

Sylvia Dixon
Comps Proposal
Content Advisor: Professor Susannah Ottaway
13 October 2025

The Sisters of Mercy in the Limerick Workhouse: Religion, Politics and Public Health in
Nineteenth-Century Ireland

Following the creation of workhouses in England, the United Kingdom's government extended this infrastructure for social welfare in Ireland in 1838 through the establishment of the Irish Poor Law. Fundamentally, workhouses were designed to provide housing and basic necessities in exchange for labor. At first glance, this program appears charitable, providing shelter and aid to destitute members of Irish society. Paupers, on the other hand, perceived workhouses as a last resort due to their punitive design, which separated families and subjected inmates to harsh living conditions. Subsequently, the majority of paupers who entered these establishments truly had no other means of providing for themselves.¹ In spite of its name, the workhouse ended up attracting paupers who were unable to work, including the disabled, the mentally ill, and those who suffered from a variety of physical ailments or diseases. The demand for medical care amongst the poor became especially vital in Ireland during and in the wake of the famine in the mid-nineteenth century. Workhouses were forced to adapt in order to provide medical attention to such individuals.² Each workhouse typically included an infirmary, sick ward, or some type of mechanism for medical care. Unfortunately, regardless of noble desires for expanded medical care in the workhouse, Ireland lacked the resources to sustain a quality system

¹ In fact, some chose death in the outside world rather than enter the workhouse due to the stigma around poor law institutions and the poor quality of the resources they provided. 1. Virginia Crossman, "Workhouse Medicine in Ireland: A Preliminary Analysis, 1850–1914," essay, in *Medicine and the Workhouse* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 123–39, 125.

² Many Irish and British workhouses later evolved into full-time hospitals or infirmaries to meet the needs of the suffering population.

of workhouse medicine. Workhouse infirmaries were thus chronically understaffed, unhygienic, and undersupplied.

One possible solution to the dearth of available medical resources was the introduction of nuns as workhouse nurses. Nuns provided cheap labor and by the nineteenth century, they had garnered a reputation as paramounds of moral integrity. Despite the perceived benefits of employing these women, it took some time before nuns became popular sources of workhouse nursing. The Limerick Union workhouse was the first to allow nuns (specifically the Sisters of Mercy) to act as nurses in an official capacity in 1861. By 1873, only 9 other unions had appointed nuns as workhouse nurses and by 1903, 83 unions had appointed nuns as nurses.³ Why were Poor Law Commissioners and Irish Boards of Guardians reluctant to hire nuns for so long? Did tensions between religious identities affect the recruitment, treatment, and authority of nurses in Irish workhouses? And how did the introduction of Catholic nuns as nurses in Irish workhouses represent a broader effort to manage “moral contagion” among the poor? I plan to explore these questions in my research by examining the public discourse and discussions between workhouse administrators around the introduction of nuns as nurses in the Limerick workhouse in 1861, relying on accounts and descriptions within the Limerick Book of Guardians Minute Books, reports in the *British Medical Journal*, and articles from Irish newspapers.

Prior to 1861, nuns had only acted in a visitor capacity to workhouse patients, unable to provide substantial care to patients.⁴ This remained the case until the Sisters of Mercy, a female Catholic congregation, petitioned the Limerick Union Board of Guardians to allow them to nurse at the Limerick union workhouse. Following their inquiry, debates about religious groups providing salaried and regular medical care within the workhouse circulated throughout

³ Maria Luddy, “Angels of Mercy’: Nuns as Workhouse Nurses, 1861-1898,” essay, in *Medicine, Disease and the State in Ireland, 1650-1940* (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 1999), 102–17, 105. Luddy, 105.

⁴ Luddy, 103.

Limerick, soon spreading across the rest of Ireland. One reason the prospect of nuns as workhouse nurses sparked controversy was the striking divide between religious denominations which plagued the Irish sociopolitical atmosphere. While workhouses were not entirely secular, the potential for interdenominational interaction was fodder for conflict due to the heightened religious tensions in Ireland at the time. Protestant guardians and Poor Law commissioners were concerned about the potential for proselytism due to interactions between Catholic nurses and Protestant patients.⁵

At the same time, some guardians and Poor Law commissioners saw the benefits of employing nuns. Not only was their labor cheap, nuns could also function as a moral authority within the workhouse. While workhouses provided medical services, one of their original purposes was to conduct “moral regulation” of the poor.⁶ Both the English and Irish Poor Laws were founded on the distinction between poverty and pauperism. Poverty was thought to be an inevitable and exogenous condition whereas pauperism was understood to be the result of poor individual choices.⁷ This logic entails the separation of the poor between two categories: deserving and undeserving. Paupers were often classified as “undeserving” because their individual choices were the cause of their unfortunate socioeconomic status, oftentimes attributed to laziness or ineptitude. The disabled often fall into the category of “deserving” poor but this dichotomy gets a little fuzzier when it comes to classifying the sick. During this time period, society was increasingly concerned with ideas about respectability.⁸ Whether the patient was deserving or undeserving, Poor Law administrators thought that all inmates should be

⁵ Luddy, 104.

⁶ Peter Gray, “Conceiving and Constructing the Irish Workhouse, 1836–45,” *Irish Historical Studies* 38, no. 149 (May 2012): 22–35, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021121400000602>, 23.

⁷ Virginia Crossman, *Politics, Pauperism and Power in Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2018), 6–7.

⁸ Luddy, 107.

beholden to some kind of moral authority. This discourse was especially prevalent in Ireland because the English generally regarded the Irish as morally inferior and lacking discipline.

Moral anxieties about the poor were reflected in workhouse structure and administration. Poor Law administrators and workhouse masters were concerned about moral contagion—this was one motivation for structuring the workhouse wards around divisions based on gender, age, and infirmity. Nuns presented an additional avenue for regulating moral contagion. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, nuns had risen to a position of elevated social and moral status in Ireland. By the 1860s, Irish nuns had established a vast network of convents, welfare institutions, and schools.⁹ As a result, they gained a privileged social status in Irish society. Nuns were seen as the embodiment of ideals to which all women should aspire—their moral authority was incredibly powerful and presented an effective tool for quelling moral contagion within the workhouse.

A few historians of Ireland and social welfare have attempted to understand the role of nuns as workhouse nurses. Virginia Crossman compiles a preliminary analysis of the medical services provided under the Irish Poor Law and the context in which developments to this system occurred. She clarifies that her work is not an exhaustive review and additional research is required before we can conduct a comprehensive assessment of the practice of medicine within the workhouse.¹⁰ Maria Luddy explores the role and reputation of nuns as nurses in workhouses in more depth in her article, “‘Angels of Mercy’: Nuns as Workhouse Nurses, 1861-1898.” She argues that nuns transformed the nursing profession, creating separate religious spheres within the world of nursing.¹¹ Additionally, Luddy suggests that the introduction of nuns to the Irish

⁹ Luddy, 106-107.

¹⁰ Crossman, “Workhouse Medicine in Ireland,” in *Medicine and the Workhouse*, 135.

¹¹ Luddy, 115.

workhouse served as a system of moral education in tandem with improving workhouse medical infrastructure.

Apart from the work of Maria Luddy, little scholarship exists specifically relating to nuns' roles as nurses in the workhouse and the process of nuns entering the workhouse. In this project, I plan to conduct more comprehensive research about the role and introduction of nuns as workhouse nurses by examining the introduction of the Sisters of Mercy to the Limerick workhouse. I chose this specific group as a case study because it was the first official implementation of nuns as workhouse nurses in Ireland and I am particularly interested in analyzing the debates among Irish community members leading up to this decision. The establishment of Catholic caregivers in the workhouse provides an interesting lens for understanding the structure of workhouse medical care, attitudes toward public health, and the political atmosphere in nineteenth-century Ireland.

In order to conduct my research, I will rely on primary sources from the *British Medical Journal* and the Limerick Union Board of Guardians Minute Books (available online from the Limerick County Council Archive Collection) which provide inspectors reports of workhouse conditions and records of meetings discussing workhouse administration. Additionally, I will consult Irish newspapers such as *The Irish Monthly*, *The Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator*, *Limerick Chronicle*, and *The Evening Packet* to assess the public discourse related to this topic. I use the intersection of important strands in nineteenth-century Irish historiography to situate this neglected topic within well-developed arguments about medicine, morality, religion, and poverty.¹² By analyzing this narrowly-focused body of primary sources in the context of this

¹² Some of these sources include "From Workhouses to Hospitals" in *The End of the Irish Poor Law?: Welfare and Healthcare Reform in Revolutionary and Independent Ireland* by Donnacha Seán Lucey, *The Transforming Power of the Nuns: Women, Religion, & Cultural Change in Ireland* by Mary Peckham Magray, and *The Workhouses of Ireland: The Fate of Ireland's Poor* by John O'Connor.

broader collection of secondary scholarship, my work can provide new insights into the world of religion, politics, and public health in nineteenth-century Ireland.

Primary Source Bibliography

Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, 186. Available from the Irish Family History Centre.

Limerick Board of Guardians Minute Book, 1861. Courtesy of “Limerick Union Board of Guardians Minute Books, 1842-1922.” Limerick.ie. Accessed October 2, 2025.

<https://www.limerick.ie/discover/explore/historical-resources/limerick-archives/archive-collections/limerick-union-board-of>

“The Sisters of Mercy at Limerick.” *The Irish Monthly* 30, no. 346 (1902): 181–89.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20500256>.

The Evening Packet. Available through the British Newspaper Archive.

Limerick Chronicle. Available through the British Newspaper Archive.

The Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator. Available through the British Newspaper Archive.

Taylor, Fanny. *Irish Hearts and Homes*. Edited by Mary McAuliffe. Dublin, Ireland: University College Dublin Press, 2013.

The British Medical Journal:

“Ireland.” *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 1360 (1887): 172–73.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20210407>.

Jacob, Henry W. “Irish Workhouses: ‘By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them.’” *The British*

Medical Journal 2, no. 1818 (1895): 1135–1135. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20233641>.

“Reports On The Nursing And Administration Of Irish Workhouses And Infirmaryes. XXI.

Rathkeale Workhouse Infirmary, Co. Limerick.” *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 1835 (1896): 542–43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20235081>.

“The Irish Workhouses.” *The British Medical Journal* 2, no. 1811 (1895): 668–668.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20233020>.

“The Medical Officer Of The Limerick Workhouse.” *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 325

(1867): 327–327. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25206697>.

Secondary Source Bibliography

Clark, Anna. “Wild Workhouse Girls and the Liberal Imperial State in Mid-Nineteenth Century

Ireland.” *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 2 (2005): 389–409.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3790774>.

Crossman, Virginia. *Politics, Pauperism and Power in Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland*.

Manchester University Press, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1vwmfm5>.

Crossman, Virginia. *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland, 1850–1914*. Liverpool University

Press, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vjb7m>.

Crossman, Virginia. “Workhouse Medicine in Ireland: A Preliminary Analysis, 1850–1914.”

Essay. In *Medicine and the Workhouse*, 123–39. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013.

Fernihough, Alan, and Cormac Ó Gráda. “Population and Poverty in Ireland on the Eve of the Great Famine.” *Demography* 59, no. 5 (2022): 1607–30.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48687809>.

Fleetwood, John F. *The History of Medicine in Ireland*. Dublin: Skellig Press, 1983.

Gray, Peter. “Conceiving and Constructing the Irish Workhouse, 1836-45.” *Irish Historical*

Studies 38, no. 149 (2012): 22–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43654252>.

Higginbotham, Peter. “The History of the Workhouse.” *workhouses.org*. Accessed October 2,

2025. <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/>.

- Jones, Greta, and Elizabeth Malcolm. *Medicine, Disease, and the State in Ireland, 1650-1940*.
Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press ; International Specialized Book Services, 1999.
- Lucey, Donnacha Seán. “From Workhouses to Hospitals.” In *The End of the Irish Poor Law?: Welfare and Healthcare Reform in Revolutionary and Independent Ireland*, 148–88.
Manchester University Press, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1b349sb.11>.
- Luddy, Maria. ““Angels of Mercy’: Nuns as Workhouse Nurses, 1861–1898.” Essay. In *Medicine, Disease and the State in Ireland, 1650-1940*, 102–17. Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 1999.
- Magray, Mary Peckham. *The Transforming Power of the Nuns: Women, Religion, & Cultural Change in Ireland*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Mauger, Alice. *The Cost of Insanity in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*. Basingstoke, England: Springer Nature, 2017.
- McDonald, Lynn. “The Extension of Nursing to Workhouse Infirmarys in Ireland.” Essay. In *Florence Nightingale on Public Health Care : Collected Works of Florence Nightingale, Volume 6*, 490–506. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2004.
- Mullins, Elizabeth. “Information Culture in the Convent and the Industrial School: A Case Study of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland.” *Archives and Records* 40, no. 2 (November 6, 2017): 133–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2017.1388223>.
- O’Connor, John. *The Workhouses of Ireland: The Fate of Ireland’s Poor*. Dublin: Anvil Books, 1997.
- Raftery, Deirdre. “Rebels with a Cause: Obedience, Resistance and Convent Life, 1800–1940.” *History of Education* 42, no. 6 (November 2013): 729–44.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760x.2013.826288>.

Relevant Coursework

HIST 139: Foundations of Modern Europe

HIST 245: Ireland: Land, Conflict, and Memory

HIST 335: Finding Ireland's Past

Class Schedule for Next Term

HIST 398.01: Advanced Historical Writing

HIST 400: Integrative Exercise

PHIL 260: Critical Philosophy of Race