C. 1845, xix, p. 720

Finally we turn to Raphoe barony and the most productive agricultural region in Donegal. Here, the area known as 'the Lagan' played an important role in providing employment for seasonal labourers before and during the Famine. As one would expect, the eastern unions of Londonderry and Strabane had the highest valuation per person holding land in the county in 1845 (see Fig. 2.5) and there is also evidence that agricultural methods were more developed in this region than in much of the west. Several witnesses to the *Devon Commission* commented on a quite sophisticated crop rotation system on most holdings. In Raphoe parish, for example, a six year cycle was employed, while in Stranorlar the general rotation of crops was 'potatoes, oats, flax and oats, pasture, except in partial cases, where clover and grass seeds are sown'.[41] Samuel Lewis, writing of Donegal agriculture in 1837, summed up the progressive nature of landlords along the eastern county boundary when he commented that the 'resident gentry' were effecting great improvement; the 'effects of their exertions show themselves in a very striking manner in the baronies of Raphoe and Tirhugh, in each of which there is a farming society, which has... very beneficial effects'.[42] As we shall see, the overall advantage of the eastern part of Donegal in relation to agriculture is mirrored by a greater level of development and prosperity in relation to most other social and economic factors which make up the composite pre-Famine picture.

2.4. MANUAL LABOUR, WAGES & EMPLOYMENT

The composition of the pre-Famine Irish population in terms of occupations was overwhelmingly agriculturally based, with over two-thirds of the population dependant on agriculture. In Britain, a rapid process of industrialisation from 1800 onward saw a transition to factory production to the extent that over 70 per cent of the male labour force was employed in the industrial sector by 1841. In the same period, a converse de-industrialisation process took place in Ireland and factory production became confined almost exclusively to Belfast and its hinterland. In total, only 17 per

[41] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt i, H.C. 1845, xix, p. 765, evidence of Samuel Ramsey; p. 787, evidence of John Speer

[42] Lewis, S. (1837), *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland,* p. 474

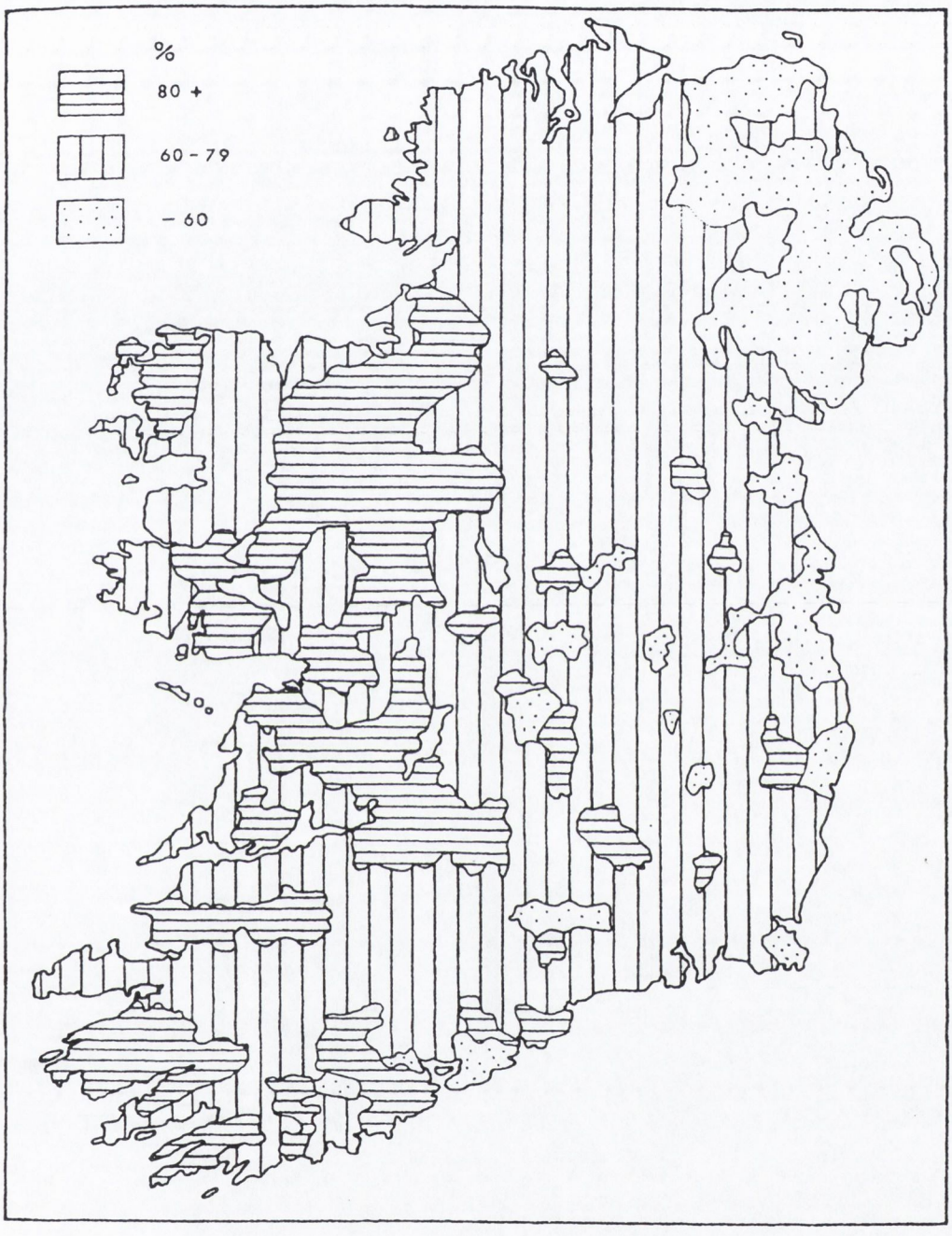
cent of the Irish male labour force was employed in the industrial sector in 1841.[43] The predominantly agricultural nature of the pre-Famine economy is highlighted in Fig. 2.6, overleaf, which maps the percentage of families engaged in agriculture on the eve of the Famine. The highest concentration of individuals dependant on agriculture occurs to the west of the country, covering large swathes of territory running from Cork north to Sligo and Leitrim. These counties were in a most precarious position in terms of an ability to deal with the imminent potato failure, given that over four-fifths of families were dependant on a sector of the economy which was soon to endure difficulties of mammoth proportions. Donegal was scarcely in a better position, though none of its baronies fall into the worst 80+ per cent category, having more in common with the returns for counties in more central and eastern areas.

During a crisis such as the Great Famine, the section of the population who had tended to subsist with only intermittent use of cash were those most likely to be adversely affected once their mode of subsistence had been eroded. Recourse to purchased food was impossible for large numbers of people throughout western parts of the country in particular, where transactions frequently involved the exchange of goods and services rather than monetary dealings. The most typical example is the bartering of labour in exchange for potato ground and other payments-in-kind.[44] An assessment of the regional variation in the number of labourers in different parts of the country is made difficult by the overlapping occupational classifications set out by the enumerators of the 1841 Census. Families classified as being 'chiefly dependant on their own manual labour' included those whose heads were farmers with holdings of under five acres, *bona fide* labourers and others 'without capital, in either money, land, or acquired knowledge'.[45]

On the basis of this classification, Donegal would appear to have been in an unenviable position, with 74.8 per cent of families grouped in this category compared

[43] Kinealy, C. (1997), *A Death Dealing Famine*, p. 31
[44] See: Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine*, p. 142
[45] *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841*, H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, p. xviii

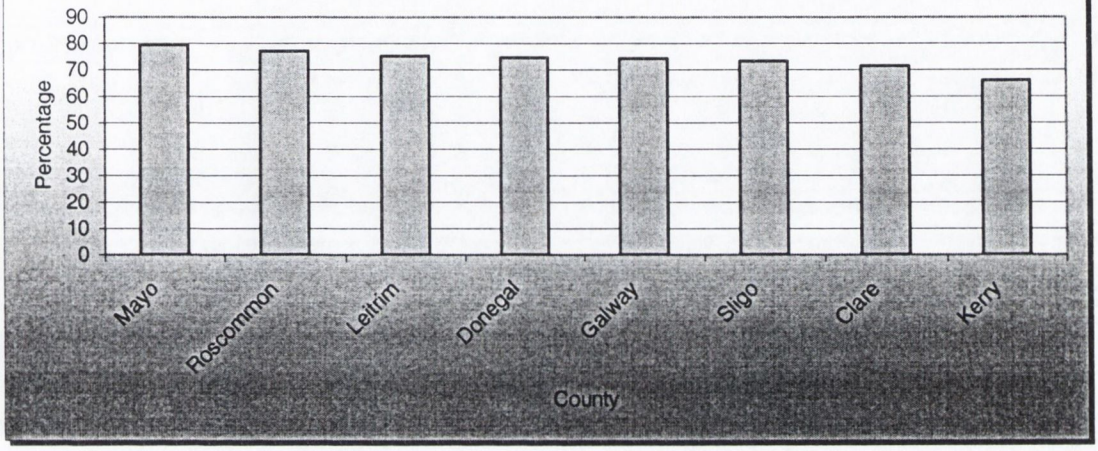
Fig. 2.6. Percentage of families occupied in agriculture, 1841, by barony



Source: O'Grada, C. (1989), 'Poverty, Population and Agriculture, 1801-45' in, Vaughan, W.E. (ed.), *A New History of Ireland, v: Ireland Under the Union,* p. 271

with a national average of 62.9 per cent.[46] Of the counties along the western seaboard, only Mayo, Roscommon and Leitrim returned a higher proportion of such households, as illustrated in Fig. 2.7.[47]

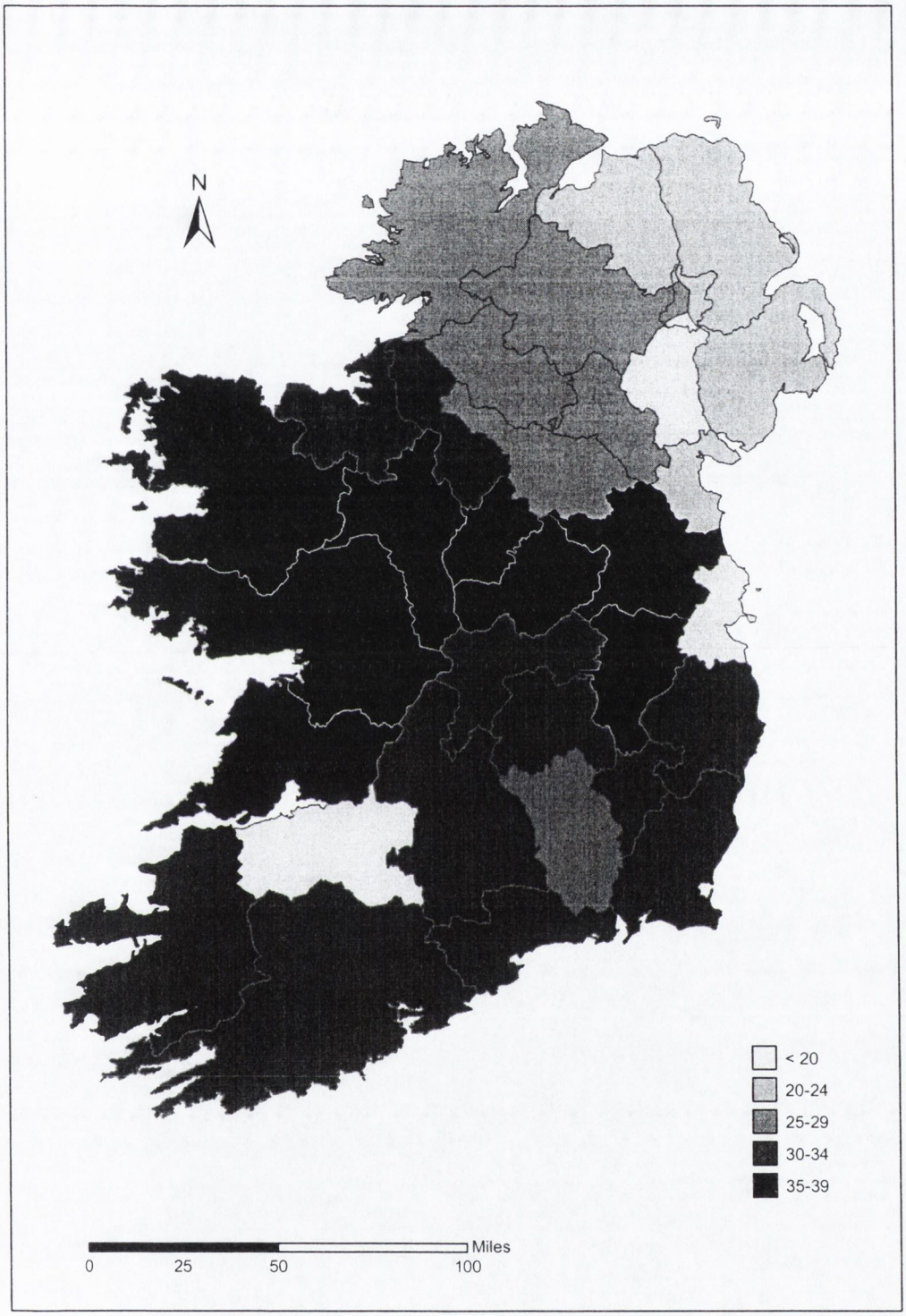
Fig. 2.7. Percentage of families 'chiefly dependant on their own manual labour' in western counties, 1841



Adopting a more refined approach to the calculations, it is possible to gauge the percentage of the male population employed specifically as labourers, albeit somewhat tentatively. The Census categories enumerating the number of persons 'ministering to food' in each county have a sub-category identifying 'servants and labourers', the vast majority whom are likely to have been agricultural labourers. A cartographic depiction of national variations in the numbers thus categorised reveals a most intriguing pattern, with highest concentrations occurring across the midlands from Meath to Galway and Mayo in the west (see Fig. 2.8). It is possible that the explanation for such a trend lies in the fact that a significant labour requirement existed in the rich agricultural counties of Meath and Kildare, while the high proportions recorded to the west of the country could be due to population pressures and a consequent sizeable number of landless labourers. The difference between east and west was that labourers in counties such as Kildare and Meath had a reasonable chance of continued employment during the Famine, while their Galway and Mayo counterparts were likely to have to found themselves in the workhouses, emigrant ships or worse.

[46] ibid., pp. 544-5
[47] Source: ibid., p. 433

Fig 2.8. Percentage of male population in each county employed as labourers and servants, 1841



Source: *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841*, H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, County Occupation Tables

Donegal, with a total of 28.6 per cent of the male population classified as servants or labourers, fits broadly into a northern zone where numbers tend to decrease moving from west to east. Within the county itself, regional patterns of the extent of the labouring classes are difficult to estimate. The most practical approach is to utilise the parish data relating to the number of families who were 'chiefly dependant on their own manual labour' in 1841. Given that it was the people in this category who were likely to be most vulnerable to the impact of the Famine, it is reasonable to surmise that the regional distribution of such families should provide a good indication of the areas exhibiting a higher probability of most adverse effects. The results are mapped in Fig. 2.9 and indicate a marked western focus, with over 80 per cent of families in the vast majority of Glenties and Dunfanaghy Union parishes thus classified.

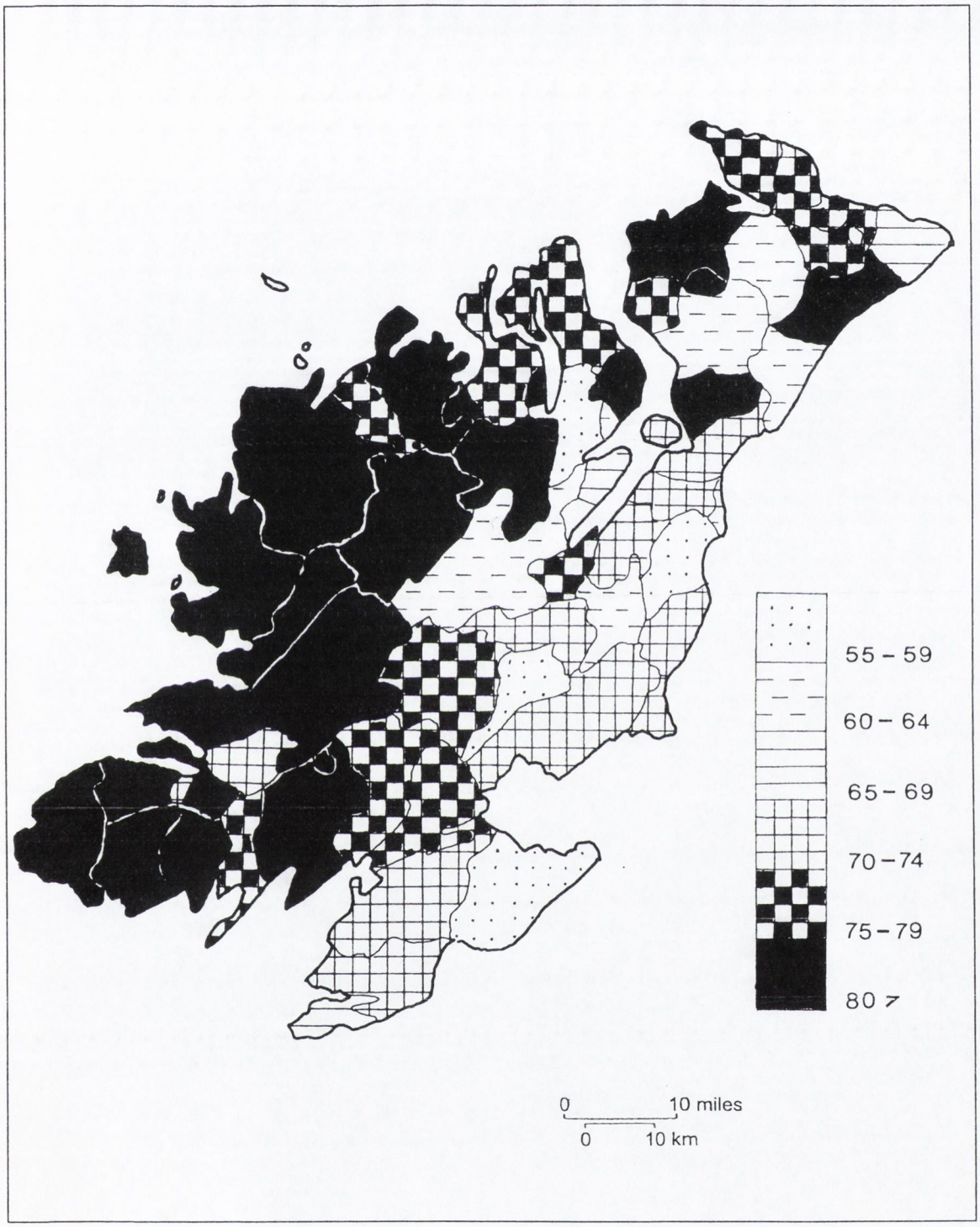
There are also clear indications of under-employment among the labourers in these western parts of Donegal, particularly at certain times of the year. Improvements in farming methods, deflation following the wartime boom and an increasing population meant that more labourers were competing for work at a time when the demand for their services was decreasing. John O'Donnell, the vice-chairman of the Glenties Poor Law guardians, blamed the lack of improvement in the conditions of labourers by 1844 on the fact that their wages had remained the same for the previous twenty years and that many of them were frequently 'three-fourths of the year without employment'.[48] A report by Lieutenant Lancey in relation to the parish of Drumhome in December 1835 stated that:

> There is nothing so much wanted as employment for the labouring poor. A farmer, who formerly employed 3 or 4 labourers, now contrives to steal in his harvest with one servant boy and the assistance of his family...[49]

The situation in south-west Donegal outlined by Lancey in 1835 showed little sign of improvement by the time of the *Devon Commission* in 1844. William Graham, a small farmer living near Donegal town, provides an insight into the lengths to which

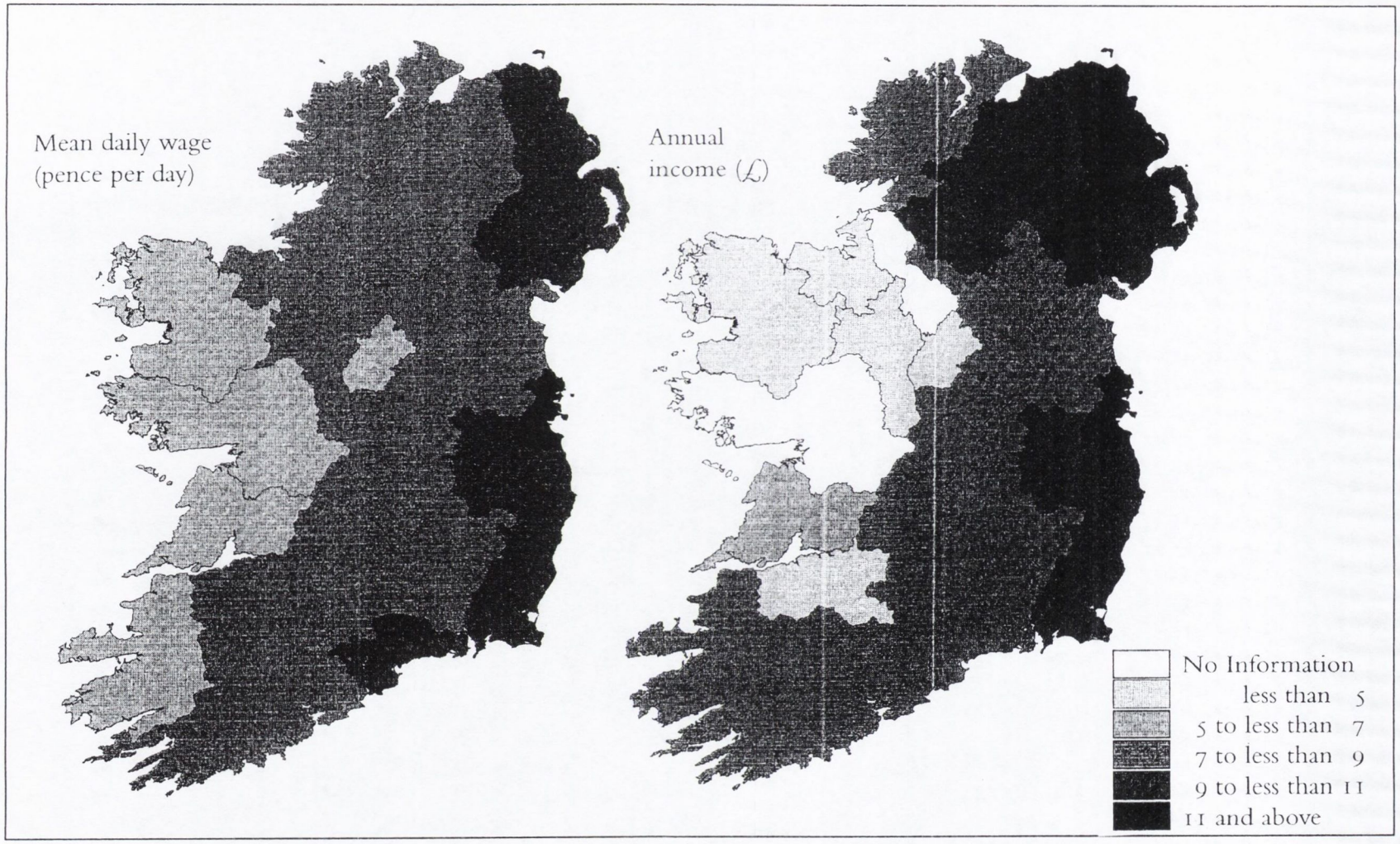
[48] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt ii, H.C. 1845[672], xx, p. 149; commenting on Inishkeel parish.
[49] Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol 39, Parishes of County Donegal II, 1835-6: Mid, West and South Donegal, p. 68

Fig. 2.9. Percentage of families in each parish classified as being 'dependent on their own manual labour' in Donegal, 1841



Source: *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841*, H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 418-421

Fig 2.10. Estimated income of a male labourer in Ireland at county level, 1835



Source: Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine,* pp. 143

labourers were forced in their quest to procure employment, many being obliged to walk up to ten miles a day to find work in winter at a rate of 8*d.* a day. Those lucky enough to find work were likely to be employed for only three days a week and such was the demand for labour that Graham felt that 'they would work for 5*d.* a day if they could get it'.[50]

It would appear that slightly better conditions existed along the eastern county boundary in the area covered by Raphoe barony where superior agricultural land offered the prospect of more frequent and better-paid employment. A farmer from Stranorlar parish, commenting in 1844, referred to recent improvements in tillage as being a key element in the creation of a greater demand for labour in the area.[51] In addition, the reduction in the price of provisions is identified by a number of respondents to the *Devon Commission* as contributing to a general improvement in the condition of the labouring classes in the eastern part of Donegal.[52] To the north-east of the county, meanwhile, it would seem likely that seasonal migration played a vital role in maintaining relatively good conditions for the labouring classes in Dunfanaghy, Milford and Letterkenny Unions. As we shall see, the ability of large sections of the population to supplement their income through harvest employment in Scotland meant that absolute poverty was avoidable despite the high densities of labourers and infrequent employment opportunities locally.[53]

A relatively healthy state of affairs is also evident in reports relating to the north-east of the county, where many parishes display quite low densities of families dependant on manual labour. One commentator to the *Devon Commission*, for example, referred to the fact that the labourers in Inishowen were 'better off than in many of the other districts; most of them are employed, and some of them have sea-weed... from which they raise a comfortable quantity of potatoes'.[54] In Inishowen, as elsewhere in Donegal, the labourers held their cottages from farmers who normally bore the responsibility of keeping them in repair, the tenants usually paying for them through their labour rather than *via* monetary exchange. The majority of such

[50] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt ii, H.C. 1845[672], xx, p. 163
[51] ibid., pt i, H.C. 1845, xix, p. 787, evidence of John Speer
[52] See for example: ibid., p. 787 & 793, evidence of James Johnston
[53] See Section 2.12
[54] ibid., p. 690, evidence of Reverend Robert Gray

dwellings came with an acre or two of land for the planting of potatoes or grazing for a cow as well as a turbary in many cases.

Determining the wages of labourers in pre-Famine Donegal is a difficult task and there is no means of arriving at any precise rate. Correlating evidence relating to wage rates in the *Poor Inquiry* and *Devon Commission,* it would appear that there were several wage bands with variations dependent on the season and whether diet was included or not. The highest rates of 10*d.* to 1*s.* per day without diet were paid in summer, the equivalent rate including diet averaging about 8*d.* per day. In winter meanwhile, the daily labouring wage fell as low as 5*d.* with diet and averaged between 7*d.* and 8*d.* without.[55] Kennedy et al. have attempted a rough reconstruction of daily incomes based on *Poor Inquiry* evidence from 1835. The results, reproduced in Fig. 2.10, would seem to indicate that Donegal labourers wages were comparable with those of a band of counties running through central parts of the country. According to Kennedy *et al.,* the fact that Mayo, Galway, Clare and Kerry fall into a western region of low wages is indicative of the 'fault lines in the pre-Famine economy' which would soon be exposed by the coming Famine.[56] In this respect, as in many others, Donegal seems to have been positioned on the right side of the line.

2.5. FEMALE EMPLOYMENT & THE DOMESTIC LINEN INDUSTRY

Female employment in pre-Famine Ireland provided a vital source of supplementary income to a huge number of poverty stricken families. As well as finding occasional paid work saving hay, picking potatoes or spreading manure, women made an important contribution to the agricultural labour requirements of their family holding. The keeping of fowl, sale of eggs and butter-making were common sources of income throughout the country, while domestic linen manufacture was a pursuit which was concentrated almost exclusively in Ulster by the 1840s. Even in the north of the country, the effects of the textile revolution in Britain had undermined the profitability of domestic spinning in the two decades leading up to the Famine and the ability of small farmers to supplement their income as part-time

[55] *Poor inquiry (Ireland): appendix D containing baronial examinations relative to earnings of labourers, cottier tenants, employment of women and children, expenditure; and supplement,* H.C. 1836[36], xxxi, pp. 418-435; *Devon Commission,* evidence from various Donegal respondents

[56] Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine,* p. 142

weavers declined in importance.[57] In the south, a once prosperous linen industry had been all but wiped out by the time of the Famine. H.D. Inglis' comments in relation to Dingle, Co. Kerry are typical of a number of contemporary references to the massive decline in linen manufacture throughout the southern provinces of Ireland: 'a thriving linen trade was once carried on here; and no trade is as beneficial as this in giving employment to different descriptions of persons. But this trade is entirely fallen, and has not been replaced by any other'.[58]

The actual decrease in numbers employed is impossible to ascertain because of differing classifications and categorisations of occupations in the Census data from 1821 to 1841. By mapping the percentage of persons classified as 'ministering to clothing' in 1841 (see Fig 2.11), we get a reasonably accurate indication of the regional variation in the importance of the linen industry. Three fairly distinct regions emerge: the first, running from south-west to east (under 20% 'ministering to clothing'); the second, running across the midlands to the west and southwards to Clare and north Kerry (20-29%); and the zone of highest concentration, Ulster, where almost every barony returns a figure of over 30 per cent. Within Ulster, the industrialised core of production in the north-east is clearly evident with over 50 per cent of the occupied population in the baronies around Lough Neagh occupying the 'ministering to clothing' category. Donegal, with the exception of the baronies of Raphoe North and South, is broadly in line with much of the rest of Ulster, with between 40 and 49 per cent of the population thus classified.

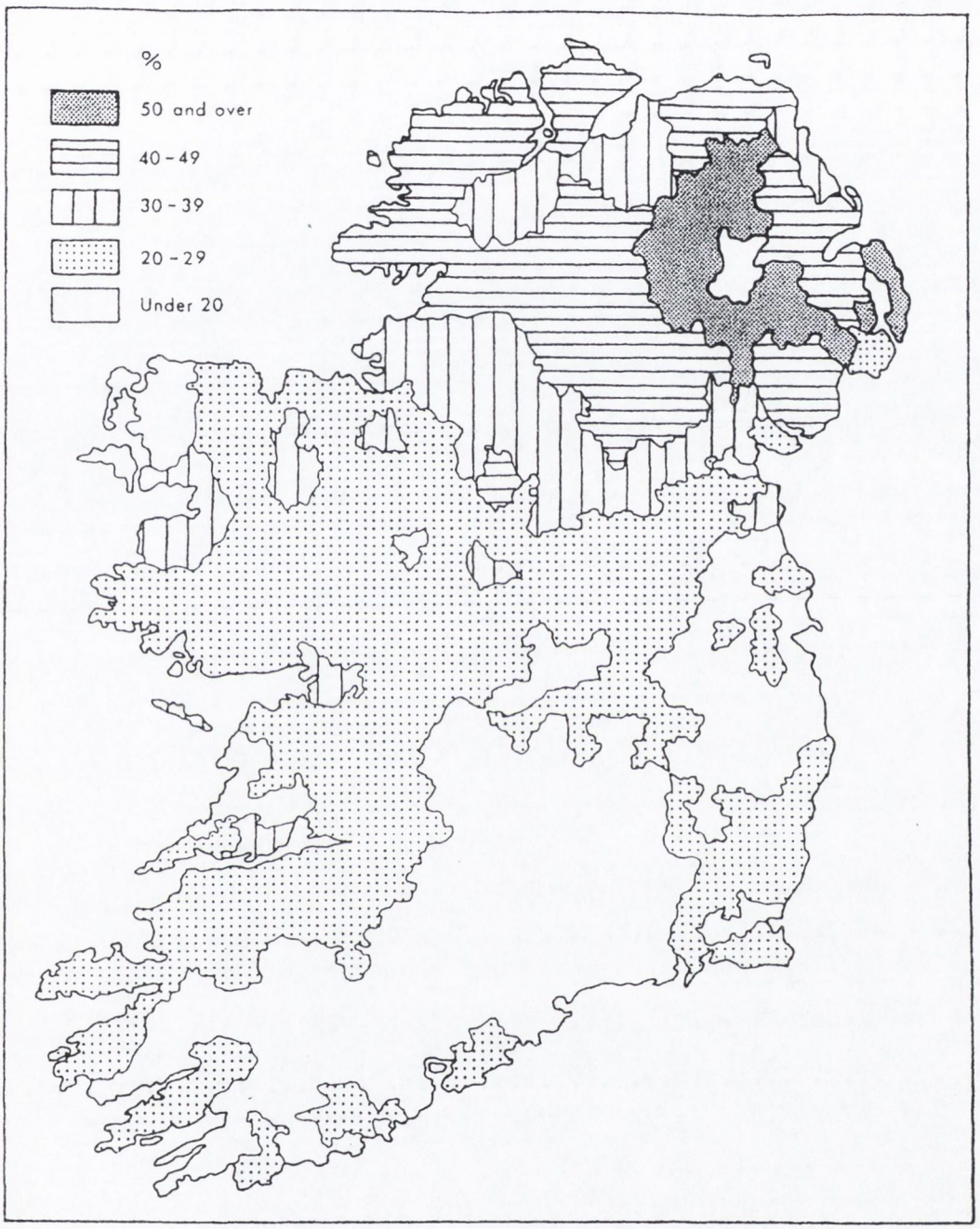
While these figures would appear to indicate a relatively healthy state of affairs in Donegal, they mask a sharp decline in hand-spinning as a domestic enterprise in the county. The competition came in two waves, the first from machine-spun cotton yarn in the early years of the century and the second from machine-spun linen yarn from the 1820s onwards.[59] The impact of this mechanisation was most severely felt in the

[57] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 4; O'Grada, C. (1993), *Ireland Before and After the Famine: explorations in economic history, 1800-1925,* pp. 22-38; Kennedy, L. & Ollerenshaw, P. eds. (1985), *An Economic History of Ulster,* pp. 1-109; Bardon, J. (1992), *A History of Ulster,* pp. 183-385

[58] Inglis, H.D. (1835), *A Journey Through Ireland in 1834,* p.244

[59] Collins, B. (1981), 'Irish Emigration to Dundee and Paisley during the first half of the Nineteenth Century' in, Goldstrom, J.M. & Clarkson, L.A. (eds.), *Irish Population, Economy and Society: Essays in honour of the late K.H. Connell,* p. 205

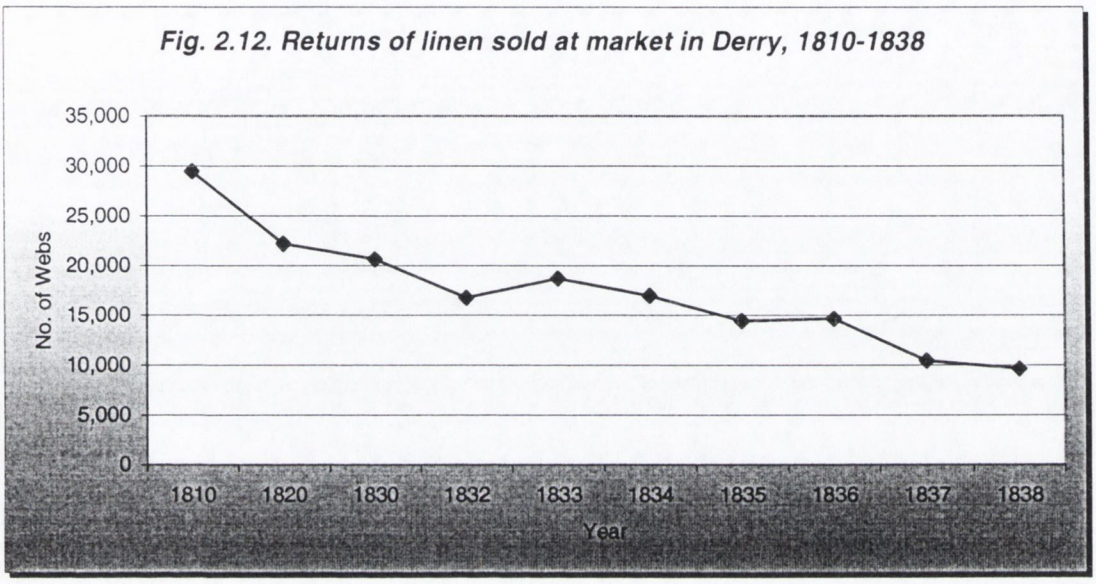
Fig. 2.11. Persons 'ministering to clothing' as a percentage of the total occupied population of each barony in Ireland, 1841



Source: O'Grada, C. (1989), 'Poverty, Population and Agriculture, 1801-45' in, Vaughan, W.E. (ed.), *A New History of Ireland, v: Ireland Under the Union,* p. 135

north-west and the market for hand-spun yarn at Londonderry was severely effected, while the price of cloth decreased markedly[60]. The full effect of the competition to Donegal and Derry's hand-spinners is illustrated in Fig. 2.12, below, which charts the decline in the number of linen webs sold at market from 1810 to 1830.[61]

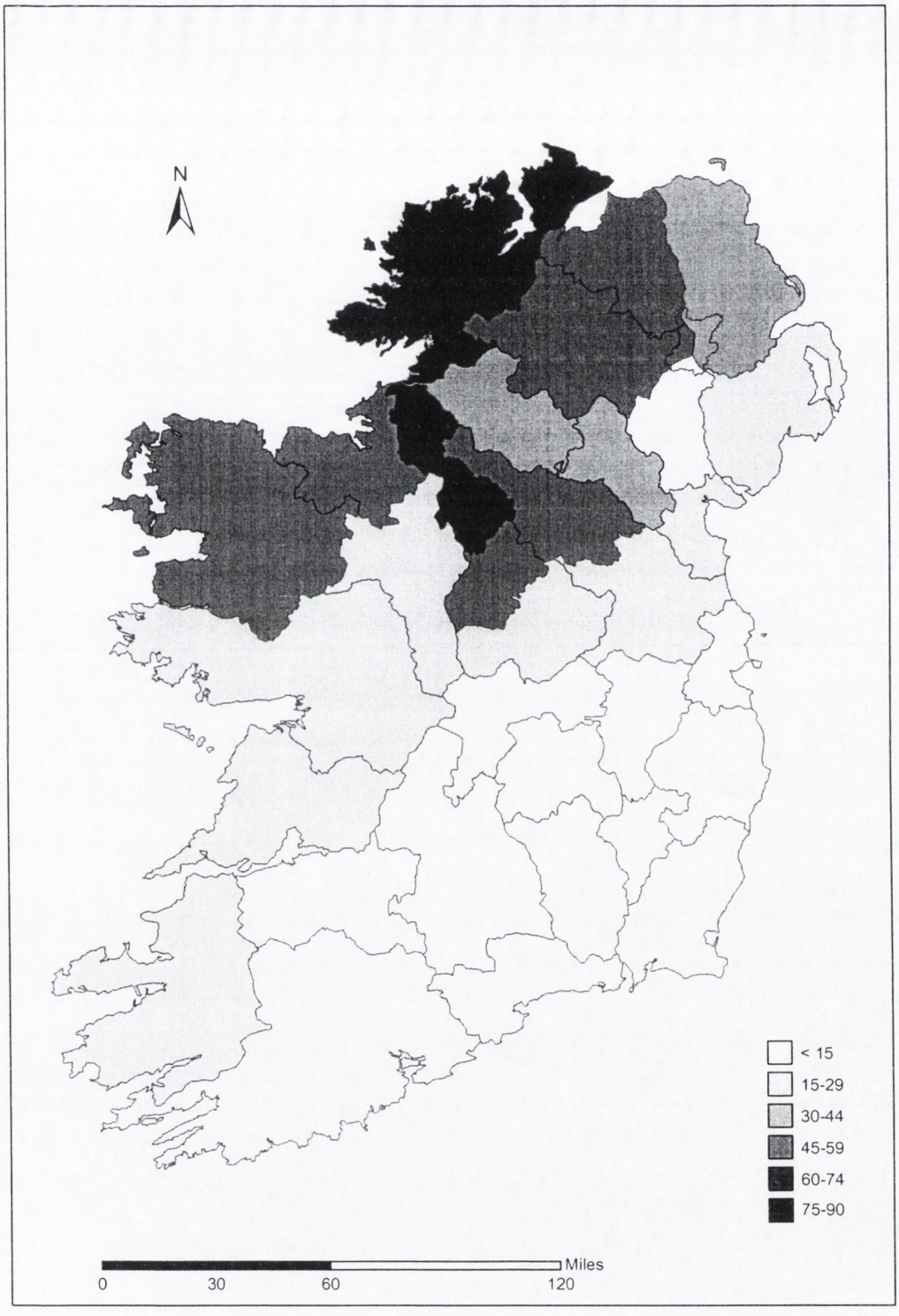
Fig. 2.12. Returns of linen sold at market in Derry, 1810-1838



Despite the overall decline in the numbers involved in linen manufacture in the first half of the nineteenth century in Donegal, the number of women who supplemented family incomes in this way was bolstered by the fact that weaving continued as a largely domestic enterprise in the same period. By the 1830s, many weavers had ceased to work on their own account and began to be employed by 'manufacturers' who gave out yarn to be woven at a fixed rate. In addition, the number of women still employed in spinning was appreciably higher than the vast majority of counties in Ireland. A subcategory of the 'ministering to clothing' section of the *1841 Census* entitled 'spinners of flax' reveals that some 10,707 females over the age of fifteen and a further 584 under fifteen were thus employed in Donegal. Plotting these figures against the returns for the rest of the country we arrive at a most dramatic result, mapped in Fig. 2.13. In terms of female employment, spinning had declined in the south of the country to such an extent that less than 15 per thousand of the female population were involved in such activity by 1841, with a further band of counties falling in the 15 to 29 per thousand range running south-west to north-east

[60] Gill, C. (1925), *The Rise of the Irish Linen Industry*, pp. 323-8
[61] Source: *Reports from assistant commissioners on hand-loom weavers, pt. III, Ireland,* H.C. 1840, xxiii, p. 555

Fig 2.13. Number of females per thousand of population classified as being employed in 'spinning flax' in each county in Ireland, 1841



Source: Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the yea 1841, H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, County Occupation Tables

from Kerry to Down. To the north of the country, as one would expect, the proportions increase, with counties from Mayo east to Antrim returning figures of up to 59 per thousand. Donegal and Leitrim are far and away the counties for which spinning was of most importance with 75 and 85 per thousand of the female population respectively employed under the 'spinning of flax' subcategory. For Donegal, such a situation was bound to have had an impact in alleviating poverty on the eve of the Famine and the supplementary income generated by spinning was likely to have been even more crucial after 1845.

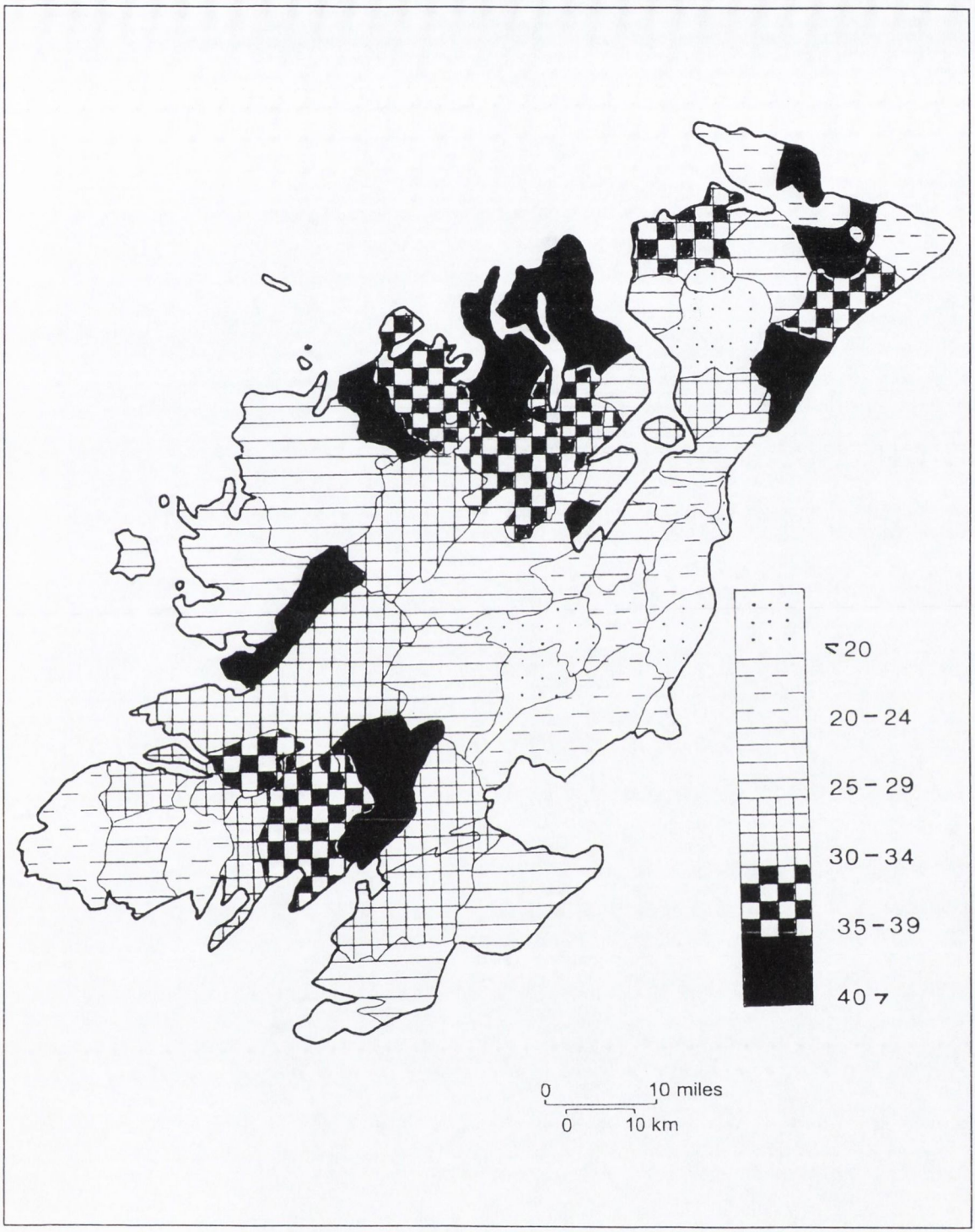
Within Donegal itself there would appear to have been considerable regional variation in the proportion of the female population engaged in spinning, with particular concentrations of activity to the north of Kilmacrenan barony in the Poor Law unions of Dunfanaghy, Letterkenny and Milford. Calculations based on a sample population of townlands on the Trinity College estates in Donegal confirm that there was a particular tradition of spinning among the women of the College's Kilmacrenan lands, with some 52 per cent of the female population thus employed in 1843.[62] Further confirmation is offered in Fig. 2.14 which maps the percentage of females classified by the *1841 Census* enumerators as 'ministering to clothing'. Since some 82.2 per cent[63] of women and girls in this category were involved in either flax spinning or spinning of other unspecified materials, it is reasonable to assume that Fig. 2.14 provides a fairly accurate picture of the pre-Famine variation in the numbers involved. The cluster of parishes to the north of Kilmacrenan are the most instantly visible grouping, with over 35 per cent of the female population recorded as being occupied in 'ministering to clothing'. Lieutenant Lancey reported in 1834 that 'spinning and weaving [were] usual' in Killygarvan parish, while in nearby Kilmacrenan where some 38.3 per cent of the female population fell into the 'ministering to clothing' category, Reverend Anthony Hastings commented that 'the linen manufacture is carried on to a good extent' providing 'constant employment'.[64]

[62] O'Connor, J. (2000), *Finely Focused Vision: Landscape and life on the Cos. Kerry and Donegal Estates of Trinity College in the 1840s* (unpublished B.A. Dissertation, TCD), p. 33

[63] Calculated from Figs. in *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, p. 426

[64] Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol 38, Parishes of County Donegal I, 1833-5, North-East Donegal, p.43, 52

Fig 2.14. Percentage of the female population classified as occupied in 'ministering to clothing' in each Donegal parish, 1841



Source: *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841*, H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 418-421

Elsewhere in Donegal, two further foci of spinning activity occur in the parishes of Muff (41.8%), Moville Upper (38.7%) and Culdaff (40.6%) to the east side of the Inishowen peninsula, as well as a southern group which includes Killybegs Lower (38.6%), Inver (35.3%) and Killymard (41.1%). The establishment of a linen market at Ballyshannon in the 1830s is likely to have stimulated or at least reinforced the domestic linen industry in parts of south Donegal in the years leading up to the Famine. A report from Killymard in January 1836 emphasises the importance of spinning in the area: 'Hand-spinning is common and pays well at present, although a woman does not earn more than 3d. a day'.[65] Despite the low monetary value of such occupation, the additional income was bound to be of huge benefit to over a third of families in the parish.

The remainder of the county can be divided along an axis running more or less contiguous to the Raphoe barony boundary. In general, parishes to the west of this line tend to fall in the 25 to 29 per cent or 30 to 34 per cent brackets, while parishes to the east returned figures of less than 25 per cent of females classified as 'ministering to clothing' in 1841. Even by 1821, the increasing unfeasibility of maintaining the tradition of hand-spinning in Raphoe barony was noted by a Mr. I. Greer in a report to the North-West Farming Society in which the author stated that he 'would hunt them [female spinners] all out to the fields who are only killing their time at their wheels'.[66] Clearly Mr. Greer felt that the women's efforts would reap better returns for their families if directed toward agricultural labour. The deterioration of domestic spinning in Raphoe and its role in rising poverty is testified to further by John Speer, a witness to the *Devon Commission* in April 1844:

> One cause of the prevalence of poverty in this part of the country, amongst the middle and lower classes of society, may be attributed to the want of profitable employment for females; for that by which they formerly derived a comfortable livelihood, the spinning of yarn, is now superseded by the introduction of machinery. They have still to be supported and dressed, probably beyond the means of those who have to do so. There are no luxuries here, nor even the common necessities of life.[67]

[65] Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol 39, Parishes of County Donegal II, 1835-6: Mid, West and South Donegal, p. 98
[66] ibid., p. 81
[67] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt i, H.C. 1845, xix, p. 790, evidence of John Speer

Though the decline of this valuable domestic industry had a deep impact on the ability of the female population to assist in maintaining some small degree of comfort in their homes, there were other means by which women could supplement their husband's meagre earnings. The principal method employed was the raising of hens and ducks and selling of eggs. Throughout various contemporary reports we find frequent references to 'egg-women' who travelled locally collecting eggs to be brought to markets in Donegal and Derry. One typical example is the evidence of Reverend John Campbell of Letterkenny to the *Devon Commission* in 1844. One Sunday in April of that year, Rev. Campbell informed his congregation that eggs could not be eaten the following week in keeping with the regulations of Lent. His announcement was met with a 'public laugh' at the absurdity of such prohibition since the majority of his parishioners scarcely ever ate eggs anyway, such was their value as a saleable commodity.[68] Stock returns for the 1841 Census reveal a marked tendency for those with smaller holdings to keep poultry. A massive 47,316 fowl were kept by householders and by tenants on plots of under one acre in Donegal, while a further 59,672 were being raised on holdings of between one and five acres. It was the female members of these families who reared the birds and sold the eggs which were to bring a most welcome contribution to potentially fatally stretched budgets during the coming years.

The Famine was destined to have a profound effect on both genders in the second half of the 1840s and it was the resourcefulness and endeavour of women which often proved vital in surviving its wide-ranging impacts. In Donegal, as elsewhere in Ireland, the supplementary income generated in the ways outlined above would be crucial in staving off the worst effects of the crisis on those positioned at the bottom end of the social scale. Despite the general decline of the domestic linen industry, it would appear that a significant proportion of the female population were still augmenting their husband's income by spinning, particularly in the north-west of the county. It is reasonable to suggest that the full brunt of the Famine may have been lessened to some degree in parts of Dunfanaghy, Letterkenny and Milford Unions as a result.

[68] ibid., p. 786, evidence of Rev. John Campbell

2.6. FISHING IN PRE-FAMINE DONEGAL

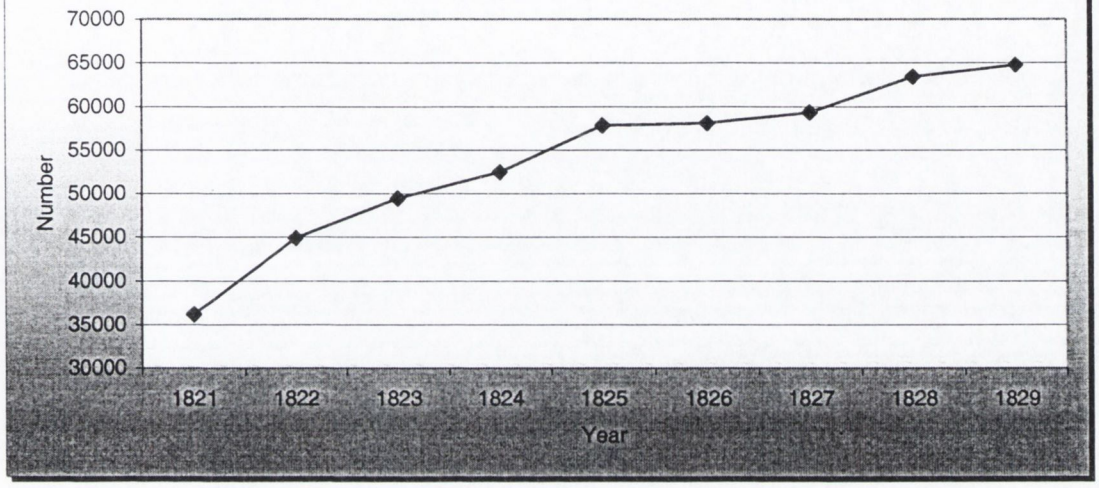
Given the peninsular location of Donegal within Ireland it is reasonable to surmise that sea fisheries would have played a significant role in the pre-Famine economy. The bulk of Famine literature to date has tended to pay scant attention to the notion that, despite the failure of the staple potato crop, people in coastal localities may have escaped the worst effects of the crisis by turning to the abundance of fish in maritime areas. The fishing industry in the first half of the nineteenth century was in an extremely backward state considering Ireland's favourable location on the continental shelf of Europe and its rich endowment of natural harbours.[69] As one contemporary observer noted: 'in respect to fish, no country can be better situated than Ireland... but certainly these natural and obvious benefits have never been turned to best advantage'.[70] The most prohibitive factors in the development of sea fisheries were the absence of capital investment, distance from markets and, above all, a grave deficiency in the number of boats capable of engaging in deep-sea fishing. Woodham-Smith refers to the fact that the greatest profusion of fish off the west coast of Ireland 'lay many miles out at sea in forty fathoms of water'.[71] At such distances and depths the fish may as well have been located off the coast of Newfoundland for all the difference it made to the vast majority of Irish fishermen.

Efforts were made to improve the situation in the early part of the century, most notably by the Irish Fishery Board which provided grants totalling some £50,769 in the 1820s.[72] In addition to these funds, which were mainly used in the improvement of piers and quays, a further £25,204 was made available through a loan scheme for the repair and outfit of boats and the purchase of new boats between 1827 and 1830.[73] Such endeavour appears to have acted as something of a stimulus to Irish fisheries, with an increase in the numbers of people involved in the industry from 36,159 in

[69] Mokyr, J. (1983), *Why Ireland Starved,* p. 172
[70] Dubourdieu, J. (1812), *Statistical Survey of the County of Antrim,* p. 569
[71] Woodham-Smith, C. (1962), *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849,* p. 289
[72] *First report of commissioners of inquiry into the state of Irish fisheries; with the minutes of evidence and appendix,* H.C. 1837[77], xxii, Appendix IX, p. 324
[73] ibid.

1821 to 64,771 in 1829, as indicated in Fig. 2.15.[74] However, the dissolution of the Fishery Board in April 1830 resulted in a decrease in the numbers employed to some 54,119 men and boys by 1836 (see Table. 2.1, overleaf).

Fig. 2.15. Numbers engaged in fisheries in Ireland, 1821-29



In Donegal, the effect of the termination of grants and loans from the Fishery Board is referred to by a number of commentators in 1836. Samuel Mitchell, Coast Guard Officer for Teilen East, comments on the fact that 'since its [Irish Fishery Board] extinction, the fishermen have had great difficulty in procuring materials', in reference to the coastline west of Killybegs.[75] To the north of the county in the area around Lough Swilly, meanwhile, we find similar reports:

> '... the loans of the late Fishery Board enabled fishermen to procure boats and gear; they were much benefited in consequence. Since [its] extinction... the fishery in Loch Swilly has decreased, from the fishermen not being able to procure materials, and not receiving any encouragement'[76]

Despite the lack of support and absence of financial input into fisheries, the numbers engaged in such activity in Donegal remained at the level which they had reached in 1830. In 1836, at a time when the number of fishermen countrywide had fallen by some 10,562 persons, the industry in Donegal remained buoyant, with

[74] Source: ibid. p. 325. Note: These figures do not indicate the number of permanently employed fishermen in Ireland. They merely refer to all persons engaged in fisheries to any extent (i.e. including farmers who fished occasionally etc.).

[75] *First report of commissioners of inquiry into the state of Irish fisheries; with the minutes of evidence and appendix,* H.C. 1837[77], xxii, p. 101

[76] ibid., p. 53, evidence of Lt. J. Holland, Coast Guard Officer, Rathmullen

Table 2.1. Boats and Men engaged in fisheries (Ireland), 1830 & 1836

Counties	Decked Vessels			Half-decked Vessels			Open Sail-Boats		Row-Boats		Total (1836)	Total (1830)
	No.	Tonnage	Men	No.	Tonnage	Men	No.	Men	No.	Men		
Dublin	121	4,651	789	27	265	140	66	297	65	249	1,505	3,002 (Wicklow& Dublin)
Wicklow	39	1,174	156	153	1,425	858	57	246	14	38	1,378	
Wexford	1	20	6	77	683	493	209	1,129	229	1,228	2,856	2,614
Waterford	-	-	-	101	1,668	595	52	301	266	1,260	2,156	1,983
Cork	13	302	82	233	3,315	1,316	346	1,698	2,039	10,353	13,738	14,621
Kerry	1	22	7	44	498	234	421	2,612	610	3,458	6,311	3,562
Clare	-	-	-	7	88	35	39	141	334	1,236	1,462	2,416
Galway	1	18	4	116	1,125	525	479	2,260	1,376	5,750	8,539	13,759
Mayo	-	-	-	4	42	12	12	42	677	3,458	3,768	5,321
Sligo	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	29	172	995	1,294	3,677
Donegal	8	130	28	11	61	42	84	289	1,169	6,254	6,613	6,633
Antrim	5	60	15	3	25	9	13	38	242	746	816	2,126
Down	13	288	67	83	872	363	23	92	358	1,608	2,305	2,441
Louth	13	434	80	11	225	52	1	5	313	1,106	1,378	2,571
Total	215	7,099	1,234	870	10,292	4,684	1,812	9,179	7,864	37,829	54,119	64,771

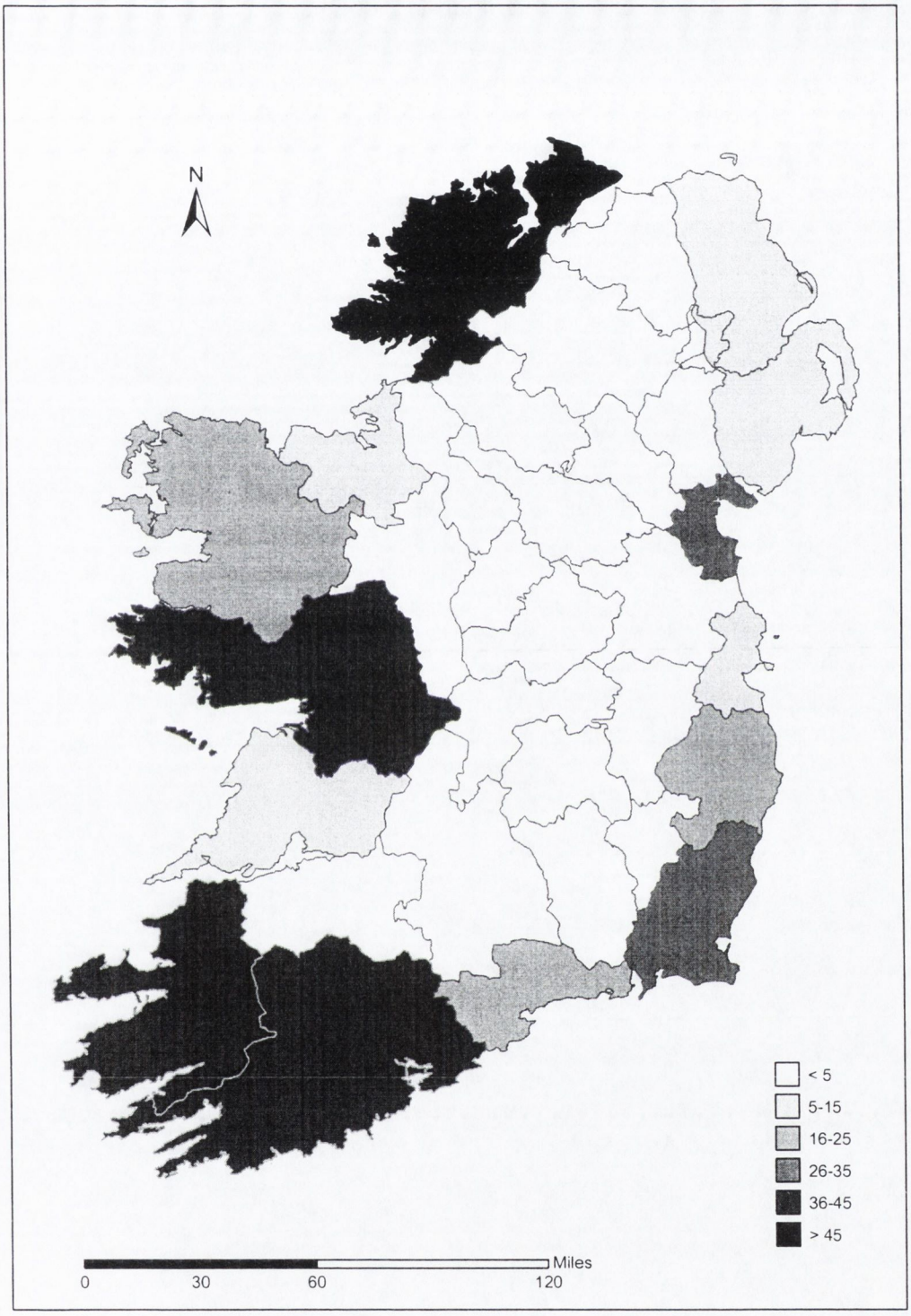
Source: *First report of commissioners of inquiry into the state of Irish fisheries; with the minutes of evidence and appendix,* H.C. 1837[77], xxii, App. X & App. XI, p. 326
Note: 1830 Figs. are reprinted from 11th Report of the Commissioners of Irish Fisheries

returns numbering 6,613 men and boys, or just over 12 per cent of the national total.[77] Fig. 2.16, overleaf, reflects the endurance of sea fisheries in Donegal in the years leading up to the Famine, with just over 45 per thousand of the male population engaged in such activity in 1836. It is only counties Kerry (43 per thousand), Galway (40 per thousand) and Cork (36 per thousand) that come close to Donegal in terms of the proportion of the male population employed.[78] In determining the likely advantages of such a situation in the face of the coming crisis, one is struck by the huge number of vessels classified as 'row-boats' in Donegal, as compared with Kerry, Galway and Cork (see Table 2.1). Only 54 per cent of Kerry boats are thus classified, with figures of 67 per cent for Galway and 75 per cent in Cork. In Donegal such vessels accounted for just under 95 per cent of the total. [79] One could argue, therefore, that fishing in Donegal was being carried out by the poorer sections of coastal communities at more of a subsistence level than their south-western and western counterparts. In effect, Donegal was not only the county for which fishing was of most significance in the pre-Famine years, it was also the county in which the section of the coastal population most likely to bear the brunt of the coming potato failure had an established alternative or supplementary food supply.

In determining the relative importance of sea fisheries in a regional context within Donegal, the latest pre-Famine figures available are from Coast Guard Station reports from 1836. These reveal several distinct pockets of fishing activity along the coastline and are mapped in Fig. 2.17 in terms of actual numbers of fishermen employed in particular areas.[80] To the south-west, the stretch of coastline from Ballyshannon, through Killybegs to Malinbeg, emerges as the predominant zone of fishing activity within the county. We find frequent references to the remarkable quality and abundance of herring and other species from Donegal Bay westwards. The 1836 Commissioners of Inquiry heard a report from Captain Sharpe, Coast Guard Officer for Killybegs in which he stated: 'The herrings taken at Killybegs are of a much better quality than those taken in Scotland. Some boats caught 25,000 herrings

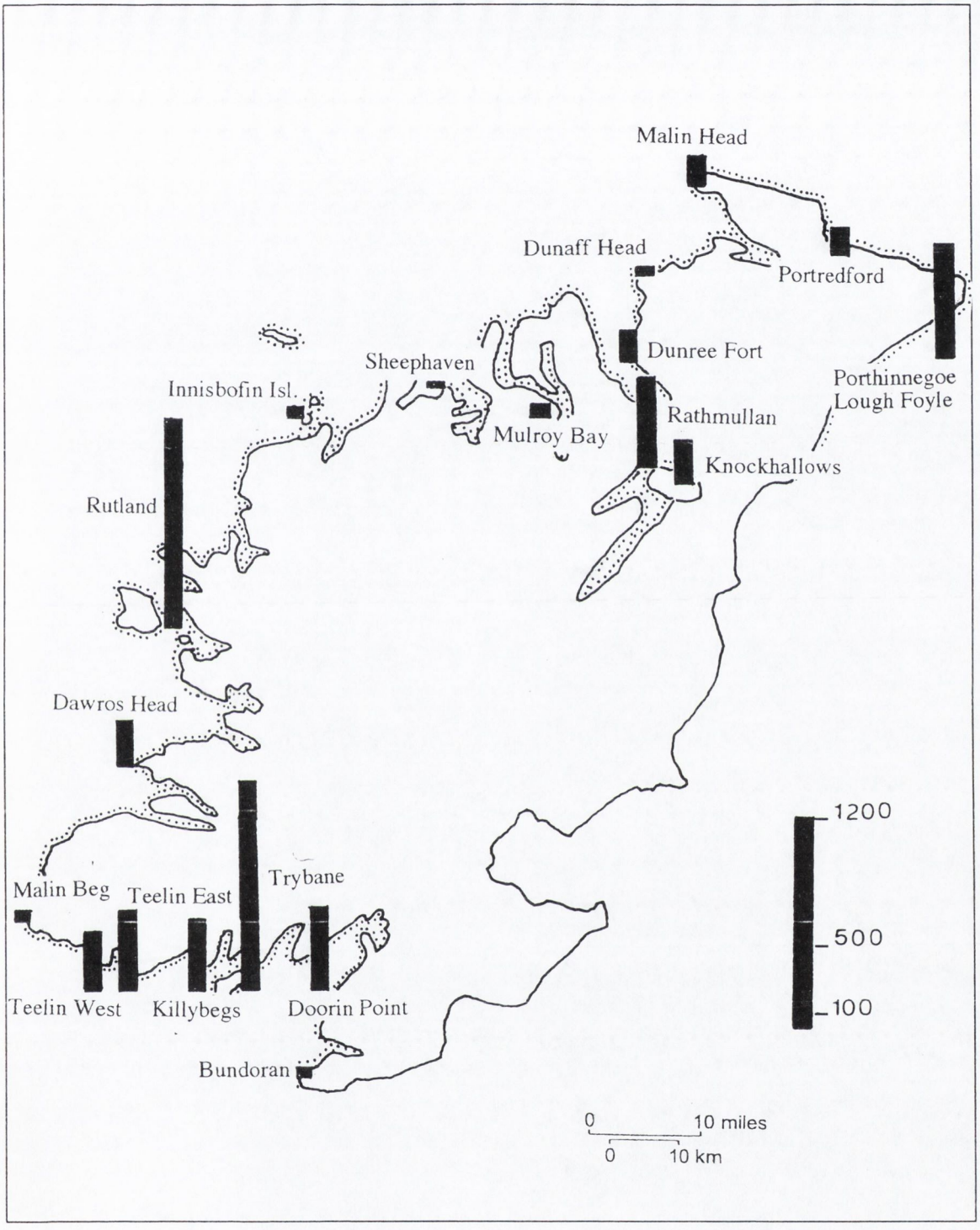
[77] ibid., Appendix XI, p. 326. Figs. for 1830 are given in Appendix X, p. 326, reprinted from 11th Report of the late Commissioners of Irish Fisheries
[78] ibid.
[79] Figs. calculated from Table 2.1
[80] For figures, see Table 2.1

Fig. 2.16. Numbers per thousand of male population engaged in fisheries in Irish Counties, 1836



Source: *First report of commissioners of inquiry into the state of Irish fisheries; with the minutes of evidence and appendix,* H.C. 1837[77], xxii, App. X & App. XI, p. 326

Fig. 2.17. Number of men & boys engaged in fishing activity at various locations along the Donegal coast, 1836



Source: *First report of commissioners of inquiry into the state of Irish fisheries; with the minutes of evidence and appendix*, H.C. 1837[77], xxii, App. X, p. 326

last winter in one night'.[81] In the parish of Drumhome, to the south of Donegal Bay, we find a report from Lieutenant Lancey from December 1835 in which he states: 'When there is a great fishery, the whole population of the sea-coast of the parish go off to it'.[82] Herring was also the principal species taken at the other key fishing districts, in the area around Rutland/ Arranmore on the coast of Boylagh barony and at Lough Swilly and Lough Foyle in the northern baronies of Inishowen East and West. John McArthur's evidence to the *Devon Commission* in 1844 testifies to the extent of fishing activity on the Greencastle estate, bordered to the east by Lough Foyle and the north by the Irish Sea. He claimed that the tenants were not making significant improvements in agriculture because 'they were too much devoted to fishing'.[83]

The inadequacy of the vessels involved is also highlighted by various commentators in evidence to the Commissioners of Inquiry in 1836. Captain Sharpe refers to the boats used by the poorer classes along the coastline near Killybegs, for example, stating that: 'The country boats are small, in bad repair, bad oars, and never carry sails; and from not being coated regularly with tar or paint, they are water soaked'.[84] In Inishowen, the inadequate size and poor quality of vessels was cited as the main reason for the loss of twenty-five men in bad weather in the winter of 1835. It would appear that the condition of the fishermen themselves was scarcely any better than their wretched equipment. Throughout the maritime communities on the coast of Donegal, fishermen were only employed for about a third of the year. The remainder of their time was spent tending to small plots of land by the sea. Lieutenant E. Harvey, commenting on fisheries along the northern coast of Inishowen, notes that: '... there are not perhaps more than six or eight persons who are exclusively fishermen. All the working classes along this coast may be called fishermen, as all are fishing occasionally'.[85] The involvement of fishermen's families in their small-scale enterprise is also noteworthy. In Lough Swilly we find reference

[81] *First report of commissioners of inquiry into the state of Irish fisheries; with the minutes of evidence and appendix,* H.C. 1837[77], xxii, p. 95
[82] Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol 39, Parishes of County Donegal II, 1835-6: Mid, West and South Donegal, p. 63
[83] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt i, H.C. 1845, xix, p. 722
[84] ibid.
[85] ibid., p. 49, evidence of Lt. E. Harvey, Coast Guard Officer, Portredford

to children collecting bait for their fathers, while further south at Rutland/ Daurus, Lieutenant Wall alludes to the fact that 'nets are made in the fishermen's families, and are preserved by boiling them along with oak boughs'.[86] Such industry within the family would undoubtedly prove vital in the coming years of scarcity.

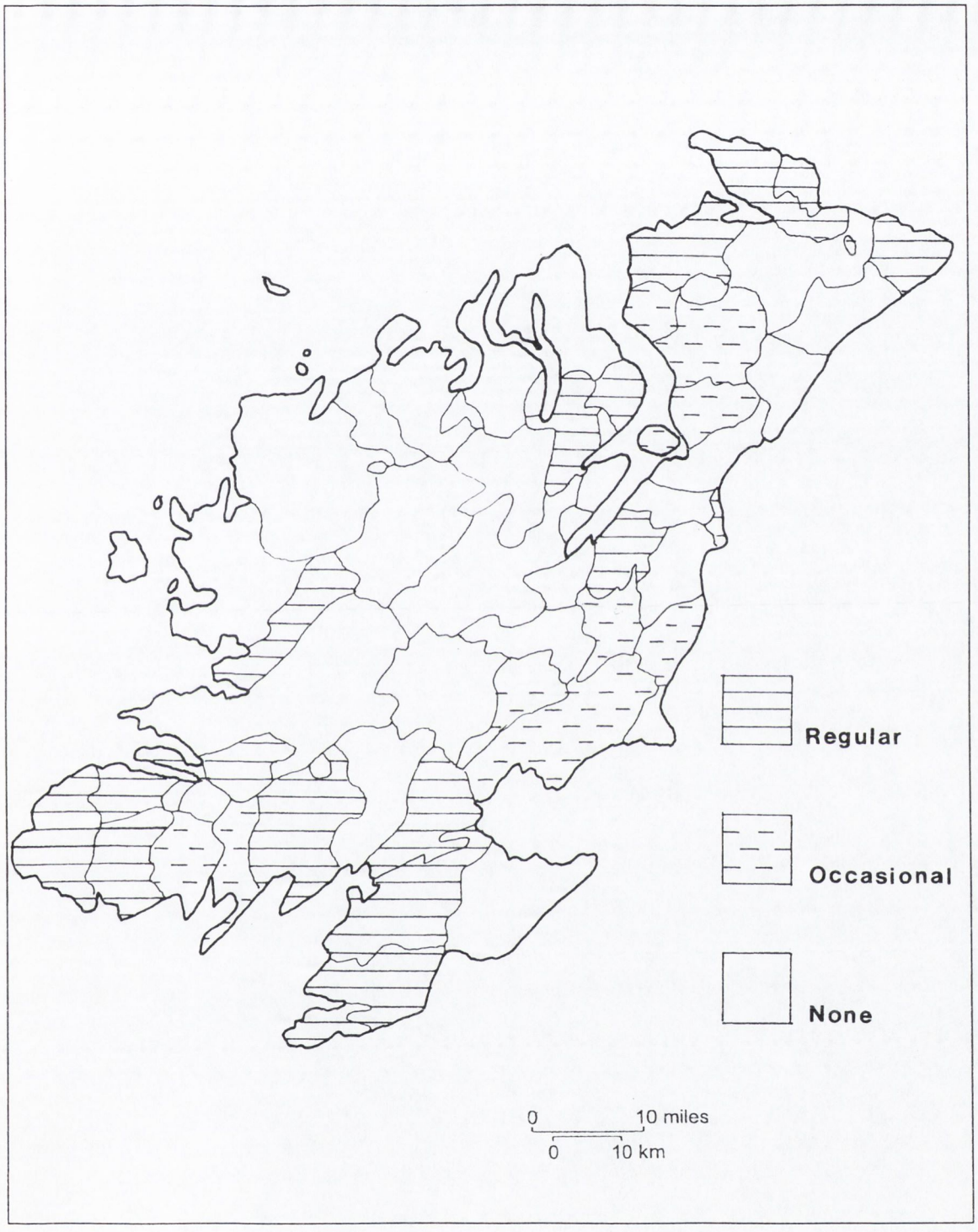
Other obstacles to the development of the fishing industry in the county were the inaccessibility of markets because of poor communications and the absence of satisfactory procedures to cure and store catches. Killybegs was the only place where curing facilities existed and these were hopelessly inadequate because the fish were not gutted or cured in barrels resulting in a severe decrease in quality, to the extent that the produce was 'not saleable in many markets at any price'.[87] There are also frequent references to the poor quality of roads from supply areas to markets. One example is the evidence provided to the Inquiry by Mr. Nassau Foster who refers to a Gweedore fisherman named Sweeney who loaded his boat four times in one night in 1835, only to find that 'the roads [to market in Letterkenny], crossing fords and strands, [were] impassable for carts'.[88] Similar testimony from throughout the county forms a recurring theme within the 1837 report.

Another means of tentatively reconstructing regional variation in the importance of fisheries in pre-Famine Donegal is suggested in Fig. 2.18, overleaf. This maps the number of respondents to the Poor Inquiry of 1836 who referred to regular or occasional consumption of fish in Donegal parishes. While such a recreation of dietary patterns is by no means an accurate portrayal of the actual level of fish consumption, the map is useful when taken in tandem with Fig. 2.17, showing the numbers engaged in fishing activity. The pattern that emerges is suggestive of a concentration of both employment and fish consumption in the coastal parishes of the southern baronies of Tirhugh, Banagh and Boylagh and towards the north of the Inishowen peninsula.

Further evidence to reinforce continuing activity in the area around Killybegs can be gleaned from the annual reports of the Commissioners of Public Works from 1844

[86] ibid., p. 60, evidence of Lt. A. Wall, Coast Guard Officer, Daurus
[87] ibid., p. 45
[88] ibid., p. 58, evidence of Mr. Nassau Foster, Burtonport

Fig. 2.18. Respondents to the Poor Inquiry referring to regular or occasional consumption of fish in Donegal parishes, 1836



Source: *Poor inquiry (Ireland): appendix D containing baronial examinations relative to earnings of labourers, cottier tenants, employment of women and children, expenditure; and supplement,* H.C. 1836[36], xxxi, pp. 418-435

to 1846.[89] In these, much of the Donegal coastline is divided into three distinct regions: Carne (Inishowen peninsula from Magilligan Point to Lough Swilly), Dunfanaghy (from western coast of Lough Swilly to the south point of the Gweebarra Bar) and Killybegs (from Gweebarra Bar to Abbey Point in Donegal Bay). The coastal parishes located in the three zones are mapped in Fig. 2.19, overleaf. Analysis of the numbers engaged in fishing activity in each area based on population figures from the 1841 Census reveals that the highest concentration of fishermen in 1845 was in Killybegs (79 per 1,000 of coastal population), followed by Dunfanaghy (74 per 1,000) and Carne (25 per 1,000).[90] It is likely that the fishing tradition established in these areas would have some part to play in providing the coastal populations alternative sustenance in the coming months and years.

The relative position of Donegal in terms of fishing population in a national context on the eve of the Famine in 1845 can similarly be extrapolated from the figures registered in the aforementioned annual reports. A steady rise in numbers employed from 6,613 in 1836 to 11,762 by 1844 was to continue into the initial years of the Famine. Fig. 2.20a indicates that over 40 persons per thousand of population were engaged in fishing activity by 1845-46 in Donegal, compared with a national average of about 10 per thousand.[91] While Donegal was bound to have a higher than average number of fishermen given that the coastal extent of the county runs to some 425 miles (about 18.1% of the Irish coastline), the results graphed are not an accurate reflection of any advantage held by the county in comparison with other coastal counties in Ireland. This problem can be solved, however, by calculating the density of fishermen based solely on parishes in Ireland with a maritime boundary. The results of these calculations are graphed in Figure 2.20b.[92] It is clear that while

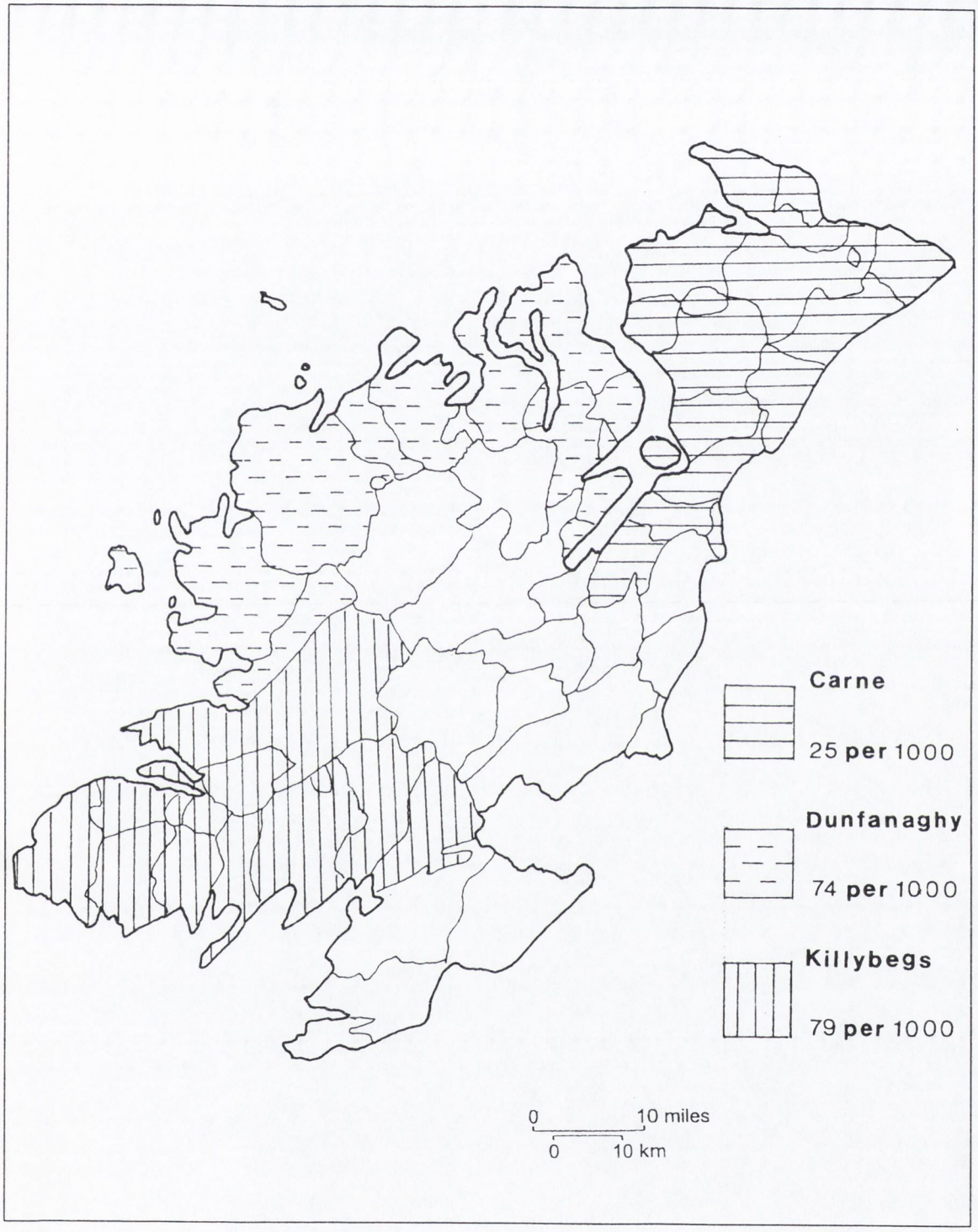
[89] *Second annual report of the commissioners of fisheries, Ireland,* H.C. 1844[502], xxx, 31; *Third annual report of the commissioners of public works on fisheries of Ireland,* H.C. 1845[320], xxvi, 211; *Fourth annual report of the commissioners of public works on fisheries of Ireland,* H.C. 1846[713], xxii, 175

[90] Calculated from: *Third annual report of the commissioners of public works on fisheries of Ireland,* H.C. 1845[320], xxvi, p. 227

[91] Calculated from: *First report of commissioners of inquiry into the state of Irish fisheries; with the minutes of evidence and appendix,* H.C. 1837[77], xxii, Appendix XI, p. 326; *Second annual report of the commissioners of fisheries, Ireland,* H.C. 1844[502], xxx, p. 33; *Third annual report of the commissioners of public works on fisheries of Ireland,* H.C. 1845[320], xxvi, pp. 226-7; *Fourth annual report of the commissioners of public works on fisheries of Ireland,* H.C. 1846[713], xxii, pp. 378-9; *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 418-421

[92] Calculated from: ibid.

Fig. 2.19. Number of fishermen per thousand of population in three coastal zones identified by the Board of Works in Donegal, 1845



Source: *Third annual report of the commissioners of public works on fisheries of Ireland,* H.C. 1845[320], xxvi, p. 227

national figures decline quite markedly from 1830 to 1836, the fishing population of Donegal maintains a proportion of around 28 per thousand of coastal population in the same period. By the time of the first impact of potato blight in 1845, numbers had risen to around 52 per thousand in Donegal, compared with a national figure of about 45 per thousand. The implications of these findings are immediately apparent: the likelihood of sea fisheries playing a role in the protection of Donegal's population from the worst effects of the impending crisis are not only far above the national average (i.e. including inland areas), the resources afforded to coastal localities were being utilised in Donegal to a greater extent than was the case in general in Ireland.

Fig. 2.20a. Numbers per thousand of population engaged in fisheries, Donegal & Ireland, 1830-1846

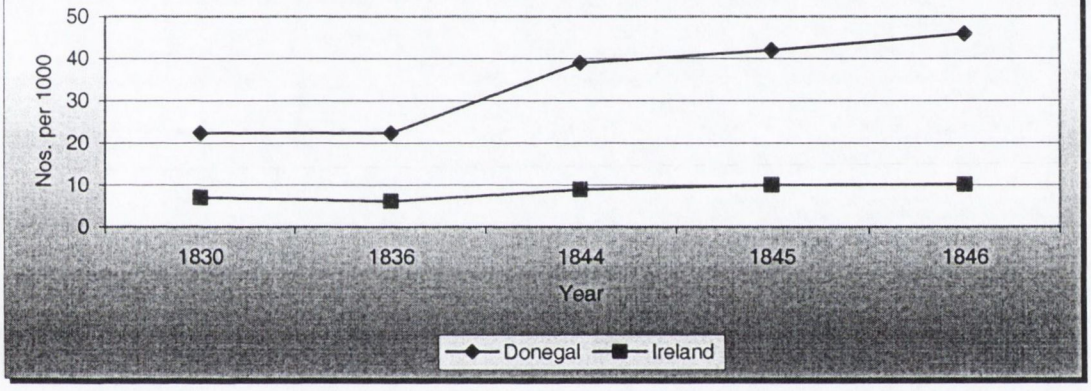
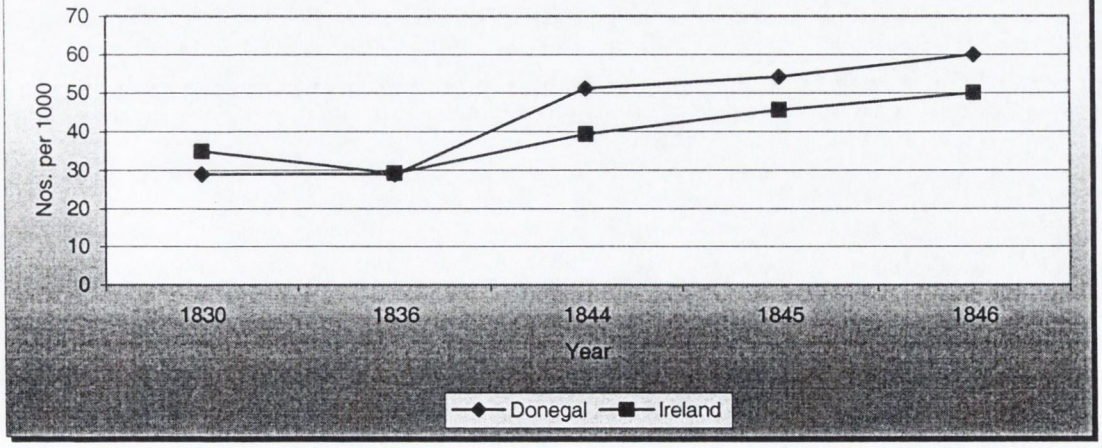


Fig. 2.20b. Numbers per thousand of coastal population engaged in fisheries in Donegal & in Ireland, 1830-1846



While sea fisheries do not appear to have been sufficiently developed to allow for any huge financial advantage to the population of Donegal during the coming Famine, the resources were exploited to an extent which would indicate that the poorer classes of small fishermen, farmers and labourers would have derived a considerable benefit from fishing in terms of food. Lord George Hill, in his evidence to the Devon Commission in November 1844, refers to the fact that 'the people, clubbing their means to purchase boats and nets, make great exertions to avail themselves of this source of profit [fish]' in Tullaghobegley parish to the west of Dunfanaghy union.[93] Just off the coast of Dunfanaghy, at Inishboffin Island, Coast Guard Officer McGladery, refers to the measures adopted by the poor in attempting to catch fish without having the benefit of nets in 1835:

> 'The poor people, for want of other means, sew their blankets and sheets together, often to a number of sixty, and each person who provides a sheet or blanket gets a share of the fish taken'[94]

Such communal effort and ingenuity in the face of desperation would prove crucial during the coming years of scarcity.

2.7. HOUSING & LIVING CONDITIONS

Another contribution to the assessment of the composite socio-economic picture of pre-Famine Donegal can be provided by an investigation into housing and living standards in the county before 1845. Housing in Ireland in general was of a poor standard in the years before the Famine, with about forty per cent of the population occupying dwellings which were classified as being in the lowest class by the 1841 Census enumerators.[95] This lowest, or fourth class, of housing were described as being 'mud cabins having only one room' and the greatest concentrations of such residences occurred in counties situated along the western seaboard. The next class comprised of 'a better description of cottage, still built of mud, but varying from 2 to 4 rooms and windows' and represented a further 37 per cent of the national total. The

[93] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt iii, H.C. 1845, xxi, p. 805

[94] *First report of commissioners of inquiry into the state of Irish fisheries; with the minutes of evidence and appendix,* H.C. 1837[77], xxii, p. 54

[95] Freeman, T.W. (1989), 'Land and People, c. 1841' in, Vaughan, W.E. ed., A *New History of Ireland, v: Ireland Under the Union,* p. 253

upper end of the scale comprised second and first class houses, the former being dwellings with five to nine rooms and with windows, while the latter were 'all those houses of a better description than the preceding classes'.[96]

Of the counties located along the west coast, Donegal would appear to have had the upper hand in terms of housing quality, with 13 per cent of residences classified in the first or second-class categories. Only Cork returned a higher proportion of 13.4 per cent in 1841, with the other counties lying in the range 4.5 to 11.5 per cent (see Fig. 2.21).[97] Since the occupants of these types of housing were those likely to be least effected by the impending crisis, it is of more importance to direct attention to those dwellings at the bottom end of the scale. Here, in the fourth-class category, we find that Donegal again had an advantage, with the lowest proportion (47.1 per cent) of one-roomed cabins among the western counties (see Fig. 2.22). It is likely that the use of stone as a building material was more widespread in Donegal than in other counties, where mud cabins proliferated. Evidence from Maurice Collis' survey of the Trinity College estates in 1843 indicates that almost all of the houses on the Donegal College estates were built of stone, while in Kerry around 48 per cent were of mud construction.[98] One can infer, therefore, that the traditional use of stone in Donegal is likely to have led to a situation where a greater proportion of the lower classes of houses were sturdier and more resilient structures than their counterparts in Kerry and in other counties along the west coast where mud was the principal building material.

However, the fact remains that housing in pre-Famine Donegal was of a poorer standard than the national average, with some 87 per cent in the third and fourth class categories, compared to around 77 per cent nationally. Figure 2.23 maps the regional distribution of fourth class housing at barony level in 1841, emphasising the overwhelmingly western concentration of such abodes. This pattern is hardly surprising considering that it was these counties that experienced greatest population

[96] *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, p. xiv

[97] *Appendix to minutes of evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt iv, H.C. 1845[672], xxii, App. 89, p. 273; Based on *1841 Census* Figures

[98] O'Connor, J. (2000), *Finely Focused Vision: Landscape and Life on the Cos. Kerry and Donegal Estates of Trinity College in the 1840s* (unpublished B.A. Dissertation, TCD), pp. 13-14

Fig. 2.21. Percentage of first & second class housing in western counties, 1841

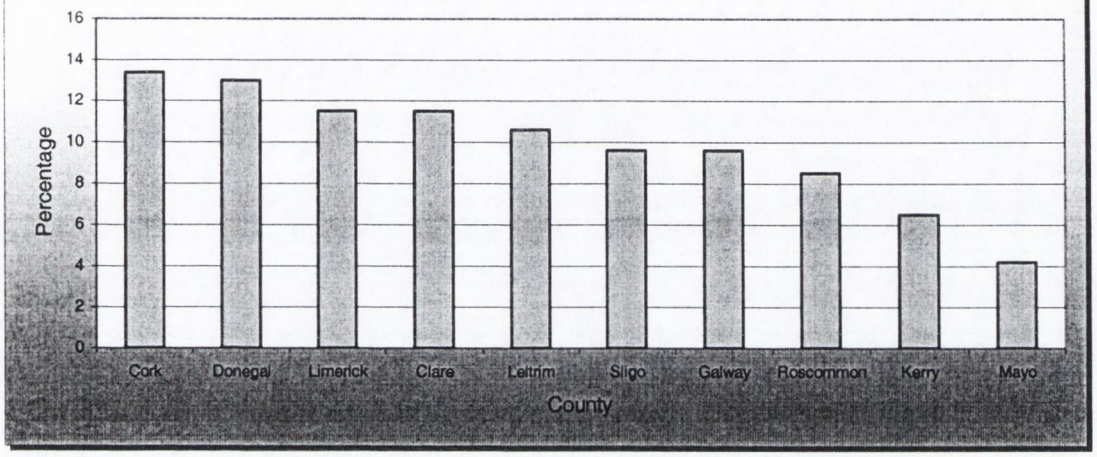
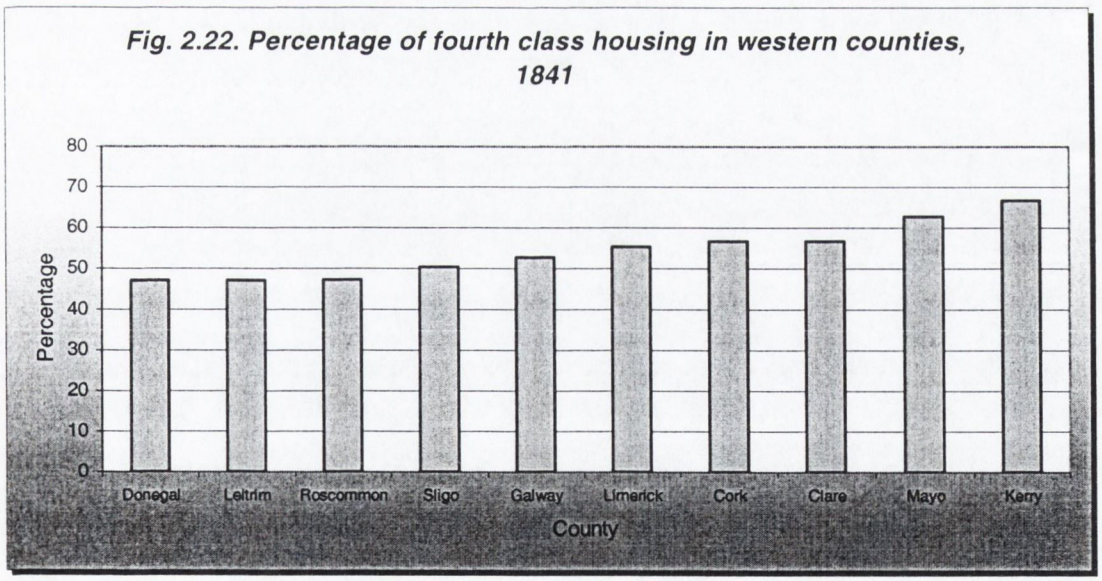
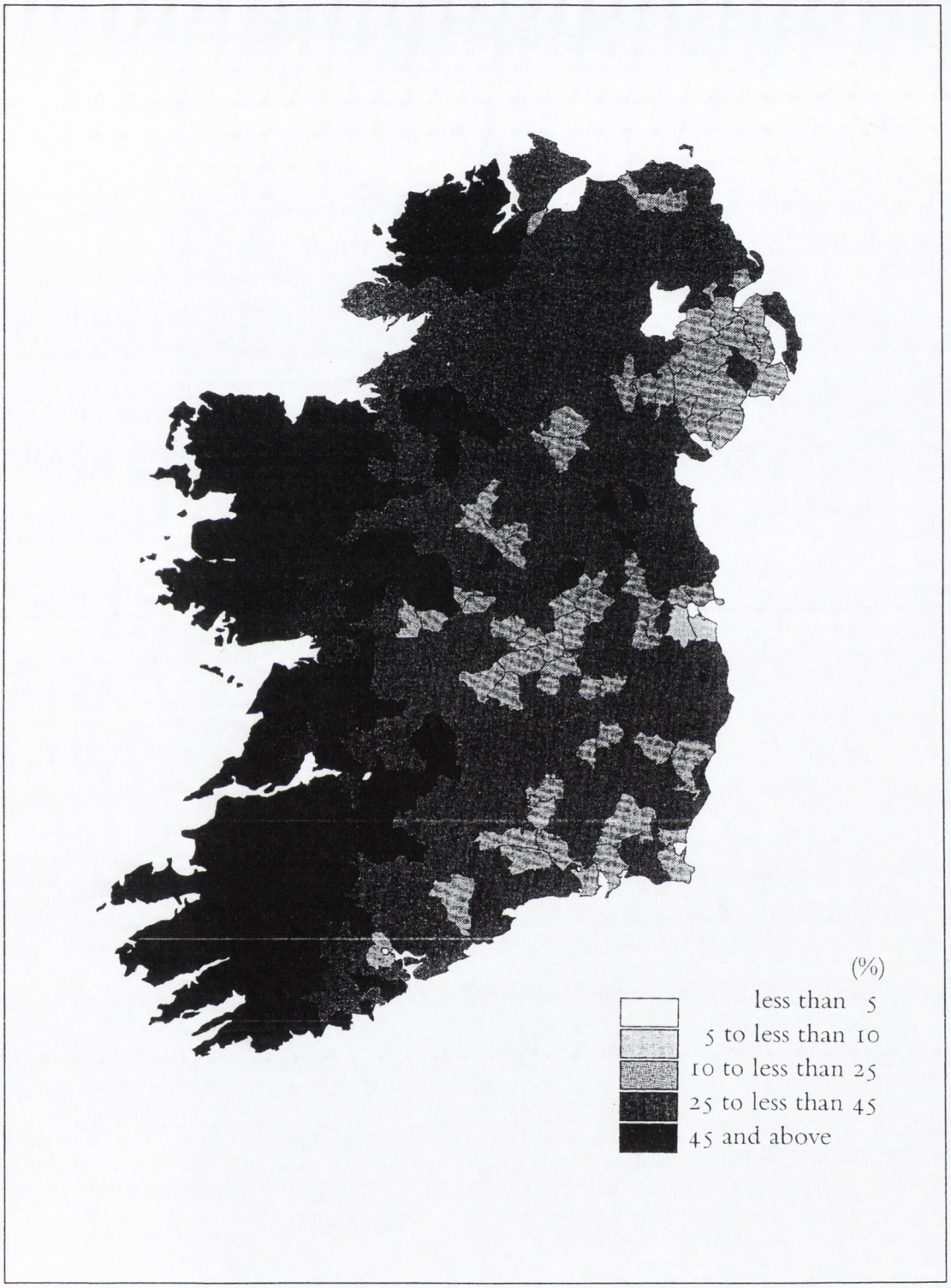


Fig. 2.22. Percentage of fourth class housing in western counties, 1841



Source: *Appendix to Minutes of Evidence Taken Before Her Majesty's Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of the Law and Practice in Respect to the Occupation of Land in Ireland,* pt iv, H.C. 1845[672], xxii, App. 89, p. 273; Based on *1841 Census* Figures

Fig. 2.23. Percentage of fourth class housing in Ireland at barony level, 1841



Source: Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine,* p. 87

growth in the years leading up to the Famine. Rapid growth in population, particularly among the lower strata of society, inevitably led to an increase in the number of small houses which could be easily constructed by their impoverished builders using local materials.[99] The profusion of fourth-class housing is most notable in west Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Clare, Galway, Mayo and Sligo, where scarcely any baronies exhibit levels of below 45 per cent. In Donegal, the northern barony of Inishowen recorded a figure of 41.8 per cent fourth-class housing, while to the south of the county the proportion of the population residing in such dwellings in Banagh amounted to 44.5 per cent of the total. It is only in Tirhugh that this class of housing was less widespread, coming to only 26.1 per cent of the total, a figure more in line with central and eastern parts of Ireland.[100]

Numerous contemporary witnesses testify to the relatively good state of affairs in Tirhugh. Lieutenant Lancey, commenting on housing in Donegal parish in November 1835, referred to the fact that 'the cabins are built of stone, of 1-storey high, 2 rooms with glass windows. Some few are slated but they are generally thatched'.[101] On the Trinity College estates which covered much of the western part of the barony, around half of the houses had two or three rooms, while just under 10 per cent were slated.[102] A witness to the Devon Commission in 1844 drew attention to the practice of landlord assistance in house construction in Donegal parish stating that 'most of the resident landlords give slates and timber to any of their tenants who build suitable houses'.[103] This custom would also appear to have been in operation in other parishes in Tirhugh. On the properties of Captain George Knox and Thomas Atkinson in Drumhome, for example, assistance was given to tenants who wished to improve their dwellings, while free grants were advanced to those building new houses.[104] The *Ordnance*

[99] Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine,* p. 76
[100] *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 218-221
[101] Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol 39, Parishes of County Donegal II, 1835-6: Mid, West and South Donegal, p. 50
[102] Calculated from Table 3 in, O'Connor, J. (2000), *Finely Focused Vision: Landscape and Life on the Cos. Kerry and Donegal Estates of Trinity College in the 1840s* (unpublished B.A. Dissertation, TCD), p.13
[103] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt ii, H.C. 1845[672], xx, p. 167; evidence of George Cecil Wray
[104] ibid., p. 172; evidence of Thomas John Atkinson

Survey Memoirs for the parish bear witness to the fruits of such endeavour stating that 'the farmhouses are in good repair, cleanly and have every comfort'.[105]

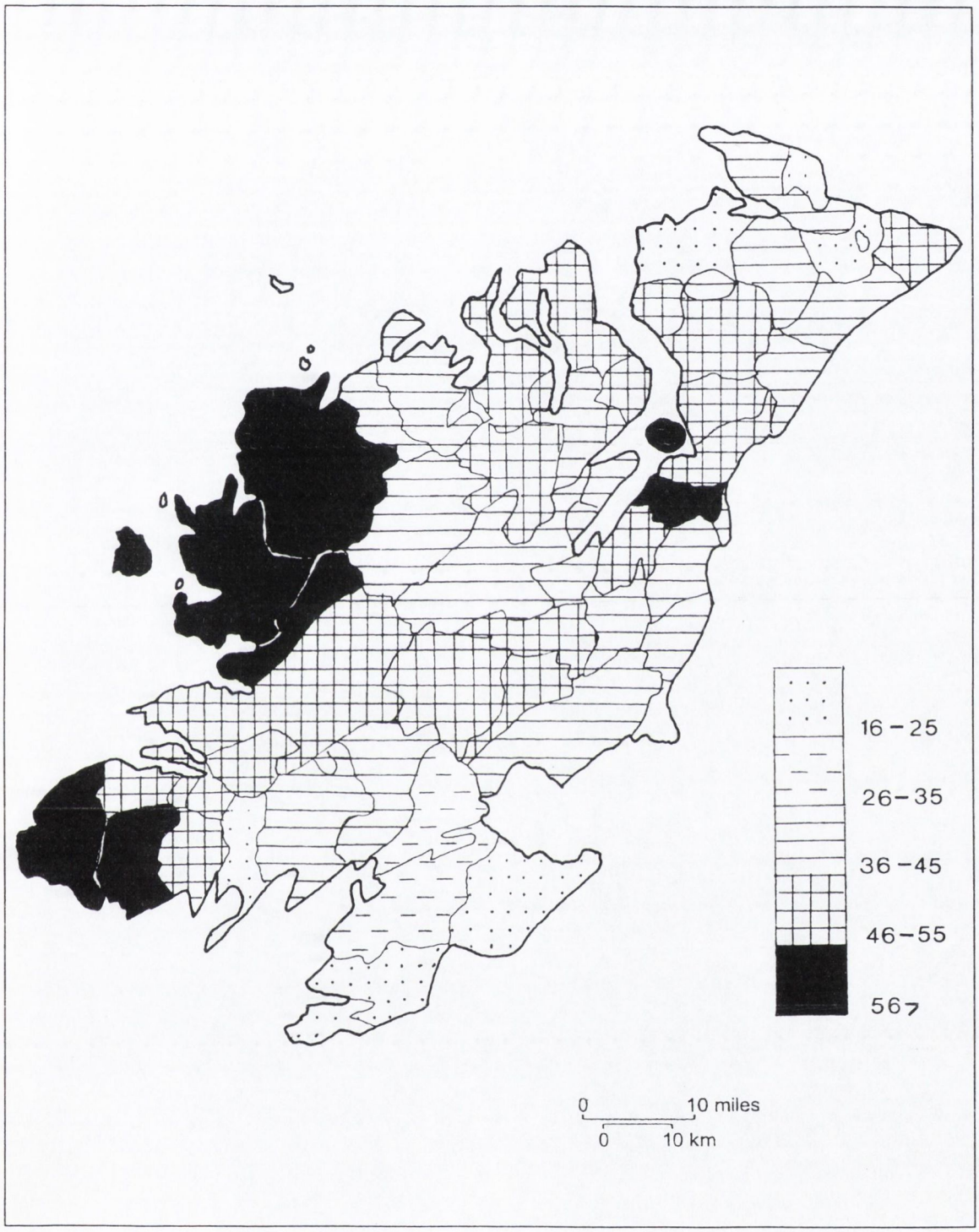
This practice would appear to have had some effect on the overall quality of housing in Tirhugh, as illustrated in Fig. 2.24, which maps the percentage of fourth-class housing in each parish in Donegal. Apart from the group of parishes to the south of the county, the only other areas where fourth-class housing represented less than one quarter of the total were in Culdaff (24.9%) and Clonmany (18.1%) parishes on the Inishowen peninsula.[106] Other parts of Inishowen were in a much poorer state with regard to housing, particularly the parishes to the east bank of Lough Swilly. Rev. Edward Maginn, a respondent to the *Poor Inquiry*, testified to the wretched living conditions in Desertegney and Fahan Upper and Lower in 1835:

> They [the houses] are generally small, of extremely bad materials, for the most part badly covered in, and without a second apartment. The cottagers have generally rude bedsteads, or fixtures which serve for that purpose; their bedding is by no means comfortable; in many cases whole families, through a want of bedclothes, are forced to compress themselves into the same bed, not being able to procure covering for a separate one.[107]

Conditions to the south east, particularly in eastern parts of Raphoe, appear to have been marginally better, with the majority of parishes exhibiting fourth-class housing levels of less than 45 per cent. Another similar zone occurs in the central part of Kilmacrenan barony, or the area along the western boundary of Dunfanaghy Poor Law Union. In the rest of the county, fourth-class cabins accounted for over 45 per cent of all housing, with particularly poor conditions along the west coast, where levels reached 63 per cent in Kilcar and a staggering 74 per cent in Lettermacaward. A report from John Barrett to the North West Farming Society in 1835 in relation to Inishkeel parish is typical of evidence from many contemporary commentators: 'The general conditions of the farmhouses is bad, that of the cottages wretched; the want of

[105] Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol 39, Parishes of County Donegal II, 1835-6: Mid, West and South Donegal, p. 61
[106] See Appendix 2.X, p. yyy
[107] *Poor inquiry (Ireland): appendix E containing baronial examinations relative to food, cottages and cabins, clothing and furniture, pawnbroking and savings banks, drinking; and supplement,* H.C. 1836[37], xxxii, p. 420

Fig. 2.24. Percentage of fourth class housing by parish in Donegal, 1841



Source: *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841*, H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 418-421

cleanliness is the more obvious defect'.[108] Housing in Inishkeel had descended into such a miserable state in the years immediately before the Famine that the principal landowner, the Marquess of Conyngham, had begun to provide grants of between £3 and £5 to small tenants for building or improving their houses.[109]

Further north in Tullaghobegley, where the 1841 percentage of fourth-class housing was just under 60 per cent, the practice of booleying is brought to our attention by Lord George Hill in his evidence to the *Devon Commission*. In the western portion of the parish it would appear that a large number of people moved between two or more dwellings according to the season. The pattern of movement involved a relocation from mountain to shore or *vice versa* and took place on a fixed day. The children of the family usually made the journey perched atop household items loaded on a pony, with the youngest often only partially visible, sitting in a churn slung to the side of the animal. According to Lord George Hill, this practice led to large numbers of his tenants neglecting both of their residences and exacerbated the already wretched living conditions:

> Owing to this Arab mode of life no pains are taken by the owners to make any of these habitations comfortable. They consist of four walls built of large rough stones put together with mud instead of mortar, no chimney, a front and back door, a window with no glass only a shutter, for thatch they use heather or bent..., half of [the house], without any division, is given up to cattle.[110]

Co-habitation between people and animals is a common feature of pre-Famine Ireland and occurred on quite a large scale in poorer localities like the west of Donegal. In general, it would appear that living conditions in the area encompassing much of Glenties Poor Law union were the worst in the county, with a greater number of fourth-class houses than elsewhere. The spatial distribution of this class of housing is a good indicator of economic inequality between west and east Donegal, in effect a microcosm of the national picture. Bad housing conditions in Glenties, and indeed in Milford and parts of Inishowen, Donegal and Dunfanaghy unions, were likely to facilitate the propagation of disease during the coming Famine. As we shall see, there

[108] Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol 39, Parishes of County Donegal II, 1835-6: Mid, West and South Donegal, p. 71
[109] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt ii, H.C. 1845[672], xx, p. 164
[110] ibid., pt iii, H.C. 1845, xxi, p. 804-5

is ample evidence to suggest that the lack of adequate shelter in overcrowded and unhygienic dwellings was a contributory factor in the spread of infection and increased distress in many western parishes.

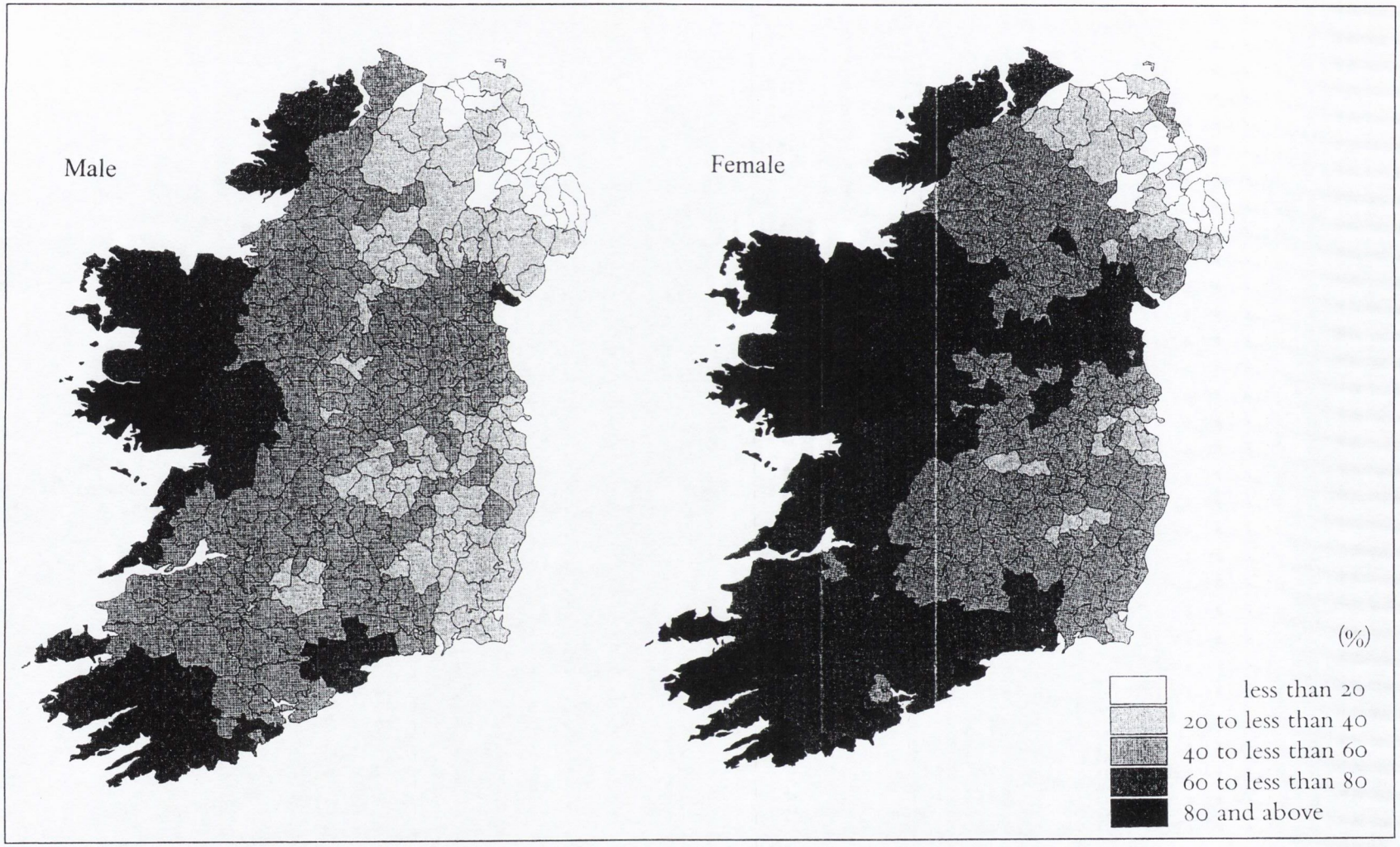
2.8. EDUCATION & LITERACY

The east-west divide within Donegal in relation to housing conditions is mirrored closely in education provision and literacy levels in the years leading up to the Famine. In this respect, as in many others, the county represents a microcosm of the situation nationally. Though the number of schools in Ireland was growing rapidly in the fifteen years before 1845, attendance was often intermittent and the teaching was often of poor quality or its provision irregular. The establishment of the Board of National Education in 1831 provided two-thirds of the cost of buildings, equipment, salaries and other running expenses out of public funds. In these schools, children of different denominations were to receive combined 'literary and moral' and separate religious instruction.[111] The success of this state system of education is difficult to gauge. On the one hand the number of national schools rose to over 4,000 by 1845, with around 432,000 pupils in attendance.[112] However, it is likely that the rising number of schools under the Board merely reflects the absorption into its system of established schools, rather than the opening of new institutions. One well-documented result of the establishment of the national system of education was the exacerbation of the decline of the Irish language which was not taught in the Board schools. Literacy levels, however, showed signs of improvement by the time of the *1841 Census* which recorded the national illiteracy rate as being some 53 per cent of those aged 5 and over, a relatively low level by contemporary European standards.[113]

Mapping the geography of illiteracy in Ireland reveals wide regional variation in the numbers of people unable to read and write. In general a marked western focus in illiteracy is evident in Fig. 2.25. which maps the percentage of illiterate males and females by barony in 1841. The maps also expose a defined gender gap in relation to

[111] Daly, M. & Dickson, D. (1990), *The Origins of Popular Literacy in Ireland: Language Change and Educational Development, 1700-1920,* p. 132
[112] McDowell, R.B. (1956), 'Ireland on the Eve of the Famine' in, Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52,* p. 60
[113] MacDonagh, O. (1989), 'The Economy and Society, 1830-45', in Vaughan, W.E. (ed.), *A New History of Ireland, v: Ireland Under the Union,* p. 234

Fig. 2.25. Male & female illiteracy in Ireland, by barony, 1841



Source: Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine,* pp. 100-101

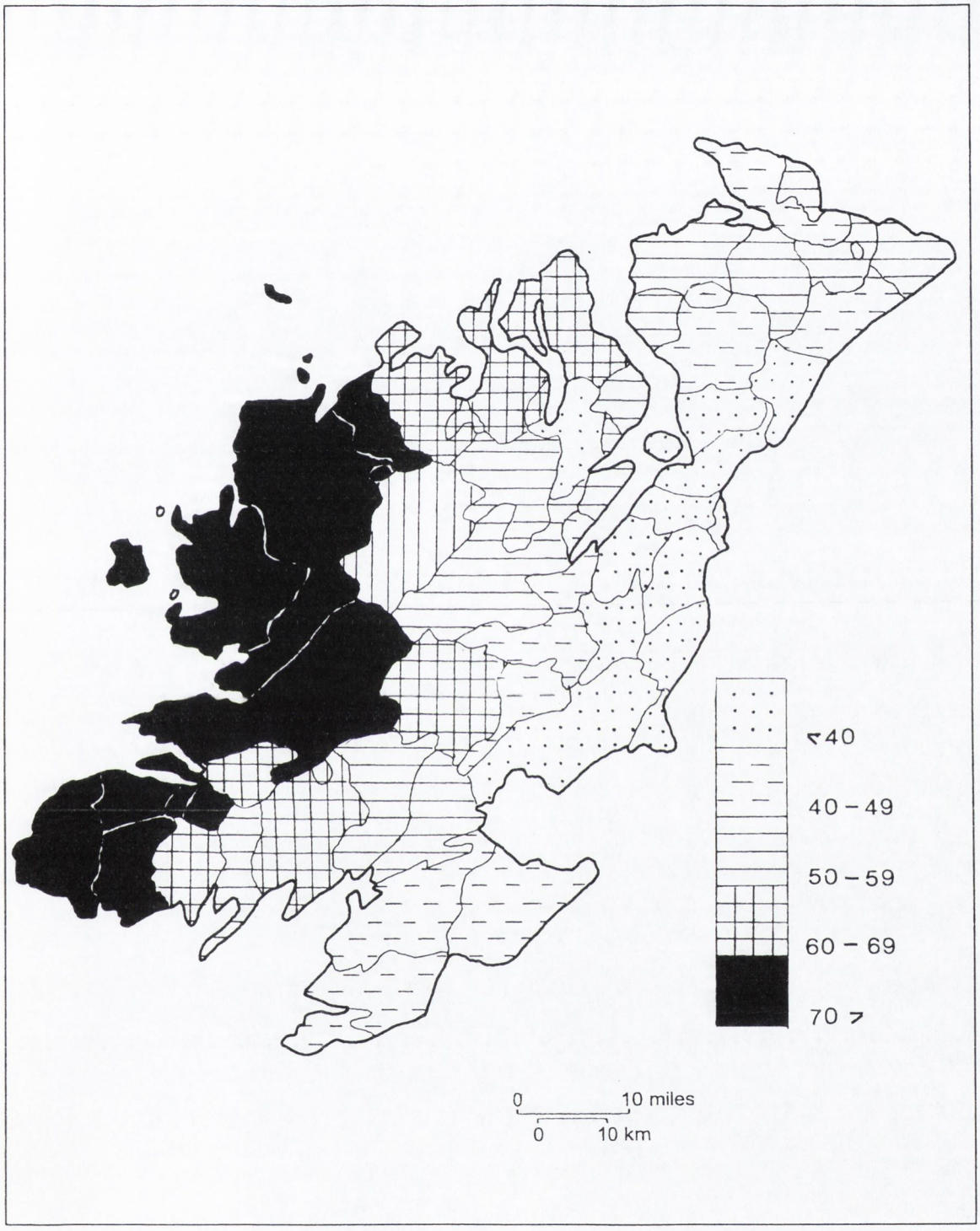
literacy, with considerably higher levels of illiteracy among females nationally. Combining the male and female totals it emerges that the vast majority of baronies west of the Shannon recorded illiteracy levels in excess of 60 per cent in 1841, the only exceptions being the cities and hinterlands of Cork, Limerick and Galway. Highest literacy levels, meanwhile, occurred in the east, south-east and most particularly in the north-east. Here, pole position went to Antrim, where many baronies returned rates of below 20 per cent illiteracy among both males and females. The description of Belfast as the 'Athens of the North' proves not to be without foundation. The link between religion and literacy is also clear in the distribution, with baronies comprising of a greater proportion of Presbyterians tallying almost exactly with the areas of highest literacy levels.[114] Predominantly Catholic parts of the country, on the other hand, display a directly converse pattern.

The same is true for Donegal, where a distinct east-west divide in literacy levels is evident even at barony level. In Raphoe, where around a quarter of the population were members of the Presbyterian Church, just over 40 per cent of the population was illiterate. In contrast, Boylagh and Banagh baronies, where around 90 per cent of the population were Catholic, returned figures of over 70 per cent, with a number of parishes exceeding the 80 per cent mark. Fig. 2.26 breaks literacy rates down to parish level, mapping the percentage of the population unable to read or write according to the 1841 Census. The zone of greatest illiteracy extends along the coastal parishes from Kilcar (80.1% illiterate) and Glencolumbcille (77.6%) in the south to Raymunterdoney (72.8%) in the north. Once again, such a pattern is hardly surprising and correlates almost precisely with other social factors discussed previously. One need only compare Fig. 2.26 with the maps of fourth class housing (Fig. 2.24) and those dependent on manual labour (Fig. 2.9) to note the relationship between poverty and low literacy rates in west Donegal. Such difficulty is referred to in the *O.S. Memoir* for Inishkeel parish where the illiteracy rate of 72.6 per cent placed it among the worst in the county:

> There is a strong and general inclination for education in all classes, but the object is often defeated by the poverty of the parents, obliging them to keep

[114] For map of religious denominations by barony in 1861 see: Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine,* p. 92

Fig. 2.26. Percentage of the population in each Donegal parish unable to read or write, 1841



Source: *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841*, H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 418-421

> their children at home for agricultural purposes, and thus they frequently forget what they have learned.[115]

An intermediate zone extending through the centre of the county from the Inishowen peninsula to Tirhugh in the south consists of parishes falling chiefly into the 40 to 59 per cent illiteracy category. There is evidence that the lower level of absenteeism and more paternalistic attitudes of a number of landlords may have had an effect in creating this pattern. Taking the parish of Drumhome as an example, we find reference to generous contributions toward education from many of the principal proprietors in the area. On the Rossnowlagh estate, Thomas Connolly subscribed £8 *per annum* to the schools on his lands, while his neighbour Reverend W.H. Forster contributed £6 *per annum*. On the nearby Murvagh estate, meanwhile, Reverend E.M. Hamilton granted an annual payment of £5 per school toward education on his estate.[116] It is likely that such benevolence made some contribution to the relatively low illiteracy level of 42.5 per cent in Drumhome in 1841. As Lieutenant Lancey commented in relation to literacy in the parish: 'Even the poorest labourers children can read'.[117]

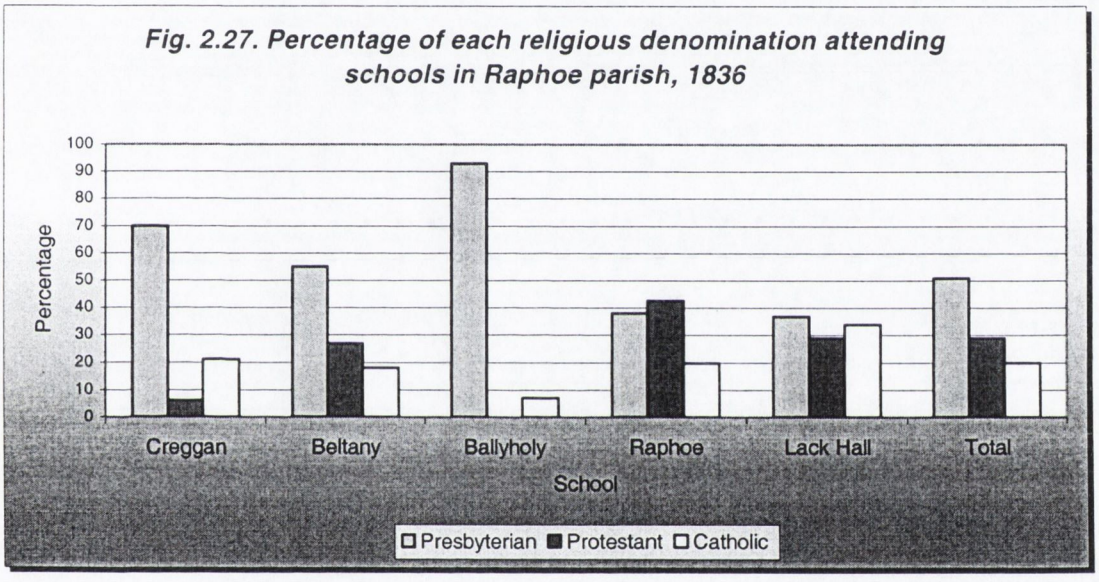
Finally, we turn to the area where highest literacy levels were recorded in 1841. Comprising of roughly the same area delineated as 'the Lagan' region, the zone of lowest illiteracy extends along the eastern county boundary through much of Raphoe barony and into Inishowen West. The relative prosperity of this area has been highlighted previously with regard to agriculture, employment and housing in the years before the Famine. A further consideration which must be taken into account in relation to education and literacy is the matter of religion. In general, literacy levels were considerably lower among the Catholic population, while a drive toward education was much more prevalent among members of the Established Church and Presbyterians, for whom theological considerations had a part to play in higher levels of literacy. Unfortunately, the population was not divided in terms of religious

[115] Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol 39, Parishes of County Donegal II, 1835-6: Mid, West and South Donegal, p. 71
[116] O'Connor, J. (2000), *Finely Focused Vision: Landscape and life on the Cos. Kerry and Donegal Estates of Trinity College in the 1840s* (unpublished B.A. Dissertation, TCD), pp. 38-9
[117] Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol 39, Parishes of County Donegal II, 1835-6: Mid, West and South Donegal, p. 61

denomination in the *1841 Census*, making it difficult to conclusively prove such an association. A remedy to this problem is posed here, though on a fairly limited scale.

Using the example of Raphoe parish, the number of pupils attending schools in 1836 has been tabulated from the *O.S. Memoirs*. The scholars are bracketed into three religious classifications, Presbyterian, Protestant and Catholic. Fig. 2.27 charts the percentages of each religious denomination attending the schools at Creggan, Beltany, Ballyholy, Raphoe town (five schools in total) and Lack Hall, illustrating a marked tendency for members of the Presbyterian faith to send their children to school, closely followed by those classified as Protestant.

Fig. 2.27. Percentage of each religious denomination attending schools in Raphoe parish, 1836



Combining the totals for all of the schools we find that the Presbyterian contingent amounts to some 51 per cent of all Raphoe pupils, when the likely proportion of the total population of the parish who were Presbyterian was only around 25 per cent. Similarly, Protestant children account for 29 per cent of the total when only around 15 per cent of the total population of the parish would have been thus classified. In contrast, the Catholic population which made up the remaining c. 60 per cent of people in Raphoe contributed only 20 per cent of all pupils to these schools. Based on this examination it would appear that religious denomination, in particular Presbyterianism, was indeed an important factor in the low illiteracy levels throughout much of Raphoe and also in Inishowen West, where around a fifth of the

population were Presbyterian.[118] In parishes and baronies further west, the far higher proportions of Catholic residents had a converse effect.

Once again, the western portion of Donegal comes off worst in relation to illiteracy, as it does in agriculture, occupations and housing. In the national context, Donegal as a whole fares quite badly also, returning a figure of 66 per cent illiteracy among those over the age of five, compared to the national average of 53 per cent.[119] In comparison to other western counties, however, the picture is considerably better given that the proportion of the population in Donegal who could read and write in 1841 was higher than that in Leitrim, Sligo, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway, Clare, Kerry and Cork. It would appear that Reverend Anthony Hastings comment that 'the people in general seem very anxious to have their children educated' was not without foundation.[120]

2.9. POPULATION GROWTH & DECELERATION

The population of Ireland increased by some 20.2 per cent between 1821 and 1841, with greatest expansion of over 30 per cent in Antrim and along the west coast in Kerry, Clare, Galway and Mayo.[121] Donegal witnessed a rise of around 19.4 per cent in the same period, placing it somewhere around the national average.[122] The accuracy of these figures has been the subject of much debate given the manner in which the 1821 and 1831 Census statistics were enumerated. As early as 1840, Thomas Larcom voiced concerns over the imprecise methods employed in the calculations of 1821 and expressed serious reservations in relation to the 1831 figures which he regarded as a potential overestimate of the population. Larcom's anxieties were not without foundation given that the 1831 enumerators believed that they

[118] Due to the absence of earlier data, all estimates of religious denomination percentages are based on 1861 figures. See: *The census of Ireland for the year 1861, part iv, report and tables relating to the religious profession, education, and occupations of the people,* vol. ii, H.C. 1863, vol. lx. It is unlikely that pre-Famine proportions would have been radically different. If anything, it is reasonable to assume that the percentage of the population who were Catholic could have been even higher in the 1830s and 1840s, making the conclusions drawn above even more sound.

[119] *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 418-425, 546-7

[120] Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol 38, Parishes of County Donegal I, 1833-5, North-East Donegal, p. 52

[121] Cousens, S.H. (1966), 'The Restriction of Population Growth in pre-Famine Ireland' in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy,* lxiv (sec. C), no. 4, p. 96

[122] Vaughan, W.E. & Fitzpatrick, A.J. (1978), *Irish Historical Statistics: Population, 1821-1971,* p. 12

would be paid in proportion to the numbers they documented.[123] Geographers and demographic historians have relied heavily on this data in computations of pre-Famine demographic curves, though all do so with caution.[124] A similarly cautious approach in relation to interpretations of maps produced using information from these censuses will be adopted here.

Despite the possibility of inaccuracies in the 1821 population statistics, one can assume that their usefulness as a means of determining regional variation in demographic modification is not grossly affected.[125] Fig 2.28, which maps population change by barony in the period 1821-41, can thus be taken as a reasonably accurate representation of this change. Greatest population increases of over 50 per cent centred around the urban pockets of Dublin and Belfast, as well as in some western baronies in Leitrim, Mayo, Galway, Clare and Kerry. In general, a fairly distinctive east-west divide is evident nationally, with much of Munster and Connaught charting rises of over 20 per cent. In the north-east, predictable gains in linen manufacturing areas are evident, while the north-west has much in common with the west and south in that its rapidly rising population was beginning to exert considerable pressure on meagre resources. Within Donegal, the balance of population increase is tilted markedly toward the west, with a particularly large expansion of over 40 per cent in Boylagh barony. In contrast, the rich agricultural lands of Raphoe recorded an increase of just over 5 per cent.

By the beginning of the 1840s the rate of population growth was slowing considerably and the 14.2 per cent increase in the national population for the decade up to 1831 was followed by one of 5.3 per cent for the succeeding ten-year period.[126] However, the deceleration of growth was having least impact in the poorest, most densely populated western portions of the country, particularly in counties Kerry,

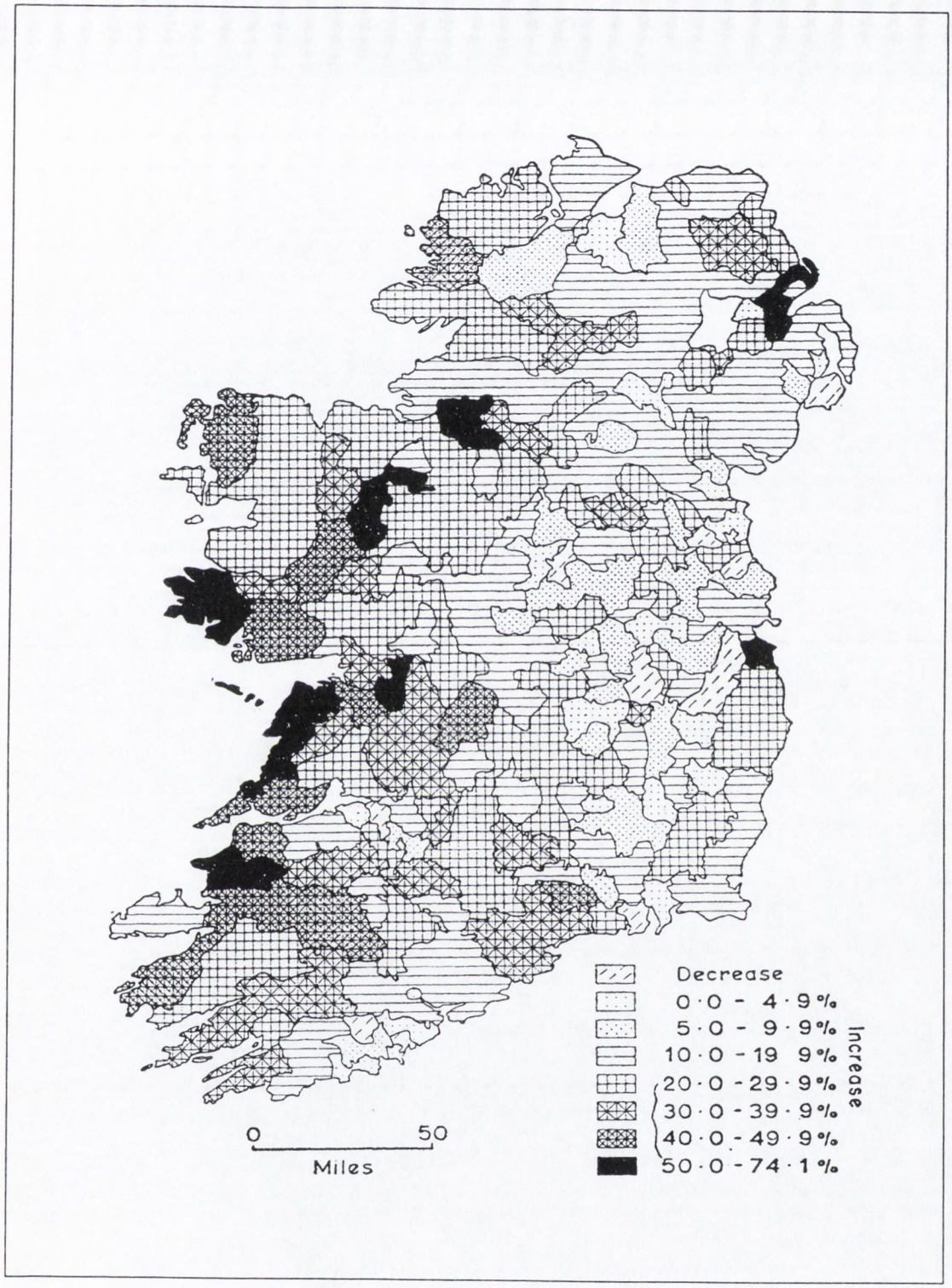
[123] *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to take the Census of Ireland for the Year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, p. viii, lii; full discussion in: Lee, J. (1981), 'On the Accuracy of the pre-Famine Irish Censuses' in, Goldstrom, J.M. & Clarkson, L.A. (eds.), *Irish Population, Economy and Society: Essays in honour of the late K.H. Connell,* pp. 37-56

[124] Connell, K.H. (1950), *The Population of Ireland, 1750-1845,* pp. 2, 20-21; McDowell, R.B. (1964), *The Irish Administration,* p. 285; Cousens, S.H. (1960), 'The Regional Pattern of Emigration During the Great Irish Famine, 1846-51' in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* no. 28, p. 115

[125] The 1821 Census is generally considered to be the more accurate of the two. See for example: Cousens, S.H. (1965), 'The Regional Variation in Emigration from Ireland between 1821 and 1841' in, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* no. 37, p. 15

[126] Vaughan, W.E. & Fitzpatrick, A.J. (1978), *Irish Historical Statistics: Population, 1821-1971,* p. 3

Fig. 2.28. Population change in Ireland by barony, 1821-41



Source: Cousens, S.H. (1965), 'The Regional Variation in Emigration from Ireland between 1821 and 1841' in, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* no. 37, p. 16

Clare, Galway, Mayo and Leitrim.[127] In Donegal, however, the rate of slowdown was even more emphatic than the national average and the 16.47 per cent increase in population in 1821-31 was followed by a rise of only 2.52 per cent between 1831 and 1841.[128] Only Dublin (-1.94), Derry (+.07), Roscommon (+1.59), King's (+1.82) and Monaghan (+2.51) had lower rates of population gain in the period. Further evidence of downward adjustment in the population of Donegal is available through F.J. Carney's work on Collis' survey of Trinity College lands in the county in 1843.[129] Calculations comparing the population data from 1843 with that of the 1841 Census reveal a 2.03 per cent drop in population on the College holdings over the two years.[130] This would suggest the possibility of a slight contraction in the population of Kilmacrenan, Tirhugh and Raphoe baronies in the years immediately before the Famine.

The overall downward trend in population growth within Donegal is illustrated in Fig. 2.29, which maps population change between 1831 and 1841 by parish. It is immediately apparent that the county total increase of 2.52 per cent masks considerable regional variation in figures. The south-west in particular exhibits substantial population growth and Boylagh barony, the area in which most rapid growth occurred in 1821-31, maintains its position as the zone of greatest expansion. All four parishes within the barony recorded levels of enlargement exceeding 10 per cent and the two most westerly parishes of Lettermacaward and Templecrone registered increases of 21.4 per cent and 20.1 per cent respectively. Another grouping further south comprising of Kilaghtee (21.8%), Glencolumbcille (16.1%), Kilcar (15.1%) and Killybegs Upper (12.9%) make up the remainder of the pressure zone which covers the entirety of Glenties union. Such concentrated population growth in the poorest part of the county was bound to have a telling impact during the impending crisis.

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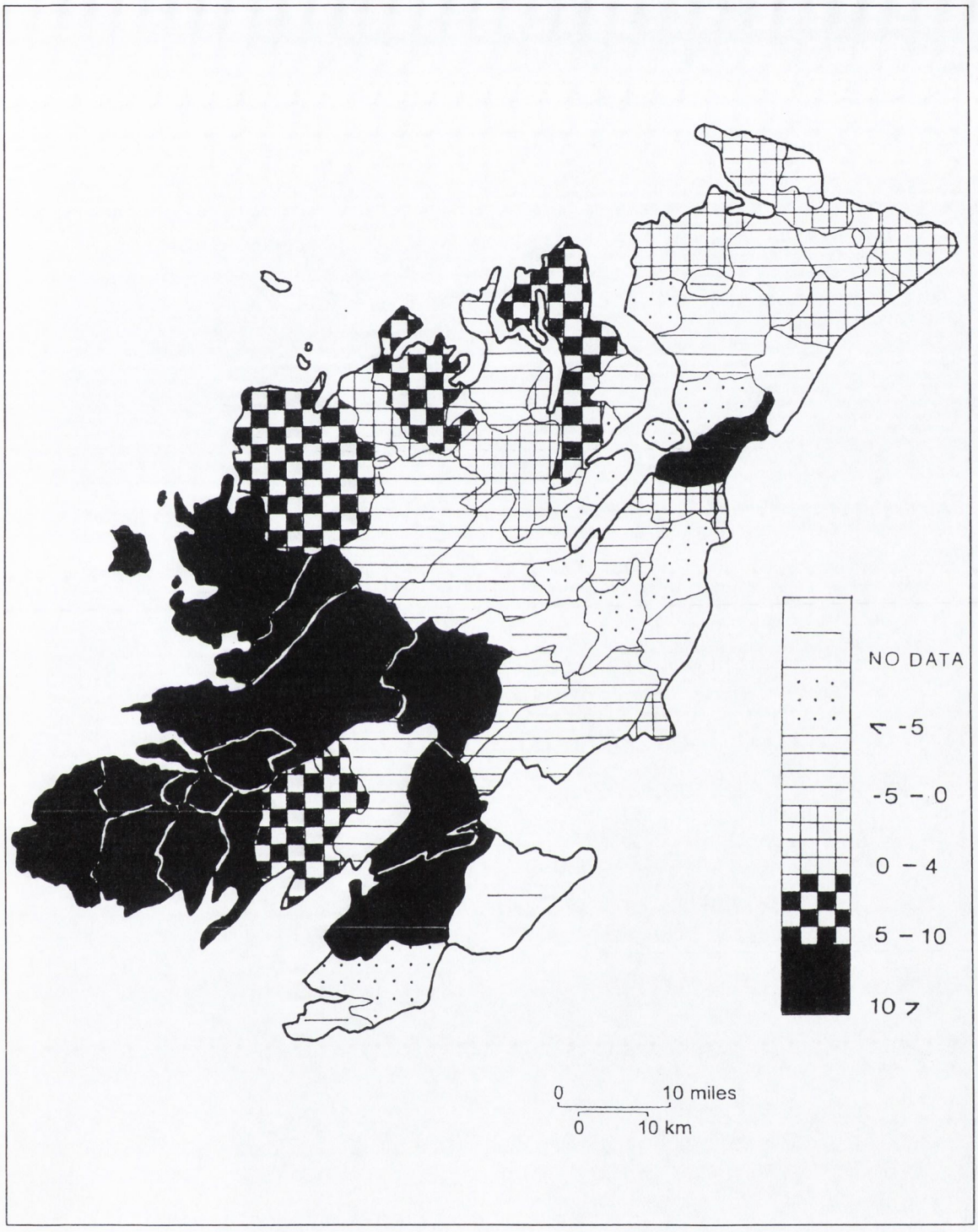
[127] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 9; *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to take the Census of Ireland for the Year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. v-lli; Boyle, P.P. & O'Grada, C. (1986), 'Fertility Trends, Excess Mortality and the Great Irish Famine' in, *Demography*, xxiii ; Mokyr, J. (1983), *Why Ireland Starved: a Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850,* pp. 38-45

[128] Vaughan, W.E. & Fitzpatrick, A.J. (1978), *Irish Historical Statistics: Population, 1821-1971,* p. 12

[129] Carney, F.J. (1975), 'Pre-Famine Irish Population: The Evidence from the Trinity College Estates' in, *Irish Economic and Social History,* Vol. II, pp. 35-45

[130] ibid., p. 40

Fig. 2.29. Population change in Donegal, by parish, 1831-41



Source: *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841*, H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 418-421

The rest of Donegal can be broadly divided into an intermediate zone along the north-west coast of Kilmacrenan, a zone of negligible population increase in Inishowen and an extensive sector which experienced population loss, stretching from Gartan in central Kilmacrenan to the eastern county boundary in Raphoe. Comparing Fig. 2.29 with Fig. 2.9, we find a remarkable correlation between the number of families described as being 'chiefly dependent on their own manual labour' and the areas of greatest population increase. Similarly, the areas in which lower proportions of such families existed correspond with decreasing or unchanged population rates. A further significant relationship can be identified by comparing Fig. 2.29 with Fig 2.39 which maps an estimation of emigration levels in the mid-1830s. Given that the eastern region of highest emigration in Raphoe corresponds precisely with the area of greatest population decrease, it would seem likely that emigration played a significant role in initiating the downward curve. Indeed, it is probable that emigration was the most crucial influence leading to decelerating population growth throughout Donegal.

This hypothesis can be reinforced in a number of ways. Firstly, there is no evidence of a decline in fertility rates in the county in the decades leading up to the 1840s. Fig. 2.30 charts the numbers of males and females in the 0-20 age group in 1821 and 1841. The 37,165 and 34,633 children in the 0-5 and 5-10 age categories in 1821 compare with figures of 46,951 and 42,081 for 1841. An even more pronounced increase in the 10-20 age group, from 62,426 in 1821 to 106,680 in 1841, is further indication of a considerably higher birth rate in the period between the two censuses than in the twenty years up to 1821.[131] Secondly, there is no indication of a decelerating birth rate in the ten-year period leading up to the 1841 Census. Fig. 2.31 graphs the retrospective data relating to births recorded in 1841, showing a fairly steady annual increase in the number of births from 8,636 in 1832 to 10,502 in 1840. Thirdly, it would appear that another demographic process which has been examined by a number of commentators, that of female marriage age, did not exert any notable influence on decreased fertility in Donegal. The increase in marriage age in the south-east of the country and in the immediate sphere of influence of Dublin has been

[131] *Abstract of answers and returns, pursuant to act Geo. 3, for taking an account of the population in Ireland in 1821,* H.C. 1824[577], xxii, p. 274; *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 424-5

Fig 2.30. Number of males and females aged 0-20 in Donegal, 1821 & 1841

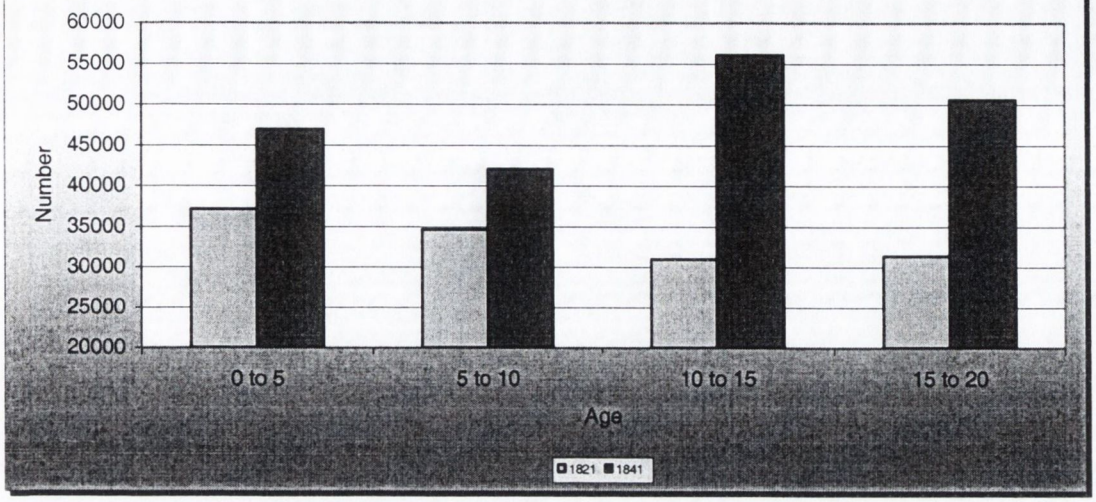


Fig. 2.31. Number of births recorded in Donegal, 1832-41

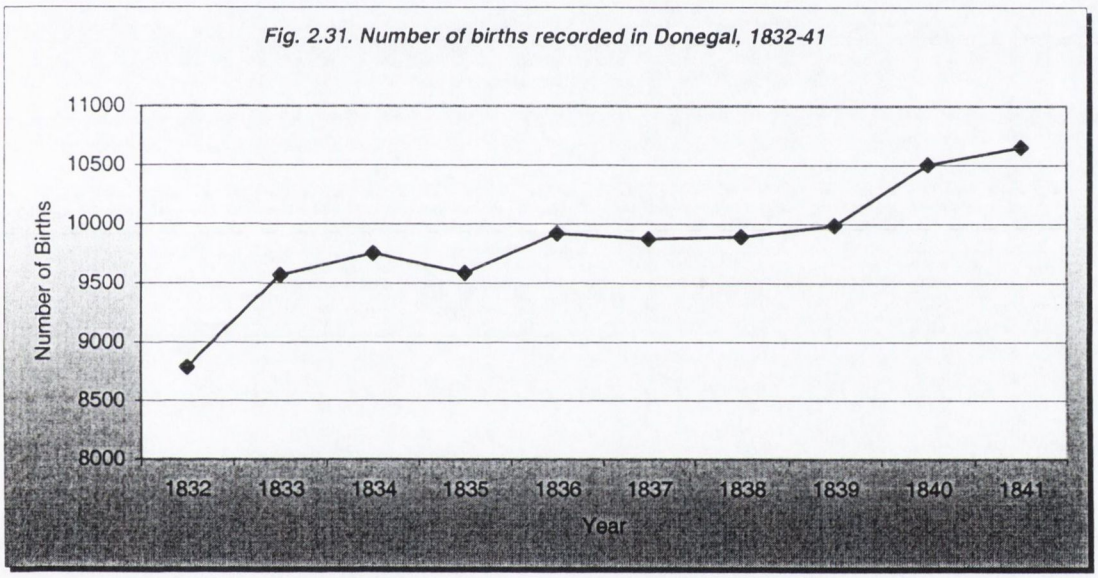


Fig 2.32. Population decrease in the 0-20 age group in Donegal, 1821 & 1841

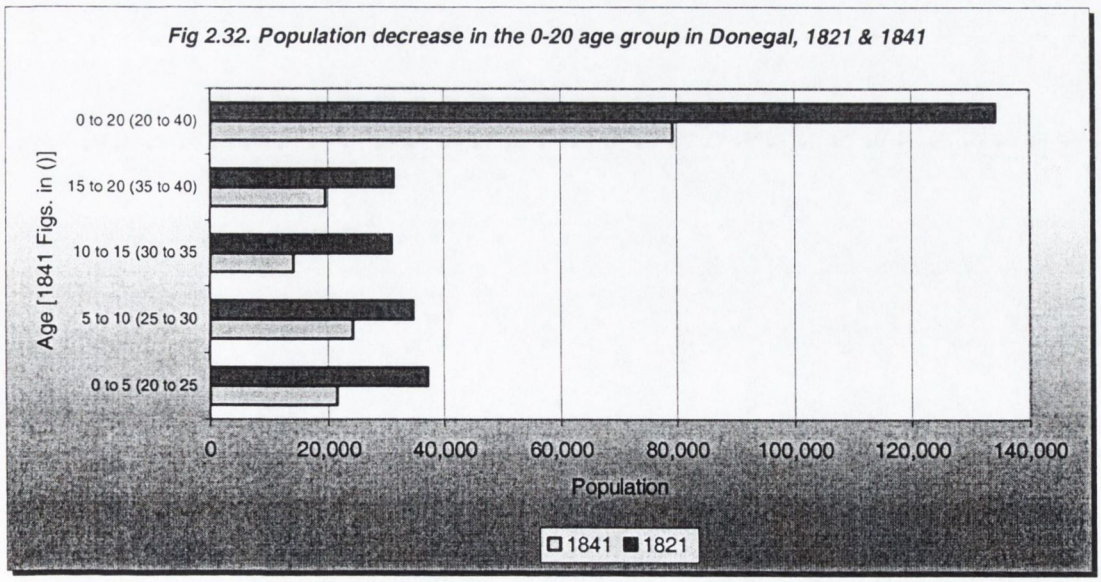
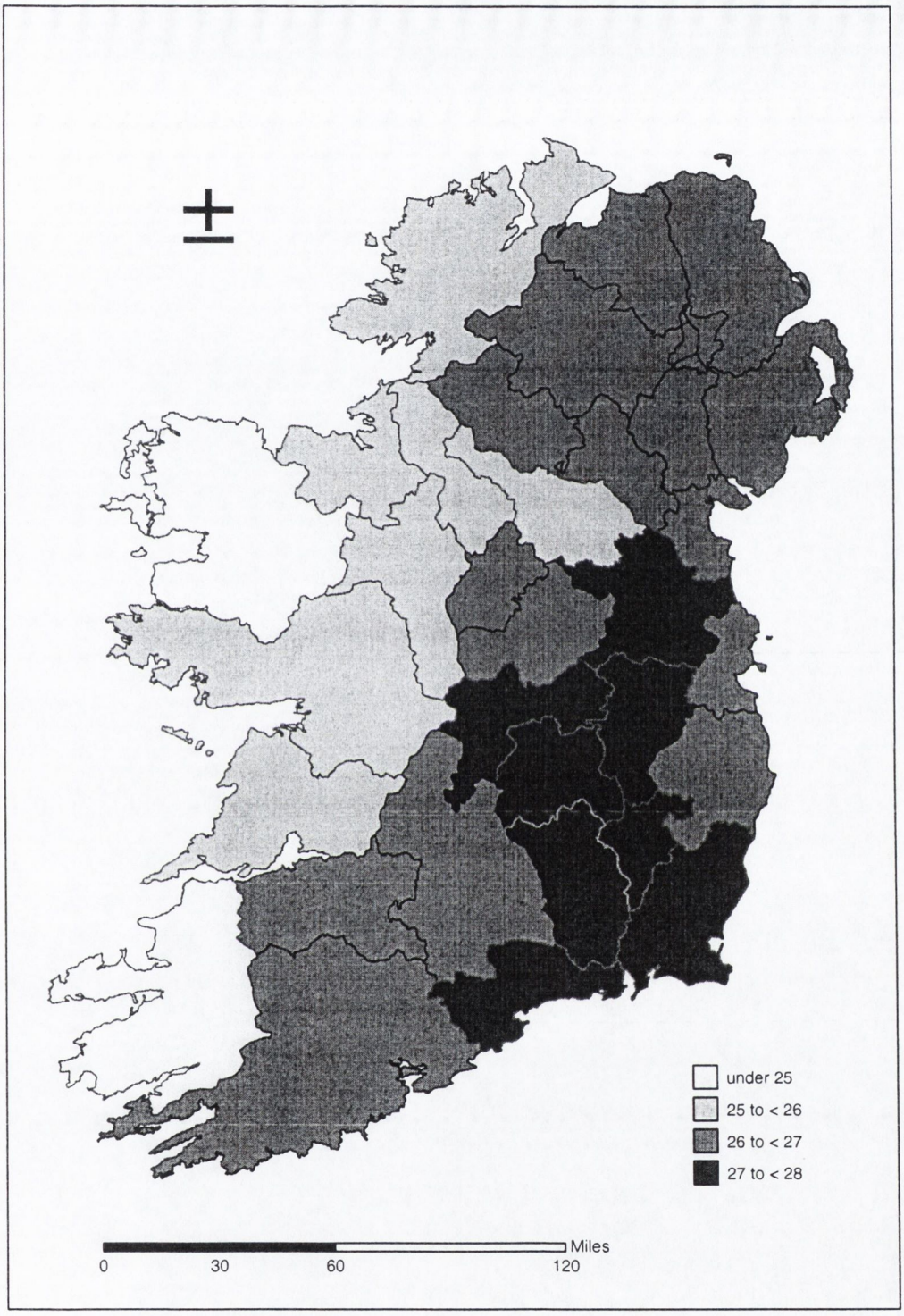


Fig. 2.33. Mean age of females at marriage in each county in Ireland, 1841



Source: Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine*, p. 52

linked to a reduction in fertility in these areas.[132] In Donegal, however, the mean age of female marriage in 1841 is estimated to have been between 25 and 26, in line with much of the west of Ireland (see Fig. 2.33).

Finally, we turn to a calculation based on the numbers of males and females aged under twenty in 1821 (See Fig. 2.32).[133] By comparing these figures with the corresponding 20-40 age group in 1841 we arrive at the conclusion that almost 55,000 people are 'missing' from the 1821 total.[134] Since the 0-20 age group was unlikely to experience a very high level of mortality and was the group most likely to emigrate, it is reasonable to suggest that the dramatic decrease in this cohort from 134,224 to 79,406 was largely as a result of emigration. As we shall see, there is considerably more definitive evidence of a relatively high level of pre-Famine emigration from Donegal.[135] For now it is sufficient to note its influence on the deceleration of population growth in the county in the 1830s.

2.10. POPULATION DENSITY

Despite the slowdown in population increase in Donegal in the period before the Famine, the county was still one of the most densely populated in Ireland relative to area of cultivated land. Though Donegal had the lowest population density relative to total land area in Ireland in 1841 (24.8 persons per 100 acres)[136], the proportion of the population competing for useful land was among the highest in the country. Fig. 2.34 maps population density per hundred acres of arable land by county in 1841. The most striking regional dimension to the distribution of population in relation to arable land is the low density associated with much of Leinster. With the exception of Dublin, Louth and Longford, all counties in the province return a relatively low 49 persons per 100 acres of cultivated land or less, with Kildare (32.1/ 100a), Meath

[132] Johnson, J.H. (1988), 'The Distribution of Irish Emigration in the Decade Before the Great Famine' in, *Irish Geography*, Vol. 21, p. 78; Cousens, S.H. (1966), 'The Restriction of Population Growth in pre-Famine Ireland' in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy,* lxiv (sec. C), no. 4

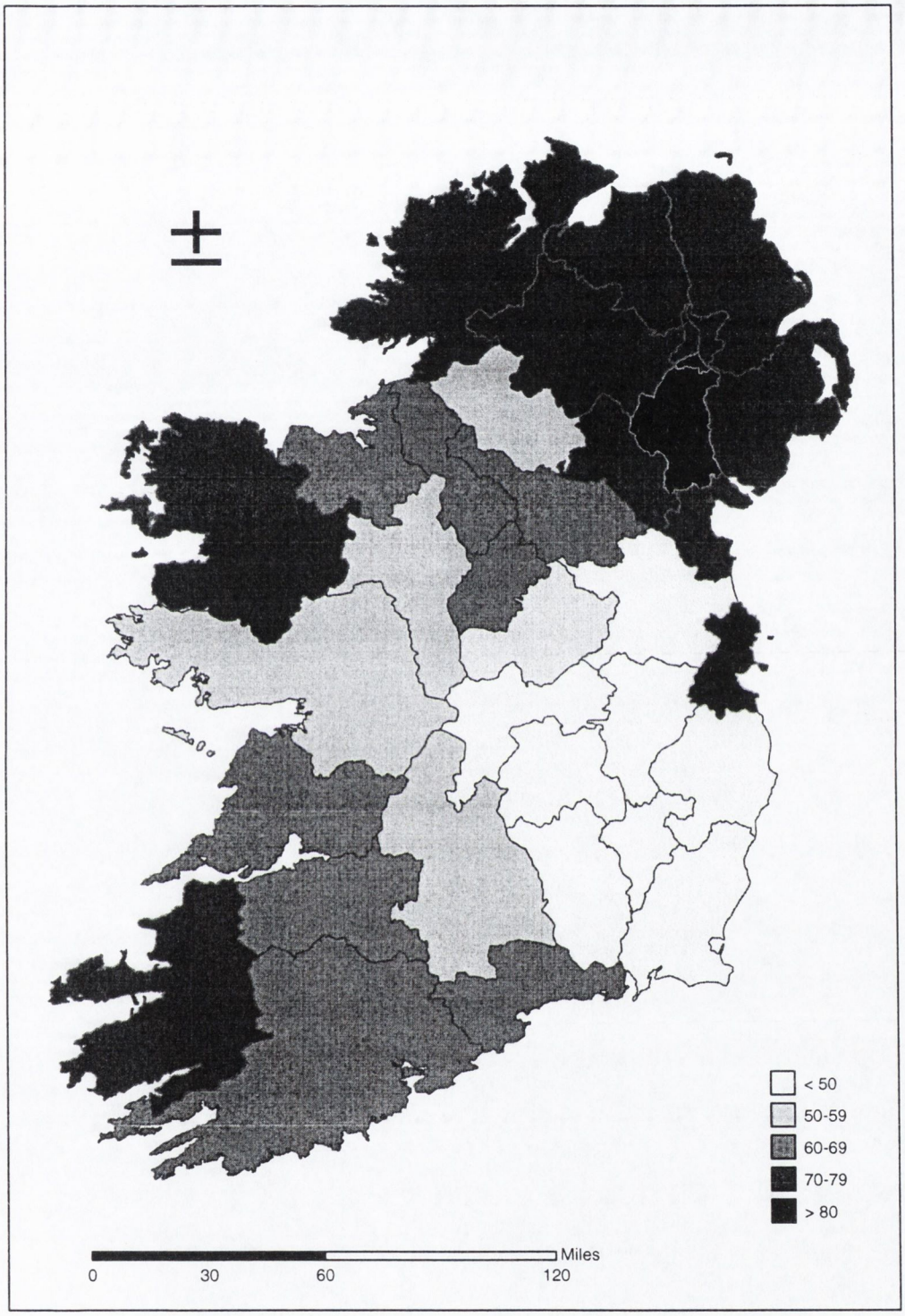
[133] Source: *Census of the Population, 1831, with Comparative Abstract as Taken in 1821,* H.C. 1833[23], xxxix, p

[134] It is not suggested that this number of *c.* 55,000 should be taken as the actual number emigrating in the period 1821-41. It is used here merely in the context of population growth deceleration.

[135] See Section 2.11

[136] *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 564-5

Fig. 2.34. Population density per hundred acres of arable land, by county, 1841



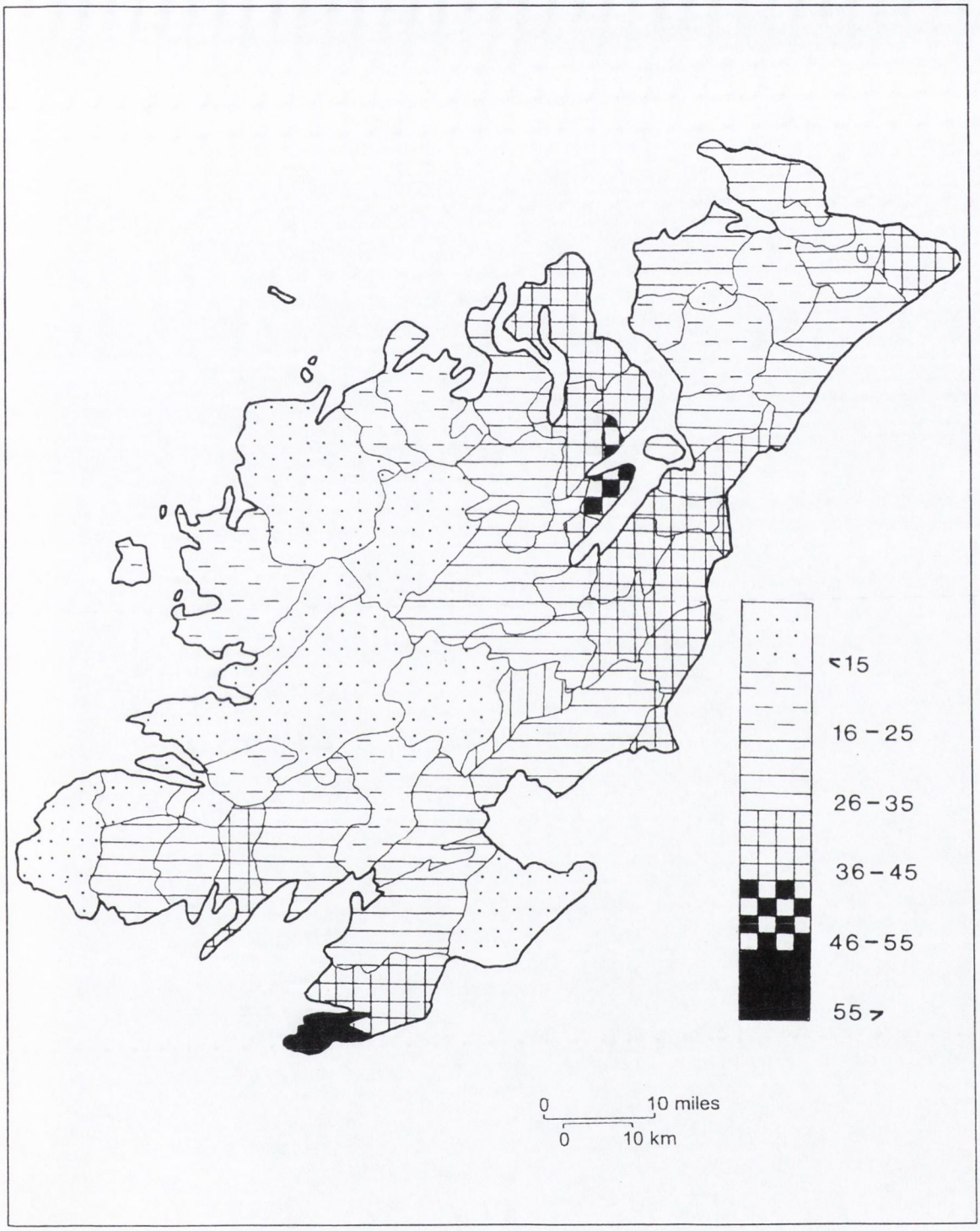
Source: *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841*, H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 544-5, 564-5

(35.5/ 100a), Westmeath (38.7/ 100a) and Wexford (39.6/ 100a) being the most sparsely populated. The more economically developed north-east of the country, meanwhile, was the most densely populated region in Ireland based on the same population to arable land ratio. Within Ulster, Armagh had the highest density of 87.6 persons per 100 acres of cultivated land, testimony to its position as the principal linen producing area in the country.

The high population densities recorded in the west and south of the country were the result of an entirely different process of demographic change to that in east Ulster. Continued subdivision of holdings, a high marriage rate, a tendency toward large families and an astoundingly high birth rate of 30 per thousand of population in 1841 were all contributory factors in the concentration of population toward the west. The omnipresent potato allowed the subsistence of large families on tiny holdings of marginal land, while a huge number of labourers and cottiers survived in a similar fashion. Of the counties along the west coast Mayo (78.2/ 100a), Donegal (75.4/ 100a) and Kerry (70.9/ 100a), were the most densely populated, closely followed by Cork, Clare, Leitrim and Sligo. The patterns illustrated and discussed previously in this chapter relating to subsistence agriculture, poor quality of housing, low literacy levels and dependence on manual labour show remarkable correlation with the concentration of population on the poorest land in the west.

Within Donegal itself, we find that the county total of 75 persons per hundred acres of arable land is a figure which masks wide variations in population density in different parts of the county. Similarly, the county total of 24 persons per 100 acres of entire land area hides the fact that some areas were markedly more sparsely populated than others, as illustrated in Fig. 2.35, overleaf. It is clear that the physical geography of the county was the foremost factor in the distribution of population with the Derryveagh, Glendowan, Aghla and Bluestack mountain ranges preventing settlement in much of central Kilmacrenan and as far south as Kilteevoge parish in Raphoe and Killymard parish in Banagh. In addition, the wide expanses of bog covering a number of parishes further west had a similar effect and densities of only 12 persons per hundred acres in Lettermacaward and Inishkeel parishes and 14 per hundred acres in Glencolumbcille were among the lowest in the county. Highest population densities, meanwhile, occurred in the lowlands along the eastern county

Fig. 2.35. Population density per hundred acres of total land area in each Donegal parish, 1841



Source: *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841*, H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 418-421

boundary in Raphoe, with relatively high levels in lowland parishes on the western bank of Lough Swilly. To the south-east, where the grey-brown podzol soils of coastal parishes to the south of Donegal Bay formed one of the richest agricultural areas in the whole north-west of the country, similarly high densities are also evident.[137]

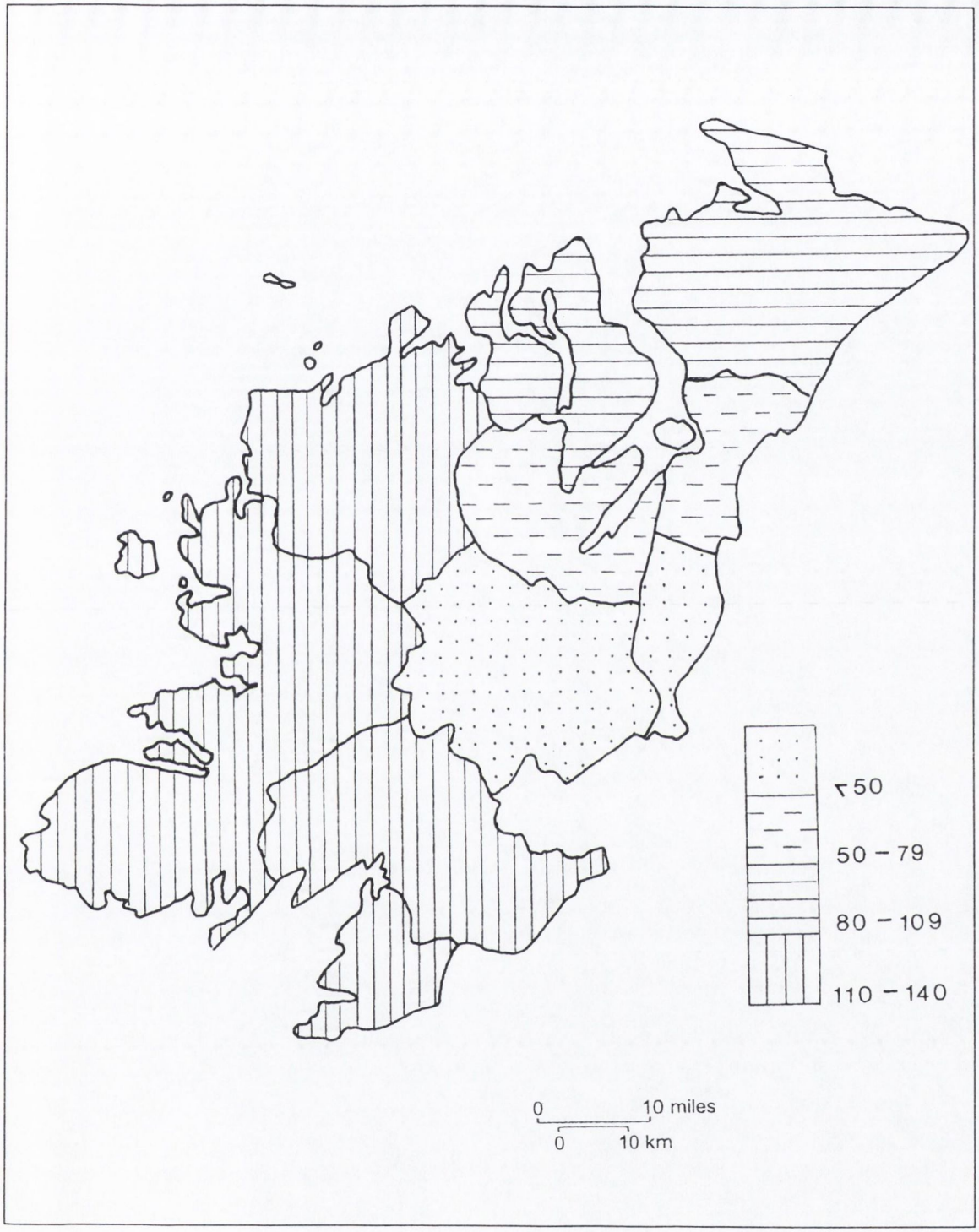
The calculation of population density in relation to total land area regardless of quality is unsatisfactory as a means of determining the likely impact of the coming Famine on different areas in Donegal. It is included here merely to demonstrate the relationship between the physical and human geography of the county. In addition, it highlights the absolute divergence in results obtained from the simple population/ total land area ratio compared with a population/ arable land ratio, as illustrated in Fig. 2.36. This maps the estimated number of persons per hundred acres of arable land by Poor Law union in 1841, providing a much more informative view of pre-Famine population density in the county.[138] When the acreage of arable land is factored into the equation densities shift westwards and the four coastal unions of Ballyshannon, Donegal, Glenties and Dunfanaghy all register densities of above 110 persons per 100 acres of land under crops. To the north of the county, Milford (95/ 100a) and Inishowen (83/ 100a) form an intermediate zone, while the region of lowest population density is formed by the eastern unions of Londonderry (64/ 100a), Letterkenny (51/ 100a), Stranorlar (47/ 100) and Strabane (40/ 100a). Such a situation was bound to have implications during the course of the coming Famine when the vulnerabilities of the western zone of highest population concentration were inevitably to be exposed.

A further useful measure of population density can be obtained by associating population with Poor Law valuations. Since the valuation was a proxy for the economic worth of the union, the results of a calculation based on dividing the population of the Donegal unions by their rateable value should highlight the

[137] See for further discussion of physical geography: O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), The Estate System of Landholding in County Donegal, 1830 to 1923: a geographical analysis (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), pp. 33-8

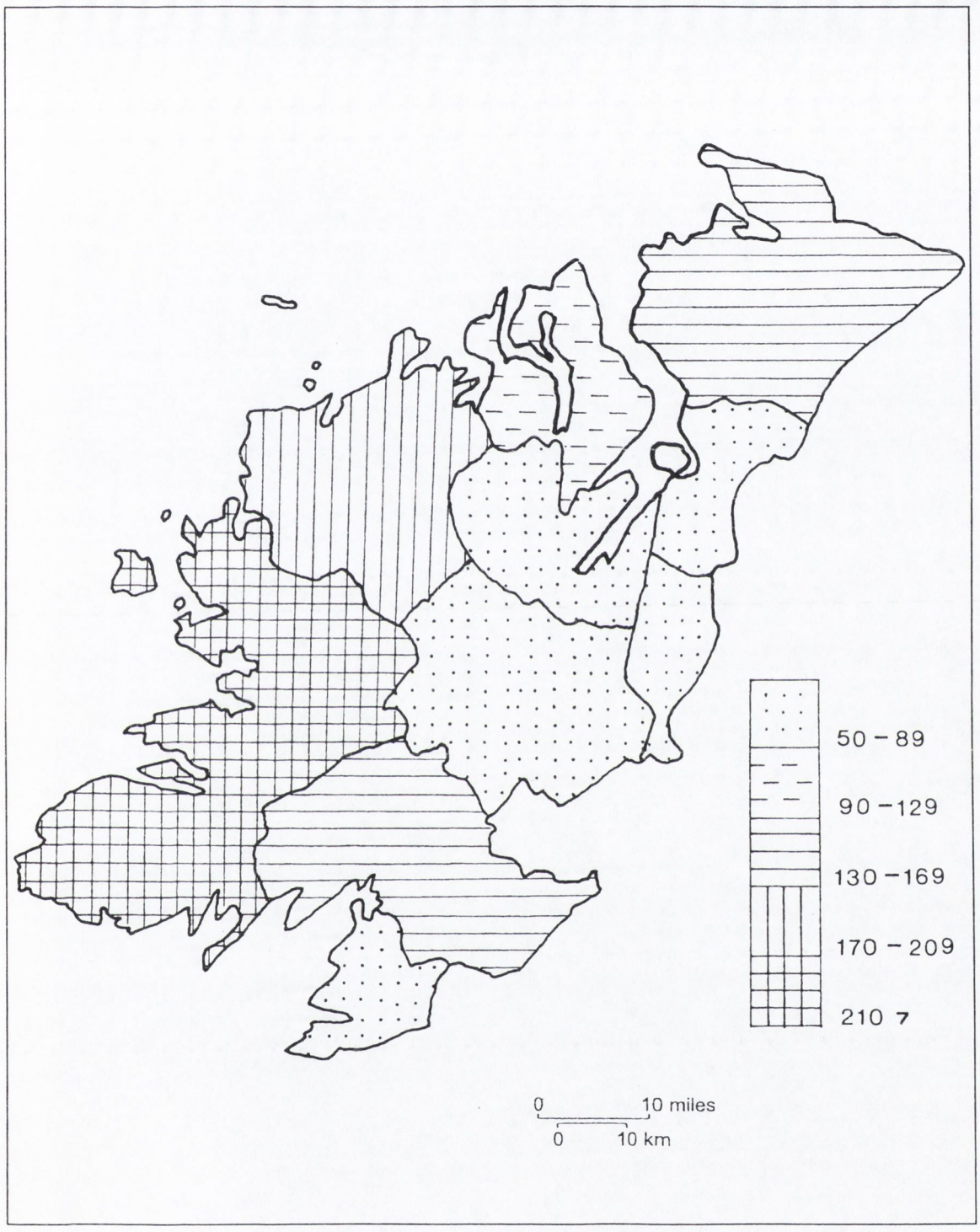
[138] Note: as there are no figures below county level for arable land area in the *1841 Census*, population densities were calculated by relating 1841 union populations to the area of arable land recorded in: *Returns of agricultural produce in Ireland in the year 1848,* H.C. 1849[1116], xlix, p. 134

Fig. 2.36. Population density per hundred acres of arable land in each Donegal Poor Law union, 1841



Source: *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841*, H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 418-421; *Returns of agricultural produce in Ireland in the year 1848*, H.C. 1849[1116], xlix, p. 134

Fig. 2.37. Population density and economic worth: the number of persons per £1 of valuation in Donegal Poor Law unions, 1841



Source: *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 418-421; *Appendix to minutes of evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt iv, H.C. 1845[672], xxii, App. 93, pp. 278-79

population 'pressure' upon each. Fig. 2.37, which maps the number of persons per £1 of valuation by union in 1841, is most revealing in this respect. The outcome is that there is even further divergence between east and west Donegal, while Glenties, with 266 persons per £1 valuation, emerges as the union in which population density is by far the highest in the county relative to economic worth. An observation made in the *O.S. Memoirs* in relation to Inishkeel parish in Glenties highlights the crux of the problem. John Barrett, commenting on the poor condition of the inhabitants of the Iniskeel remarks on the large numbers of men who did not have the 'means of earning money' but still saw fit to 'marry and entail misery on a large family'.[139] Early marriages, large families, small holdings and generally poor living conditions in Glenties, combined with a low emigration rate and almost complete dependence on the potato made its defences against the effects of the crop failure in 1845 the weakest of all the Donegal unions.

2.11. PRE-FAMINE EMIGRATION

Given that Donegal was among the counties with highest population densities per hundred acres of arable land, it is important to examine pre-Famine emigration levels in order to establish how much of an alleviating effect on population pressures this may have had in different areas. A number of commentators have attempted to assess the regional variation in pre-Famine emigration from Ireland with varying degrees of success.[140] In terms of the numbers involved, the most accurate estimates would indicate an exodus numbering some 417,446 persons in the period 1839-45.[141] This figure is confined to emigrants destined for North America and when taken in conjunction with the estimated Irish-born population in Britain in 1841, would point

[139] Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol 39, Parishes of County Donegal II, 1835-6: Mid, West and South Donegal, p. 71

[140] Adams, W.F. (1932), *Ireland and Irish Emigration to the New World from 1815 to the Famine,* p. 158; Cousens, S.H. (1965), 'The Regional Variation in Emigration from Ireland between 1821 and 1841' in, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* no. 37, pp. 15-30; Mokyr, J. (1983), *Why Ireland Starved: a Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850;* for a critique of the various methods, see Johnson, J.H. (1988), 'The Distribution of Irish Emigration in the Decade Before the Great Famine' in, *Irish Geography*, Vol. 21 pp., 78-87

[141] Calculated from: Vaughan, W.E. & Fitzpatrick, A.J. (1978), *Irish Historical Statistics: Population, 1821-1971,* p. 259

towards a total figure of well over half a million emigrants in the seven years leading up to the Famine.[142]

Having formulated a large number of complex calculations in order to reach a conclusion regarding the geographical distribution of pre-Famine emigrants, it emerges that the most accurate means of assessing such variation has already been carried out through the work of Joel Mokyr.[143] Refining the methods employed in the pioneering work conducted by S.H. Cousens[144], Mokyr uses Census data from 1821 and 1841 to reconstruct approximate levels of pre-Famine emigration at county level. Essentially based on a comparison of the number of people aged 0-20 in 1821 with those who were aged 20-40 in 1841, the study proposes that any decline in this cohort greater than that expected from mortality can be seen as a product of emigration. The results mapped in Fig. 2.38 also allow for regional variation in mortality and take into account the distribution of internal migration, thereby arriving at what must be the most accurate indication of pre-Famine regional distribution. Broadly speaking, Donegal fits into the group of counties to the north-west of the country in which annual net emigration was around one per cent of the mean population in the period 1821-41. Lowest levels occur to the west of a line stretching from Galway to Waterford, possible indicative of an inability to raise the funds required for passage to North America or Britain.

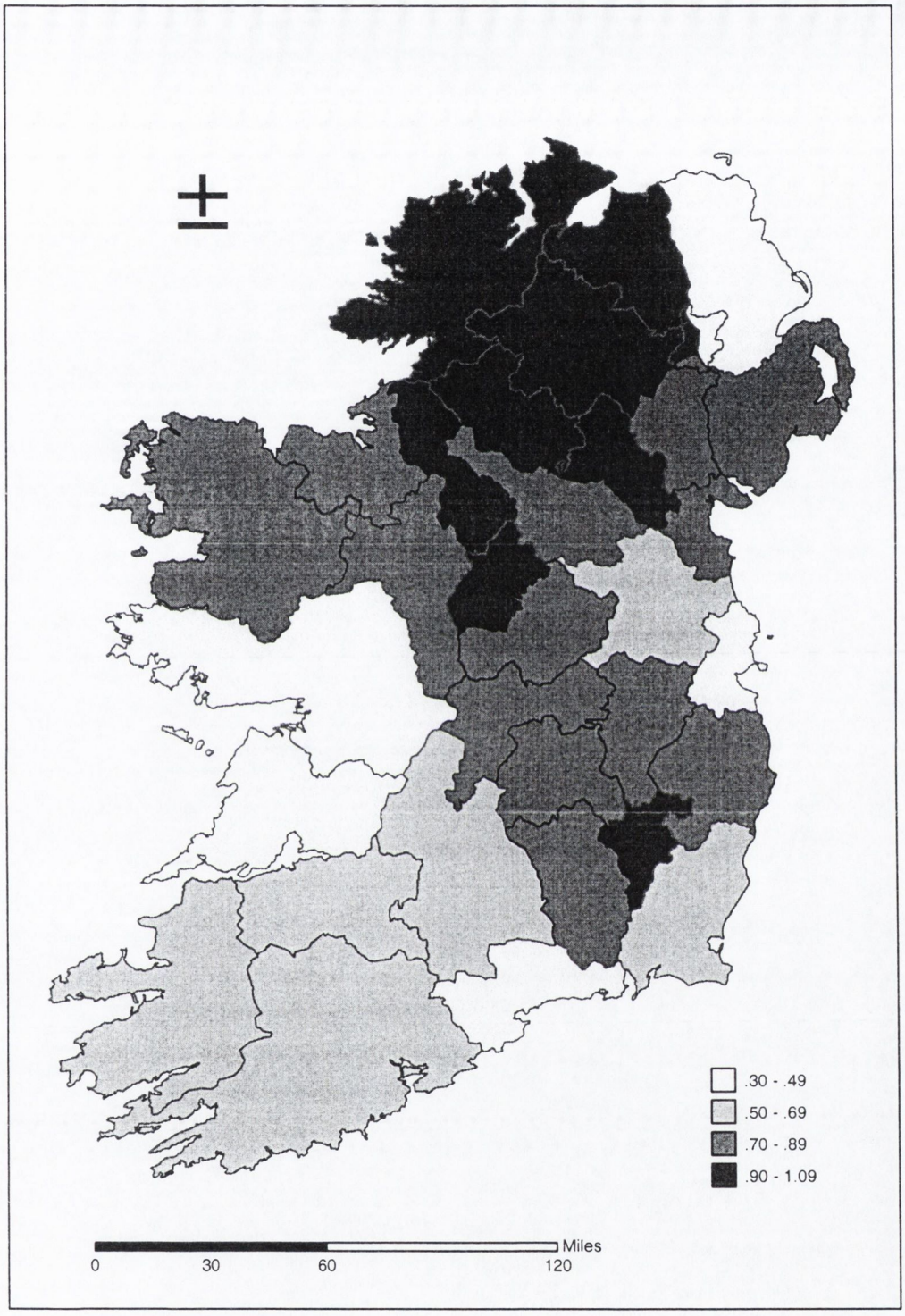
Perhaps the most crucial factor allowing relatively high levels of emigration in pre-Famine Donegal was the widespread operation of the tenant right custom in the county. This provided an opportunity for even the poorer classes of tenants to raise the means necessary for emigration. Thomas Bateson, a land agent in Inishowen, gave evidence to the *Devon Commission* in 1844 in which he spoke of a case of consolidation of holdings on one of his estates where the out-going tenants received

[142] By 1841 over 400,000 people of Irish birth were resident in Britain. See: McDowell, R.B. (1956), 'Ireland on the Eve of the Famine' in, Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52*

[143] Mokyr, J. (1983), *Why Ireland Starved: a Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850;* For further discussion on Mokyr's calculations see Johnson, J.H. (1988), 'The Distribution of Irish Emigration in the Decade Before the Great Famine' in, *Irish Geography*, Vol. 21 pp., 78-87

[144] Cousens, S.H. (1965), 'The Regional Variation in Emigration from Ireland between 1821 and 1841' in, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* no. 37, pp. 15-30

Fig. 2.38. Annual net emigration as a percentage of mean population in Irish counties, 1821-41



Source: Johnson, J.H. (1988), 'The Distribution of Irish Emigration in the Decade Before the Great Famine' in, *Irish Geography*, Vol. 21, p. 82; based on calculations by J. Mokyr

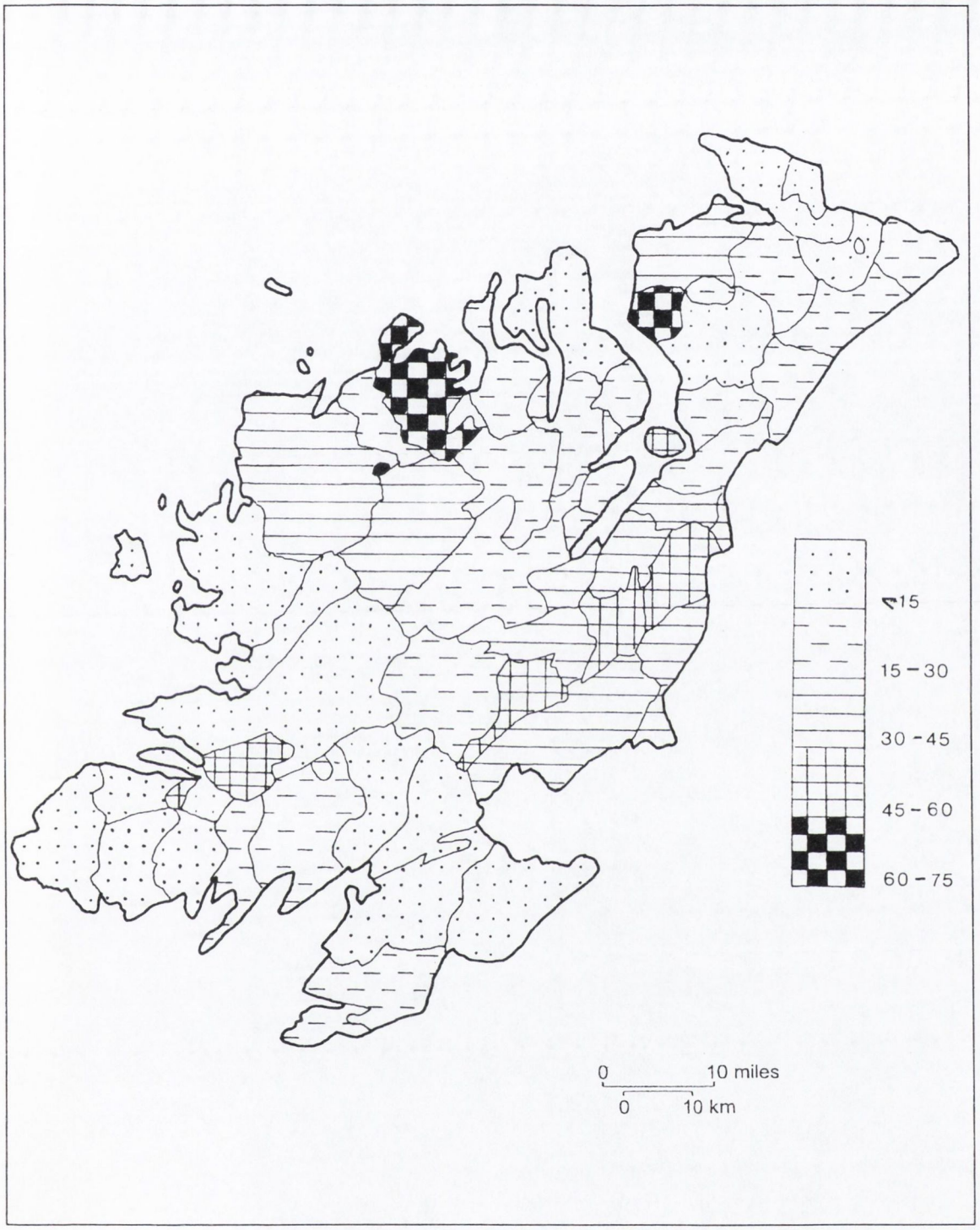
five years purchase and 'went to America, ...perfectly satisfied'.[145] In general, it would appear that the usual 'good-will' of a holding amounted to about five or six years purchase which would finance the voyage to North America for the tenant and his family. This meant that a large proportion of Donegal's pre-Famine population were provided with what amounted to a 'safety-net' of sorts. A farmer from Ardnamona, near Donegal town, touched upon this subject in a statement in 1844:

> The rate of purchase of good-will, where the land is set at a fair rent, is about £6 an acre; in many cases I have known the tenant gets as much for his good-will as the land was worth in fee.... It certainly is calculated to increase the tenant's interest in his farm, and he is always certain of having the means of taking his family to America, should he find himself unable to support his family on his farm.[146]

Unfortunately, emigration statistics for pre-Famine Donegal do not exist, making a determination of regional variation within the county problematic. Both the *Ordnance Survey Memoirs* and *Devon Commission* evidence provide some general information relating to emigration from individual parishes, but neither offers any adequate indication of the numbers involved. The only other source is the *Poor Inquiry* of 1835 which invited respondents to record the number and description of emigrants who had left their parish in the previous three years.[147] While these returns are unsatisfactory in places because some incumbents were unable to gauge precisely how many emigrants there were or failed to indicate if they were referring to families or individuals, they are useful in gaining some idea of regional patterns. A speculative attempt at mapping the responses is provided overleaf (Fig. 2.39). This reconstruction certainly seems to point towards a concentration of emigration to the south-east of the county, in an area roughly contiguous with Raphoe barony. Such a situation is hardly surprising since it was this part of the county which contained the highest proportion of the population most likely to have the means and opportunity to emigrate. Better land, greater agricultural development, higher incomes, the decline of the domestic textile industry and easy access to the port at Derry were all factors

[145] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt i, H.C. 1845, xix, p. 720
[146] ibid., pt ii, H.C. 1845[672], xx, p. 169
[147] *Poor inquiry (Ireland): appendix F containing baronial examinations relative to conacre, quarter or score ground, small tenantry, consolidation of farms and dislodged tenantry, emigration, landlord and tenant, nature and state of agriculture, taxation, roads, observations on the nature and state of agriculture; and supplement,* H.C. 1836[38], xxxiii, pp. 728-745

Fig. 2.39. Estimated emigration per thousand of population in Donegal parishes, 1833-35



Source: *Poor inquiry (Ireland): appendix F containing baronial examinations relative to conacre, quarter or score ground, small tenantry, consolidation of farms and dislodged tenantry, emigration, landlord and tenant, nature and state of agriculture, taxation, roads, observations on the nature and state of agriculture; and supplement*, H.C. 1836[38], xxxiii, pp. 728-745

which would have contributed to a relatively high level of emigration from this region. Johnson Mansfield, commenting on the parish of Donaghmore to the south of Raphoe (Stranorlar union), stated that 'about 130 persons have gone annually for the last three years; those who emigrate are generally the children of reputable farmers..., the desire for emigration is generally increasing'.[148]

The other key zone of high emigration occurs to the north-west of Donegal in Dunfanaghy union which witnessed the departure of over three per cent of its population in the three years from 1833 to 1835, based on the numbers indicated in Fig. 2.39. In Clondahorky, for example, Rev. Joseph Magee refers to an 'immense number' of emigrants, 'about 500; some farmers, and a considerable number of young men and women' leaving the parish in the period. To the north-east of the county in the Inishowen peninsula we find fewer references to emigration, though the *Ordnance Survey Memoirs* from May 1834 do testify to large-scale movements in some areas. In Clonmany parish, for example, around forty people were estimated to have left for America in 1834, while on the other side of Lough Swilly, along the eastern boundary of Kilmacrenan barony it was stated that 'no less than 500 between Letterkenny and Fanad took their passage for America this season at the offices of Letterkenny and Rathmelton'.[149] Finally, the south-west and south of the county appear to have been the areas of lowest emigration in the 1830s, with very infrequent references to any significant numbers in either *Poor Inquiry* or *Ordnance Survey* reports. However, the *Devon Commission* in 1844 does suggest a marked increase in emigration in one particular area to the north of Donegal union in the early 1840s. John Crommer's evidence alludes to a significant increase in employment in Killymard parish which he attributes to the numbers of labourers that have 'gone to America... [leaving] more employment for those that remain', while George Cecil Wray provides evidence of large numbers leaving Donegal parish, immediately east of Killymard:

> Emigration has latterly increased so mush that the younger members of the small farmers and tradesmen's families are in many cases fitted out for America by the holder of the farms.[150]

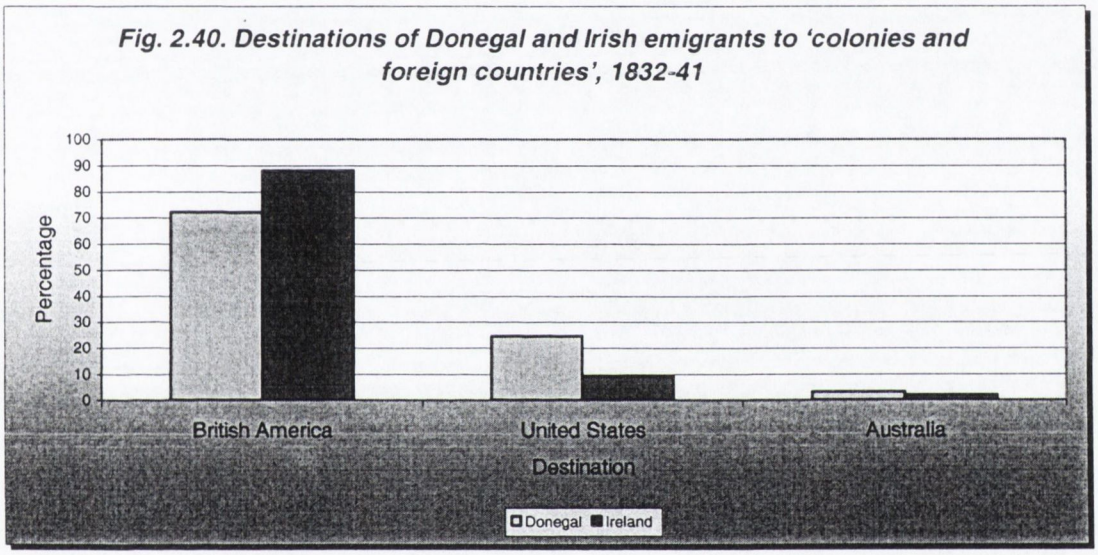
[148] ibid., p. 739

[149] Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol 38, Parishes of County Donegal I, 1833-5, North-East Donegal, p. 17; p. 93

[150] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt ii, H.C. 1845[672], xx, p. 167, evidence of George Cecil Wray

The principal means by which people were able to afford the voyage to North America was either through income from agriculture or by selling their tenant right. However, another crucial role in nineteenth century emigration was played by the members of families who were already resident in other countries and were in a position to finance the crossings of siblings or other family members. Shipping agents at Derry reported that half the fares and a large number of the sea-stores of emigrants going through the port in 1834 were paid for by relatives who had made the journey at an earlier date.[151] With relatively high levels of emigration from Donegal throughout the 1830s and early 1840s, it is likely that a source of finance for many Famine emigrants was readily available once the crisis had struck.

Fig. 2.40. Destinations of Donegal and Irish emigrants to 'colonies and foreign countries', 1832-41



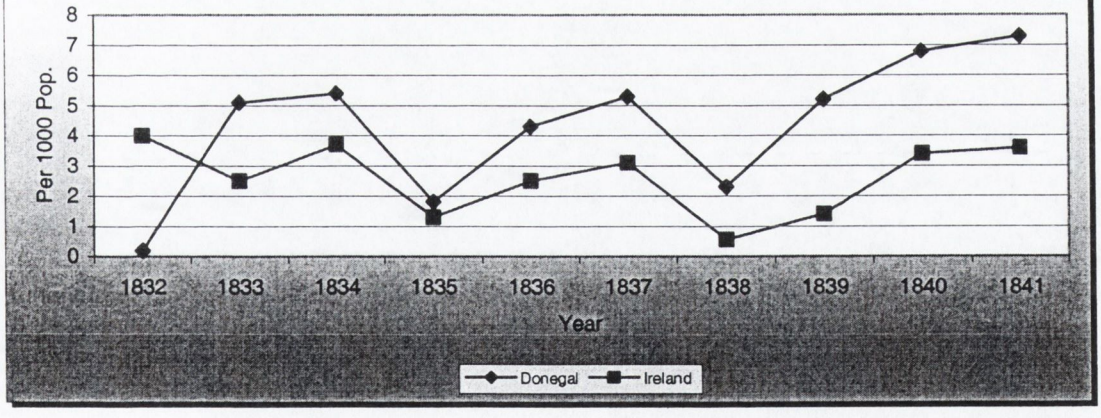
Arriving at an estimate of the number of emigrants who left Donegal is possible, though only through a rather convoluted calculation. Statistics for the number of direct emigrants to 'foreign' countries (i.e. not Britain) for the period 1832-41 were recorded in the 1841 Census, the total for the ten year period amounting to 214,647 nationally.[152] Of these, some 30,563 set sail from Derry. Assuming that the proportion of emigrants through the port of Derry who originated in Donegal in the ten year period did not differ markedly from 1841 levels (see Fig. 2.44), we arrive at a total of 12,989 direct emigrants to foreign countries from Donegal in the period 1832-

[151] Adams, W.F. (1932), *Ireland and Irish Emigration to the New World from 1815 to the Famine,* p. 167

[152] *Appendix to minutes of evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt iv, H.C. 1845[672], xxii, App. 106, pp. 320-21, Figs. here are reprinted from *1841 Census*

41.[153] Almost 90 per cent of these emigrated to British America, with the remainder settling chiefly in the United States, as illustrated in Fig. 2.40, above. It is reasonable to assume that quite a large number of Donegal emigrants also boarded vessels bound for Britain and then travelled onward to North America but there are no records which would allow us to determine the precise numbers involved. Analysis of the national emigration figures proposed by Vaughan and Fitzpatrick reveals that 242,549 emigrants from Ireland (or around 58 per cent) made their journey to North America *via* Liverpool in the period 1839-45.[154] Applying this percentile to the Donegal figure of 12,989 direct emigrants leads to a reasonably accurate total estimate of around 30,926 Donegal emigrants in the period 1832-41, or about 7.4 per cent of the national total. Setting the county firmly in the national context, it is possible to graph the numbers of direct emigrants per thousand of population in Donegal and Ireland in the period 1832-41, as illustrated in Fig. 2.41. This graph clearly indicates a consistently higher proportion of emigrants from Donegal compared with the national average for much of the 1830s, while a marked rise to 7 per thousand of population in 1841 shows an increasing propensity to emigrate in the early 1840s.

Fig 2.41. Numbers per thousand of population of direct emigrants to 'colonies and foreign' countries during the ten years ending June 6th 1841



[153] Total number of emigrants from Derry originating in Donegal in the summer of 1841 was 4,815 out of 11,317 = 42.5%; Same proportion is used to arrive at 1832-41 figure of 12,989

[154] Vaughan, W.E. & Fitzpatrick, A.J. (1978), *Irish Historical Statistics: Population, 1821-1971,* p. 259; Figs. above are based on Vaughan's revised figures following: Adams, W.F. (1932), *Ireland and Irish Emigration to the New World from 1815 to the Famine,* pp. 413-4

Since somewhere in the region of 30,000 emigrants had already departed in the ten years up to 1841 and the general trend of movement would appear to veer upward in the three years immediately preceding the Census, it is reasonable to assume that at least a further ten thousand or so emigrated in the period 1841-45. In the context of the coming crisis, such a large numbers of Donegal emigrants are significant in two key respects. Firstly, the fact that the rate of emigration from the county was significantly higher than in the case of almost every other western county (see Fig. 2.38), meant that population pressures were eased to a greater extent in Donegal as compared to much of Connaught and Munster. Taken in conjunction with the fact that massive land reclamation efforts and other agricultural improvements were also in evidence, the alleviation of population pressures through emigration must surely have resulted in some abatement from the intense competition for land which was so perilously prevalent in the poorer parts of pre-Famine Ireland.

In more readily definable and practical terms, the high rate of emigration also offered another potential advantage to the population during the course of the Famine itself. Again taking into consideration our conservative estimate of around 40,000 Donegal emigrants in the fifteen years before the onslaught of the crisis, it is not unreasonable to put forward the theory that the many of those left behind to face the difficulties after 1845 would have received assistance from abroad. Relating the estimated number of pre-Famine emigrants to the fact that there were a total of 53,919 families residing in Donegal in 1841, we can safely assume that practically every household in the county would have had at least one close relative in the United States or elsewhere.[155] The success and prosperity of those who had departed would unquestionably have meant that they were in a position to afford monetary aid to their families from afar and, as we shall see in Chapter 5, there is fairly definitive evidence that assistance from the New World played a crucial role in the relief of Famine distress.[156]

[155] *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841*, H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, p. 423

[156] See Chapter 5, Section 5.5

2.12. SEASONAL MIGRATION

As well as high levels of emigration, a further crucial element of pre-Famine population movement in Donegal is the issue of seasonal migration. Within the county itself, there was a strong tradition of harvest migration from the west and north of the county to the area known as the 'Lagan'. Described in evidence to the *Irish Folklore Commission* as '200 square miles of the best agricultural land in Europe', the core of the area lies between Letterkenny and Derry, along the eastern county boundary.[157] Delineating the extent of the zone in terms of baronial or parish boundaries is an impossible task. Broadly speaking, the nucleus of the 'Lagan' region stretches from the parish of Burt in south Inishowen to Clonleigh parish in Raphoe, or in terms of Poor Law union, from mid-Londonderry south through the bulk of Strabane. This rich agricultural area traditionally provided much-needed seasonal employment for the younger members of poor western families who were hired as farm or domestic workers for part of the year.[158]

Workers were recruited at the hiring fairs which took place at dates which coincided with the large bi-annual fairs in May and November. The largest of the Donegal fairs was the Letterkenny fair, or Rabbles, which took place on the Fridays after May 12th and November 12th. It was at Letterkenny, along with the other principal regional fairs at Derry, Omagh and Strabane, that the majority of seasonal migrants to the Lagan found employment.[159] Older men were hired as farm hands whose duties were chiefly related to harvest work in cutting corn and pulling flax. For the younger workers, employment in the Lagan served as an apprenticeship in farm labour which would be essential in future careers as seasonal migrant labourers to Scotland. It is this link with Scotland which may have proved vital in allowing labourers to earn enough to survive the coming Famine.

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[157] O'Dowd, A. (1995), 'Seasonal Migration to the Lagan and Scotland' in, Nolan, W., Ronayne, L. & Dunlevy, M., *Donegal: History and Society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county,* p. 632; *Irish Folklore Commission,* questionnaire on *Seasonal Workers*, I.F.C. Q80/ Donegal 10, Portnoo

[158] O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), *The Estate System of Landholding in County Donegal, 1830 to 1923: a geographical analysis* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 43

[159] For further information on Donegal hiring fairs see: O'Dowd, A. (1995), 'Seasonal Migration to the Lagan and Scotland' in, Nolan, W., Ronayne, L. & Dunlevy, M., *Donegal: History and Society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county,* pp. 625-648

The early decades of the nineteenth century were characterised by a growing demand for agricultural labour in Britain at a time when employment opportunities in Ireland were on the decline. The harvest season in Scotland and England was a period of acute shortages in labour and outside sources had to be resorted to. One way of supplementing the permanent labourers was to employ local paupers, who, besides not being noted for their efficiency and good conduct, were a further financial liability in that they would be thrown back on the local poor rate upon termination of their employment.[160] A decidedly more attractive alternative was facilitated by the development of a regular steamship service between Ireland and Britain by 1821, which served as a 'floating bridge' for Irish seasonal workers.[161] Fares to Britain varied depending on the different steamship companies but were generally between 2*s.* 6*d.* and 12*s.* 6*d.*[162] By 1836, four steam vessels served the route from Derry to Glasgow at a cost of only three to four shillings for deck passengers.[163] It was by this route that large numbers of Donegal labourers reached Scotland in a quest to supplement their earnings through harvest work by the 1830s.

While summer wages in Ireland averaged about 10*d.* a day, the migrant labourer in Scotland or England could expect to return with around £5 to £8 for six to eight weeks work, depending on the district and the weather.[164] Given that the majority of seasonal migrants would have been surviving at a subsistence level in Ireland, such an injection of cash was crucial in meeting rental obligations since the wages earned in Britain would almost cover the average cottier's rent for the year. Most conveniently, the labourers existence in Ireland was based on the omnipresent potato, a crop which would have been planted quite early, allowing those who were married to migrate in the knowledge that their families would survive until their return. Such a situation is clearly illustrated in evidence to the *Poor Inquiry* of 1835, where the vast majority of

[160] Hasbach, W. (1908), *History of the English Agricultural Labourer,* p. 192
[161] *Third report from the select committee on emigration from the United Kingdom,* H.C.1826-7[237], v., p. 675
[162] *Second report of the commissioners appointed to consider and recommend a general system of railways for Ireland, 1838,* H.C. 1837-8[553], xxxv, p. 79
[163] Johnson, J.H. (1960), 'Population Movements in County Derry During a Pre-Famine Year' in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy,* Vol. 60, Sec. C., p. 156-7
[164] Kerr, B.M. (1943), 'Irish Seasonal Migration to Great Britain, 1800-38' in, *Irish Historical Studies,* Vol. III, p. 369; p. 377

Donegal respondents refer to wives and families being 'supported by the potatoes their husbands have planted'.[165]

Determining the actual numbers of seasonal migrants in the 1830s is quite a difficult task owing to the absence of accurate and reliable data. Kerr estimates that around 12,000 harvesters left Ireland in 1834, about 2,500-3,000 of whom crossed from Derry to Glasgow.[166] An Inquiry in 1837 reported that some 10,645 seasonal labourers came to Great Britain from Ireland in the months of July, August and September of that year.[167] Both figures are likely to be underestimates of the true movement considering that some steamship companies refused to provide passenger data. While ascertaining the exact numbers of migrants involved is not a viable proposition, it is possible to identify broad regional trends of seasonal movement from different parts of Ireland. Johnson's analysis of evidence to the Poor Inquiry in 1834-5 reveals defined patterns of seasonal migration from the north and west of the country, while the labourers to the east and south would appear to have had less of a propensity or a need to leave Ireland in search of work (See Fig. 2.42). It would appear that many migrants in these areas would have found work at destinations within Ireland. A south-west to east movement of labour in the summer months is the most likely to have been the migratory pattern, with workers from Kerry, for example, finding employment in the Golden Vale of Limerick and further east in Wexford, where the grain harvest required additional labour in the late summer. On the return journey, many of the labourers would have found work digging potatoes along their route home, thereby completing a full circle of work and travel throughout the summer months.[168]

In Donegal, however, seasonal migration to Britain was of significantly more importance than internal migration, with only 2.9 per cent of the population migrating

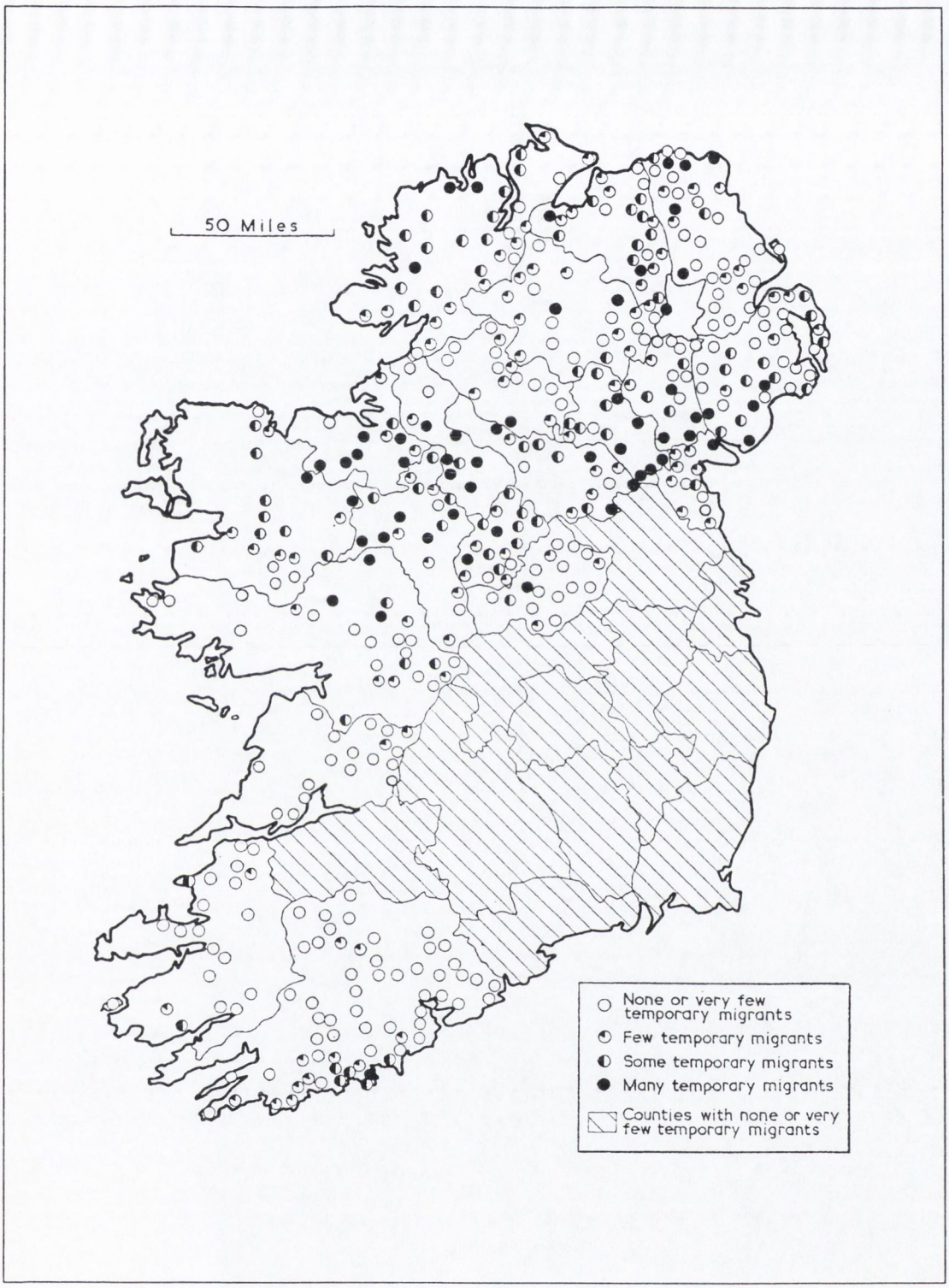
[165] *First report from his majesty's commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland, with appendix A and supplement,* H.C. 1835[369], xxxii, pt. i, pp. 1127-1144. Eg. is from Lettermacaward, p. 1130

[166] Kerr, B.M. (1943), 'Irish Seasonal Migration to Great Britain, 1800-38' in, *Irish Historical Studies,* Vol. III, p. 372

[167] *Second report of the commissioners appointed to consider and recommend a general system of railways for Ireland, 1838,* H.C. 1837-8[553], xxxv, p. 90

[168] Johnson, J.H. (1967), 'Harvest Migration from Nineteenth-Century Ireland' in, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* No. 41, p. 102-3; Gives the example of Newmarket in Co. Cork, where large numbers of men passed through on their way to the grain harvest in Wexford and dug potatoes on the return journey.

Fig. 2.42. Irish labourers temporarily employed in Britain, c. 1834



Source: Johnson, J.H. (1967), 'Harvest Migration from Nineteenth-Century Ireland' in, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* No. 41, p. 100

to other counties in Ireland, compared with an average of 5.8 per cent in Leinster and Munster counties in 1841.[169] Determining the origins of migrants to Scotland from within Donegal is a difficult task. The only means of arriving at a rough determination of variation in the numbers of seasonal migrants from various parts of Donegal is by analysis of evidence given to the Poor Inquiry in 1834. By using the figures recorded in answer to a question relating to the numbers of labourers in individual parishes who travelled to Britain in search of seasonal work, we arrive at the result mapped in Fig. 2.43. Given the highly subjective nature of responses to the Inquiry, this should be taken only as a very tentative reconstruction of the regional variation in the number of such workers in Donegal. The results do appear, however, to be indicative of greater numbers of seasonal migrants from the west of the county, most particularly from parishes within Milford, Dunfanaghy and Letterkenny Poor Law unions, along with the northern portion of Glenties.

Such a situation is confirmed to some extent by the respondents to the *Devon Commission* in 1844. Comments relating to migration to Britain are confined exclusively to western parts of the county. John O'Donnell, commenting on the parish of Inishkeel in Glenties Union, referred to the fact that 'they [labourers and small farmers] go much from that part of the country to England and Scotland'.[170] Based on the 1834 evidence, a figure of 83 per thousand of labouring population was calculated for Inishkeel. Further north, J.V. Stewart testified to great numbers of labourers migrating to Scotland seasonally from Letterkenny Union, stating: 'I have known them to go to the same farmers for eight or ten years'.[171] Calculations based on the 1834 returns for the parishes of Leck and Aughnish in Letterkenny Union yield figures of 97 and 66 seasonal migrants per thousand of labouring population respectively.[172] Several other *Devon Commission* commentators allude to the tradition of labourers and small farmers in Dunfanaghy, Milford and Letterkenny migrating seasonally to Scotland and England. The *Ordnance Survey Memoirs* also provide an insight into seasonal migration from Donegal. In Desertegney parish, for

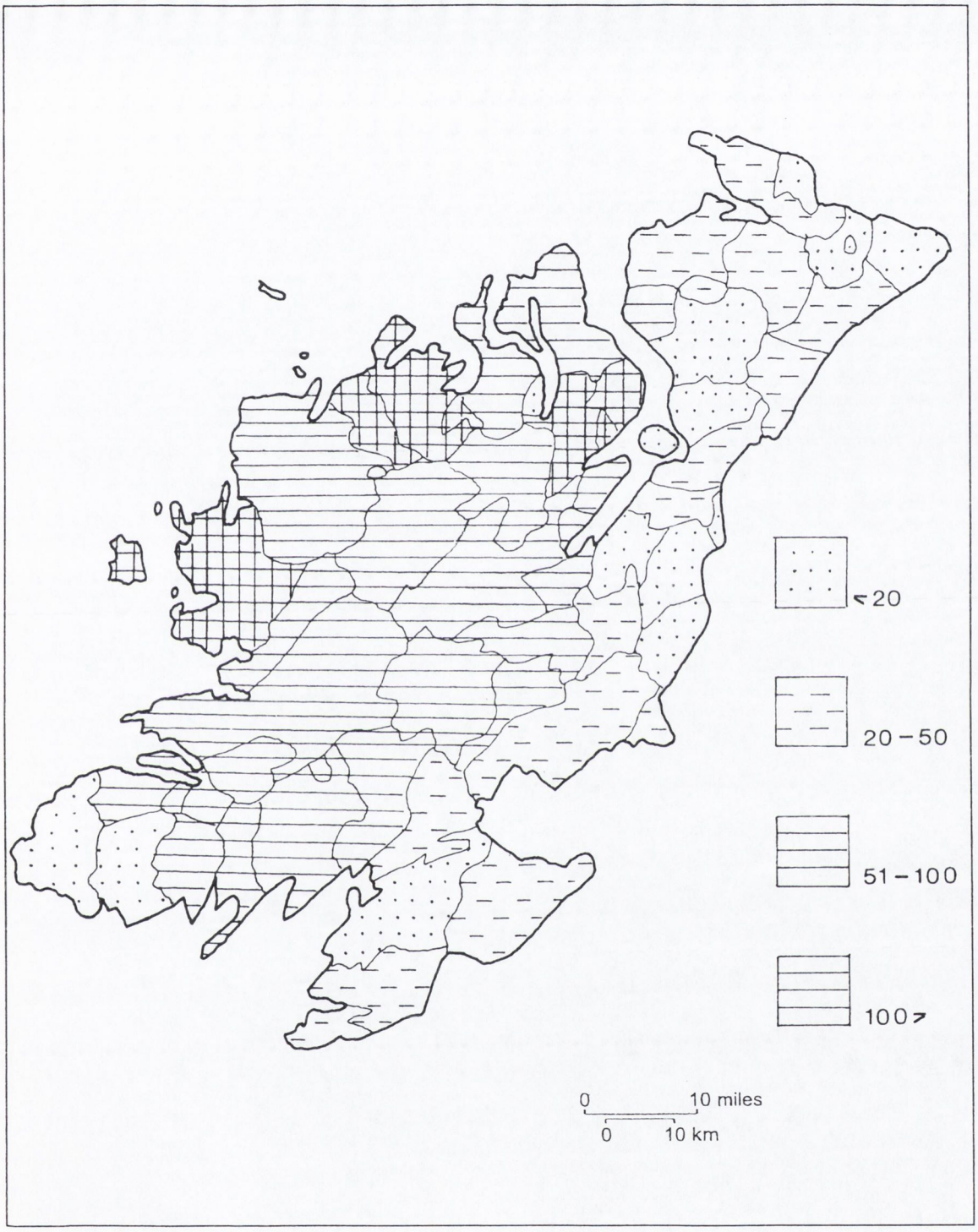
[169] *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 446-47

[170] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt ii, H.C. 1845[672], xx, p. 149

[171] ibid., pt i, H.C. 1845, xix, p. 748

[172] *First report from his majesty's commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland, with appendix A and supplement,* H.C. 1835[369], xxxii, pt. i, pp. 1126-1144

Fig. 2.43. Numbers per thousand of population classified as being 'chiefly dependant on their own manual labour' estimated to have migrated seasonally to Scotland or England from Donegal, c. 1834



Source: *First report from his majesty's commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland, with appendix B and supplement,* H.C. 1835[369], xxxii, pt. ii, pp. 1126-1144

example, Lieutenant Lancey reported that 'many go to England and Scotland for the harvest and some to the Scotch spinning and carding factories. Only a part of the household leaves home and the others plant the family potatoes for the winter's support'.[173]

The 1841 Census provides us with the first reasonably accurate assessment of the numbers of seasonal migrants to Britain. The total number of migrants leaving Ireland on vessels bound for Britain between May 13th and August 31st was calculated to be 57,651.[174] Freeman has pointed out that this figure may be an underestimate since it is unlikely that the enumerators managed to register all migrants.[175] However, as a means of assessing regional variation in seasonal migration from Ireland this data is invaluable. Dublin, Drogheda and Londonderry were the three most popular points of departure and of the 11,317 who left through the port at Derry, 4,815 of them originated in Donegal (see Fig. 2.44). Of these, about 94 per cent were male, the vast majority of whom are likely to have been harvest workers bound for Scotland. In fact, over 98 per cent of those who left Derry disembarked at Glasgow, representing about a quarter of the total migrants to the city from Ireland in the summer of 1841. From Glasgow, it is likely that the workers would have travelled to Berwick and Roxburgh, where the harvest was earliest and then north-west through the Valley of Forth to the southern borders of Fifeshire.[176] The harvesters generally travelled and worked under a leader who was experienced in seasonal labour in Scotland and would bargain with the farmers for the rate of wages to be paid to the group.[177] At the end of the harvest season, the migrants returned to Donegal with their most important earnings of the year in their pockets.

[173] Day, A. & Mc Williams, P. eds. (1997), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland,* Vol. 38, Parishes of County Donegal I, 1833-5, North-East Donegal, p. 27

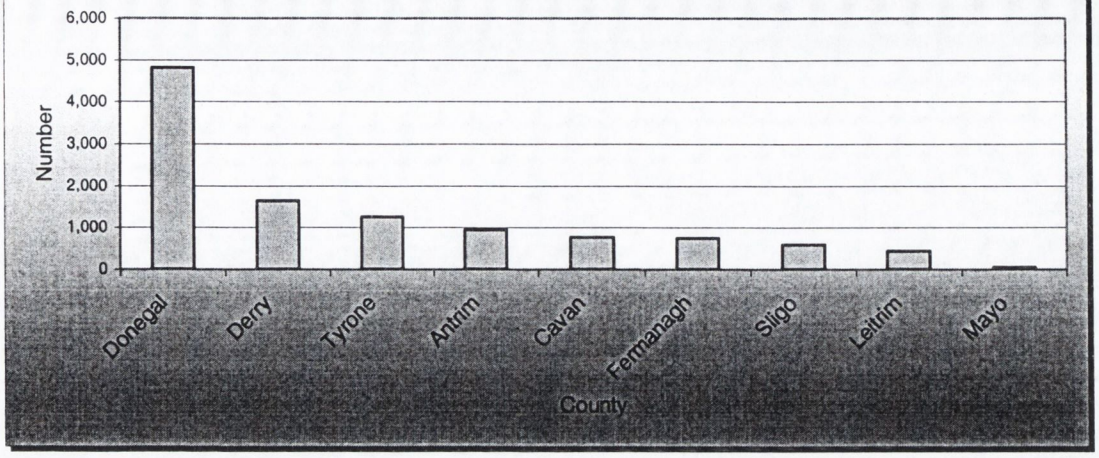
[174] *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 562-3

[175] Freeman, T.W. (1957), *Pre-Famine Ireland: a Study in Historical Geography,* p. 39

[176] O'Dowd, A. (1995), 'Seasonal Migration to the Lagan and Scotland' in, Nolan, W., Ronayne, L. & Dunlevy, M., *Donegal: History and Society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county,* p. 642

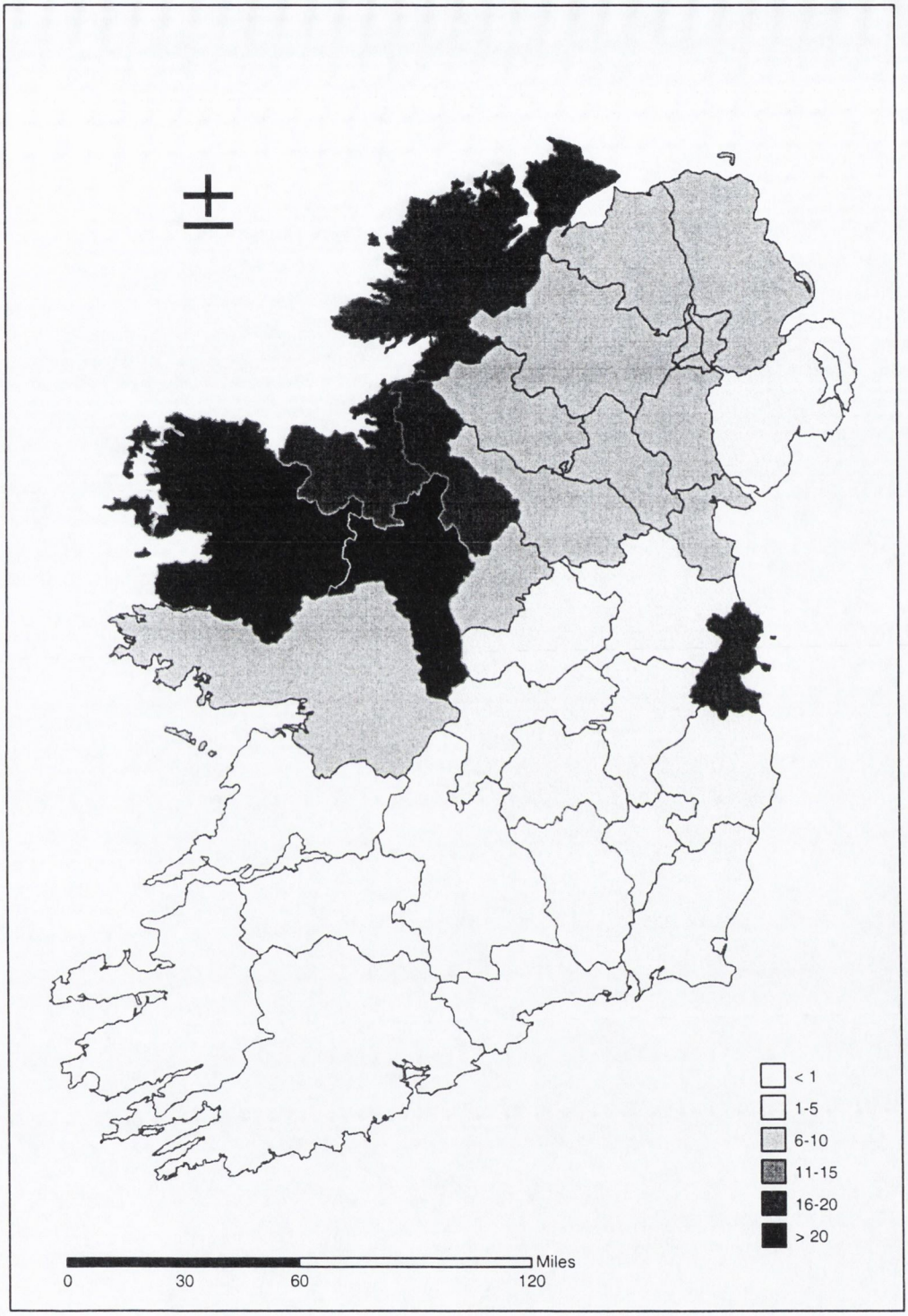
[177] Kerr, B.M. (1943), 'Irish Seasonal Migration to Great Britain, 1800-38' in, *Irish Historical Studies,* Vol. III, p. 377-8; *Report from the Select Committee on the Laws Relating to Irish and Scotch Vagrants,* H.C. 1828[513], p. 10

Fig. 2.44. Origins of persons boarding vessels at Derry port in the summer of 1841



Donegal's position in the national context is highlighted in Fig. 2.45, overleaf. The main concentration of seasonal migrants is to the north-west of the country, with Mayo (27 migrants per 1000 of population) and Roscommon (21 per 1000) being the principal contributors. Next in line is Leitrim (18 per 1000), followed by Sligo and Donegal (17 per 1000). While these figures do not appear particularly high, it is important to bear in mind that they relate to the entire population. The 1841 Census figure classifies 40,306 persons as being 'chiefly dependant on their own manual labour' in Donegal. By correlating this with the seasonal migration figures it would appear that about 12 per cent of the labourers and smallholders worked in Scotland during the harvest of 1841. For quite a large number of Donegal people, particularly in the more marginal western areas of the county, this link with Scotland played a crucial role in subsisting from year to year. Lord George Hill highlights the importance of the tradition in the parish of Tullaghobegley in Dunfanaghy union speaking of 'the young men [who] go in great numbers to the harvest in Scotland' in the absence of constant employment at home. It is reasonable to assume that this custom would have continued on at least the same scale after 1845 and the 'great numbers' bringing wages home to their distressed families is likely to have proved absolutely vital to the survival of many in Dunfanaghy and throughout much of west Donegal during the Famine years.

Fig. 2.45. Persons per thousand of population who emigrated to Great Britain between May 13th and August 31st 1841



Source: *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841*, H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 562-3

2.13. CONCLUSION

Coming to a clear determination of Donegal's prospects on the eve of the Great Famine is an exercise which involves two important questions. The first is the overall position of the county in the national context. The second is an assessment of the regional vulnerabilities and strengths of different areas within the county itself in terms of the socio-economic dynamics discussed earlier. We have seen in Chapter 1 that Famine mortality in Donegal as a whole was extremely low in the national context and utterly incomparable to the sort of levels recorded in all other counties along the west coast. Undoubtedly, this phenomenon has inextricable links with the pre-Famine geographies of society and economy in the county, though it would be presumptuous to come to any definitive conclusions in relation to this connection without first examining the geography of the Famine itself. A full analysis of the apparent advantages of the county in relation to the others along the west coast of Ireland will, therefore, be offered in Chapter 7, when it becomes possible to draw the strings of our discussion of pre-Famine Donegal through the course of the crisis itself and onward to attempt to answer the question of low excess mortality much more comprehensively.[178]

For the moment, it is sufficient to note the fact that Donegal should not be included in any generalisations relating to the underdevelopment and poverty of the west in the years leading up to the Famine. As we have seen, there are indications of a greater level of improvement in agriculture in the county compared to much of the west coast, while there is irrefutable evidence of a lower dependency on agriculture, a superior housing standard, a higher level of literacy and a lower percentage of the population employed as labourers. In addition, employment prospects were good and labourers wages were higher, while women's supplementation of family income played a more important role in Donegal than elsewhere in the west. The oft-cited line drawn from Derry to Cork which purports to divide the country in terms of a socio-economically backward west and a more developed east and north-east has been shown here to be one which wavers considerably in relation to Donegal.

[178] See Chapter 7, Section 7.2

The reasons for this relative prosperity (or lower poverty) in relation to much of the west coast of Ireland becomes apparent upon examination of the regional dimensions of pre-Famine society and economy within the county itself. In most instances, the eastern region of the 'Lagan' and indeed almost all of the area covered by the baronies of Raphoe and West Inishowen, have the effect of 'driving up' the county statistics for such factors as quality of housing, employment, literacy levels, emigration and agricultural productivity and development. It is reasonable to assume that this part of Donegal comprising of the Poor Law unions of Londonderry, Strabane and eastern portions of Stranorlar and Letterkenny would be the area least likely to bear the full brunt of the crisis after 1845. The shape and scale of government relief required in this region during the Famine would, therefore, be likely to differ from that needed in many western parts of the county. Inishowen union to the north and Ballyshannon to the south seem to fit somewhere between east and west Donegal in terms of pre-Famine development and the prospects for their respective populations would thus appear better than in unions to the extreme west, though far northern coastal areas of Inishowen were very poor also. Again, a more comprehensive treatment of regional variation within Donegal is carried out in Chapter 7, when the issue of how different areas fared during the Famine is related back to the pre-Famine dynamics discussed here.[179]

Finally, we turn to west Donegal and the unions of Glenties, Dunfanaghy and Milford in particular. In contrast to much of the eastern part of the county, these areas had more in common with the rest of the west of Ireland. Population growth and density was high, poverty was rife, employment prospects poor, illiteracy levels high, housing conditions wretched and agricultural development was slow. However, both fishing and seasonal migration were likely to have played a significantly more important role in west Donegal than in the majority of areas in the country which were most at risk after 1845. Fishing as a source of employment and more crucially as a source of sustenance following successive failures of the potato crop, could prove vital in the subsistence of the population during times of food shortage. The strong tradition of seasonal migration to the Lagan and to Scotland was of particular

[179] See Chapter 7, Section 7.2

significance in Dunfanaghy and Milford and the employment opportunities offered to the labouring populations of these unions during the Famine provided another potential conduit of relief. In addition, the large number of resident proprietors in Dunfanaghy in particular could offer similar advantages in terms of employment, as well as involving themselves directly in the local relief efforts. In terms of all of the factors discussed in this chapter, it was Glenties alone which fitted most closely the mould of many western parts of Ireland. Central to the general backwardness of the area was the absence of any resident landowners and a resultant lack of fundamental stimulus to development. In the context of the Famine itself, the fact that there were no resident proprietors had not only precipitated a situation where the population was highly vulnerable to the crisis, it also meant that a crucial element in the local relief effort was missing. The general pre-Famine difficulties of Glenties are drawn together in a report from George Nicholls, in which he refers to clusters of 'hovels' with an 'excessive population' who:

> ... admitted they were too numerous – too thick upon the land, and that, as one of them declared, they were eating each others heads off; but what could they do – there was no employment for the young people, or relief for the aged and infirm, nor opportunities for removing their surplus population to some more eligible spot; they could only, therefore, live on, hoping, as they said, that times might mend.[180]

With the initial appearance of potato blight in the late autumn of 1845 came confirmation that the cottiers understanding of their desperate plight was proven to be all too accurate and that the times were far from on the mend.

[180] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt i, H.C. 1845, xix, p. 151, evidence of James Donleavy (which quotes Nicholls)

CHAPTER THREE

TOWARDS THE PRECIPICE: PARTIAL POTATO FAILURE AND RESPONSE, 1845-6

3.1. POTATO BLIGHT STRIKES

The first report of the appearance in Ireland of the fungal disease *phytophtora infestans*, or potato blight, came courtesy of the *Dublin Evening Post*, in a brief paragraph of September 6th 1845.[1] From such inconspicuous beginnings, the subject would come to dominate the national and local media for several years to come. The disease, which is strongly suspected to have originated in the eastern United States, was first noticed in the Courtrai area of Belguim in late June 1845 and by mid-July it had spread to parts of the Netherlands and France. A month later, the blight had extended to north-west France and southern England, reaching Ireland by the beginning of September.[2]

At this early stage there was a notable absence of alarm in press reports relating to the disease, while public reaction was similarly restrained. The potato crop as a whole was estimated to have been some 6 per cent larger than the previous year and the initial deficiencies caused by blight were not immediately visible.[3] Furthermore, an unusually abundant oat crop diverted attention away from any potential defect in the potato crop. The *Londonderry Journal* referred to the 'immense supply of oats' at Strabane market in early October, while the grain market in Derry and Donegal was said to be in an 'excited state'.[4] It was only towards the end of October that some idea of the extent of the potato blight became known with the digging of the 'late' crop throughout the country. The relative calm of previous weeks gave way to a mass of letters reporting the attack of the 'potato murrain' in various localities, prompting the editor of the *Freeman's Journal* to report that by late November 'one-half of the potato crop [had] been already lost as human food'.[5]

While this ominous report was almost certainly an overestimation of the extent of the crop loss, there is considerable evidence suggesting quite a severe potato failure in

[1] Bourke, P.M.A. (1993), *'The Visitation of God'? The Potato and the Great Irish Famine*, p. 144
[2] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 41; Bourke, P.M.A. (1993), *'The Visitation of God'? The Potato and the Great Irish Famine*, p. 141-43; Woodham-Smith, C. (1962), *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-9*, pp. 94-5
[3] *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland*, H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 5
[4] *Londonderry Journal*, October 22nd 1845
[5] *Freeman's Journal*, December 1st 1845

this first year of the Famine. P.M.A. Bourke estimates that the mean loss by tuber rot was some 40 per cent in a crop which had yielded well, so that the production of sound potatoes was between a quarter and a third below normal.[6] The only available data which can be used to determine the regional impact of the blight in Ireland are constabulary returns which estimated the proportion of the crop lost in the majority of electoral divisions in Ireland. However, the presentation of these returns is in a format which merely lists the number of electoral divisions in each county that had crop losses ranging from one tenth to nine tenths of the total planted.[7] The only remotely satisfactory method of assessing the regional variation in damage as a result of the blight is presented in Fig. 3.1 which maps the percentage of electoral divisions in each county in which the crop loss was estimated by the constabulary to have exceeded one third of the total crop by the end of 1845.

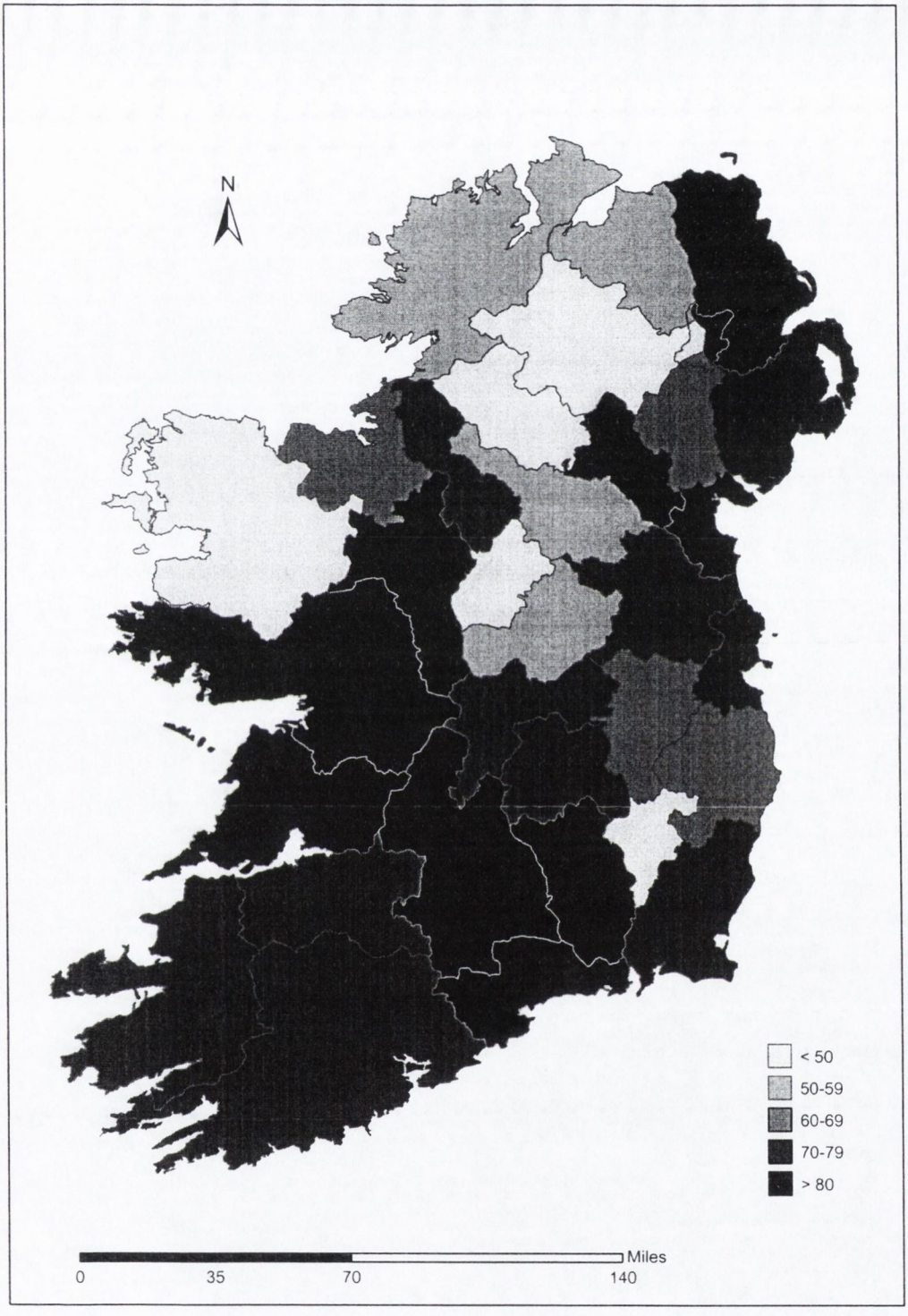
Fig 3.1 does not purport to be an accurate measure of the actual crop loss but does provide a reasonably good indication of the geography of blight impact. It would appear that the worst affected counties lay in a band running north-west from Waterford to Galway and Roscommon, in which over 80 per cent of electoral divisions recorded crop losses of over a third. The ravages of the potato blight are also evident in a north-eastern zone consisting of Antrim, Louth and Monaghan, where similarly severe failures seem to have occurred. In general, much of the remainder of Leinster and Munster was impinged upon to a lesser extent, with the majority of counties lying in the 60-69 and 70-79 per cent ranges. Moving toward the north-west, there is a noticeable drop in the proportions of electoral divisions which had a crop failure rate of over one third, most noticeably in Tyrone and Fermanagh, both of which had a majority of divisions where blight struck only one tenth of the crop.[8] On the basis of the evidence in these constabulary reports, it would appear that Donegal had escaped any grave damage to its overall crop by the end of 1845, with around 50 per cent of divisions recording estimated losses of under a third. In fact, Donegal was one of only four counties in which there were no reports of blight

[6] Bourke, P.M.A. (1993), *'The Visitation of God'? The Potato and the Great Irish Famine,* pp. 144-5

[7] See: *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland,* H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 36

[8] There is some doubt in relation to the situation in Cos. Mayo, Westmeath, Cavan and King's, all of which have incomplete returns; Calculations are based on the proportion of electoral divisions for which estimates were made, rather than the total number of electoral divisions in these counties. There are no returns for Co. Carlow.

Fig. 3.1. Percentage of electoral divisions in each county in which the potato crop loss exceeded one third of the total crop in 1845



* Note: no returns for Co. Carlow, partial returns only for Mayo, Offaly, Cavan & Westmeath
** Note: Figures used are for total number of electoral divisions for which there were returns
Source: *Correspondence Explanatory of the Measures Adopted by Her Majesty's Government for the Relief of Distress Arising from the Failure of the Potato Crop in Ireland,* H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 36

whatsoever in some divisions, while around a quarter of all divisions recorded losses of under 20 per cent.[9]

Reports of the progress of the blight in the local press in Donegal generally followed the same pattern as the national media. Initially positive 'intelligence' from the *Londonderry Journal,* referring to fact that the disease had 'not reached this quarter' by late September[10], gave way to deepening despair by mid-October:

> We regret to say that, since our last, we have received accounts of this alarming disease prevailing to a greater extent than we had supposed.... In various parts of Ennishowen, the loss which it has caused is very great. Here the infected crop is in the ground there is no other mode of dealing with the disease than immediately digging up the tubers, and making the most of those which are not utterly unsound.[11]

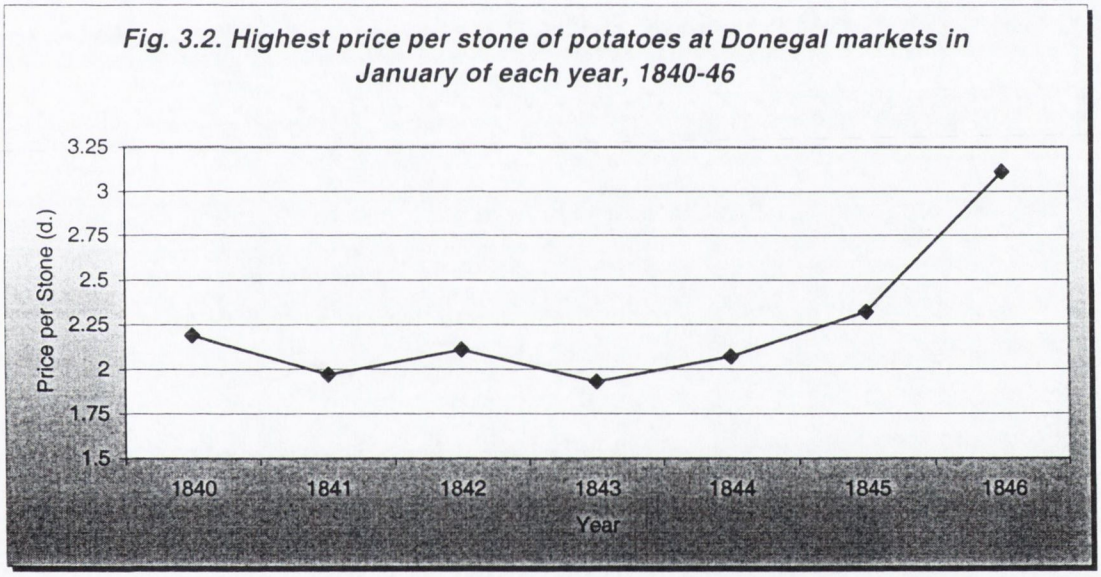
To the south-west of the county in Glenties union, the Reverend Joseph Welsh, Rector of Killaghtee, voiced his growing concern at the spread of the disease, referring to the blight being 'most lamentably prevalent' in the parish.[12] Further south in Ballyshannon union we find little evidence of the blight having taken hold to any great extent by the end of October, leading the *Ballyshannon Herald* to state that there was 'scarcely any appearance of disease in the potatoes in this locality'.[13] However, a week later on November 7th the same paper reported that a large number of potatoes, which had originally appeared healthy, were discovered to be 'in a state of decay' only four days after being pitted.

The encroachment of the disease on large tracts of land planted in potatoes, as well as the associated difficulty of apparently sound potatoes rotting away into a condition which made them unfit for human consumption was bound to have had an effect on a population which relied heavily on the crop for food. In addition, the infestation of the fungus had a marked effect on the market price of potatoes in Donegal. Fig. 3.2 graphs the highest price per stone of potatoes at 22 markets in the county for the week

[9] *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland,* H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 36
[10] *Londonderry Journal,* September 30th 1845
[11] ibid., October 15th 1845
[12] Rlf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), II/2a/5047, Revd Joseph Welsh, Rector, Killaghtee, October 20th 1845
[13] *Ballyshannon Herald,* October 31st 1845

ending January 24th in each year from 1840 to 1846. The impact of the blight becomes immediately apparent when comparing the average market price of January 1845 with the corresponding figure for 1846. While potatoes had sold at a cost of between about 2*d.* and 2¼*d.* per stone in each of the years up to 1845, the sharp rise to an average of just over 3*d.* per stone can only be attributed to a considerable decline in the supply of potatoes to market in the county in the winter of 1845-6. However, while such an increase is certainly significant, it would appear that Donegal did not suffer as badly as the majority of counties in Ireland. In Co. Kerry, for example, the market price of potatoes in Tralee rose from about 4*d.* to over 6½*d.* per stone in the same one year period, while in Ballymacarrett, Co. Down, the usual potato price of around 2½*d.* to 3*d.* had spiralled by over 100 per cent to some 7d. per stone by April 1846.[14]

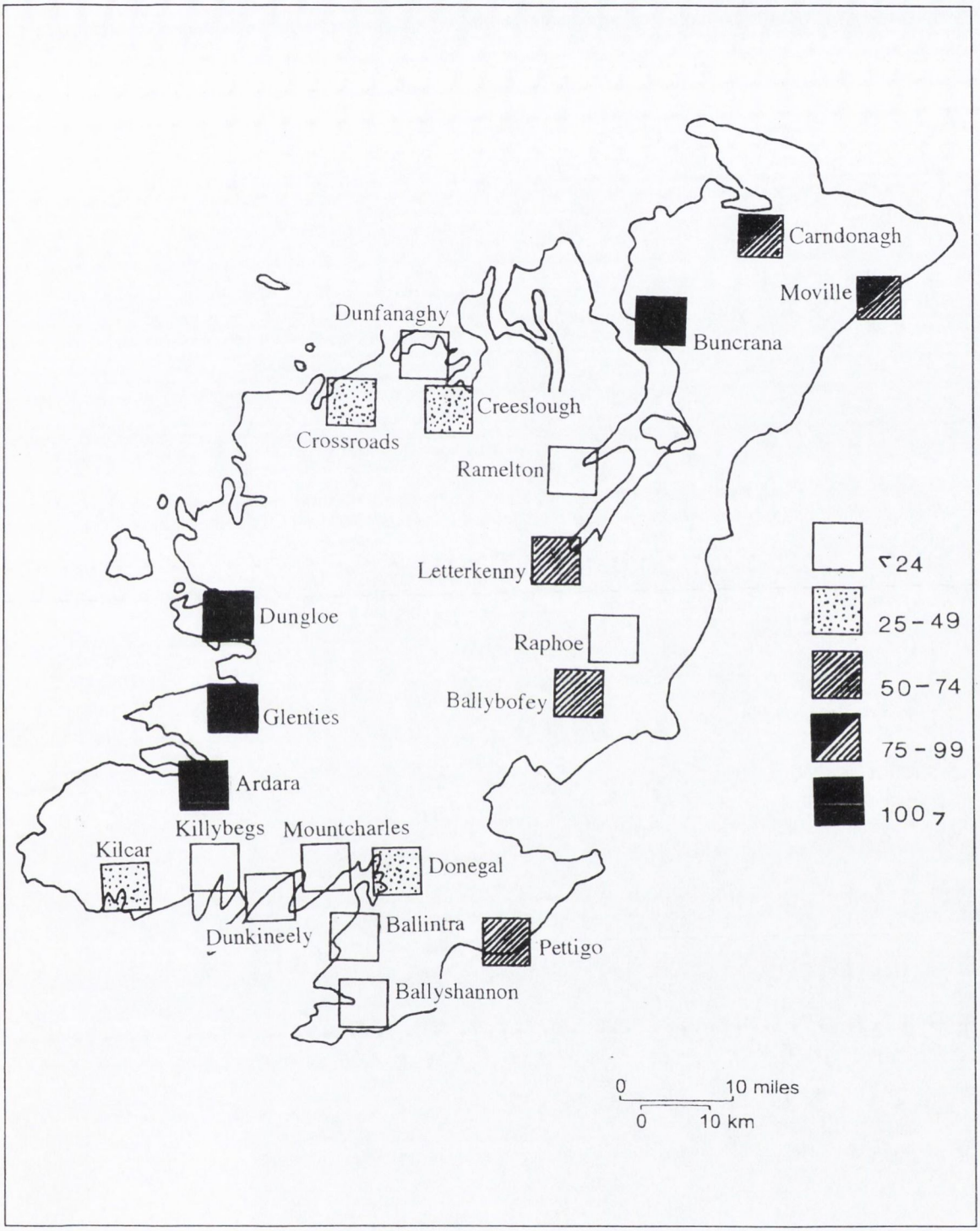
Fig. 3.2. Highest price per stone of potatoes at Donegal markets in January of each year, 1840-46



Within Donegal, we find quite pronounced variation in the price rise in different markets throughout the county. By mapping the 22 market locations for which there are returns (see Fig. 3.3.), it is possible to hypothesise on the severity of the blight in different parts of the county. This approach should be treated with some caution as the relationship between market price and the extent of crop failure is one which is somewhat tenuous. It is possible that prices may have remained steady in some areas due to the hasty offloading of dug potatoes by concerned farmers who wished to sell

[14] Foley, K. (1997), *Kerry During the Great Famine, 1845-52* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 63; Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), p. 11

Fig. 3.3. Percentage price increase for potatoes at markets in Donegal, January 1845 to January 1846



Source: *A Return of the Highest Price of Potatoes in the Various Market Towns in Ireland per Bushel or Stone, in the Week Ending the 24th day of January for the Last Seven Years, as well as they can be ascertained,* H.C. 1846[110], xxxvii, p. 490-91

their crop before it deteriorated. On the basis of the market returns for January 1846, it would appear that the western coastal region of Glenties union was the worst affected part of Donegal, with markets at Ardara, Glenties and Dunglow all experiencing price increases of 100 per cent or over when compared to the same date in 1845. In a letter dated January 14th 1846, Richard Nesbitt of Ardara had written to the Secretary of the Relief Commission, John P. Kennedy, to inform him that the 'symptoms of the disease [were] progressing' in his locality.[15] The increase in price of potatoes from 1½*d.* per stone in every year from 1840 to 1845 to a high of 3*d.* per stone at Ardara market only ten days after Nesbitt's communication is unlikely to be coincidental.[16]

Further north in Dunfanaghy union, the markets at Crossroads and Creeslough witnessed fairly minimal increases, while Dunfanaghy town was one of only four markets in the county in which the 1846 price per stone was the same as the cost a year earlier. The attack of the blight in Inishowen, highlighted by the *Londonderry Journal* in October 1845[17], appears to have translated into pronounced inflation in the market price of the crop by January 1846. In Buncrana, the cost per stone rose from 2*d.* to 4*d.*, while the Cardonagh and Moville markets bear further testimony to the severe crop loss on the peninsula, with respective increases of 75 per cent and 80 per cent in January potato prices in the period 1845 to 1846.

Markets to the extreme south-west of Donegal do not seem to have been as severely affected, with five of the seven from Ballyshannon west to Kilcar charting price increases of under 25 per cent. However, there is little contemporary testimony pointing towards any significant 'escape' from the blight in this southern coastal region. The explanation for the low market price in January may lie in the fact that the full impact of the disease would appear to have been felt at a later date in this area than elsewhere in the county. As late as November 1845, the Inspecting Commander of the Coastguard at Killybegs reported that he had seen '... 10 tons of potatoes

[15] Rlf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), II/2a/1327, Richard W. Nesbitt to Secretary Kennedy, January 14th 1846

[16] *A return of the highest price of potatoes in the various market towns in Ireland per bushel or stone, in the week ending the 24th day of January for the last seven years, as well as they can be ascertained,* H.C. 1846[110], xxxvii, p. 490

[17] See footnote 11 above, *Londonderry Journal,* October 15th 1845

examined, and there was not 20 lbs of bad ones among them'.[18] By January 1846, the fate of this apparently sound crop was elucidated most alarmingly by Captain Alexander Browne of Killybegs who wrote that he had 'not a sound potato out of 30 barrels; they rot so bad that they sickened the cows and the pony so much that they would not eat their hay'.[19]

There are few contemporary reports of any extensive damage to the potato crop in eastern parts of Donegal and the relatively low increases in market prices at Raphoe and Ballybofey go some way toward confirming that the crop was reasonably sound (See Fig. 3.3.). An account in the *Ballyshannon Herald* of a farmer near Stranorlar who opened his potato pits to find his stored crop 'quite rotten' by November 1845 is atypical of the generally healthy situation referred to by the majority of commentators.[20] When the Stranorlar Poor Law guardians met on November 22nd to consider the propriety of purchasing a quantity of oatmeal for the relief of the poor, they found that the eight men who they had employed to enquire into the state of the crop throughout the union had returned with remarkably good reports. Due to the fact that 'the injury sustained by the potato crop from disease, in [the] union, was very trifling indeed', it was decided not to go ahead with the purchase of the aforementioned oatmeal.[21]

Such reports give some idea of the regional dynamics of the crop failure within Donegal, though the precise extent of the blight in different parts of the county is impossible to ascertain, even with the help of market price returns. What can be said with some certainty, however, is that the county as a whole would appear to have been amongst those in which this initial onslaught of the disease was least severe. Furthermore, the extent of the blight in the whole country in 1845 would prove to be considerably less widespread than in later years of the Famine. The other key advantage to Ireland in 1845 compared with the following two years was that reports relating to the extent of the blight tended to be overestimates. The government's own scientific commissioners held the view that the disease had infected at least half the

[18] Rlf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), II/2a/154, Lieutenant Bates, Coastguard, Killybegs to Sir James Dombrain, November 2nd 1845
[19] ibid., Alexander Browne to Sir James Dombrain, January 9th 1846
[20] *Ballyshannon Herald,* November 7th 1845
[21] ibid., December 5th 1845

potato crop and that even this was 'a low estimate'.[22] Both J.S. Donnelly and P.M.A. Bourke have suggested that such pessimism propelled Peel's government into a more determined counteraction than would otherwise have been the case.[23]

3.2 THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Along with pursuing various lines of inquiry into the progress of the disease in Ireland, Sir Robert Peel's government had already set the wheels of relief in motion before the full extent of the blight was known. The policy was fundamentally based around impermanent relief measures for what was viewed as a temporary crop failure and even as late as May 1846 it was still deemed unnecessary to apply anything other than 'a temporary remedy to a temporary, though widespread, calamity'.[24] It was felt that a three-pronged approach involving the distribution of imported meal, combined with a system of public works would suffice, with the third mechanism of an existing Poor Law workhouse network to be utilised as a last resort. The earliest measure adopted by Peel was the secret purchase of £100,000 worth of Indian corn and meal from the United States in November 1845.[25] At around the same time, a temporary relief commission was established to oversee the distribution of this meal and to coordinate the efforts of the large number of local relief committees which came into operation by the spring of 1846. Food depots began to be established throughout the country by February, the main depot to serve Donegal being at Sligo. In addition, a grant was made to the Board of Public Works in December 1845, though neither food nor employment through public works were to be made available until well into the spring of the following year.[26]

This strategy was designed to regulate Irish markets and prevent the withholding of food stocks by dealers waiting for price increases due to shortages. Of even more importance from the government's point of view, was the hope that such a course of

[22] *Copy of the report of Dr. Playfair and Mr. Lindley on the present state of the Irish potato crop and on the prospect of approaching scarcity (dated 15th November 1845),* H.C. 1846[28], xxxvii, p. 33
[23] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine,* p. 47; Bourke, P.M.A. (1993), *'The Visitation of God'? The Potato and the Great Irish Famine,* p. 146
[24] *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland,* H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 184, Sir James Graham to Lord Lieutenant, May 7th 1846
[25] ibid., p. 2
[26] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 38

action would force the Irish landlords into the provision of relief. The widely-held view that the landlords were the creators of conditions which exacerbated the difficulties associated with the crop failure[27] led to a firm resolution that state assistance should be auxiliary to the main thrust of relief measures as it was felt that 'the landlords and other ratepayers [were] the parties who [were] both legally and morally answerable for affording due relief to the destitute poor'.[28] Accordingly, the central relief commission was to provide government food supplies to local committees at cost price and the funds for purchase were to be raised through subscriptions, chiefly from local landowners. It was only in cases where local donations were insufficient to meet the cost of provisions that government intervention was sanctioned and grants were allowed to subsidise the voluntary contributions of the community.[29] By the end of February 1846, the official instructions for local relief committees had been drafted by Sir Randolph Routh, the Chairman of the Relief Commission.[30] These were forwarded to the constabulary, boards of guardians, magistrates and clergy throughout the country and formed the basis for the establishment and operation of a network of local relief committees who were to be the principal providers of relief in this first year of the Famine.

Under the recommendations of the 'Instructions', relief committees were to be organised under the direction of the county Lieutenant. The proposed membership was to consist of local magistrates, an officer of the Board of Works, Poor Law guardians, Coast Guard Officers, clergymen of all persuasions and any other 'active and intelligent gentlemen' deemed appropriate by the Lieutenant. The only guideline relating to the area for which individual committees were responsible was that they should service 'conveniently-sized relief districts' and in general the committees tended not to conform to any geographic or administrative boundaries.[31] Once up and running, the main function of the committees was to raise funds to be utilised in the

[27] See: Trevelyan, C. (1850), *The Irish Crisis;* Collison Black, R.D. (1960), *Economic Thought and the Irish Question, 1817-70*

[28] *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland,* H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 68, Trevelyan to Routh, January 26th 1846

[29] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine,* p. 49

[30] *Instructions to committees of relief districts, extracted from minutes of the proceedings of the commissioners appointed in reference to the apprehended scarcity,* H.C. 1846[171], xxxvii

[31] ibid., p. 2; Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52*, p. 44

purchase and distribution of the government's food imports. It was also suggested that members should provide and promote employment in their districts.

This local involvement in the relief effort was seen by the government as being essential in the prevention of abuses of the system and quite stringent guidelines were drawn up to ensure the efficient relief of those who were genuinely in difficulty. Central to this policy was the recommendation that the individual committees should obtain townland lists of relief applicants and draw up 'minute reports of the circumstances of each family'. It was on this basis that the allocation of tickets or certificates entitling the bearer to admission onto Public Works was made. Similarly strict conditions governed the direct assistance of the state in the relief effort. Every applicant for relief was required to complete a task of work assuming they were capable of carrying it out. Such employment was to be 'in prosecution of some public improvement... within or adjacent to the distressed locality' and payment was in the form of food, except where completely impracticable. It was only in cases where a destitute individual was incapable of a day's work, had no able-bodied relative to support them and for whom there was no room in the workhouse, that gratuitous relief was to be considered.[32]

Throughout the spring and early summer of 1846, relief committees were established in the majority of Irish counties in accordance with Routh's 'Instructions'. Some 650 were in operation by August 10th, with the main concentration of such groups occurring to the south and west of the country.[33] The midlands and east had a significantly lower number of relief committees, while Ulster had very few and counties Armagh, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone had none whatsoever. From the end of March to the beginning of August, the relief committees raised a total of £98,000 from local subscriptions, a sum which was complemented by a further £65,000 from the Lord Lieutenant *via* the Treasury coffers. Most of this money was raised by committees in the south and west of the country, particularly those in Cork, Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford. In counties Clare, Galway and Mayo, meanwhile, large numbers of fairly small committees were established and despite

[32] *Instructions to committees of relief districts, extracted from minutes of the proceedings of the commissioners appointed in reference to the apprehended scarcity,* H.C. 1846[171], xxxvii, pp. 1-2
[33] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine*

their lower level of fundraising, their overall activity would suggest quite severe food shortages in these areas.[34] The relatively healthy position of Donegal in relation to the rest of the west coast is reflected in the fact that only about a dozen local committees were in operation by the end of the summer of 1846. Of these, only three required additional finance from the government, testifying to the fact that local subscriptions were generally adequate in maintaining the numbers of destitute persons affected by the partial potato failure of 1845.

3.3. LOCAL COMMITTEE RESPONSE TO THE 1845 FAILURE

The most notable aspect of the local response to the potato failure of 1845 in Donegal is the relative inactivity of the relief committees in the county. While the operation of local committees generally followed the guidelines set out in Routh's 'Instructions', there is little evidence of the formation of any large central committees in 1845-6. Grant refers to the lack of strict organisational endeavour in relation to the establishment of local relief mechanisms in Donegal, noting that: 'there is no evidence of any central baronial arrangements, but simply the appointment of *ad hoc* committees in single parishes, as distress made itself felt'.[35] The absence of any severe distress in is reflected in the fact that there were no reports of food scarcity from the county in the period up to the beginning of March 1846. In contrast, complaints of scarcity had reached the relief commission from every county in Connaught, from all except Kerry in Munster, all except Carlow and Dublin in Leinster and even from Armagh and Derry in Ulster.[36]

Ascertaining the location and number of relief committees which were in operation by early to mid-1846 is a task which is made extremely difficult because of the lack of communication between such groups and the central relief commission in the period. In many instances it is possible only to infer the existence of committees through later evidence from the early autumn of the year. It is reasonable to assume that the majority of committees who were in contact with the central authorities by

[34] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52*, pp. 45-6
[35] Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), p. 69
[36] O'Neill, T.P. (1946), *Organisation and Administration of Relief During the Great Famine* (unpublished MA. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 28; Distress Papers, 1846, Carton 1402, D 28

Fig. 3.4. Local relief committees in operation in Donegal by September 1846



Source: Relief Commission Papers (Co. Donegal), 11/3, 1845-6; *Londonderry Journal & Ballyshannon Herald,* 1845-6; *The weekly reports of the scarcity commission, showing the progress of disease in potatoes, the complaints which have been made, and the applications for relief, in the course of the month of March 1846,* H.C. 1846 [201], xxxvii, p. 429; Clinton, G. (1999), *A Benevolent Society? local relief committee membership in Ireland, 1817-52* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, TCD), p. 158; Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), pp. 23-24; Meehan, H. (1996), 'The Cholera (1832-33), The Famine and Inver Relief Committees' in, *Donegal Annual,* no. 48, p. 199

August or September had already been in existence for some months, their lack of activity explainable by the dearth of distress. Taking all of the available evidence into consideration, the locations of Donegal relief committees operating in the period up to September 1846 are mapped in Fig. 3.4. The striking feature of this reconstruction is the distribution of the committees within the county. It would appear that the pre-Famine socio-economic trends discussed in Chapter 2 were already holding true at this early stage of the Famine, with a marked concentration of the need for local relief activity toward western and northern coastal areas. Of the thirteen committees in operation by October, six were located in Glenties, where the population was rightly perceived as being most at risk as a result of the potato failure.

It is possible that the inhabitants of the high-risk coastal portion of Glenties received some abatement from the effects of food shortage through a particularly healthy fishery during the early months of 1846. With an abundance of herring appearing earlier than usual and close to shore, at least some of the poorer people were likely to have had a replacement for their diseased potatoes:

> Herring have been taken in considerable quantities in the last ten days along the coast of Teeling Head, and in Killybegs bay, very near to the town. It is rarely that herrings are caught so far inland, and from their appearing much earlier than in some seasons past – the 15th of January being about the usual time of their arrival in this bay – it is expected that the fishing will be good.[37]

In light of the increasing difficulties for the poorer sections of the Glenties population in the coming months, the prediction of the *Ballyshannon Herald* could prove to be vital in their survival of the first year of shortage.

Among the earliest reports of distress in Glenties is a 'memorial of the inhabitants of the parish' of Templecroan in late March 1846, which highlights the fact that some two hundred families were 'in a state of destitution', with a further five hundred households depending on only five weeks provisions. Though the Templecrone relief committee is not referred to by name in this communication, it is reasonable to assume that it was behind the request 'that immediate employment be given to the

[37] *Ballyshannon Herald,* January 2nd 1846

inhabitants of [the] district'.[38] Further south in Killybegs, we find reference to the formation of a relief committee on June 29th under the instruction of Sir James Stewart, the Deputy Lieutenant of Donegal.[39] By the beginning of July, ten tons of meal had been sent from the main depot at Sligo to the sub-depot at Killybegs for the relief of the poor in the area. Reverend William Drummond, treasurer of the committee, reported subscriptions of just over £102 from local landowners and clergy by the 11th of July. A further £40 donation from the trustees of the Murray Stewart estate by July 16th swelled the reserves of the Killybegs/ Dunkineely committee.[40] Four days later, a donation of £100 in aid of these local subscriptions was sanctioned by the Relief Commission.[41] The bulk of these funds were used to purchase government meal from Sligo, as well as in the employment of 'above three hundred persons' in gravelling and improving roads.[42]

Elsewhere in Glenties, the only concrete evidence for relief committee activity before September 1846 comes *via* an article in the *Londonderry Journal* which indicates that the Templecrone and Mullaghderg committees may have been in operation by May. It would appear that Marquis Conyngham was reluctant to contribute to the committees, preferring to instruct his agent to 'provide food and employment for the poor on the Rosses estate, and not to apply for relief, if visited by distress, to any other fund'.[43] Throughout the rest of the county, the level of distress as a result of the 1845 potato failure was not high enough to warrant application to the Relief Commission for funds in aid of local subscriptions.[44] However, this does not imply that famine-related problems were nonexistent by the spring of 1846. In March, the secretary to the Moville committee, A. Clements, drew attention to the fact that 'many families [would] have great difficulty in procuring food in these parishes till August'. He went on to state that 'fever [had] set in, and in many cases

[38] *The weekly reports of the scarcity commission, showing the progress of disease in potatoes, the complaints which have been made, and the applications for relief, in the course of the month of March 1846,* H.C. 1846 [201], xxxvii, p. 459

[39] Rlf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), II/2a/4023, Sir James Stewart to Sir James Dombrain, July 1st 1846

[40] ibid., II/2a/3179, Revd. William Drummond to J.J. Stanley, Secretary, Central Relief Commissioners, July 11th 1846; II/2a/4397, Revd. William Drummond to Relief Commissioners, July 16th 1846

[41] Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), p. 24

[42] Conaghan, P. (1997), *The Great Famine in South-West Donegal, 1845-50*, p. 45

[43] *Londonderry Journal,* May 20th 1846

[44] The only other committees to receive funds from the relief commission were Milford, £30 by August 1st and Lettermacaward, £20 by September 16th

fatally', the only report of mortality as a result of the Famine at this stage of the crisis.[45] Moreover, the absence of relief committees in the east of the county does not necessarily indicate that the population escaped the effects of the first year of blight completely. The parish priest of Convoy in Stranorlar union reported that a number of his parishioners were in a 'state of destitution' by mid-March 1846. Reverend Feely suggested that a sum of £500 should be forwarded to the parish for 'the erection of a chapel, to give employment to the people, and to afford them a place of religious worship'.[46] His prayers, it would appear, were never answered.

Reports such as those of Mr. Clements and Fr. Feely are few and far between however. In general, there is little indication of any severe distress in Donegal as a result of the partial potato failure of 1845. Relief committees in Donegal were far less active than in all other counties along the west coast in the spring of 1846. As we shall see, the bulk of their activity throughout the year was confined to the last four or five months, when it became clear that the 1846 potato failure was of a far more universal nature than that of 1845.[47] Moreover, government donations in aid of local subscriptions did not begin to be requested by the vast majority of committees until August and September 1846 in response to the poor harvest. The second part of Peel's response to the blight of 1845 was a program of public works and the relatively low proportion of the Donegal population who were forced to apply for such employment provides further confirmation that the vast majority of people did not suffer to any great degree in this first year of the Famine.

3.4. PUBLIC WORKS IN THE SUMMER OF 1846

The effort to gauge the scale of Public Works required in each county began in January 1846 with a series of communications between the Relief Commission and the County Lieutenants. In the case of Donegal, the earliest evidence of such dialogue occurs on January 14th, when the Secretary of the Commission, John P. Kennedy, wrote to the Deputy Lieutenant informing him of 'very pressing

[45] *The weekly reports of the scarcity commission, showing the progress of disease in potatoes, the complaints which have been made, and the applications for relief, in the course of the month of March 1846,* H.C. 1846 [201], xxxvii, p. 443
[46] ibid., p. 429
[47] See Chapter 4, Section 4.8

representations' being made in relation to the distress prevalent in 'the neighbourhood of Dooran, Mt Charles, Inver, Kilaghtee, Glen, Malinmore, and Roxboro'.[48] Kennedy suggested that Stewart should convene a meeting of interested parties connected with these districts in order to consider the necessity of providing employment for the people as 'a means of alleviating such distress'. An officer of the Board of Works would be directed to attend the meeting and the level of unemployment in south-west Donegal was to be determined as an indicator of the scale of works required in different areas. In addition, the Deputy Lieutenant was instructed to ascertain the probable date that Public Works should commence, the length of time such relief should continue and the daily rate of wages for able-bodied men. Finally, the meeting was to provide a forum to deliberate upon what kind of works were most desirable with reference to their proximity to those in need of employment and to their permanent utility when executed.[49]

Similar instructions were circulated throughout the country in the early months of 1846, although works were not expected to commence until early summer. It was hoped that many of the works would be of a reproductive or regenerative nature, serving the dual purpose of relieving the distress arising from the potato failure, as well as permanently strengthening the Irish economy.[50] In light of this, the bills presented by Peel to parliament in January 1846 encouraged the development of harbours and the erection of piers, along with measures facilitating thorough drainage and other agricultural improvements. Road improvements were, however, the main source of employment and two statutes within the government's 1846 legislation outlined the procedures under which such work was to be carried out. Half of the funds under one statute were to be charged to the consolidated fund, with the other half repayable to the government through the county cess and these improvements were to be carried out under the direction of the Board of Works. Under the other statute the works were controlled locally and the government advanced a loan for the full cost of works at the outset.[51]

[48] Rlf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), II/2a/401, John P. Kennedy to Sir James Stewart, January 14th 1846
[49] ibid.
[50] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine,* p. 54
[51] 9 Vic. C. 1-4; O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52,*p. 219

With legislation in place and instructions relating to the organisation of meetings sent to the County Lieutenants, schedules of Public Works began to be compiled throughout the various counties where relief and employment were required. In Donegal, as one might expect, the great bulk of such activity occurred toward western and southern parts of the county. Following Kennedy's suggestions of mid-January, the Deputy Lieutenant organised a meeting at Killybegs on the 22nd of the month. The various community members in attendance identified a number of districts within the south-west region which were 'suffering great distress and are likely to suffer still more severely from the extensive failure in the potato crops'. Accordingly, a schedule of works was drawn up for the government's summer programme and forwarded to the Secretary of the Relief Commission on January 24th.[52] The details outlined in relation to the various distressed districts are reproduced in Table 3.1, overleaf.

On the basis of these returns it would appear that up to 2,810 people would require employment on road or quay building and improvement projects in the coming summer. This figure represents almost 12 per cent of the total male population of the parishes in which these districts are located, indicating quite a high potential dependence on the relief afforded by employment on the works.[53] Wages were set universally at 10*d.* per day. In general, the existing supply of potatoes was expected to last until around April or May, with works scheduled to begin operation at either the beginning of May or beginning of June. The only exception was in the hinterland of Killybegs, where only one months supply of potatoes remained in some areas, leading to calls for immediate employment for one hundred people. In Largy district, just west of Killybegs town, potato supplies had been completely exhausted by late January and works were scheduled for commencement by the beginning of March, a very optimistic target date considering that the Public Works legislation did not receive the Royal Assent until March 5th.[54] As it turned out, no Public Works whatsoever were in operation in Donegal by the end of June.

[52] Rlf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), II/2a/402, Sir James Stewart to John P. Kennedy, January 24th 1846
[53] *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 418-421
[54] 9 Vic. C. 1-4

Table 3.1. Schedule of Public Works proposed at Killybegs Meeting of January 22nd 1846

District	Number Unemployed	Date of Works	Works Proposed	Wages per Day	Date Potato Supply Expected to be Exhausted
Dooran	150	June 1st to August 31st	Piers at Buncronan, Creevin, Drumaneely to be repaired and road from Drumaneely to Drumbeg to be improved.	10d.	No Info
Dunkineely	100	May 1st to August 31st	To cut down hill leading to the church and several other hills in the town of Dunkineely. Quays to be built at Ballysaggart or Ballyrotherland and repaired at Bruckless and Trebane.	10d.	End of April
Glencolumbcille	400	June 1st to August 31st	To make two miles of road between Malinmore and Glencolumbcille church, estimated cost of £400	10d.	No Info
Inver North & South	400	July 1st to August 31st	To alter the post road from Donegal to Killybegs in the townlands of Fanaghans and Coolshangan, estimated cost of £70. Pier to be built at Fanaghans.	10d.	End of May (North), end of June (South)
Kilcar/ Roxboro	400	May 1st to August 31st	To improve the road from Kilcar to Muckross. Quay to be repaired at Teelin East	10d.	End of March
Killaghtee	600	June 1st to August 31st	To make a new line of road from the post road at Darney to the new pier at Bruckless harbour. To fill in the end of the new pier	10d.	End of May
Killybegs	400	June 1st to August 31st & for 100, immediately	To repair the road from the crossroads at James Gillespey's to Donald Gallagher's at Carricktaggart. To widen and improve the street of Killybegs. Quays to be built at Mr. Murray's and Killybegs schoolhouse. Slips to be built at Conolly's Quay.	No Info	Only one months supply in some areas.
Largy	100	March 1st to August 31st	To improve the post road from Largy to Killybegs. Pier to be built at Portnacross	10d.	No potatoes left
Malinmore/ Malinbeg	100	June 1st to August 31st	Same works as at Glencolumbcille	10d.	No. Info
Mount Charles	50-60	June 1st to August 31st	To make a new line of road from Donegal to Killybegs as far as Mount Charles, estimated cost of £1,000. Pier to be built at Sea View, estimated cost of £1,000.	10d.	End of April
Muckross	100	May 1st to August 31st	To make and repair the road from Kilcar to Ardara, seven miles at estimated cost of £1,400	10d.	End of April

Source: Rlf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), 11/3, Sir James Stewart to John P. Kennedy, January 24th 1846

The delay in beginning relief operations through Public Works was due in part to the lengthy official procedures which had to be carried out before work could begin. Following the submission of an application, projects first required approval from the County Surveyor, the Lord Lieutenant and the Relief Commissioners. Assuming everything was found to be in order, an official of the Board of Works visited the site and submitted a report which was perused by the aforementioned parties before being forwarded to the Treasury for final sanction. Trevelyan pointed out in no uncertain terms that ultimate control of Irish Public Works lay in the hands of Treasury officials, stating that: 'the Board of Works is a subordinate Board to the Treasury, they are under their orders and the Treasury have full power to give them any directions they think proper'.[55] In addition to the intricacy in official procedures, a further difficulty was the sheer volume of applications with which the Board of Works was faced. The result of the government's attractive terms for grants and loan repayments was that a large number of landlords were propelled into action in seeking their 'fair share' of the available finance, so that the estimated cost of works applied for by May 1846 ran to some £800,000.[56]

The machinery of the Board of Works slowly cranked into operation in May, with the daily average number of labourers reaching around 21,000 nationally during the month of June. By the first week of July, just under 30,000 per day were employed in road-building, while a further 1,667 were classified as being engaged in drainage works.[57] Despite the fact that at least ten large schemes had been applied for in Donegal by this time, no Public Works whatsoever were in operation in the week ending July 4th 1846. In contrast, the majority of other western counties had seen an escalation in the numbers employed, particularly in Clare (8,359 per day), Limerick (4,676), Tipperary (3,705), Galway (2,565) and Kerry (2,276). This pattern continued throughout the month and by the beginning of August the average daily number of labourers had reached a peak of over 98,000 countrywide.[58] By mapping the average number of labourers per thousand of population employed in the first four weeks of July, it is possible to gain some idea of the regional variation in reliance on the Public

[55] Woodham-Smith, C. (1962), *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-9*, p. 79
[56] ibid., p. 80; Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 54
[57] *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland*, H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 408
[58] ibid.

Works (see Fig. 3.5). Of the counties in which the rate of employment exceeded 60 per thousand of population in each week, Clare and Limerick, at 322 per thousand and 157 per thousand respectively, were by far the greatest proponents of the system.[59] In general, the highest concentrations of works were being carried out in a distinct grouping of counties stretching south from Mayo and Roscommon to Kerry and as far east as Tipperary. The only slight anomaly in an absolute east-west divide is the relatively high figures returned in counties Meath (82 per thousand per week) and Louth (70 per thousand), though these figures are not entirely unexpected considering that the potato crop loss exceeded one third in 79 per cent of electoral divisions in the former and 91 per cent of divisions in the latter (see Fig. 3.1).[60]

The association between the 1845 crop failure and reliance on Public Works in the following year is one which is difficult to identify. The Board of Works itself was adamant that the numbers employed on its relief works did not provide 'an index to the state of distress' in any particular area. Donnelly concurs with this view, stating that 'the Board of Works was right to complain that the numbers employed on its relief schemes were no fair guide to the geographical distribution of distress'.[61] Such an argument does hold a certain amount of water when taken in the context that abuses of the system were undoubtedly taking place. In Co. Clare, to take the most extreme example, it is inconceivable that over 13,000 people should require daily employment on the Public Works in July when the potato deficiency was not markedly more severe than the national average. However, there is substantial evidence that Donnelly's broad agreement with the Board of Works assertion that a firm link cannot be made between the potato failure, the numbers employed on Public Works and the level of distress in different counties is a view which holds very little water indeed.

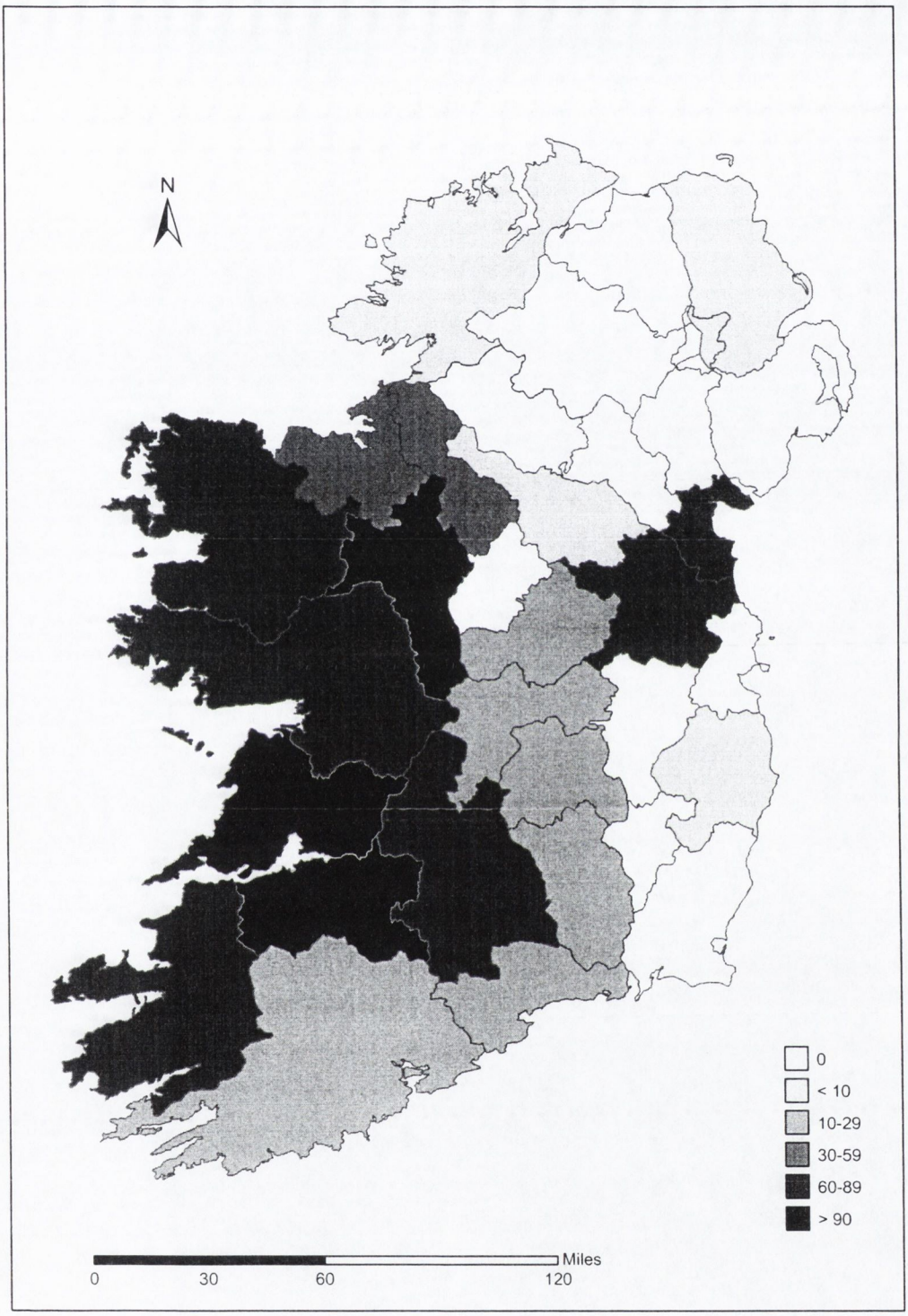
There are two key reasons for disagreeing with Donnelly's assessment. The first is that there is a reasonably clear correlation between July employment levels (see Fig. 3.5.) and the estimated potato crop loss statistics illustrated in Fig 3.1. Broadly

[59] The figures mapped are the total average per week. Therefore the likely number of labourers employed per day is one seventh of the weekly totals, i.e. for Clare the average daily figure would amount to about 46 per thousand of population, for Limerick the daily number would be about 22

[60] *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland,* H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 36

[61] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine,* p. 56

Fig. 3.5. Average number of persons per thousand of population employed on Public Works in each of the four weeks in July 1846



Source: *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland,* H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 408

speaking, the counties in which crop loss exceeded one third in over 80 per cent of electoral divisions tend to fall in the 60-89 or over 90 per thousand ranges in terms of weekly public works employment. Similarly, the vast majority of counties in which less than 70 per cent of electoral divisions experienced crop losses of a third recorded weekly employment ratios of under 10 per thousand of population. The second factor lending support to the conclusion that there was a link between the level of employment on public works in this period and the level of distress in particular areas is the fact that the bulk of works activity occurred in western parts of the country. Bearing in mind all of the socio-economic characteristics discussed in Chapter 2, it is impossible to ignore the contention that counties in the west and south were more likely to require relief on a larger scale than those in the north and east. The concentration of Public Works employment in counties Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary, Clare, Galway, Mayo and Roscommon in this first year of the Famine goes some way in indicating that even at this early stage of the crisis the impact of the potato failure was likely to be more severe in the more backward parts of the country despite the fact that the actual crop loss might be greater elsewhere. Contrary to the view propagated by the Board of Works and agreed upon by Donnelly, it would seem that Public Works employment levels in 1846 are inextricably linked to the degree of distress in different parts of the country.

On the basis of such an assessment, Donegal appears to have escaped the worst of the difficulty in the period leading up to the autumn of 1846, with less than 10 per thousand of population dependant on public works in July (see Fig. 3.5.). Clearly, the relatively good state of affairs with regard to the socio-economic development of the county discussed in Chapter 2, combined with quite a low level of crop loss, had obviated the need for relief on the scale required elsewhere on the west coast of Ireland. On the ground in Donegal, the number employed reached a daily maximum of just over three hundred labourers in the week ending July 11th, a figure very much lower than the 2,810 which had been anticipated at the Killybegs meeting in January (see Table 3.1)[62]. The works carried out during July and early August would appear to have been projects confined exclusively to the south-west of the county.[63] Though

[62] *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland,* H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 356
[63] Conaghan, P. (1997), *The Great Famine in South-West Donegal, 1845-50,* p. 32-33

there had been proposals for a programme of pier repair and construction under the works in the other coastal unions, no actual employment seems to have been made available. Pier building projects at Ballyness Bay in Dunfanaghy and Buncrana in Inishowen had been alluded to in the *Londonderry Journal* of March 11th, but there is no evidence that either project went ahead at this time. Similarly, proposals to build 'a stone pier' at Moville on the western shore of Lough Foyle, were not carried out under the Public Works in 1846, nor is there any evidence that any road building was undertaken in Inishowen during the summer.[64]

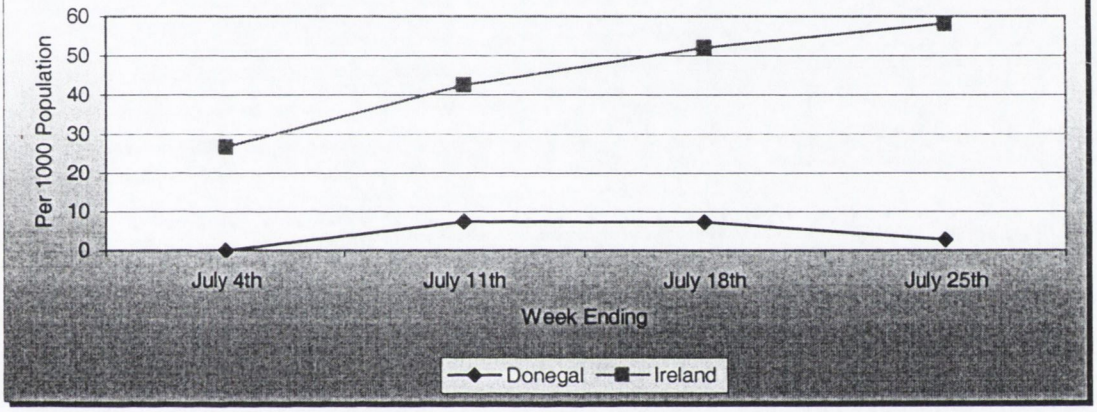
The only pier project definitely completed under the Public Works legislation during the summer of 1846 was the one which had been proposed for Sea View, or the area now known as Salthill, in the district of Mountcharles (see Table 3.1). Aided by a grant of £1,337, the total cost of construction ran to some £2,133.[65] All of the work was carried out during the month of July and it is likely that a substantial proportion of the total number employed on Public Works in Donegal were involved in the project, given that the final product was a stone structure of over 450 ft. in length, making it an extremely labour intensive endeavour. Of the other proposals outlined at the Killybegs meeting, the only other pier project which went ahead was the completion of the dock at Bruckless, just east of Dunkineely. There is no evidence which suggests that any of the other harbour schemes were sanctioned for commencement in the summer of 1846, while there is similarly scant evidence of any extensive road building projects being undertaken in Donegal in the same period. In fact, the only projects which saw completion were the building and repair of the road from Kilcar to Ardara in Glenties union and the construction of another running south-west from Mountcharles towards Doorin Point in Donegal union.[66]

The numbers employed on the Public Works were thus relatively small when compared with much of the south and west of the country. Moreover, the vast majority of activity seems to have been confined to a two-week period towards the beginning of July, whereas the peak of employment in the rest of the country was

[64] *Londonderry Journal,* June 17th 1846
[65] Meehan, H. (1996), 'The Cholera (1832-33), The Famine and Inver Relief Committees' in, *Donegal Annual,* no. 48, p. 201
[66] Conaghan, P. (1997), *The Great Famine in South-West Donegal, 1845-50,* p. 32

reached at the end of the month.[67] Graphing the weekly average number of labourers per thousand of population in Donegal against the equivalent statistics for the whole of Ireland provides an indication of the patterns of works activity for the month of July. Fig. 3.6 also clearly illustrates the position of Donegal relative to the national average proportion of population seeking relief under the scheme, reinforcing the contention that the county was considerably less distressed than others in the first year of the Famine.[68]

Fig 3.6. Numbers employed on Public Works per thousand of population in Donegal & Ireland for the weeks ending July 4th to July 25th, 1847



In the same week as the number of labourers on Public Works schemes rose to their highest level of just under 60 per thousand of the national population, a Treasury minute was drafted by Trevelyan directing the closure of all schemes by August 15th.[69] Lord John Russell and the Whig government that had taken office on June 30th had decided to bring Peel's relief system to a close so that they could introduce their own legislation to combat the distress in Ireland. The new government were convinced that the forthcoming harvest would provide ample employment for the people and sufficient time to put the new measures in place. After furious protests from the Board of Works it was decided not to adhere rigidly to the termination date originally suggested, although the numbers employed began to be gradually reduced

[67] *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland,* H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 356
[68] Source: ibid.
[69] Woodham-Smith, C. (1962), *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849,* p. 90; Treasury Minute, July 21st 1846, T 64 368 A

in the second week in August. In Donegal, where the number of labourers seeking work was already on the decline from July 18th onward, the total number engaged in works schemes had fallen to only 160 by the first week in August and none at all in the following week. For the rest of the country, the process took slightly longer and there were still a total of about 38,000 people employed in the completion of various projects by the end of August. The complete conclusion of Peel's Public Works scheme came soon thereafter, though it would be only a very short time before the Board of Works was called upon to implement a radically different piece of public employment legislation.

3.5. THE ROLE OF THE POOR LAW

Before addressing the degree to which Peel's government had achieved its aim of producing a solution to the problems with which it was faced in 1845-6, it is necessary to allude briefly to a third mechanism of relief operating in this period. It will be recalled that Peel's three-pronged approach consisted of local relief committee efforts, public works employment and, as a last resort, the Poor Law system. The organisation of Irish Poor relief was governed by legislation drawn up during an earlier term of government under Russell in 1838 and was modelled largely on the system adopted in England in 1834. Based on the principles put forward by George Nicholls, an English Poor Law Commissioner who had been despatched to Ireland in 1837 to investigate the suitability of a Poor Law for Ireland, the Irish Act of 1838 did differ in relation to one key subject.[70] Relief in Ireland, unlike England, could only be provided within the confines of the workhouse and outdoor relief was not allowed under any circumstances.[71] In the context of the crisis which left Ireland utterly stricken in the years after 1845, this measure was to become hugely significant.

By the time of the initial potato crop failure in September 1845, the system of Poor Relief was up and running. As noted in Chapter 1, the country had been divided into 130 new administrative units, each containing a centrally situated workhouse capable

[70] *Report by George Nicholls to his majesty's secretary of state for the home department, on poor laws, Ireland,* H.C. 1837[69], li, pp. 1-2
[71] 1 & 2 Vic. C. 56

of accommodating the destitute within the individual unions.[72] Funding for the system was raised by means of a Poor Rate which was levied on all occupiers of land valued at over £4 in each electoral division, so that local taxation on the privileged effectively provided local relief for the poor. Responsibility for the striking of rates and all administrative duties relating to each union were overseen by a board of guardians generally composed of local officials and landowners. By the beginning of 1845, 118 union workhouses were open and by the time the blight struck in the autumn, the system was almost fully operational.[73]

Relief in the workhouse was by no means an attractive option for the poverty stricken. The regulations governing the establishments were constructed in a manner designed to provide a 'test' of destitution. A diet which was deliberately intended to be monotonous and of an inferior quality to that of even the poorest classes was one measure typical of the punitive nature of relief in the institutions. Only whole family units, as opposed to individual paupers, were permitted to enter the workhouse and once admitted, families and sexes were strictly segregated. Each inmate was expected to perform some type of labour in accordance with their age and sex and the work was consciously made to be of an 'irksome' nature to further deter all but the most utterly destitute.[74] Even at their most desperate, those who had any small glimmer of hope left would not resort to the workhouse.

The Poor Law system in operation in 1845 was thus designed to deal with actual destitution rather than simple poverty and though the line between the two was bound to be blurred by a catastrophe on the scale of the Famine, provision for the poor who suffered as a result of the crisis was not directly allowed made until 1847. For the moment, Peel's government decided an extension of the 1838 Act was unnecessary and in opting for alternative relief measures, pushed the Poor Law to the periphery of the state relief effort. On the ground, there was little apprehension on the part of

[72] See Chapter 1, Section 1.4; For full discussion of the establishment of workhouses in Co. Donegal see: Crampsie, A. (2003), *The Creation of the Donegal Workhouses: a historical geography* (unpublished B.A. Dissertation, TCD)

[73] *Eleventh annual report of the poor law commissioners for England and Wales, with appendices* H.C. 1845[624][660], xxvii, p. 34

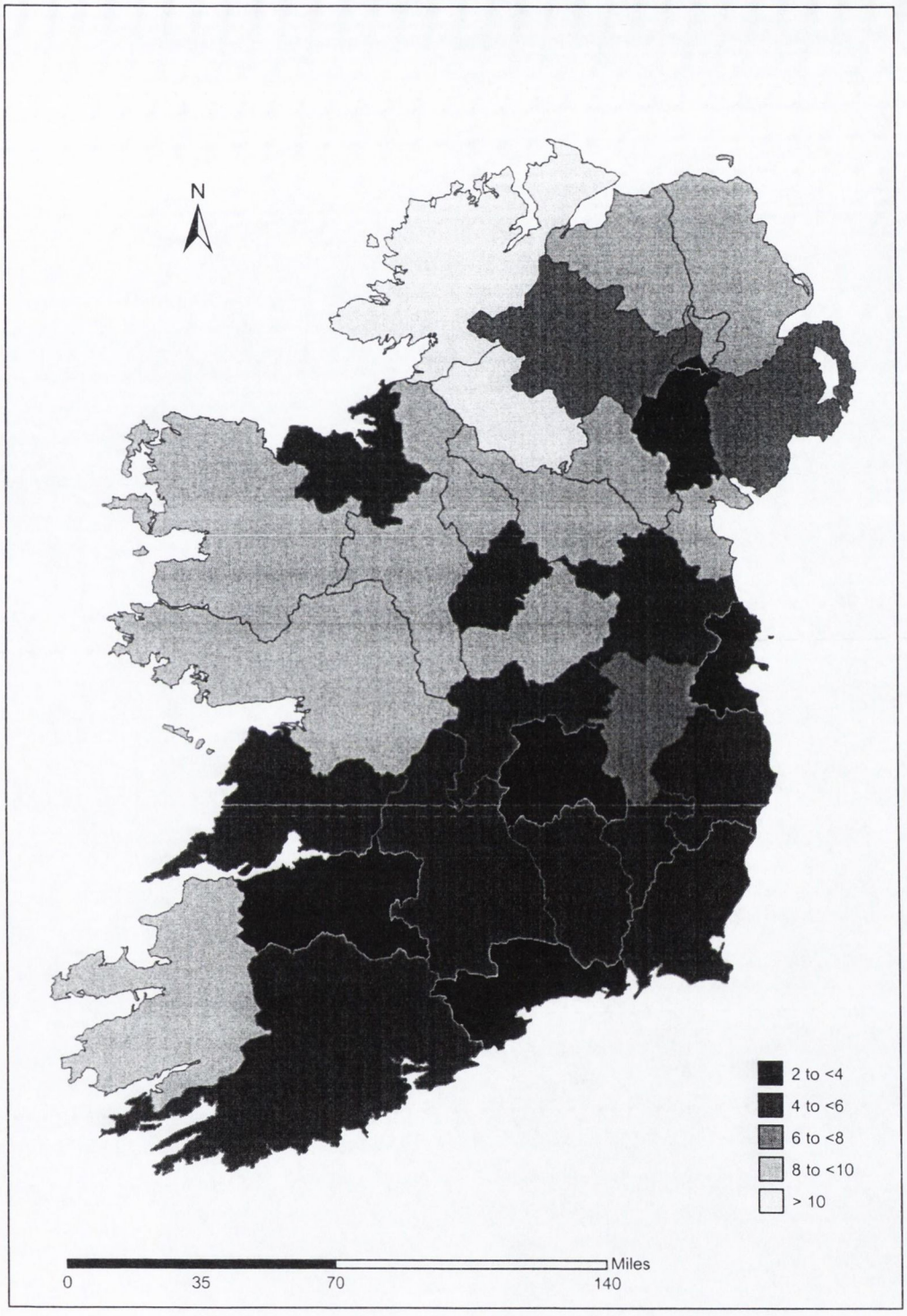
[74] *Reports from the select committee of the house of lords appointed to inquire into the operation of the Irish Poor Law, and the expediency of making any amendments to its enactments, together with minutes of evidence,* H.C. 1849[192], xvi, pp. 88-90; Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 25

many union guardians with regard to the potential impact of the potato failure on admissions to the workhouses. The minute books of the boards responsible for Donegal's eight union workhouses make no mention of a possible influx of paupers in the period following the discovery of the blight. Fig. 3.7 illustrates the limited role played by the workhouses in the aftermath of the initial potato failure by mapping the number of vacancies per thousand of population for each county in Ireland in December 1845.

In general, counties toward the south and east of the country had the lowest number of vacancies relative to population, though the levels recorded would still indicate very little pressure on the workhouse system. Limerick and Waterford, for example, had vacancy rates of only 3.5 per thousand of population and 3.7 per thousand respectively, but these figures still amount to workhouse space for nearly 1,200 people in the former and over 700 in the latter. In the main, counties in the west would appear to have fared even better in terms of the availability of Poor Relief, with Kerry, Galway, Mayo, Roscommon and Leitrim all returning figures of over eight vacancies per thousand of population. In the north-west, there was room left for 1,634 paupers in the Fermanagh workhouses (10.4 per 1,000 of population), while Donegal tops the list with space for 3,248 inmates or eleven vacancies for every thousand people in the county. The fact that there was little pressure on the workhouse network does not, of course, provide any indication of the level of distress in any particular area. It merely indicates that the measures taken to ensure that the system was used only as a last resort were working effectively and that absolute desperation was not prevalent among the bulk of the population in the first year of the Famine.

Combining the county totals, we find that the actual number of vacancies nationally comes to 53,175, meaning that the average workhouse in Ireland was just over 40 per cent full. Moreover, the total number of inmates in Irish workhouses by December 1845 (38,232 nationally) was only fractionally higher than the number which had been in residence at the same time in 1844 (37,763), as illustrated in Fig. 3.8. In the first months of 1846, however, further inmate admissions had brought the total number accommodated to just over 47,000 by March of that year, compared with

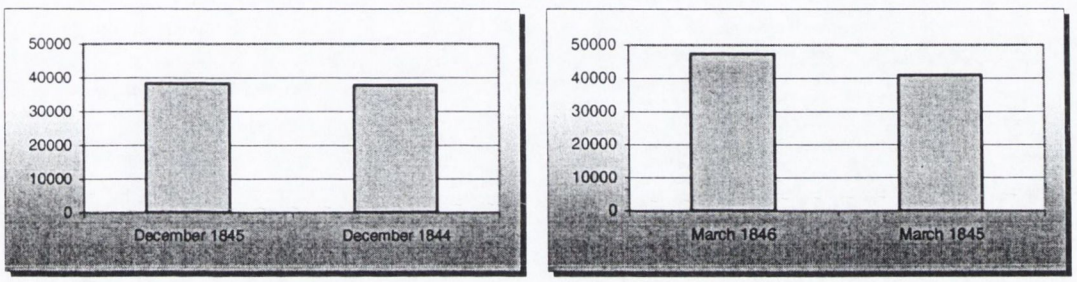
Fig. 3.7. Number of vacancies in workhouses per thousand of population in each county in Ireland, December 1845



Source: *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland,* H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 57

40,931 inmates in the workhouses in the same month of the previous year.[75] It is possible that this increase could have been attributed to rising destitution as a result of the potato failure in 1845, though it is likely that the opening of more workhouses during the year was a factor also. Either way, it is abundantly clear that the resources of the Irish Poor Law system were not being stretched to any great extent at this time.

Fig. 3.8. Number of workhouse inmates in Ireland in December 1844-5 and March 1845-6 [76]



In fact, the only significant impact which the Famine had on the workhouses in this period was a change in diet for the inmates. The instruction of the 1838 Act stipulating that the institution diet should be nutritious but as banal as possible was rigidly adhered to, the paupers generally being fed meal after meal of potatoes mixed with buttermilk.[77] With reports of the potato failure increasing in the late autumn of 1845, the Poor Law Commissioners issued a circular permitting guardians to alter this diet if potatoes were either difficult or expensive to obtain.[78] Though none of the Donegal boards found it necessary to implement the change immediately, the diet in some unions was changed in the spring of the following year. In Dunfanaghy, for example, a resolution dated April 7th 1846 ruled that the diet of able-bodied paupers should be changed from 3lbs of potatoes for dinner each day to '8ozs of oatmeal made into stirabout' on three days per week and 'a pint of thick oatmeal gruel served with pepper onions etc. and ¾ of a lb. of bread' over a further three day period.[79] As indicated in Table 3.2 potatoes were only to be served on Sundays. By May of the

[75] ibid.
[76] *Twelfth annual report of the poor law commissioners for England and Wales,* H.C. 1846[704][745], xix, p. 168
[77] O'Connor, J. (1995), *The Workhouses of Ireland: the Fate of Ireland's Poor,* p. 132
[78] BG 97/3/1, Inishowen Minutes, November 16th 1845
[79] BG 81/1/1, Dunfanaghy Minutes, April 7th 1846

following year an alternative diet was in place in just over half the institutions in Ireland.[80]

Table 3.2. Altered workhouse diet of Dunfanaghy, April 7th 1846

Classes	3 Days - Bread diet with gruel for dinner	3 Days - Stirabout for dinner	Sunday - Potatoes
Working Men and Women and Children Over 13	12oz bread and 1 pint of gruel	8oz oatmeal made with third quart of buttermilk	3lbs Potatoes, third quart of buttermilk
Aged & Infirm and Children under 13 and above 9	8oz bread and 1 pint of gruel	6oz oatmeal made with third quart of buttermilk	2½lbs Potatoes, third quart of buttermilk
Children under 9 and above 2	6oz bread and 1 pint of gruel	4oz oatmeal made with third quart of buttermilk	1¾lbs Potatoes, third quart of buttermilk

Apart from the change in workhouse diet, the impact of the first year of potato failure in terms of Poor Law relief was fairly limited. During the spring of 1846, when the prevarications relating to the implementation of the temporary Public Works operations were taking place, a number of boards of guardians were put under pressure from the poor to allow relief outside of the workhouse. None complied with such demands, however, merely continuing to offer indoor relief. Not surprisingly, those clamorous for outdoor assistance refused to bend to the stringencies of the workhouse 'test', preferring instead to wait for the Public Works to begin.[81] With the majority of works schemes open by the end of June and continued activity on the part of local relief committees, the need to resort to the support offered by the Poor Law system was further obviated. The machinery of the Irish Poor Law and workhouse network would not, in fact, be tested until much later in the year, when the harsh blow of a second potato failure began to hit home.

3.6. CONCLUSION: AN ADEQUATE POLICY OF RELIEF

The first year of the Famine in Donegal was one during which cases of severe distress were scarce, particularly relative to the other counties along the west coast. Potato crop losses, though extensive, were far less crippling than would be the case in later years, while the relatively good pre-Famine record of the county in terms of

[80] *Twelfth annual report of the poor law commissioners for England and Wales,* H.C. 1846[704][745], xix, p. 51

[81] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 68

economy and society undoubtedly stood to the poorer sections of the population in 1845-6. So much so, in fact, that the systems of government and local relief in place appear to have been resorted to only intermittently and in small numbers. Given the lack of evidence pointing to any serious difficulty in the most vulnerable portion of the county along the west coast, it is reasonable to assume that the local committees in operation during the first months of 1846 acted as an effective safeguard against utter destitution or starvation. With the Public Works cranking into operation in the summer of that year, a further mode of relief was provided. In terms of regional variation of distress within the county, it would appear that the south-west was the only part of Donegal where a significant number of people were employed on works projects. Even then, the numbers applying for employment were very small in comparison to all of the western and southern counties, perhaps an indication that Donegal's strong tradition of seasonal migration had allowed the outflow of labourers who would otherwise have been in need of relief during the summer. In the years that followed, the safety valve of harvest employment in the Lagan and Scotland would prove crucial to the survival of the poorest classes during successive crop failures.

The policies adopted by Peel's government in response to the failure of the potato crop in 1845 were generally considered to have been successful. The *Freeman's Journal* later went as far as to declare that 'no man died of famine during his administration', a view which had also been put forward by the *Nation* in the weeks following the fall of Peel's administration.[82] While these views were undoubtedly something of an overstatement, it is difficult not to return a favourable verdict on the relief mechanism in the first year of the Famine. The Public Works system, though slow to get off the ground, seems to have catered for the needs of the poor more than adequately. In fact, the official view of the scheme was that it had been too generous and open to abuse with 'every man in the country [looking] to the Board of Works for employment'.[83] Overly generous or not, the works were most certainly effective in terms of carrying out the task for which they were intended and while abuses were

[82] *Freeman's Journal,* April 5th 1847; *Nation,* August 15th 1846; O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52,* p. 222

[83] *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland,* H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 352, Commissioners of Public Works to Lords of the Treasury, August 8th 1846

rampant in some areas, the system did reach those who were in genuine need of relief also.

The activities of the Relief Commission, meanwhile, were of crucial significance in creating a bulwark against starvation in the areas worst affected by the potato failure. By the time of cessation of its operations in mid-August, the Commission had spent some £105,256 on Indian meal from the United States and a further £45,923 on imports of food from Great Britain.[84] Bourke has noted that while the provision made was 'parsimonious by modern standards... the emergency measures blunted the sharper edge of starvation in the spring and early summer of 1846'.[85] Since the actual crop loss was only half that originally estimated by government officials, it stands to reason that imports to food depots would generally have been sufficient to meet the demand for relief. The initiative shown by Peel in entering the food market by selling meal at cost price is one which deserves much praise considering that it was completely at odds with the *laissez faire* economic theory of his time.[86] The government which replaced Peel's administration at the end of June 1846 would take an entirely different approach to the question of Famine relief and eventually stand accused of turning a crisis into a catastrophe. Even as Lord John Russell's new government was finding its feet in the first weeks of July, early reports of an unprecedented failure of the potato crop in Ireland had begun to filter through.

[84] *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland,* H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 249
[85] Bourke, P.M.A. (1993), *'The Visitation of God'? The Potato and the Great Irish Famine,* p. 146
[86] See: Collison Black, R.D. (1960), *Economic Thought and the Irish Question, 1817-70*

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM CRISIS TO CATASTROPHE? THE PUBLIC WORKS, 1846-7

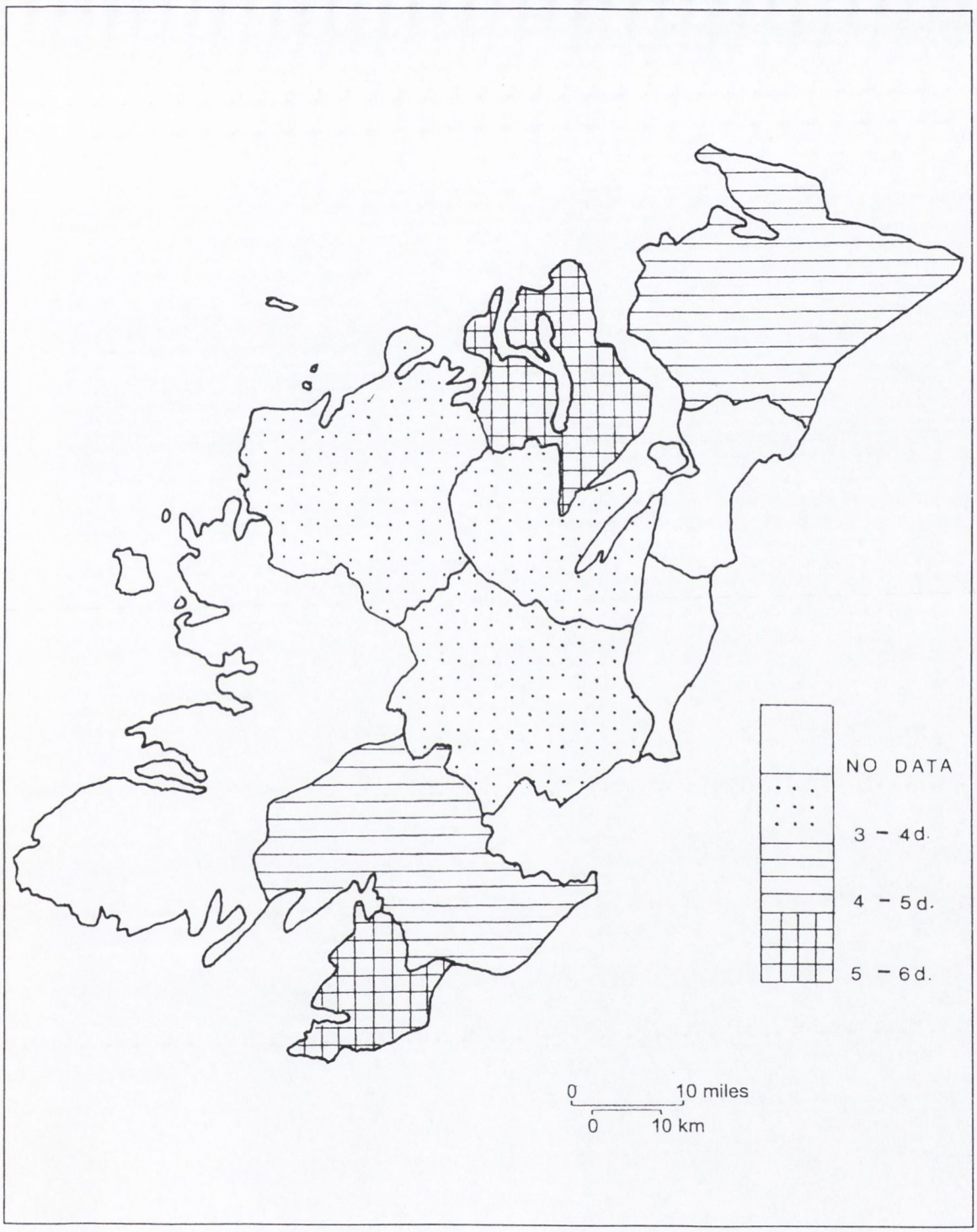
4.1. UNIVERSAL POTATO FAILURE: THE HARVEST OF 1846

The difficulties arising from the harvest of 1846 had their foundation in the partial potato failure of the previous year. As early as February 1846, the *Londonderry Journal* had commented on the possibility of a deficiency of seed owing to the blight of 1845, stating their 'fear [of] the consequences at seed time'.[1] By the beginning of May, reports began to arrive from eastern and northern parts of Donegal testifying to the fact that 'as great a breadth [of potatoes] will not be planted as in former years'.[2] The calculations of P.M.A. Bourke offer confirmation of a reduction in the overall potato acreage in the county in 1846, with the estimated area under the crop falling from 86,529 acres in 1845 to some 81,259 acres in the following year.[3] This 6.5 per cent reduction is considerably lower than the 25.8 per cent drop in acreage of potatoes planted nationally, reflecting the relatively low losses of the first season of blight in Donegal. In the second harvest season of the Famine, however, Donegal was not to fare nearly as well.

Despite initially positive reports on the prospects for 1846, worrying signs that the early crop might be infected with blight were first noted in April when it was reported that 'the shoots from early planted seed [had] already exhibited unmistakable symptoms of the disease of last year'.[4] By May, the absence of any great abundance of potatoes at market in the county is evident in the considerable inflation in prices per stone of potatoes throughout much of the county. Fig. 4.1 maps the price of potatoes in Donegal unions in that month based on the Poor Law Commissioners reports on the subject. As we have seen, the usual pre-Famine price of potatoes averaged around 2*d.* per stone, rising to just over 3*d.* per stone by January 1846.[5] Five months later, the cost of a stone of potatoes exceeded this level in all but one of the unions, namely Dunfanaghy. Elsewhere, particularly high prices were being charged at markets in Inishowen (4¼*d.*), Donegal (4½*d.*), Milford (5¼*d.*) and

[1] *Londonderry Journal,* February 4th 1846
[2] ibid., May 6th 1846
[3] Bourke, P.M.A. (1959), 'The Extent of the Potato Crop in Ireland at the time of the Famine', in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland,* Vol. XX, Part III, pp. 8-9
[4] Conaghan, P. (1997), *The Great Famine in South-West Donegal, 1845-50,* p. 38; *Londonderry Journal,* April 15th 1846
[5] See Chapter 3, Fig. 3.2

Fig. 4.1. Price per stone of potatoes in Donegal Poor Law unions in May 1846



Source: Cox, C., Kinealy, C. & Cannon, S. (1992), *The Famine in Dunfanaghy*, Document II D 2, p. 150; figs. based on Annual Reports of Poor Law Comissioners

Ballyshannon (6*d.*).[6] While such price increases are certainly significant, it should be noted that the cost of potatoes was still not anywhere near the exorbitant rates of 1*s.* 3*d.* per stone which were being charged in some other parts of the country by the end of May.[7]

By June, the *Dublin Evening Post* was beginning to receive reports of the spread of blight in various localities throughout the country, prompting a column in which it was stated that there was 'no doubt as to the fact that the calamity of last year has again visited us'.[8] The absence of any similar reports in the Donegal press in June would suggest that the blight had not yet taken hold in the county by early summer. Towards the end of July, however, the *Ballyshannon Herald* referred to 'a disease of an alarming nature [making] its appearance in the growing crops'.[9] The nature of the blight seems to have differed from the previous year's infestation in that the potato crop never even had a chance to ripen in 1846. In a report from Donegal in the early autumn, Deputy Commissary General Dobree alluded to this when he wrote that:

> ... it was blighted half-grown, and has never since made any progress to further maturity; the tubers are not half the usual size, the largest being the most affected; and as the people say, with some truth, so scanty is the crop that "it takes a man a whole day to dig his dinner".[10]

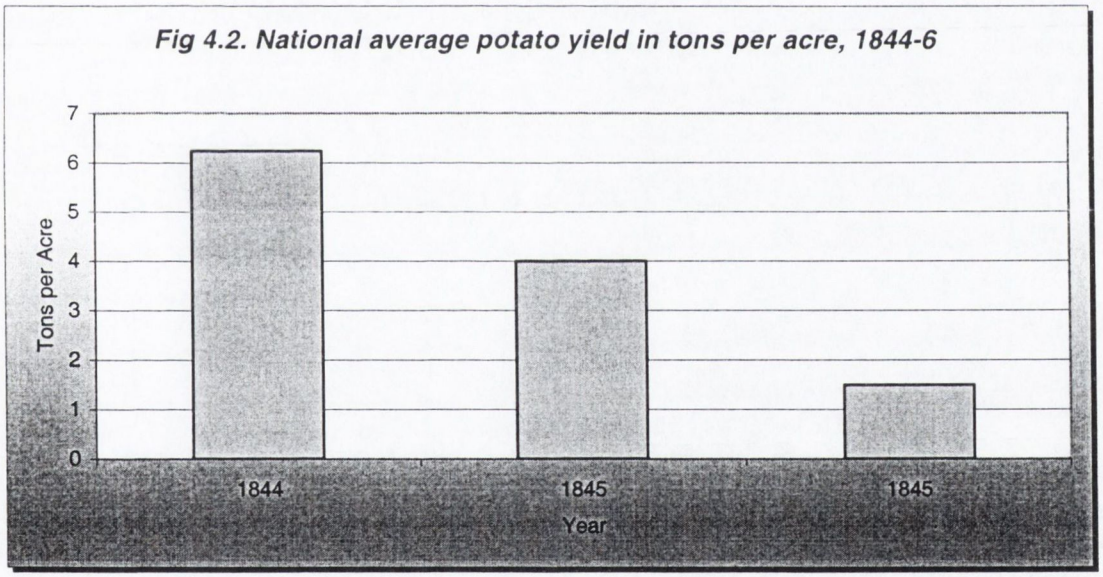
The complete deterioration of the crop throughout the county was confirmed in reports from Donegal's two main newspapers by the beginning of September. The first dramatically informed readers in the south and west of the county that 'the poor man's hope' had been obliterated and the 'prospect of a sound-keeping potato [was] nowhere to be found'. To the north and east, meanwhile, the crop was described as 'everywhere presenting a blackened surface; and the tubers, where not already gone, are in a state of rapid decay'.[11]

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[6] Cox, C., Kinealy, C. & Cannon, S. (1992), *The Famine in Dunfanaghy*, Document II D 2, p. 150
[7] O'Neill, T.P. (1946), *Organisation and Administration of Relief During the Great Famine* (unpublished MA. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 28; *Dublin Evening Post,* May 28th 1846
[8] *Dublin Evening Post,* June 10th 1846
[9] *Ballyshannon Herald,* July 24th 1846
[10] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* H.C. 1847 [761], li, p. 51
[11] *Ballyshannon Herald,* August 21st 1846; *Londonderry Journal,* September 2nd 1846

Such reports are typical of all references to the attack of the blight from throughout the country by September 1846. The devastation in this season was total, a point confirmed by the constabulary in their investigation into the extent of the loss during the month of October. Their reports reveal that the average yield per acre was only a third of a ton, compared to an average yield of almost eight tons per acre in the years before 1845.[12] Bourke considers the constabulary estimates to be slightly inaccurate, putting forward his own approximation of the actual yield per acre being somewhere in the region of 1½ tons. Similarly, his exhaustive extrapolations would indicate that the pre-1845 yields were a little lower than those estimated by the constabulary, albeit still a healthy 6¼ tons per acre in 1844. The dramatic decline in yields is graphed in Fig 4.2, below, which compares Bourke's estimates for each of the three years from 1844 to 1846.[13] Based on the same evidence, Donnelly notes that 'to use the adjectives 'total' and 'universal' in reference to the failure of 1846 is to exaggerate hardly at all'.[14]

Fig 4.2. National average potato yield in tons per acre, 1844-6



Predictably, the greatest initial levels of distress as a result of the crop failure in Donegal appear to have occurred in the west and south-west of the county, where the dependence of poorer sections of the population on the potato was greatest. This is

[12] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 57; *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* H.C. 1847 [761], li, p. 57

[13] Bourke, P.M.A. (1959), 'The Extent of the Potato Crop in Ireland at the time of the Famine', in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland,* Vol. XX, Part III, p. 11

[14] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine,* p. 57

reflected in a number of meetings which took place in response to the destruction of the crop. The largest of these gatherings was at Glenties on August 24th, when over a thousand concerned parties attended a discussion on the 'ravages' of blight in the area and the potential methods of alleviating the poor from its effects. To this end, plans were outlined and memorials forwarded to the Lord Lieutenant pleading 'for immediate employment' for the destitute.[15] Evidence that the situation was so desperate that it propelled the 'distressed' themselves toward taking matters into their own hands can be gleaned from the pages of the *Ballyshannon Herald* of September 18th, where it was reported that a 'monster meeting' of the distressed peasantry was to have taken place four days earlier. Though eventually dissuaded from going ahead with the meeting by the Ballyshannon clergy, the stated purpose of the organisers was to 'implore the landed proprietors and government to commence public works, and to send in Indian meal for distribution'.[16] A more conventional strategy was adopted in the east and north of the county where the discussion of relief measures was left to the landed proprietors and clergy at meetings in Lifford and Buncrana towards the end of September.[17]

The general increase in relief committee and individual activity throughout Donegal by the last weeks of August, led to an upsurge in the number of pleas to the Chairman of the Relief Commission for food and employment provision as soon as possible. In addition, alarming reports from the Coast Guard Officers persuaded Routh that 'great distress' now prevailed in Donegal, particularly in the west. The urgency of the need for relief was vividly demonstrated by Lieutenant Moore, Coast Guard Officer at Ardara, who asked for 'an immediate and ample supply of food for the people' whose condition had deteriorated to the extent that they had begun to kill mountain sheep that did not belong to them.[18] An increasing volume of similar requests convinced Routh that the only course of action was to send a senior officer, Deputy Commissary General Dobree, to the north-west with a view to increasing the capabilities of the Sligo food depot which served Donegal, as well as the

[15] ibid.
[16] *Ballyshannon Herald,* September 18th 1846
[17] Cox, C., Kinealy, C. & Cannon, S. (1992), *The Famine in Dunfanaghy*, Document II A 4, p. 122
[18] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* H.C. 1847 [761], li, p. 26, Moore to Routh, August 25th 1846

establishment of two further depots in Donegal itself.[19] His action marked the first part of the relief effort in what turned out to be the year of greatest crop loss during the entire course of Famine.

4.2. THE CRY FOR GOVERNMENT MEAL

The new Whig government under Lord John Russell had expected the situation in Ireland to return to normal by the middle of August, when a new crop of potatoes would begin to become available. In light of this, the relief measures which had been introduced by Peel in the previous year had been deemed sufficient to carry the population through until the autumn. The reality on the ground, however, was radically different and government intervention on a much larger scale was required in parts of the country even before August. The key difficulty in relation to Donegal in this period was that the supplies of meal from the existing depot at Sligo were actually being scaled down, leaving the local committees in an unenviable position considering the infinitely more serious failure of the potato crop in 1846. Even as Dobree began his assessment of potential sites for the two new government depots in the county, meal shortages at the sub-depots in Donegal were already becoming apparent. At Ardara, for example Lieutenant Moore reported that as early as the beginning of August he had begun to confine sales to 'one stone to each person' on alternate days of the week 'in order to keep some meal in hand'. Despite Moore's best conservation efforts, however, the supply had been completely exhausted by August 13th.[20]

Given that the food deficit in the previous year had been made up to a large extent by the direct importation of meal to be sold at cost price, the expectation countrywide was that similar intervention in the market would be the approach adopted in 1846 also. However, the new government believed that Peel had set a dangerous precedent and deemed it essential that their own relief effort should not interfere with the role of traders and merchants.[21] Essentially, the fear was that if commissariat grain retailed at prices which undercut the local market price, the local trade would cease, leaving

[19] ibid., p. 36, Routh to Dobree, August 31st 1846
[20] ibid., p. 7, Moore to Inspector General of the Coastguard, August 13th 1846
[21] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52*, p. 73

the population entirely dependent on government supplies. Consequently, the price of government meal rose in accordance with local trends, which increasingly meant upward movement in light of the scarcity of meal in the market generally. At the end of August, Assistant Commissary General Stevens of the Sligo depot reported that there was hardly any supply of meal in the whole north-west region apart from the dwindling stock in the depot itself. With meal issues already totalling nearly one hundred tons during the last week in August, the officer urgently requested 'transport to keep up the necessary supplies at the several coastguard stations' as he felt the supply to Donegal was now crucial in preventing actual starvation.[22] However, a week after this report, Stevens was directed to increase the price of meal in line with a local trader named Culbertson who still had a small supply left. The supply from the depot was then to be stopped and all requests for meal to be referred to the aforementioned merchant.[23]

The cry for meal in Donegal had swelled to a crescendo by the first weeks of September and the extent of food shortage and general distress is clearly evident in the mass of correspondence directed toward the Relief Commissioners in this period. As we might expect, the vast bulk of such communication stemmed from western parts of the county, most particularly Glenties union. On September 15th, for example, James Quigley of the Glenties relief committee reported that their 'scanty supply' of five tons of meal from the coastguard station at Ardara had been exhausted in a matter of days. This was despite the fact that it had been circulated among the needy 'with the greatest economy, in stones, half-stones and even in pounds'.[24] The supply from Sligo to replenish the stock at Ardara was hardly adequate either, for a fourteen ton issue to the sub-depot the day before Quigley's report had all but been disposed of less than a week later. On one day alone, Lieutenant Moore had sold over eight tons, so that by September 20th there was only one sack of sixteen stone remaining. The gravity of the situation is highlighted in Moore's request for additional supplies from Sligo in which writes of:

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[22] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* H.C. 1847 [761], li, p. 34-5, Stevens to Routh, August 31st 1846

[23] ibid., p. 50, Routh to Trevelyan, September 7th 1846

[24] RIf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), II/2a/5824, James Quigley, Secretary, Glenties Relief Committee, September 15th 1846

> Persons coming a distance of 18 miles for a small quantity of meal, who had to go home wanting... Numbers will die of starvation if you cannot send us an immediate, and keep up a constant supply.[25]

Further north in Templecrone, the parish priest, Fr. McMenamin, reported that his parishioners were 'without meal of any sort' in a region far removed from any market town or merchants. He requested the immediate delivery of a cargo of cheap meal to Burtonport to feed the starving population.[26] From the other side of Gweebarra Bay, meanwhile, another man of the cloth complained of the shortage of meal in Inishkeel parish, writing that 'the poor who have yet the means to buy have not a pound of meal to get'. Reverend James Ovens went on to criticise what he saw as preferential treatment for the coastguard stations around Killybegs, which he believed were being allocated an unfair proportion of the meal supply to west Donegal.[27] His comments were not without foundation, for a statement of provisions issued from Sligo during August and September reveals that while 50 tons and 36 tons of meal went to Lochrus (Ardara) and Killybegs respectively, a mere 10 tons was divided between Rutland in Templecrone and Port Noo in Inishkeel.[28]

Despite the fact that over 80 tons of meal had been distributed to the population in the south of Glenties union, Fr. William Drummond of the Killybegs committee still issued a stark warning that many of his poorer parishioners were 'near the starving point' by the end of September. At this point, there was only one small vessel engaged in the transport of meal from Sligo, which Fr. Drummond viewed as being wholly inadequate to meet the demand. Such was the dearth of supply, that even those 'willing to part with their last earthly means' in the purchase of provisions had no meal to buy. At the end of his letter, Fr. Drummond referred to the fact that there were no merchants or traders in the area, so that there was 'no commerce to be interfered with' and he called, therefore, for 'a reduction in price and a more

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[25] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* H.C. 1847 [761], li, p. 96, Moore to Stevens, September 20th 1846

[26] RIf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), II/2a/5891, McMenamin, P.P., Templecrone, September 21st 1846

[27] ibid., II/2a/5891, Rev. James Ovens, Rector and Chairman, Inishkeel Parish Relief Committee, September 28th 1846

[28] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* H.C. 1847 [761], li, pp. 94-6

convenient distribution' of government supplies.[29] There is no evidence that Routh acceded to his demands and the high price of provisions from Sligo was maintained in line with the government's *laissez faire* policy.

As well as the constant reference to general market prices of meal, the other official preoccupation at this was the continual reiteration that 'home' produce of cereal should be utilised as much as possible. At the same time as the total issues of meal from the Sligo depot were reaching levels of around 200 tons per week, Routh expressed his bewilderment at the continuing reliance on government supplies when the fields ought to the 'teeming with crops'. As was to be a recurring theme in official circles throughout the course of the Famine in Ireland, his puzzlement contained a degree of suspicion that the government's relief effort was being exploited unnecessarily, as he felt it 'impossible' to comprehend such 'total want... in the midst of harvest'.[30] Contrary to the picture imagined by Routh, the reality on the ground in west Donegal was that there were few fields 'teeming' with crops. The Dunfanaghy landlord, Wybrants Olphert had estimated at the end of August that there would be 'no prospect of relief from the growing crops for fully three weeks' and even then the absence of local mill power would render the harvest largely ineffectual in feeding the poor.[31] Further south at Ardara, Lieutenant Moore reported that about two thirds of the population 'had no growing grain of their own', a point which was reiterated by James Quigley of the Glenties relief committee only a day after Routh's correspondence with Trevelyan.[32] Clearly, the hope that 'home' grain would make any significant contribution to the relief of the poor was one which was considerably wide of the mark.

[29] RIf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), II/2a/5950, William Drummond, P.P., Secretary, Killybegs Relief Committee to Routh, September 28th 1846

[30] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* H.C. 1847 [761], li, p. 73, Routh to Trevelyan, September 14th 1846

[31] RIf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), II/2a/5624, Wybrants Olphert to Routh, August 31st 1846

[32] ibid., II/2a/5824, James Quigley, Secretary, Glenties Relief Committee to Routh, September 15th 1846

4.3. DOBREE'S REPORT FROM DONEGAL

The reports submitted by Deputy Commissary General Dobree during the month of September offer valuable insights into both the government's relief effort and the general condition of Co. Donegal in this period of the Famine. On the issue of turning to 'home' grain supplies, for example, Dobree agreed with the local commentators referred to above, writing that even 'if [a man] has a patch of oats, the greater part will be required for his rent and for seed'. The unavailability of this already insubstantial supply, combined with the 'total deficiency in the ordinary means of subsistence', placed what the commissariat officer referred to as 'an entire dependence on Government relief measures'. Moreover, the difficulties associated with the actual implementation of this relief policy on the ground in Donegal were also highlighted by Dobree, who made the point that with large sections of the population 'dotted about the country in single houses', it would not be easy to bring all of the poor within the area covered by official measures. With regard to the general condition of the people, the officer's travels in the north-west led him to comment that the poor were 'scarcely clad with common decency' and lived in cabins that could 'not be compared to a North American Indian wigwam'. On the role of some of the landlords, meanwhile, the reports were equally contemptuous. We can assume Dobree was referring chiefly to the absentee proprietors of Glenties and the south-west, when he states his opinion that:

> ... unless numbers like Lord George Hill, the public-spirited and philanthropic owner of Gweedore, shall start into existence, and assume, as he does, the responsibility, and personally discharge the duties of their properties, I fear we are only putting a new piece of cloth on a threadbare garment, which now must no longer be patched up as heretofore, but entirely renovated...[33]

Dobree's principle objective in Donegal was not, however, to provide a commentary on the condition of the poor or the shortcomings of some of the landed proprietors in providing relief for their amelioration. His responsibility was to enquire into the formation of a large depot at Sligo, along with the secondary

[33] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* H.C. 1847 [761], li, pp. 73-4, Dobree to Trevelyan, September 14th 1846

consideration of selecting 'two localities for depots in Donegal'.[34] The fact that the Sligo depot was the first in the country to be reassessed in this manner following the second year of potato failure is indicative of the very high level of distress in the north-west by the autumn of 1846. The further expansion of the depot system into Donegal itself bears testimony to the severity felt in western and southern parts of the county, for such a strategy flew in the face of official policy generally.

It is useful to allude briefly to the selection process employed by Dobree in determining the most suitable locations for the Donegal depots, for it provides an insight into the machinations of officialdom on the ground at a time when sections of the population were rapidly approaching starvation. The most important criteria for meal depots were that they were accessible by sea, had ample storage facilities and, above all, had a water supply capable of generating mill power to grind the Indian corn.[35] The large number of proposals from various individuals offering storage space or suggesting potential locations for depots along the west coast of Donegal can be taken as an indication of both the level of distress and the degree to which local people were willing to aid the relief effort. Unfortunately, the vast majority of locations advocated were lacking in one or more of the criteria outlined above.

Among the earliest correspondents to the Relief Commission was the postmaster at Ballyshannon, who offered to let storage space for up to five hundred tons of meal close to the town.[36] Further north in Glenties, the main proposals of any note were made by the landlord Colonel Connolly, who suggested that Lettermacaward should be a constabulary sub-depot and the bulk of the supply to the south-west of Donegal should be landed at Portnoo on the south side of Gweebarra Bay. Connolly offered his own storage space for free at Carrick Glin and referred to one of his tenants who was willing to let a generous store at Lettermacaward on very reasonable terms.[37] However, Dobree's assessment of the various locations proposed by Connolly and others were found wanting in one respect or another. The fact that Portnoo itself had only a very small store ruled it out, while a store at Lettermacaward would be too far

[34] ibid., pp. 35-6, Routh to Dobree, August 31st 1846
[35] ibid., pp. 35-6, Routh to Trevelyan, August 28th 1846
[36] Rlf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), II/2a/5653, Postmaster, Ballyshannon to Routh, September 4th 1846, with draft reply
[37] ibid., II/2a/5789, Col. Connolly to Routh, September 14th 1846, with draft reply

removed from the landing point. Similarly, Ardara was rejected because of insufficient storage space, while Rutland Island, which was already a coastguard depot, would not be extended on the grounds that it was inaccessible to a large proportion of the mainland population.[38]

Further along the coast in Dunfanaghy, meanwhile, Wybrants Olphert of Falcarragh, had heard that Dobree had been instructed to go no further north than Gweedore in his mission to select depot locations. Olphert highlighted the existing difficulty in procuring meal in an area where supplies had to be brought in from Derry, a distance of about fifty miles. He therefore proposed that Ballyness Harbour, which he considered as accessible as Gweedore, should be used as a storage facility of 300 tons capacity, while Dunfanaghy should be established as a meal depot 'before the winter sets in, as this is an exposed coast'.[39] Olphert's view was echoed in further offers of store accommodation from Dunfanaghy, most notably those of William Ramsay, who wrote that he could provide facilities 'for 200 tons at Dunfanaghy and also for 150 tons at Crossroads, Falcarrow'.[40] Routh replied, however, that official policy relating to the establishment of depots had 'not yet matured' and Messrs Olphert and Ramsay were both instructed to direct their proposals to the Deputy Commissary General. Dobree, it would appear, had already more or less decided that Bunbeg in Gweedore Bay was 'the only spot adapted for a depot in the N.W. part of the county', owing to its accessibility to vessels under two hundred tons, as well as the mill power and storage facilities necessary to accommodate a large supply of meal.[41]

Determining the location of the other Donegal depot proved to be a slightly more difficult exercise despite Routh's initial enthusiasm for Killybegs, which he deemed 'an admirable port'. So much so, in fact, that it had already been suggested as an ideal site for a floating depot.[42] Dobree himself commented on the merits of Killybegs, particularly in relation to the fact that it was accessible to even the largest

[38] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* H.C. 1847 [761], li, p. 51-2
[39] RIf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), II/2a/5747, Olphert to Routh, September 11th 1846
[40] ibid., II/2a/5781, Ramsay to Routh, September 13th 1846
[41] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* H.C. 1847 [761], li, p. 51-2
[42] ibid., p. 36, Routh to Dobree, August 31st 1846

vessels. In addition, should the storage provided by a floating depot be inadequate, there was sufficient space on land in the town to make up the deficit. In the final requirement, however, Killybegs came up short, with no suitable mills in the immediate vicinity. The problem was that Indian corn had to be ground using French burrs and all of the five small mills in and around the town were fitted with Irish stones which were suitable only for the coarse grinding of oats. Dobree devised a solution to this difficulty by arranging for the use of a flour mill a few miles south of Donegal town at Coxtown. With five pairs of French burrs grinding fifty tons of meal per week at Coxtown and a further fifty tons milled at a converted distillery in Ballyshannon, Dobree expected sufficient food generation once his proposals were put into operation. Furthermore, the Irish stones at two smaller mills in Bunbeg and Glenties were to be replaced and used as milling locations further north, thereby providing meal for the poor in Dunfanaghy and around the town of Glenties itself.[43]

With such provisions in place, the local relief committees in the south-west of the county fully expected to have ample supplies of meal in the near future. The only flaw in Dobree's selection of Killybegs and Bunbeg was that a large swathe of coastline running all the way around the Glencolumbcille peninsula, through the bays at Loughros and Gweebarra and north to Rutland and Burtonport, would still have had no direct supply of government meal. Similarly, no supplies were to be landed anywhere along the north-western coast from the Bloody Foreland all the way to the Fanad peninsula, a situation which would surely leave the relief committees in Milford and the eastern portion of Dunfanaghy in severe difficulty. Inishowen, meanwhile, was ignored completely by Dobree, but we can assume that a steady supply of meal from Derry was sufficient to meet the demand, particularly when taking into account the silence of the Moville and Buncrana relief committees at this time. A comparable absence of any correspondence from individuals or committees in eastern parts of Donegal can be similarly taken as an indication that distress, food shortage and the consequent cry for meal were not of any great magnitude in the early autumn of 1846.

[43] ibid., pp. 60-63, Routh to Trevelyan (with enclosure of Dobree's final report), September 17th 1846

4.4. THE CLOSURE OF THE DEPOTS

The potentially problematic spatial orientation of government relief as represented by the depots was nothing compared to a much greater difficulty which began to come more clearly into focus at about the time Dobree was submitting his final report in mid September. As we have noted, the demands for government supplies of meal to western parts of Donegal had reached epidemic proportions at this time. The reason for Routh's constant stalling in relation to answering such requests was the simple fact that the government had grossly underestimated the quantity of meal that needed to be imported. The enormity of the shortfall only became clear to Routh towards the end of September when the Treasury rejected his estimate of 25,000 tons of meal required immediately for government depots in Ireland.[44] Clearly, Dobree's report and the pleas for assistance from Donegal and the rest of the counties along the west coast had registered with the Commissariat. The Treasury, on the other hand, were less aware of the worsening conditions in the west of Ireland and continued to reiterate that their hands were tied:

> The fact is, that we have already bought up and sent to Ireland all the Indian corn which is immediately available; and the London and Liverpool markets are at present so completely bare of this article, that we have been obliged to have recourse to the plan of purchasing supplies of Indian corn which had been already exported from London to neighbouring continental ports.[45]

The problem was that the government had not acted quickly enough, or indeed on a scale as large as was required, in their sourcing and purchase of meal for Ireland. A dealer named Erichsen had been retained as a buyer of supplies but because his company was initially directed to procure corn from within the United Kingdom, Erichsen ran into difficulty in obtaining sufficient amounts. Even after the sphere of purchase was extended to include Europe and eventually America, the corn buying season was almost at a close and unusually high competition in the market had inflated prices markedly.[46] Despite the steeply rising cost of imports and the high price of grain in the Irish market itself, there was no effort to curb exports from the

[44] ibid., p. 63, Treasury Minute, September 29th 1846
[45] ibid., p. 80, Trevelyan to Routh, September 22nd 1846
[46] ibid., pp. 208-11, Statement of corn and wheat purchased for Ireland by Mr. E. Erichsen & Co., October 28th 1846

country. Towards the end of September Routh tentatively voiced his concerns at the continuing sale of Irish grain but was rebuffed in no uncertain terms by Trevelyan who told him 'not to countenance in any way the idea of prohibiting exportation'.[47] Such rigid adherence to *laissez faire* economic doctrines has added much fuel to the charges made against Trevelyan by nationalist writers on the Famine. However, the notion that a simple ban on exports could have altered the situation to any great degree in the late autumn and winter of 1846 is one which holds little water, given that the magnitude of potato loss was such that even total retention and distribution of all the grain exported is likely to have compensated for only one seventh of the overall food deficiency.[48] It could be argued that the more serious failure of the government was the delay in acquiring sufficient imports, though it is acknowledged that the prohibition of exports could have contributed in preventing actual starvation among the lowest tiers of the population at some level. In terms of the relief effort in late September 1846, the real problem on the ground in Donegal and the rest of Ireland was that what were already insufficient imports of meal were overpriced and the prospects for an increase in supply and decrease in cost were poor. Even optimistic projections forecasted no change in the market until late November, meaning that the depots in Ireland would not begin receiving supplementary stock of any consequence until the beginning of December. In the short term, therefore, a Treasury minute of September 29th directed that no new depots were to be established and the existing ones, which were already confined to the west coast, were to be used only as a last resort.[49]

This had an immediate impact on Dobree's considerable exertions in Donegal and far from supervising the establishment of two large depots, his role was reversed completely by the beginning of October. As Routh had become aware of the virtual non-existence of government meal supplies, he was forced to instruct Dobree to reduce the number of sub-depots in the county. The Deputy Commissary General set about his task with remarkable alacrity and by October 12th all seven of the constabulary depots had been closed, while the activities of four coastguard stations

[47] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine,* p. 69; ibid., October 1st 1846, Trevelyan to Routh
[48] ibid.; see: O'Grada, C. (1999), *Black '47 and Beyond: the Great Irish Famine in history, economy and memory,* pp. 122-5
[49] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 75

which had been providing 'small issues' of meal were also terminated.[50] This left only Killybegs, Ardara and Rutland open from mid-October onward, the relief committees in the vicinity of the other depots being directed to 'compel the people to look to themselves for subsistence... and to draw the home produce into consumption'.[51] The depot at Bunbeg was abandoned completely while Routh himself acknowledged that 'time will not be afforded to us to mature our intended depot at Killybegs'.[52]

The closure of eleven sub-depots and the instruction that 'home' grain should be used to feed the people provoked an understandably angry reaction from all concerned with the relief effort in Donegal. G.V. Wilson, an agent in Killybegs, highlighted the difficulties faced by a large number of his tenants whose corn crop had already been 'sold for meal or ground into meal by the family themselves'. Those who actually had any corn left were in an only marginally better position, for once their crop had been consumed they would have 'nothing to seed the ground with again next year'.[53] With the situation in Killybegs mirroring that in much of south and west Donegal, the majority of letters to Routh continued to contain requests for government meal. From Bunbeg, Reverend Hugh McFadden wrote asking for a supply of 80 tons of Indian meal from Liverpool.[54] From Lettermacaward, John Rogers requested that ten tons of meal be transported to Rutland for distribution in the parish.[55] There even seems to have been difficulty in obtaining meal for the poor in the prosperous barony of Raphoe, where a meeting of magistrates and cesspayers demanded that government depots be established.[56]

In response to the persistent requests for meal from Donegal, Routh could do little but continue to reiterate that government supplies were to be used as a 'last resort'

[50] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* H.C. 1847 [761], li, p. 153, Dobree to Trevelyan, October 12th 1846
[51] ibid., p. 147, Dobree to Routh, October 8th 1846
[52] ibid., p. 158, Routh to Trevelyan, October 15th 1846
[53] RIf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), II/2a/6068, G.V. Wilson to Commissary General, October 3rd 1846
[54] ibid., II/2a/6713, Memorial to the Earl of Bessborough on behalf of the inhabitants of the parish of West Tullaghobegley, signed by Hugh McFadden, P.P., October 14th 1846
[55] ibid., II/2a/6454, John Rogers to Routh, October 15th 1846
[56] ibid., II/2a/6526, Memorial of magistrates and cesspayers assembled at baronial sessions, signed by E. Hayes, Chairman, October 19th 1846

and enclose with his replies 'papers on producing cheap food from home corn'.[57] The fact was that there were simply no supplies to be sent. Though the issues of meal from the Sligo to the remaining Donegal depots totalled some 98 tons during the month of October, they fell markedly to only a further 8 tons up to the end of November.[58] The clamour for meal had already begun to decline by mid-October in Donegal, since it had become obvious that no government assistance was forthcoming. From this point onward, the clergy and landlords who organised and contributed to the local relief committees had a most arduous task on their hands in obtaining sufficient supplies of meal, for the depots remained closed for almost all of the last three months of the year. The other key concern of the committees was the processing of applications for Public Works, which were to be the principal component in the government's relief effort for the winter of 1846-7.

4.5. GOVERNMENT POLICY ON PUBLIC WORKS

The alleged abuses of the system of Public Works during Peel's administration led the new government to the conclusion that a more rigid legislative structure was called for in 1846. Consequently, the Labour Rate Act, which came into operation from September onward, was designed with the intention of eliminating the waste, inefficiency and mismanagement which were thought to have been prevalent in the previous year. Central to this objective was the stipulation that the Board of Works should assume sole responsibility for the management of all works schemes. While the grand juries of individual counties still held presentment sessions for works projects to be proposed, passed and forwarded to the Lord Lieutenant, the local relief committees were no longer allowed to issue tickets for employment. Moreover, the works themselves were not actually sanctioned until a Board of Works officer had visited the site, while the same official also took charge of issuing tickets to those he deemed to be in need of relief. The role of the committees, therefore, was confined to compiling lists of potential candidates for public employment, so that direct local control over this part of the relief effort was effectively lost.[59]

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[57] ibid., draft reply from Routh

[58] *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* pt ii, H.C. 1847 [796], lii, p. 50, Dobree to Trevelyan, January 29th 1847

[59] 9 & 10 Vic. Cap. 107; Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 90

The other significant change in the Public Works system was in the means by which projects were to be financed. Owing to the widespread view in official circles that Irish landlords should be forced to support the Irish poor, local taxation through the county cess was ultimately to provide all funding for local relief works. Though the Treasury advanced the money required in the first instance, all loans were to be repaid with interest of five per cent *per annum,* so that the expense of Public Works would 'fall entirely on the persons of property in the distressed district'. In addition, the works schemes themselves were not to be of a 'reproductive' nature, so as to limit the number of applications from landowners and road construction and improvements were to provide the bulk of employment. Though the restrictions on 'reproductive' works were later modified under pressure from the landlords, the adjustment in policy did not result in any significant increase in the numbers employed on projects other than road building.[60]

In essence, the central premise of the new legislation was to centralise the administration of relief works, while simultaneously decentralising the financing of the schemes in a bid to reduce overall costs and keep the numbers employed from spiralling out of control. A further indication of the government's concern in relation to these issues is the fact that wages earned under the new system were to be paid on the basis of the amount of work completed by each individual. The payment of fixed wages during the previous year of Public Works was viewed as one of the principal factors encouraging the abandonment of farm labour in favour of public employment. Task work, or payment by results, was considered to represent not nearly as attractive a proposition for the potentially indolent. Local Board of Works officials were instructed to devise a payment mechanism which would allow 'an ordinary worker to earn from 10*d.* to 1*s.* per day, and a good labourer who exerted himself, from 1*s.* 4*d.* to 1*s.* 6*d.* per day'.[61]

Several fatal inadequacies of such a system are immediately obvious. Firstly, the ability of an 'ordinary' worker to earn even 10*d.* per day was bound to be reduced

[60] O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52,* pp. 227-8; NLI, MSS, Monteagle Correspondence, Memorandum of C.E. Trevelyan, August 1st 1846

[61] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* H.C. 1847 [764], l, p. 140

given his weakened state at the outset. Secondly, a severe shortage of implements such as crowbars and wheelbarrows meant that the majority of labourers were without the basic equipment needed to maintain any level of productivity. This problem was compounded by an instruction from the Board of Works which encouraged 'as far as possible the manufacture of implements of wood and iron in the localities in which the works are situate'.[62] While such a directive was clearly aimed toward stimulating employment among the tradesmen of distressed areas, the massive quantities of tools required by the workers could not hope to be produced in this manner. The third difficulty with task work was that it contributed directly to growing physical debility among the labourers employed on the Public Works. Since the wages earned in the first place were generally inadequate in a climate of soaring food prices, the provisions bought by the workers were not sufficient to feed themselves or their families. The consequent malnourishment among the labourers, meant that large numbers of them were caught in an ever deepening spiral of weakness, leading to further reductions in possible wages earned.

Before the problems with task work became fully apparent on the ground in Ireland, the other shortcomings in the Public Works legislation were already coming into focus. The key difficulty was the complete transfer of administration and management of the schemes to the control of the Board of Works, an organisation which was ill equipped to oversee such an operation. In order to begin to tackle the mammoth task ahead, an additional 10,000 overseers, 5,000 check clerks and a multitude of other officials were recruited by the Board during the summer of 1846. Such a volume of fresh staff would have encountered difficulties even in normal times, but in the middle of a crisis and with new intricate legislation to deal with, delays, prevarications and general bureaucracy were rampant. As the Commissioners of Public Works themselves noted in early September, even the 'utmost and most wearied exertions' of their officials could not avoid serious impediments in beginning work.[63]

[62] ibid., p. 227, Instructions of Commissioners of Public Works to Inspecting Officers, October 14th 1846

[63] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* H.C. 1847 [764], l, pp. 111-112

An associated difficulty was the fact that lists of people requiring relief in specific areas could not be compiled until properly constituted local relief committees were put in place. Raphoe barony in east Donegal, which by September 4th had been proclaimed among the twenty-four most distressed areas in the country, provides a good example of the delays resulting from this part of the legislation. Initial difficulties occurred at the presentment sessions held at Raphoe on September 14th, when an adjournment had to be called immediately and the sessions postponed until parish committees could be organised in the locality to draw up lists of persons needing employment. The other problem at this point was the fact that the two Board of Works officials present, Captain Gordan and Mr. W.R. Townsend, were not in a position to offer any advice on the public works because they had only arrived in Raphoe two days previous to the meeting. Such was the extent of the total delay involved that it took over a month for lists to be compiled, the sessions reconvened at Lifford and a total of £30,000 voted for, of which £20,000 was intended for drainage works. However, this was by no means the end of the setbacks as the decisions made at Lifford were rescinded a week later following disagreements between the Grand Jury and other members of the sessions. Further delays in overcoming these difficulties meant that by the time a total presentment of £20,000 had been agreed upon, it was already well into November and this amount then had to be sanctioned by the Treasury which finally approved the recommendations on November 13th.[64]

In sum, then, the time which had elapsed between the proclamation of sessions and eventual authorisation for works amounted to well over two months. While a delay of this length is cause for considerable concern, even more worrying is the fact that the Raphoe example was by no means exceptional. Throughout the whole country in fact, similar delays of between seven and thirteen weeks were the norm. It should also be stressed that these hold-ups were due to administrative and organisational difficulties, rather than the actual practicalities of getting work started on the ground. As we shall see, the administrative complications arising directly as a result of the governments Public Works legislation paled in comparison to the problems of disorder and delay which pervaded the operation of the schemes themselves.

[64] ibid., pp. 523-559; Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), p. 151; *Northern Whig*, September 8th 1846; ibid., September 19th 1846; ibid., October 19th 1846; ibid., October 20th 1846

4.6. DELAYS IN OPENING OF WORKS SCHEMES

As one might expect, the earliest reports relating to the commencement of Public Works in Donegal were chiefly concerned with the issue of delays in issuing tickets for employment. Lieutenant J.W. Milward, the inspecting officer for the county, reported in early October that he was most anxious that works schemes be put into operation 'particularly in the neighbourhood of Glenties and Letterkenny'. There were, however, no properly established relief committees in either locality at a time when 'a great proportion of the people [were] in a most destitute state'. The problems faced by Milward were compounded by the fact that there was little prospect of appropriately managed committees being appointed as the Lieutenant of the county was an absentee and the Vice Lieutenant, Sir James Stewart, was away on his yacht and could not be contacted. Consequently, Milward requested that he be allowed to receive lists of destitute persons from committees which had 'already [been] formed among the Gentlemen in the various parishes'.[65] Despite the gross incongruity in the image of Stewart sunning himself on the high seas while the poor in Glenties and Letterkenny were approaching destitution, the central authorities at the Board of Works appear to have been unmoved by Milward's plea and there is no record of any works beginning in either district until late November.

Elsewhere in Donegal, the state of affairs in the closing weeks of November was scarcely any better. It will be recalled that the Treasury had finally sanctioned works in Raphoe barony on November 13th. It was more than a week later that the first 150 tickets for employment were issued at Stranorlar, the project in question being the repair of a road through the Bluestacks at Barnesmore Gap to the south-west of the town.[66] Even these small numbers in receipt of government relief through public employment around Stranorlar were atypical of the situation in much of the county by

[65] Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), p. 164; RIf. Comm. Papers (Co. Donegal), 11/2a/6345, J.C. Walker to William Stanley, October 15th 1846. Grant notes that: 'this inter-departmental communication forwards an extract from a letter of Milward to his superiors at the Board of Works, dated Letterkenny 7 Oct. 1846'.

[66] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* H.C. 1847 [764], l, p. 275, Extract from Journal of Lieutenant J.W. Milward, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, November 22nd 1846

the beginning of December. The other Donegal inspecting officer, Captain W. O'Neill alluded to the continuing impediments facing the Board of Works, whose increased staff was clearly still stretched past breaking point in the attempt to set the massive works apparatus into motion:

> The people are most clamorous for work; but the officers of the engineer department have not a sufficient number of engineers to lay out works in the different parts of the country. I cannot, therefore, issue tickets until these works are reported by Mr. Townsend to be ready to employ men on them.[67]

It was at around this time that another serious difficulty in the commencement of operations began to emerge. Even though the majority of relief committees had been reformed in compliance with official guidelines by this time, it would appear that a breakdown in communications had resulted in the drawing up of innumerable improper lists by the committees. Upon attending a meeting of the Glenties relief committee on December 2nd, for example, Lieutenant Milward found that though all present were 'very clamorous for work', he was unable to distribute tickets to the destitute because the lists had been 'made out in a most incorrect and wretched manner'. The lists of people requiring works relief at Mountcharles in Donegal union, meanwhile, were similarly flawed and had to be returned to the local committee for revision. By December 6th, it would appear that the amendments made by committee members in Mountcharles at least had met with Milward's approval for we find that he had issued 130 tickets 'for the road from Donegal to Killybegs' in the previous week. In addition, a further 263 tickets were issued at Donegal town amid 'a good deal of shouting' from those assembled and work began on the repair of the 'post road from Donegal'.[68]

The extended bureaucratic and administrative postponements experienced in putting the Public Works machinery into operation in Donegal were mirrored throughout the rest of the country, although it would appear that the delays in Donegal were even more severe than was the norm. Fig. 4.3 clearly illustrates the result of ongoing protractions in getting works started, by mapping the daily average

[67] ibid., p. 325, Extract from Journal of Captain W. O'Neill, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, December 5th 1846

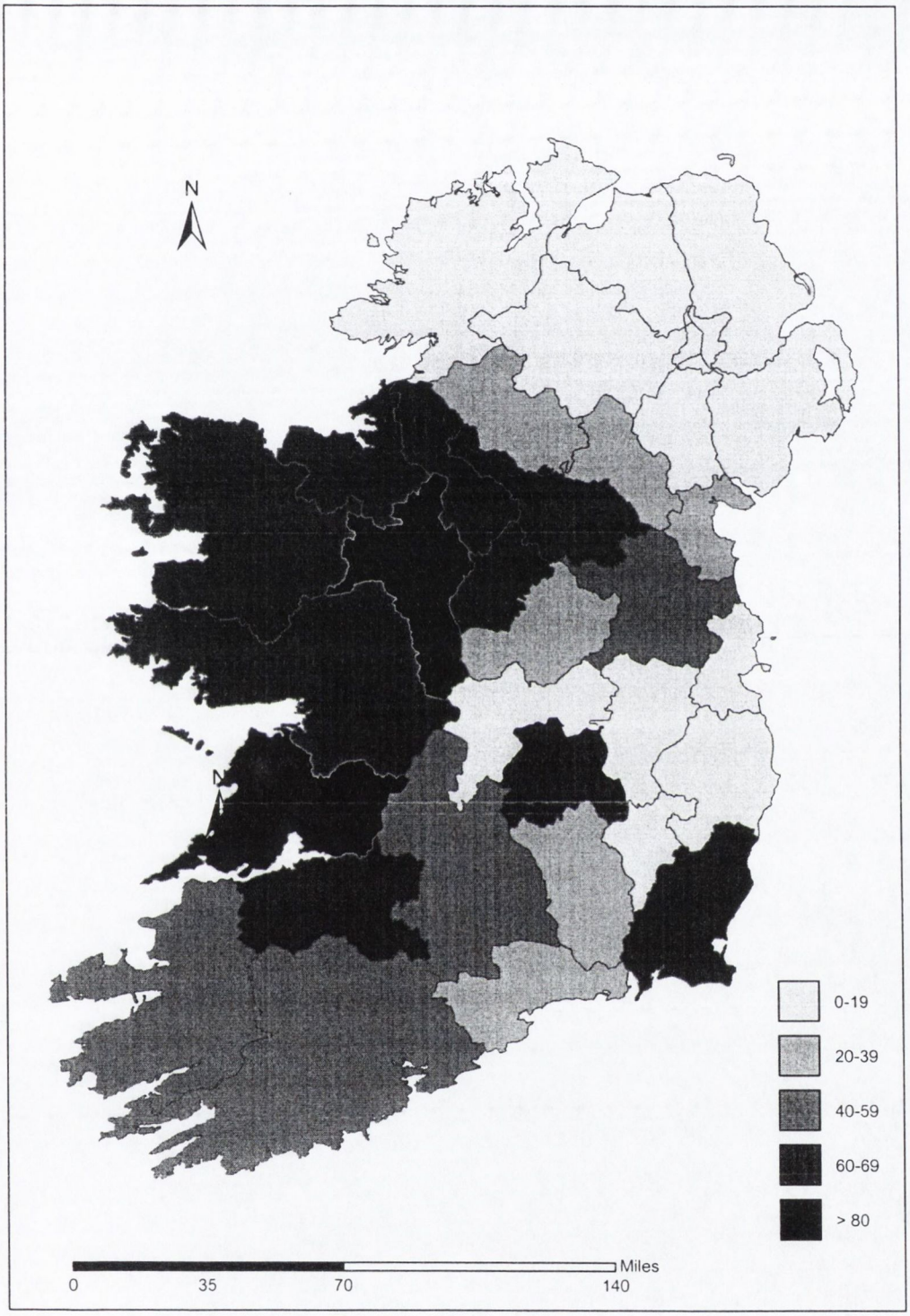
[68] ibid., Extract from Journal of Lieutenant J.W. Milward, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, December 6th 1846

number per thousand of county population employed on Irish Public Works in the week ending December 5th 1846.[69] In terms of the regional variation in numbers employed countrywide, the pattern largely follows that set during the operation of Peel's relief works earlier in the year.[70] Again, Clare and Roscommon are among the counties which relied most heavily on Public Works, with daily averages of 28,257 (99 per 1000 of population) and 30,757 (121 per 1000 of population) labourers respectively. These are closely followed by all of the counties in Connaught where the daily average number employed exceeded 60 per thousand of population in each case and the Munster counties, which, with the exception of Waterford, recorded rates in excess of 40 per thousand on average. Unsurprisingly, the returns for Leinster and Ulster are indicative of generally better conditions and far lower reliance on works schemes, though Wexford, Longford and Cavan do show signs of a significant rise in destitution when compared with the July figures mapped for these three counties in Fig. 3.5.[71]

It would be wrong at this juncture, however, to make any definitive statements on the relationship between reliance on Public Works and the level of distress in any particular area. The most that can be said is that the effects of the universal potato failure in 1846 appear to have been most severe in relation to western and southern counties, as we might expect. What can be said with some certainty, however, is that the apparently favourable position in Donegal as illustrated in Fig 4.3, has little to do any significant avoidance of distress and is related instead to the lengthy delays in commencing operations discussed above. The total number publicly employed averaged 757 per day in the week ending December 5th, a total which amounts to less than three workers per thousand of the county population. It is inconceivable that such low totals should be recorded in a county where the cry for supplies of meal had already reached deafening proportions over two months earlier.[72] On the basis of the evidence illustrated in Fig 4.3, it would appear that the delays in opening Public Works in Donegal had left the population without any mode of government assistance whatsoever for a period of at least six weeks, bearing in mind that the depot system had all but shut down by mid-October and limited works operations had only been

[69] ibid., p. 376
[70] See Chapter 3, Fig. 3.5
[71] See ibid
[72] See Section 4.2

Fig. 4.3. Daily average number employed on Public Works per thousand of population in Ireland in the week ending December 5th 1846



Source: *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* H.C. 1847 [764], l, p. 376

initiated by the very end of November. As we shall see, it was only through the unfailing exertions of local landlords, clergymen and other charitable individuals, that very considerable mortality was avoided as a result of the official prevarications in this period.[73]

Though the numbers employed on works projects in Donegal rose gradually during the month of December, the same administrative problems persisted and continued to prevent large numbers of destitute persons from obtaining government assistance through Public Works. While the Board of Works officials on the ground cannot be completely absolved of responsibility with regard to hindering progress, it is difficult to lay the blame for lengthy delays at any other door other than that of the government's overly complicated legislation. Officials such as Lieutenant Milward in Donegal were faced with a most arduous task in having to organise, direct and supervise virtually all aspects of the works schemes at almost every step of the way. The degree to which the resources of the Board of Works and its employees were being stretched in this respect by December 1846, was even noted by the chairman of the Dunfanaghy local relief committee who reported that:

> ... notwithstanding every exertion on their part, the calls of the engineers and officers of the Board of Works to lay roads are such that only 150 have as yet been set to work... I fear that it will be some time yet before tickets can be issued for the remaining 332, for I know that the inspecting officer who issues them, has engagements for a fortnight at least, and the calls upon the engineers in every direction are as pressing as possible.[74]

With works projects in Donegal already beset on all sides by adversity in one form or another, things took a dramatic turn for the worst in the second week of December when appalling weather conditions made the task of the workers infinitely more arduous. In a report of December 12th, Milward informed his superiors that the 'weather [was] very bad, the snow 8 inches deep on the hills'.[75] It is difficult to imagine that the continuation of labour through this period resulted in anything other than sheer exhaustion in the first instance and the distinct possibility of severe illness

[73] See Sections 4.8 & 4.9

[74] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52*, p. 93; James H. Tuke, Report of the Society of Friends on distress in Ireland, NLI, Ir 9410859, December 1846

[75] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series*, H.C. 1847 [764], l, p. 384, Extract from Journal of Lieuteant J.W. Milward, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, December 12th 1846

in the second. Given their already weakened state as a result of at least two or three months of food shortage and general hardship, combined with the fact that the clothing of those employed on the Public Works was hardly likely to have kept the elements at bay to any great degree, cases of dysentery and fever must have become prevalent within the workforce. The effect of the cold and unsympathetic weather conditions on the population at large can safely be presumed to have been equally harsh and substantiation of rising destitution and desperation is provided by the workhouse statistics for December 12th, when the number of inmates in six of the eight Donegal institutions had reached levels approaching maximum capacity.[76]

The other difficulty posed by the weather was that it impeded the already stinted progress of the Board of Works officials in opening various works schemes. Since communications between different parts of the county were all but cut off for a two-week period in the middle of December, it is hardly surprising to find no reference to the opening of any more projects in the journals of the inspecting officers in the same period. Instead, we find Milward reflecting on the likely increase of distress as a result of the severe conditions in an entry dated December 11th. He reported that the snow was 'excessively heavy' and was 'completely blocking up the roads, and rendering communication with the mountainous districts impossible, which will render the amount of distress really alarming'.[77] Though the harsh weather eased somewhat in the last week of 1846, the numbers employed on Public Works had reached only 1,804, or less than 0.5 per cent of the national total of 398,231, by December 26th and it would not be until the first weeks of the new year that government relief reached any significant proportion of the population.[78]

4.7. PUBLIC WORKS IN OPERATION

The problems posed by delays in getting Public Works schemes off the ground in Donegal in the last months of 1846 were replaced almost instantly by a new set of troubles at the beginning of 1847. The worst winter of the whole Famine period had

[76] See Section 4.10, Figs. 4.8a & 4.8b
[77] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* H.C. 1847 [764], l, p. 384, Extract from Journal of Lieuteant J.W. Milward, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, December 12th 1846
[78] ibid., p. 456

already begun to take its toll on an increasingly distressed population who clamoured for government assistance, their sheer desperation occasionally resulting in hostility and even physical violence. Up until January, the only recorded case of threatening behaviour toward Board of Works officers in Donegal occurred near Letterkenny on December 4th, when a project overseer was 'stopped on the road by labourers who tried to intimidate him to return them as at 1s. a day'. The wily official defused the situation in dramatic fashion, however, when he produced a pistol and was allowed to pass uninjured.[79]

The threats of an even more frustrated crowd turned to actual violence a month later in Milford union, when a portion of the crowd assembled at Carrickart schoolhouse were angered by the less than expansive labour lists issued on January 5th. It would seem that the inspecting officer, Captain O'Neill, had chosen the schoolhouse as his headquarters for issuing tickets and upon perusing the lists compiled by the local committee, had proceeded to approve 130 people for works relief. However, the inspector soon found himself trapped inside the school by a boisterous throng who demanded that more names be included on the registers. It would appear that the crowd did begin to disperse with the intervention of the local police, but in the ensuing confusion at least one member of the constabulary was hurt and one civilian seriously injured. O'Neill later gave an account of the events from his vantage point inside the schoolhouse, writing that:

> One of the police... was attacked by four of the people, when some of his comrades coming up drove them away. The mob then commenced throwing stones of from one to three pounds weight, and I am sorry to say that one of the country people, a man of the name of James Lynagh, was severely hurt by a blow of a musket on the head from one of the police. The mob shortly after dispersed, and some of them threatened to break the wheelbarrows and other tools on the works that are already in progress, if they were not employed.[80]

It was not only in Milford that the poorer sections of the population began to express their discontent at what they perceived as unwillingness on the part of the Board of Works inspectors to provide employment commensurate with the level

[79] *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* pt ii, H.C. 1847 [797], lii, p. 63
[80] ibid., p. 22, Extract from Journal of Captain W. O'Neill, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, January 25th 1847

distress. The fact that the hands of the officials were bound under the constraints of government legislation and the direction of their superiors was of little consequence to the man who did not have enough to feed his family. A report from Lieutenant Milward some time after his colleague's temporary imprisonment in the schoolhouse at Carrickart emphasises the increasing desperation of the people in the vicinity of Donegal town. Having issued tickets to 200 people for employment on the road from Donegal to Barnesmore, Milward readied himself for departure but found that the large crowd assembled were 'determined not to let [him] leave the town', crying out that they 'would have [his] life or employment'. The inspector managed to seize the 'ringleader, who had hold of [his] horse by the head', until obliged to let go due to forceful punch from one of the multitude surrounding him. Having received 'several blows', Milward managed to escape due to the intervention of local clergymen but even then encountered further attacks as he rode out of town. The result of the whole debacle was that the inspecting officer decided to give no further employment in the area around Donegal town, though he did allow works to continue where already in operation.[81]

The incidents of violence outlined in relation to Carrickart and Donegal town were, however, isolated occurrences during an otherwise relatively peaceful winter in Donegal. Threatening confrontations or attacks on inspecting officers, engineers and other officials in the country as a whole were, in fact, confined mainly to the south of the country. Of the 140 incidents reported as outrages in Board of Works correspondence for the period from September 1846 to the beginning of February 1847, only four took place in Donegal, compared with 28 in Clare, 19 in Limerick, 11 in Cork and 9 each in Kerry and Mayo, the only Connaught county in the top five.[82] Kinealy has attributed the majority of such incidents in the country as a whole to dissatisfaction over 'the lowness of wages due to task work', though there is little evidence of any violence in Donegal as a consequence of this issue.[83] Rather, it would seem that the opinion of at least some sections of the population was that the

[81] ibid., p. 23, Extract from Journal of Lieuteant J.W. Milward, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, January 25th 1847
[82] ibid., pp. 60-69; Foley, K. (1997), *Kerry During the Great Famine, 1845-52* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 157
[83] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52*, p. 94

real failure of the works schemes was that there simply weren't enough of them in operation.

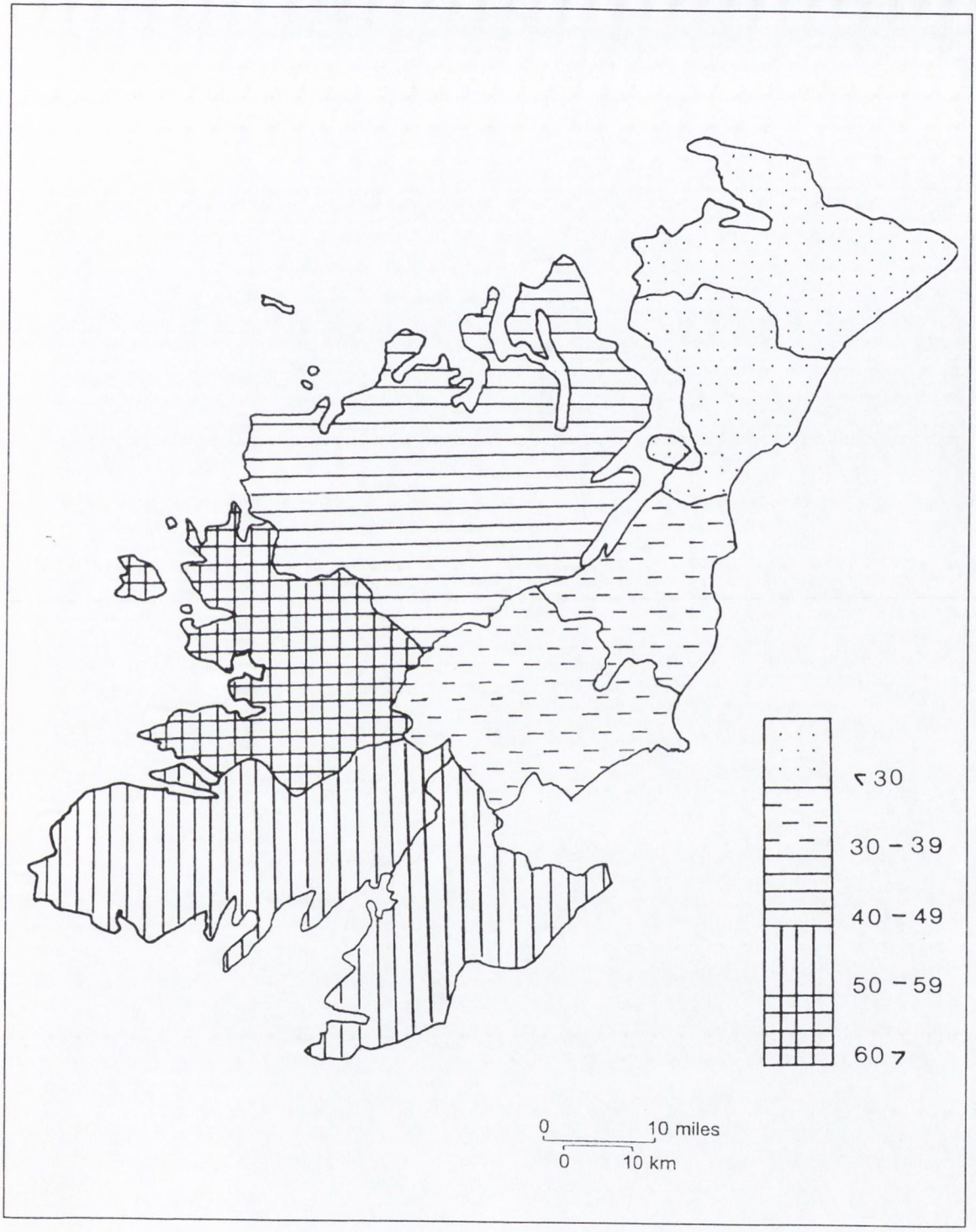
By the end of January, this difficulty had been overcome to some extent with the opening of a considerable number of projects throughout the most distressed western portion of the county and we find no further evidence of public employment related violence from this point onward. All of the relief committees had managed to draw up their employment lists in compliance with regulations and there were no further delays related to this issue. Such was the sudden acceleration in commencement of Public Works from the turn of the year, that the 12,541 labourers working on projects in Donegal by January 30th was almost seven times the number employed only a month earlier.[84] Milward's comment that 'the employment [was] now very general in all the baronies' would indicate that the prevarications and delays which had featured so strongly in the attempt to initiate works had, in the main, been eradicated by the end of January.[85] Bearing this in mind, we can get some idea of the regional variation in the true level of distress at this time, for the employment data should reflect actual dependence on Public Works, rather than the extent to which delays tended to result in labourer numbers being lower in some areas compared with others.

Unfortunately the smallest administrative area for which statistics were recorded is the barony, though even the variations in baronial employment levels in Donegal are wide enough to provide substantiation of the geography of distress in early 1847. Fig. 4.4 maps the daily average number per thousand of population employed on works schemes in the six Donegal baronies for the week ending January 30th. Predictably, it is in the baronies of the south and west of the county that the highest proportions of the population sought relief through Public Works, a trend which was to continue in relation to later measures of government relief during the course of the Famine. On the supposition that employment levels can be taken as a reasonably accurate gauge of distress, it would appear that Boylagh barony, or the northern portion of Glenties union, was the part of Donegal which had suffered most as a result of the second potato failure and subsequent harsh winter. The number requiring employment on the

[84] *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* pt ii, H.C. 1847 [797], lii, p. 48

[85] ibid., p. 90, Extract from Journal of Lieuteant J.W. Milward, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, January 23rd 1847

Fig. 4.4. Daily average number employed on Public Works per thousand of population in Donegal Baronies in the week ending January 30th 1847



Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series, pt ii, H.C. 1847 [797], lii, p. 54

works at the end of January totalled some 2,162 people per day, or nearly one in ten of the 1841 baronial population.[86]

The other region of acute distress as characterised by high dependence on Public Works, was in the southerly tract of territory comprising of Banagh and Tirhugh baronies, where the proportions of workers employed on government projects amounted to 51 per thousand of population in the former and 54 per thousand in the latter. Even with these relatively high numbers in receipt of assistance, it would appear that that there was still considerable pressure on the Board of Works to employ further labourers due to a continuing rise in destitution. In Tirhugh, for example, Lieutenant Milward attended a meeting of the Ballyshannon relief committee on January 29th and found the local volunteers complaining bitterly at what they viewed as a continuing lack of government intervention on a scale proportionate to the level of distress. The day after the meeting, Milward reported that 'the accounts of destitution here [in Ballyshannon] are very distressing... although upwards of 1000 people are employed'. He remained unmoved by the demands of the committee members, however, viewing them as 'exorbitant' and 'unreasonable', his outlook presumably coloured by the growing numbers of what were seen as less than genuine applicants for employment in many parts of Donegal by this time.[87]

Returning to Fig. 4.4, it will be noted that the eastern barony of Raphoe appears to have fared considerably better than its southern and western neighbours, with only 30 per thousand of the baronial population requiring works employment. Such a trend should not be entirely unexpected when one considers the superior socio-economic standing of the region which has been discussed in Chapter 2. Milward himself alluded to this in one of his January reports, when he noted that 'the parishes of Killea, Clonleigh, Taughboyne and others in [Raphoe] are the best in the county... and there is very little destitution among [the population]'.[88] More puzzling, perhaps, is the relatively good performance of Kilmacrenan and the exceptionally low requirement for Public Works in Inishowen, where only 20 per thousand of population were employed on works schemes. In both cases, it would appear that

[86] ibid., p. 48
[87] ibid., p. 91, Extract from Journal of Lieuteant J.W. Milward, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, January 30th 1847
[88] ibid., p. 89, January 2nd 1847

local relief efforts and landlord intervention in particular, played a vital role in preventing destitution during the winter of 1846-7 and it is likely that this obviated the need for Public Works on a scale of any great magnitude. A discussion of the crucial role of local landlords and clergy in the relief effort in these northern areas and an examination of the corresponding dearth of sufficient local exertions in western and southern parts of Donegal in this period will be entered into in due course.[89] As we shall see, the regional pattern of distress was the result not only of pre-Famine underdevelopment in the west and south of the county or the shortcomings of government relief legislation; it had much to do with the failure of others capable of providing assistance to respond in an appropriate fashion to what later emerged as the most critical phase of the whole Famine period.

That distress and destitution were on the rise in west Donegal by the end of January and beginning of February is reflected to a degree in the composition of the workforce employed on works projects at this time. Of the 12,541 people working on the schemes in Donegal by the end of January, just under 9 per cent were women, while a further 8 per cent were boys and infirm men. A traveller in the worst affected barony of Boylagh commented on the sheer desperation of the population by early February, noting that:

> ... every day people fell down exhausted working on the roads and were carried home. I saw men and women trying to work, and also girls and boys, from the age of twelve years... It would be useless to enumerate particular instances of distress as all had some tale of woe... The magistrate informed me that he believed it was not uncommon for mothers, both on the island [Arranmore] and the main, in addition to the infant at the breast, also to try and afford the same nourishment to one or two of their other children up to three and four years of age.[90]

The consequences of attempting to survive under such conditions are highlighted by another commentator visiting the southern part of Glenties union a few weeks later. In a letter from Killybegs on February 22nd, a fisheries officer named Kennan reported that destitution was 'frightful' in the region and that 'two or three funerals

[89] See Sections 4.8 & 4.9

[90] O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52*, p. 233; Society of Friends (1852), *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847*, p. 11

passed by [his] window every morning'.[91] Kennan attributed the rising mortality which was visibly evident to the 'want of food, which produces, first, diarrhoea, then prostration, low typhus fever, and death'. Clearly, the government's system of Public Works was proving inadequate in meeting the needs of a people in dire straights and it is likely that even those still fit enough to work could not earn enough to feed their starving families.

The other notable aspect of this period of rising destitution was an analogous increase in reported cases of alleged abuses of the government system. Accounts from inspectors throughout the country reported cases in which people got onto works schemes when they did not, in the officers' view at least, genuinely require relief. Donegal was no different to anywhere else and Lieutenant Milward reported in late January that the 'present applicants for relief are, for the most part, those who do not require it'. Milward felt that such claimants were merely anxious to be employed so that they could obtain 'their share of the money', rather than as a result of destitution.[92] Such assertions are typical of the innumerable official reports of the 'idle' Irish supposedly milking the government for all they were worth throughout the course of the Famine. During the extended Poor Law relief effort from 1847 onward, we will find that one of the principal preoccupations of government officials and local guardians was the prevention of 'abuse'.

While it must be said that abuses of the Public Works system certainly took place, the derogatory remarks made in parliament and English newspapers on the character of the Irish poor were indisputably well wide of the mark. In March 1847, for example, a report in *The Times* described the Irish population as 'a people born and bred from time immemorial, in inveterate indolence, improvidence, disorder and consequent destitution'.[93] What the writer failed to acknowledge was the failure of the works to adequately deal with a crisis that had, by this time, been turned into a catastrophe. Sheer desperation undoubtedly drove large numbers of people who

[91] *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* pt ii, H.C. 1847 [797], lii, p. 156, Kennan to Mulvany, Killybegs, February 22nd 1847

[92] ibid., p. 27, Extract from Journal of Lieuteant J.W. Milward, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, January 26th 1847

[93] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 105; *The Times,* March 23rd 1847

would be considered ineligible by the government to seek employment on the works from January onward. However, Donnelly correctly points out that 'even if those deemed undeserving could have been thrown back on their own resources, supposing they had some, the undeniably destitute would more than have filled their places'.[94] As we shall see in Chapter 5, it was at around this time in late January that Russell's government began to appreciate this reality and, acknowledging the failure of its current mode of relief in Ireland, began to examine an alternative relief mechanism based on soup kitchens.[95]

On the ground in Ireland, however, the still rapidly rising numbers employed on Public Works posed a new difficulty, as farming operations had all but ground to a halt in the most distressed regions by the beginning of February. The problem centred on the tendency for labourers and small farmers to favour works employment over agricultural labour or tending to their own holdings. In relation to Donegal, the only positive reports on agriculture in this period come from the baronies of Tirhugh and Raphoe. Mr. Ffennel, a fisheries inspector travelling along the west coast of Ireland in February referred to the area between Ballyshannon and Donegal town as 'the only locality in which I saw any preparation worth mentioning for sowing and cultivation'.[96] In the eastern barony of Raphoe, meanwhile, Captain O'Neill provided an even more encouraging report when he wrote that the people were 'advanced in farming, as there are many fields ploughed, and every day a visible improvement in that way'.[97] Such a state of affairs would appear to have been the exception rather the norm in Donegal at this time however, for O'Neill went on to note that 'all other parts of this county [were] very backward' in their farming operations.[98]

O'Neill's claim is backed up strongly by a number of other commentators writing from Donegal in February. From the south-west, Kennan reported that 'nothing [had] been done... for the cultivation of the soil' in the vicinity of Killybegs.[99] In Boylagh

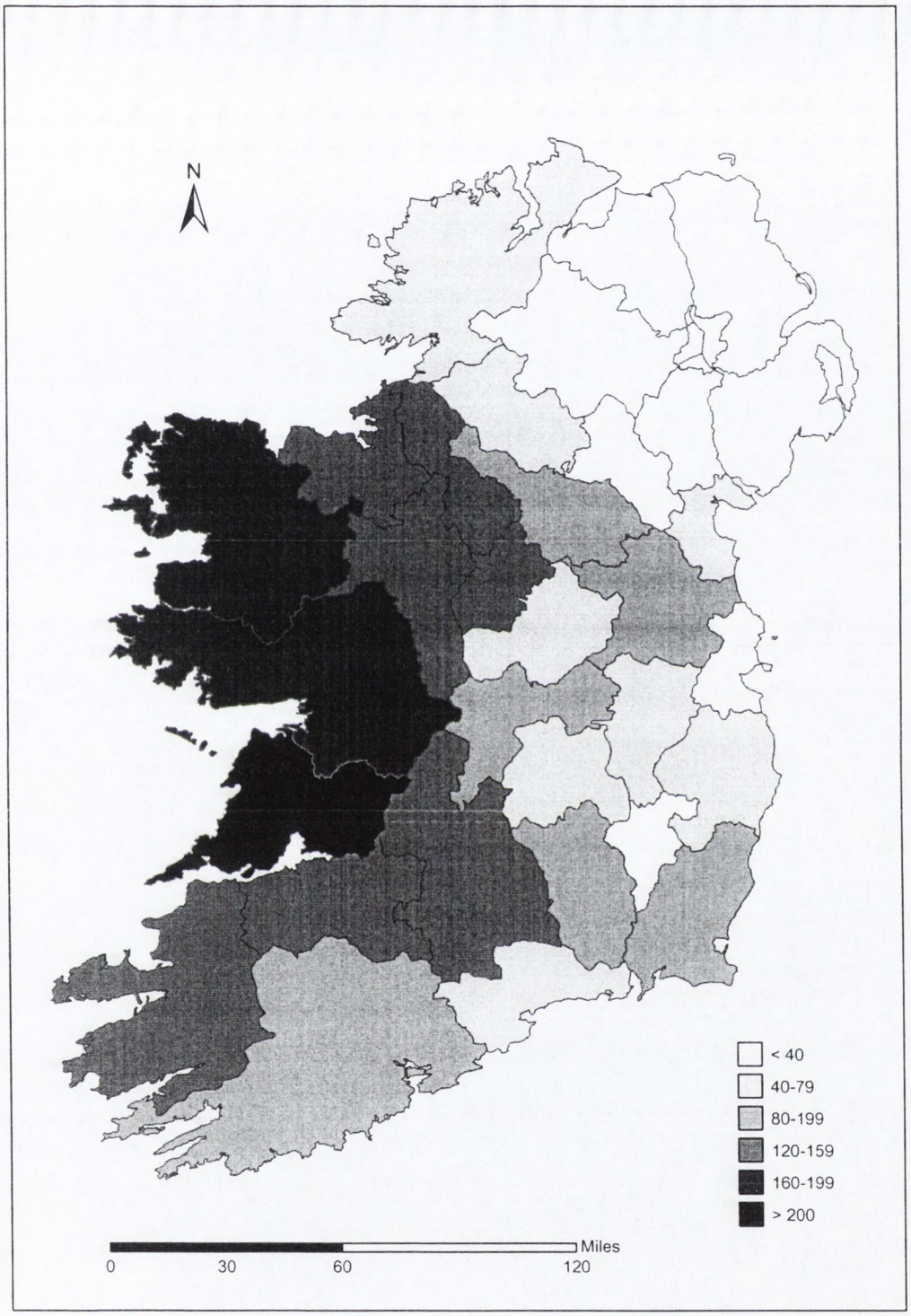
[94] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine,* p. 79
[95] See Chapter 5, Section 5.1
[96] *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* pt ii, H.C. 1847 [797], lii, p. 157, Extract of a letter from Mr. Ffennell, Inspector of Fisheries, February 23rd 1847
[97] ibid., p. 248, Extract from Journal of Captain W. O'Neill, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, February 20th 1847
[98] ibid.
[99] ibid., p. 156, Kennan to Mulvany, February 22nd 1847

barony, where greatest numbers of people were employed on Public Works, a Lieutenant Villiers noted that the land was 'nearly all lying waste' and there was not the 'slightest appearance of any farming going on'.[100] Further north in Kilmacrenan, meanwhile, Captain O'Neill reported that in no part of the barony had 'any attempt at farming commenced'.[101] Finally, another inspector's account of the level of progress in agricultural operations in Inishowen would indicate that despite the fact that a very low proportion of the population were employed on Public Works, progress in sowing and cultivation had been hindered greatly by those 'look[ing] to the Government for support'. Central to the agricultural difficulties in the barony was the absence of 'any preparation for labour among the small farmers', while the labouring population compounded the problem as they were said to 'prefer working at Public Works on roads at 9*d.* per day to going to farmers at 1*s*'.[102] Clearly, the works schemes had increased in popularity to the extent that farming operations in almost every part of Donegal were being grossly neglected at this point in time. The future implications of such a situation in terms of food provision in the short term and seed supply in the longer term are all too obvious.

Concerns relating to the potential repercussions of agricultural neglect in the most distressed parts of Ireland had absolutely no effect on the continuing masses pouring onto Public Works projects throughout the month of February. By March, over a fifth of the population in Clare were dependent on the system for employment, while the returns for Mayo and Galway place these two counties in only a marginally better position. As illustrated in Fig. 4.5, this western grouping was the zone of greatest concentration of labour on works schemes in the spring. In addition, relatively high figures of over 120 per thousand of population on Public Works were recorded in a band of counties running from Sligo and Leitrim in the north to Limerick and Kerry in the south. While Donegal is more comparable to much of Leinster than either the south or west, there were still over 21,000 people (7.19 per cent of population) employed on works schemes by the beginning of March, a number nearly double the

[100] ibid., p. 248, Extract from Journal of Lieutenant Villiers, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, February 20th 1847
[101] ibid., Extract from Journal of Captain W. O'Neill, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, February 20th 1847
[102] ibid., p. 228, Extract from Letter of W.G. Marshall, Inspector of Drainage, Co. Donegal, February 27th 1847

Fig. 4.5. Daily average number employed on Public Works per thousand of population in Ireland in the week ending March 6th 1847



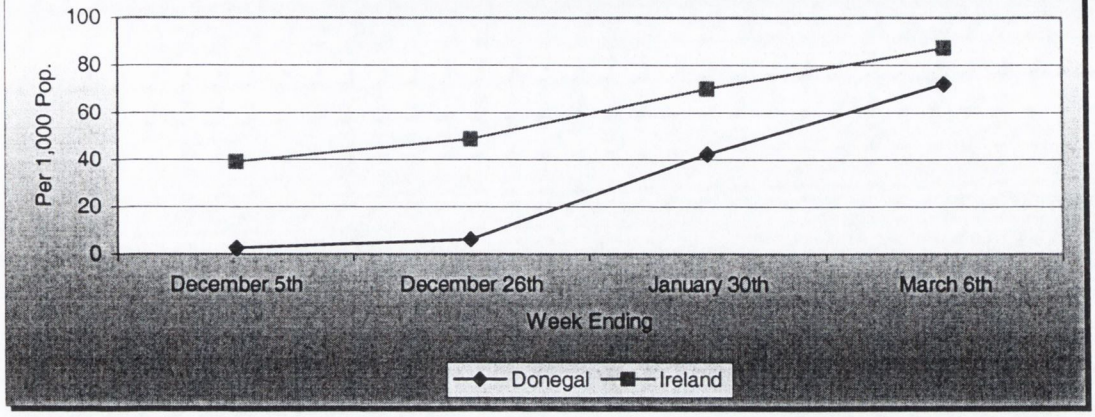
Source: *Reports of the boards of public works in Ireland relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in March 1847,* H.C. 1847[834], xvii, p. 3

12,000 or so recorded at the end of January.[103] Such widespread pressure on the system further strengthened the government's conviction that it had become, in the words of Trevelyan, a 'monstrous evil' and following the early March peak in numbers, the Public Works saw an immediate and dramatic reduction in scale.[104] The transfer of the burden of relief to the new soup kitchen scheme was not going to be easy, however, and we shall see in Chapter 5 that the government left a vacuum in the relief effort while the changeover to the new mechanism was completed, just as it had done in 1846 during the transfer to what had turned out to be a wholly inadequate and ultimately disastrous system of Public Works.

Before concluding our examination of the Public Works in operation, it is important to place the composite picture of works relief and distress in Donegal in perspective. Unquestionably, distress as a result of the 1846 potato failure was in evidence to a greater degree by the beginning of 1847 than at any previous point in the course of the Famine, but how grave was the plight of the county relative to the rest of the Ireland? We have seen that the numbers employed on works schemes in Donegal by the beginning of December were far lower than in any other county along the western seaboard. While the apparent lack of pressure on the system in December can be attributed in part to the lengthy delays in actually commencing operations, the employment statistics from the end of January onward can be taken as a sound indicator of the general level of distress. It has already been noted that the number of people employed in Donegal at the March peak of works activity countrywide, was relatively low when compared with other counties along the western seaboard. By graphing the daily average number of workers per thousand of population at various points during the operation of the schemes, it is possible to illustrate that Public Works were consistently relied upon to a lesser extent in Donegal than was the case in Ireland generally (see Fig. 4.6, overleaf).[105]

[103] ibid., p. 48
[104] ibid., pp. 232-33, Trevelyan to Burgoyne, March 10th 1847
[105] Source: *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* H.C. 1847 [764], l, pp. 376, 456; *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* pt ii, H.C. 1847 [797], lii, p. 48,54; *Reports of the boards of public works in Ireland relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in March 1847,* H.C. 1847[834], xvii, p. 3

Fig. 4.6. Daily average number of persons per thousand of population employed on Public Works in Ireland & in Donegal, December 5th 1846 to March 6th 1847

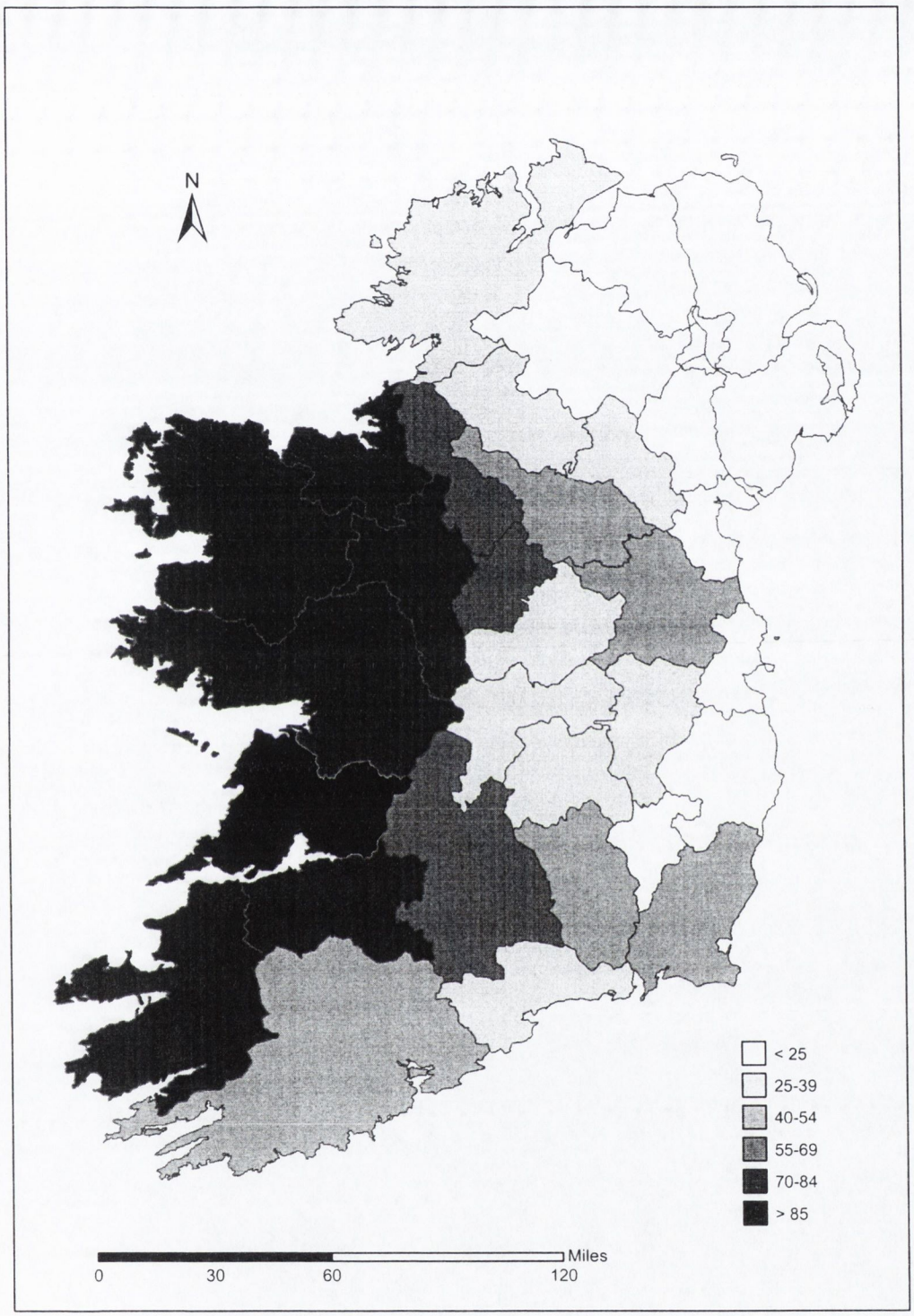


Driving home the point a little further, the retrospective data relating to Public Works for the entire period of operations under the government works legislation can be utilised in mapping the daily average number employed on works schemes in each county from October 10th 1846 to the complete cessation of activity on June 26th 1847. Fig. 4.7 illustrates the relatively healthy (or less severely distressed) position of Donegal relative to the rest of the west coast. The daily average number of labourers employed on public projects in the county was 9,002, a figure which equates to only 30 per thousand of the 1841 population.[106] While this total is the second highest in Ulster behind Cavan at 51 per thousand, the numbers employed in Donegal compare quite favourably with returns for Leinster counties, as indicated in the general trends mapped in Fig. 4.7. In actual fact, there were only five counties in Leinster where there was a lower proportion of the population on Public Works in this period, namely Kildare, Louth, Wicklow, Carlow and Dublin.[107] Donegal, therefore, emerges somewhat better than we might have expected in terms of dependence on government relief at this critical phase of the crisis.

The pattern of employment in the western counties running from Sligo south to Kerry clearly demonstrates that the socio-economic fault lines in place before 1845 were the foundation for distress and consequent dependence on relief after the Famine had struck. As discussed in Chapter 2, Donegal cannot be coupled entirely with the

[106] *Analysis of returns of poor employment under 9 Vic. c.1 and 10 Vic. c.107 from week ending 10 October 1846 to week ending 26 June 1847,* H.C. 1852[169], xviii, p. 545
[107] ibid.

Fig. 4.7. Daily average number employed on Public Works per thousand of population in Ireland from October 3rd 1846 to June 26th 1847



Source: *Analysis of returns of poor employment under 9 Vic. c.1 and 10 Vic. c.107 from week ending 10 October 1846 to week ending 26 June 1847,* H.C. 1852[169], xviii, p. 545

counties of western and southern Ireland in terms of housing, agriculture, literacy, demographics and other factors alluded to. Equally, however, the county could hardly be said to compare particularly favourably with those of Leinster either. Consequently, we might well expect the level of dependence on Public Works in 1846-7 to be higher than it turned out to be in reality. Had the potato failure been less severe in Donegal than elsewhere, it might have resulted in a lower requirement for relief in the county. As has been verified, this was not the case. Similarly, had the period of operation of works occurred during the summer, one could argue that the strong tradition of seasonal migration in Donegal might contribute to the low numbers needing employment. Again, this was not an influencing factor, for it was through the depths of winter that works schemes were principally in progress.

Finally, it could be suggested that fishing was more likely to have provided an alternative food supply for the poor in coastal areas of Donegal than in maritime localities elsewhere in the country. Given the relatively high proportion of the coastal population (over 5 per cent) engaged in fishing activity in 1845, it is not unreasonable to concur with such a view.[108] A comment made by one visitor to the county in early 1847 offers some indication that fishing may have played a role in the amelioration of conditions during the harsh winter of 1846-7. Mr. Kennan, the fisheries officer referred to previously in relation to his observations on the abandonment of farm operations, noted in February that 'with respect to the future, *nothing* has been done, except in fisheries'.[109] However, in the absence of any remotely conclusive quantitative or qualitative evidence pertaining to the role of fisheries in this period, such a remark cannot be taken as anything other than a fairly fragile indication of continuing fishing activity during the winter. At best, we can make the tacit presumption that the pre-Famine tendency for small farmers to supplement their food supply with fish was maintained in Donegal after 1845. Even if this were the case, it would still not account for the remarkably low dependence on Public Works, however. Cleary, there was another assisting force in operation during the winter of 1846-7. As we shall see, it was through the considerable efforts of local individuals

[108] *Fourth annual report of the commissioners of public works on fisheries of Ireland,* H.C. 1846[713], xxii, pp. 378-9; See Chapter 2, p. xxx

[109] *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* pt ii, H.C. 1847 [797], lii, p. 156, Kennan to Mulvany, Killybegs, February 22nd 1847

and committees that the baton of relief dropped by the government's failing Public Works system was picked up and carried through this most harrowing phase of the Famine.

4.8. THE ROLE OF LANDLORDS IN RELIEF COMITTEES

The landlords in Donegal played a dual role in the relief effort during the winter of 1846-7. Their contribution was crucial in the establishment and operation of relief committees in most parts of the county, both from a financial and organisational perspective. In addition, the employment provided by a large number of resident and progressive landlords offered reasonable wages and consequent relief to a large number of the distressed tenantry in the dark days of winter and early spring. With regard to both modes of assistance, however, there would appear to have been a degree of regional variation in the level of aid granted and south-western areas received least benefit as a result of high absenteeism. As early as November 1846, for example, the secretary of the Ardara and Inishkeel relief committee noted that Marquis Conyngham had not contributed 'one shilling to aid us in this awful crisis'.[110] The Marquis, who held vast tracts of land in both Glenties and the eastern portion of Donegal union, would appear to have failed to make any significant donation to the local committees in either area until late February 1847, when the sum of £100 appears on a subscription list of the Inver committee.[111]

Considering the sizeable fissure in the state relief effort between the closure of the depots in October and the opening of Public Works in December, the intervention of landlords was vital to the survival of the poor. In Glenties, the absence of resident proprietors made the task of the local committees considerably more problematic than in other parts of Donegal. Central to this difficulty were the government's regulations relating to official donations in aid of subscriptions to local committees, which allowed commissariat grants matching only 'private' contributions to the relief funds. This problem is referred to by Fr. Hugh O'Donnell of the Killaghtee relief committee

[110] Conaghan, P. (1997), *The Great Famine in South-West Donegal, 1845-50,* p. 111
[111] Rlf. Comm. Papers (Co. Donegal), 11/2a/3274, Rev. P. Gallagher to William Stanley, February 27th 1847

who pleaded for government contributions to match the total amount subscribed to the local fund in the early part of 1847:

> Our private subscription list is small – but this district is so miserably poor that little can be expected from those who are daily and hourly expending their means in the relief of the awful destitution by which we are surrounded. We have no resident landlords, and, as you see, little has been done by the absentees. It is truly alarming to contemplate the state of our district extending to a space of 12 miles by 6 – with a population of near 7,000 – without a single resident landlord to relieve our wretched people.[112]

In all, only £78, including a paltry £10 from Marquis Conyngham, had been donated by private individuals which meant that the bulk of funding for the committee had come from charitable organisations such as the Society of Friends and the British Association. In light of this, Routh recommended a government donation of only £91, despite the fact that the total received in donations amounted to over £290.[113] Another example of this problem was highlighted by the chairman of the Lettermacaward committee, who received only £50 from the commissariat because the majority of their £181 fund was similarly derived from charitable associations, rather than local landowners.[114] Reverend F.L. Molloy composed a response to Routh's recommendation in an effort to voice his irritation at the injustice of the official approach to subscriptions, writing: 'Am I to understand... that because we have no resident landed proprietors or gentlemen to contribute that this locality is to get not contributions from government [?]'.[115] The simple answer to this question, it would seem, was that Molloy's understanding of the government's position was quite correct, for there is no evidence that any additional contribution from commissariat funds was forthcoming.

In contrast to the situation in Glenties, the parts of Donegal which did have a resident and active gentry experienced the direct opposite effect in terms of relief committee funding and organisation in the winter of 1846-7. In Dunfanaghy, for example, Lord George Hill was the energetic chairman of the Gweedore committee, while his neighbouring proprietors, Wybrants Olphert and Alexander Stewart chaired

[112] ibid., II/2a/3275, Rev. H. O'Donnell to William Stanley, March 9th 1847
[113] ibid.
[114] ibid., II/2b/14620, Rev. F.L. Molloy to Routh, March 15th 1847
[115] ibid., II/2b/15716, Rev. F.L. Molloy to Routh, March 24th 1847

the other two committees in the union. As well as his financial donations to the local fund, Hill also used his reputation as a responsible and improving landlord to obtain a much higher level of government funding than that granted to the Glenties committees. So much so, in fact, that the Gweedore relief fund which totalled some £227 in early January, was supplemented by a commissariat donation of £300.[116] In addition, Hill openly admitted that the Gweedore committee, like the others organised by the various landowners in Dunfanaghy, was selling meal at below cost price, a practice which directly contravened government regulations. Hill's justification for such sales would appear to have been convincing enough to appease Routh's misgivings on the matter, for the commissariat donations in aid of subscriptions were not affected in any way by the landlord's admission.[117]

At an even earlier date, the Drumhome/ Rossnowlagh committee had admitted that the food provided by the local fund would be sold 'to [the] bona fide labouring poor at or even under cost price'. Financing of the fund itself was actually achieved mainly through loans from the local landlords to purchase meal, with two of the most important contributions coming from Colonel Connolly (£400) and John Hamilton (£200). As well as the loan fund, additional contributions from local landowners and others amounted to a very sizeable £485 as early as the beginning of November 1846. At that point in time, the maximum government donation in aid of local funds was only 50 per cent of the total private contribution. It is testimony to the efforts of John Hamiltion and others that Routh recommended a £235 government contribution to the fund in spite of the fact that meal was being sold at under cost price.[118] Hamilton was also chairman of the neighbouring Donegal committee and unashamedly confessed to Routh that he had allowed large scale interference in trade in early January 1847 when a large number of 'hucksters' had driven meal market prices far out of reach of the poor in the town and its hinterland. Again, while Routh's response did not actually condone such a course of action, he still recommended a donation of £150 in aid of a fund that only stood at £98. 10*s.* at the time.[119]

[116] ibid., II/2b/9400, Lord George Hill to William Stanley, January 21st 1847
[117] ibid., II/2a/9611, Lord George Hill to William Stanley, January 25th 1847, with draft reply
[118] Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), p. 124
[119] Rlf. Comm. Papers (Co. Donegal), 11/2b/9765, John Hamilton to William Stanley, January 28th 1847, with draft reply

Relief committees in eastern and north-eastern parts of Donegal appear to have had a landlord presence rivalling their counterparts in the south and northwest. In Inishowen union, for example, the local gentry played a vital role in each of the committees in operation in the closing months of 1846. In the Clonmany/ Donagh, Muff and Moville committees nearly half of all members were landed proprietors, while the extremely large membership of the Buncrana committee was composed of clergy, traders and gentry in equal measure.[120] Among the most active landlords in the union were John Harvey of Cloncha who sat on four of the five committees in the union and George Young who held much of the land in Culdaff and chaired the local committee in the parish.[121] The involvement of these proprietors clearly made a significant contribution to the relief of the poor in Inishowen, for the potato failure and initial distress was by no means less severe than in Glenties. The *Londonderry Journal* reported on November 25th 1846 that:

> Great distress, of which we have the most moving accounts exists in some portions of this half-barony [Inishowen West]. In Clonmany alone, by the report of the clergy of all denominations there are 588 destitute heads of families.[122]

Despite this disturbing report, however, we have noted that the proportion of the population requiring employment on Public Works by the end of January in Inishowen was far lower than the numbers in need of such relief in either of the two baronies which made up Glenties union. In Inishowen, like Dunfanaghy, Donegal and Ballyshannon, the resident landlord's relief committee activity clearly made a difference in the protection of the distressed during the difficult winter. Grant has pointed out their huge importance to the relief effort, noting that 'it is probably true to say that Donegal had more resident landlords committed to the success of their relief committees than any other Ulster county'.[123] Indeed, it was not only through their energy as members of local committees that the resident landlords made a difference, for another mode of relief was offered by many of the same proprietors through the provision of employment on drainage schemes.

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[120] Clinton, G. (1999), *A Benevolent Society? local relief committee membership in Ireland, 1817-52* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, TCD), p. 172
[121] ibid., pp. 173-4
[122] *Londonderry Journal,* November 25th 1846
[123] Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), p. 129

4.9. PUBLIC & PRIVATE DRAINAGE BY LANDLORDS

The vast majority of landlords in Ireland were disappointed at the government's Public Works legislation which stipulated that works carried out should not be of a 'reproductive' nature. The Donegal proprietors were no exception and their voices were added to a growing number of protests calling for reproductive works in the weeks following the introduction of the Labour Rate Act. The main thrust of the landlord's argument was that those requiring relief would be better employed in works which were 'conducive to some permanent improvement of the productive resources of the country'. In addition, the proprietors initially set out to persuade the government to reduce the area of taxation for Public Works from the existing baronial district to smaller units such as townlands, so that they might have greater control over the finances of their own estates.[124]

From Donegal, John Hamilton wrote to the Lord Lieutenant in September 1846 complaining that the reckless expenditure of money on roads would actually be detrimental to the progress of the county leaving the roads 'cut up and destroyed on 99 cases for one in which they were improved'.[125] Up until this point, Hamilton had done his best to provide employment for his tenants but was forced to scale down improvements due to lack of funds. In light of this, he called for the introduction of a measure that would enable him to obtain government loans for improvement, thereby providing employment for the distressed and allowing permanent development of agriculture in the progress. On the taxation issue, meanwhile, John Vandeleur Stewart of Letterkenny complained at the injustice of legislation that essentially left the improving landlord to be taxed for works which might only be necessary due to the neglect of other proprietors within a barony.[126]

The response to such correspondence from Donegal landlords and other proprietors countrywide came in the form of a letter from Chief Secretary Henry

[124] Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), pp. 190-91; *Northern Whig*, August 29th 1846
[125] O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), *The Estate System of Landholding in County Donegal, 1830 to 1923: a geographical analysis* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 122
[126] ibid., *Ballyshannon Herald*, September 25th 1846

Lebouchere to the Board of Works on October 5th 1846. This communication conceded that works of 'a reproductive nature and permanent utility' were allowed to be presented for at any extraordinary presentment sessions held under the Labour Rate Act on certain conditions. The first condition was that they be specified for individual electoral divisions within a barony, with the outlay assessed in proportion to the most recent Poor Law valuation of each division. This was something of a concession to the landlords who had feared a double taxation system, though it turned out not to have the desired effect. The townland taxation proposed by a number of landlords would have assured them of virtually complete control over their estates and taxes but the government dismissed such suggestions as unworkable because the fiscal administration of over 60,500 townlands in the country was viewed as an impossible task. The second condition of what would become widely known as *Lebouchere's Letter* was that a written undertaking had to be given by each proprietor that funds expended on drainage would be a charge 'exclusively on the lands to be improved'.[127]

Though the concessions outlined by Lebouchere were initially welcomed, enthusiasm began to wane quite quickly as the landlords began to realise the difficulties inherent in actually carrying out the drainage works in reality. In Donegal, plans for large scale drainage works under the *Letter* in Tirhugh barony were abandoned when the local proprietors learned that presenting for drainage would not relieve them from any of the burden of Poor Rate for their district.[128] In Banagh, meanwhile, the proprietors felt that the drainage legislation was 'so beset with difficulties and agricultural and statistical disadvantages, that they [could not] avail themselves of it, with any prospect of utility for their tenantry or estates'.[129] Though not explicitly stated by either the Tirhugh or Banagh proprietors, we can presume that one of the key difficulties with the provisions of *Lebouchere's Letter* was that it still raised the distinct possibility that improving landlords might be liable for double taxation. Unless all landlords within an electoral division agreed to expend all presentment money in drainage, those who wished to drain would have had to pay

[127] O'Rourke, J. (1902), *The History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847 with Notices of Earlier Irish Famines,* p. 550; O'Rourke reproduces the text of *Lebouchere's Letter* in its entirety, pp. 549-551
[128] O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), *The Estate System of Landholding in County Donegal, 1830 to 1923: a geographical analysis* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 124
[129] ibid., p. 125; *Ballyshannon Herald,* December 4th 1846

their share of the presentment for drainage along with the expenditure on Public Works for those estates where drainage was refused.

In the end, the potential pitfalls of Lebouchere's drainage legislation dissuaded any large number of Donegal landlords from availing of government loans offered for drainage, though the legislation was put to work in two baronies. Inishowen received advances totalling £519. 17*s.* in the period from October 1846 to February 1847. Of this, some £311. 14*s.* was advanced to Lord Templemore whose estate covered almost all of the two main electoral divisions in Burt parish to the south of the barony. The total acreage drained on the Templemore holding amounted to just under 100 acres, or around two-thirds of the total drained in the whole barony under the scheme. Apart from Inishowen, the only other Donegal barony in which Lebouchere drainage was successfully presented for was in Raphoe, where the Marquis of Abercorn was the principal landowner to apply for such works. Again, the substantial Abercorn estate covered all of three divisions along the eastern county boundary, meaning that the proprietor's expenditure of over £2,500 on drainage would not leave him exposed to double taxation as there were no Public Works in any division. In all, just over 1,000 acres were thorough drained under *Lebouchere's Letter* in Raphoe in 1846-7, the other main advances being made to R.G. Montgomery in Donaghmore (£862. 6*s.* 1*d.*), Edward Hayes in Convoy (£855. 3*s.* 0*d.*) and T.C. Style of Glenfin in Kilteevoge (£344. 4*s.* 3*d.*).[130] It will be recalled that it was in Raphoe and Inishowen baronies that the lowest proportion of the population were forced to resort to Public Works employment by the end of January 1847 (see Fig. 4.4.). It would seem likely, therefore, that the resident landlords who provided alternative employment under Lebouchere's scheme in the two baronies had at least some part to play keeping the numbers on roads schemes to a minimum. In the process, these proprietors made an invaluable contribution to the relief of distress in the winter of 1846-7.

It was not only through the government drainage scheme that Donegal landowners afforded employment to their tenants in this period. As well as their various contributions to the relief effort through local committees, the resident proprietors also made considerable exertions in the field of private drainage. As with the pattern

[130] *Seventeenth report from the board of public works, Ireland, with appendices*, H.C. 1849[1089], xxiii, p. 433; O'Donnell M.M. (1998), op cit., p. 123

of gentry involvement in relief committee activity in this period, the high level of absenteeism in Glenties union again hindered the relief of distress through landlord funded employment. On the Conyngham holding, for example, no drainage or improvement works whatsoever were carried out in this period despite the fact that this estate was not only the largest in Glenties, but the largest in the whole county. Were the Marquis to have engaged in drainage works under *Lebouchere's Letter*, he would not have been liable for double taxation to any great extent for the estate covered all of six electoral divisions in south-west Donegal, as well as portions of others. In addition to the absence of any public drainage during the critical winter of 1846-7, there would appear to have been no private efforts at employing the distressed tenantry of the Conyngham estate either. Lieutenant Milward, reporting from Glenties union in early January 1847, alluded to the fact that the property was 'much neglected' and comprised of 'an immense tract of land [122,300 acres], principally waste, but a large proportion of which could be easily reclaimed, however not a shilling has been spent on it'.[131] The problems in Glenties were compounded by the fact that the other principal landowner, Colonel Connolly, was 'very averse to drainage', while another large property held by Lady Anne Murray was under Chancery, meaning that 'nothing [could] be done with it.[132]

In other parts of Donegal, however, the private relief efforts of landlords through employment on drainage and improvement activity were considerably more prominent in this period than at any time up to the autumn of 1846. Influenced by their disappointment at the outcome of the Lebouchere scheme a number of resident proprietors began to explore the possibilities of borrowing government money through drainage legislation already in existence before the second season of potato failure. They were facilitated by the 'Summary Proceedings Act' which had been brought in earlier in 1846 under Peel's administration.[133] This piece of legislation greatly simplified the notoriously complex procedures which had hindered such government assisted private drainage schemes in the years before the Famine.[134] As early as November 1846, the improving landlord John Hamilton had already applied

[131] *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* pt ii, H.C. 1847 [797], lii, p. 89, Extract from Journal of Lieuteant J.W. Milward, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, January 2nd 1847
[132] ibid.
[133] 9 Vic. Cap. 4
[134] See: Collison Black, R.D. (1960), *Economic Thought and the Irish Question, 1817-70,* pp. 183-5

for a government loan to drain and subsoil 1,000 acres of his Donegal holdings. Hamilton was followed by two neighbouring proprietors in Donegal union by the beginning of December, when the Earl of Arran and John Leslie applied for funding toward the drainage of 1,200 acres and 4,000 acres respectively. In addition, the Milford landlord, Henry Letham, had also proposed an improvement scheme on his property, the principal objective of which was the drainage of 600 acres of land. The total acreage applied for by Donegal landowners came to 14,617 acres, or nearly one tenth of the acreage applied for nationally.[135]

The beginning of the new year saw a number of further applications for drainage loans, most notably from Anthony Grayson (2,000 acres) and Andrew Alexander Watt (1958 acres). Adding the total acreage proposed in the months of November and December to that applied for by February 13th 1847, we find that the Donegal proprietors had submitted applications to drain some 20,587 acres of land during the winter. Though it is unclear how much of the money required was actually advanced to the landowners in question, we can assume that the majority of loans were sanctioned by the Treasury, as the 'Summary Proceedings Act' had greatly reduced the amount of red tape involved in such applications. What is important in relation to this discussion, however, is that the Donegal landlords exhibited a much greater propensity for drainage and improvement in comparison to their Connaught and Leinster counterparts. In addition to the fact that nearly 10 per cent of the national acreage applied for up to the end of 1846 was in Donegal, further evidence of the resident proprietor's enthusiasm for drainage can be gleaned from the returns for January and February, when twelve separate loan applications were made. This compares with the nineteen made in the whole of Connaught and a further nineteen from landowners in Munster. The drainage of somewhere in the region of 20,000 acres in Donegal during the winter of 1846-7 was an operation which would have required large numbers of workers. It is reasonable to suggest that the employment thus created made some contribution toward keeping the numbers on Public Works to a minimum, while providing vital relief to the poorer tenants on a number of large estates.

[135] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* H.C. 1847 [764], l,, p. 140

Many Donegal landlords were, of course, experiencing quite severe financial strain in this period as a result of diminishing rental income and escalating taxes and under such circumstances were not in a position to offer direct relief through employment. However, there is evidence to suggest that a large number of proprietors and agents were willing to allow quite large rent abatements during the winter of 1846-7. O'Donnell estimates that the average abatements for this period ranged from between 30 to 50 per cent, on the basis of evidence for individual estates and upon re-examining the relevant Donegal newspaper reports for November and December 1846, there is no reason to disagree with her assessment.[136] As we shall see in Chapter 6, the Donegal landlords were to remain quite lenient in relation to the issue of diminished rental and did not evict any great number of their tenants during the Famine, unlike some of their counterparts in Munster and Connaught.[137] A good example of the type of indirect assistance afforded through rent abatements is the case of Anthony G. Cary, a lessee on the Marquis Donegall's property in south Inishowen. Though Cary was neither actively involved in the local relief committee, nor did he provide employment for his tenants, he did make a contribution to their survival during the winter by tolerating a pronounced decrease in his own income at a time when he still had to pay his own rental. Writing to the *Londonderry Journal* in January 1847, he commented that:

> When I informed you that out of my holding in the parish of Donagh, I have not received about £10 and have had to pay a half years rent to Lord Donegal, you will, I think, agree with me that I have already contributed to the relief of my tenantry.[138]

Another example of rent abatements are those which were allowed on A.R. Stewart's Kilmacrenan estate, where rents of only 50 to 80 per cent of the full amount were allowable during the difficult winter. The same proprietor also provided seed and agricultural tools to his tenants in a bid to increase cultivation, while he began paying them for drainage, subsoiling and fencing at a rate of 1*s.* to 1s 6*d.* per day.[139] With reasonably good wages available to tenants who wished to improve their own

[136] O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), *The Estate System of Landholding in County Donegal, 1830 to 1923: a geographical analysis* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 120; *Londonderry Journal,* November 4th 1846; December 23rd 1846; *Ballyshannon Herald,* November 11th 1846; November 27th 1846; December 24th 1846

[137] See Chapter 6, Section 6.8

[138] *Londonderry Journal,* January 20th 1847

[139] *Ballyshannon Herald,* January 15th 1847

holding, it can be presumed that the number choosing Public Works employment at around 9*d.* a day would have been extremely low. Similar improvement schemes financed directly through the landlords themselves were quite widespread in this period. Large numbers of tenants were employed in private works on the estates of John Harver and Isaac Colhoun in Inishowen, for example. In the same barony, the exertions of Thomas Dougerty in employing his tenants received great praise in a *Londonderry Journal* report at the beginning of December 1846 which declared that 'the improvements on his estate are most extensive, and have greatly alleviated the distress which existed in the neighbourhood'.[140]

Further south in Tirhugh, meanwhile, Lord Erne extended the improvement schemes already in operation on his estate by granting loan advances to tenants who wished to drain and fence their land. In Dunfanaghy, Lieutenant Milward referred to the works of improvement and general cultivation which were 'going on near the resident gentlemen's places' by mid-December 1846.[141] It can safely be assumed that the officer had in mind resident proprietors such as Lord George Hill and Wybrants Olphert when making this report. Even in west and south-west Donegal, where applications for Lebouchere or other government assisted drainage schemes were non-existent, there does appear to have been limited employment provided by at least two landlords. One was Colonel Connolly, who, despite his aversion to actual drainage operations, appears to have employed some of his tenants in other unspecified tasks during the winter. In addition, the Connolly family was praised by the *Ballyshannon Herald* in December 1846 for their contributions toward the purchase of food for the poor and assistance offered to the children of tenants in the form of clothes and schoolbooks.[142]

The other Glenties landlord providing employment was Captain R.W. Nesbitt in Ardara, who paid his tenants 9*d.* per day for improvements on their own holdings in the months before Public Works began in the area. In addition, Nesbitt established a soup kitchen in the village of Ardara and also distributed soup directly from his

[140] *Londonderry Journal,* December 2nd 1846; O'Donnell, *Landholding in County Donegal,* p. 128
[141] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* H.C. 1847 [764], l, p. 382, Extract from Journal of Lieuteant J.W. Milward, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, December 12th 1846
[142] O'Donnell, *Landholding in County Donegal*, p. 128; *Ballyshannon Herald,* December 24th 1846

residence at Woodhill.[143] It would appear that the Captain had hit upon a novel idea in relation to the 'soup' itself, which contained poultry purchased from the tenants themselves, thereby effectively providing relief on the double. A Quaker report from Ardara alludes to the generosity of Nesbitt at the height of the harsh winter of 1846-7:

> ... within a very short time they [Captain Nesbitt and his family] had taken upwards of three hundred fowls from the farmers, who were glad to obtain anything for them; and whilst we were talking on the subject, a little girl, the daughter of a small farmer, came to the window to implore them to take a little hen; this was done, the lady giving the child 6*d.* for it, although 2*d.* or 3*d.* was considered its value, and would have been greatly accepted. These excellent people are distributing meal and soup to a large number of people daily, who otherwise would literally have perished from want.[144]

Though it is impossible to quantify the contribution of the Donegal landlords to the relief effort during this particularly traumatic phase in the Famine, it can be argued on the basis of the evidence presented above in relation to employment and earlier in relation to relief committee involvement that their role in assisting the poorer tenants was nothing less than vital. The Society of Friends referred to the particularly active gentry throughout much of the county during the winter of 1846-7, reporting that many proprietors were 'employing large numbers of labourers for the improvement of their estates... [while] several had 100 men employed in this manner'. The report went on to say that 'many of these landlords, as well as the clergy [who were landlords in their own right in a number of cases], are most assiduously working in all ways in their power'.[145] Within Ireland itself, landed proprietors were among the very few individuals or bodies who actually had the 'power' to at least partially avert the crisis which took hold of the country during the Great Famine. In the winter of 1846-7, when the government failed to deliver an adequate response to the rapidly deteriorating conditions, the energetic Donegal proprietors would appear to have made much more of a difference than their counterparts elsewhere along the west coast.

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[143] ibid.
[144] Conaghan, P. (1997), *The Great Famine in South-West Donegal, 1845-50,* p. 113; quoting, Society of Friends (1852), *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847*
[145] ibid., p. 114

4.10. THE ROLE OF THE POOR LAW

Along with the Public Works and local committee systems of relief operating in the period from the autumn of 1846 to the late spring of 1847, there was, of course, another subsidiary support mechanism available to the destitute through the Poor Law. As in the previous year of distress the workhouses were intended to be utilised only as a last resort, the Public Works being 'the principal means of contending with the calamity'.[146] Both Routh and Trevelyan remained adamant throughout the closing months of 1846 that no additional financial support to the Poor Law system should be provided as it would merely bring upon the government the 'charge and care for all the poor in the workhouses in addition to those outside'.[147] While Russell agreed strongly with this analysis, he did advise the Lord Lieutenant that more use should be made of the workhouses than had been the case in the previous year.[148] Accordingly, the Poor Law Commissioners, anticipating an increase in pressure on the institutions, issued a circular to the boards of guardians throughout the country informing them of the potential increase in demand on their resources. They advised the guardians that they should:

> ... base the estimates for their financial and other arrangements on the assumption that the whole accommodation which the workhouse affords will be placed in requisition, during a considerable period commencing from the close of the present autumn, and recommend that the guardians should promptly review the subject of their contracts for provisions and other supplies, the present state of their stocks of bedding and clothing and the general state of their finances, so as to be prepared in due time for any accession in the number of inmates which the present state of the union render probable.[149]

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[146] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 106; Trevelyan, C. (1850), *The Irish Crisis,* p. 43

[147] *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by her majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland,* H.C. 1846[735], xxxvii, p. 241, Routh to Trevelyan, November 7th 1846

[148] O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52,* p. 245; Gooch, G.P. (1925), ed., *The Later Correspondence of Lord John Russell, 1840-1878,* p. 146

[149] BG 38/1/3, Ballyshannon Minutes, September 12th 1846; This circular, or slight variations on it, appears in the minutes of each board of guardians in Donegal and throughout the rest of the country in mid-September

The severity of the potato failure, combined with the lengthy delays in beginning Public Works operations, meant, however, that the commissioner's concerns became a reality much earlier than they had anticipated in many parts of the country, particularly the south and west. The number of workhouse inmates nationally rose steeply from early October onward and by the end of December, more than half of the 130 institutions countrywide were full, some even containing more people than their official limit. Despite the postponement of Public Works operations in many parts of Donegal, the rise in workhouse numbers was not as pronounced in the last months of 1846 as was the case in much of Connaught and Munster. The official returns for the dates on which individual workhouses were declared to be full indicate that only the Milford and Stranorlar institutions were at their accommodation limit by December 19th 1846.[150] However, a different set of union returns would suggest that the Ballyshannon establishment was also full by mid-December, as indicated in Fig. 4.8a.[151]

Even though the majority of Donegal workhouses were not actually full, or even close to capacity by the end of the year, there is still evidence of a deterioration in conditions in at least three of them as a result of the general rise in inmate numbers from October 17th to December 12th (see Figs. 4.8a & 4.8b). In Glenties, where there was still vacancies for 100 inmates by mid-December, the workhouse was said to be in a 'dreadful state', the people inside being 'half starved and only half clothed'. Furthermore, the inefficiency and mismanagement which was to become typical of the Glenties guardians in later years was already in evidence at this early stage, as they had 'not sufficient food in the house for [a] day's supply'. Such was the appalling nature of conditions in the institution that a number of people were reported to have left the house in December, 'preferring to die in their own hovels rather than in the poor house'.[152] In Letterkenny, meanwhile, the workhouse was only filled to around two thirds of its capacity by December 12th, but 'one fourth of the inmates

[150] *Thirteenth annual report of the poor law commissioners for England and Wales,* H.C. 1847[816], xxviii, l, pp. 27-8

[151] *Copies of extracts of correspondence relating to the state of the union workhouses in Ireland (first series),* H.C. 1847[766], lv, pp. 106-111; Figs. for week ending December 12th 1846

[152] Begley A. & Lally S. (1997), 'The Famine in County Donegal' in Kinealy C. & Parkhill, T. (eds.), *The Famine in Ulster: the regional impact,* p. 82; extracts from, Tuke, J.H. (1847), *Narrative of the Second, Third and Fourth and Weeks of William Forster's Visit to Some of the Distressed Districts of Ireland*

were in the infirmary' as a result of what the master of the house called 'an epidemic cancer in the mouth [scurvy]' caused by a constant diet of Indian meal.[153] Finally, Ballyshannon workhouse appears to have been in the worst condition of all. As early as November 28th, the board of guardians had decided on the basis of a medical officers report 'not to admit any more paupers until such time as those present in the house are provided with necessary clothing and accommodation in their respective wards'.[154] The resolution to postpone further admissions would appear to have done little to improve the state of the institution, for a group of Quakers visiting the workhouses in Donegal towards the end of the year 'found the [Ballyshannon] poor-house in about as bad a condition as any [they had] seen'.[155]

The rest of the workhouses in the county would appear to have been in a much better state than any of the three alluded to above. The Dunfanaghy guardians were praised by the same group of Quakers who had visited Ballyshannon in light of the 'excellent order' in which they found the union workhouse in December. Even in Milford, where accommodation was stretched to its limit by the second week of December, the house was reported to be 'in excellent order' and the inmates all 'in good health'. The resources of the Stranorlar guardians were similarly stretched in this period and it is testimony to their good management skills that the Society of Friends report on the institution referred to the 'appearance and general health' of the inmates as 'forming a pleasing contrast to many [they] had seen'.[156] Such glowing reports were mirrored by other commentators in later years, particularly in relation to Stranorlar and Dunfanaghy, where the resident and active gentry had a large input in the effective administration of the workhouses through their role as union guardians.

In sum, then, the general condition of the county workhouses was reasonably good in the latter part of 1846, with the exception of Glenties and Ballyshannon. In addition, there was remarkably little sign of any huge pressure on the Poor Law system in Donegal, a trend which was to continue throughout the rest of the winter and early spring. At a national level, severe overcrowding had become rampant by

[153] ibid.
[154] BG 38/1/3, Ballyshannon Minutes, November 28th 1846
[155] Begley A. & Lally S. (1997), 'The Famine in County Donegal' in Kinealy C. & Parkhill, T. (eds.), *The Famine in Ulster: the regional impact*, p. 82
[156] *Copies of extracts of correspondence relating to the state of the union workhouses in Ireland (third series)*, H.C. 1847[863], lv, p. 240

the end of January and 108,487 people were packed into institutions which had been built to accommodate a total of only 100,480.[157] O'Neill alludes to the problem of overcrowding in the early part of 1847, writing that it 'was mainly felt in the establishments in the south and west of the country and ninety-three of the one hundred and thirty workhouses contained more inmates than they were built to contain'.[158] The union returns for Donegal in the first week of February reveal a markedly lower burden of destitution in the county than was the case elsewhere along the western seaboard where all workhouses were either full or overcrowded. In contrast, only 2,995 inmates had been admitted to Donegal institutions by February 6th, meaning that, on average, the workhouses were slightly more than three-quarters full.[159]

It should be noted, however, that the figures for the whole county do disguise the regional variation of pressure on the system within Donegal. By splitting the returns into their individual union totals, it is possible to identify the varying burdens borne by each workhouse in the county. The returns of inmate numbers at various points between October 1846 and May 1847 are graphed for each union in Figs. 4.8a and 4.8b. It is clear that while a definite general rise in the number of inmates had occurred up to February 6th, only the Ballyshannon institution was overcrowded and even then, not dangerously so. The medical officer of the workhouse had informed the guardians that the health and safety of the inmates would not be compromised even if they allowed 'a considerable number' be admitted at the beginning if February.[160] Taking him at his word, the board allowed 53 extra inmates to be allocated accommodation.[161] Though the Milford and Stranorlar houses had been operating at above their official capacity earlier in the year on January 2nd, numbers had declined by the beginning of February, with 16 and 35 vacancies respectively

[157] O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52,* p. 245; P.R.O.I., Rlf. Comm. Papers, No. 11603, 1A/50/71

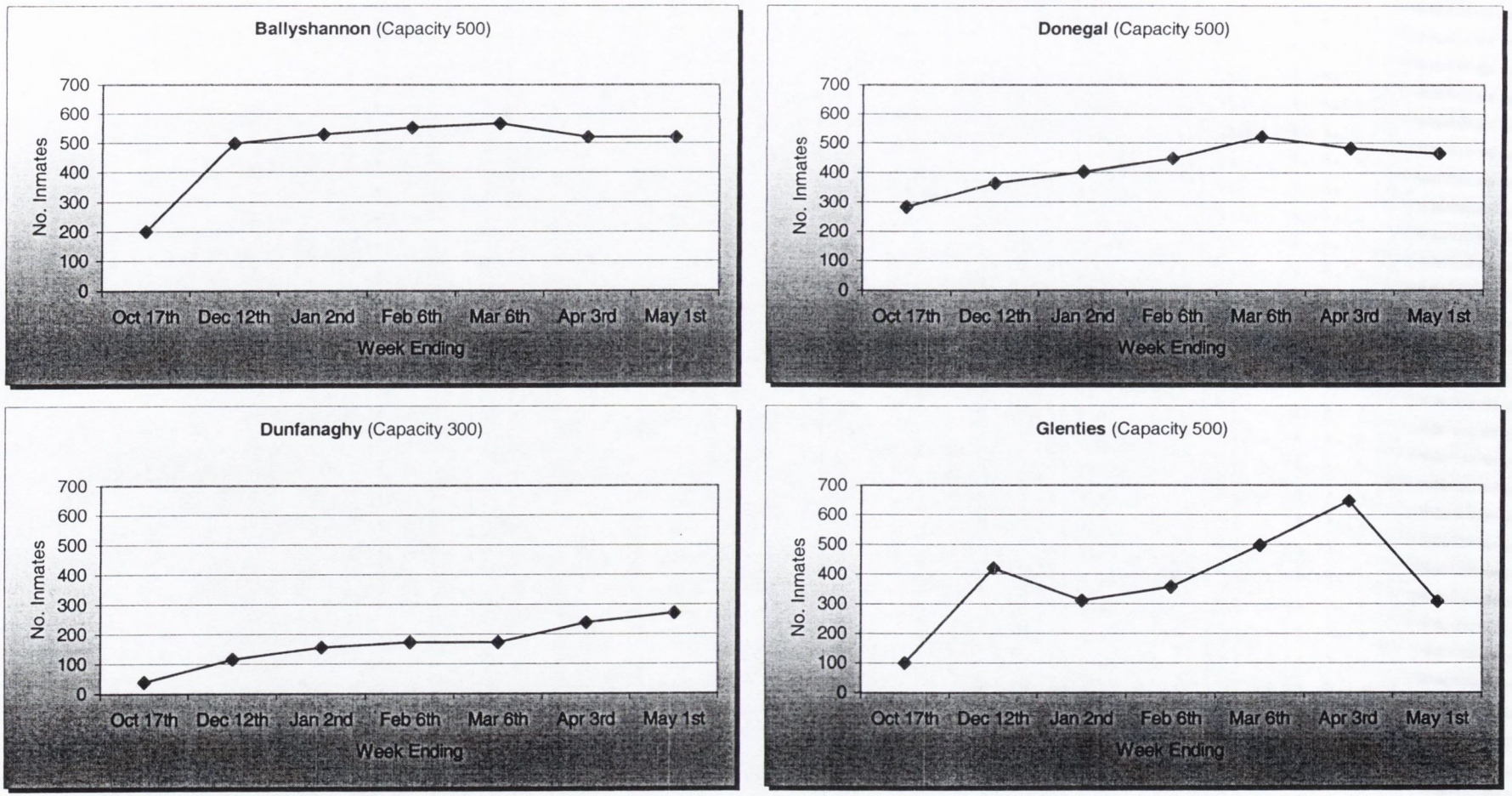
[158] ibid.

[159] *Copies of extracts of correspondence relating to the state of the union workhouses in Ireland (third series),* H.C. 1847[863], lv, pp. 238-251

[160] Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), p. 262

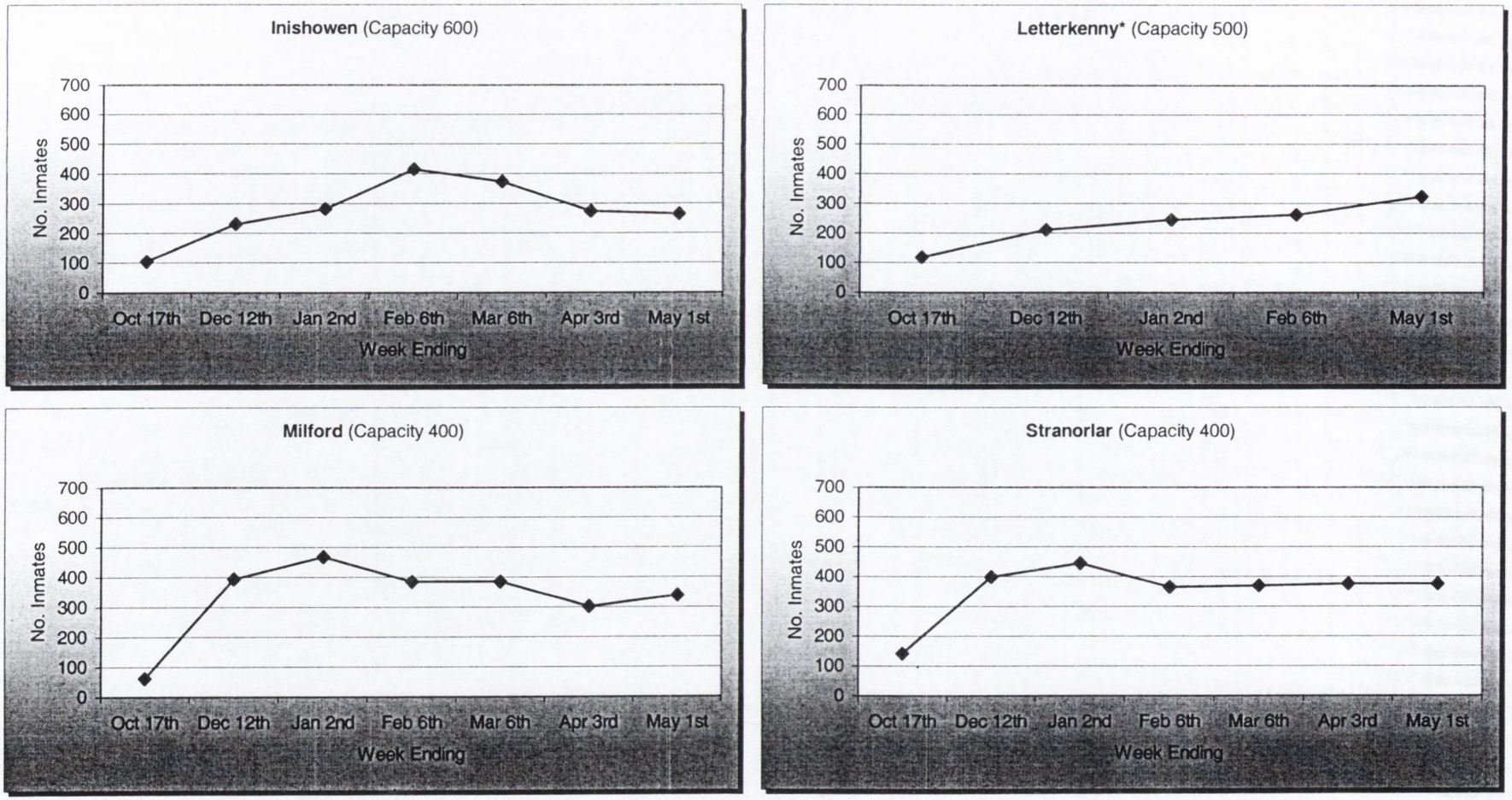
[161] *Copies of extracts of correspondence relating to the state of the union workhouses in Ireland (third series),* H.C. 1847[863], lv, p. 238

Fig 4.8a. Number of inmates in Donegal union workhouses on dates between October 17th 1846 and May 1st 1847



Source: *Copies of extracts of correspondence relating to the state of the union workhouses in Ireland (first series),* H.C. 1847[766], lv, pp. 34-5, 106-111; ibid., *(second series),* H.C. 1847[790], lv, pp. 133-138, 238-251,; ibid., *(third series),* H.C. 1847[863], lv, pp. 295-306, 358-371, 414-427

Fig 4.8b. Number of inmates in Donegal union workhouses on dates between October 17th 1846 and May 1st 1847



Source: *Copies of extracts of correspondence relating to the state of the union workhouses in Ireland (first series),* H.C. 1847[766], lv, pp. 34-5, 106-111; ibid., *(second series),* H.C. 1847[790], lv, pp. 133-138, 238-251,; ibid., *(third series),* H.C. 1847[863], lv, pp. 295-306, 358-371, 414-427

*Note: No returns for Letterkenny on March 6th or April 3rd

available on the 6th of the month.[162] In the rest of the county, the figures certainly indicate that destitution was rising, but not to the extent that any of the workhouses were either full or overcrowded.

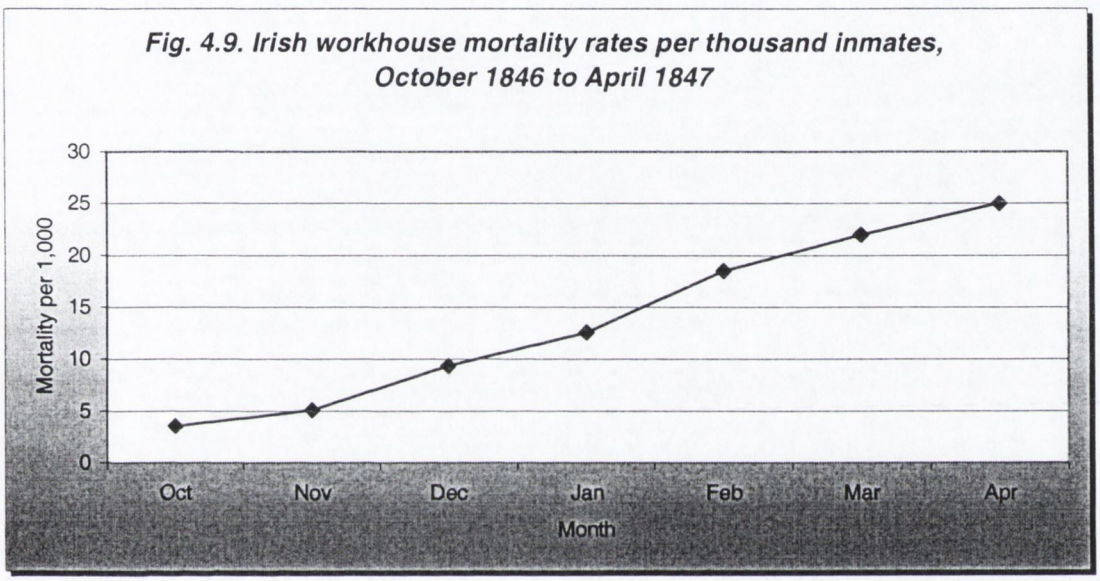
The situation in Donegal was in stark contrast to that in all of the Connaught and Munster workhouses in this period and, indeed, in quite a number of the institutions in parts of Leinster and Ulster. One of the principal difficulties faced by Irish boards of guardians at this time was the provision of additional accommodation. The most usual solution to this problem was the erection of wooden 'sleeping galleries' around the larger common rooms, dormitories or wards. In addition the Poor Law Commissioners circulated plans for wooden sheds to be erected in workhouse yards. Another means of affording auxiliary accommodation was through renting houses or other buildings near the workhouse.[163] In total, 88 of the 130 boards of guardians in the country added to their accommodation at some point during the early part of 1847 through one or more of these methods. The additional space made available amounted to some 19,198 places (148 per workhouse), a figure which is indicative of both the huge pressure on the Poor Law system and the high level of utter destitution in this period. Among the most extreme cases were Clonmel, where the 'hiring of a large concern formerly used as a brewery' provided accommodation for 1,000 people and Cork, where the guardians erected wooden sheds and hired 'portions of [the] old house of industry' to provide space for 3,250 inmates. The original capacity of these institutions was 600 in the case of Clonmel and 2,000 in Cork. That Donegal was unquestionably in a remarkably healthy position in terms of the necessity for Poor relief is reflected in the fact that no such measures were required. In fact, it was only the workhouse in Donegal town which had to be supplemented in terms of accommodation at any time before the autumn of 1847 and even then, only a small house was hired to provide space for 10 inmates.[164]

The key difficulty in relation to overcrowded workhouses nationally, was that conditions inevitably deteriorated and the spread of disease intensified as more and

[162] ibid., p. 240
[163] Circulars of Poor Law Commissioners, December 1846 to April 1847; See for example: BG 38/1/3, Ballyshannon Minutes, January 16th 1847
[164] *Thirteenth annual report of the poor law commissioners for England and Wales,* H.C. 1847[816][873], xxviii, 1, App. 16, pp. 185-187

more people were crammed in. Donnelly refers to the rapidly rising mortality as a result of fever and other illnesses, commenting on the fact that the workhouses had been 'planned and built for relieving the abnormal distress of a poor country in normal times, not to contend with the mass starvation and disease of a catastrophic famine'.[165] The full extent of increasing mortality is graphed in Fig. 4.9, which measures the average workhouse mortality rates per thousand inmates in each month from October 1846 to April 1847.[166]

Fig. 4.9. Irish workhouse mortality rates per thousand inmates, October 1846 to April 1847



The steady rise in deaths within the workhouses from October (3.5 per 1,000) to February (18.5 per 1,000) can be attributed firstly to the growing number of inmates over the winter months, but also to the universal deterioration in health outside of the institutions themselves. It stands to reason that innumerable cases of fever and dysentery beyond the workhouse walls would be transferred inside as soon as people were forced to resort to the Poor Law for relief. Once inside, disease was bound to breed and spread rapidly in the confines of an overcrowded institution. Even though inmate numbers began to decline in most parts of the country from February onward, the difficulty in ridding the institutions of disease is reflected in the continuing rise in mortality up to a peak of 25 per thousand inmates in April 1847.

[165] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 103
[166] ibid., p. 30

Since overcrowded workhouses and generally high levels of distress and disease, were most prevalent in the south and west of the country, it is unsurprising to find that workhouse mortality rates tended to be highest in a band of counties running southward from Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim to Cork and Kerry. All counties in between, as well as isolated cases in Fermanagh, Down, Louth and north Tipperary, had at least one union in which the mortality rate in the week ending April 3rd exceeded 40 per thousand of total inmates (see Fig. 4.10, overleaf). In contrast, the Co. Donegal workhouses, with the exception of the institution in Donegal union, registered rates of below twenty per thousand inmates, following the trend in the majority of unions to the east and southeast of Ireland. The situation in the workhouses to the north-west and east of the county was particularly favourable, with mortality rates of under 10 per thousand inmates in Dunfanaghy, Milford, Letterkenny and Stranorlar.[167]

The pressure on the workhouses nationally began to ease slightly from the beginning of March 1847 onward, as illustrated in Fig. 4.11.[168] However, the system was still under quite severe pressure through the months of March and April because the scaling down of Public Works in many distressed areas left large numbers of people with no alternative other than to seek relief in the workhouses. This was particularly the case in the south and west of the country, a point noted by Kinealy when she writes that 'demand for [workhouse] relief continued to be highest in the unions within counties Clare, Cork, Galway, Kerry, Limerick and Mayo'.[169] In Donegal, almost all unions recorded a decline in workhouse numbers after March 6th and Glenties was the only one to chart any significant increase (see Fig. 4.8a), presumably due to the particularly high numbers coming off Public Works.[170] The Poor Law Commissioners themselves were careful to emphasise that the decline in

[167] Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine,* p. 127

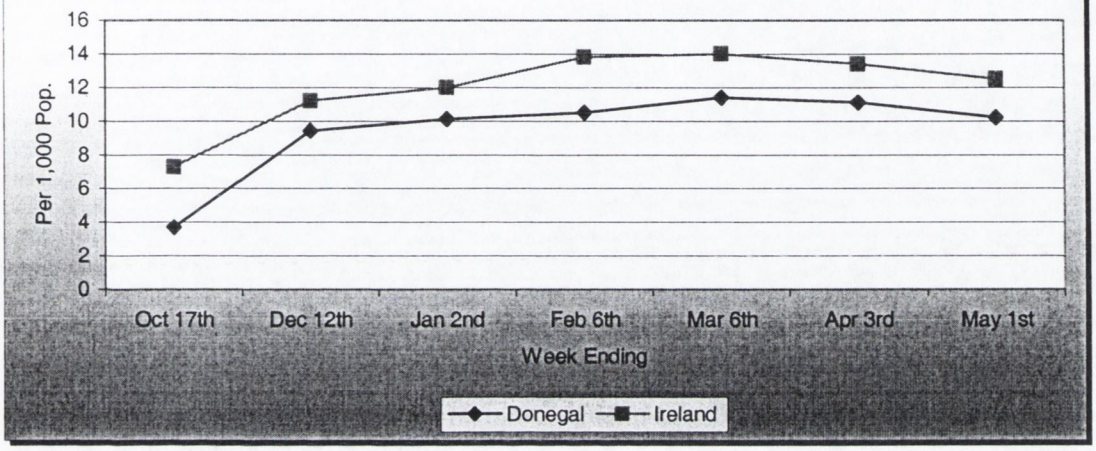
[168] *Copies of extracts of correspondence relating to the state of the union workhouses in Ireland (first series),* H.C. 1847[766], lv, pp. 34-5, 106-111; ibid., *(second series),* H.C. 1847[790], lv, pp. 133-138, 238-251,; ibid., *(third series),* H.C. 1847[863], lv, pp. 295-306, 358-371, 414-427; * Note: Figs. for Donegal are extrapolated by using the total 1841 population statistics for the eight unions in which workhouses were located within the county (280,300 total pop.), rather than the county population of 296,448. In addition, it should be noted that incomplete returns for Letterkenny for the weeks ending March 6th and April 3rd necessitates the estimation of numbers in the workhouse in those weeks. The estimate used is based on the mean number generated from the February and May returns = est. 292 for both March and April weeks.

[169] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 128

[170] Based on the fact that highest proportions of population on Public Works within Donegal in January (see Fig 4.4) were in Banagh and Boylagh baronies, it can be assumed that Glenties would be the union put under most pressure when the works schemes were scaled down.

numbers up to the beginning of May should not be viewed as 'any abatement of the distress' in many parts of the country, but could be attributed to 'increased precaution' on the part of many boards of guardians in seeking to reclaim control over unbridled admissions and overcrowding.[171]

Fig. 4.11. Workhouse inmate numbers per thousand of total population* in Donegal and in Ireland, October 1846 to May 1847

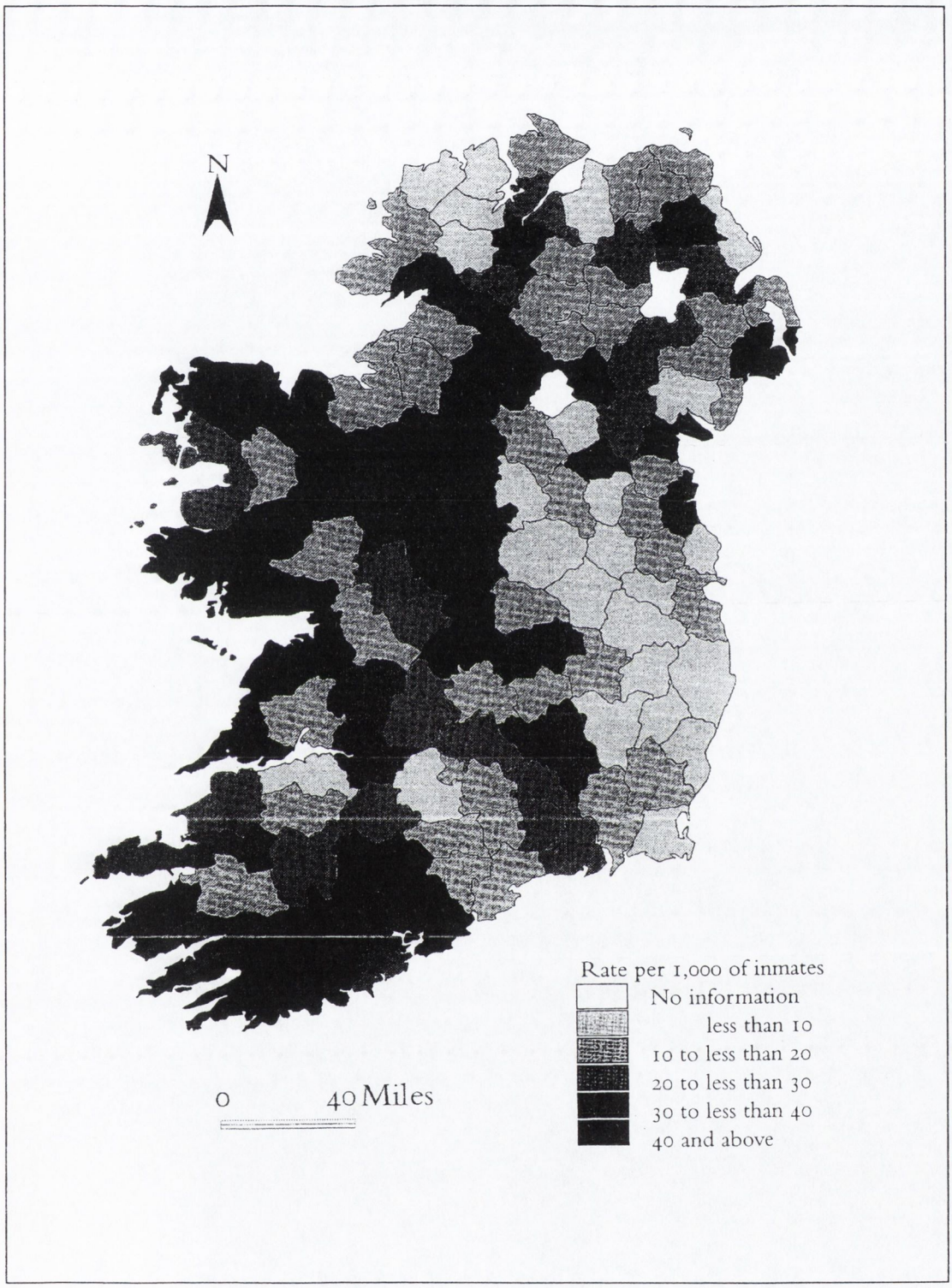


As well as illustrating the variations in pressure on the Poor Law system from the time of the universal crop failure of 1846, Fig. 4.11 also proves conclusively that at no point during this critical phase of the Famine was reliance on workhouse relief in Donegal greater than the national average. Bearing in mind that the requirement for Public Works on any great scale was similarly unnecessary, we can only come to the same conclusion as made previously with reference to the importance of the energetic Donegal landlords. In the case of all the boards of guardians in the county, with the exception of Glenties, one or more of the resident proprietors in the union played an active role in the administration and management of the workhouse through their position as board members.[172] Under the leadership of such competent 'landlord guardians', the majority of union institutions were run smoothly and efficiently with admissions kept below dangerous levels. In addition, it was largely through the efforts of the landlords themselves that the actual physical pressure of sheer volume of applicants for Poor relief was kept at bay in Donegal to a much greater extent than in counties in the west and south of Ireland in the first place. In his study of the

[171] *Thirteenth annual report of the poor law commissioners for England and Wales,* H.C. 1847[816][873], xxviii, 1, pp. 27-28, May 1st 1847

[172] See various Board of Guardians Minutes

Fig. 4.10. Workhouse inmate mortality rates in Ireland for week ending April 3rd 1847 at Poor Law union level



Source: Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine,* p. 129

Famine in Ulster, Grant emphasises that the uniquely robust response of the resident proprietors did have a telling impact on the need for workhouse relief because the landlords who expended their 'time, energy and money... in making such a success of the efforts of local relief committees in the county... helped to ease the strain on the workhouses in Donegal rather more effectively than on those in other [Ulster] counties'.[173] On the basis of Grant's very rational assessment of the state of affairs in Donegal as compared with other Ulster counties, we can likewise conclude that the landlords had an even more crucial role in bringing about the vast difference between the minimal pressure exerted on the Poor Law system in Donegal and the enormous strain placed on workhouse resources elsewhere along the west coast of Ireland.

Our assessment does not, however, account for the relatively low numbers of inmates in Glenties workhouse[174], which might, at first glance, be perceived either as an indication that distress was not particularly severe in the union or that the Public Works system was coping with the crisis adequately and obviating the need for large sections of the population to seek workhouse relief. On both counts, sufficient evidence has already been provided to prove that neither of these hypotheses holds any water. In fact, it would seem that it was the absence of any resident proprietors which may explain the incongruity of the apparently negligible pressure on the workhouse and the innumerable reports of distress and destitution in the union. It will be recalled that in Glenties, where no major landowner was a member of the board of guardians, the simple provision of food to the inmates in December could not be effectively carried out because an adequate supply had not been found. In addition, the Poor Law Commissioners found in January that the institution was 'much in want of clothing and bedding' due to the inability of the guardians to acquire such articles.[175] By February, Lieutenant Milward was reporting that far from seeing to the proper management of the workhouse, two of the Glenties guardians were in fact employed on the Public Works.[176] It can reasonably be argued that the particularly

[173] Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), p. 265
[174] See Fig. 4.8a
[175] *Copies of extracts of correspondence relating to the state of the union workhouses in Ireland (second series),* H.C. 1847[790], lv, p. 10, Statement dated January 9th 1847
[176] *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* pt ii, H.C. 1847 [797], lii, p. 238, Extract from Journal of Lieuteant J.W. Milward, Inspecting Officer, Co. Donegal, February 7th 1847

poor organisational skills of the Glenties board was a contributory factor in keeping the number of inmates at a relatively low level until the end of February simply because the institution did not actually offer any 'relief' to even the most desperate of individuals. If a starving man could not even get food in the workhouse, he had little option but to take his chances outside its walls. With a hopelessly inadequate Poor relief system and the absence of landlord assistance on the outside, the only alternative for such a person was to resort to the Public Works (assuming he could actually get onto the employment lists), a measure of 'relief' which has already been shown to have actually exacerbated distress in parts of west Donegal. As we shall see in Chapter 6, the difficulties for the poor of Glenties were to continue throughout the remainder of the Famine.

By May 1st 1847, the number of inmates in Glenties workhouse had declined in line with almost all of the others in Donegal. With the introduction of the provisions of the Temporary Relief Act during the summer, the pressure on workhouses subsided dramatically throughout the country as the poor were provided with sustenance through a successful soup kitchen network. The fact that the workhouse system was proven to be incapable of carrying the burden it was forced to shoulder in the early part of 1847 did not deter the government from resolving that the Poor Law should become the principal conduit of relief following the harvest of that year. Bearing in mind that the role of this relief mechanism was officially only a subsidiary one throughout the winter and spring of 1846-7, the prospects for its success as the main agency of relief can hardly be presumed to be good. As we shall see in Chapter 6, the continuing famine conditions after the harvest of 1847 and succeeding years presented even more challenges and in attempting to overcome them, the extended Poor Law frequently came up short. The abatement of pressure on the workhouses during the summer proved to be all too short lived and as early as July 10th, the intention to discontinue the Soup Kitchen Act had already been announced.[177] A circular from the Poor Law Commissioners advised guardians throughout the country that from August onward 'the responsibility of relieving the destitute poor in Ireland was to devolve almost wholly on the boards of guardians of the several unions'.[178]

[177] Poor Law Commissioners Circular; See e.g., BG 38/1/3, Ballyshannon Minutes, July 10th 1847
[178] ibid.

4.11. CONCLUSION: FROM CRISIS TO CATASTROPHE?

In the final assessment of the overall state response to the second failure of the potato crop in the autumn of 1846, it is difficult to see any light at the end of a very long and meandering tunnel of fatally flawed legislation and official prevarication and delay, stretching right through the winter and well into spring. At the heart of the problem is the failure of Russell's government to recognise at an early date that the blight which had damaged the crop in 1845 was showing signs of returning with even greater malevolence in the following year. It could be argued, perhaps, that since neither Russell, Trevelyan or a raft of other members of the Whig government were horticulturists or plant biologists, they could not have foreseen the imminent return of *Phytophtora infestans*, but with newspapers reporting signs of the fungus as early as April 1846, such a view would be laughable. Far from humorous, however, was the fact that this initial delay in acknowledgment of the looming crisis had a knock-on effect on relief provision throughout the harrowing winter of 1846-7.

First, there was the delay in obtaining sufficient supplies of meal which eventually resulted in the closure of government depots at a time when no other means of obtaining food were available in many parts of the country. Second, by failing to interfere with local market prices in the first place, the government not only pushed up the price of food, it also contributed to delays in allowing local committees to even source a steady supply of meal for their own relief effort. Thirdly, the lengthy delays in putting the main Public Works relief mechanism into place undoubtedly played a significant part in rising distress and mortality in the last months of 1846. Fourthly, official prevarications and bureaucracy on the ground led to constant postponements in the issuing of tickets to those who required employment and even when lists had been compiled in accordance with government regulations, masses of destitute people were still deemed ineligible for relief. Finally, once the works schemes were up and running countrywide, the Board of Works proved hopelessly (and understandably) incapable of managing and maintaining a system of such mammoth proportions in any efficient and orderly manner.

Most of the difficulties which permeated the Public Works had their root in the legislation governing the system. The original stipulation that works were not to be 'reproductive' drew well-warranted criticism from the landlords but even when the regulations were changed, the vast majority of labour was still deployed in road-making. Much of the work carried out was utterly useless in terms of improving communications, while the eventual cessation of projects left many roads unfinished, impassable or dangerous. Neither the government or the Board of Works accepted responsibility for this situation and as early as January 1847, one of the commissioners of works wrote that 'the great communications of the country are destroyed... and many [are] nearly impassable; but whose fault is that? Not ours'.[179] A far greater problem associated with the government's legislation was the inadequacy of wages which, when combined with the downward spiral of physical debility among the workers and the fact that food prices were extremely high, meant certain death for many. Though it is difficult to make an accurate estimate of mortality arising as a result of the failed relief effort, the fact that the death rate increased substantially in the Public Works period is in little doubt, as illustrated in Fig 4.12, overleaf.[180]

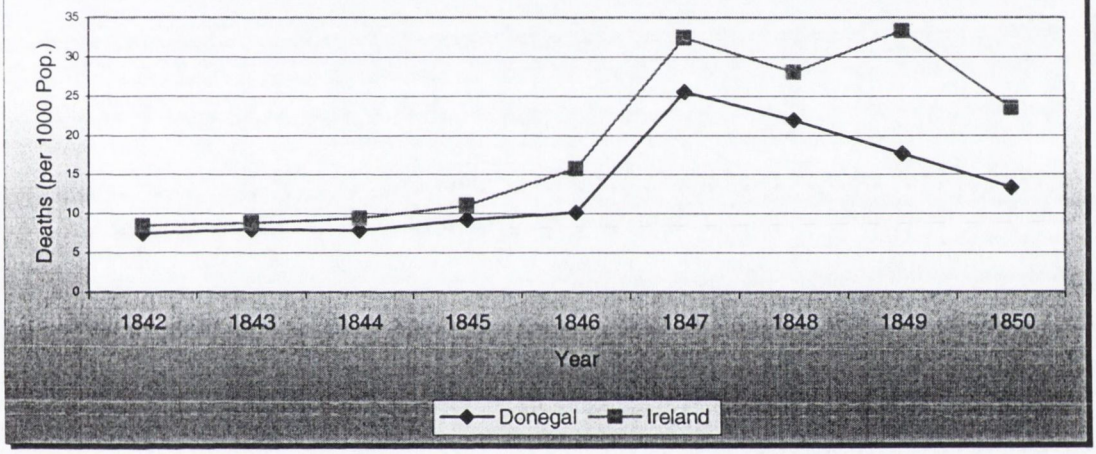
Even though the number of deaths as a result of the Famine in the months up to around October 1846 would have been negligible as a consequence of Peel's successful relief policy, the national crude death rate for the whole year rose quite markedly from its 1845 level. It is not unreasonable to suggest that this rise could be attributed to the rising mortality in evidence towards the end of 1846 when the government left a vacuum in the relief effort. Similarly, the successful implementation of the Soup Kitchen Act in the summer of 1847 kept Famine mortality to a minimum at that time also, though upon its termination mortality rose

[179] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* H.C. 1847 [764], l, p. 486, Jones to Trevelyan, January 13th 1847

[180] *Reports of the commissioners appointed to take the census for Ireland for the year 1851,* H.C. 1856[2087][2134], xxxi, Table xxxiii, p. li; * Note: Fig. 4.12. graphs the crude death rate, rather than the excess mortality rate in the period 1842-51. It does not, therefore, allow for birth rates or emigration rates, though the death rate is adjusted in accordance with an estimate of yearly decline in population based on the simple subtraction of crude deaths from total population in 1841 to get an indication of population in 1842 and so on. Though there are shortcomings associated with this method, the graph is intended to illustrate both the increasing death rate after 1845 in Ireland and a secondary concern is to demonstrate that death rates in Donegal did not exceed the national rate at any point during the period in question. Factoring any other variables into the equation would merely result in a greater potential for error and inaccuracy in relation to both objectives.

again under the extended Poor Law in the last months of the year. Taking everything into consideration, however, it is fair to say that the huge escalation in crude death rates in 1847 must mainly have been as a result of mortality during the period of Public Works operation at the beginning of the year. In answering the question implicit in the title of this chapter, we will find no more definitive evidence (at least a threefold increase in deaths) that the government did indeed turn a crisis into a catastrophe due to the abject failure of its main agency of relief to prevent the deaths of well over a hundred thousand people.[181]

Fig 4.12. Crude death rates based on retrospective 1851 Census data*, Donegal & Ireland, 1842-50



The other associated theme presented in Fig. 4.12, is the rising crude death rate in Donegal. While still significantly below the national average, the increase to around 25 per thousand of population in 1847 marks a considerable upsurge in deaths when compared to the pre-Famine level of around 8 per thousand. All of the qualitative evidence offered earlier in our discussion provides fairly definitive attestation to the fact that distress as a result of the total potato failure in the county was exceptionally severe during the winter of 1846-7. Were it not for the intervention of the resident landlords in most parts of Donegal, it would seem likely that the death rate would

[181] The figure of at least 100,000 deaths is based on the following: 1. Average no. of deaths in Ireland = 75,296 per annum, 1842-1845; 2. Total deaths in 1847 = 249,335 = difference of 174,039 over pre-Famine average; 3. Calculation allows neither for deaths of emigrants on board ships, averted births or the fact that the retrospective data used is almost certainly an underestimate of the actual number of deaths (for discussion, see Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved,* pp. 264-269); 4. On the hypotheses put forward in the text (see above), one half (at the very least) of the 174,039 deaths recorded must have occurred in the period January to May 1847 when the Public Works were the main agency of government relief. 5. Taking points 3 and 4 together, we reach a conservative estimate of 100,000+.

have been even higher, for in their absence the combined state relief systems of Public Works and Poor Law would unquestionably have proved incapable of coping with the crisis. The Quaker party travelling around the county in the depths of winter referred to this when they noted the unique contribution of the gentry in both the efficient running of the workhouses and in simply providing an alternative to state relief. They reported that: 'throughout Donegal, [they] found the resident proprietors doing much for their suffering tenantry; in many cases, all that landlords could do for their relief and assistance'.[182] If the crisis in Donegal at this time could be said not to have turned into an utter catastrophe, it was due in the main to the vital contribution of the landlords, who steered many of their tenants through what turned out to be the worst phase of the Great Famine.

[182] Conaghan, P. (1997), *The Great Famine in South-West Donegal, 1845-50,* p. 113; quoting: Tuke, J.H. (1847), *Narrative of the Second, Third and Fourth and Weeks of William Forster's Visit to Some of the Distressed Districts of Ireland*

Chapter Five

A New Departure:
Soup Kitchens in the Spring & Summer of 1847

5.1. INTRODUCTION: A NEW DEPARTURE

By the beginning of 1847 the government had already begun to acknowledge the failure of the system of Public Works in Ireland and looked toward a dramatic change of tack in its Famine relief efforts. With reports of inefficiency, corruption and violence daily reaching Dublin Castle and expenditure on Public Works spiralling uncontrollably, an alternative means of dealing with the crisis was essential. Sir Charles Trevelyan himself conceded that the method of relief employed by the government had failed disastrously, stating that 'the tide of distress has for some time past been steadily rising and appears now to have completely overflowed the barriers we endeavoured to oppose it'.[1] Moreover, the harsh winter of 1846-7 had taken its toll and severe distress and increasing levels of mortality were prevalent throughout much of the country by January as a result of the weather and the failure of relief through Public Works. Treasury officials highlighted the deterioration of conditions in correspondence with the relief commissioners at the beginning of February, acknowledging that:

> Although upwards of two million persons, either directly or indirectly, obtain assistance from the Relief Works, there are other multitudes who stand equally in need of relief ...and instances of starvation daily occur.[2]

Even in Donegal, where the level of distress and pressure on Public Works and workhouses was nowhere near as acute as in much of the south and west of the country, alarming reports from a number of commentators indicated worsening conditions as a result of dwindling food supplies and inclement weather. We have already noted a number of such reports in Chapter 4, but it is worth re-emphasising the fact that low numbers reliant on Public Works and Poor Law relief did not mean that distress was not prevalent among the poorer classes in some parts of the county. James H. Tuke, travelling in the area around Dunglow at the beginning of February, reported that west Donegal was again 'deeply covered with snow' and wrote of his fear that the Public Works would be terminated, leaving the 'poor creatures' to

[1] O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52*, p. 235; N.L.I., MS 7745, Larcom papers, Trevelyan to Jones, January 14th 1847

[2] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52*, p. 136; Chief Secretary's Office, Registered Papers, Z.1591, Treasury to Relief Commissioners, February 10th 1847

perish.[3] In another harrowing account of the 'many cases of distress' on Arranmore Island, Tuke referred to the appalling lack of resources to combat the Famine in a country governed by the foremost imperial power in the world. The inhabitants of the island were, according to Tuke, living in conditions which 'resembled more the wretched resources of savage life than those which might be expected to be found within the precincts of a civilised nation'.[4] Further south in Killybegs, the situation was scarcely any better. In a letter to the relief commissioners dated February 27th 1847, Reverend Labatt voiced his concerns at the deterioration in conditions in the parish. He wrote that he had been 'left alone to carry a wretched people through the most appalling destitution mortal creatures are capable of bearing', going on to say that 'grave numbers of poor creatures [were] already tottering under starvation and disease'.[5] The government, faced with a barrage of similar reports from newspapers and even its own officials in the west and south of the country, was compelled to adopt a new course of action in relation to the relief effort.

The central premise behind what became popularly known as the Soup Kitchen Act was that the provisions made were intended to act as a bridge between the termination of public works and the commencement of a relief effort based solely on an extended Poor Law system. The initial plans for this interim measure were announced by Lord John Russell towards the end of January and the new strategy became law on February 26th 1847.[6] Under the terms of the Temporary Relief Act, direct relief was to be provided gratuitously in soup kitchens in the form of cooked food or soup. Such a course of action marked a complete reversal of the government's previous relief policy, in that soup would be distributed without any work required in return. There can be little doubt that this was a most prudent decision when one considers the large numbers of people who had failed to attend to their holdings during the winter and at sowing time in early spring. With the new legislation in place, Russell hoped that the farmers and labourers and farmers would be encouraged to return to work on their own plots of land and 'thus tend to produce

[3] *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847,* reprinted in: Donegal Annual (1973), Vol. X, no. 3, p. 263
[4] ibid., p. 264
[5] Rlf. Com. Papers (Co. Donegal), II/2a/3278, Revd E. Labatt, Rector, Killybegs to Relief Commissioners, February 27th 1847
[6] 10 Vic. C. 7; O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52,* p. 237

food for the next harvest and procure perhaps some small wages to enable them to support their families'.[7]

The soup kitchen scheme was to be directed by a new commission which was formed by the Lord Lieutenant and chaired by Sir John Burgoyne, who had previously spent some fourteen years as chairman of the Board of Works. The other principal members of the commission had been deeply involved in the attempt to control and organise the Public Works system in earlier years of distress and were all too familiar with the difficulties of relief operations in Ireland. The Poor Law Commissioners were represented by E.T.B. Twistleton, the Board of Works by Colonel Harry Jones and the Commissariat by Sir Randolph Routh.[8] The smooth operation of the relief system was to be supervised at Poor Law union level by inspecting officers recruited from the ranks of the commissariat and board of works. With the administrative structures in place, the commission now needed to set the government's policy into motion on the ground and attempt to avoid the pitfalls which had already crippled the former mode of Famine relief.

5.2. SOCIETY OF FRIENDS SOUP KITCHENS

The commission and its officers were by no means departing into completely virgin territory with regard to the dispensing of food from soup kitchens. In fact, the government's system was to be based on an already widespread soup kitchen apparatus controlled at a local level by the Society of Friends and local relief committees. The Society of Friends, or Quakers, had first become involved in the relief effort in Ireland in November 1846, when a Central Relief Committee was established in Dublin. Two English members of the Society, James H. Tuke and William Forster, set out on a tour of the most distressed parts of the country in late November, visiting much of Connaught and western parts of Ulster including Donegal. During the course of their journey, Tuke and Forster noted that it was in areas where the administrative machinery of government relief was at its most limited that distress was often most severe. It was in these western counties that the role of

[7] Woodham-Smith, C. (1962), *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849*, p. 172

[8] *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series*, pt ii, H.C. 1847 [796], lii, pp. 105-9, Trevelyan to Members of the new Commission, February 10th 1847

the Quakers was most crucial during the early months of 1847, given that the Public Works system was already admitted to be a failure and government relief under the Soup Kitchen Act had yet to become fully operational.[9]

The most important contribution of the Society of Friends toward famine relief in the early part of 1847 was its importation of quite substantial quantities of food which could be distributed by local relief committees through soup kitchens. The Society had originally intended to supply such provisions at cost price, but as time moved on they became aware of the fact that those in greatest need of food were not in a position to purchase it at even this low rate. As a result, Quakers on the ground began to provide food for the people gratuitously, while financial aid was made available to local committees so that soup kitchens could be established. In Donegal, the timely intervention of the Society proved particularly important. As we have seen, Tuke's reports from Dunglow and Arranmore Island drew attention to the exceptionally severe weather and horrendous condition of the inhabitants of Glenties union in the first months of 1847. The circumstances of the inhabitants of other unions in west Donegal were scarcely any better. A scene described by Tuke with reference to one cramped cabin in Dunfanaghy is testimony to the worst ravages of the Famine in this period:

> One dirty cabin, not more than twelve feet square contained 17 persons. Two or three of them were full grown men, gaunt and hunger stricken, willing and wishful to obtain work, but unable. The mothers, crouching over a few embers of turf, looked misery itself. Two or three half-naked children were lying in one corner of the room, partly covered by an old rug... [while] several other children were at the time stowed away in darkness and filth.[10]

In another part of Dunfanaghy, Tuke reported that 'many families were living on a single meal of cabbage, and some... upon a little sea-weed'.[11] On the basis of such evidence, it would appear that even the considerable exertions of local landlords such as Hill and Olphert were not enough to prevent at least some of the population from feeling the effects of the Famine in Dunfanaghy. Even in the more prosperous union

[9] O'Neill, T.P. (1946), *Organisation and Administration of Relief During the Great Famine* (unpublished MA. Thesis, NUI Dublin), pp. 140-41; Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* pp. 158-59

[10] Society of Friends (1852), *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847,* p. 4-5

[11] ibid.

of Letterkenny, food was in very short supply. A group of Quakers who stopped to rest on a road near Letterkenny town were reported to have been surrounded by 'scores of starving peasants within a few minutes'.[12]

Such reports highlighted the gravity of the situation in Donegal and propelled the Central Relief Committee of the Society into immediate action on a larger scale. Throughout January and February 1847, supplies of food were landed at various ports along the coast. The provisions were mainly in the form of rice, biscuit, Indian meal and peas, along with a quantity of Scotch barley and American beef. The benevolence of the Quakers extended still further with the supply of eighteen boilers, which could be used by the local committees in the effort to dispense cooked food from their soup kitchens. Table 5.1. lists the quantities of each type of food aid and the number of boilers landed at Dunfanaghy, Templecrone, Killybegs and Donegal in the two-month period at the beginning of 1847.[13]

Table 5.1. Society of Friends provisions landed at Donegal ports in January and February 1847

Port	Indian Meal	Rice	Biscuits	Peas	Scotch Barley	Beef	Tapioca	Boilers
	Barrels	Bags	Sacks	Sacks	Bags	Casks	Casks	
Dunfanaghy	90	240	143	84	13	20	-	1
Templecrone	30	42	69	40	4	10	-	6
Killybegs	50	263	195	220	4	30	26	10
Donegal	-	70	-	-	-	-	-	1
Total	170	545	407	344	21	60	26	18

It would appear that relief was required most urgently and on the largest scale in Glenties union, given that sixteen boilers and the majority of food rations were brought ashore at Killybegs and Templecrone. Considering that the government depots in the union had all been more or less closed since October 1846, this fairly substantial supply would certainly have been appreciated by the local committees. Taking into consideration the absence of any resident proprietors to finance and direct

[12] Murphy, D. (1981), *Derry, Donegal and Modern Ulster, 1790-1921*, p. 93
[13] *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847*, reprinted in: Donegal Annual (1973), Vol. X, no. 3, p. 263

the sourcing and supply of provisions to the committees, the Quaker supply was nothing less than vital. The rest of the provisions were landed at Dunfanaghy and an unspecified proportion was allocated to the Crossroads relief committee in Creeslough, along with a boiler. It is likely that the majority of the remaining supply was distributed among the twelve local committees in Milford union where the level of distress was considerably higher than in Dunfanaghy.[14]

The total cost of the food and boilers amounted to some £6,659 and the Society bore all of the expense. So impressed was the government by the efforts of the Quakers, they agreed to meet the freight and warehousing charges for the provisions and also waived all port duties for the vessels involved.[15] As well as their expenditure on these valuable food supplies, the Society gave direct financial assistance to the local relief committees in Donegal in the form of grants totalling £1,429, bringing their total contribution to over £8,000. Such generosity was mirrored in other counties in the west and by the time the Quakers had begun to conclude their activities in the summer of 1847, they had donated around £200,000 toward the relief of distress as a result of the Famine in Ireland.[16] The success of the organisation in relieving the poor undoubtedly had a significant part to play in the government's decision to adopt a similar tack in its own relief effort.

5.3. FINANCING THE SOUP KITCHEN ACT

With the foundations of a local soup kitchen system already in operation by the beginning of 1847 and the Temporary Relief Act passed by the end of February, the commission appointed by the Lord Lieutenant to oversee the efficient running of the legislation began to set the new scheme in motion. The first step taken by the commission was to reorganise the local relief committees into units of one or more electoral divisions. As well as these district committees, a small finance committee of two to four persons was established for each Poor Law union in a bid to regulate expenditure. Next, the necessary documentation to be used by officials and local

[14] *Supplementary appendix to the seventh, and last report, of the relief commissioners,* H.C. 1847-8[958], xxix, p. 461
[15] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 160
[16] Society of Friends (1852), *Transactions of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends during the Famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847,* App. xxviii

committees had to be printed and distributed, a task which delayed the introduction of the system by a number of weeks. The delay was hardly surprising considering that the ration tickets alone numbered about three million separate vouchers.[17] In reference to the slow implementation of the new relief policy, J.S. Donnelly notes that:

> Because the relief commission was firmly determined to impose administrative order and strict financial accountability on [an] extended bureaucracy, the machinery was not activated as quickly as the doleful circumstances demanded.[18]

A further impediment to the execution of government policy on the ground was caused by delays in agreeing upon minutely detailed proposals relating to monetary support for the soup kitchens. The financial arrangements for funding the project were drawn up by J.C. Bromley and finally submitted to the Treasury on March 22nd 1847.[19] Bromley's plan, which was rigidly adhered to, required each local relief committee to choose from a list of seven methods of funding allowed by the government. Table 5.2 outlines the seven options open to the members of the committees in the order of preference which the government proposed. Having decided on what means of financing were to be pursued, the committee was then required to submit fortnightly estimates of its needs to the union finance committee who then pooled the divisional estimates together to arrive at a general union estimate for the period in question.

Table 5.2. Means of funding soup kitchens in government's order of preference[20]

1. Balances of old relief committees
2. Local subscriptions
3. General subscriptions
4. Monies in hands of guardians under the Poor Law Act
5. Rates to be struck for a sum sufficient to serve for three months
6. Loans from government in anticipation of rates to be levied
7. Grants or donations from government in aid of rates or subscriptions

[17] *First report of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847[799], xvii, p. 8

[18] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine*

[19] *Fifth, sixth and seventh reports of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847-8[876, xxix, App. Pt. I, p. 10

[20] ibid., pp. 11-13

The methods of funding clearly favoured by the Treasury were the ones which did not require any government support. The preferred method was the use of local committee's balances in hand, a measure which understandably encountered some initial resistance. The majority of committees had, however, begun to make their financial resources available by first weeks of April. The sums generated by this process are bound to have been fairly meagre for the most part and it is difficult to see how any of the four alternatives next in order of priority could have produced any substantial amount of funding. In many of the worst affected parts of the country, the chances of receiving any considerable subscriptions from charitable individuals in the locality or elsewhere were surely slim at a time when donor fatigue had been amplified by the long winter.

Similarly, the apparent optimism of the Relief Commission that 'monies in hands of guardians under the Poor Law Act' could be utilised was a severely misguided view when one considers that even the best managed boards were tottering on the brink of insolvency. The Ballyshannon guardians, for example, were barely keeping their ship afloat in the early spring of 1847, surviving mainly on regular £60 advances from the poor law commissioners.[21] With the total uncollected Poor Rate in the union amounting to some £1,233 on March 27th, the prospect of striking another temporary rate was hardly an attractive proposition either, particularly considering that further burdens were going to be placed on them upon termination of the Temporary Relief Act.[22] The position of the Ballyshannon board was one which was shared by the guardians in Glenties, Donegal and Milford, along with the vast majority of other unions in the south and west of the country.

Considering the various difficulties that went with attempts to raise funds along the first five guidelines set out in Bromley's funding theory, it was inevitable that the two methods least favoured by the government were the modes most commonly used to finance the soup kitchens in practice. In Donegal, the most popular means of raising the money necessary to keep the soup kitchens open through the spring and summer would be through loans advanced by the Relief Commissioners in

[21] BG/38/1/3, Ballyshannon Minutes, March 20th 1847; In total, the Ballyshannon board had received four advances of £60 each by this date.
[22] Ibid., March 27th 1847

anticipation of swift repayment by way of rates levied. Nearly £18,000 in total was divided between the six of the seven unions wholly contained within the county boundaries and the other three, namely Ballyshannon, Strabane and Londonderry. In addition, a further £4,396 was advanced in the form of grants in aid of rates, the bulk of which went towards the soup kitchens in Donegal, Glenties and Inishowen unions. Finally, donations in aid of subscriptions were sanctioned by the commissioners in the amount of £1,288 bringing the total outlay to nearly £24,000 by the time the establishments closed in August and early September (See Table 5.3).[23] There is no evidence to suggest that the loans advanced by the treasury on the security of rates in Donegal were ever repaid, much like the general practice in the rest of Ireland.[24]

Table 5.3. Nature and amounts of loans & grants advanced under the Temporary Relief Act to Donegal unions, 1847[25]

Union	Loans Advcd. on Credit of Rates to be Repaid	Grants in Aid of Rates	Donations in Aid of Subscriptions	Total of Advances
Ballyshannon	£3,899	-	-	£3,899
Donegal	£2,885	£1,685	£94	£4,664
Dunfanaghy	£113	£14	-	£127
Glenties	£2,132	£1,661	£13	£3,806
Inishowen	£3,410	£941	£64	£4,415
Letterkenny	-	-	£534	£534
Londonderry	£717	-	-	£717
Milford	£713	-	£139	£852
Strabane	£3,150	-	£100	£3,250
Stranorlar	£954	£95	£344	£1,393
Total	£17,973	£4,396	£1,288	£23,657

[23] *Supplementary appendix to the seventh, and last report, of the relief commissioners,* H.C. 1847-8[958], xxix, pp. 23-81

[24] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine,* p. 90

[25] *Supplementary appendix to the seventh, and last report, of the relief commissioners,* H.C. 1847-8[958], xxix, pp. 23-81

5.4. SCALING DOWN PUBLIC WORKS

Before the soup kitchen scheme could become fully operational, the system of Public Works had to be scaled down. As has already been noted, the mode of relief provided by the works was admitted to have been a complete failure by January 1847.[26] However, it will be recalled that at this point in time the numbers thus employed were still growing inexorably and disengaging the current vehicle of relief in favour of the new one was going to be an extraordinarily difficult task. Against the backdrop of a continuing escalation in numbers employed on the works, Trevelyan admitted in early March that the system had become a 'monstrous evil' with which it had become 'absolutely necessary to grapple'.[27] Accordingly, the initial attempt to tame the beast got under way before the end of that month when the Treasury ordered the immediate dismissal of 20 per cent of the labourers employed on Public Works by March 20th. A second reduction of 10 per cent was to be enforced on April 24th, with a complete cessation of all works activity to begin by May 1st. Furthermore, should a soup kitchen open in the vicinity of works sites prior to these dates, all operations were to be brought to a close immediately.[28] Though the original deadlines put in place were impossible to meet given the level of destitution and the absence in many areas of the prescribed alternative mode of relief, the discharge of nearly 700,000 labourers had taken place by the end of June.[29]

Even though the scaling down of works was not as rapid as the government would have wished, it was still far in excess of the pace at which the soup kitchens were coming into operation on the ground. To all intents and purposes this created another 'relief vacuum' in many areas over a period of anywhere between two weeks and two months while the changeover was effected, much as had occurred while Public Works were being started up at the end of 1846. Considering that the poorest electoral

[26] See Section 5.1, above
[27] Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), p. 223; *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* pt ii, H.C. 1847 [797], lii, pp. 232-33, Trevelyan to Burgoyne, March 10th 1847
[28] *Second report of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847[819], xvii, p. 7
[29] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine,* p. 83

divisions were frequently the last to open soup kitchens, the gap in relief provision resulted in a dramatic rise in distress and mortality. Grant argues that 'the loss of life in Ireland was heavier during the changeover from Public Works to relief by food than at any other phase of the Great Famine'.[30] Using the death rate in the workhouses as a barometer of the state of the country in this period, we have already seen the pronounced increase in inmate mortality rates in the immediate aftermath of the initial reduction in scale of the Public Works. Referring back to Chapter 4, it will be recalled that the institution death rate, which was normally under 5 inmates per thousand weekly, increased to a high of around 25 per thousand in the transition to soup kitchen relief.[31] Though the inmate mortality rate in Donegal at the beginning of April was certainly far lower than that recorded in other western counties, the relatively low rate should not in any way detract from the fact that the vacuum in the relief effort had horrific consequences on the ground in Donegal, however.[32] In a particularly graphic account of the period before implementation of the Temporary Relief Act in the county, John Hamilton recalled the 'melting away' of the poor and declared that '...you could not trace the people to their deaths actually; but they are gone and nobody can say where'.[33]

The other result of the delay between the closure of Public Works and the opening of the soup kitchens was a further escalation in violence in some parts of the country. In Galway, for example, a marked increase in the number of attacks on meal depots was noted as the works closed down, while several vessels off the coast were also boarded and plundered.[34] The intermittent disturbances and cases of violence associated with the allocation of tickets for Public Works in Donegal had subsided by this time and there is no evidence of any physical manifestations of dissatisfaction relating to the closure of the schemes. In fact, even in the poorest parts of the county, there is no indication that crime in any shape was particularly prevalent at this time, other than the occasional case of sheep-stealing. A Quaker travelling in the county

[30] Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), p. 247
[31] See Chapter 4, Fig. 4.9
[32] For inmate mortality rates in each union in Ireland for the week ending April 3rd 1847, see Chapter 4, Fig. 4.10
[33] ibid., p. 430
[34] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52*, p. 145

during the changeover to the provisions of the Soup Kitchen Act in May 1847, noted the generally peaceable nature of the majority of the population:

> I have heard of some instances of sheep being stolen in the mountains by those who could no longer bear the pangs of hunger; but this is by no means general. The people of the district, being naturally peaceable, [are] unstained by crimes of violence and [submit] to their suffering without much complaint.[35]

By the end of June, the system of Public Works had been terminated and the number of cases of violence throughout the country took a downward turn during a summer when the relief mechanism provided by the Temporary Relief Act operated with a considerably greater degree of success than its predecessor.

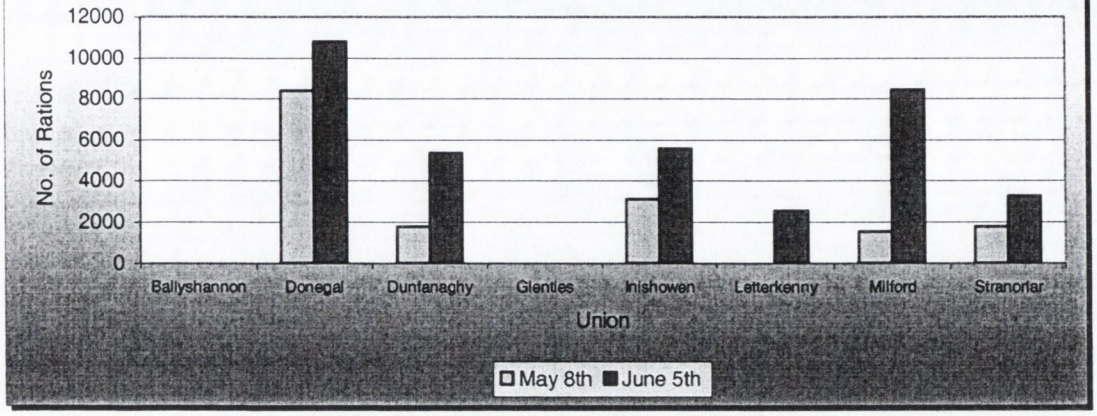
5.5. SOUP KITCHENS IN OPERATION

The operation of government aided soup kitchens in the spring and summer of 1847 was initially slow to get off the ground. By March 23rd, three days subsequent to the first dismissals of labourers from Public Works schemes, the *Freeman's Journal* declared that not a single facility had begun operations under the Temporary Relief Act.[36] Following a gradual increase in the numbers opened through the months of April and early May, the Relief Commissioners reported with a fair degree of disappointment, that only 1,248 of the 2,049 electoral divisions in the country had a soup kitchen open by May 15th.[37] The worrying aspect of this was that among the eight hundred or so that had failed to put the legislation into effect, there were a great many divisions which were in severe distress at this time. Included in these were all of the electoral divisions in Letterkenny and Ballyshannon. Even more disturbing, was the complete absence of official soup kitchens in any part of Glenties or Ballyshannon unions as late as June 5th, despite the fact that Public Works support had been withdrawn for the most part by that date (see Fig. 5.1, overleaf).[38]

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[35] ibid.; *Ballyshannon Herald,* May 21st, 1847
[36] *Freeman's Journal,* March 23rd 1847
[37] Woodham-Smith, C. (1962), *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849,* p. 287
[38] *Second report of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847[819], xvii, pp. 24-26; *Third report of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847[836], xvii, pp. 30-31

Fig. 5.1. Number of daily rations issued under the Soup Kitchen Act in Donegal unions in the weeks ending May 8th and June 5th 1847



Elsewhere in Donegal, the number of rations issued on a daily basis in the week ending May 8th totalled 16,602½, rising to 35,985 by the first week in June. The extent to which rations were being dispensed in individual unions in this period, as illustrated in Fig. 5.1, is less a gauge of distress than an indication of efficiency on the part of the relief committees overseeing the foundation of soup kitchens in Donegal, Milford, Inishowen and Dunfanaghy. Moreover, while the total number of persons receiving rations by June 3rd amounted to just over 12 per cent of the county population, there is a very strong case to be made that the provisions of the Soup Kitchen Act were not effectively dealing with the true scale of distress. It will be recalled that just over 7 per cent of the Donegal population had required employment on Public Works in March 1847.[39] Assigning five dependents to each of these 21,315 labourers raises the total relief necessity to somewhere in the region of 125,000 people. Clearly, barring that a miracle on the scale of the Biblical loaves and fishes could be performed, the 35,985 daily rations dispensed at the beginning of June cannot have fed the hungry. As there is no evidence of a descent from heaven to the north-west of Ireland in this period, we can only assume that a number of the poor may have ascended in the opposite direction.

At a national level, the percentage rise in rations dispensed over the period May 8th to June 5th was considerably higher than that which occurred in Donegal, so that by the beginning of June the number of people receiving relief under the scheme totalled

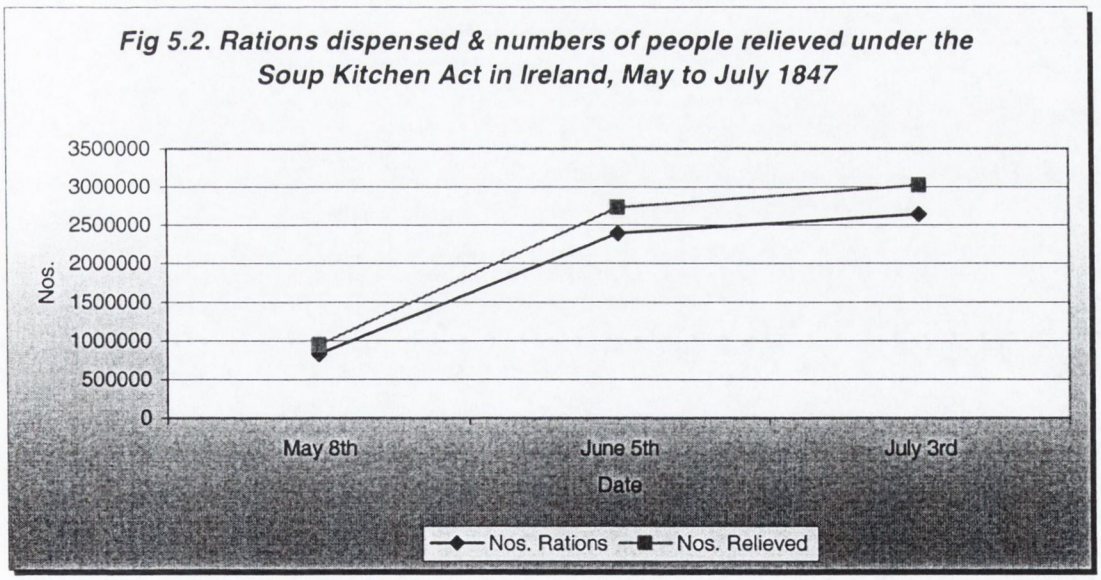
[39] See Chapter 4, Fig. 4.5

2,729,684, or just over a third of the population.[40] The initially low level of relief in May (944,372 people relieved, or 11.6 per cent of the population) can be attributed largely to the delays in official procedures and general bureaucracy, combined with a discernable reluctance on the part of the poor to seek assistance from the system. Part of the reason for this lack of enthusiasm seems to have been the widespread belief amongst those in greatest distress that in order to be eligible for soup kitchen aid, one was forced to surrender one's property in the manner of relief through the Poor Law. In addition, Woodham-Smith has noted that the manner in which food was dispensed may have been construed as an affront to 'Irish pride':

> The method of distribution was detested by the people. Each person was required to bring a bowl or pot and stand in line until his turn came to have soup or stirabout ladled into it.[41]

Despite the initial misgivings on the part of the poor, delays in implementation of policy by officials and natural teething problems for local committees, the number of people sustained throughout the month of June and well into July reached up to about three million daily. The climb to a July 3rd peak in numbers relieved of 3,020,712, or about 37 per cent of the national population, is illustrated in Fig. 5.2, below.

Fig 5.2. Rations dispensed & numbers of people relieved under the Soup Kitchen Act in Ireland, May to July 1847



[40] *Third report of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847[836], xvii, p. 29

[41] Woodham-Smith, C. (1962), *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849,* p. 295

Given the scale of the relief effort at this point, it is important to allude briefly to the stipulations for entitlement to aid under the Soup Kitchen Act and the nature of relief afforded. The regulations of the act permitted the allocation of rations to four categories of people as follows: (1) destitute helpless persons, (2) destitute able-bodied persons not holding land, (3) destitute able-bodied persons holding small portions of land, and (4) the able-bodied employed at wages insufficient for their support at the current high price of food.[42] The first two categories of people were entitled to gratuitous relief, while the third class received food gratis on condition that they cultivated their holdings. The able-bodied employed, meanwhile, were allowed to purchase the cheapest types of food at cost price.

The food provided by the soup kitchens was not necessarily 'soup' in the manner that we would view it today. It was, as the Relief Commissioners noted in their first report, 'any food cooked in a boiler, and distributed in a liquid state, thick or thin, and whether composed of meat, fish, vegetables, grain or meal'.[43] The official government line on the reason for issuing cooked, as opposed to uncooked, food, was that unfamiliarity with the correct cooking methods for raw meal would merely result in an increase in cases of dysentery and diarrhoea. After closure of the soup kitchen schemes in Donegal, J.C. Bromley considered that this policy had been a resounding success, reporting that 'in one union, Dunfanaghy, the medical men report that the people were never so healthy as since the use of cooked food'.[44] The other good reason for distributing food in cooked form was that the government considered it to be a far more stringent 'test' of destitution. Their concerns that the system might be open to abuse if food was issued raw were not without foundation, as one newspaper report indicates with regard to a number of men who had sold the family rations of uncooked meal earlier in the year and 'got drunk on the proceedings, leaving their children to starve'.[45] The conversion of food to liquor, or anything else for that matter, would not be a problem during the summer of 1847.

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[42] O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52*, p. 238; 10 Vic. Cap. 7, pp. 4-5

[43] *First report of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847[799], xvii, p. 38

[44] *Supplementary appendix to the seventh, and last report, of the relief commissioners,* H.C. 1847-8[958], xxix, Suppl. App. to 7th Report, Bromley to Relief Commissioners, December 31st 1847

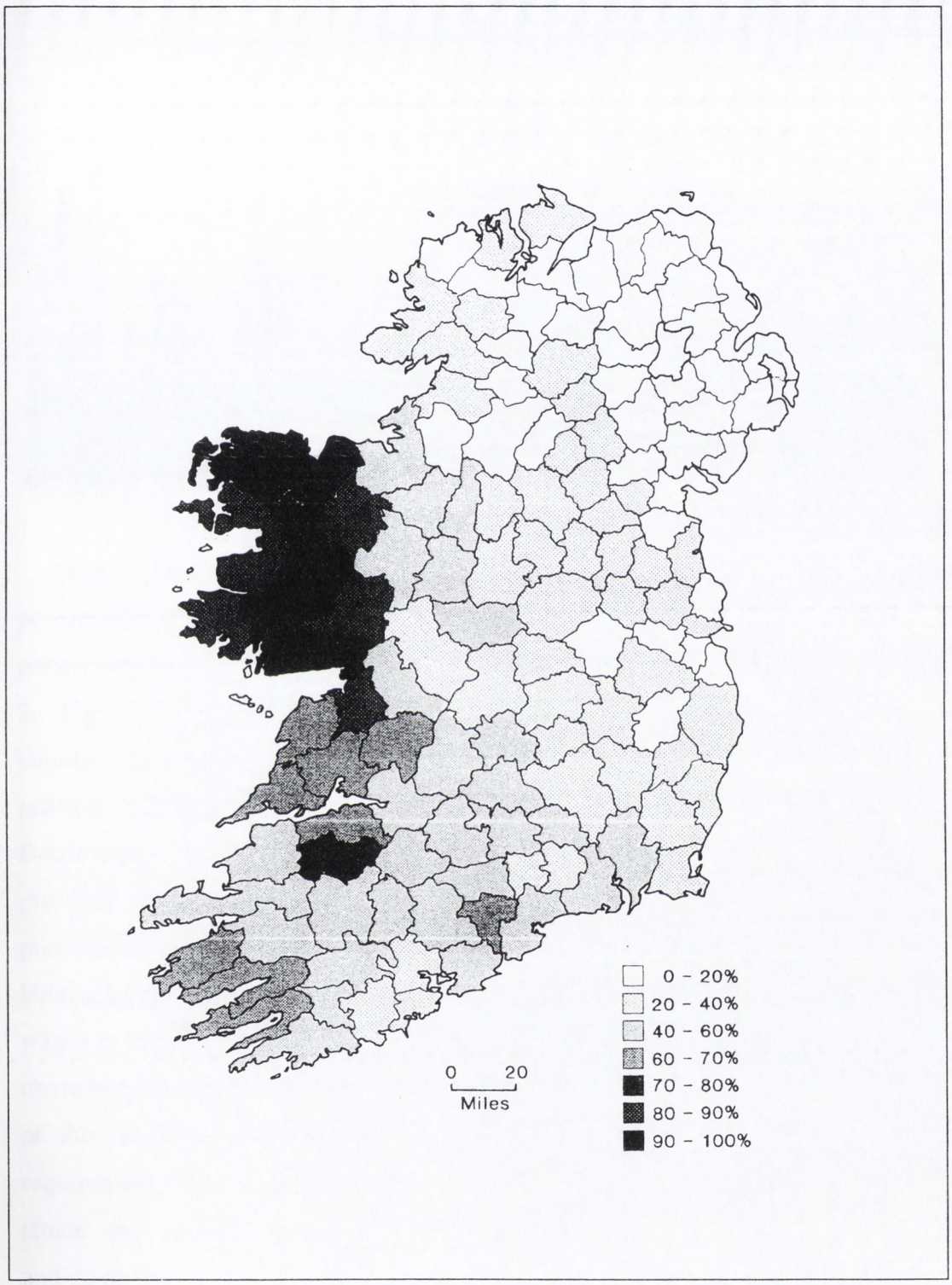
[45] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52*, p. 146; *Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette,* May 22nd 1847

As we might expect, the majority of the nearly three million applicants for relief under the Soup Kitchen Act in July were from unions grouped along the west coast of Ireland. Fig 5.3 maps the percentage of the population in receipt of rations at the height of the scheme, providing what Grant refers to as 'a rough profile of the pressure points of distress in Ireland' in this period.[46] The July statistics are certainly a far better indicator of the level of difficulty than the corresponding returns for May or June, since by this stage all but about two hundred electoral divisions had soup kitchens operating within their boundaries. The pattern of distress thus gauged is concentrated to a large extent in Cos. Mayo, Galway and Clare, in which the vast majority of unions recorded rates of above 60 per cent of the population relying on soup kitchen support. In fact, it is only the east Galway unions of Loughrea and Ballinasloe that prevent this entire western region from falling into the plus 60 per cent category. Further south, the majority of Kerry and Limerick unions appear to have required a substantially lower level of government assistance than those in west Connaught, with the exception of Newcastle in Limerick where rations were being dispensed to well over 70 per cent of the population in July.

In Donegal, an altogether more positive picture can be gleaned from Fig. 5.3. Relative to the much of the rest of the western seaboard, the requirement for relief under the Temporary Relief Act was quite low, more comparable in fact to the counties in Leinster than those of the west and south. Broadly speaking, the trend follows that set earlier in the year when the numbers employed on public works in Donegal were similarly analogous to eastern parts of Ireland.[47] Following the relatively slow implementation of the government's relief legislation in May and early June in the county, a period of considerable activity on the part of the local committees resulted in a peak figure of just under 70,000 people, or over a fifth of the county population, in receipt of daily rations in the week ending July 3rd. In all, 66 electoral divisions had come under the umbrella of the Soup Kitchen Act between May and July, with 100 per cent coverage of land area in Milford, Donegal, Ballyshannon and Inishowen unions. Meanwhile, only one out of the eleven divisions in Stranorlar and two of the thirteen in Glenties failed to apply to the relief

[46] Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), p. 237
[47] See Chapter 4, Fig. 4.7

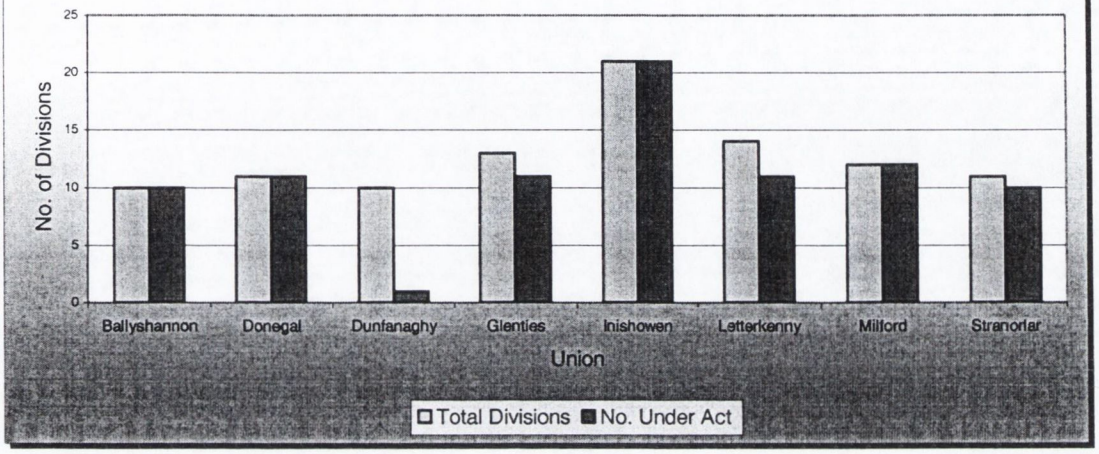
Fig. 5.3. Percentage of population in receipt of rations in each union in Ireland under the Temporary Relief Act, July 1847



O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52*, p. 242

commission for advances toward soup kitchen provision in this period, as indicated in Fig. 5.4.

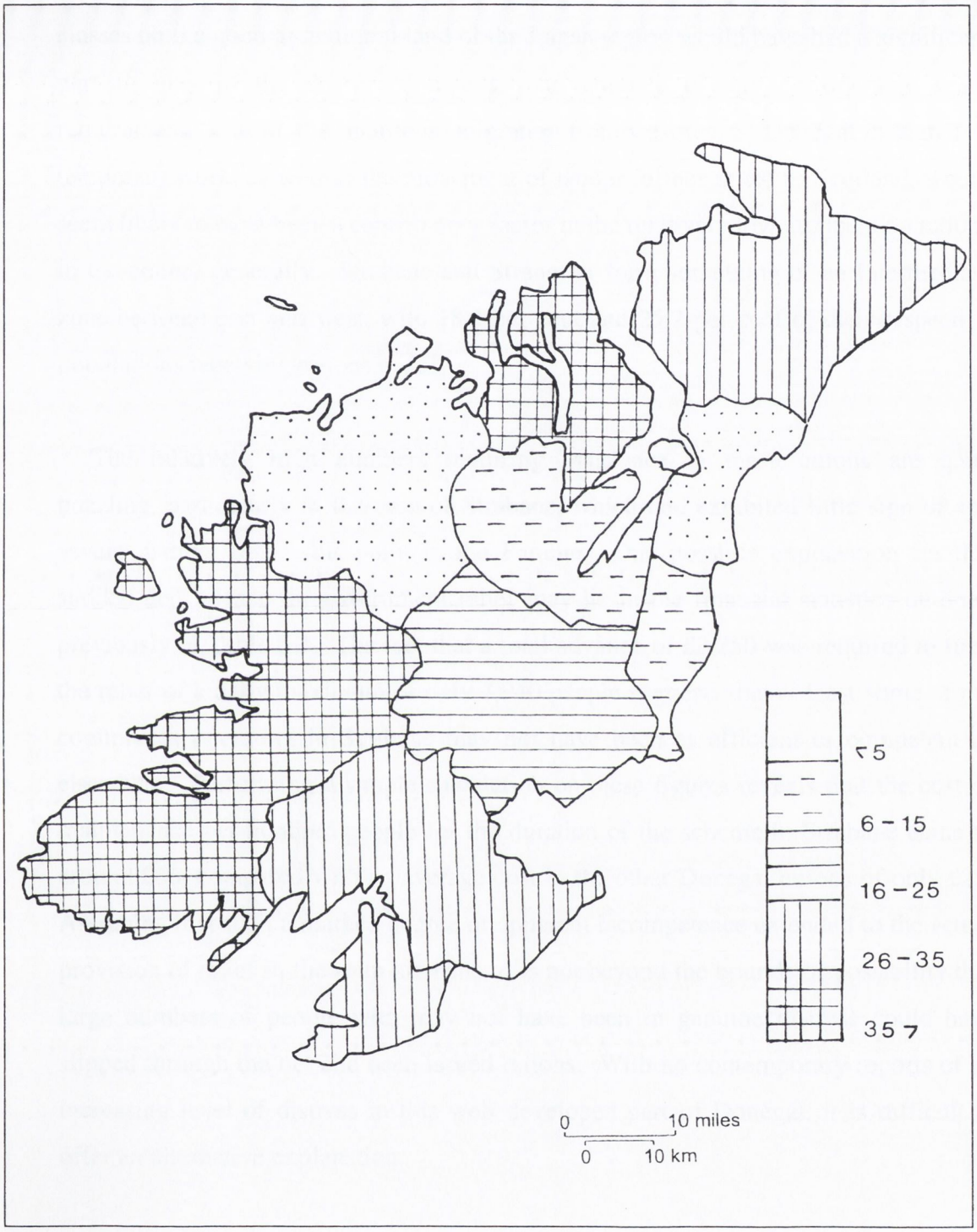
Fig. 5.4. Number of electoral divisions in eight Donegal unions under the terms of the Soup Kitchen Act, July 1847



Within Donegal, we find that the spatial spread of distress as indicated by the percentage of the population receiving rations during the summer is arranged in a pattern which corresponds strikingly with the pre-Famine trends discussed in Chapter 2. Fig. 5.5 maps the maximum number of persons on rations in each union in the county. Clearly, the poorer western portion of the county was the area in which greatest reliance on the soup kitchens occurred, with the notable exception of Dunfanaghy, where only 4.6 per cent of the population sought the sustenance provided by the government at the height of the scheme. It would seem that the presence of active landlords such as Lord George Hill was still making a difference in Dunfanaghy and it is likely that at least some of the population were in able to earn wages in improvement works on the Gweedore estate and others in the union, thereby obviating the need to seek rations. According to John Vandaleur Stewart, chairman of the neighbouring Letterkenny union, the principal reason for the low relief requirement in Dunfanaghy was that the 'mutual relationship' between landlord and tenant was healthy and its resident proprietors had given the character of the union and its public opinion a 'sound tone'. In addition he noted that Dunfanaghy had 'long been remarkable for its orderly and industrious habits'.[48]

[48] *Reports from the select committee of the house of lords appointed to inquire into the operation of the Irish Poor Law, and the expediency of making any amendments to its enactments, together with minutes of evidence,* H.C. 1849[192], xvi, p. 342

Fig. 5.5. Maximum number of persons on rations under the Temporary Relief Act in Donegal Unions as percentage of population, 1847



Source: *Supplementary appendix to the seventh, and last report, of the relief commissioners,* H.C. 1847-8[958], xxix, pp. 23-81

To the east, in the more prosperous unions of Letterkenny and Londonderry, the daily number of rations dispensed never exceeded 3,000 in the former and 5,000 in the latter. Presumably the fact that the level of available employment for the poorer classes on the good agricultural land of the Lagan region would have had a significant part to play in the dearth of distress and absence of any considerable relief requirement. Indeed, the traditional migration from west to east Donegal in search of temporary work, as well as the movement of labour further afield to Scotland, would seem likely to have been a contributory factor in the relatively low numbers on rations in the county generally. Strabane and Stranorlar form something of an intermediate zone between east and west, with 18.4 per cent and 25.2 per cent of their respective populations receiving rations in July.

The relatively high numbers requiring assistance in these unions are quite puzzling, particularly in the case of Strabane, which had exhibited little sign of any severe distress up to this point in the Famine. One possible explanation for this sudden dependence on government relief may lie in the financial statistics outlined previously in Table 5.3. The fact that a total advance of £3,250 was required to fund the relief of a daily maximum of only 4,940 people suggests that at least some of the committees operating in Strabane may not have been as efficient or competent as elsewhere. Performing a simple calculation on these figures reveals that the cost of maintenance per hundred people for the duration of the scheme in Strabane came to around £66, compared with an average cost in the other Donegal unions of only £25. Assuming that such a marked degree of apparent incompetence extended to the actual provision of relief in the soup kitchens, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that large numbers of people who may not have been in genuine distress could have slipped through the net and been issued rations. With no contemporary reports of an increasing level of distress in this well developed part of Donegal, it is difficult to offer an alternative explanation.

Finally, we move to the west, where the level of distress evident throughout the previous year of famine appears to have continued into the summer of 1847. As illustrated in Fig. 5.5, the people of Inishowen, Donegal and Ballyshannon did not rely on the soup kitchens to quite the same extent as was the case in Milford and Glenties, although somewhere between a quarter and a third of the population in each

were dependant on rations at the peak of the schemes in July. Glenties, somewhat surprisingly, was actually second to Milford in terms of the proportion of inhabitants applying for relief. A high of 35.6 per cent of the population receiving food from the committees was still considerably lower than the proportions noted with respect to the majority of unions in the south and west of Ireland. Considering that there were no resident proprietors to provide either finance for the soup kitchen schemes or an alternative mechanism of relief in the union, the fact that just only over a third of the population required rations during July indicates that the level of distress was still low relative to much of the rest of the west coast.

In Milford, the soup kitchen network already in operation in the spring of 1847 had been reformed in accordance with government regulations by the beginning of May and there were already 1,780 people receiving rations in the first week of that month. By June 5th numbers had risen to over eight thousand, a level at which they stayed until termination of activity in August. The fact that such a high proportion of the population (38.2 per cent) required relief for the entire three-month period suggests that the level of distress in Milford may have been even higher than in Glenties at this time. While the number of people receiving rations in Glenties had dropped from 9,183 at the end of July to only 5,478 by the end of August, the number applying for relief at Milford soup kitchens actually rose from 8,373 to 9,881 in the same period.[49]

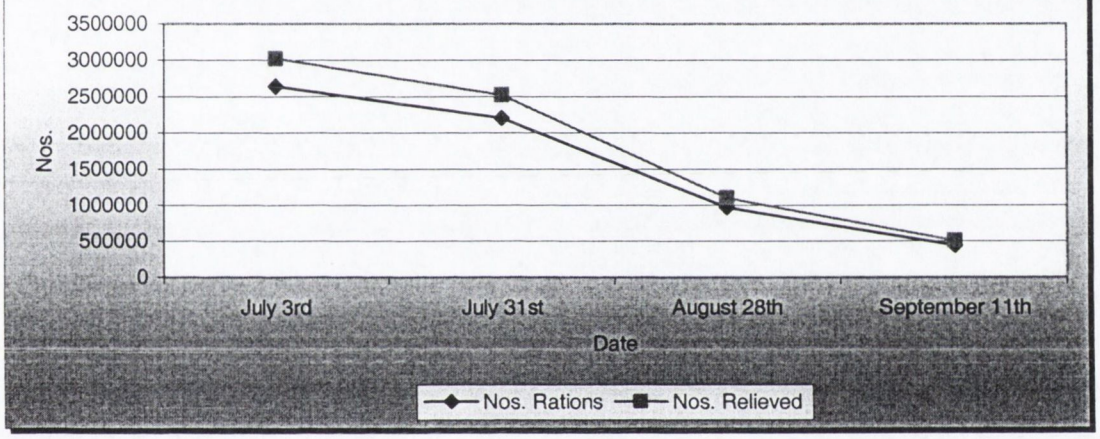
One other interesting point relating to the relief operation in Milford is the manner in which it was funded. Referring back to Table 5.3, it will be noted that loans and subscriptions totalling a mere £852 were advanced to the local committees from the Relief Commission. This equates to only £6 per hundred persons receiving rations over the four months from May to the end of August. To put it another way, somewhere in the region of 12,000 rations would feed a hundred people for the four-month period, but the cost of this would come to considerably more than £6. In fact at the standard cost of a single ration (about 1*d.*), the total cost of feeding a hundred people during the summer would come to around £50. The question is, where was the £44 shortfall coming from? The answer lies in an obscure reference to Milford by J.C. Bromley in a report to the Relief Commissioners dated December 31st 1847:

[49] *Fourth report of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847[859], xvii, pp. 148-49

> The difficulty of improving the condition of the people is reported to be very great; yet out of his country the Irishman is admitted to be energetic and industrious, and this is shown by the sum of 2200*l.* having been remitted from abroad, within the last six months, through the post office of the little town of Rathmelton.[50]

Evidently, help from afar was at hand for the relief of distress in Milford. Given the scale of pre-Famine emigration from Donegal, it is reasonable to assume that charitable donations from abroad must have played a crucial role in the relief effort throughout the course of the Famine in many parts of the county.

Fig. 5.6. Rations dispensed & numbers of people relieved under the Soup Kitchen Act in Ireland, July to September 1847



With the exception of Milford, the numbers of people receiving rations under the Temporary Relief Act declined steadily in the other unions in Donegal from the peak of soup kitchen activity in the week ending July 3rd. This was also the case in the country at large, as the official cessation date for relief operations was set at August 15th in fifty-five unions in the east and midlands. The remaining soup kitchens, mostly situated in the west and south of the country were to close by August 29th, at which time the transfer of the relief effort to an extended Poor Law system was to occur. The decline in numbers receiving relief from July 3rd onward is charted in Fig. 5.6.[51] The reason that there were still over half a million people receiving rations on

[50] *Supplementary appendix to the seventh, and last report, of the relief commissioners,* H.C. 1847-8[958], xxix, p. 131

[51] *Fourth report of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847[859], xvii, p. 5; *Fifth, sixth and seventh reports of the relief commissioners (constituted under the Act 10 Vic., c. 7), with appendices,* H.C. 1847-8[876], xxix, pp. 6-7

September 11th, two weeks after the official termination of operations, was that the 'impotent' sick or poor in the forty-six most distressed unions could continue to apply for relief under the Soup Kitchen Act until September 30th. The fact that Milford and Donegal unions did not cease operations until August 29th and Ballyshannon and Glenties until September 12th is a fair indication that Donegal was far from out of the woods in relation to the crippling distress caused by the Great Famine.

5.6. CONCLUSION: A SUCCESSFUL RELIEF MECHANISM

Though the transition from the Public Works system to relief under the Temporary Relief Act had been a difficult one which had undoubtedly resulted in avoidable distress and even deaths, the final verdict on the soup kitchen scheme can only be that it was a success. The Relief Commissioners, in their final report on the subject, emphatically declared that 'the measure has finally succeeded in its object, there can not be the slightest doubt'.[52] Local committee workers were equally satisfied that the relief operation had accomplished its goal, one volunteer even leaping to its defence by emphasising that 'however easy it may be to find fault, it is not so easy to feed more than three millions of souls'.[53] This statement is one which is an effective summation of the achievements of the government in this period, for at no other time during the course of the Famine was a relief operation put into place which even remotely aspired to such an ambition.

During the inauguration of the act in the spring of 1847, concerns had been voiced in relation to the ability of the thousands of Irish local committees to efficiently orchestrate and implement the proposed policies on the scale which seemed necessary. The principal worry had been that corruption and abuses of the system would result in spiralling costs and a repeat of the Public Works debacle. Any doubts as to the capabilities and honourable nature of the majority of volunteers had been answered by the time the project had wound down, thanks to the many reports of their ardent commitment to their task and the discovery that government expenditure on the scheme had been far from excessive. In fact the final cost to the public purse of some

[52] *Supplementary appendix to the seventh, and last report, of the relief commissioners,* H.C. 1847-8[958], xxix, p. 10

[53] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine,* p. 90; ibid, p. 12

£1,724,631 was more than half a million pounds less than had been anticipated and amounted to only about a third of the cost of the appallingly uneconomical Public Works of the previous winter and spring.[54]

As well as the efficiency of the local committees and union finance committees in keeping costs at a minimum, the success of the soup kitchens scheme was facilitated by the fact that cereal imports to Ireland were far greater than exports from the country, a reversal of situation in the months following the harvest of 1846.[55] In addition, a slump in food prices in early spring had seen the cost of Indian corn plummet from a high of £19 per ton in February 1847 to only £7 10*s* per ton by the end of August.[56] These falling prices allowed for significant savings in the establishment and running of soup kitchens, thereby making possible the relief of a greater number of people in a more efficient manner than would otherwise have been possible.

Such was the popularity of the soup kitchen mode of relief that the Commissioners were moved to state in their final report that the regret was 'universal... that it had not preceded all other measures of relief'.[57] Regardless of its popularity, however, the Temporary Relief Act did not establish a precedent for the provision of gratuitous and extensive outdoor assistance. Even as the relief measures ground to a halt in late August the Irish Poor Relief Extension Bill had already passed through parliament and Irish property was thereafter to assume sole responsibility for Irish poverty.

[54] *Supplementary appendix to the seventh, and last report, of the relief commissioners,* H.C. 1847-8[958], xxix, pp. 16-17

[55] O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52,* p. 244

[56] Woodham-Smith, C. (1962), *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849,* p. 293

[57] Grant, J. (1986), *The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster, 1845-49: the mechanisms of relief* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Queens University Belfast), p. 249; *Supplementary appendix to the seventh, and last report, of the relief commissioners,* H.C. 1847-8[958], xxix, p. 11

CHAPTER SIX

PROPERTY SUPPORTING POVERTY: THE EXTENDED POOR LAW, 1847-52

6.1. INTRODUCTION

The termination of the Temporary Relief Act in the autumn of 1847 saw the closure of the majority of Donegal soup kitchens by the end of August. The remaining schemes in Ballyshannon and Glenties unions ceased operations on September 12th and relief thereafter was to be administered solely through the Poor Law system under an extended Act of June 1847. A reorganisation of the Poor Law Commission led to the establishment of a separate Irish Commission in Dublin, under Edward Twistleton as Chief Commissioner. The operation of Poor Law relief mechanisms was to be controlled by Twistleton with the assistance of the Chief Secretary, Sir William M. Somerville and the Under Secretary, T.N. Redington.[1] The monetary crisis of late 1847 in Britain had led to a hardening of public opinion in relation to Famine relief in Ireland and the transfer of the fiscal burden of relief from central to local resources seemed to represent a viable solution to the problem. Thus, the efficient levying and collection of the Poor Rate in each electoral division was required to finance aid to the destitute therein. The introduction of the provisions of Irish Poor Relief Extension Act in the autumn of 1847 placed the burden of relief firstly at the door of the 130 Poor Law union workhouses in the country. Once the workhouses were full, the Act empowered the boards of guardians to grant outdoor relief to the able-bodied destitute.

The key purpose of this chapter is to chart the continuing national and regional patterns of state relief, destitution and distress in the period 1847 to 1850 and to assess the effectiveness of the Poor Law as a relief mechanism. Consequently, we will begin by alluding to the financial basis of the relief efforts and the difficulties associated with attempting to extract highest Poor Rates from the same areas in which the impact of the Famine was likely to be most severely felt, before referring to the activities and monetary contribution of the British Association to Famine relief. A subsequent thorough examination of both the indoor and outdoor relief systems in Donegal and at a national level is essential in attempting to gain an idea of patterns of distress countrywide. Towards the end of the chapter, an investigation into the effect

[1] O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52*, p. 246

of the controversial 'Gregory Clause' which stipulated that persons holding more than a quarter acre of land were prohibited from receiving assistance under the Act is carried out. This clause, along with pre-existing legislation under which landlords bore the responsibility for payment of Poor Rates on holdings on their estates valued at under £4, presented an opportunity and a motivation for landlords to carry out evictions. Firstly, however, it is necessary to concentrate on the 1847 harvest and the extent of the potato blight.

6.2. THE 1847 HARVEST

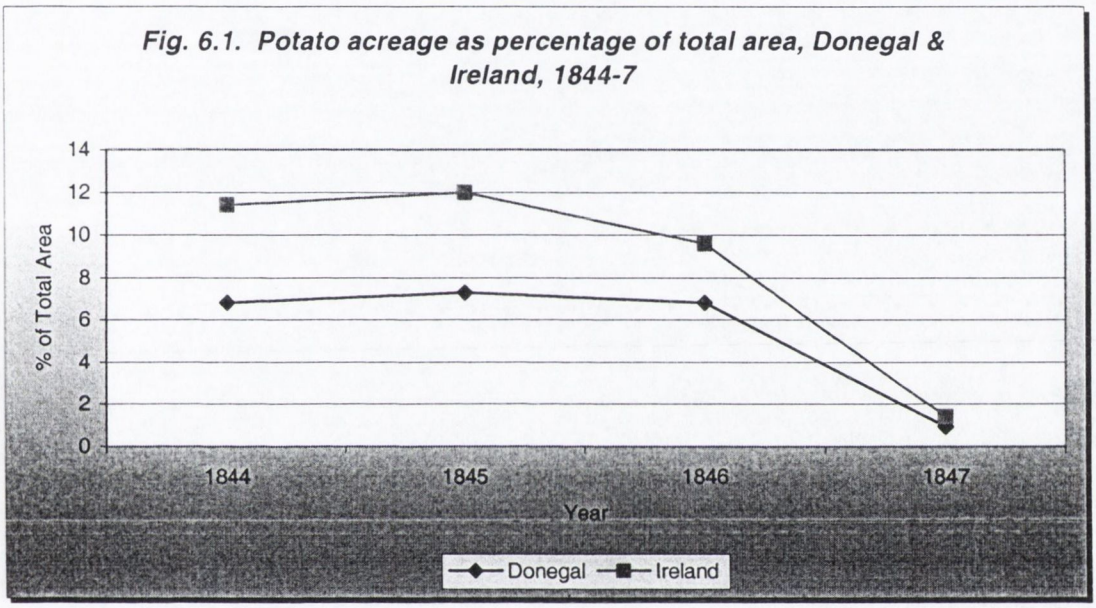
The prospects for the 1847 harvest had appeared quite promising in the months preceding it. It transpired, however, that the actual yield was disappointing, despite the fact that the potato blight was on a far smaller scale than in the previous year. The overall impact of the Famine in the previous two years had led to a considerable reduction in the acreage of potatoes planted with figures plummeting from 1,999,068 acres nationally in 1846 to only 284,116 in 1847.[2] The magnitude of the decrease is illustrated in Fig. 6.1, overleaf, which compares potato acreage as a percentage of total land area in Donegal and Ireland between 1844 and 1847.[3] In Donegal, the reduction in acreage was not quite as pronounced as the national fall, though the scale of decrease was still of such massive proportions that the 1847 crop amounted to only 13.5 per cent of the area planted in the previous year. The emphasis on survival during the severe winter of 1846-47 was the principal reason for such a poor harvest. As we have seen in Chapter 4, there was a considerable decline in farming operations and crop preparation in this period, combined with a perceptible reluctance to sow potatoes in light of the onslaught of the blight in the previous two seasons.[4] Finally, and most importantly, was the difficulty in obtaining seed because of the lack of availability and the absence of the means to purchase it among the poorer classes. A report from a commissariat officer in Templecrone parish in February 1847 highlights the crux of the problem: 'I have asked them why, instead of being idle, they do not dig their land... and get but one answer – they have neither food to eat while working

[2] Bourke, P.M.A. (1959), 'The Extent of the Potato Crop in Ireland at the time of the Famine', in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland,* Vol. XX, Part III, p. 9; *Returns of agricultural produce in Ireland in the year 1847, pt I, Crops,* H.C. 1847-8[923], lvii, p. ix
[3] Source: ibid.
[4] See Chapter 4, Section 4.7

nor seed to put in'.[5] At a national level, the 1847 potato crop did not suffer the ill effects of the blight on nearly the same scale of former years. In Donegal itself, a report from the *Londonderry Journal* on September 22nd is indicative of a general contraction in the extent of the previously omnipresent blight:

> Although the number of diseased potatoes brought to our market has been on the increase, we are happy to learn, from various accounts, that the disease, of late, has made scarcely any perceptible progress among the tubers still in the ground... This may almost satisfy us that the disease has lost much of its former malignity.[6]

Fig. 6.1. Potato acreage as percentage of total area, Donegal & Ireland, 1844-7



The fact remained, however, that the harvest was poor. Indeed, the level of agricultural production internationally was below average in 1847, a situation which was to create global difficulties in the following year. In Britain, a resulting financial crisis in the autumn of 1847 had repercussions in Ulster where the linen trade was affected and remained depressed in Donegal despite improvements in parts of Down, Antrim and Armagh.[7] This complication, in conjunction with the huge dent in potato yields, meant that the relief effort now supported solely by the Poor Law under the extended Act was to be faced with the prospect of increasing numbers of destitute

[5] *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, commissariat series,* pt ii, H.C. 1847 [796], lii, p. 178, Captain Giffard to Trevelyan, February 27th 1847

[6] *Londonderry Journal*, September 22nd 1847

[7] Kinealy, C.A. (1983/4), *The Irish Poor Law, 1838-62: a study of the relationship between the local and central administrators* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, TCD), p. 135

persons requiring assistance. Such assistance was to be financed through the local taxation system of the Poor Rate, so that Irish property would truly be supporting Irish poverty.

6.3. FINANCING RELIEF: THE POOR RATE

The transfer of the burden of relief to the Poor Law system ushered in a period which necessitated a more disciplined and vigorous collection and levying of Poor Rates. Woodham-Smith argues that 'it was an article of faith with the British Government that rates could be collected in Ireland if pressure were used; apply the screw with sufficient force and the money would appear'.[8] The difficulty in turning the screw, however, lay in the fact that the unions requiring the most financial assistance from the rates were precisely the same ones that were experiencing the most severe distress. At the time of the transfer in the autumn of 1847, various local relief administrators pointed out that the means at the disposal of many ratepayers were exhausted, while some of the poorer unions had no funds in hand. In the face of such difficulty, a number of boards of guardians suggested that the Temporary Relief Act should remain in operation. The Relief Commissioners responded by stating that the soup kitchens were not intended to provide 'a remedy for any embarrassments in the unions, nor for any general poverty in the country, but solely to replace, for one season, the food of which the people were deprived by the failure of the potato crop'.[9]

By December 1847, the financial state of the unions appeared to be reasonably healthy with 119 out of 130 recording balances in their favour. The intensification of the collection process in the latter part of the year had swelled the overall Poor Rate lodged to some one million pounds and the theory that property could support poverty seemed, on the face of it, to be a sound one. Delving a little deeper into the finances of the unions, however, we find that the reality of the situation was not quite so promising. In the case of the Donegal unions, which were generally among the more solvent in the country, it emerges that the positive balances recorded disguised the fact that seven of the eight unions indicated in Table 6.1 were actually in debt due to

[8] Woodham-Smith, C. (1962), *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-9*, p. 310
[9] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52*, p. 185; Letter from R. Hamilton, Relief Commission Office, Dublin, reprinted in *Kerry Evening Post*, August 11th 1847

establishment costs, Public Works and soup kitchen advances and miscellaneous loans. The two unions which exhibit greatest indebtedness are Glenties and Milford, a situation which was to continue throughout 1848, particularly in the case of Glenties. The impoverishment of the union was highlighted in October 1847, when the Poor Law Commissioners were forced to allow an advance of £100 to the Glenties guardians 'to prevent actual starvation'.[10]

Table 6.1. Financial position of Donegal Poor Law unions, December 31st 1847

Union	Poor Valuation	Rate Collected in 10 Months to Dec. 31st	Remaining Uncollected	Net Debts
Ballyshannon	£51,435	£2,347	£6,287	£323
Donegal	£31,639	£2,883	£822	£446
Dunfanaghy	£10,543	£907	£76	*
Glenties	£16,330	£1,327	£2,690	£1,042
Inishowen	£36,607	£1,502	£5,080	£409
Letterkenny	£31,835	£455	£2,424	£568
Milford	£31,377	£1,416	£3,147	£1,348
Stranorlar	£29,402	£1,764	£1,380	£590
Total	£239,168	£12,601	£21,906	£4465

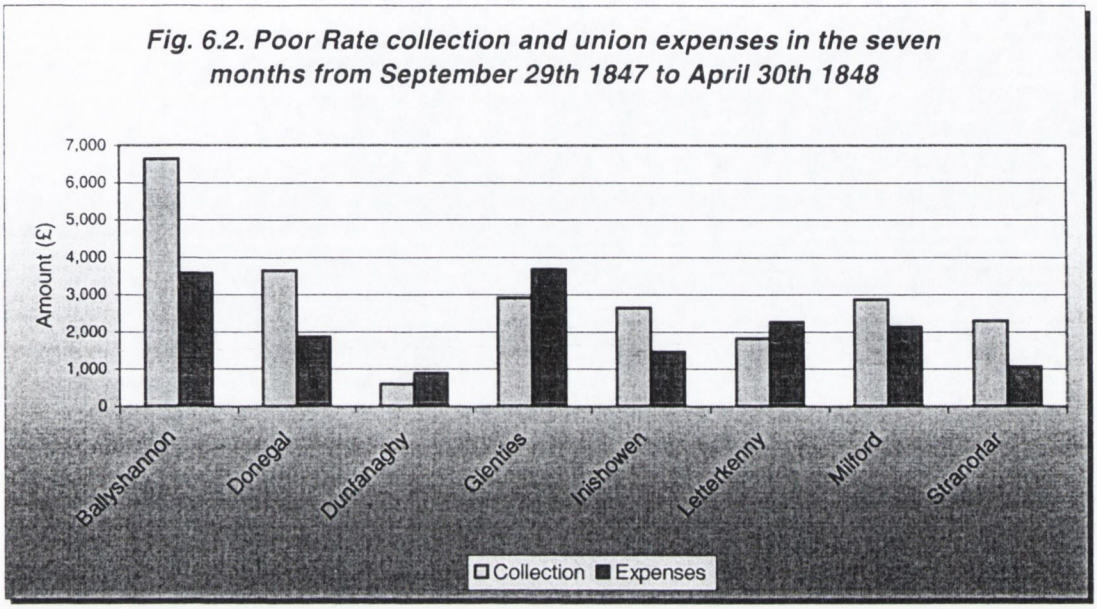
*Subtracting debts from amount in treasurers account in Dunfanaghy still left a net balance of £261

In Milford, the winter of 1847 saw a rapid rise in numbers of destitute and the financial stresses of the union were exacerbated by large numbers of defaulting ratepayers and inefficient collectors. In a report to the Poor Law Commissioners on January 4th 1848, the Poor Law Inspector, Mr. Horsley, mentioned that 'the collection of the rate [still] goes on very slowly.[11] Of the remaining six unions, five recorded relatively modest debts and figures for Dunfanaghy bare witness to a fairly strong financial position with a positive net balance of £261. The introduction of outdoor relief in Glenties, Ballyshannon, Donegal, Inishowen and Glenties by the beginning of 1848 led to a sharp rise in expenditure. Consequently, a more energetic policy of rate collection was recommended by the Poor Law Commissioners who stressed that such activity 'should be carried out with the least avoidable delay'.[12] The union inspectors, guardians and collectors generally responded effectively to the request and new rates were struck. In the case of Donegal union, for example, a new rate of 3*s*. in the pound was levied throughout the union by January 1848, except in the electoral

[10] ibid., p. 187; Twistleton to Trevelyan, PROL T.64.367.A, October 23rd 1847
[11] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 325, Horsley to Poor Law Commissioners
[12] ibid., p. 26, Poor Law Commissioners to Herbert

divisions of Laghy and Templecarn where a rate of 1*s.* 6*d.* was deemed sufficient to meet probable expenses for the year.[13] The fortunes of the unions from a financial viewpoint up to April 1848 are highlighted in Fig. 6.2, which reveals a turnaround in the troubles of Milford, where total collections exceeded expenses by some £731 for the seven months from September 1847[14].

Fig. 6.2. Poor Rate collection and union expenses in the seven months from September 29th 1847 to April 30th 1848



Returns for Stranorlar, Inishowen and Donegal unions indicate a similar absence of financial hardship with expenditure in all three amounting to about fifty per cent of income. Letterkenny and Dunfanaghy, somewhat surprisingly, found themselves in a position where expenses exceeded revenue, though the absence of outdoor relief provision in both areas throughout the Famine was to cut costs substantially in the coming months. In Glenties, on the other hand, the proportion of the population requiring outdoor assistance had risen to over 10 per cent by the beginning of April and the consequent financial burden on the union is reflected in Fig. 6.2 which reveals an outlay of some £3,680, the highest figure in the county, during a period which saw the collection of only £2913. Ballyshannon provides the most striking example of increasing vigour in the collection of rates. Expenditure for the seven months was comparable with Glenties, but income for the period stood at £6,639, by far the highest in Donegal. This situation had arisen largely through the efforts of the Poor Law inspector, John S. D'Arcy, who streamlined the rate collection system by

[13] ibid., p. 29, Herbert to Poor Law Commissioners

[14] Figure 6.2. source: *First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1847-8[963], xxxiii, Appendix B, pp. 166-67

initiating rapid legal action against defaulters and by fining inefficient rate collectors. The inspector himself acknowledged that for 'rate payers and guardians accustomed to such small rates and so tardy a collection, it may be easily supposed how unpalatable the amount of the present rate must be, and the rapidity of its collection...'.[15] In the coming months D'Arcy was to receive a clear indication of just how disagreeable his implementation of a stringent rate collection policy was.

Resistance to the collection of the Poor Rate in some parts of the country was robust enough to lead to violence. In Co. Fermanagh, for example, a collector was murdered in the winter of 1847, while the Castlebar guardians in Co. Mayo encountered difficulty in filling the post of rate collector due to the potentially hazardous nature of the job.[16] In Donegal, the threat of violence appears to have been confined for the most part to Ballyshannon, where D'Arcy's enthusiasm for rapid rate collection led to passionate opposition from the ratepayers. The inspector himself received repeated warnings that he 'should be careful not to be out late' as he was a 'marked man'.[17] By the winter of 1847-8, D'Arcy considered himself to be in such danger of violent reprisal against his efficiency in instigating rate collection that he abandoned plans to move his family to Bundoran when a hotelier in Ballyshannon warned: 'I doubt if it would be safe for you going in and out late [from Ballyshannon to Bundoran]; and I would not say this if I had not reason'.[18] Elsewhere in the county, there is little evidence of any aggression toward the inspectors or rate collectors. At the same time as D'Arcy began to encounter hostility in Ballyshannon, the Inspector for Donegal union, Captain Herbert, reported that the conduct of the population continued to be 'peaceable and orderly'.[19] In Glenties, meanwhile, it was reported that there had been 'no opposition to the payment of rates..., except in one case'.[20] By January 1848, D'Arcy had even been threatened by a member of the Ballyshannon board of guardians, who informed him that he would have to 'prepare

[15] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 39, D'Arcy to Poor Law Commissioners
[16] O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52*, p. 248
[17] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 39
[18] ibid., statement from Mr. Cockburn, the hotel-keeper in Ballyshannon, to D'Arcy, December 1847
[19] ibid., p. 27
[20] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Eighth Series*, H.C. 1849[1042], xlviii, p. 235

military' before the individual's rate would be forthcoming. The same guardian, Mr. Brady, was later accused of attempting to have his name erased from the rate book so as to evade payment of rates for a substantial proportion of his property.[21]

Given that the arrival of D'Arcy in Ballyshannon had heralded in an era of rate collection of such magnitude that the total amount lodged in the six month period up to March 25th 1848 (£6179, 0*s*. 11*d*.) eclipsed the combined figure for the previous four years (the rate collected between Sept. 1843 and Sept. 1847 amounted to £4825, 14*s*. 4*d*.), it is hardly surprising that the rate collectors were not the most popular people in the area. On December 17th 1847, the collector for Churchill electoral division was told that 'lives would be lost' if he did not resign his post.[22] Another collector, James Flanagan, was victim to that most commonplace nineteenth century tool of antagonism, the threatening letter. In one such communication from 'the inhabitants of Baha division', he was advised that he should discontinue his rate collection efforts and that failure to comply would result in death. Another, penned in January 1848, reduced Flanagan to a state where he reportedly 'shook like an aspen' upon receiving it:[23]

Kilcock, the 6th, 1848

Sir,

> We the people of the district that you collected the Poor rates in, in either Boush or Innismacthesant, or any other part that you collect the Poor Rates in, or take up any distress, or drives any person's cattle for the Rates, we will be under the necessity of shooting you in the open daylight, for we may as well loose our lives as to loose our support; so if you don't like this warning we give you, take your own advice, for we are determined to stop you or any other person that will come to collect them till the times mend.
>
> James Flanagan,
>
> There is your doom,
> so if you like it, continue

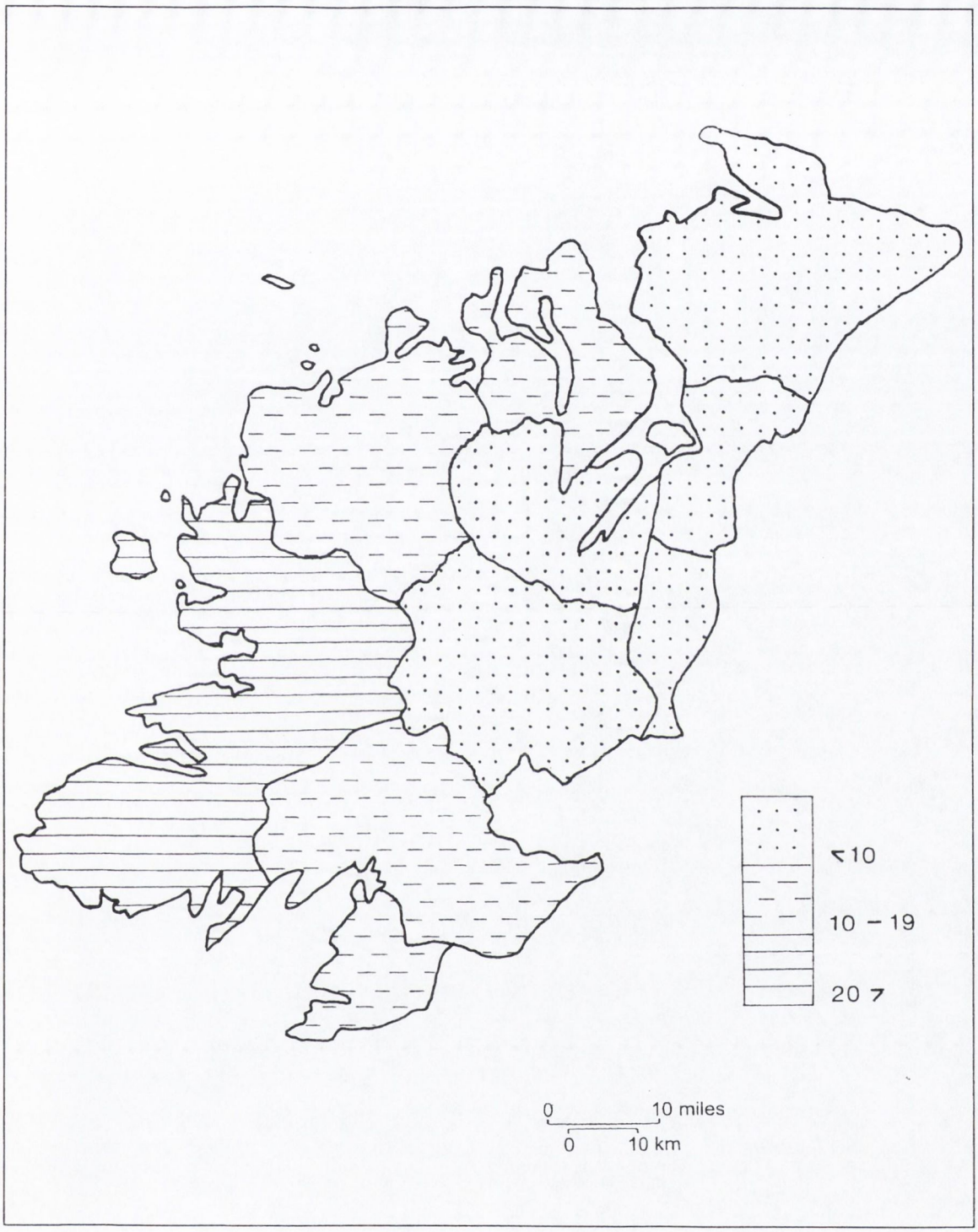
[21] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 38
[22] ibid., p. 39
[23] ibid., p. 46

While it transpired that no such threats were carried out, there were cases of actual physical violence against collectors in Ballyshannon union, most of which occurred during attempts to recover cattle which had been seized due to non-payment of rates. By March 1848, the collector for Ballyshannon division had fallen victim to such attacks with a frequency which led him to request protection.[24] Similar cases occurred in Kinlough, Churchill and Innismacsaint divisions throughout the spring, while the Ballintra collector was 'much abused and beaten' when five separate 'rescues' of cattle occurred on a single day in April 1848.[25] Elsewhere in Donegal, resistance to rate collection appears to have been mainly confined simply to a refusal to pay. Action against defaulters was usually swift and almost always yielded results. At the Ballintra petty sessions, for example, eighty defaulters were summoned in January 1848. Of these, thirty paid the due rate before the court date, twenty-five on the morning of the sessions and a further five in the court itself, leaving only twenty to be proceeded against.[26] Legal action was also taken with increasing regularity against inefficient rate collectors, as was the case in Glenties, Letterkenny, Stranorlar and Milford unions in the early months of 1848.[27] At the petty sessions held at Donegal in January 1848, three of the union collectors, Messrs. Hoey, Griffin and Reed, were fined the sum of 20*s*. each for unsatisfactory revenue intake and 'disobedience of the orders of the board of guardians'.[28]

The difficulty in collecting rates in during the Famine in Donegal and indeed throughout the country as a whole, lay in the fundamental structure of a system which levied highest rates on those least able to afford them. Kinealy refers to the fact that such local taxation was self-perpetuating, since it tended to pauperise small occupiers who had previously paid rates and lead to them, in turn, becoming dependant on the Poor Law system.[29] Fig. 6.3 illustrates the predicament in which the poorer unions found themselves by the end of September 1848. The board of Glenties union, with highest levels of destitution in the county and thus highest expenditure, were faced

[24] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Sixth Series,* H.C. 1847-8[955], lvi, p. 81
[25] ibid., p. 84
[26] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 29
[27] ibid., p. 324-25
[28] ibid. p. 30
[29] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 192

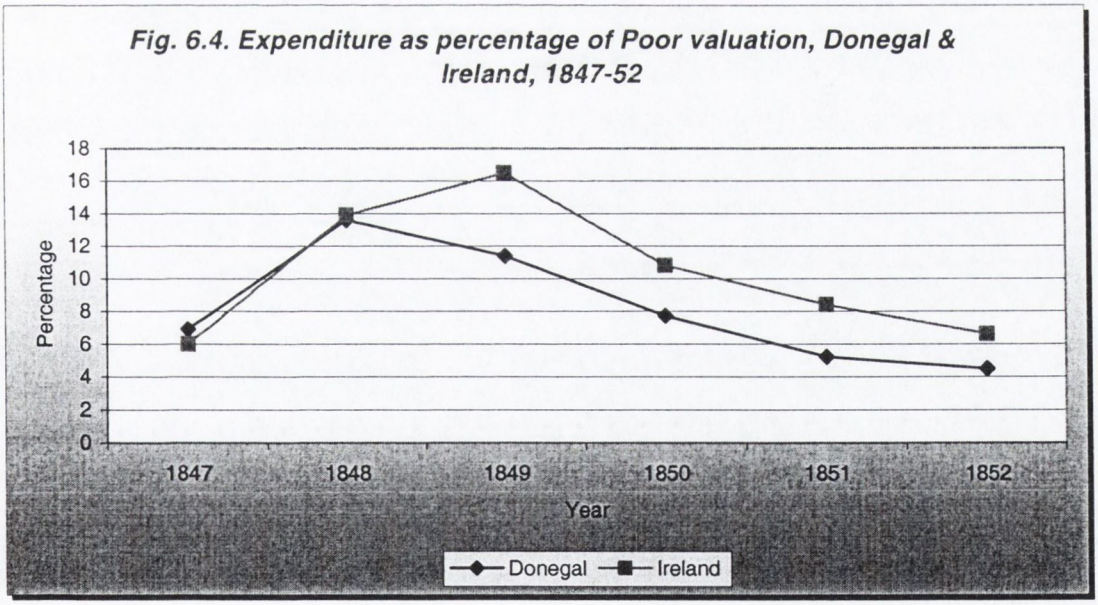
Fig. 6.3. Poor Law union expenditure as percentage of valuation for the year ended September 29th 1848



Source: *Second annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1849[1118], xxv, pp. 171-174; See Appendix 6.2 for data

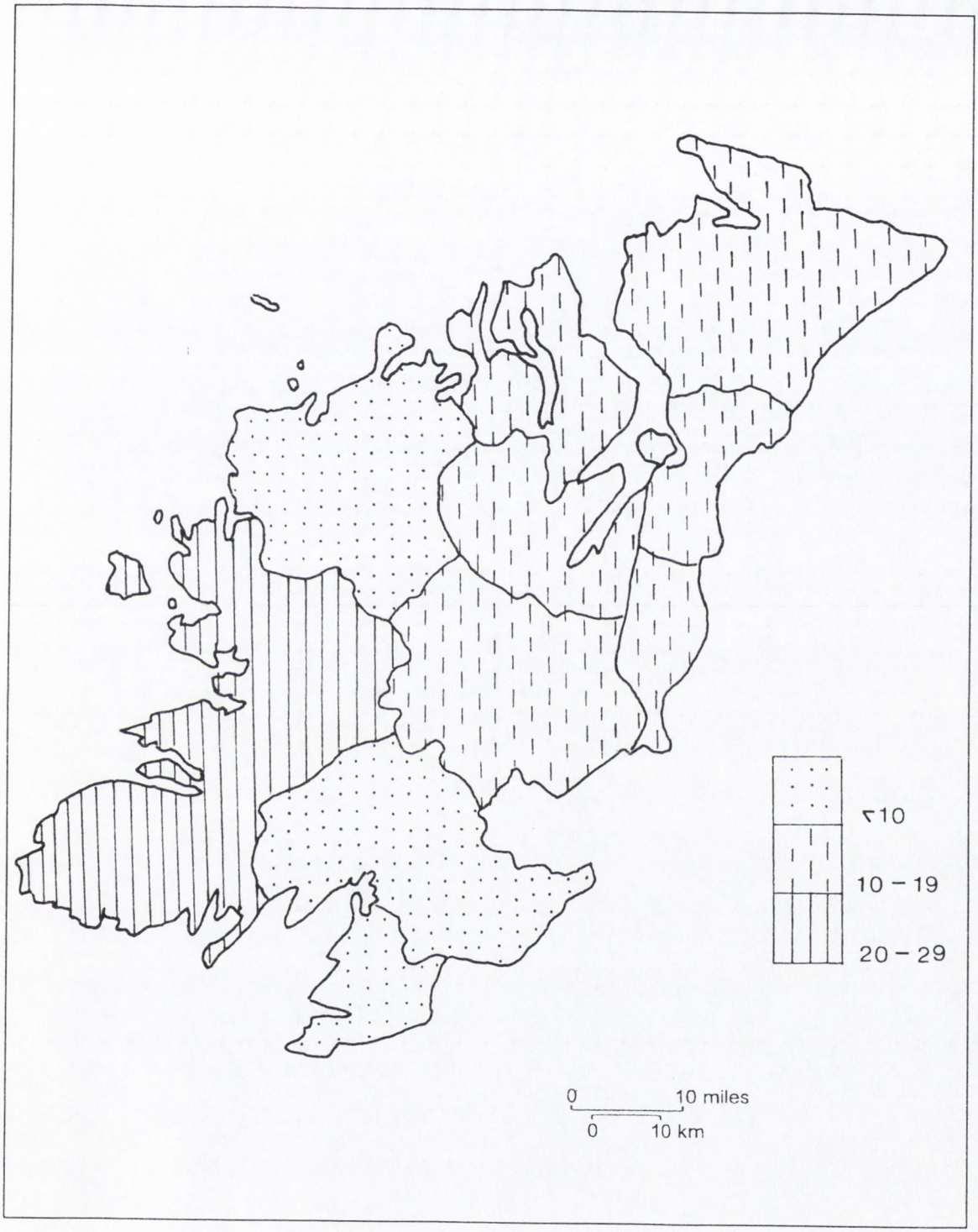
with a financial crisis on a scale rivalling the poverty-stricken unions of the south and west of the country. Expenditure for the year amounted to £7,812 or around 47.8 per cent of the Poor Valuation of the union. Since little alternative financial aid was forthcoming, either from government or elsewhere, the greater proportion of this sum had to be raised from the meagre resources of the Glenties ratepayers. In contrast, the funds of ratepayers in Stranorlar, Letterkenny, Inishowen, Londonderry and Strabane, who were in a better position to meet the taxes levied on them, were not stretched to nearly the same extent since Poor relief expenditure was much lower, standing at less than ten per cent of valuation for all five unions. The situation throughout the county showed an improvement in the financial conditions of the unions for the year ended September 1849. Fig. 6.5, overleaf, illustrates the marked decrease in expenditure in Milford (from 11.3% to 6.2% of valuation), while all other unions with the exception of Donegal (with a small increase) and Glenties recorded slight decreases. In Glenties, expenditure fell from £7,812 (or 47.8% of valuation) to £4498 (27.5%), marking a significant improvement in its financial affairs. Rate collection, however, remained chronically low, with a mere £176 lodged in the year (see Appendix 6.8).

Fig. 6.4. Expenditure as percentage of Poor valuation, Donegal & Ireland, 1847-52



In the context of the country as a whole, Donegal began to diverge from national trends of expenditure in the year ended September 1849 and figures remain significantly below the national average thereafter (see Fig. 6.4, above). Such a trend is indicative of a more rapid and defined improvement in conditions in the county

Fig. 6.5. Poor Law union expenditure as percentage of valuation for the year ended September 29th 1849



Source: *Third annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices*, H.C. 1850[1243], xxvii, pp. 542-544; See Appendix 6.3 for data

from the autumn of 1848 onward: while the upward movement in Poor Law expenditure nationally rose to a peak of £2,177,650 (16.5% of valuation) in 1849, levels decreased in Donegal to £31,282 (11.4%).[30] However, the concept of 'property supporting poverty' continued to exhibit grave shortcomings and it often fell to local committees and philanthropic organisations to make up the deficit. One organisation which played a pivotal role in the provision of financial aid auxiliary to the Poor Law in this period was the British Association.

6.4. THE BRITISH ASSOCIATION

The difficulty in financing the relief of distress solely through the Poor Rate had little impact in prising open the coffers of the imperial Treasury. Direct state aid was granted only occasionally to the more distressed unions in the form of loans.[31] Throughout the period following the implementation of the extended Poor Law, the government remained adamant that its contribution had been more than adequate and any additional assistance should be financed from the funds of the British Relief Association. This philanthropic organisation was founded in London in January 1847, its goal being 'the relief of extreme distress in remote parishes of Ireland and Scotland'. Much like the Society of Friends, the British Association proposed to facilitate support to the destitute through the distribution of food, clothing and fuel. The majority of its funds were advanced through the Treasury as loans to the most distressed unions.[32] The most successful scheme introduced by Count Strzelecki, the agent of the Association in Ireland, was the distribution of rations to children in schools. Initially, this proposal was intended to be confined to the twenty-two unions officially designated as being 'distressed', but by the time of the organisation's withdrawal from Ireland, some forty-seven unions had received some form of assistance. In Donegal, the contribution of the British Association was quite significant. Table 6.2 shows the total number of children receiving rations in schools from November 1847 to April 1848.[33]

[30] See Appendix 6.3
[31] Daly, M.E. (1986), *The Famine in Ireland,* p. 140
[32] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 162
[33] Source: *First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1847-8[963], xxxiii, Appendix. A, p. 114

Table 6.2. Total number of children receiving relief from the British Association in Donegal schools from November 30th 1847 to April 30th 1848

Union	Denomination of Schools				Total No. Relieved	Total Rations Issued
	National	Est. Church	Dissenter	Catholic		
Ballyshannon	4,582	864	62	4,327	9,835	998,962
Donegal	1,364	2,813	610	848	5,635	504,399
Glenties	5,834	1,218	136	0	7,197	616,021
Milford	1,746	964	324	0	3,034	321,965
Total	13,526	5,859	1,132	5,175	25,701	2,441,347
Total (27 Unions)	80,073	26,988	4,721	89,645	201,427	21,621,881

The regional patterns of destitution in Donegal are once again indicated by the fact that the Association confined its activities to Ballyshannon, Donegal, Glenties and Milford unions, with Ballyshannon and Glenties recording the highest figures for the period. At a national level it is somewhat surprising to find that the children in these four unions comprise some 12.8 per cent of the total relieved in the country. Given that the extent of destitution in Donegal was considerably below the national average in the first place, one can infer that such assistance was a significant contribution to the relief effort in the county in the winter and spring of 1847-8. In Glenties, for example, the board of guardians were in a position to strike all children off the outdoor relief books in February 1848 because they were receiving sufficient food supplies from the Association.[34] By March 27th, the number of children receiving rations in Donegal union was 5,400, while the Association also donated 500 suits of boys clothing, thus 'affording joyous exultation to a number of juveniles, who have never been so well-clothed before'.[35]

One result of the scheme was a huge increase in attendance in schools in which it was in operation. Kinealy refers to Swinford union in Co. Mayo where the Poor Law inspector reported schools springing up like 'mushrooms', leading to an increase in total pupil numbers from 176 to some 2,138.[36] Similar testimony reached the Poor Law Commissioners from Donegal, where Captain O'Neill, inspector for Glenties union, reported that 'the numbers now pressing for admission into the school-houses because they have heard that there is gratuitous relief about to be administered, is

[34] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Sixth Series,* H.C. 1847-8[955], lvi, p. 344, O'Neill to Poor Law Commissioners
[35] ibid., p. 604, Herbert to Poor Law Commissioners
[36] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 208

fearful'.[37] An example of such pressure is provided by the case of Roxborough schoolhouse in the parish of Kilcar in Glenties, where 174 children were in attendance in early December 1847, despite the fact that the building was designed to accommodate only 90 pupils.[38] One can safely assume that the fire burning in their bellies was not one which had been ignited by the prospect of education.

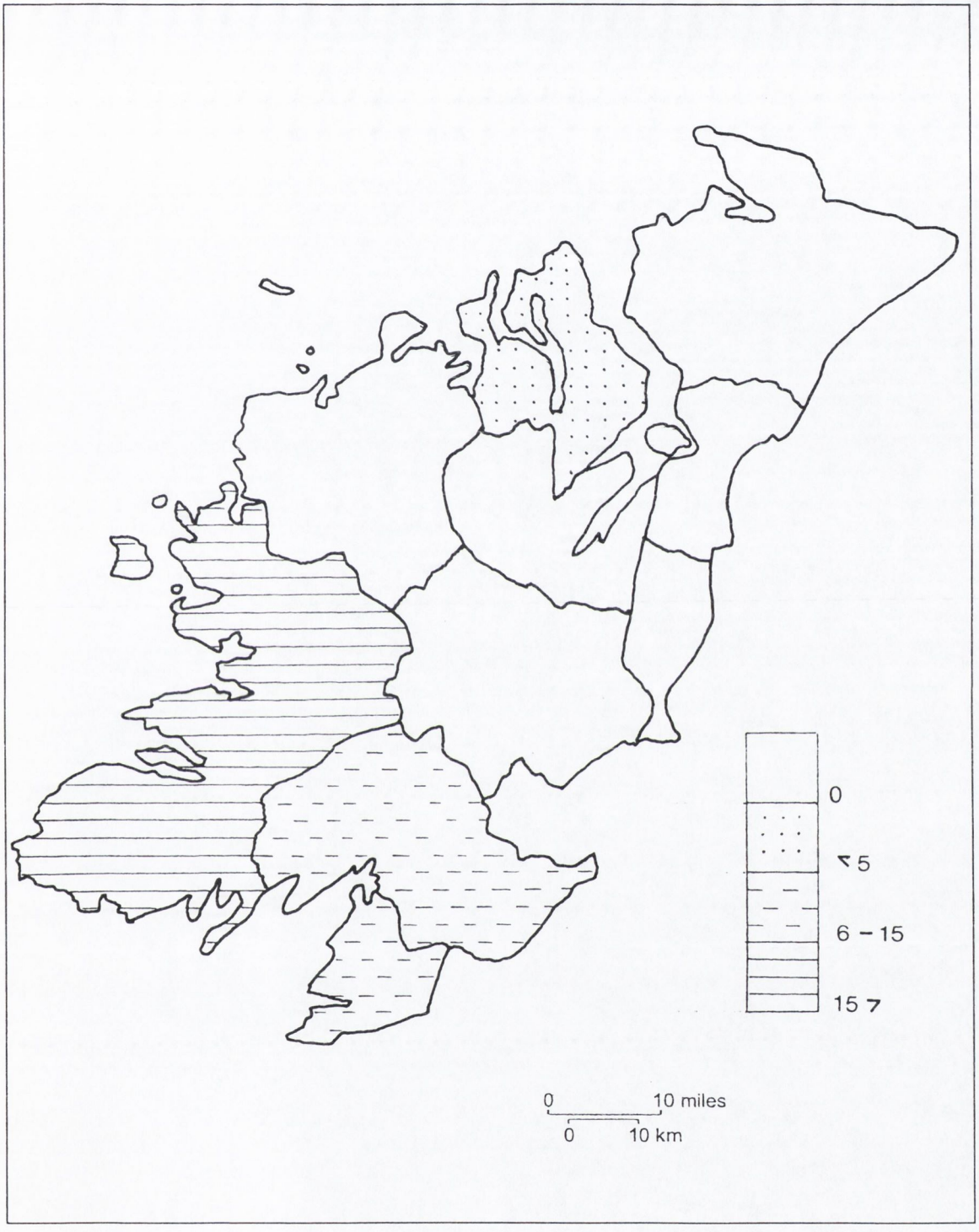
By the summer of 1848, the funds of the British Association were almost exhausted and it gradually withdrew from relief operations from July onwards. At a time when, as we shall see, the need for relief was on the increase, the termination of the Association's activities came at an inopportune point in the Famine. Its financial contribution to the relief of distress in the four Donegal unions in which it was in operation is outlined in Table 6.3.[39] Around three-quarters of the total assistance in monetary terms was toward the school rations scheme. The greater part of the remainder went to the relief of general distress in Glenties union, further testifying to the unique situation of that union in the context of the county as a whole. The regional allocation of British Association funds within Donegal as a percentage of Poor Law Valuation is mapped in Fig. 6.6, overleaf. At the close of its activities in Ireland, the Association had a balance in hand of £12,900 which was donated to the Poor Law Commissioners for the aid of the distressed unions.[40] The government maintained its position of minimal direct intervention, only affording financial assistance in cases where starvation was imminent.

Table 6.3. Total grants made by the British Association towards general distress and relief of schoolchildren in Donegal, 1847-48

Union	General Distress			Rations in Schools			Clothing in Schools			Total Grants		
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
Ballyshannon	50	0	0	3350	0	0	243	16	4	3643	16	4
Donegal				2650	0	0	239	0	4	2880	0	4
Glenties	2157	2	10	2400	0	0	425	16	6½	4982	19	4½
Milford				1000	0	0	300	0	0	1300	0	0
Total	2207	2	10	9400	0	0	1208	13	2½	12806	16	0½
Total (35 Unions)	143,518	15	11	80,885	4	1	12,083	10	1½	236,487	10	1½

[37] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 56, O'Neill to Poor Law Commissioners
[38] ibid.
[39] *Fourth report from the select committee of the House of Lords appointed to inquire into the operation of the Irish Poor Law, and the expediency of making any amendments to its enactments, together with minutes of evidence*, H.C. 1849[365], xvi, p. 853
[40] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52*, p. 209

Fig. 6.6. Total grants from the British Association to Donegal unions as a percentage of Poor Law valuation, 1847-8

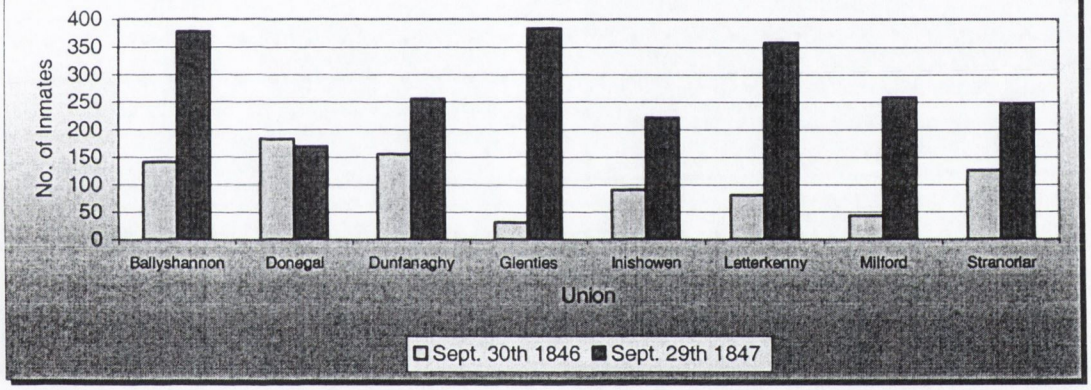


Source: *Fourth report from the select committee of the House of Lords appointed to inquire into the operation of the Irish Poor Law, and the expediency of making any amendments to its enactments, together with minutes of evidence,* H.C. 1849[365], xvi, p. 853

6.5. RELIEF IN THE WORKHOUSE

The extension of the Poor Law had an immediate effect on the numbers requiring relief in the Donegal workhouses. The poor harvest of 1847 had come at a time when the termination of soup kitchen rations left large numbers of people without any means of government assistance apart from the Poor Law and the full scale of rising destitution can be measured by charting inmate numbers in the institutions. Fig. 6.7, compares the number of people requiring relief in each of the union workhouses in the county at the end of September 1847 with the level recorded in the previous year.[41]

Fig. 6.7. Number of inmates in Donegal workhouses, September 1846 & September 1847



Donegal union, the only to register a reduction in inmate numbers in the year, appears to have staved off the worst affects of the poor harvest and even by the end of November had vacancies for 270 inmates in its workhouse 'owing to the employment found for the population generally in the Union'.[42] The Poor Law Inspector of Donegal, Captain Herbert, in a communication to the Poor Law Commissioners in mid-December, reported that '...as the resident proprietors are fully alive to the advantages of reproductive labour being afforded to the peasantry, instead of unproductive idleness in the workhouse, I entertain sanguine hopes that the

[41] *First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1847-8[963], xxxiii, App. B, p. 135; See Appendix 6.2 for data
[42] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, pp. 26-7

workhouse will not be filled for some time'.[43] Similarly, the workhouses in Dunfanaghy, Inishowen and Stranorlar did not experience any worryingly large rise in numbers in September 1847 as compared with September 1846. In Dunfanaghy in particular, we have already noted the low requirement for soup kitchen relief during the summer and the relatively good conditions in the union were to continue through the autumn, with inmate numbers in the workhouse actually decreasing in the period up to December 1847.

In general, the unions in which highest proportions of the population had been surviving on soup kitchen rations in the summer were the areas where distress during the autumn and winter was greatest. Inevitably, rising destitution resulted in considerable pressure on the workhouses of Milford, Ballyshannon and Glenties in particular. By November 29th the board of guardians in Milford workhouse had been forced to admit 434 destitute persons to a building which had been originally designed to hold 400.[44] After providing auxiliary accommodation for a further 30, demand for places continued to exceed supply and numbers rose to 506 by December 15th 1847.[45] In Ballyshannon, the Poor Law Inspector, John D'Arcy, reported his fear of imminent distress:

> Throughout the country generally, the people present the most wretchedly, squalid appearance, and it is evident that those who are endeavouring to support themselves at home are not half fed; a great number are at present living on turnips, and as that description of crop is fast disappearing in the country, I apprehend in a month or two hence, very general and severe distress[46]

The inspector for Glenties voiced similar concerns in mid-December when the workhouse was exceeding its allotted accommodation by thirty-five inmates.[47] It was suggested that additional premises be taken to house the male children so that space would be provided for the able-bodied.

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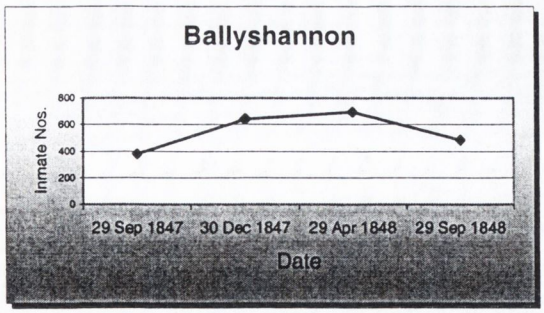
[43] ibid., p.27
[44] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 317
[45] ibid., p. 318
[46] ibid., p. 34, D'Arcy to Poor Law Commissioners
[47] ibid., p. 59, O'Neill to Poor Law Commissioners

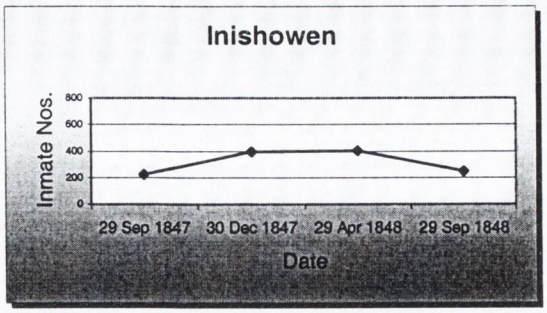
Overcrowding was not the only difficulty with which the various boards of guardians were faced. The related problem of illness began to rear its head in this period also. Dysentery had become widespread in the Ballyshannon[48] and Glenties workhouses where 'the necessities of nature were performed without due regard to decency and cleanliness'.[49] In early January 1848, the Ballyshannon house was referred to as 'one vast infirmary' where the extent of overcrowding in the fever sheds was such that separate beds could not be provided to each patient.[50] A similar crisis presented itself to the Letterkenny and Milford union guardians, where about one quarter of the inmates were confined to the hospital and fever sheds over Christmas having contracted fever.[51] By January 4th 1848, we find Mr. Horsley, the inspector for Milford, reporting that 'the number of candidates for admission to the workhouse yesterday was so large that the Guardians could not possible see half of them'.[52] Fig. 6.8, overleaf, charts the increase in pressure on the workhouses from September to December 1847 and the subsequent general decrease in numbers thereafter. Again, Dunfanaghy, Stranorlar and Inishowen unions chart the least significant increase in numbers, while Ballyshannon, Glenties and Milford were all at, or about to reach, full capacity. In Letterkenny, sufficient auxiliary accommodation was obtained to increase capacity to 850 by the end of the year so that the 582 persons requiring workhouse relief on December 30th did not lead to overcrowding.[53] As we shall see, Letterkenny, along with Dunfanaghy, were the only two unions in the county that did not have to resort to the introduction of outdoor relief at any time during the Famine.[54]

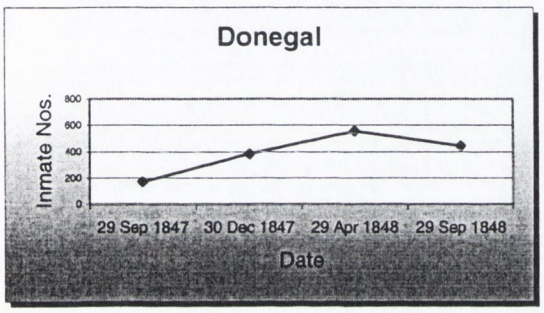
The period from the beginning of January to the end of September 1848 marked a general decrease in numbers relieved in the Donegal workhouses (see Fig. 6.8). Only in Ballyshannon and Donegal unions was there any marked increase in numbers between January and April, though Glenties and Inishowen maintained their high

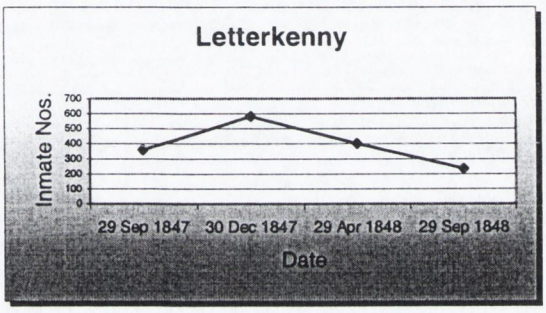
[48] ibid., p. 34, D'Arcy to Poor Law Commissioners
[49] Mac Cnaimhsi, B. (1973), 'Arranmore Island in the Great Famine' in *Donegal Annual*, Vol. X, No. 3, p. 246
[50] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 41, D'Arcy to Poor Law Commissioners
[51] ibid., p. 320, Horsley to Poor Law Commissioners
[52] ibid., p. 324, Horsley to Poor Law Commissioners
[53] *Fourteenth report from the select committee on poor laws (Irl.), together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, appendix and index to the fourteen reports*, H.C. 1849[572], xv, pt II, p. 225
[54] See Section 6.7

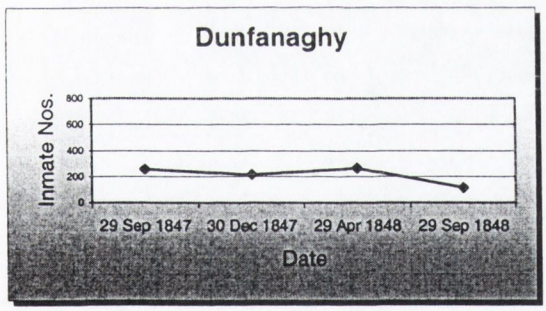
Fig. 6.8. Inmate numbers in Donegal union workhouses on dates between September 1847 and September 1848

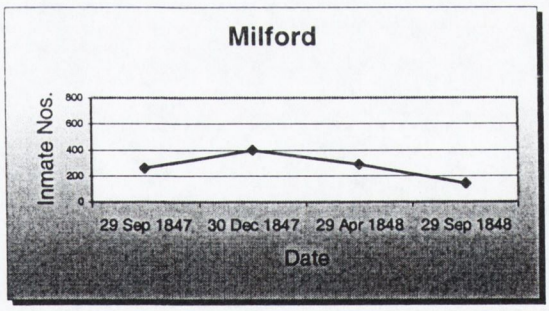


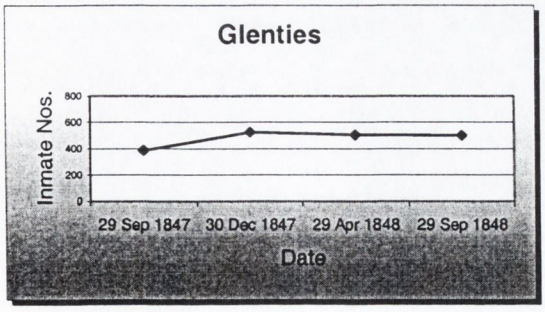


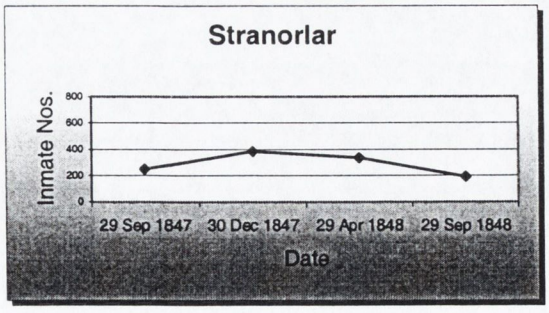












Source: *First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1847-8[963], xxxiii, Appendix B, pp. 135, 153; F50 Appendix 2 in 14th report, p.225; *Second annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1849[1118], xxv, pp. 171-174

figures. Crowds daily gathered at the Ballyshannon workhouse, 'clamorous for admittance' from January onward[55] and the board were forced to meet twice weekly in order to cope with the their increased workload.[56] In Donegal union, despite quite considerable efforts by the resident gentry to provide employment, vacancies in the workhouse had dropped to 83 by January 29th, a symptom of the severity of the weather, according to Captain Herbert, the Poor Law inspector.[57] At the end of the following week the workhouse was full.[58] Inmate numbers in Glenties workhouse, meanwhile, had reached 600 by February 16th and the Poor Law Commissioners were forced to intervene, deeming such levels unsafe in a building designed to accommodate only 500.[59] Accommodation was duly increased by one hundred by means of an additional building being obtained to house the male children. Even in Dunfanaghy and Inishowen, two unions in which we have observed quite a considerable abatement from the worst severities of the Famine, overcrowding in the workhouses was reaching epidemic proportions by March 1848 (see Table 6.4).[60]

Table 6.4. Workhouse relief in Donegal for the month of March, 1848

Union	Population (1841)	Total Accommodation	Average No. Inmates During March	Average No. on Outdoor Relief During March	Total Average No. Relieved During Month
Ballyshannon	43,403	870	813	948	1,761
Donegal	41,371	550	541	845	1,386
Dunfanaghy	18,571	300	327	0	327
Glenties	43,571	600	501	4,644	5,145
Inishowen	43,569	600	655	380	1,035
Letterkenny	25,921	920	503	0	503
Milford	38,108	430	387	1,810	2,197
Stranorlar	25,786	460	360	0	360

One of the most common pursuits in all of the Donegal unions in this period was the quest to increase accommodation. As well as the aforementioned auxiliary house taken by the Glenties board, the capacity of Ballyshannon workhouse was extended by means of a temporary schoolhouse for boys with accommodation for 100, along

[55] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 44, D'Arcy to Poor Law Commissioners
[56] BG/38/1/3, Ballyshannon Minutes, January 11th 1848
[57] ibid.
[58] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Sixth Series,* H.C. 1847-8[955], lvi, p. 599, Herbert to Poor Law Commissioners
[59] ibid., Poor Law Commissioners to Glenties guardians
[60] Source: *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 1066

with a further auxiliary workhouse with a capacity of 120.[61] Tenders were also sought to 'raise the building between the Hospital and the fever sheds, over the Idiot Wards, so as to become a permanent enlargement of the workhouse'.[62] A similar proposal was approved in Milford union where it was decided to erect sheds in the children's yards to serve a dual purpose as schoolrooms and dormitories.[63] Drawings were also prepared for new fever hospitals in Donegal and Ballyshannon unions, as well as an infirmary enlargement in the latter, while a new two-storey building to the rear of the men's and women's yards was proposed at Letterkenny. Meanwhile, the boards of Milford and Stranorlar unions submitted plans for fever hospitals capable of accommodating sixty patients and the Glenties guardians deliberated upon a similar building with a capacity of forty.[64] A breakdown of workhouse, hospital and auxiliary accommodation on April 29th 1848 is given in Table 6.5.[65]

Table 6.5. Workhouse, hospital & auxiliary accommodation in Donegal, April 29th 1848

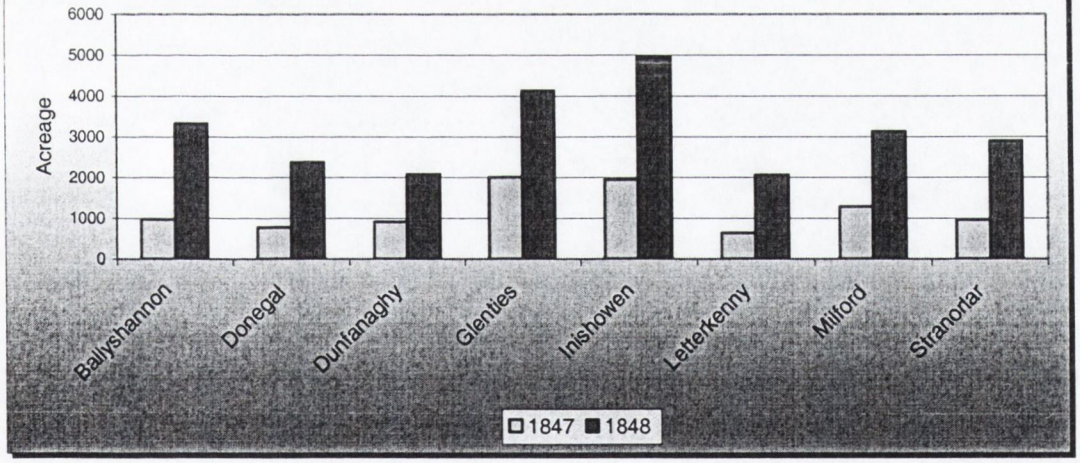
Union	Date of first admissions	Original Capacity	Fever Hospital/ Sheds Cap.	Additional Accom.	Total Accom.	Inmate Nos., April 29th
Ballyshannon	May 6th, 1843	500	50	320	870	695
Donegal	May 21st, 1843	500	50	-	550	555
Dunfanaghy	June 24th, 1845	300	-	-	300	264
Glenties	July 24th, 1846	500	-	100	600	502
Inishowen	Oct. 2nd, 1843	600	-	-	600	403
Letterkenny	March 14th, 1845	500	70	350	920	401
Milford	April 6th, 1846	400	-	30	430	288
Stranorlar	May 3rd, 1844	400	-	60	460	332
Total		3,700	170	860	4,730	3,440
Total Ireland		93,860	12,888	51,229	157,977	135,688

From April onwards, numbers in the workhouses declined universally within the county, largely through employment in preparation for the coming harvest. In Donegal union it was reported on April 17th that '...during the week of fine spring weather, a considerable number of the rural population was busily employed in

[61] ibid., p. 50
[62] BG/38/1/4, Ballyshannon Minutes, January 26th 1848
[63] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 328
[64] *First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1847-8[963], xxxiii, Appendix A, pp. 111-2
[65] Source: ibid., Appendix B, p. 153

preparations for sowing the land; and in all directions ploughs, harrows, and spade husbandry, were in active operation.[66] The widespread availability of seed potatoes and the reduction in price from 1*s.* to 8½*d.* per stone at Ballyshannon market saw a 'very considerable breadth' of potatoes planted, while in Glenties it was estimated that double the quantity of potatoes were planted compared with the previous year.[67] The market price of seed potatoes at Milford was 5*s.* per 120lbs, which the Poor Law Inspector, Mr. Horsley, asserted was 'within the reach of the means of the small farmer and of the cottier in employment'.[68] The full extent of the increase in each union is illustrated in Fig. 6.9.[69] For the county as a whole, the potato acreage rose almost three-fold from only 10,983 acres in 1847 to 27,884 acres in 1848. While the Donegal returns certainly indicate a quite a significant improvement in the condition of the county with regard to the potato, one should not ignore that fact that the total 1848 crop still only amounted to just over a third of the estimated 1846 acreage of 81,259 acres.[70] It can thus be inferred that such a shortfall is indicative of a continuing inability among the poorer classes to obtain seed.

Fig.6.9. Potato acreage in eight Donegal unions, 1847 & 1848



[66] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Sixth Series,* H.C. 1847-8[955], lvi, p. 605

[67] *First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1847-8[963], xxxiii, Appendix A, pp. 120, 126

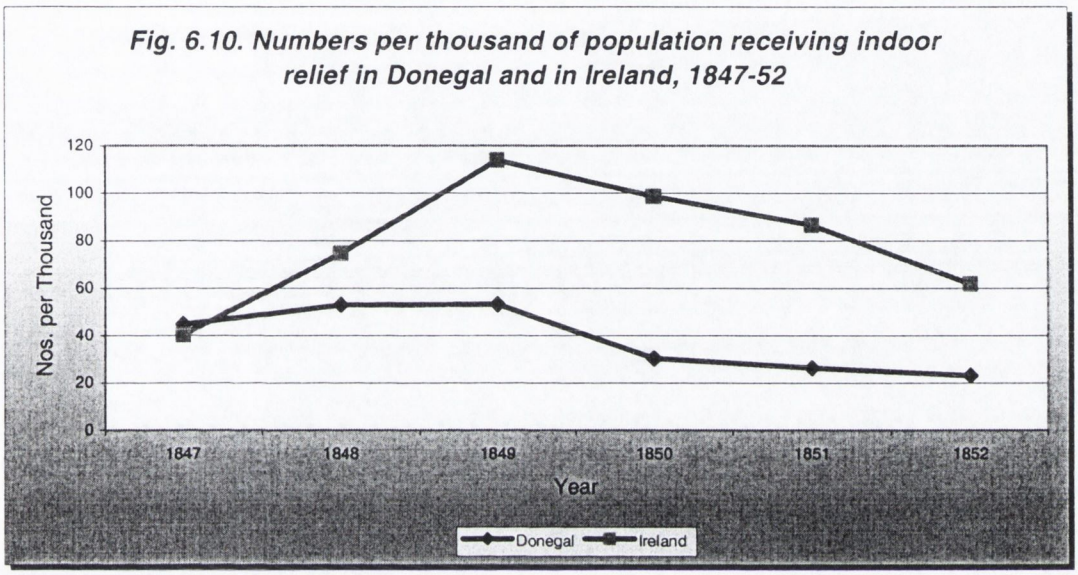
[68] ibid., Appendix B, p. 130

[69] Source: *Returns of agricultural produce in Ireland in the year 1847, pt I, Crops,* H.C. 1847-8[923], lvii, pp. viii-ix; *Returns of agricultural produce in Ireland in the year 1848,* H.C. 1849[1116], xlix, p. 134

[70] Bourke, P.M.A. (1959), 'The Extent of the Potato Crop in Ireland at the time of the Famine', in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland,* Vol. XX, Part III, p. 9

The scale of Poor relief in Donegal from a national perspective in this period can be deduced from the yearly returns of inmate numbers for the whole country. Fig. 6.10 illustrates the levelling off of workhouse numbers in Donegal between September 1848 and 1849, at a time when the numbers receiving indoor relief nationally increased from 75 per thousand of population to a peak of 114 per thousand in the year ended September 1849.[71]

Fig. 6.10. Numbers per thousand of population receiving indoor relief in Donegal and in Ireland, 1847-52



However, the Famine was by no means at its end in Donegal by the autumn of 1848. The winter of that year saw a dramatic increase in destitution in some unions, particularly Donegal, Glenties and Inishowen. The level of absenteeism among the landlord class in Glenties was one factor alluded to by the inspector of the union in attempting to explain its particularly high level of indoor and outdoor relief requirement:

> The real cause of destitution in this union, is the want of employment, as there are scarcely any resident proprietors who are able to give employment to an extensive scale, to the labouring man: hence arises the pressure for relief from all classes of able-bodied paupers of both sexes...[72]

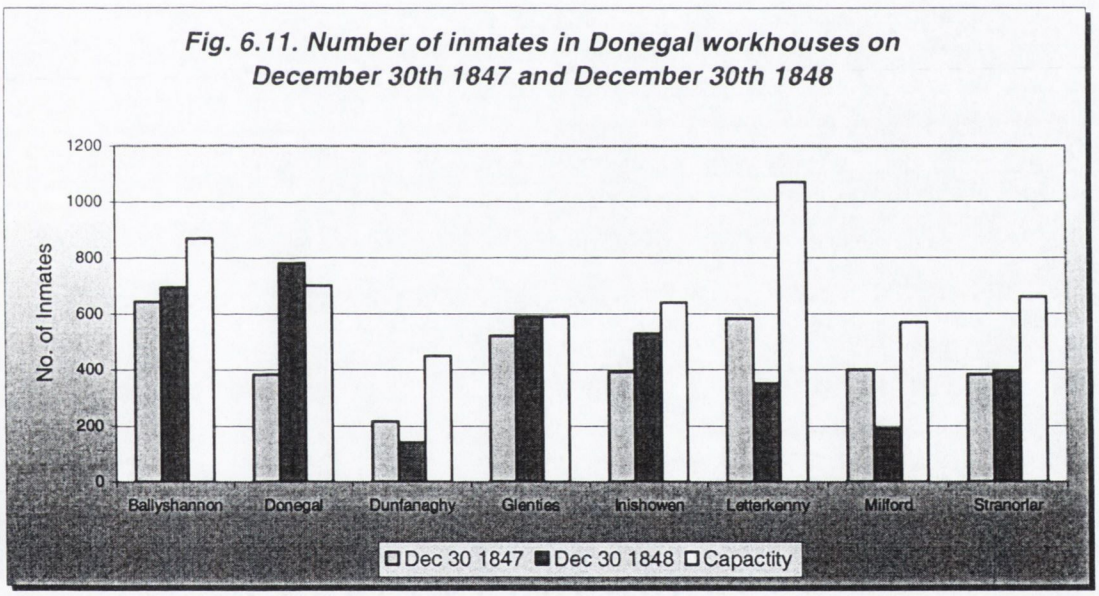
The rising number of destitute persons 'wandering about the country without being half-clad' by mid-December in Glenties had no course other than to present

[71] Source: calculated from Appendices 6.2 to 6.6, pp. xxx-yyy

[72] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Eighth Series*, H.C. 1849[1042], xlviii, pp. 2-3, O'Neill to Poor Law Commissioners

themselves for relief at the workhouse and by the end of the month it was full.[73] In Milford, meanwhile, the difficulty among the poorer classes in obtaining sufficient clothing and bedding to keep out the elements appears to have been a common predicament also. Mr. Horsley, in a report of December 26th, refers to the lack of blankets and warm bedding among the poor of the union and seems particularly annoyed that despite his success in securing clothing for 1,300 children from the British Association earlier in the year, he now finds that 'these same children are in as ragged and dirty a state as ever'.[74] Destitution in Milford generally, however, does not appear to have been as prevalent as in other unions (see Fig. 6.11)[75] In fact it is only in the Milford, Dunfanaghy and Letterkenny unions that a decrease in inmate numbers at the close of the year is recorded. Of the other workhouses, Donegal is the only one to exceed its capacity. The Ballyshannon establishment, though documenting only a marginally lower number of inmates, still had 176 vacancies.[76]

Fig. 6.11. Number of inmates in Donegal workhouses on December 30th 1847 and December 30th 1848



[73] *Fourteenth report from the select committee on poor laws (Irl.), together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, appendix and index to the fourteen reports,* H.C. 1849[572], xv, pt II, p. 255

[74] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Eighth Series,* H.C. 1849[1042], xlviii, p. 360

[75] Source: *Second annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1849[1118], xxv, pp. 171-174; *Fourteenth report from the select committee on poor laws (Irl.), together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, appendix and index to the fourteen reports,* H.C. 1849[572], xv, pt II, p. 225

[76] ibid.

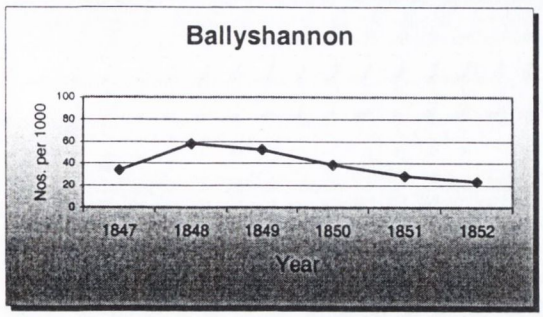
The spring of 1849 provides us with the first indication of a marked decrease in distress in Co. Donegal. Signs of recovery in Glenties union, by far the worst affected by the Famine, are symptomatic of a general improvement in the circumstances of the county. A comparison between the fifteen weeks from December 24th to March 10th in 1847-48 and 1848-49 reveals a reduction in expenditure from £1,159 to £236. Outdoor relief figures for the two periods similarly drop from 39,569 (1847-48) to 10,070 (1848-49).[77] The reduction in the provision of outdoor relief had an effect on numbers in the workhouse and the Glenties institution is the only one in Donegal to record an increase in indoor relief between September 1848 and September 1849, with the exception of Stranorlar which registered a moderate rise in numbers (see Fig. 6.12, overleaf). In Glenties, however, figures rose from 62 per thousand of population in the year ended September 1848 to 95 per thousand in the year ended September 1849. Thereafter, figures declined quite rapidly in line with the other Donegal unions, as illustrated in Fig. 6.12. In his evidence to the Select Committee on Poor Laws in April 1849, John Vandeleur Stewart, the resident proprietor from Letterkenny, referred to the general amelioration in distress:

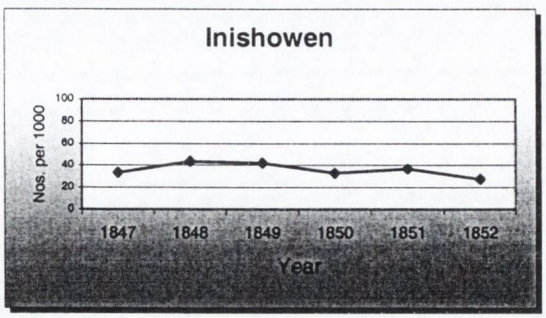
> I believe Donegal to be one of the poorest [counties] in Ireland with reference to population and value, but I am happy to say that seven of eight of its unions are in a prosperous condition...[78]

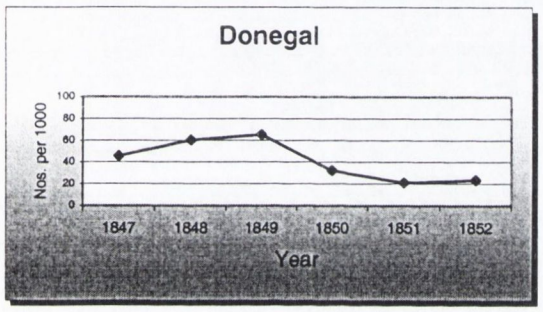
At a national level, the final assault on the population arrived in the early months of 1849 in the form of a severe outbreak of cholera. Institutions such as workhouses, where poor sanitation and overcrowding provided optimal breeding conditions for the disease, were struck particularly hard. Fearful of an epidemic in Donegal, the Glenties guardians and others set about amalgamating various electoral divisions into medical districts 'in order to provide for the treatment of cholera cases should such occur'.[79] However, the outbreak never materialised in Donegal and the guardians were spared the pressure under which their counterparts in other parts of the country were placed, thereby continuing to maintain the county's position of relative well-being. Fig. 6.13 illustrates the death rates per 100,000 of population during the

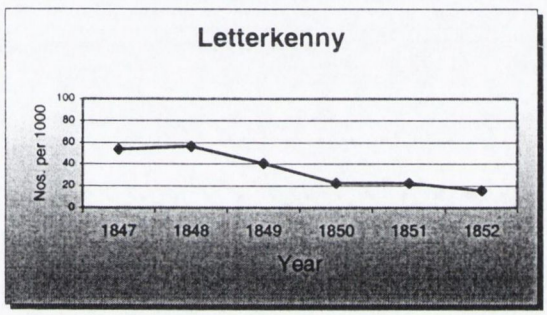
[77] *Second report from the select committee of the House of Lords appointed to inquire into the operation of the Irish Poor Law, and the expediency of making any amendments to its enactments, together with minutes of evidence,* H.C. 1849[228], xvi, p. 479
[78] *Third report from the select committee on poor laws (Irl.),* H.C. 1849[572], xv, pt I, p. 438
[79] BG/92/A/3, Glenties Minutes, March 17th 1849

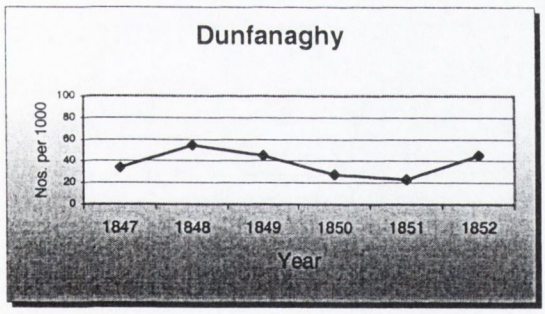
Fig. 6.12. Numbers per thousand of union population receiving indoor relief in Donegal workhouses, 1847-52

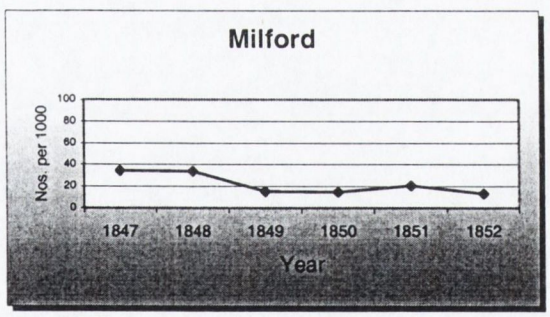


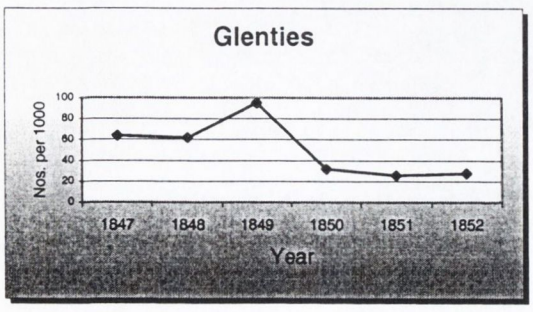


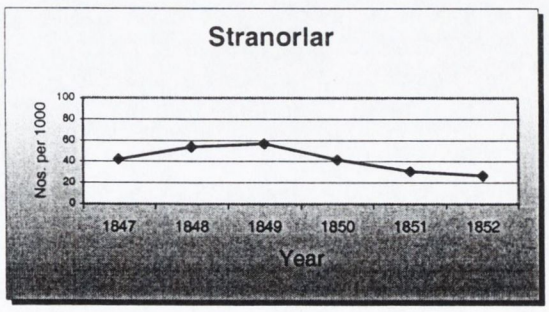






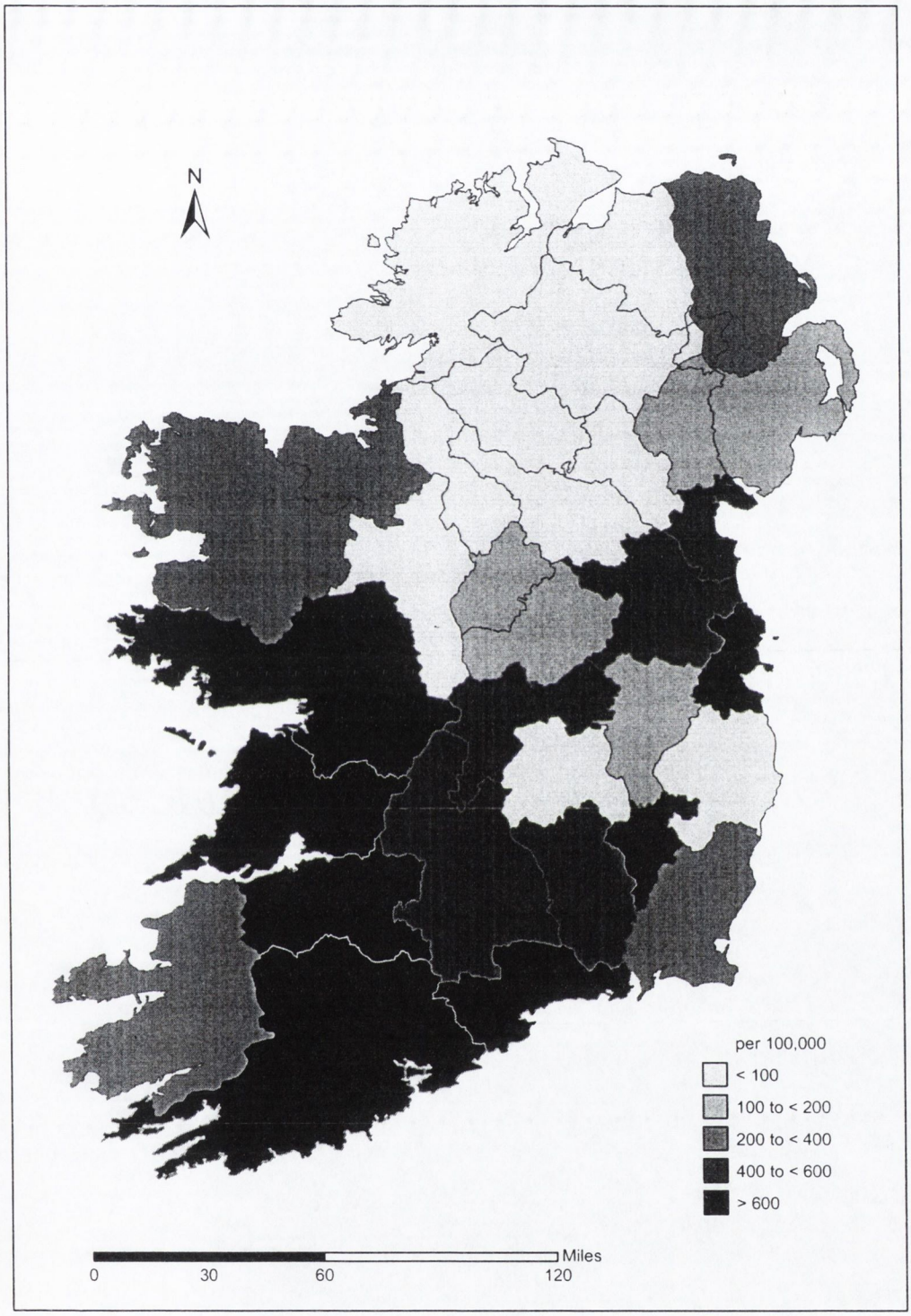






Source: Extrapolated from data in Appendices 6.2 to 6.7, pp. xxx-yyy

Fig. 6.13. Death rates from cholera at county level in Ireland, 1849



Source: Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine*, p. 123

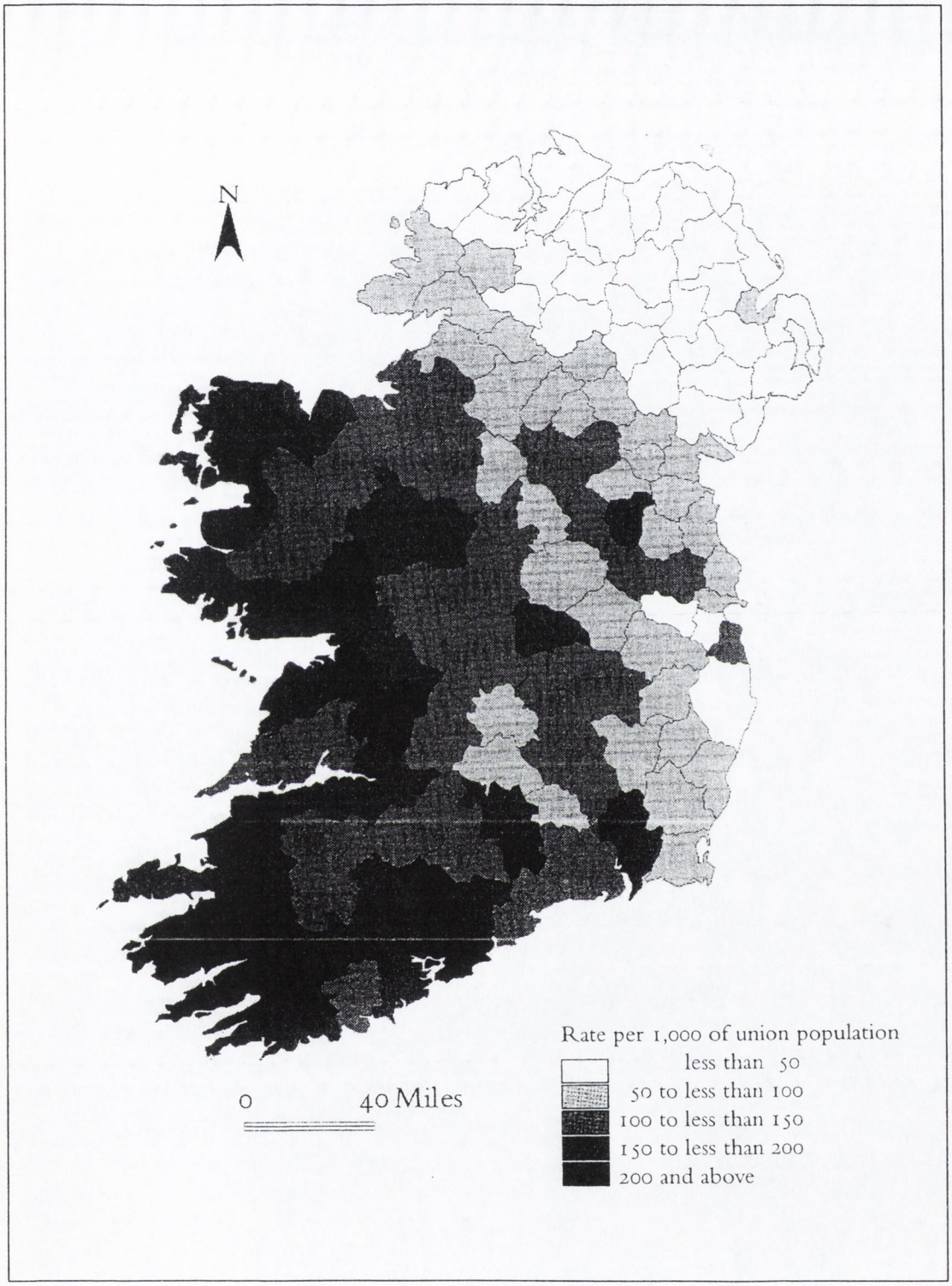
epidemic of 1849. Though mortality was highest towards the south and west of the country, the disease was one of the few indiscriminate killers of the Famine. Amid the regional diversity in conditions, which were becoming ever more pronounced by 1849, the epidemic was particularly virulent in counties Carlow, Offaly, Dublin and Kilkenny, as well as in long-suffering areas such as Galway and Clare.

In Donegal, we find further evidence of recovery by the late summer and early autumn of 1849. The *Londonderry Journal* reported that '...the absence of all indication of the blight on the potato crop... comes near to an assurance that we are not to have a failure of any kind in the potatoes this year'.[80] The acreage planted in the county increased further to some 36,757 acres in 1849, marking a return to about one half of the pre-Famine level and indicating an increase in the proportion of the poorer classes who were in a position to plant the crop.[81] Pressure on the workhouses had lifted considerably with the Ballyshannon guardians reporting that 'the number of paupers is daily diminishing, the distress through the county is weekly decreasing [and] there is now accommodation in the union workhouse for 343 paupers'.[82] In Glenties, meanwhile, the clerk was directed to inform one Patrick Mulloy that the building which the board had leased from him as an auxiliary workhouse was to be surrendered to him by August 24th, the additional accommodation no longer being required.[83]

The overall improvement in the position of Donegal on a national scale is clearly illustrated by Fig. 6.14, which maps the numbers per thousand of population relieved in the 131 union workhouses of Ireland for the year ended September 1849. Further decreases in inmate levels were to occur in the county in 1850 (30 per 1,000 relived during the year), 1851 (20 per 1,000) and 1852 (23 per 1000)[84] and the workhouses were required only to maintain the permanent deadweight of the 'impotent' poor, whose dependence on the Poor Law moved far beyond the crisis.

[80] *Londonderry Journal,* August 1st, 1849
[81] *Returns of agricultural produce in Ireland in the year 1851,* H.C. 1852-3[1589], xciii, p. xxix
[82] BG/38/1/5, Ballyshannon Minutes, August 18th, 1849
[83] BG/92/A/4, Glenties Minutes, August 11th 1849
[84] Source: see Appendices 6.4 to 6.6

Fig. 6.14. Workhouse relief in Ireland during the year ending September 29th 1849 at Poor Law union level



Source: Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine,* p. 127

6.6. THE WORKHOUSE TEST & PRESSURE FOR OUTDOOR RELIEF

One of the chief preoccupations of the Poor Law Commissioners and boards of guardians in the aftermath of the extension of the Poor Law was the preservation of the workhouse as a 'test' of destitution. As O'Neill has pointed out, the workhouse was seen as an institution of prison-like discipline, where rules and regulations were a sufficient deterrent to entry except when absolutely essential to survival.[85] Such a perception on the part of the destitute was looked on as a decided advantage in preventing abuse of the system from the point of view of its administrative hierarchy. In Donegal, we find frequent references to the 'necessity for straining every nerve to keep the house as a test'.[86] Evidence of the attempted application of the test come to us by way of the figures relating to the significant increase in workhouse and auxiliary accommodation in the county.[87]

In his evidence to a House of Lords Select Committee in 1849, John Vandeleur Stewart alludes to the example of the Letterkenny board of guardians who provided additional accommodation for some 300 inmates when faced with increased pressure for admission to the workhouse in January 1848. The result, as Stewart saw it, was a gradual decrease in inmate numbers from 602 on January 8th to 328 on December 23rd 1848 and the obviation of a need to grant outdoor relief in the union.[88] While acknowledging that Stewart had a somewhat simplistic view of events – he was but one of many commentators who looked at the changing dynamics of the crisis solely through the window of the heavily-curtained Poor Law system,[89] without considering other external factors - such a decrease undoubtedly acts as a bolster to the notion that

[85] O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52*, p. 250

[86] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 325; Also, see for example, Kinealy, C.A. (1983/4), *The Irish Poor Law, 1838-62: a study of the relationship between the local and central administrators* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, TCD), pp. 155-6: Milford guardians told that for reasons of economy, the workhouse was to be maintained as a test for the able-bodied.

[87] See Section 6.5, Table 6.5

[88] *Second report from the select committee of the House of Lords appointed to inquire into the operation of the Irish Poor Law, and the expediency of making any amendments to its enactments, together with minutes of evidence*, H.C. 1849[228], xvi, p. 469; Evidence of John Vandeleur Stewart

[89] For example, see ibid., p.5 – Evidence of A. Power, in which he entirely attributes the considerably more favourable circumstances prevalent in Co. Donegal when compared with Co. Clare to the smaller union areas and slightly higher proportion of workhouse accommodation per capita in the former county.

a proportion of the clamour for admittance to workhouses was merely a measure designed to induce the introduction of outdoor relief. In Donegal union, where outdoor relief had been grudgingly granted by February 1848 it was felt that '...there would not be two of them [the destitute in receipt of outdoor relief] in the house if we had room to give them'.[90]

Such a view is borne out in evidence which will be referred to presently; for the moment it is prudent to enter into a brief elucidation of the elements of workhouse life which were contributory factors in the resistance of the population to seek refuge therein. Overcrowding, as we have seen, was rife by late 1847 and continued to raise serious difficulties throughout 1848. The already frugal diet of the inmates had disimproved if anything by the most severe period of the Famine and was compared unfavourably in most areas with that of the local goal.[91] Most important in relation to the workhouse test was the issue of labour. The fundamental principle of the test was that the able-bodied should be encouraged to exhaust all other possibilities before turning to the relief afforded them by the Poor Law. In light of this, it was felt that labour in the workhouse should be as unattractive an option as possible. Thus we find that the able-bodied men and boys in Ballyshannon workhouse, in common with their counterparts in much of Donegal and Ireland as a whole, were required to break between a quarter and a half ton of stones per day.[92] The Poor Law Inspector of the union noted that 'breaking stones, as a test, is closely attended to by the assistant master'.[93]

Female inmates, meanwhile, were usually engaged in spinning or sprigging, as was the case in Glenties, Inishowen, Stranorlar and Milford unions by the beginning of 1848 when frequent reference is made to the purchase of wheels for the purpose.[94]

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[90] *Second report from the select committee of the House of Lords appointed to inquire into the operation of the Irish Poor Law, and the expediency of making any amendments to its enactments, together with minutes of evidence,* H.C. 1849[228], xvi, p. 20; Evidence of John Hamilton

[91] O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52,* p. 249; *Freeman's Journal,* February 19th 1848

[92] BG/38/1/5, Ballyshannon Minutes, December 16th 1848

[93] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Sixth Series,* H.C. 1847-8[955], lvi, p. 79

[94] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series,* H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 54; BG/92/A/3, Glenties Minutes; BG/97/3/1, Inishowen Minutes; BG 147/4/2, Stranorlar Minutes; BG 119/3/2, Milford Minutes

In April 1848, the matron of the Ballyshannon workhouse reported that the able-bodied females had made 'within the last week 130 bed-ticks, 126 pair of sheets, and 100 shifts'.[95] Though stone-breaking was the recommended employment for the able-bodied male, there is considerable evidence to suggest that several Donegal boards of guardians endeavoured to engage their charges in productive industry, despite the disapproval of the Poor Law Commissioners. The spring of 1848 ushered in an extended period of turf-cutting in Glenties union and men thus engaged were allowed an increase in their meal rations from 1¼lb to 2lb.[96] Donegal union also offers verification of a reluctance to use stone-breaking as the sole mode of labour. A summary of the fruits of the able-bodied inmates endeavour during the year 1849 is outlined below:

45 Tons of manure removed and spread
42 Square perches of potatoes set
8 Tons of stones broken
10 Hanks of flax yarn spun
24 Yards of drugget woven
24 Suits of men's and women's clothing mended
96 Suits of boys' and girls' clothing mended
6 Pieces of flowering done
24 Bed ticks made
12 Women's shifts made[97]

Such productivity certainly provides evidence that the boards of guardians were wholeheartedly committed to ensuring that 'no individual capable of exertion must ever be permitted to be idle in a workhouse'.[98] The measures taken to guarantee that the workhouses should be utilised only as a last resort would appear to have some justification in the face of constant attempts at abuse of the system. Reports from throughout Donegal, but particularly in the more distressed unions of Glenties, Ballyshannon, Donegal and Milford, highlight the exertions of the population in striving to force the introduction of outdoor relief. January 1848 in Glenties union, for example, saw several able-bodied men and their families who had previously refused to enter the workhouse when there was room, pressing for admission now that

[95] ibid.; BG/38/1/4, Ballyshannon Minutes, April 29th 1848
[96] Conaghan, P. (1997), *The Great Famine in South-West Donegal, 1845-50,* p. 227
[97] *Ballyshannon Herald,* March 22nd 1850
[98] Poirteir, C. ed. (1995), *Famine Echoes,* p. 6, Michael Gildea, Dromore, Ballintra, Co. Donegal

the house was full.[99] In late March 1848, some fifty-three inmates of the Donegal union workhouse left voluntarily in one week, stating that the reason for their departure was that 'they would not have entered the workhouse but in the expectation of being immediately discharged on the outdoor relief list'.[100] An account of a statement delivered by the union Inspector to a large crowd gathered outside the Ballyshannon workhouse in January 1848 offers similar confirmation of the existence of such an attitude:

> I stated to the paupers that I trusted they had not sought admission in the expectation of being put out shortly on allowances, and that if so they were mistaken, as an additional house had been taken, and that the workhouse was to be enlarged, so that they should remain inmates of one or other of these houses. Upon this a woman with five children, who had been most clamorous for admittance, at once left the house, and six others followed her example[101]

Milford and Inishowen unions mirrored their south Donegal counterparts with a number of reports of a 'rush' on the workhouses in the hope of forcing a system of outdoor relief upon the guardians.[102] The contemporary outlook on this situation was essentially that the people were capable of all manner of deception in their exploitation of the Poor Law system. Though there is evidence to suggest some justification for such an analysis, it must be recognised that pressure on the workhouses was, to a large extent, a 'real' phenomenon, instigated by severe destitution among the poorer classes in some areas. In the west and south of the country, distress was rising at an alarming rate by the winter of 1847-8 and the introduction of outdoor relief on a massive scale became necessary. In Donegal, such relief measures remained relatively small in scale and were adopted only in Glenties, Ballyshannon, Donegal, Milford and Inishowen unions.

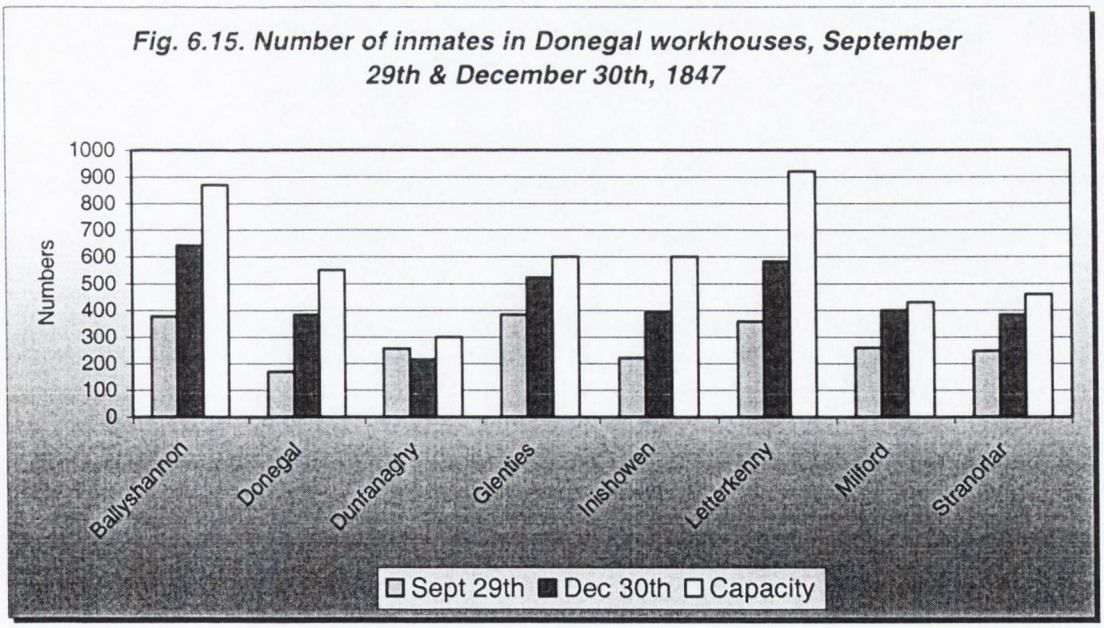
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[99] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 59, O'Neill to Poor Law Commissioners
[100] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Sixth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[955], lvi, p. 604, Herbert to Poor Law Commissioners
[101] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 52, D'Arcy to Poor Law Commissioners
[102] ibid., p. 328, Horsley to Poor Law Commissioners

6.7. OUTDOOR RELIEF

The most dramatic change in policy under the Irish Poor Relief Extension Act was the sanctioning of outdoor relief. Both the Irish Commission of Inquiry and the Nicholls Inquiry, which preceded the passing of the Irish Poor Law Act, had repudiated the idea of outdoor relief, while a House of Lords Select Committee of 1846 had declared that 'the introduction of any system of outdoor relief would be dangerous to the general interests of the community'.[103] However, despite a similar lack of enthusiasm on the part of the Poor Law Commissioners and boards of guardians in Ireland, the granting of outdoor relief was beginning to become a necessity by late 1847. As we have seen, the demand for workhouse places was far exceeding supply at this point and a large proportion of the establishments countrywide were in a severely overcrowded state. In Donegal, inmate numbers had risen steadily from September and by December 1847 the Milford, Stranorlar and Glenties houses were approaching full capacity. Fig. 6.15 charts the general increase in inmate numbers from September 29th to December 30th 1847.[104]

Fig. 6.15. Number of inmates in Donegal workhouses, September 29th & December 30th, 1847



[103] *Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the laws relating to the destitute poor and the operation of medical charities in Ireland, with minutes of evidence*, H.C. 1846[694], xi, p. 24

[104] Source: *First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices*, H.C. 1847-8[963], xxxiii, Appendix B, p. 135; F50, Appendix 2 in 14th Report, p.225

Under the new legislation the guardians were in a position to grant outdoor relief under two separate headings. Section 1 allowed relief to persons classed as 'disabled' due to sickness, infirmity or old age. Widows with two or more dependant legitimate children were also entitled to relief under this section. All other destitute poor 'unable to support themselves by their own industry and other lawful means' were to be offered assistance only in the workhouse.[105] However, Section 2 of the Act provided something of a loophole, whereby periods of 'unusual distress' were deemed to warrant the sanctioning of outdoor relief to the able-bodied for periods of two months.[106] The initial hesitation of guardians to grant outdoor relief is typified by the reaction of the Inishowen[107] and Ballyshannon boards, who stated their hope 'that the Commissioners will not press the appointment of Relieving Officers until it is absolutely necessary'.[108] Necessary or not, advertisements for relieving officers (whose duties were to examine applicant circumstances and administer relief accordingly) appeared in the local press for all unions in late 1847.[109]

By the end of October the Ballyshannon workhouse was full but the sanctioning of outdoor relief was avoided by providing auxiliary accommodation.[110] In Glenties, meanwhile, it was proposed that ovens be built throughout the union in order that cooked food might be administered.[111] By the end of December, Glenties, Inishowen and Milford had commenced outdoor operations and Donegal and Ballyshannon were to follow in January and February respectively.[112] One of the principal initial difficulties, particularly in Glenties, was the transportation of meal through poor roads

[105] 10 Vic. Cap. 31; *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fourth Series*, H.C. 1847[896], liv, pp. 6-7

[106] ibid., p. 7

[107] Kinealy, C.A. (1983/4), *The Irish Poor Law, 1838-62: a study of the relationship between the local and central administrators* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, TCD), p. 149 – the Inishowen guardians refused to appoint a relieving officer, seeing it as a further burden on the ratepayers when there was still accommodation in the workhouse

[108] BG/38/1/3, Ballyshannon Minutes, 30th October 1847

[109] *Londonderry Journal*, September 15th 1847; ibid., October 6th 1847; *Ballyshannon Herald*, September 22nd 1847

[110] BG/38/1/3, Ballyshannon Minutes, 30th October 1847

[111] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, pp. 53, 58. Cooked food was preferable to raw owing to the fear of abuse of the system, whereby cooked rations could be sold by the poor. In the few areas of the country where it was available the uptake was considerably lower than that for uncooked, possibly indicating that the authorities reservations were justified, though one could argue that improper cooking of rations or the simple fact that food would have gone cold/ bad by the time a recipient actually reached home, played a part in lower applicant numbers

[112] ibid., pp. 3, 13; BG/92/A/1, Glenties Minutes, December 4th 1847; BG/97/1, December 10th 1847; BG/119/1, Milford Minutes, December 17th 1847

to some of the stores.[113] This was later resolved to some extent by the delivery of supplies by sea to Rutland and Killybegs.[114] Initial numbers on outdoor relief were highest in Glenties (1,217 by December 11th[115]) and this was to remain the case throughout the extent of such measures in the county. Fig. 6.16, overleaf, demonstrates this in relation to the first six months of 1848 and charts a general rise in outdoor relief numbers in the five unions in which it was in operation.

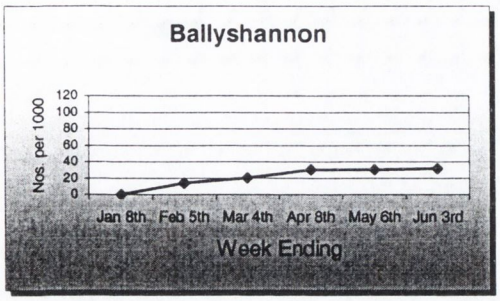
Of the remaining three unions in Donegal, only Stranorlar found itself in a position which warranted the provision of any outdoor relief and even then it was only in occasional exceptional cases. In fact a mere 25 cases were recorded for the year ended September 29th 1848 (see Appendix 6.3) and none whatsoever thereafter.[116] Meanwhile, the Dunfanaghy guardians and their Letterkenny counterparts were never forced to consider outdoor aid as a relief mechanism at any time.[117] Thus, the regional pattern of destitution in Donegal largely mirrored the earlier relief schemes under the Soup Kitchen Act when the unions of Letterkenny and Dunfanaghy had the lowest proportions of population (5 per cent & 13 per cent respectively) receiving rations in the county.

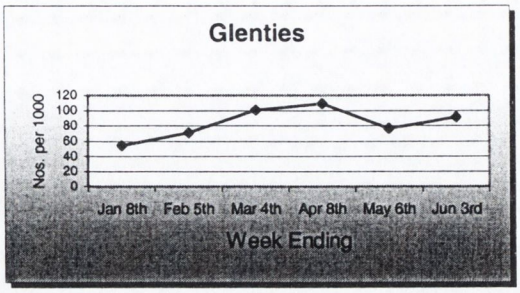
The continuing reluctance of the Ballyshannon board to admit that outdoor relief was urgently required by January 1848 began to create problems. In a report to the Poor Law Commissioners, the union Inspector, John S. D'Arcy, gave an account of a case in which he directed a 'miserable and infirm' man to Mr. McIntyre, the relieving officer for Ballyshannon district. Upon D'Arcy's return to the town later that evening, he found that McIntyre had yet to visit the man's house to look into the family's condition and offered to accompany him:

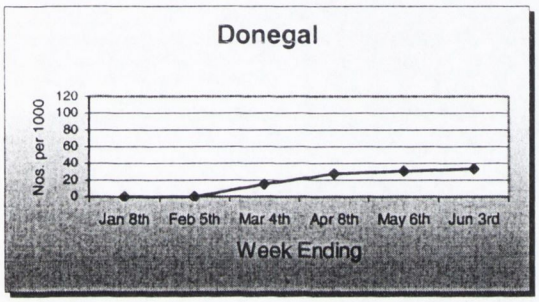
> ... having followed the man down a lane off the main street, we arrived at a sort of cellar, and nothing I can write would convey an adequate idea of the squalid misery that presented itself, as my sight became accustomed to the darkness the place was enveloped in. On either side a fireplace, insensible and,

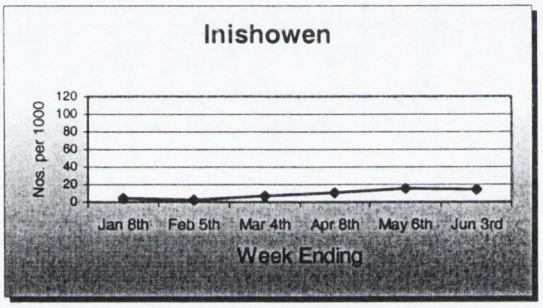
[113] ibid., p. 56
[114] *Londonderry Journal*, January 19th 1848
[115] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 57
[116] *Second annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices*, H.C. 1849[1118], xxv, p. 173
[117] See Appendices 6.2 to 6.7

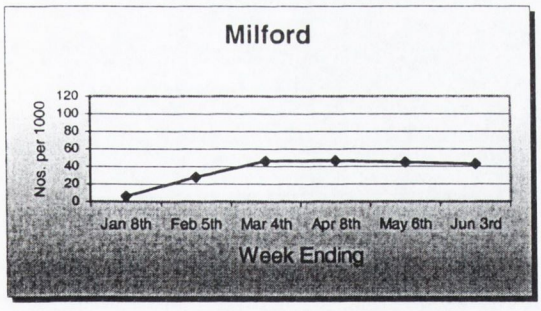
Fig. 6.16. Numbers receiving out-door relief per thousand of population in Donegal unions, January to June 1848











Source: *Numbers of persons relieved in each union in Ireland, distinguishing In-door and Out-door Poor, in each of the weeks ending respectively 8 January, 5 February, 4 March, 8 April, 6 May, and 3 June 1848, with average cost of maintenance,* H.C. 1849[141], xlvii, p. 730-33

> apparently to me, in the last stage of fever, were stretched two women, literally naked, a little straw under them, and the remains of a blanket over; their clothes had all been disposed of to procure food and the necessaries they had stood in need of; there was no furniture in the room, save a pot and three-silver, and I desired Mr. McIntyre never for one instant, to hesitate in affording relief to cases even approaching this in destitution, much less where such abject misery existed.[118]

The Poor Law Commissioners, in typical fashion, responded to D'Arcy's report in a stiff and reprimanding tone, reminding him that the legal powers of relieving officers to act independently of the board of guardians were limited to cases which were '*sudden* as well as urgent'.[119] There have been differing viewpoints among writers in relation to a charge of genocide laid at the door of the British government and its response to the Famine in Ireland in terms of relief policy. Whether one agrees or disagrees with opposing sides of the debate, it is difficult not to take D'Arcy's report as substantive evidence of the rigidity and bureaucracy of legislation being prone to act as a factor inducing mortality.

The provision of outdoor relief in Ballyshannon union rose steadily from 596 cases on February 5th to 1,381 cases by June 3rd 1848.[120] The other four unions followed a similar pattern with Glenties leading the way. The inefficiency of the Glenties guardians, discussed previously, was compounded by rapidly rising destitution and its potential to lead to abuses of the system. One example is that of persons granted outdoor relief due to temporary illness, who, upon seeing the relieving officer approaching their homes, 'instantly ran in, and went to bed, alleging that they were very ill'.[121] Another is the surrender of land by able-bodied men to their teenage sons so as to be eligible for outdoor relief.[122] Such incidents appear to have been particularly frequent in the spring of 1849, presumably contributing to some degree to the relatively high numbers receiving outdoor relief in Glenties in March (4,337 persons, or 10 per cent of population) and April (4,770 persons or 11 per cent of

[118] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 25
[119] ibid., pp. 47-8
[120] *Numbers of persons relieved in each union in Ireland, distinguishing In-door and Out-door Poor, in each of the weeks ending respectively 8 January, 5 February, 4 March, 8 April, 6 May, and 3 June 1848, with average cost of maintenance*, H.C. 1849[141], xlvii, p. 730-33
[121] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Sixth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[955], lvi, p. 52
[122] ibid.

population).[123] Of the other unions, Milford was the one in which highest numbers were recorded reaching 3,989 persons or 4.3 per cent of the population by June 1847.[124] The early months of the year had seen reasonably high levels of labouring employment in the union, reclaiming, trenching, draining and fencing land at a rate of 1*s.* per day.[125] These opportunities began to become more limited as the month of February passed and the consequent rise in destitution is evident in Fig. 6.16. Finally, Inishowen appears to have been the least affected of the five unions in this period with levels of outdoor relief never exceeding 2 per cent of the population in the first six months of 1848.[126]

Thus the composite picture of Co. Donegal in the national context emerges. By plotting the numbers per thousand of population receiving outdoor relief in the five Donegal unions against corresponding figures for the country as a whole, we arrive at the results graphed in Fig. 6.17, overleaf.[127] The gradual rise in numbers on a national scale is mirrored by Donegal figures but at a far lower level. So much so, in fact, that the only point at which numbers in Donegal exceed half the national rate is on April 8th. One of the key reasons for the overall increase in the requirement of outdoor relief to a 1st July maximum of 833,889 nationally[128] (the highest level reached throughout the course of the Famine), was the fact that any of the old crop of potatoes which existed would have steadily run out and the new crop had yet to be harvested by June/ July of the year. Such was the pressure in south-west Donegal that the Glenties guardians were forced to the remove the able-bodied inmates in Dunglow, Mullaghderg and Rutland[129], while in Ballyshannon an increase in fever cases among the destitute necessitated a grant of £1 to each relieving officer for their

[123] *Numbers of persons relieved in each union in Ireland, distinguishing In-door and Out-door Poor, in each of the weeks ending respectively 8 January, 5 February, 4 March, 8 April, 6 May, and 3 June 1848, with average cost of maintenance,* H.C. 1849[141], xlvii, p. 730-33

[124] ibid.

[125] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Sixth Series,* H.C. 1847-8[955], lvi, p. 381

[126] *Numbers of persons relieved in each union in Ireland, distinguishing In-door and Out-door Poor, in each of the weeks ending respectively 8 January, 5 February, 4 March, 8 April, 6 May, and 3 June 1848, with average cost of maintenance,* H.C. 1849[141], xlvii, p. 730-33

[127] Compiled from figures in: ibid; *First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1847-8[963], xxxiii, 377; *Second annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1849[1118], xxv, 89; Figures for January 8th nationally are estimated, based on incomplete returns

[128] Burke, H. (1997), *The People and the Poor Law in Nineteenth Century Ireland,* p. 137

[129] BG/92/A/1, Glenties Minutes, 5th May 1848

relief.[130] To the north of the county in Milford and Inishowen the chief problem appears to have been the lack of employment:

> The labour market is not in a healthy state..., and a very many able-bodied persons are idle and starving, while the land around them is not producing half what it would if brought under proper cultivation.[131]

Fig. 6.17. Numbers per thousand of population receiving out-door relief, Donegal & Ireland, January to June 1848

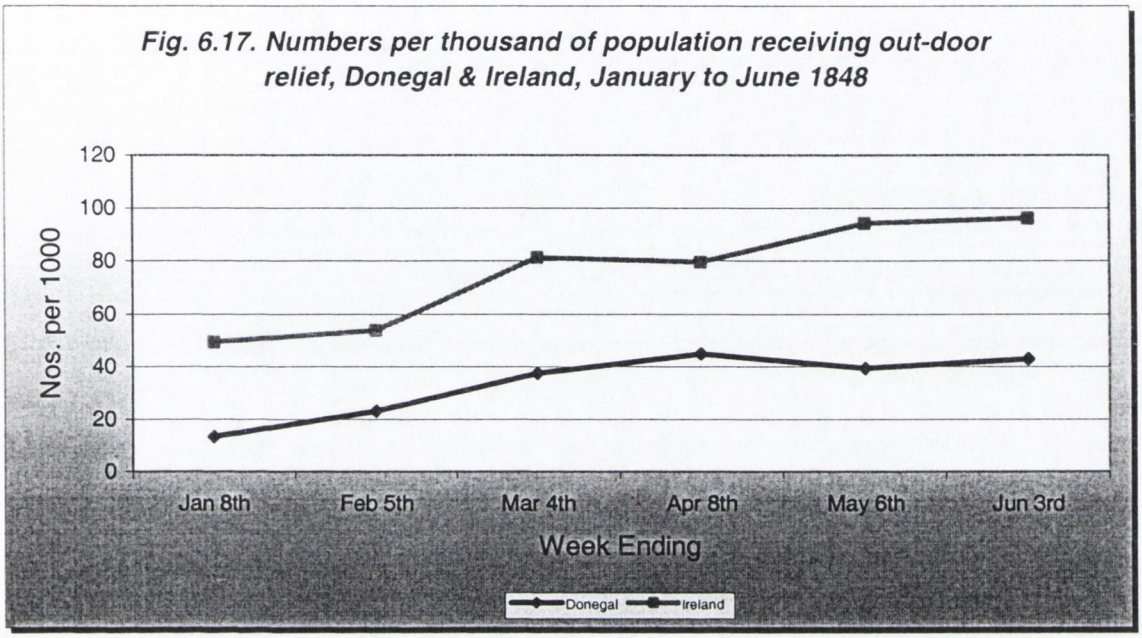
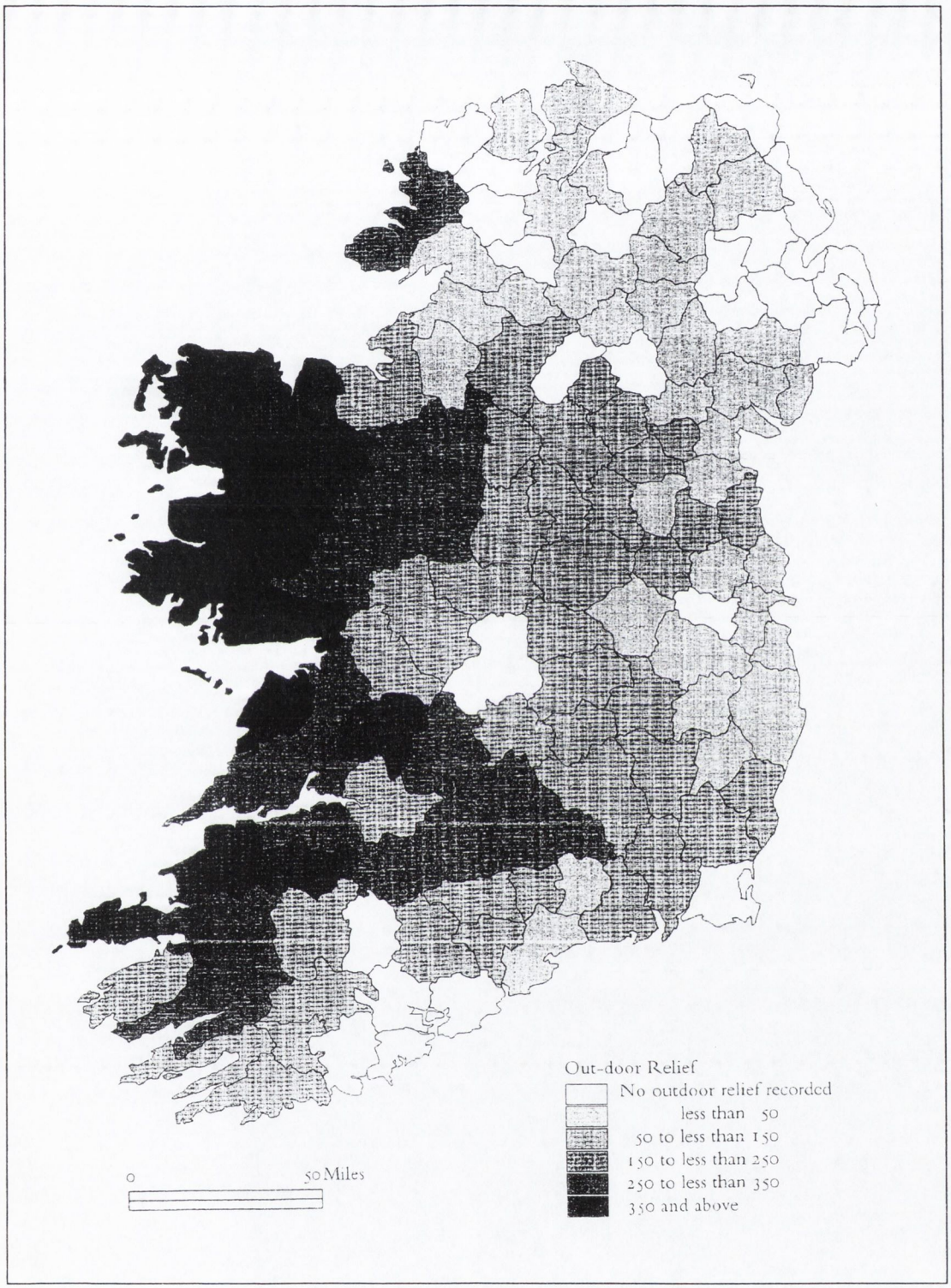


Fig 6.18, overleaf, maps the number of persons per thousand of population in receipt of outdoor relief in each union in Ireland at the peak date of July 1st 1848. The regional variation in provision of outdoor relief is immediately apparent, with highest levels establishing a distinct pattern northwards from north Kerry, through Clare and Galway to North Mayo. Glenties is the only Donegal union exhibiting anything like the extent of distress in these areas, while Inishowen, Milford, Ballyshannon and Donegal unions form part of a group stretching across the north and east of the country. Perhaps the most striking aspect of Donegal's position is that the unions of Dunfanaghy, Letterkenny and Stranorlar (along with Castlederg) form one of only three well-defined pockets recording no provision of outdoor relief whatsoever, the others occurring in the hinterlands of Belfast (Belfast, Larne, Antrim, Lurgan,

[130] BG/38/1/3, Ballyshannon Minutes, 17th June 1848
[131] *Londonderry Journal,* July 5th 1848

Fig. 6.18. Numbers per thousand of population receiving out-door relief in Ireland in the week ending July 1st 1848 at Poor Law union level



Source: Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine,* p. 138; *Note: as no returns were received for Glenties or Clifton unions for July 1st, data for the week ending July 25th was used.

Lisburn, Newtownards and Downpatrick unions) and Cork (Cork, Midelton, Kinsale, Bandon and Mallow).[132]

The expectation of a healthy harvest in 1848 led to the gradual decline in numbers requiring outdoor relief so that by the week ending October 7th, the number in receipt of outdoor rations nationally was less than one quarter the figure for July 1st (199,603 persons).[133] Figures in the Donegal unions for the entire year ending September 29th 1848 are mapped in Fig. 6.19 and are once again demonstrative of Glenties weak position in comparison to the rest of the county, with a rate of 255 persons per thousand requiring outdoor assistance. Milford and Londonderry unions are next highest registering rates of 73 per thousand and 70 per thousand respectively, while Donegal (54 per thousand) and Ballyshannon (65 per thousand) to the south of the county exhibit marginally lower levels. Dunfanaghy, Letterkenny and Stranorlar (it should be mentioned that Stranorlar had a rate of only 1 per thousand, or 25 cases, for the year) again occupy the best positions within the county.

Taking Co. Donegal as a whole it emerges that the pattern set in the first six months of the year holds through to September when the annual aggregate number of persons relieved outside the workhouse was 175 per thousand of population nationally and only 94 per thousand in Donegal.[134] From September 1848 to September 1849 the national position and that of Donegal diverge still further and the decrease in numbers on outdoor relief in the county was a far steeper decline than that which occurred in Ireland as a whole in the same one-year period (See Fig. 6.20).[135]

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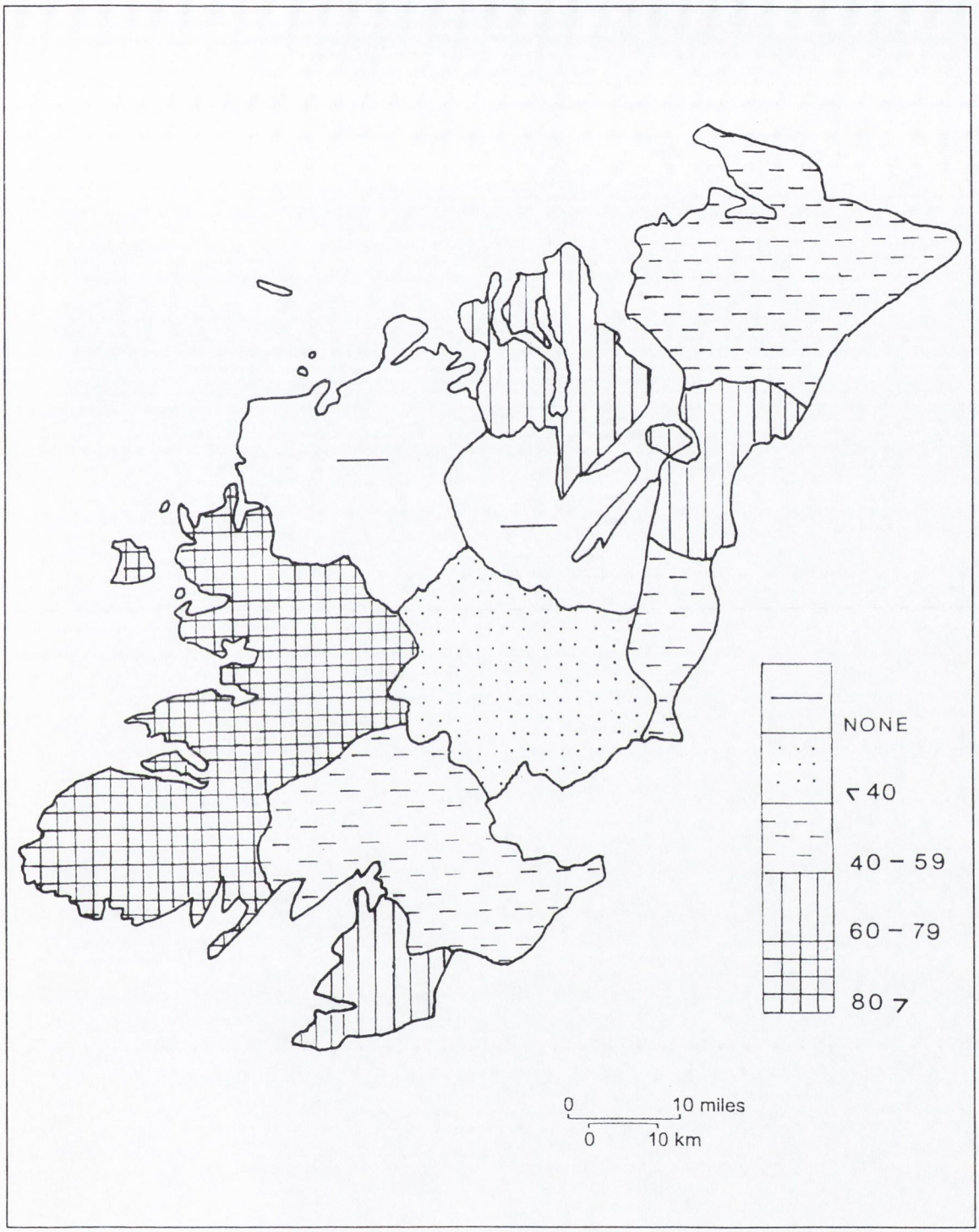
[132] In the case of the Co. Cork unions in particular, the use of auxiliary workhouse accommodation on a large scale played a role in the results which we see in Fig. 6.18, rather than low levels of destitution, which was the principle factor in the north-east and north-west.

[133] Burke, H. (1997), *The People and the Poor Law in Nineteenth Century Ireland,* p. 137

[134] Source: *Second annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1849[1118], xxv, pp. 171-174; *Third annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1850[1243], xxvii, Appendix B, pp. 542-544; *Fourth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1851[1381], xxvi,, pp. 161-165

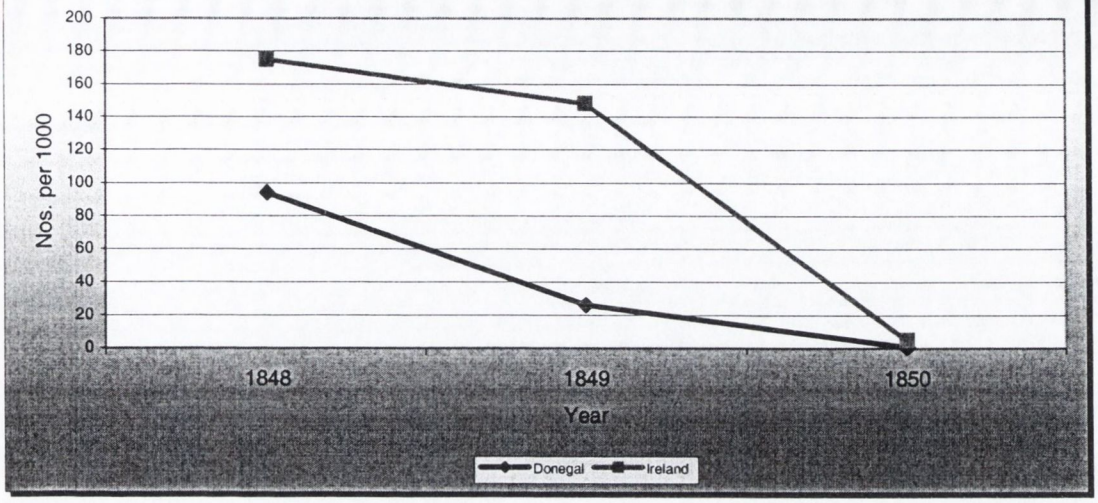
[135] Source: ibid.

Fig. 6.19. Numbers per thousand of population receiving out-door relief in Donegal unions in the year ended September 29th 1848



Source: *Second annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices*, H.C. 1849[1118], xxv, pp. 171-174; See Appendix 6.3 for data

Fig. 6.20. Numbers per thousand of population on out-door relief for years ending September 29th 1848-50, Donegal & Ireland



Another blighted crop in the south and west of the country kept up the numbers requiring outdoor relief nationally in the autumn of 1848. In Donegal, however, the crop showed only 'very slight' signs of blight by August.[136] The *Londonderry Journal* of October 4th, meanwhile, reported that 'the disease has not at all progressed during the last three weeks'. Furthermore, the healthy crop stored in the autumn was generally not affected by blight by the beginning of winter, a recurring problem elsewhere in the country.[137] By September 16th, outdoor relief had been discontinued in Ballyshannon and was only resorted to in 36 cases in 1849.[138] The Ballyshannon board had resolved 'that in consequence of the harvest and the quantity of potatoes at present in the county, ...together with there being plenty of room in the house, we decide that there shall be no more outdoor relief afforded at present.[139] Inishowen, Milford and Strabane unions appear to have experienced a similar improvement with only 144 and 73 instances of sanctioning necessary up to September 1849. Fig. 6.21, overleaf, illustrates the decline in the provision of outdoor rations in the Donegal unions over the year ended September 29th 1849. Glenties shows a four-fold decrease in numbers from 1848, with levels falling to 3,372 persons[140] over a period when even

[136] *Londonderry Journal,* August 2nd 1848
[137] ibid., November 8th 1848
[138] See Appendix 6.4
[139] Ballyshannon Minutes BG/38/1/4, September 16th 1848
[140] ibid.

the eastern unions of Kells, Gorey and Carlow registered figures of 5,598, 4,411 and 7,575 respectively.[141]

In the west, meanwhile, the situation had scarcely improved from 1848 with Ballina, Ballinrobe, Castlerea, Castlebar, Ennis and Ennistymon all registering levels of over 25,000 for the year.[142] In the south-west, Limerick and Kilmallock also provided outdoor relief to more than 25,000 in each union.[143] In contrast, all the Donegal Unions had ceased to provide any outdoor relief from October 1849 on, except in very infrequent cases and in small numbers. Even the worst affected union of Glenties had no reason to sanction any outdoor relief whatsoever after October.[144] Donegal union, in which relatively high figures were recorded up to September of the year had dismissed all relieving officers by October.[145] The Ballyshannon board, meanwhile, questioned the Poor Law Commissioners as to why they should be 'saddled with a continuation of [the] useless expense' of relieving officers, labelling it 'a scandalous misuse of our funds'.[146] By 1850, with the Famine receding markedly throughout the country, the granting of outdoor relief became necessary with much less regularity and applicant numbers decreased to 368,565 for the year, with only 232 cases in Co. Donegal.[147] The key reason for this decline was that the potato crop of 1849 was more or less blight free, resulting in the discontinuation of all orders under Section 2 of the Act and from then on all able-bodied persons were required to enter the workhouse in order to receive relief.[148]

6.8. THE QUARTER ACRE CLAUSE, £ VALUATION & MASS EVICTION

One of the most contentious issues raised by the extension of the Poor Law was the insertion into the Act of the draconian 'Quarter Acre' Clause. Popularly referred to as the 'Gregory Clause', after the eponymous Irish landlord who introduced it,[149]

[141] *Third annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1850[1243], xxvii, Appendix B, pp. 542-544
[142] ibid.; Highest levels in: Ballinrobe (40,290), Ballina (38,654), Castlebar (37,386)
[143] ibid.
[144] See Appedices 6.5 to 6.7
[145] referred to in Ballyshannon Minutes, BG/38/1/5, October 6th 1849
[146] ibid.
[147] See Appendix 6.5
[148] Burke, H. (1997), *The People and the Poor Law in Nineteenth Century Ireland,* p. 136
[149] William Gregory, who held lands in Co. Galway and a parliamentary seat for Co. Dublin

the clause stipulated that persons occupying more than a quarter acre of land could not be deemed destitute and were therefore exempt from relief under the Poor Law.[150] One intention of the clause was to reduce potential abuses of the relief system and the Poor Law Commissioners initially welcomed it as a valuable bulwark against the deceptions of the poor which had been prevalent under the Public Works and the Temporary Relief Act of recent years. A more sinister element to the amended legislation was the wide recognition in parliament of its potential as an estate-clearing device.[151] These observations were proved to be well founded as the clause led directly to mass eviction by numerous landlords countrywide, most notoriously in Kilrush union in Clare, where the houses of 1,951 families were levelled and a further 408 families were displaced from their dwellings.[152]

The operation of the Gregory Clause highlighted the reluctance of the destitute to enter the workhouse. Even before this legislation was enacted there was a natural inherent pride among the smallholders, a reluctance to admit that their situation had become untenable. If turning to the relief afforded them by the Poor Law had been a last resort up to 1847, it now became utterly inconceivable. In Donegal union, the tenants residing in the electoral divisions of Inver and Mountcharles, where destitution was rapidly on the increase in the latter part of 1847, steadfastly refused to turn to the workhouse, preferring to risk starvation than relinquish their holdings.[153] Similar reports came from Letterkenny, Inishowen and Glenties where the Poor Law Inspector, Captain O'Neill provides us with an account exhibiting a stunning lack of understanding of the population's resistance to Poor relief:

> "...it is extremely difficult to get them to give up their small farms of land, although they have not a particle to support them, nor are they able to pay rent or supply themselves with food from the land they hold. I must confess I never met with a more lazy, idle, lying set of people than the generality of the lower orders in this union. Their wants are but few, and if they can eke out the most miserable existence they would prefer it to working for a fair day's wages and a sufficiency of food".[154]

[150] 10&11 Vic. C.31, section 10
[151] *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, third series, XCI, cols. 588-9
[152] Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, p. 147
[153] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 30
[154] ibid., p. 57

O'Neill is accurate in one regard – that of the attempt to struggle through the difficulty - but it was entered into with the prospect that their former mode of subsistence might return, provided they continued in possession of their land. Indeed, the attachment to the land was more than simply an economic link, it was an attachment to place, to landscape and to local society. The strength of such a resolve is clearly evident in the case of a man named Keenan who remained in occupation of his two and a half acres in Ballyshannon until he 'died of destitution and want of food' in February 1848. His wife having suffered the same fate earlier in the winter, he left behind five children to the care of the Union.[155] As reports from throughout the country began to reach Dublin and London, the authorities were forced to admit that the Gregory Clause was responsible for substantial mortality.[156] Though the clause remained in place, it was now deemed acceptable that the dependants of the occupants of more than a quarter acre could receive aid, assuming they were determined to be destitute.[157]

There was, however, no attempt to accede to incessant demands that the clause be abolished and many destitute smallholders maintained their tenuous grip on the land, spurred on by the justifiable fear that their dwellings would be demolished should they choose to abandon them. Though the legislation dictated that only the land in excess of a quarter acre be yielded up, the tenants were frequently met with a refusal from the landlord or agent to a partial surrender. Since the Poor Law charged landlords with the responsibility of paying the Poor Rate on holdings valued at under £4, it was on estates which were heavily subdivided that the burden was felt most. Given the overall situation of decreasing rental income and increasing taxation imposed on them, many landlords were provided with a powerful incentive to engage in the clearance of smallholders from their estates. From 1848, the highest levels of

[155] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Sixth Series,* H.C. 1847-8[955], lvi, p. 73

[156] Gray, P. (1999), *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society, 1843-1850,* p.296; *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, third series, XCVII, p. 338-62 (March, 1848)

[157] *Copies of the correspondence upon which the Commissioners of Poor Laws in Ireland took legal advice as to theconstruction of the 10th section of the Act 10 Vict. C. 31, and the case submitted by them to counsel; and of the circular letters of the Commissioners thereupon,* H.C. 1847-8[442], liii, pp. 519-23; Ballyshannon Board of Guardian Minutes, May 27th, 1848, BG/38/1/4

evictions occurred in counties Clare, Galway, Limerick, Mayo, Leitrim and Tipperary with Donegal registering relatively low rates.[158]

As we have seen in Chapter 2, the system of landholding in Donegal was at a more developed stage than that of the western counties generally and the high numbers of destitute smallholders, relentlessly holding on to their lands in Mayo or Clare, were not present to such a large extent in Donegal in early 1848. Both John Hamilton and John Vandeleur Stewart remarked on the absence of a will, or indeed a need on the part of the Donegal proprietors to carry out large scale Famine clearances such as those prevalent in Co. Clare and elsewhere.[159] Far from clearing their lands, a large number of Donegal landlords were continuing to improve them by employing the tenants on drainage and reclamation works in the period from 1847 to 1849. We have already noted the substantial public and private drainage efforts of the resident gentry during the winter and spring of 1846-7 and it is useful to point out that the improvement of holdings in no way deteriorated as an enterprise from the spring of 1847 onwards. From the time the Land Improvement Act in June 1847 until the end of December 1849, a total of 96 separate applications for loans were made by Donegal proprietors.

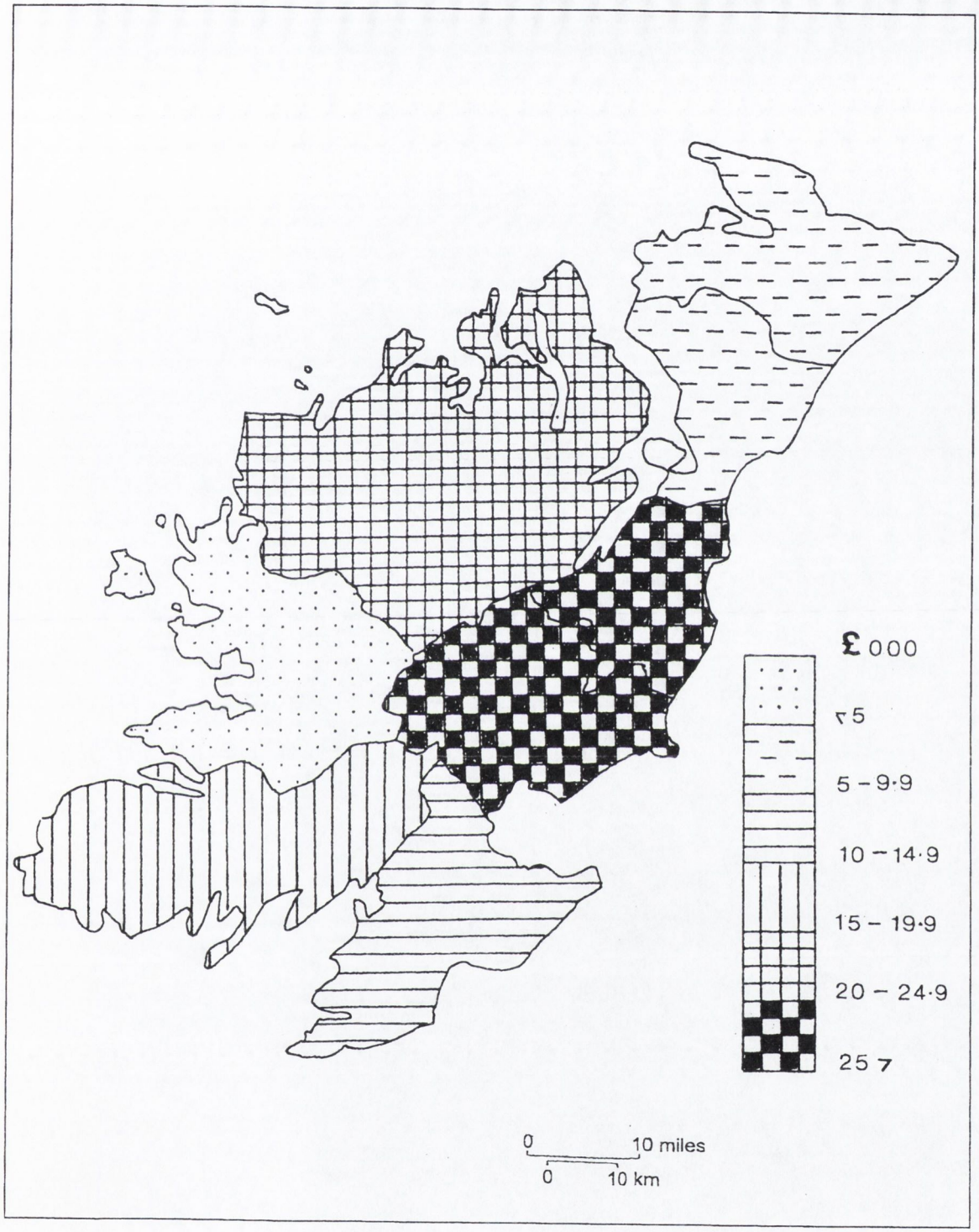
The amount sanctioned by the Board of Works came to some £91,000 in the same period and the baronial distribution of approved loans is mapped in Fig. 6.21, overleaf. As was the case in previous years of improvement works, Raphoe and Kilmacrenan feature strongly in the distribution and it is reasonable to assume that much needed employment opportunities were created for the small farmers and labourers in each barony. To the west, in Boylagh, only a single application for £2,300 was made by James Hamilton and the continuing absence of employment provided by the landowners in the barony must have contributed, in part at least, to the heavy reliance on workhouse and outdoor relief following the extension of the Poor Law.[160]

[158] Daly, M.E. (1986), *The Famine in Ireland,* pp. 109-10

[159] *Second report from the select committee of the House of Lords appointed to inquire into the operation of the Irish Poor Law, and the expediency of making any amendments to its enactments, together with minutes of evidence,* H.C. 1849[228], xvi, p. 439; ibid., p. 478

[160] O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), *The Estate System of Landholding in County Donegal, 1830 to 1923: a geographical analysis* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 129-132

Fig. 6.21. Amount of loans sanctioned under the Land Improvement Act in Donegal baronies, 1847-49*



Source: O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), *The Estate System of Landholding in County Donegal, 1830 to 1923: a geographical analysis* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 130, Table 3.4
*Note: not all loans sanctioned were necessarily issued

In roughly the same period of what can be considered as fairly substantial improvement works in Donegal, the landlords also resisted the opportunities for eviction created by the Gregory Clause. Between 1846 and 1849 the number of ejectments brought in all courts amounted to 1,082, a figure which was below the national average of 1,173 per county for the same period.[161]

Table 6.6. Number of ejectments brought in all courts 1846-49 & constabulary returns of evictions, 1849-51, Donegal & Ireland[162]

	Queen's Bench	Exchequer	Assistant Barristers	*Total*	*Constabulary Returns*		
				1846-9	1849	1850	1851
Donegal	74	12	996	1,082	218	190	208
Ireland	7695	3358	26474	37,527	16,686	19,949	13,197

Note: Court returns and constabulary reports overlap in 1849 but cannot be accurately compared since court returns only cover the period from January to the end of trinity term. Neither the court statistics or constabulary returns reflect the actual number of evictions, this table is designed to reflect Donegal's position in a national context. Of the 16,686 evictions returned by the constabulary in Ireland for 1849, 3,302 were readmitted; similarly 1850 and 1851 saw the readmission of 5,403 and 4,382 families respectively.

The clearances which occurred in Kilrush at the hands of Colonel Vandeleur and Marcus Keane have been well documented, as have all other major incidences of Famine clearance in Galway, Tipperary, Leitrim, Mayo and throughout the country.[163] Though eviction had been employed as an estate management tool by Lord George Hill and others in the years before 1845, clearances involving the levelling or un-roofing of houses appear to have been very infrequent occurrences in Donegal during the Famine. A report from Milford Union in the winter of 1847 refers to the levelling of dwellings following the surrender of holdings to the landlords under the quarter acre clause, rather than as a result of a *bona fide* eviction: '.. almost every landlord or occupier has, on the admission of such parties [the destitute] to the workhouse, instantly levelled their wretched hovels with the ground'.[164] Such levelling was adopted as a device to obviate the need for an expensive ejectment in the case of a re-

[161] *Abstract of Returns Relating to Ejectments, Ireland,* H.C. 1849[315], xlix, p. 7

[162] ibid.; *Returns of the Evictions from 1849 to 1880 as Reported by the Constabulary in Law and Crime (Ireland),* H.C. 1881[6-1], lxxvii, 732-33

[163] see for example, Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine,* pp. 144-59; Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* pp.216-27; O'Neill, T.P. (2000), 'Famine Evictions' in King, C. (ed.) *Famine, Land and Culture in Ireland,* pp. 26-70

[164] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, p. 320, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 320

occupancy of the holding by a returning tenant: in this scenario the ejectment had to be procured from the superior court, thus substantially increasing the financial ramifications for the landlord, given that a suit of this nature could cost as much as 150 guineas.[165] In Ballyshannon the collection of the Poor Rate was affected by the fact that a number of houses in the union were 'down' and were no longer subject to payment.[166] Here, the post eviction procedure was to set the roof of the dwelling on fire to prevent reoccupation:

> A man named Diver who lived in this townland was among those who were evicted out of their homes. The landlord himself was present on this occasion and he offered the sum of one pound to anybody who would set fire to the house. Diver who was standing out on the street with a number of neighbours, stepped forward and said he would earn the money. He thereupon stepped into the kitchen where some turf was still smouldering on the hearth, brought them out on a shovel and placed them among the thatch of the roof. In a few moments it was ablaze, fanned by a strong south-westerly breeze and in a short time his home was gone... When the landlord tendered Diver the money which he had thus so strangely earned, he coolly put it in his pocket, turned on his heel, nodded to the neighbours and disappeared from the scene.[167]

Arranmore Island provides us with the only clear case of the quarter acre and £4 valuation clauses operating as a precursor to the dispossession of smallholders *en masse*, and even then, the evidence available does not warrant the labelling of the event as a 'clearance'. The 1847 purchase of the island from Marquis Conyngham by a London industrialist, Walter Chorley, initiated a process of consolidation of holdings.[168] On Arranmore, the rundale system had prevailed into the early Famine years and Chorley's determination (in light of the consequent financial burden of Poor Rate on him) to bring an end to it saw the eviction of up to half the population of the island.[169] Such an incident was, however, exceptional in Donegal in the period. In contrast to some of their southern and western counterparts, the Donegal landlords did not seize on the opportunity to clear estates which presented itself. Evictions

[165] *Report from the select committee on Kilrush union, together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, etc.*, H.C. 1850[613], xi, pp. 90-91

[166] Begley A. & Lally S. (1997), 'The Famine in County Donegal' in Kinealy C. & Parkhill, T. (eds.), *The Famine in Ulster: the regional impact*, p. 90

[167] ibid., p. 91; Poirteir, C. ed. (1995), *Famine Echoes*, p. 26, Michael Gildea, Dromore, Ballintra, Co. Donegal

[168] *Papers relating to the proceedings for the relief of distress, and state of the unions and workhouses in Ireland, Fifth Series*, H.C. 1847-8[919], lv, p. 61

[169] Mac Cnaimhsi, B. (1973), 'Arranmore Island in the Great Famine' in *Donegal Annual*, Vol. X, No. 3, p. 246

occurred more usually on estates such as the Atkinson property in south Donegal, where proceedings against recalcitrant tenants only began in 1848, despite the non-payment of rents since 1843.[170] Similarly, Marquis Conyngham only moved to eject a number of his defaulting tenants in 1849 after four years arrears had amassed.[171]

It is possible to gain some idea of the regional pattern of evictions in the whole of Donegal for the year 1848. The official returns indicate that 372 cases of eviction took place in the county in 1848, though it is possible that the actual number is slightly lower as the figures recorded occasionally referred to the number of people in a family rather than a single household eviction. The incidence of evictions is shown in Table 6.7, overleaf, which lists the number of families evicted in each union and observations relating to those largest in scale and the variation in numbers between the different unions would seem to largely mirror the geographical homogeneity of distress as measured by the scale of Poor relief. The same five unions that were forced to adopt out-door relief measures were also the areas where greatest numbers of ejectments occurred, though it should be noted that nowhere in Donegal did the level of evictions come close to the mass 'clearances' in some of the most distressed parts of the south and west of Ireland.

Much debate has surrounded endeavours to quantify the precise scale of Famine eviction nationally. Estimates for the period 1846-54 vary widely from Vaughan's 70,000 families or 250,000 persons[172] to Donnelly's estimate of over half a million persons,[173] with numerous other commentators arriving at numbers in between the two.[174] Since the essential purpose of this treatment of the subject is to place Donegal

[170] Murphy, T.D. (1979/80), *Derry and North-West Ulster, 1790-1914* (unpublished M.Litt. Thesis, TCD), p. 269; T.R. Blake to T.N. Redington, 17th April, 1848; T.J. Atkinson to Chief Secretary, 28th July, 1848 (S.P.O., Outrage Papers, Donegal, 1848)

[171] *Londonderry Journal,* 5th December, 1849

[172] Vaughan, W.E. (1994), *Landlords and Tenants in mid-Victorian Ireland,* p. 28; Figure given in Appendix 1 is 71,603, pp. 230-1

[173] Donnelly, J.S. (1995), 'Mass Eviction and the Great Famine' in Poirteir, C. (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine,* pp. 155-73

[174] Daly, M.E. (1986), *The Famine in Ireland,* pp. 110-11 – 3,500 to 3,600 families (1846), 6,026 families (1847), 16,686 families (1849). The accuracy of her results is questionable, in particular the 1849 figure which would appear to be based on constabulary returns (see Table 6.6). Of the 16,686 evictions returned by the constabulary for 1849, 3,302 were readmitted, meaning the actual number permanently dispossessed was 13,384. See also: Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 218; Kinealy, C. (1997), *A Death Dealing Famine,* pp. 118, 215-7; Boyce, D.G. (1990), *Nineteenth Century Ireland: the Search for Stability*, p. 110; Steele, E.D. (1974), *Irish Land and British Politics: Tenant-Right and Nationality, 1865-1870*, p. 17

Table 6.7. Evictions in Donegal unions and county totals, 1848

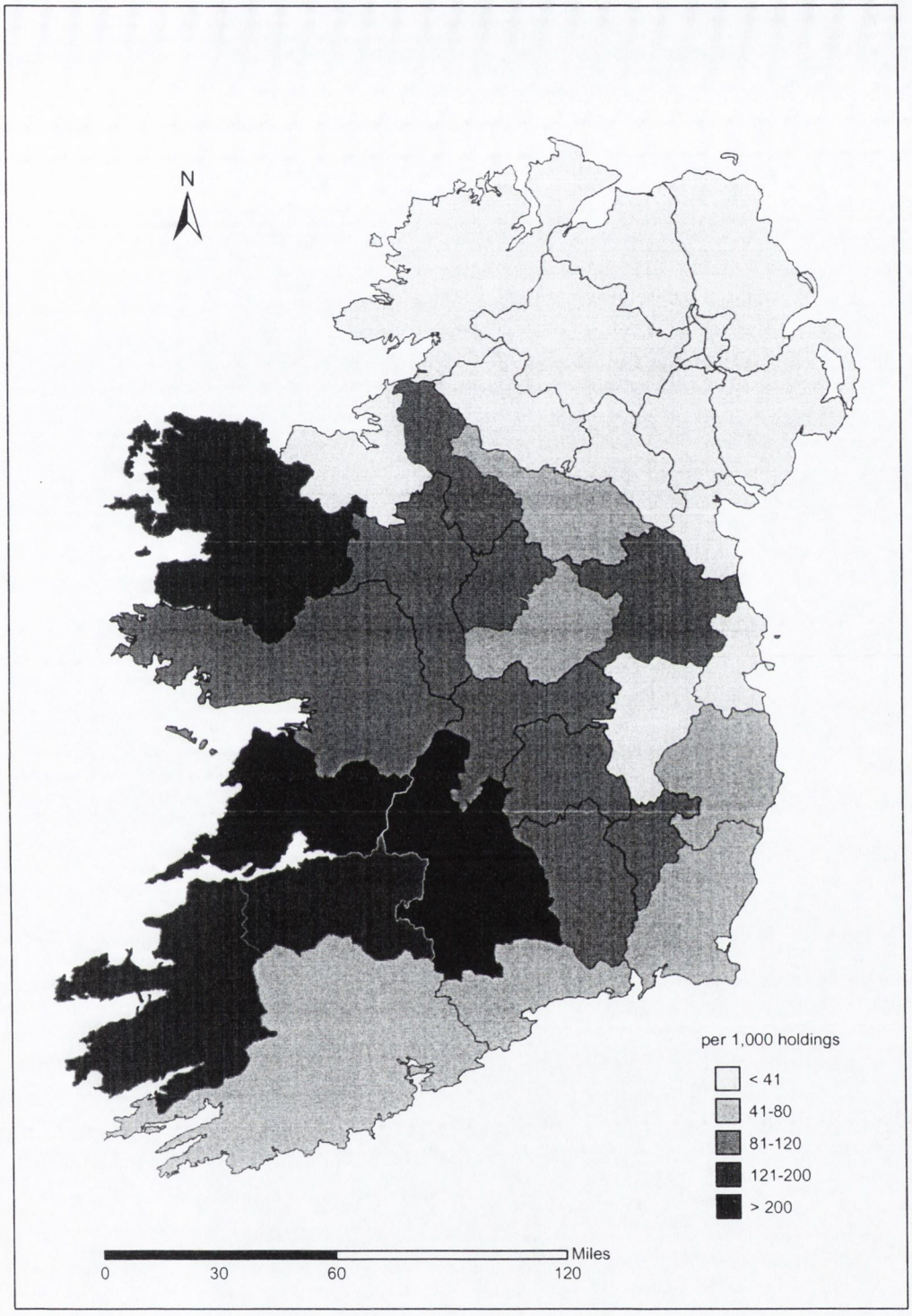
Union	No. of families	*Observations relating to largest incidents*
Ballyshannon	78	Largest numbers were 23 in townland of Ballymagurty in Ballintra Electoral Division, where Alexander Hamilton, agent to Colonel Connolly served the notices; Hamilton also in Cashlard, Ballyshannon: 8, and another 12 served by James Thornley, agent to W. Delap in Coolcolly, also in Ballyshannon Division
Donegal	48	Evictions small in scale; largest was 6 families in the townland of Laghey (Laghey Division), notice served by Thomas Gorman on behalf of the landlord, Colonel Edward Connolly
Dunfanaghy	13	9 evicted by Rev. J. Olphert in Ballyconnell townland, Crossroads Division. Remaining 4 were on the estate of Henry Irwin in Cresslough Division
Glenties	61	Largest was 9 families evicted by William Barrett, agent for Samuel Delap in townland of Killybegs. Barrett also acted as agent for F.J. Nesbitt and served notices on 6 holdings in the townland of Carricknagore, also in Killybegs Division
Inishowen	45	All small scale – most by Michael Doherty who served notices to 3 families as agent to Thomas Alexander in the townland of Ballymacarry, 4 as agent to Daniel Todd in Tullywille (both Buncrana Division) and a further 4 on the lands he owned himself at Rasheny in Ballyliffin Division
Letterkenny	35	19 of the thirty-five families were evicted by Samuel Davis from his estate at Kilpheak in Kilmasney Division. Alexander Hamilton, this time acting as agent for Thomas Brooke served notices to 10 in the townland of Carrick in Templedouglas Division
Milford	47	Largest in scale (11) occurred in the townland of Lurganbrack (Oughterlin Division) where notice was served by Denis Deeney on behalf of Andrew A. Watt, agent for Florenda Watt and W. Dunlop
Stranorlar	33	13 by an agent named Russel on behalf of the Marquis of Conyngham in the townland of Stranorlar; a further 8 in three different townlands in Comoy and Killygordan Divisions by Samuel Sproule, agent to Robert G. Montgomery
Total 8 Unions	360	
County Total*	372	

*including 12 in Donegal parts of Londonderry and Strabane

Note – In these returns in some instances the figure in the column relating to the number of families may actually represent each individual in a family. The compilers did not find it practicable to remedy this discrepancy. The figures may therefore be inaccurate to some degree have been added here as they appear on the returns as number of families in the absence of a means of rectifying the irregularity. Regional variation should not be compromised but the total of 372 would seem to be rather when compared with figures for 1849-51 in Table 6.6.

Source: *Return of all notices served upon relieveing officers of poor law districts in Ireland, by landowners and others, under the act of last session, 11 & 12 Vic. C. 47, entitled, 'An act for the protection and relief of the destitute poor evicted from their dwellings'*, H.C. 1849[517], xlix, pp. 284, 291-2, 294-6, 298-9, 302, 309

Fig. 6.22. Rates of eviction in Ireland, by county, 1849-53



Source: Donnelly, J.S. (2001), *The Great Irish Potato Famine,* p. 157

within a national context, it is not necessary to engage in what might be an unwise attempt to estimate the actual number of evictions in the county during the Famine period. We have already seen that Donegal levels were below the national average for the period 1846-9[175] and in determining county rates for 1849 to 1853 we find that the pattern continues with Donegal ranked twenty-fifth of the 32 counties, Tipperary and Clare staking claim to first and second place respectively.[176] Donnelly's estimates[177] of evictions per 1,000 holdings in the same period are mapped in Fig. 6.22 and further reinforce the contention that the quarter acre and £4 valuation clauses had little impact on the numbers of dispossessed tenants in the later years of the Famine in Donegal. The landlords of the county had once again, it would seem, wielded their power as a force of assistance and support to their tenants as the crisis subsided, just as they had done at the height of the calamity in the winter of 1846-7.

6.9. DONEGAL THROUGH THE LENS OF POOR LAW SYSTEM & STRUCTURE

Before addressing the issue of the adequacy of the extended Poor Law as a relief mechanism nationally and in the case of Donegal in particular, it is first necessary to refer to the other questions posed at the outset of this examination in relation to continuing national and regional patterns of destitution and distress. Turning firstly to the picture which emerges from within Donegal itself, it is apparent that Glenties union endured a level of distress which was far more severe than any other part of the county. During the year ended September 1848, at the height of the crisis in the Poor Law period, some 31.6 per cent of the population were assisted through workhouse and outdoor relief, a figure which amounts to well over double the proportion in other Donegal unions.[178] Such a level of reliance on government relief mechanisms has been noted previously in relation to employment on the Public Works up to 1847 and during the operation of the Temporary Relief Act in the summer of 1847 when some 36 per cent of the Glenties population were in receipt of rations. The fundamental reason for the development of such a situation in the union is that its pre-Famine

[175] See Table 6.6
[176] Vaughan, W.E. (1994), *Landlords and Tenants in mid-Victorian Ireland,* p. 235 – Appendix 4 ranks Donegal seventh from top in terms of lowest rates.
[177] Donnelly acknowledges W.E. Vaughan as the source of the data
[178] Figures calculated from Appendix 6.3

socio-economic condition placed it in a position of considerably higher vulnerability than elsewhere. The proportion of the population most likely to suffer from the onslaught of the Famine was relatively high in Glenties, as enquiry into agriculture, housing, literacy, employment and a series of other factors has revealed in Chapter 2.

The other Donegal unions which bore the brunt of the crisis, albeit to a lesser extent, were Ballyshannon, Donegal and Milford and the aforementioned socio-economic state of affairs existed to varying extents in these unions also. The inability of the poorer classes to avoid the relentless push of the Famine against them is a theme which will be explored in greater detail in the conclusion of this study in Chapter 7. Similarly, the ameliorating forces operating in other areas within the county will also be assessed more fully. With regard to Dunfanaghy, Letterkenny and Stranorlar, where out-door relief was not required[179] and workhouse inmate numbers were relatively low in the years after the extension of the Poor Law, it is interesting to note a difference in the basic structure of the system itself in these unions when compared with the others, in which outdoor relief was adopted. The fifth column of the 'Donegal' section in Table 6.8 (overleaf) sets out the ratio of permanent workhouse accommodation to union population for each administrative area in the county. It is quite interesting to note that the ratios for Letterkenny, Dunfanaghy and Stranorlar were significantly lower than elsewhere, meaning that there was one workhouse space for every 59 people on average in each of the three unions, compared with accommodation for one in 85 on average for the other five. The simple fact that there was more accommodation in Letterkenny, Dunfanaghy and Stranorlar institutions must go some distance in explaining the absence of a need to introduce outdoor relief in these unions. In the other five, the capacities of workhouses relative to population were lower and pressure on the system was bound to have been greater even if the unions in question had not been at a socio-economic disadvantage in the first place.

The operation of the Poor Law system in Donegal in the national context raises a number of significant points. It has been clearly demonstrated that the numbers of persons requiring both indoor and outdoor relief were lower than the national average

[179] Apart from the 25 people in Stranorlar in the year ended September 29th 1848; see Appendix 6.3

Table 6.8. Comparing Donegal unions with Clare unions in terms of rateable property, workhouse accommodation to population ratios and numbers on out-door relief in 1848

Donegal Unions	Rateable Property £	s	d.	Population(1841)	Workhouse Accommodation	Accommodation to Population Ratio	On Out-Door Relief
Ballyshannon	51,435	12	5	43,403	500	1:86	1,259
Donegal	31,639	0	3	41,371	500	1:83	1,217
Dunfanaghy	10,543	9	8	18,571	300	1:61	0
Glenties	16,330	5	0	43,571	500	1:87	4,069
Inishowen	36,607	0	0	43,569	600	1:73	550
Letterkenny	31,865	12	1	25,921	500	1:52	0
Milford	31,377	8	6	38,108	400	1:95	1,899
Stranorlar	29,402	3	0	25,786	400	1:64	0
Total	**239,170 11**	**12**		**280,300**	**3,700**	**1:75**	**8,904**
Clare Unions							
Ennis	101,222	9	6	77,840	800	1:97	18,740
Ennistymon	67,486	17	0	49,935	600	1:83	14,424
Kilrush	59,449	8	6	82,353	800	1:103	13,523
Scariff	44,609	12	0	53,563	600	1:89	17,203
Total	**272,768**	**7**	**0**	**263,691**	**2,800**	**1:94**	**63,890**

Clare = 1 in 4 on Out-Door
Donegal = 1 in 31 on Out-Door

Source: *Second report from the select committee of the House of Lords appointed to inquire into the operation of the Irish Poor Law, and the expediency of making any amendments to its enactments, together with minutes of evidence*, H.C. 1849[228], xvi, p.469; *Thirteenth report from the select committee on poor laws (Irl.)*, H.C. 1849[416], xv, pt. II, p.458

and substantially lower than figures recorded in the south and west of the country, despite the existence of quite similar socio-economic structures. Donegal, as we have seen in Chapter 2, undoubtedly held slight advantages in relation to a number of factors, but surely not enough to warrant such marked positive divergence from western, southern and even national patterns of destitution. Comparing, for example, the number of persons on out-door relief in Donegal and Clare in April 1848 as outlined in Table 6.8, we find ratios of 1 in 4 persons on relief lists in Clare and only 1 in 31 in Donegal.[180] The most notable difference between the two counties in terms of the structure of the Poor Law system is that Donegal was divided into twice as many Poor Law unions and the permanent accommodation to population ratio was higher, though not enough to go very far in explaining such huge anomalies in outdoor relief numbers.

Remaining within the bounds of possible explanations provided solely by the make-up of the Poor Law system itself, however, one could argue that Donegal unions benefited from a more efficient administrative structure than many others situated west of the line from Derry to Cork. While individual cases of incompetence and inefficiency do come to light quite frequently in guardians' minutes and other evidence relating to Donegal, such problems would appear to have been largely contained and prevented from instigating the total breakdown of the system which occurred elsewhere. In total, nearly forty separate boards of guardians were dissolved in Ireland between 1847 and 1849 and replaced by paid officials. The reasons generally cited for dissolution of a board were its failure to levy and collect a sufficient rate, refusal to repay government advances, the provision of illegal relief or high levels of death from starvation in the union.[181]

The frequency of such incidents in the Donegal unions was low enough to spare them the threat of dissolution, indicating a relatively competent and adept administrative system. While it was certainly the case that instances of dissolution exhibited a predominantly western and southern trend, it should be noted that several

[180] Source: *Second report from the select committee of the House of Lords appointed to inquire into the operation of the Irish Poor Law, and the expediency of making any amendments to its enactments, together with minutes of evidence,* H.C. 1849[228], xvi, p. 469; *Third report from the select committee on poor laws (Irl.),* H.C. 1849[572], xv, pt I, p. 458

[181] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 211

unions in Ulster (Lowtherstown, Enniskillen, Cavan and Cootehill), the midlands (Trim, Mullingar, Athlone, Granard and Longford) and the south-east (Waterford, New Ross, Kilkenny and Tipperary), were not immune to dissolution. The argument that boards were dissolved because of the impossibility of dealing with the crisis which presented itself in poorer areas is thus refuted to some degree, since none of the aforementioned unions could be considered to have been faced with chronic distress. The most striking thing about Donegal's position in terms of board dissolution is the fact that Glenties, where difficulties existed on a scale similar to the west and south, is the only one of the twenty-two unions officially classified as 'distressed' whose board of guardians was not dissolved in the period.

Though there is a certain amount of merit in at least raising the issue of possible explanations for regional variation in distress and relief through the lens of the Poor Law system itself, it would be imprudent to overemphasise the slight advantages held by Donegal unions in terms of favourable administrative and organisational structures. Far more important to the relatively low levels of distress and destitution, were the pre-Famine advantages of Donegal discussed in Chapter 2, as well as the progressive and paternalistic nature of the county's resident proprietors, who continued to assist, employ and generally support their tenants in the latter years of the Famine.

6.10. CONCLUSION: ASSESSING POOR LAW RELIEF

In conclusion, we turn to the question of the adequacy of the extended Poor Law as a relief mechanism in the period 1847-50. At a national level, the system has received much criticism and the general consensus among prominent commentators is that the relief provided was hopelessly inadequate.[182] A system which had been designed to provide assistance in ordinary circumstances could not hope to prove adequate during such an extraordinary disaster as the Great Famine. One of the more central issues in relation to this were the continuing problems of overcrowding and

[182] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* pp. 231, 356-9; O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52,* pp. 258-9; Donnelly, J.S. (1989), 'The Administration of Relief, 1847-51' in Vaughan, W.E. ed., *A New History of Ireland, v: Ireland Under the Union,* pp.317-9, 329-31

the difficulty in separating the sick from the healthy in the workhouses. Donegal would appear to have experienced something of an abatement from such harrowing distress as is recorded for many southern and western counties in the period. Donnelly refers to the plight of the Fermoy workhouse inmates in Co. Cork, for example, whose numbers swelled to some 1,800 in 1847 when the capacity of the building stood at only 800 persons.[183] Such situations arose frequently with a general resistance on the part of boards of guardians countrywide to grant outdoor relief and the workhouse was often more than a 'test' of destitution, it frequently became a test of mettle and will to simply survive.

Fig. 6.23. Provincial workhouse mortality rates per thousand inmates, 1847-50

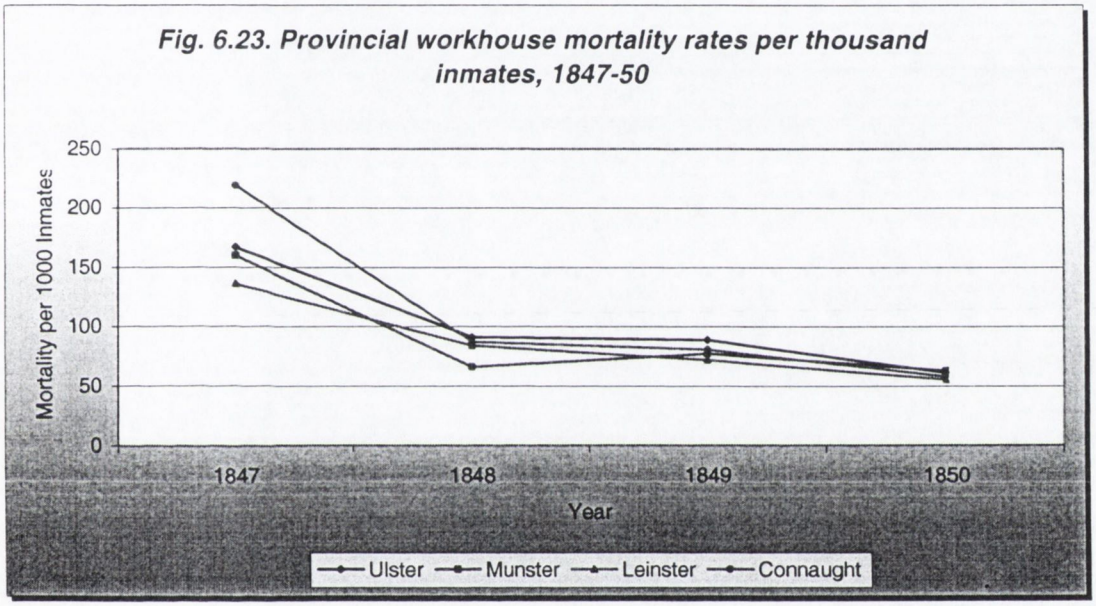


Fig. 6.23 charts the workhouse mortality rate by province for the period 1847-50. The inadequacies and appalling defectiveness of the newly introduced system to provide 'relief' in 1847 cannot be more clearly illustrated than in fact that the average mortality rate in the institutions came to 163 per thousand inmates in Ireland. A state aid measure in the midst of a crisis on the scale of the Great Famine could hardly be described as anything but a failure when one in every six people who sought 'relief' through its provisions ended up dead. As one might expect, highest levels were recorded in Connaught where about 22 per cent of the workhouse population died in 1847. On a slightly more positive note, what is quite striking is the considerable improvement in conditions after 1847, due principally to the widespread construction

[183] Donnelly, J.S. (1989), 'The Administration of Relief, 1847-51' in Vaughan, W.E. ed., *A New History of Ireland, v: Ireland Under the Union,* pp. 317-8

of fever hospitals and the provision of auxiliary accommodation by most boards of guardians in the country. In this respect at least, the Poor Law system can be seen to have adjusted positively in response to initial difficulties.

However, the legislation itself was flawed at a fundamental level. We have noted, for example, the financial complications resulting from a taxation system which weighed heaviest on the areas where distress was greatest. An attempted solution to this predicament arrived in May 1849 with the introduction of the controversial Rate-in-Aid of 6*d.* in the pound, which was a piece of legislation designed to create a situation where the poorer unions would be supported by those in areas of the country which had ostensibly recovered from the Famine.[184] The new tax was met with fierce resistance from the unions in the north-east of the country, where many ratepayers felt that they would be 'keeping up an army of beggars [in the south and west], fed out of the industry of Ulster'.[185] The shortcomings of the Rate-in-Aid scheme were that it came too late in the day in the first instance, while loud protests were raised in relation to the fact that under the Act of Union the rates should have been levied not only on Irish unions, but those in the rest of Britain as well.[186]

In assessing the role of the Poor Law in relief efforts nationally, it is difficult to define very many saving graces apart from the fact that the system undoubtedly did save many thousands of lives. There can be a tendency to fail to acknowledge this in the all too easy thrust of attack on the deficiencies and weaknesses of the system. However, a relief mechanism which was the root cause of starvation and mortality (precisely what it should have been attempting to prevent) because of such measures as the Gregory Clause, for example, can hardly be seen as anything but a failure. Just as with the Public Works system of 1846-7, the inadequacies of the extended Poor Law as a mechanism of relief were inevitably exhibited most clearly in the west and south of the country where pressure was highest. Therein lies the difficulty in attempting to evaluate the success or failure of the Poor Law in Donegal, since the unions in the county did not experience such a severe burden, with the possible

[184] 12 & 13 Vic. C. 24
[185] Kinealy, C. (1995), 'The Role of the Poor Law During the Famine', in Poirteir, C. (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine,* p. 120; *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates,* col. 62, March 1st 1849
[186] Donnelly, J.S. (1989), 'The Administration of Relief, 1847-51' in Vaughan, W.E. ed., *A New History of Ireland, v: Ireland Under the Union,* p. 328

exception of Glenties. The particularly poor record of Glenties was, of course, due almost entirely to the absence of a discernable alternative to Poor relief after 1847. One can only conclude that while the system itself most certainly showed evidence of grave shortcomings and, as we have seen, did lead to deaths as a result of its rigidity, the majority of Donegal unions were spared the worst failures of the Poor Law, due largely to forces which operated outside its confines.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

7.1. INTRODUCTION

Three broad groups of conclusions emerge from this study. The first issue to be addressed relates to regional variation in levels of distress and relief required within Co. Donegal. Regional patterns of pre-Famine prosperity and poverty are pertinent to the exploration of this theme. During the course of the Famine the role of landlordism had a significant bearing on the levels of distress encountered and relief obtained. The second issue to be addressed relates to Famine distress, relief and mortality in Donegal set within an overall Irish context. Particular emphasis will be placed on the disparity between Donegal and the other western seaboard counties. The third issue to be addressed is the nature, scale and adequacy of the state response to the Famine. Delay and prevarication in activating the various relief mechanisms will form a major component in this discussion.

7.2. INTRA-REGIONAL VARIATION IN DISTRESS & RELIEF

In addressing the issue of intra-regional variation in distress and relief, we begin with the east of the county, where the links between pre-Famine prosperity and low level of difficulty after 1845 are readily identifiable. The 'east' may be defined as comprising the unions of Letterkenny and Stranorlar, along with the Donegal parts of Strabane and Londonderry. This region had by far the lowest ratio of population to valuation in the county[1] and also the lowest dependence on various relief mechanisms. For example, the proportion of population receiving rations in July 1847 under the Temporary Relief Act in the four unions of Letterkenny, Stranorlar, Londonderry and Strabane averaged 11.6 per cent, as compared with 27.6 per cent on average for the rest of Donegal.[2] In the east, labour requirements remained high during the Famine, affording employment opportunities to labourers and cottiers and obviating the necessity for large-scale relief provision.

[1] See Chapter 2, Fig. 2.37

[2] *Supplementary appendix to the seventh, and last report, of the relief commissioners,* H.C. 1847-8[958], xxix, pp. 23-81

Moreover, the prosperous landowners of the east enjoyed the boon of financial stability which enabled them to provide employment on drainage and improvement works during the Famine crisis. Under both *Lebouchere's Letter* and the Land Improvement Act, Raphoe barony (virtually coterminous with the 'east') figures prominently as the setting in which most improvement works were carried out. Here, the £7,930 advanced under the first scheme in 1846-7 and £27,850 applied for up to 1849 under the second piece of legislation, must have transferred to widespread employment for those affected by the Famine.[3] On the basis that the drainage of a single acre of land cost c. £8 under the 1846 legislation, it may be deduced that some 4,400 acres was improved in Raphoe from December 1846 to December 1849. Applying this figure to the 8,000 or so heads of families 'dependant on their own manual labour' in the barony in 1841, we may gain a measure of the significance of the employment afforded to those most in need.[4] Fundamentally, the critical factor in lower levels of distress and lower relief requirement in the east was predicated on the ownership, occupation and quality of the land.

Turning our attention further to the north of the county, the union of Inishowen presents something of an enigma in terms of how the population actually fared during the Famine. There are very few useful reports from inspectors, local clergy or landowners, or any other commentators that give any impression of the level of distress. From the raw data of statistics relating to the proportion of the population relieved, it appears that distress in Inishowen was nowhere near as severe as that experienced by the population in much of west and south-west Donegal. Active local relief committees undoubtedly aided the relief effort. Landlord drainage schemes in operation in the winter of 1846-7 may account for the low number of people forced to turn to Public Works for support.[5] On the other hand, improvements under the Land Improvement Act from the middle of 1847 to the end of 1849 offered relatively little assistance to the population in terms of employment. Loans totalling only £1,350 were sanctioned for the northern part of the union in the period.

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[3] *Seventeenth report from the board of public works, Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1849[1089], xxiii, p. 433; O'Donnell, M.M. (1998), *The Estate System of Landholding in County Donegal, 1830 to 1923: a geographical analysis* (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, NUI Dublin), p. 130

[4] *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, p. 309

[5] See Chapter 4, Fig. 4.4

In the southern part of Inishowen, the numbers requiring relief were low relative to Glenties, Milford, Donegal and Ballyshannon unions. Proximity to employment prospects in the Lagan may be held accountable. Those subsisting at the fringes of the peninsular coastline are far less easily accounted for. A tentative hypothesis as to their ability to survive the crisis may be proposed. With their sole source of sustenance obliterated in the autumn of both 1846 and 1847, is it not possible that the inhabitants of these marginal stretches turned to the sea for food? The sheltered inlets of Lough Foyle and Lough Swilly to the east and west offered attractive fishing grounds. The returns of boats and men engaged in fisheries in 1836 offers support for such a hypotheses. Some 1,289 men were then classified as 'fishermen' working from row-boats.[6] Indeed, one reliable witness had noted that 'all the working classes' in the north of Inishowen were engaged in fishing at some level in the 1830s.[7] Similarly, we have also noted the evidence of John McArthur to the *Devon Commission,* in which he claimed that agriculture was being neglected on the eastern shore of Lough Foyle due to constant fishing activity among the cottiers and small farmers.[8]

Let us now turn west to Milford, Dunfanaghy, Glenties, Donegal and Ballyshannon unions. On the basis of pre-Famine indicators of vulnerability as outlined in Chapter 2, the area covered by these five unions can be further subdivided into a poorer western sub-region, delineated by the boundaries of Glenties, Dunfanaghy and Milford and a more prosperous sub-region to the south, as represented by the unions of Donegal and Ballyshannon (or the baronies of Tirhugh and east Banagh). In terms of distress and relief requirement, this area has been demonstrated to lie somewhere between the more prosperous 'east' of Donegal and the backward west.[9] Looking to pre-Famine socio-economic characteristics, this southern region lagged behind the east. It is therefore as expected that the level of distress should be higher and the relief requirement greater.

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[6] See Chapter 2, Table 2.1

[7] *Evidence taken before her majesty's commissioners of inquiry into the state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland,* pt i, H.C. 1845, xix, p. 49, evidence of Lt. E. Harvey, Coast Guard Officer, Portredford; See Chapter 2, p. 73

[8] See Chapter 2, p. 73

[9] with the obvious exception of Dunfanaghy

By comparison, however, with the poorer western sub-region (Glenties, Dunfanaghy and Milford), the unions of Ballyshannon and Donegal exhibit less pre-Famine vulnerability and had seen a greater level of agricultural improvement from the 1830s onward. In addition, the coastal parishes along the south of Donegal Bay formed one of the most productive belts of agricultural land in the county, and the ratio of population to valuation was considerably lower than in the western sub-region. The quality of housing was superior, literacy rates were higher and the proportion of families classified as being 'dependent on manual labour' was lower. Thus it was well placed to fare better at a time of crisis.

A key factor in differentiating out the west was the presence or absence of landlords. In Glenties, for example, the impact of absenteeism was deep and negative. In contrast, in south Donegal the principal contribution to the relief effort made by landlords was through their active involvement in local committees. One of the key advantages in having a landlord as the chairman of a relief committee was that government donations in aid of subscriptions were much more readily obtainable. John Hamilton, chairman of both the Donegal and Drumhome/ Rossnowlagh committees which served almost all of south Donegal, was one proprietor whose good reputation held such sway with the Chairman of the Relief Commission, Sir Randolph Routh, that the Commission chose to ignore the sale of food by both committees at under cost price. In addition, Routh sanctioned donations to the south Donegal committees in excess of strictly allowable sums.[10] The financial advantages did not end there. In addition to securing a greater level of funding from the Relief Commission, local relief funds were quite substantial in the first place and the intervention of landlords Hamilton and Connolly in loaning an additional £600 for the purchase of meal was vital for the poor of south Donegal during the harsh winter of 1846-7.

Other favourable indicators occur during the Famine years. Thus, in the spring of 1847 we find the fisheries officer, Mr. Ffennell, commenting that Tirhugh was the only area along the whole north-west coast of Ireland in which he had observed considerable crop preparation and sowing. In the spring of 1848, another observer

[10] See Chapter 4, Section 4.8

noted a similarly vigorous rural population working on their holdings.[11] This evidence is supported by the *1848 Agricultural Returns* in which the potato acreage increase from 1847 in Ballyshannon and Donegal unions is higher than in Glenties, Milford or Dunfanaghy. In addition, the 1,701 acres of wheat planted in Donegal and Ballyshannon unions in 1848 represented just over 50 per cent of the total county acreage.[12] Clearly, the pre-Famine improvements in agriculture instigated by landowners or agents in the south had contributed towards the industry and productivity exhibited by farmers during the Famine. For many of the small farmers and labourers in the region, local employment opportunities, ability to earn a wage and the tendency to continue maintaining their own holdings meant that in comparison to Glenties, in particular, there was a lower proportion of the population dependent on Public Works, soup rations and workhouse or outdoor relief under the Poor Law.

Finally, we turn to the western sub-region and the unions of Milford, Dunfanaghy and Glenties. In terms of pre-Famine vulnerabilities, Milford would appear to have been marginally less poor than the others. Though there were very high percentages of holdings under one acre and between one and ten acres in 1844, the ratio of population to valuation was considerably lower than either Glenties or Dunfanaghy.[13] Furthermore, housing was somewhat better, literacy rates higher and dependence on manual labour lower than the other unions of the far west.[14] Another advantage enjoyed by Milford union was that domestic spinning was still an important source of supplementary income in the 1840s. In many other parts of Donegal it had already undergone terminal decline. With around 35 to 40 per cent of the total female population classified as being employed 'ministering to clothing' in 1841, Milford was the main pocket of such industry within the county. The income generated among the poorer households during the crisis made a significant contribution towards survival.[15]

[11] See Chapter 4, p. 197 & Chapter 6, pp. 280-81
[12] *Returns of agricultural produce in Ireland in the year 1848,* H.C. 1849[1116], xlix, p. 134
[13] See Chapter 2, Figs. 2.4, 2.36
[14] See Chapter 2, Figs. 2.9, 2.24, 2.26
[15] See Chapter 2, Fig. 2.14

During the course of the Famine, the level of distress in Milford was higher than that of the neighbouring union of Dunfanaghy, but less than Glenties. The most significant variable governing these distinctions was landlordism. By far the largest landowner in Milford, the earl of Leitrim contributed little to the relief of distress on his estates in the parishes of Kilmacrenan, Clondavaddog, Tullyfern and Mevagh. The Board of Trinity College, the head landlord of the earl's Kilmacrenan holding, did little either for the relief effort from 1845 to 1847, since their donation of £2,000 was divided between vast properties (195,573 acres) scattered among sixteen different counties.[16] In terms of financial assistance to relief committees or employment provision by the main proprietors, Milford was thus at a considerable disadvantage to Dunfanaghy and also compared unfavourably with unions to the east and south of the county. However, there were a number of smaller landlords actively involved in Famine relief, most notably Henry Letham whose ambitious improvement schemes were of particular importance to his tenants in the southern part of Clondavaddog parish during the winter of 1846-7. Such local employment, though fairly small-scale, may explain in part the difference between the circumstances of the population in Milford as compared with Glenties. In the latter union, there was little hope of earning any wages through local agricultural improvements during the course of the Famine.

There were other notable differences between Milford and Glenties. During the operation of the Temporary Relief Act, a similar proportion of the two union populations were on soup kitchen rations. However, the Milford committees were in a better position to run their operations more efficiently due to considerable financial contributions from abroad. The lower rate of pre-Famine emigration from Glenties meant fewer donations of this kind, and a consequent reliance on government donations or loans advanced on credit of rates. It appears that the soup kitchen schemes in Milford were reaching those who needed support during the summer of 1847. In Glenties, it is likely that some portion of the distressed population might have slipped through the relief net. From the autumn of 1847 onward, there are signs that the well-funded local relief effort continued to operate effectively in Milford, and although there was considerable pressure on the workhouse by December of that year,

[16] O'Connor, J. (2000), *Finely Focused Vision: Landscape and Life on the Cos. Kerry and Donegal Estates of Trinity College in the 1840s* (unpublished B.A. Dissertation, TCD), p. 26

the number of inmates had dropped by around 50 per cent by the end of 1848.[17] All of the other workhouses in Donegal, with the exception of Dunfanaghy and Letterkenny, recorded an increase in numbers in the same period. The other major factor in reducing pressure on the workhouse in Milford was the provision of outdoor relief in 1848 and 1849. In this respect, the poverty of the union is reflected in the outdoor returns. Milford ranked second only to Glenties in terms of proportion of population relieved. However, there was still a vast gulf between the two unions. The total number relieved outside the workhouse in the year ended September 1848 amounted to only 2,765 in Milford (7.25 per cent of population), compared with 11,137 in Glenties (25.56 per cent).[18] The lower proportion in Milford may be attributed in part to the greater landlord input in employment and also to the well-funded local committees.

It is abundantly clear that Glenties was the part of Donegal which suffered most during the Famine. On the basis of the pre-Famine socio-economic factors examined in Chapter 2, this is in line with expectation. However, the scale of the divergence in conditions in Glenties and Dunfanaghy during the Famine is surprising. There is little to choose between the two unions in terms of indicators of poverty in the years before 1845. Percentages of fourth class housing and illiteracy were similar and dependence on manual labour was pronounced.[19] The ratio of population to arable land area was higher in Glenties and Dunfanaghy than in any other union. Crucially, the ratio of population to valuation was highest in Glenties (266 persons per £1 valuation) and second highest in Dunfanaghy (176 per £1 valuation).[20] There is scarcely any difference between the two unions in pre-Famine poverty, dependence on agriculture and the potato, low standard of living and education, and subsistence on marginal land. In terms of vulnerability to the crisis, the far west, as delineated by the union boundaries of Glenties and Dunfanaghy, was far more at risk than any other part of Donegal.

Why, then, the dramatic and absolute contrast between the level of distress and scale of relief required in the two unions? The only possible explanation for these

[17] See Chapter 6, Fig. 6.11
[18] See Appendix 6.3
[19] See Chapter 2, Figs. 2.9, 2.24, 2.26
[20] See Chapter 2, Fig. 2.37

trends is the immense contribution of the resident proprietors to the local relief effort in Dunfanaghy and the converse absence of intervention on the part of the absentee landlords in Glenties. The three main inputs of the landlords in Dunfanaghy were through the organisation and funding of local committees, the provision of employment, and the successful administration of the Poor Law system. It has already been noted that the presence of a well-respected local landlord acted as a persuasive force in generating funding for relief committees from central resources. There is no better example of such a positive influence than the case of Lord George Hill, who managed to secure a Relief Commission donation of £300 on a fund which stood at only £227 at the beginning of 1847. In complete contrast, the Killaghtee fund in Glenties totalled some £290 in the same period, but the lack of weight carried by the committee chairman, Fr. O'Donnell, meant a donation from Routh of only £91.[21] In addition, the resident landlords themselves contributed generously to the local relief effort, both financially and in their role as chairmen of the committees.

Given that the vast majority of land in Dunfanaghy was owned by only four proprietors, Lord George Hill, Wybrants Olphert, Rev. Nixon and Stewart of Ards, it made perfect sense to cooperate and attempt to employ the poor, thereby keeping them off the Public Works or Poor Law systems and reducing the amount of rates to be paid. By sitting on the board of guardians, the same landowners assumed almost complete control of all aspects of the relief effort and their management of the workhouse appears efficient and effective in providing assistance to those who required it. In Glenties, on the other hand, there was no landlord presence on the board and although relief was granted to large numbers of people, levels of distress were still high. In 1847-8, for example, 31.75 per cent of the population were being assisted under the Poor Law system, yet we still find numerous harrowing reports of distress from all parts of the union.[22] It is not necessarily the case that the Glenties landlords completely ignored the plight of their tenants; they were simply too far removed from their holdings to collaborate with each other in effecting a response similar to Dunfanaghy. Furthermore, the large number of estates involved would have made it difficult to contain rates at as low a level as Dunfanaghy. That being said, it was simply the case in Glenties that the absence of direct landlord intervention

[21] See Chapter 4, pp. 204-206
[22] See Chapter 6, Sections 6.5 & 6.7

helped to throw a poverty-stricken, destitute and often hopeless people upon the unsteady vehicle of relief steered through the Famine by the state.

7.3. DONEGAL AND IRELAND

It has been established that the level of distress experienced and relief required in Donegal was lower than in all the other western seaboard counties of Ireland. Furthermore, our discussion of the various state relief mechanisms from 1845-50 has revealed that the necessity for government assistance in Donegal was consistently lower than the national average. Under Peel's initial Public Works schemes, the proportion of the Donegal population requiring relief never exceeded 10 per thousand, when the national average rose as high as 60 per thousand at the end of July 1846.[23] During the second period of Public Works in the winter of 1846-7, the numbers employed in Donegal equated to around 40 per thousand of population by January, and rose to just over 70 per thousand by March. The national returns show an increase from about 70 per thousand to almost 90 per thousand in the same period.[24] At the height of soup kitchen operations under the Temporary Relief Act in July 1847, some 37 per cent of the Irish population was in receipt of rations, as compared to 21 per cent in Donegal.[25]

Workhouse returns show that dependence on indoor relief in 1847 was similar to the national average of just over 40 per thousand of population. From 1847 onward, the proportion of population turning to the workhouses nationally increased to 75 per thousand in 1848, peaked at 114 per thousand in 1849, and declined steadily to just over 60 per thousand by 1852. In the same period, the equivalent proportions for Donegal did not exceed 60 per thousand in either 1848 or 1849 and dropped to just over 20 per thousand by 1852.[26] The numbers on outdoor relief amounted to between 80 and 100 per thousand of the Irish population between March and June of 1848. In the same four months, Donegal registered a steady 40 per thousand of its population

[23] See Chapter 3, Fig. 3.6
[24] See Chapter 4, Fig. 4.6
[25] *Supplementary appendix to the seventh, and last report, of the relief commissioners,* H.C. 1847-8[958], xxix, pp. 23-81
[26] See Chapter 6, Fig. 6.10

on outdoor relief.[27] Finally, and crucially, it should be noted that Famine mortality in Donegal was markedly below the national average in the period 1846-51 (see Fig. 7.1, overleaf). It was, in fact, low enough to rank the county twenty-fourth among the thirty-two counties of Ireland for annual excess death rates. Why were levels of distress, levels of relief and levels of mortality in Donegal far lower than in any other western county and considerably lower than the national average?

Part of the answer lies in the composite pre-Famine picture of Donegal outlined in Chapter 2. The pace of agricultural improvement and development in Donegal from the 1830s gave the county an edge over much of the west and south of Ireland. In one of the few contemporary comments made in relation to Donegal's unique position in terms of distress and relief during the Famine, Edward Twistleton referred to the relatively low amount of land held in conacre as being central to the relatively good condition of the people.[28] Bourke's estimates would indicate that the proportion of Donegal potato land held in conacre in 1846 was 3.5 per cent. This compares with an average of 9 per cent in the Connaught counties and 17 per cent in Munster.[29] Clearly, the lower level of conacre in Donegal meant that fewer people were in a position of absolute vulnerability to the potato failures after 1845. The argument is further buttressed by the 1841 Census returns enumerating male 'labourers and servants'. Of all the western counties, only Donegal and Limerick recorded figures of under 30 per cent classified in this category and it is worth noting that the same two counties emerge as those with by far the lowest excess mortality rates. Similarly, the four counties in the west with highest proportions returned as labourers in 1841 (Mayo, Galway and Roscommon and Sligo) are those in which Famine mortality was greatest.[30]

Mokyr's work on Famine mortality has revealed that the pre-Famine factors which correlate most closely with the geographical distribution of excess deaths were

[27] See Chapter 6, Fig. 6.17

[28] *Fifth report from the select committee on poor laws (Irl.), together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, appendix and index to the fourteen reports,* H.C. 1849[572], xv, pt II, p. 339, Twisleton to Committee

[29] Bourke, P.M.A. (1959), 'The Extent of the Potato Crop in Ireland at the time of the Famine', in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland,* Vol. XX, Part III, p. 9

[30] See Chapter 1, Fig. 1.1; Chapter 2, Fig. 2.8

illiteracy rates and income per capita.[31] With respect to illiteracy, Donegal held an advantage over the majority of western seaboard counties, ranking below Mayo, Galway, Roscommon, Sligo, Clare, Kerry and Cork in terms of the proportion of the population unable to read or write in 1841.[32] As well as being a good indicator of greater pre-Famine socio-economic development, Mokyr suggests that 'literacy may have been correlated with other skills which were important for survival' during the Famine.[33] With respect to the second correlation, income per capita, Donegal was in an even stronger position. Firstly, the annual income of a male labourer in pre-Famine Donegal was higher (£7 to £9 *per annum*) than in all of the Connaught counties (under £5 *per annum*) and all counties in Munster (£5 to £7 *per annum*).[34] Secondly, the Lagan provided a continuing conduit of employment for migratory labourers from most parts Donegal during the Famine. A high labouring wage was thus maintained in the years of food scarcity. Thirdly, the strong tradition of seasonal migration to Scotland meant considerable supplementation of wages earned locally (£5 to £8 for six to eight weeks work).[35] Kinealy suggests that harvest migration to Scotland continued to provide vital wages for the labouring classes in Donegal during the Famine.[36] Fourthly, the 11,291 women and girls classified as 'spinners of flax' in the 1841 Census amounted to 7.5 per cent of the female population. Income generated through domestic spinning during the Famine in Donegal was of greater importance than in Connaught or Munster, where only 2.3 percent of females were thus engaged.[37]

During the course of the Famine itself, several factors shaped levels of distress, relief and mortality in Donegal. Firstly, the simple fact that the initial crop failure in 1845 was less extensive than that which occurred in the majority of other counties meant that the affect of the blight on the population was far less pronounced in the

[31] Mokyr, J. (1983), *Why Ireland Starved: a Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850*, p. 269

[32] *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, pp. 432-33

[33] Mokyr (p. 269) suggests that these skills might include 'personal hygiene, ability to adjust rapidly to unknown foods such as Indian corn, knowledge about emigration opportunities, and so on'

[34] Kennedy, L.; Ell, P.; Crawford, E. and Clarkson, L. (1999), *Mapping the Great Irish Famine,* p. 143

[35] Kerr, B.M. (1943), 'Irish Seasonal Migration to Great Britain, 1800-38' in, *Irish Historical Studies,* Vol. III, p. 377

[36] Kinealy, C. (1994), *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-52,* p. 171

[37] *Report of the commissioners appointed to take the census of Ireland for the year 1841,* H.C. 1843[504], xxiv, County Occupation Tables; See Chapter 2, Fig. 2.13

first year of the crisis.[38] Local relief efforts were mobilised and Public Works put in place where required and there is little evidence of severe distress or mortality in this period. Secondly, the direct intervention of Donegal landlords in local committee activity in the late autumn of 1846 bridged the gap in the state relief effort caused by delays in beginning Public Works. The sale of meal at under cost price by resident proprietors such as John Hamilton and Lord George Hill was crucial in this period. Thirdly, the provision of employment by Donegal landlords kept the labourers and small farmers off the Public Works system during the harsh winter of 1846-7. Much of this employment was in private drainage works and one-tenth of national applications for funding came from Donegal landowners in these winter months.[39] In the same period, the daily average proportion of population on Public Works was 1.69 per cent in Donegal, as compared with a national average of 5.25 per cent.[40] Since 'relief' under the Public Works actually contributed to the degeneration in health of labourers working in appalling weather conditions during this phase of the Famine, low numbers of such workers in Donegal meant lower mortality. Ultimately, it was through the landlord and local committee effort that numbers relying on Public employment were maintained at low levels.

Similarly, landlord intervention in Donegal also led to a lower requirement for relief through the workhouse system in the aftermath of the second season of blight. During the winter of 1846-7, workhouse overcrowding contributed to the spread of contagious disease, and mortality rose to over 40 per thousand inmates in a band of unions in the west and south of Ireland.[41] Donegal was in a unique position among the western seaboard counties in that maximum capacity was reached in only three of the eight workhouses during the winter of 1846-7 and the rate of inmate mortality in the institutions was less than 20 per thousand inmates. The other reason for a lower reliance on government mechanisms of relief in this second year of the Famine was the timely intervention (in January and February 1847) of the Society of Friends in the poorer parts of the county. The distribution of well over a thousand sacks of Indian meal, rice and biscuit, along with eighteen boilers to cook the provisions, did

[38] See Chapter 3, Fig. 3.1
[39] *Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland, board of works series,* H.C. 1847 [764], I, p. 140
[40] See Chapter 4, Fig. 4.6
[41] See Chapter 4, Fig. 4.10

much to relieve distress where it was most evident.[42] During what was unquestionably the worst winter of the whole Famine period, the direct local inputs by landlords, relief committees and the Society of Friends were central in shielding the population from the worst affects of the crisis. Their contribution is clearly reflected in the fact that crude death rates in the county were nearly 30 per cent lower than the national average in 1846-7.[43]

During the winter of 1847-8, the role of the British Association in the relief effort was of even greater importance to Donegal than the considerable endeavours of the Society of Friends in the previous year. Again, the parts of the county in most severe difficulty were targeted and some 2,441,347 rations of food (c. 10 per cent of the national total) were provided to schoolchildren in Glenties, Milford, Ballyshannon and Donegal unions between December 1847 and April 1848.[44] By targeting the young in poorer parts of Donegal, the Association made a significant contribution to lower levels of general distress and lower county mortality rates. The local input of landowners was also critical in the years following the extension of the Poor Law system in the autumn of 1847. Firstly, the workhouse and outdoor relief mechanisms worked effectively in Donegal due to the organisational and administrative skills of the landlords who sat on seven of the eight boards of guardians in the county. The workhouse buildings themselves were never dangerously overcrowded, while the often substandard auxiliary accommodation provided for the destitute in other western seaboard counties was far less prevalent in Donegal (only 1.67 per cent of national auxiliary accommodation was in Donegal). Less overcrowding and a lower dependence on temporary sheds or substandard rented buildings meant lower mortality among the poor forced to rely on the Poor Law system.

The proportion of the Donegal population dependent on the indoor and outdoor relief mechanisms provided through the extended Poor Law from 1847 to 1850 was also lower than the national average in the first place.[45] On the basis of pre-Famine socio-economic trends, we might expect distress (as indicated by dependence on the

[42] See Chapter 5, Table 5.1
[43] See Chapter 4, Fig. 4.12
[44] British Association relief data given in: *First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1847-8[963], xxxiii, App. A, p. 114; See: Chapter 6, Section 6.4
[45] See above, pp. 331-32

only state relief system in operation) to be less severe in Donegal as compared with other western seaboard counties. The very favourable position of the county relative to the national average deserves further attention. Fundamentally, the continuing influence of landed proprietors after 1847 is critical in explaining this trend. The first contribution of the landlords was through the almost universal absence of a propensity to evict. The quarter acre and £4 valuation clauses led to large-scale eviction and clearances, particularly in parts of the west. However, while the rate of eviction tended to be highest in western counties (Clare, 7.4 per cent of population from 1846-9; Roscommon, 6.6 per cent; Leitrim 6.5 per cent), the problem was not confined to the poorer parts of Ireland. In the prosperous north-east, for example, around 5.8 per cent of tenants in Armagh were evicted in the period 1846-9 and in Antrim the proportion stood at 3.5 per cent in the same period. Donegal, along with Derry and Down, were the three counties in which the rate of eviction was lowest at around 1 per cent in the same period.[46] Where evictions were more prevalent, tenants were either forced to enter the workhouse or seek shelter with other families. The death rate inside the workhouses was high, while overcrowded cabins with multiple families in residence led to rampant disease, distress and, ultimately, higher mortality. Clearly, a lower rate of eviction in Donegal was linked to lower distress, lower relief requirement and lower mortality. Cousens' work on the regional variation in mortality refers to what is described as a unique 'landlord attitude' in the north-west of Ireland in the period 1847-9:

> The only poor counties with low mortalities were Donegal, Tyrone and Londonderry, and it was in these counties particularly that landlord attitudes were most markedly favourable to the poor. Landlord reactions do not admit precise regional delineation, but a general pattern of favourable and detrimental activity can be established. Evidence of a lack of eviction, and of independence of public relief, distinguish Donegal, Tyrone and Londonderry as being the counties in which landlords mostly either fed or employed the destitute.[47]

The second key contribution of the Donegal landlords in the last years of the Famine was the continuing provision of employment. The fact that a total of £91,000 was sanctioned under the Land Improvement Act from 1847 to 1849 gives some

[46] Cousens, S.H. (1963), 'The Regional Variation in Mortality During the Great Irish Famine' in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy,* lxiii (sec. C), no. 3, pp. 133-4
[47] ibid., p. 134

indication of the scale of drainage and improvement works. At a cost of around £8 per acre, the loans advanced would have been sufficient to drain at least 10,000 acres. Taking into consideration the extensive drainage operations undertaken by the Donegal landlords during the winter of 1846-7 and from 1847 onward, it is unquestionably the case that employment for very large numbers of the poor and distressed was provided during the Famine. Comparing the statistics relating to cultivated acreage in 1841 and 1851, we find that the area of arable land in the county had increased by 76 per cent. In accounting for the position of Donegal in the national context in terms of distress, relief and mortality, the significance of this figure is that the national average increase in arable land area was under 10 per cent.[48] It would follow, therefore, that the labour input in land improvement in Donegal was some seven times greater than in Ireland as a whole. Employment and the ability to earn a wage locally were critical to endurance and survival.

Distress was alleviated through such agricultural employment in Donegal to a greater degree than was the case generally in Ireland (i.e. c. seven times more employment). Therefore, a significantly lower proportion of the Donegal population were forced to rely on relief through the various state systems. On the basis of pre-Famine indicators of poverty and vulnerability, it appears likely that distress and relief requirement through official mechanisms in Donegal would have been lower than in other western counties even if local inputs had not been so markedly robust. The combination of an exceptional landlord response in terms of employment, the energy of local committees, the relatively efficient operation of workhouses, and vital intervention by philanthropic organisations kept distress at a lower level than that exhibited nationally. It is through the unique combination of these factors that the excess mortality rate in Donegal was so radically different to rates in other western seaboard counties and in Ireland generally. Ultimately, the poorer sections of the population in Donegal had superior resources for survival of the Famine and it was for this reason that their endurance through the crisis was made possible.

[48] Bourke, P.M.A. (1965), 'The Agricultural Statistics of the 1841 Census: a Critical Review' in *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, xviii, no. 2, p. 387; As already noted in Chapter 2, Bourke has indicated that the actual percentage increases in arable land area are likely to be inaccurate owing to differences in definitions of an 'acre' in 1841. The regional pattern of increase in the period 1841-51 is not grossly affected. There is little doubt, therefore, that the acreage improved in Donegal was seven times greater than the national average.

7.4. ADEQUACY OF STATE RESPONSE

Having concentrated principally on the contingent factors which appear to have had most significance on the shaping of distress, relief and mortality in Donegal in the previous two sections, it is now necessary to turn briefly to the question of adequacy of state response. The nature and scale of the British government's relief operations varied quite widely during the Famine and the response in different phases of the crisis was not necessarily commensurate with the varying level of distress at different points in time. The principal question to be addressed is the success or failure of the government to achieve the objectives set out under its own relief policies.

The most successful period of government relief came at the beginning of the Famine in 1845 in response to the initial failure of the potato crop. Under Peel's government, the direct importation of Indian meal to be distributed and sold at cost price was a successful measure of relief. The fact that Peel moved so quickly in response to reports of the blight was of critical importance. Even before the full extent of the crop failure was known, the government had already purchased some £100,000 worth of provisions for the relief of those likely to be affected. By going against the grain of *laissez faire* economics in directly entering the food market, Peel prevented the withholding of stocks by dealers and succeeded in keeping the cost of provisions down. The involvement of local committees on the ground was deemed to be imperative to the relief effort and with supplies of government meal to distressed localities, these committees generally operated effectively under the official 'Instructions'. Though there were delays in commencing Public Works, this second part of the relief system also succeeded in alleviating distress. Since the potato failure was only of a partial nature, and the winter of 1845-6 relatively good in terms of weather conditions, the numbers on Public Works remained low. Similarly, workhouse inmate numbers did not rise markedly. The problems of administration and organisation that would come to such prominence in later years of the Famine were thus avoided.

A second successful initiative came in 1847 with the introduction of the Soup Kitchen Act under Russell and the Whig government. Again, direct intervention through the provision of food rations was central to success. At the height of the

schemes, over three million people were provided with food gratuitously on a daily basis. At no other point during the course of the Famine were such large numbers of people catered for. Direct local committee involvement in the schemes meant that rations were provided to individuals who would not necessarily have been viewed by officials as being genuinely distressed (in some unions the number on rations even exceeded the population according to the 1841 Census[49]). The government tolerated this 'abuse' of the system since the cost of relief under the Soup Kitchen Act was considerably lower than the previous system of Public Works. Thus, one of the most successful aspects of the measure was that despite the best efforts of the government to prevent 'abuse', large numbers of people were able to receive assistance before they had descended into utter destitution.

The Public Works system of relief was an entirely different matter. Rather than relieving distress, the public employment schemes in operation during the winter of 1846-7 often contributed to the difficulties of the labourers forced to turn to the government for assistance. The first key problem was that 'relief' could only be obtained in exchange for physical labour. During the worst winter of the Famine period, this unquestionably contributed to a general deterioration in health among workers who were already weakened by the impacts of a second crop failure. A second issue was the inadequacy of wages earned on the schemes. With food prices escalating rapidly through the winter and spring, thousands of families simply did not have the means to purchase sufficient provisions and starvation ensued. The third key failing of the system was that local committee responsibility only extended as far as compiling lists of the destitute. Those applying for relief could only begin work when an official from the Board of Works had deemed them eligible. Rigid administrative structures put in place by a government intent on preventing 'abuse' of the system resulted in large numbers of genuinely distressed individuals being denied relief.

The final mechanism of state relief in operation during the Famine was the Poor Law. Even before the entire burden of relief was thrown upon the Poor Law system, fatal inadequacies were already in evidence. In late 1846 and the first months of 1847, the problems of overcrowding, appalling workhouse conditions, rampant

[49] O'Neill, T.P. (1956), 'The Organisation and Administration of Relief, 1845-52' in Dudley Edwards, R. and Williams, T.D., *The Great Famine: studies in Irish history, 1845-52*, p. 240

disease and a rising death toll inside the institutions did nothing to deter the government from resolving that the Poor Law should be the sole conduit of Famine relief. The extension of the system in the autumn of 1847 compounded these difficulties, while the legislation at the heart of the extended Poor Law was fundamentally flawed. Firstly, the stipulation that the workhouse had to be full before outdoor relief was granted led to increasing pressure on the institutions. The sick could not be separated properly from the healthy and fever and dysentery spread rapidly. Secondly, boards of guardians were reluctant to sanction outdoor relief owing to the financial implications of allowing this measure. Thirdly, evictions arising as a result of the Gregory Clause meant that ever-increasing numbers of destitute people were left with no option but to turn to the Poor Law. Fourthly, heavy taxation in the worst affected areas led to diminishing funding for the relief effort over the course of time. Irish property could not support Irish poverty. Ultimately, a system that had been designed to afford assistance to the poor under ordinary circumstances proved hopelessly inadequate in providing relief for the masses in the midst of an extraordinary catastrophe.

It was not, however, the difficulties with the state systems themselves that constituted the greatest inadequacy of the relief effort. Rather, the worst failing of government was as result of the delay and prevarication which pervaded almost all aspects of the commencement of various operations. This left a number of gaps in the relief effort, the worst being in the aftermath of the second crop failure in 1846. By not moving quickly enough to secure imports of meal, there was no supply to the government depots. Market prices rose inexorably as a result. In Donegal, Deputy Commisary General Dobree wasted valuable time and energy in assessing potential locations for new depots only to eventually be directed to close most of the existing ones. Public Works could not be started because of presentment sessions had to be convened and full approval for works projects sought from central authorities. The relief committees who were to issue the tickets to those who needed work on the schemes had to be reorganised in line with government directives. In the meantime, the cry for meal had risen to a crescendo in Donegal and it was only through the exertions of local landlords and others that starvation and death were kept at bay to a considerable extent. Almost all of the difficulties and delays encountered on the ground were as a direct result of the inadequacy of government policy.

7.5. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Investigation into the interrelated issues of distress and relief during the Famine in Donegal has revealed much about the geography of the crisis. The most important recommendation to be made as a result of this thesis is that researchers should be aware that pre-Famine poverty did not necessarily indicate high levels of distress during the Famine. It has been shown that two environmentally and socio-economically similar regions (Glenties and Dunfanaghy) within a single county could have had radically different Famine experiences. The reason for such divergence were that distinct local inputs could have more of an influence on the condition of the people on the ground than any measure of state relief. The value of detailed and close study of the Famine at regional and local level is that it exposes patterns and processes which would not emerge in larger scale national analysis.

One recommendation for future research is that further investigation into famine in the nineteenth century in an international context should be conducted. It may be possible to adopt a similar approach as that implemented in this thesis in relation to regional variation in distress within different countries (e.g. Finland in 1866-68 or India in the 1860s), while comparisons might be made between the official responses to famine in Ireland and elsewhere. In addition, further research in historical geography could be carried out in relation to famine theory. Blaikie *et al.*, for example, define *vulnerability* as 'the characteristics of a person or group to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impacts of natural hazard'.[50] This thesis has shown that while the areas most vulnerable to the Great Famine generally suffered most during the crisis, it was possible for people in relatively disadvantaged areas to survive, largely through local inputs on the ground. It would be interesting to examine whether this was the case elsewhere during the nineteenth century, while it is conceivable that further research could be undertaken comparing vulnerability in 1845 Ireland to vulnerability to contemporary famines worldwide.

[50] Blaikie, P., Cannon, T., Davis, I. & Wisner, B. (1994), *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters*

This study, empirical in its thrust, has sought to outline and explain the geography of what actually happened in Co. Donegal in a period of great trauma, rather than impute blame. Polemics are deemed to be far less significant than patterns and their perception. Nevertheless, the efficacy, adequacy and efficiency of the government response to the Famine crisis was defective, as it was elsewhere in Ireland. It simply mattered less in Donegal because of the resilience and safety valves built into pre-Famine patterns of living there. The ability to withstand an impending and actual crisis was therefore greater than in any other western seaboard county. In addition, local relief inputs were crucial for survival. Indeed, during the Famine crisis, Donegal's standing at twenty-fourth in order of declining severity among Irish counties, serves to highlight the uniqueness of its *genres de vie* and the singularity of its locational attributes.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 6.1. Donegal Poor Law unions, population and Poor Law valuation

Union	Population (1841)
Ballyshannon	43,403 [19,845]
Donegal	41,371
Dunfanaghy	18,571
Glenties	43,571
Inishowen	43,569
Letterkenny	25,921
Londonderry	64,740 [18,636]
Milford	38,108
Strabane	58,883 [22,720]
Stranorlar	25,786
[Total for the 8 Unions]	[280,300]
Total (Donegal County)	296,448
Ireland	8,175,124

Union	Poor Law Valuation (£)
Ballyshannon	51,435 [25,424]
Donegal	31,639
Dunfanaghy	10,543
Glenties	16,330
Inishowen	36,607
Letterkenny	31,835
Londonderry	111,959 [28,235]
Milford	31,377
Strabane	81,529 [35,346]
Stranorlar	29,402
[Total for the 8 Unions]	239,168
Total (Donegal County)	276,884
Ireland	13,187,421

*Note: Figures in brackets indicate the population/ valuation contained in Co. Donegal parts of Ballyshannon, Londonderry and Strabane unions. 'Total for the 8 unions' refers to the eight besides Londonderry and Strabane

Appendix 6.2. Expenditure and numbers relieved in Donegal Poor Law unions during the year ending September 29th, 1847

Union	Expenditure For Year £ s. d	No. of Inmates, Sept. 30th, 1846	No. Admitted/ Born	Total No. Relieved	Discharged/ Died	Inmate Nos., Sept 29th, 1847
Ballyshannon	3,542 15 ½	141	1,327	1,468	1,090	378
Donegal	2,943 15 5	183	1,707	1,890	1,721	169
Dunfanaghy	1,274 3 0	156 *	474	630	374	256
Glenties	2,331 11 3½	32	2,758	2,790	2,406	384
Inishowen	2,064 18 7	91	1,359	1,450	1,228	222
Letterkenny	2,607 0 0	81	1,309	1,390	1,032	358
Milford	2,074 0 3	43	1,534	1,577	1,318	259
Stranorlar	2,358 6 10½	126	1,214	1,340	1,093	247
Total (Donegal)	19,196 10 5½	**853**	**11,682**	**12,535**	**10,262**	**2273**
Total (130 Unions)	**£ 803,684**	**52,636**	**364,503**	**417,139**	**330,763**	**86,376**

* Numbers estimated, no return being received

Source: *First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1847-8[963], xxxiii, App. B, p.135, Donegal Minutes

Appendix 6.3. Expenditure and numbers relieved in Donegal Poor Law unions during the year ending September 29th, 1848

Union	Expenditure During the Year Ended September 29th, 1848												Total Accommodation, September, 1848	Number of Inmates in Workhouse, 29th September, 1847	Number of Inmates in Workhouse, 29th September, 1848	Admitted and Born During the Year	Discharged and Died during the Year	No. of Persons Relieved	
	In- Maintenance			Out – Relief			Establishment/ Other			Total								Indoor	Outdoor
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.							
Ballyshannon	2907	8	1¼	845	6	11¾	2151	8	4	5904	3	5	870	378	485	2123	2016	2,501	2,825
Donegal	2030	16	11½	785	16	1	1653	11	7½	4470	4	8	650	169	444	2319	2044	2,488	2,214
Dunfanaghy	919	19	4		-		598	15	9	1518	15	1	300	138	114	872	896	1,010	0
Glenties	1870	18	0¼	4483	7	0½	1457	19	1¾	7812	4	2½	600	384	500	2316	2200	2,700	11,137
Inishowen	1758	7	7	411	1	7	721	10	7¾	2710	19	9¾	640	222	247	1687	1662	1,909	1,862
Letterkenny	1921	5	10¾		-		1189	0	3¾	3110	6	2½	870	358	235	1106	1229	1,464	0
Milford	1606	19	7½	653	16	2¾	1308	9	0¾	3569	4	11	510	259	144	1138	1253	1,397	2,765
Stranorlar	1276	16	6½	1	14	10	908	5	10	2186	17	2½	460	247	190	1145	1202	1,392	25
Total	14292	12	0¾	7181	2	9	9989	0	8½	31282	15	6¼	4900	2155	2359	12706	12502	14,861	20,828
Total (131 Unions)	603,035	15	9¾	725,449	2	1¾	506,825	19	2¾	1,835,310	17	2¼	169,142	85,200	124,003	525,263	486,460	610,463	1,433,042
Londonderry	4185	14	6	1434	9	1	2633	1	1	8253	4	8	1,100	669	517	3023	3175	3,692	4,564
Strabane	3683	10	5	762	13	6½	2245	8	4¼	6691	14	3¾	960	451	460	2771	2762	3,222	2,518

Source: *Second annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1849[1118], xxv, pp. 171-174

Appendix 6.4. Expenditure and numbers relieved in Donegal Poor Law unions during the year ending September 29th, 1849

Union	Expenditure During Year Ended September 29th, 1849												No. of Persons Relieved	
	In- Maintenance			Out – Relief			Establishment/ Other			Total				
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	Indoor	Outdoor
Ballyshannon	2411	6	9¼	12	4	7	2793	4	2½	5216	15	6¾	2,270	36
Donegal	2818	2	9¼	570	7	8	2817	2	0½	6205	12	5¾	2,709	2,509
Dunfanaghy	709	18	5		-		538	4	9	1248	3	2	843	0
Glenties	2172	9	8¾	911	5	10¾	1411	12	7¾	4498	8	3¼	4,128	3,372
Inishowen	1788	6	8	26	12	2	781	9	2	2596	8	0	1,833	144
Letterkenny	1440	3	9		-		616	4	1½	2056	7	10½	1,061	0
Milford	771	8	7½	9	5	2½	1178	6	9¾	1959	0	7¾	582	73
Stranorlar	1212	2	10¾		-		1287	14	7¼	2499	17	6	1,466	0
Total	13323	19	7½	1529	15	6¼	11423	18	4¼	26280	13	6	14,892	6,134

TOTAL (130 Unions)	797,294	8	4	679,693	11	5¾	700,752	14	10¾	2,177,650	14	8½	932,284	1,210,482

Londonderry	2970	19	1	874	8	3	3354	9	11	7199	17	3	2,625	1,648
Strabane	2943	12	8½	0	7	10	4486	4	1¼	7430	4	7¾	2,571	4

Source: *Third annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1850[1243], xxvii,, Appendix B, pp. 542-544

Appendix 6.5. Expenditure and numbers relieved in Donegal Poor Law unions during the year ending September 29th, 1850

Union	Expenditure During Year Ended September 29th, 1850												No. of Persons Relieved	
	In- Maintenance			Out – Relief			Officers Salaries			Other Expenses			Total				
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	Indoor	Outdoor
Ballyshannon	1426	19	4¾		-		386	6	6	1767	7	6	3580	13	4¾	1,684	0
Donegal	1503	4	0¼	1	5	3	403	4	10	1097	14	1	3005	8	2½	1,337	4
Dunfanaghy	424	12	9		-		267	12	0	344	18	7	1037	3	4	508	0
Glenties	1048	2	2½	8	4	11	479	9	6	569	15	6¾	2105	12	2¼	1,376	123
Inishowen	1204	2	3	4	5	4	250	0	6	1333	2	1	2791	10	2	1,429	51
Letterkenny	730	4	4		-		418	18	8	538	12	4	1687	14	4	582	0
Milford	806	6	7½	0	9	6	420	12	11	740	16	9	1968	5	9½	568	8
Stranorlar	749	12	6		-		533	18	8	273	10	10	1557	2	0	1,071	0
Total	7893	4	1	14	5	0	3160	3	7	6665	17	8¾	17733	7	5	8,555	186

Total (163 Unions)	710,945	2	7¾	120,722	16	11	151,055	15	2¼	447,334	7	6¼	1,430,108	2	3¼	805,702	368,565

Londonderry	1985	1	8	0	18	1	754	17	1	1427	8	9	4168	5	7	2,564	36
Strabane	2275	6	5½	2	10	0	537	11	4	811	1	2	3626	8	11	1,907	10

Source: *Fourth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1851[1381], xxvi, pp. 161-165

Appendix 6.6. Expenditure and numbers relieved in Donegal Poor Law unions during the year ending September 29th, 1851

Union	Expenditure During Year Ended September 29th, 1851												No. of Persons Relieved	
	In- Maintenance			Out – Relief			Officers Salaries			Other Expenses			Total				
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	Indoor	Outdoor
Ballyshannon	952	13	11		-		384	2	0	497	7	1	1816	3	0	1,235	0
Donegal	1095	16	4	1	17	8	358	7	7½	552	17	11	2008	19	6½	883	29
Dunfanaghy	367	17	6		-		246	9	2	156	18	11	771	5	7	431	0
Glenties	649	6	1		-		357	8	11	293	4	7	1299	19	7	1,113	0
Inishowen	1229	19	11	0	12	10	379	14	4	116	12	1	1726	19	2	1,605	4
Letterkenny	600	17	10		-		330	17	2	395	11	11	1327	6	11	587	0
Milford	1083	4	2	0	7	5	375	16	3	239	17	7	1699	5	5	779	0
Stranorlar	566	18	11½		-		424	10	6	253	16	10	1245	6	3½	789	0
Total	6546	14	8½	2	17	11	2857	5	11½	2606	6	11	11895	5	6	7,422	33
Total (163 Unions)	692,913	18	0¾	11,398	19	3¾	137,248	16	5½	261,210	4	7½	1,102,771	8	5½	707,443	47,914
Londonderry	1951	10	8		-		634	17	3	1602	9	4	4188	17	3	2,602	0
Strabane	1681	7	7	2	10	10	570	12	8	970	15	4	3225	6	5	1,708	16

Source: *Fifth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1852[1530], xxiii, pp. 307-312

Appendix 6.7. Expenditure and numbers relieved in Donegal Poor Law unions during the year ending September 29th, 1852

Union	Expenditure During Year Ended September 29th, 1852												No. of Persons Relieved	
	In- Maintenance			Out – Relief			Officers Salaries			Other Expenses			Total				
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	Indoor	Outdoor
Ballyshannon	961	12	3		-		313	0	1	206	18	1	1561	10	5	1,022	0
Donegal	885	15	11½	0	1	0	422	5	9	264	18	0	1573	0	8½	742	1
Dunfanaghy	250	5	8		-		299	0	3	184	17	5	1058	19	3	843	0
Glenties	933	15	8		-		357	8	11	293	4	7	1299	19	7	1,113	0
Inishowen	1229	19	11	0	1	0	334	12	4	342	15	6	1611	4	6	1,190	4
Letterkenny	518	11	0		-		295	10	5½	199	9	6½	1013	11	0	414	0
Milford	613	13	8	1	12	3	373	14	5	172	1	2	1161	1	6	513	4
Stranorlar	546	5	8½		-		403	6	8	134	14	0	1084	6	4½	690	0
Total	5939	19	10	1	14	3	2798	18	10½	1798	18	3½	10373	3	6	6,527	9

Total (163 Unions)	517,445	6	5	4,917	7	9	133,752	9	11¼	214,955	7	6¼	871,070	11	7½	504,864	14,911

Londonderry	1829	15	4		-		685	1	11	1168	12	2	3683	9	5	2,236	0
Strabane	1229	3	2	5	17	10	580	4	11	306	10	8	2121	16	7	1,075	21

Source: *Sixth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1852-3[1645], l, Appendix B, pp. 253-258

Appendix 6.8. Numbers receiving relief in and out of the Donegal workhouses at end of weeks indicated in the first six months of 1848

Union	January 8th 1848		February 5th 1848		March 4th 1848		April 8th 1848		May 6th 1848		June 3rd 1848	
	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out
Ballyshannon	697	0	870	596	826	884	717	1311	683	1315	677	1381
Donegal	388	0	540	6	531	595	550	1132	550	1259	621	1376
Dunfanaghy	235	0	319	0	380	0	285	0	253	0	241	0
Glenties	548	2346	573	3080	529	4337	462	4770	493	3349	567	3989
Inishowen	421	198	586	102	675	287	516	446	412	656	462	618
Letterkenny	602	0	547	0	530	0	469	0	416	0	433	0
Milford	409	235	380	1071	389	1759	338	1780	272	1704	258	1650
Stranorlar	395	0	397	0	367	0	356	0	359	0	394	0
Total	3695	2779	4212	4855	4227	7862	3693	9439	3438	8283	3653	9014

Source: *Numbers of persons relieved in each union in Ireland, distinguishing in-door and out-door poor, in each of the weeks ending respectively 8 January, 5 February, 4 March, 8 April, 6 May, and 3 June 1848, with average cost of maintenance,* H.C. 1849[141], xlvii, p. 730-33

Appendix 6.9. Poor rate lodged & expenditure in half years ended March & September 1848 & 1849

Union	6 Months to March 25th 1848						6 Months to Sept. 29th 1848						6 Months to March 25th 1849						6 Months to Sept. 29th 1849						Balance in Favour, Sept. 29th					
	Rate Lodged			Expenditure			Rate Lodged			Expenditure			Rate Lodged			Expenditure			Rate Lodged			Expenditure			Balance (1848)			Balance (1849)		
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
Ballyshannon	6179	0	11	2913	12	9	1039	0	11	2990	10	8	6223	10	6	3207	15	6	444	7	10	2009	0	0¾	347	12	2½	1797	2	8¾
Donegal	1981	18	8	1526	7	0¾	3310	9	8	2943	17	7¼	1078	8	6¼	2580	5	1¾	2500*	17	11	3616	7	4	1078	8	6¼	140	2	0¼
Dunfanaghy	520	18	1	753	12	9	749	18	8	765	2	4	257	5	11	647	15	5	407	6	8	600	7	9	257	5	11	323	7	5
Glenties	165	8	7	2887	6	4¼	804	6	7	4924	17	10		-		2477	7	3¼	175	18	8	2021	1	0		-			-	
Inishowen	1362	3	10	1186	11	4	2218	14	7	1521	8	5¼	1738	7	1	1251	15	5	907	14	8	1344	12	7	1313	2	10	1526	18	10
Letterkenny	1462	10	0	1652	18	10¼	770	0	0	1457	7	4¼	1421	4	11	1000	12	2½	815	7	11	1055	15	8	103	5	3	115	0	2¼
Milford	2632	0	9	2020	5	2	587	13	3	1548	19	10	281	16	8¾	1183	8	6¼	216	2	2	775	12	1¼	281	16	8¾	1176	13	3½
Stranorlar	1864	14	1	1060	14	6½	938	15	2	1126	2	8	519	1	8	1100	3	4½	1483	4	11	1399	14	1½	619	10	11½	334	18	0¾
Total	16168	14	11	14001	8	10¼	10418	18	10	17278	6	8¾	11519	15	4	13449	2	10¼	6951	0	9	12822	10	7½	4001	2	5	5414	2	6½
Londonderry	4353	15	10	4060	10	7	2665	3	6	4192	11	1	4745	14	8	5505	1	5¼	2060	3	4	1925	3	2¼	197	18	1	1520	17	5½
Strabane	7786	2	10	2946	1	11¾	932	14	3	3745	12	4	4941	9	0	1296	3	5	1726	14	7	2963	14	10	2542	19	10	207	15	1

* Note: Figure estimated, indecipherable return in which last three decimal places are obscured, i.e. £2,??? – hence the estimate of 2,500

** Note: For total expenditure and breakdown of costs for the years ended September 29th 1847, 1848, 1849, 1850, 1851 & 1852, see Appendices 7.1 – 7.6, pp. xxx-yyy

Source: *Second annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1849[1118], xxv, Appendix B., pp. 175-178; *Third annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland, with appendices,* H.C. 1850[1243], xxvii, Appendix B., pp. 545-549