

## Conceiving and constructing the Irish workhouse, 1836–45

The Irish workhouse has had a troubled history, attracting mostly negative commentary from the inception of the national poor law system after 1838 to the final abolition of the poor law in Northern Ireland in 1948. The popular historian of the institution opens his account with the bald statement that ‘the workhouse was the most feared and hated institution ever established in Ireland’.<sup>1</sup> While one might quibble with this (the penitentiaries and asylums of the nineteenth century were surely as much feared, and perhaps with more reason; the record of the industrial schools and Magdalene asylums has more recently attracted the appalled attention of Irish society), the statement contains a kernel of truth. Designed with the deterrent principle of ‘less eligibility’ to the forefront, and irrevocably associated with the horrors of mass mortality during the Great Famine, the workhouses became in Irish popular memory (and in the bulk of historical commentary) associated with the suffering and degradation of their inmates. Nevertheless, the early history of the poor law and its associated workhouses is more complex than this suggests and deserves closer attention.

Where popular and local histories have stressed the negative experiences of workhouse inmates and the demotic antagonisms of the poor towards these ‘Irish bastilles’, academic history has tended to explore both the administrative failures of the system and the cultural and ideological contexts within which it existed. The work of Michel Foucault in particular has had some impact on workhouse studies. The historical geographer David Nally has recently sought to apply the Foucauldian concept of ‘colonial biopolitics’ to the Irish poor law regime and the policy response to the Great Famine.<sup>2</sup> While his conclusions might strain the evidence to its limits, Nally’s approach builds on a well-established discourse on the post-1834 workhouse regime in England (and by extension also in Ireland) that stresses its commonalities with the ideological origins of the modern prison, as developed in Foucault’s *Discipline and punish*, and applied with more historical rigour in the British historical context by Michael Ignatieff (for penitentiaries) and Felix Driver (for the ‘new poor law’ workhouses in England and Wales).<sup>3</sup> In her work on female workhouse rioting in Dublin, Anna Clark also

<sup>1</sup> John O’Connor, *The workhouses of Ireland: the fate of Ireland’s poor* (Dublin, 1995), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> David Nally, “‘That coming storm’: the Irish poor law, colonial biopolitics, and the Great Famine” in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, xcvi, no. 3 (2008), pp 714–41.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (London, 1977); Michael Ignatieff, *A just measure of pain: the penitentiary in the industrial revolution* (London, 1978); Felix Driver, *Power and pauperism: the workhouse system 1834–84* (Cambridge, 1993).

employs the explanatory categories of ‘Foucauldian governmentalism’ and ‘colonial modernity’ in tracing the origins of the Irish system.<sup>4</sup> This approach seeks to explain the key characteristics of the post-1834 poor law in both countries as embodying administrative surveillance, systematic state centralisation, rigid classification and ‘moral regulation’ of the poor. Jeremy Bentham’s ‘panopticon’ is frequently discussed as the ideal form of this liberal disciplinarianism, a scientific architectural concept equally applicable to all the institutions required for the moral reformation of society through the centralised surveillance of social deviants.

Unquestionably these disciplinary elements played a significant part in the creation and implementation of the Irish workhouse regime. As has been observed, the construction of an Irish national poor law system *ab initio*, largely without the problem of having to incorporate the many pre-existing poor law institutions and practices that complicated the English and Welsh reform from 1834, and with the significant degree of administrative freedom granted to the English Poor Law Commissioners to create the Irish system from 1838, allowed a more essentialist version of the Benthamite principles underlying the 1834 English Poor Law Amendment Act to be implemented across the Irish Sea. The consequence was a poor law that (at least initially) restricted all relief to the wholly destitute, and applied a rigid test of admission to the workhouse and subjection to its discipline in return for the meagre relief proffered there.<sup>5</sup>

This article takes as read that the key administrators in the establishment of the Irish system, including the resident Poor Law Commissioner, George Nicholls, and his mentor the secretary to the English Commission, Edwin Chadwick, shared a Benthamite agenda. But it seeks also to raise some critical questions relating to the development of the Irish workhouse system in the years between 1838 and the outbreak of the Great Famine in 1845: how inevitable was the workhouse template and regime actually adopted? Were alternative models available and what influence did they have? Was the workhouse building designed solely to overawe, classify and impose moral discipline on the poor, or was it intended to embody additional social purposes and meanings? Did the aesthetic choices involved in workhouse design have any public significance? How contested was the imposition of the workhouse and its regimes in Irish society in the years before 1845?

Much recent work on the Irish poor law has stressed its capacity in the post-Famine decades to evolve, in part under the influence of growing public pressure, in part as a consequence of wider developments in both social thought and social structure, into a more comprehensive and non-pauperising welfare system. While subsequent legislation (especially in 1847, 1851 and 1862) extended the formal scope of the system introduced in 1838, much of this expansion reflected changes in poor law practice, frequently driven by local initiative and adaptation to circumstances in a volatile political climate.<sup>6</sup> A contrast still tends to be drawn between these later nineteenth-century developments and the harsh and

<sup>4</sup> Anna Clark, ‘Wild workhouse girls and the liberal imperial state in mid-nineteenth century Ireland’ in *Journal of Social History*, xxxix (2005), pp 389–410.

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Crossman, *The poor law in Ireland 1838–1948* (Dublin, 2006), pp 10–12.

<sup>6</sup> See Virginia Crossman, *Politics, pauperism and power in late nineteenth-century Ireland* (Manchester, 2006); Virginia Crossman and Peter Gray (eds), *Poverty and welfare in Ireland 1838–1948* (Dublin, 2011), chapters 1–4.

inhumane forms that were introduced under the 1838 Act and enforced initially through the newly-constructed workhouses. The intention here is to suggest that at least some of these ambivalences may have been part of the Irish poor law and its physical manifestation, the workhouse, from its origins.

One of the most striking aspects of the Irish workhouse was the high degree of uniformity in its physical structure, to a much greater degree than in England, Wales or Scotland. With a small number of exceptions, all the Irish workhouses were built to a uniform template designed by a single architect, George Wilkinson. They were erected rapidly in two phases, the first in 1839–45, comprising 126 buildings ranging in size, with nominal capacities of 200 to 2,000 inmates, each with scope for further expansion through the addition of extensions. The second phase, initiated following the creation of new unions in the latter stages of the Famine, saw an additional thirty-three workhouses constructed in the early 1850s, along with replacement buildings for the temporary accommodation previously employed at Clonmel and Fermoy. Wilkinson also designed the fever hospitals added to each workhouse complex from 1843, although greater autonomy was allowed to local boards in constructing these than was the case with the workhouses proper.<sup>7</sup> Only in the North and South Dublin unions were older buildings retained in adapted form, these being respectively the former Dublin House of Industry (1772) and the Foundling Hospital (itself initially built as a municipal workhouse in 1703). In England, poor law guardians were at liberty to contract their own architect to build a union workhouse (albeit requiring the approval of the London Commissioners after 1834), and many recalcitrant unions long delayed doing so or continued to employ pre-1834 workhouse buildings. In Ireland, on the other hand, the power of contract lay with the central poor law authority, and workhouses were to be built with government loans repayable by unions through the rates over an extended period. This ensured the rapid formation of a uniform network of workhouses in a remarkably short period of time, but, as we shall see, at a price.

The rationale for introducing a universal and compulsory (if initially limited) poor law into Ireland was more complex and multifaceted than the rather stereotypical picture in much of the historical literature suggests.<sup>8</sup> Fundamentally, although its forms appeared similar, the prime objective of the Irish measure of 1838 was quite different from that of the English Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. The latter was targeted principally at reforming the ‘pauperised’ rural districts of the English south, and at reimposing labour discipline and self-dependence on the mass of landless agricultural labourers who, it was widely believed, had been morally ‘corrupted’ by the Speenhamland system of wage subsidies introduced from 1795 and the moral hazard associated with untested outdoor relief. Critics such as Thomas Malthus condemned these ‘abuses’ as creating unintended stimuli to improvident reproduction and hence to the engrossment of the very poverty the law was intended to relieve. The 1834 reform was also intended to ratchet down what was widely regarded by both bourgeois and gentry commentators as a grossly-inflated burden of poor rates

<sup>7</sup> *Tenth annual report of the Poor Law Commissioners*, H.C. 1844 [560], xix.9, p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> See Peter Gray, *The making of the Irish poor law, 1815–43* (Manchester, 2009), passim.

falling on property. The new-model workhouse, with its architecture and associated regime of less-eligibility, was intended as the engine of reform, deterring all but the residual destitute from union relief.

In Ireland, however, the 1838 Poor Law Act created an unprecedented rate burden levied for the relief of destitution where none had previously existed in most localities, and which was more heavily weighted towards the taxation of landowners than was the case in England. It also acknowledged for the first time the state's responsibility for ensuring a measure of social welfare (although not, at least until 1847, any 'right' of the destitute to relief), where this had previously been absent, or at least restricted to medical assistance through the unevenly distributed and semi-voluntary dispensary system. The rhetoric surrounding the introduction of the Irish law was also different, downplaying the necessity of imposing less-eligibility as a means of disciplining a 'corrupted' labouring class, or retaining this only to give an assurance that the Irish wages-fund would not be immediately swamped by too-generous relief, made available to all without a residency test. It stressed instead both the social equity that compulsory poor-rates would introduce in a society whose rural inequalities were regarded as the root of its social and political upheavals, the incentives the rates would impose on landowners to improve and employ the rural poor on their estates, and the likelihood that the 'social security' thus provided under the law would facilitate a transition from a peasant to a capitalised agricultural system. The principal political 'target' of the new Irish poor law was thus not, as in southern England, the pauperised and demoralised peasant, but the stereotypical rackrenting or absentee landlord, who was deemed by British Whig and radical (and by much of Irish Catholic) opinion to be primarily responsible for Ireland's socio-economic backwardness.

The creation of a network of large, imposing and stylistically uniform workhouses in the Irish countryside (funded by rates on landed property and governed by quasi-democratically elected boards of guardians under central supervision) might thus be regarded as a physical symbol of the changing relationship between the British state and the landed elites of Ireland. Whatever its ultimate failure, the Irish poor law was envisaged by a reforming Whig administration whose Irish policy was largely directed by Lord John Russell from the Home Office as part of a menu of conciliatory measures – including tithe reform and the reform of the municipal corporations – that would embody 'justice to Ireland'. That the locus of resistance to the new system before the Famine lay largely (if not entirely) within that landed elite would appear to support this reading.

The rationale for the creation of the workhouse system in Ireland was supplied by the three reports on Irish poverty completed by the Poor Law Commissioner, George Nicholls, in 1836–7. Nicholls had been intimately involved in the evolution of the new Benthamite-style workhouse as overseer of the poor at Southwell, Nottinghamshire, in the 1820s before joining the new English Poor Law Commission in 1834.<sup>9</sup> Although he had been involved in the development of the new model workhouse built at Southwell in 1824 under the direction of

<sup>9</sup> [George Nicholls], *Eight letters on the management of the poor* (Newark, 1822); H. G. Willink, 'Life of Sir George Nicholls' in George Nicholls, *A history of the English poor law* (new ed, 2 vols, 1898), i, pp xi–xv, xxxii–xxxv.

Rev. John Becher, which had combined the principles of segregation and surveillance of the inmates,<sup>10</sup> he was initially sceptical about the suitability of workhouse relief in the very different conditions prevailing in Ireland.<sup>11</sup> Under pressure from the British administration, he subsequently changed his mind and provided the government with the arguments it required to ditch the Irish Poor Inquiry Commission's 1836 'third report', which had, under the leadership of Archbishop Richard Whately of Dublin, rejected compulsory relief in favour of aid to voluntary charity and assisted emigration. Rejecting the commission's figures for the numbers in a state of poverty as grossly inflated, Nicholls calculated that no more than one hundred workhouses, with a capacity of 80,000, would be required 'in ordinary times' for Irish relief; he also agreed with the former assistant commissioner, George Cornwall Lewis, in arguing that the main purpose of a workhouse system would be to facilitate and stimulate socio-economic change in Ireland.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, it was Nicholls who was given responsibility by Russell for the creation of the Irish system following the passage of the Poor Law Act in 1838.

Nicholls represented the perspectives and experience of the London Poor Law Commission, and the system he was foremost in bringing into existence reflected its agendas. There were, however, alternative visions of an Irish poor law widely discussed and debated at the time. Of particular significance was that of John Revans, formerly secretary to the Poor Inquiry Commission and who played a large part in influencing the government towards rejecting the voluntarism of Archbishop Whately's third report. A political radical who was employed by the Poor Law Commission for several years after leaving Ireland, Revans's alternative plan (published to wide acclaim as part of a quasi-official 'digest' of the Inquiry's findings in 1836) urged a network of up to 500 small 'houses of refuge' applying a workhouse test to the able-bodied only, with outdoor relief to the elderly, infirm, and children. Revans's hope was that a popular poor law would serve as an agent for introducing an agricultural minimum wage in Ireland, gradually raising the living standards of all the labouring poor.<sup>13</sup> The radical Catholic priest, Fr Thaddeus O'Malley, in a text serialised in the *Freeman's Journal*, agreed with Revans on the need for numerous local workhouses and a national rate, but also stressed the need for remunerative pauper employment on land reclamation and central supervision by an Irish Board in Dublin and not from London.<sup>14</sup> While neither Revans's nor O'Malley's alternative plans were proceeded with despite being read by ministers, their importance lies in offering a more liberal vision of how a

<sup>10</sup> Although the building was completed after Nicholls had left Southwell, its design influenced the 'model' workhouse plans approved by the Poor Law Commissioners in 1835 and disseminated to boards of guardians: Peter Higginbotham, 'Southwell Union (Thurgarton Hundred Incorporation), Nottinghamshire', <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Southwell/> (accessed 3 Nov. 2011).

<sup>11</sup> For Nicholls's shifting position on the applicability of the workhouse principle in Ireland, see Gray, *Making of the Irish poor law*, pp 130–4, 158–68.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholls memo, 20 Jan. 1837 (T.N.A., HO100/247, fols 340–1); *Report of Geo. Nicholls, esq. ... on poor laws, Ireland, H.C. 1837* [69], li.201.

<sup>13</sup> John Revans, *Evils of the state of Ireland: their cause and their remedy – a poor law* (London, 1836). For its reception see Gray, *Making of the Irish poor law*, pp 230–1.

<sup>14</sup> Thaddeus O'Malley, *An idea of a poor law for Ireland* (2nd edn, London, 1837).

workhouse-based poor law might operate, and left a legacy for future debates on the system.<sup>15</sup>

Having been sent to Dublin in summer 1838 to put into execution the new legislation, one of Nicholls's first priorities was to oversee the planning of the workhouse infrastructure. His preference for large unions (with substantive workhouses) reflected not only a concern for economies of scale, but for the imposition of effective central control over a limited number of boards of guardians through a compact team of Irish-based assistant commissioners, with the localisation of fiscal responsibility through individual union rating. Working out from regional centres, his assistant commissioners had marked out 130 unions by 1840, with an average radius of ten miles (although many in the west were much larger); the experience of famine later led to subdivision of these larger unions, creating 163 in total. Each union was to have a centrally-located workhouse, close to a market town and of a size appropriate to the union's population. The commission would take full charge of construction, working from a small number of plans and supervised by a single architect.<sup>16</sup>

The 1838 legislation had omitted to give the Irish Board of Works responsibility for workhouse construction, and there is also evidence that the poor law authorities (or at least the Commission's secretary, Edwin Chadwick) thought it best to retain direct control of this themselves.<sup>17</sup> Certainly Nicholls had no intention of waiting until amending legislation could be passed to enable the Board of Works to proceed. In December 1838 he decided, on his authority as resident commissioner for the poor law in Ireland, to appoint a single architect with universal responsibility for the island. There was no public competition – rather Nicholls 'instituted inquiries' and made his choice on the basis of the results, probably from a shortlist of three. The appointed architect, George Wilkinson, was already well-known as a workhouse builder. Following the approval of his plans, he was formally appointed, with a good salary of £500 p.a. and a staff of assistants, and he continued to hold the post until 1855. Perhaps inevitably, the 'parachuting in' of an Englishman to this lucrative position led to protests from Dublin architects, and ultimately to the formation of the Institute of Architects in Ireland as a lobby group in 1839 (although ironically Wilkinson was in time to be admitted to, and hold office in, this body).<sup>18</sup>

George Wilkinson, the son of a builder, had begun his architectural career in 1835 by winning the contract to design the new workhouse for his native town of Witney, Oxfordshire, closely followed by Woodstock in the same county.<sup>19</sup> This success drew the attention and support of the regional poor law assistant commissioner, Edward Gulson, and later of Gulson's superior in London, George

<sup>15</sup> See for example the positive referencing of Revans by the liberal-Catholic writer Patrick McMahon in *Monthly Chronicle*, iv (Oct. 1839), p. 443.

<sup>16</sup> Poor Law Board memo, 9 Oct. 1838, in *Fifth annual report of the Poor Law Commissioners*, H.C. 1839 [239] xx.1, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> Chadwick to Nicholls, 10 Dec. 1838 (U.C.L. Archives, London, Chadwick Papers, 1486/14–20); Poor Law Commissioner to Treasury, 8 Feb. 1839, in *Fifth annual report*, pp 33–4.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick O'Dwyer, 'Building empires: architecture, politics and the Board of Works, 1760–1860' in *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, v (2002), pp 108–75.

<sup>19</sup> *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 6 Feb. 1836.



Nicholls.<sup>20</sup> A combination of official endorsement, competitive tendering and willingness to adapt to the preferences of local guardians allowed Wilkinson to win further workhouse contracts and establish himself as a specialist in this field. By 1838 he was responsible for at least thirty-one workhouses in western England and south Wales. Interestingly, the designs he adopted, especially for the English workhouses, were significantly varied. All complied with the commission's concern for an architecture that promoted classification, deterrence and surveillance, but Wilkinson was clearly experimenting with forms as well as responding to local preferences. Several of his English houses (such as Witney and Chipping Norton) incorporated the classic 'panopticon' form of spokes radiating from a central observation tower – a form also used by some rival workhouse architects – but this was not persevered with in his later work. Hexagonal and square plans were tried in other places. Most of these buildings were 'plain and utilitarian', with 'minimal classical detailing', reflecting English boards of guardians' preoccupations with adding minimal charge to the union rates for construction costs and desire for buildings whose principal purpose was to reduce pauper numbers through active deterrence.<sup>21</sup>

Wilkinson's Welsh workhouses are those which most closely prefigure their Irish successors – and Nicholls had singled out his experience in the principality in working 'under circumstances' and with materials 'not very dissimilar from what exist in Ireland' as a relevant factor in his appointment.<sup>22</sup> Resistance to the new poor law was much more pronounced in Wales than in southern England, and one of Wilkinson's Welsh workhouses was burned down (probably deliberately) shortly after completion. Socio-religious tensions in the Welsh countryside to some extent paralleled those of Ireland, and local elites had historically been much less generous in poor law provision. The poor law authorities consequently adopted a much more directive role in imposing a workhouse system there than in England, although not always successfully.<sup>23</sup>

Wilkinson appears to have been given greater freedom in designing his Welsh commissions, and the outcome seems to have been the adoption of a more personal style: a number of the larger workhouses now took on the elongated H-pattern later used in Ireland, and Wilkinson adopted a striking 'Tudor' or 'Elizabethan' decorative style for unions such as Pembroke and Abergavenney, with 'steep gables with kneelers or bargeboards, cast-iron diamond-paned casements, mullions and transoms, carved corbels, shaped chimneys, stone slates and even cruciform arrow loops'.<sup>24</sup>

One commentator explains the choice as reflecting local guardians' preference for buildings looking more like traditional almshouses than prisons, but the concentration of such ornate workhouses in Wales (and later in the very different circumstances of Ireland) rather than in England casts some doubt on this; a clearer motivation can be found in Wilkinson's own writings, and perhaps in the

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Cooper and Kathryn Morrison, 'The English and Welsh workhouses of George Wilkinson' in *The Georgian Group Journal*, xiv (2004), pp 105–6.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>22</sup> Poor Law Commissioner to Treasury, 8 Feb. 1839, in *Fifth annual report*, p. 34.

<sup>23</sup> D. G. Evans, *A history of Wales 1815–1906* (Cardiff, 1989), pp 55–8; John Stewart and Steve King, 'Death in Llantrisant: Henry Williams and the new poor law in Wales' in *Rural History*, xv (2004), pp 69–87.

<sup>24</sup> Cooper and Morrison, 'Wilkinson', p. 123.

rhetorical context surrounding the full extension of the English poor law to these ‘Celtic’ regions.

Having won the competition and been engaged by Nicholls in 1838, Wilkinson set about engineering the Benthamite principles of discipline and classification into the physical structure of his Irish buildings, as he had those in England and Wales. Accommodation, yards and workspaces were strictly segregated by sex, age, and health. Most houses had a separate (often externally striking) front building housing the boardroom, probationary (or casual) accommodation and the porter; the ‘main block’ of three to four storeys followed with the master’s and matron’s accommodation in the centre with the schoolroom and children’s accommodation, with the adult men and women at opposite ends in the cross-wings. Behind was a perpendicular ‘utility block’ containing kitchens, dining hall (also used as a chapel) and stores; and at the rear a parallel block with the infirmary and ‘idiot wards’, with a mortuary or ‘dead house’ at the rear. The entire complex was walled, although Wilkinson was anxious that this be ‘not so high as to give a prison-like appearance’, and usually surrounded by several acres of land reserved for cultivation by the inmates. Notoriously, Wilkinson pursued strict ‘economy’ in interior fittings of his Irish houses, seeking (not entirely successfully) to undercut the costs of English workhouse fittings by a third, not least by the use of earthen floors and replacement of beds with sleeping platforms.<sup>25</sup>

Yet he also made aesthetic choices (principally in Ireland and Wales) that suggested a different set of concerns to the reductionist architecture of less-eligibility, and which differed to some extent from Nicholls’s concern that ‘mere decoration’ be ‘studiously excluded’.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the commissioner favoured Wilkinson’s draft plan, which one architectural historian has noted owed more to the country mansion than to any existing English workhouse design.<sup>27</sup>

Why was this the case? Wilkinson’s personal architectural preoccupations were subsequently laid before the public in his 1845 treatise, *Practical geology and ancient architecture of Ireland*.<sup>28</sup> He was hardly the only nineteenth-century architect who sought to combine ‘scientific’ method (in his case based on an elaborate set of practical experiments on the qualities and durability of individual stones) with a sympathetic appraisal of antique forms. The reader of this book could be in no doubt of its author’s preference for medieval, stone-built, ‘organic’ forms to the dull and shoddy universalist brickwork of modern building, such as that manifest in the architecture of Georgian Dublin (which he thought unlikely to endure). Wilkinson had found time during his frantic tours of the numerous Irish workhouse construction sites to visit the country’s ‘ancient architecture’ – extending from the neolithic to the Tudor – and offered an appraisal of its merits and limitations in his book. Undoubtedly he also drew on the antiquarian researches of George Petrie and others, given wide public dissemination in the

<sup>25</sup> Wilkinson’s report in *Fifth annual report*, pp 81–3. For the most detailed description of the layout and construction of the workhouses, see M. H. Gould, ‘George Wilkinson and the Irish workhouse’, (M.Phil. thesis, Queen’s University Belfast, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> George Nicholls, *A history of the Irish poor law, in connexion with the condition of the people* (London, 1856), p. 244.

<sup>27</sup> Gould, ‘George Wilkinson and the Irish workhouse’, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> George Wilkinson, *Practical geology and ancient architecture of Ireland* (London, 1845).



1830s and 1840s in the *Dublin Penny Journal* and its successor the *Irish Penny Journal*.<sup>29</sup> Wilkinson was (perhaps surprisingly given his reputation as an English Benthamite) extremely positive about the architectural merits and durability of ancient Irish forms, particularly the round tower (each surviving example of which he had sketched and annotated in his text), and the evidence this offered of high levels of ancient civilisation on the island, albeit attained under the influence of European Christian civilisation. The quality of his research on this subject received critical praise from contemporaries.<sup>30</sup>

Wilkinson's greatest enthusiasm, however, was reserved for the 'Elizabethan' style that in his opinion combined the virtues of the gothic with the classical – and which he sought to demonstrate was nearly as well represented in Ireland (in buildings constructed of local stone) as it was in England. Wilkinson is silent on the colonial context in which many 'Elizabethan' buildings (such as Donegal Castle, rebuilt in Tudor style by the Brookes during the Ulster Plantation) were constructed in Ireland. The underlying premise of his architectural study was consciously unionist – that the British 'Elizabethan' form was as appropriate and natural to Ireland as it was to England and Wales, while offering no fundamental challenge to, or break from, older Irish architectural forms (themselves a local response to more universal cultural forces).<sup>31</sup>

Yet why should he apply this rather abstract architectural thesis to his workhouse buildings? Wilkinson does not state this explicitly in surviving sources, but the choice of an 'Elizabethan' style he used extensively throughout Ireland in the years 1838 to 1842 (with only one or two local variations, such as Carlow, which was constructed in Italianate style at the request of the local guardians) might have reflected more than his personal aesthetic preferences. Much of the official rhetoric surrounding the passage of the 1838 Act concerned the extension of the original Elizabethan English Poor Law of 1601 to Ireland, albeit in a 'purified' form (the act was regularly referred to public discourse as the 'forty-third Elizabeth'). This rhetoric stressed the idea that the obligation of society (specifically the landed property owners) to employ and relieve the poor was the foundation of the 'social constitution' of England (and now, by extension following the Act of Union, of Ireland). Although also used by enemies of the 1834 reform in England, and by advocates of outdoor relief in Ireland, to contrast the perceived generosity of 'old poor law' with the mean-spiritedness of the 1834 and 1838 acts, this rhetoric stressing the continuity between the 'purified' poor law and the 1601 foundation-stone of the 'social constitution' was an important part of the strategy of poor law extension to Ireland (not least in its appeal to radical and to middle-class, especially Catholic, opinion). It is tempting to regard the choice of the external appurtenances of the 'Elizabethan' style in Wilkinson's workhouse designs as closely related to this rhetoric of the poor law as an institution that combined historical continuity with the more recent correction of abuses manifested in its Benthamite amendments.

Another context for the adoption of 'Elizabethan' workhouse architecture may lie in the debate sparked by the publication in 1836 of Augustus Pugin's

<sup>29</sup> For its part, the *Irish Penny Journal* featured Wilkinson's workhouse plans in its issue of 27 February 1841, and, in an article probably penned by Samuel Ferguson, praised both the aims of the poor law and the commission's 'intelligent and skilful architect'.

<sup>30</sup> *The Literary Gazette*, 10 May 1845.

<sup>31</sup> Wilkinson, *Practical geology*, pp 120–30.

*Contrasts, or a parallel between the noble edifices of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and similar buildings of the present day.* A recent English convert to Catholicism, one of Pugin's concerns in the book was to contrast the moral superiority of pre-Reformation religious charity (symbolised architecturally by the high gothic friary) with the soulless modern panopticon of the Benthamite workhouse. Pugin's work caused some stir in English architectural circles, and it is plausible to see Wilkinson's turn to the 'Elizabethan' and away from his earlier more utilitarian models after 1837 as a riposte to both the architectural and ideological challenges thus thrown down.<sup>32</sup> He was not alone in this. Wilkinson's designs coincided with the publication in 1839 of the first volume of Joseph Nash's *Mansions of England in the olden time*, an illustrated architectural work that went far to create an idealised and sentimentalised image of Elizabethan England that was both nostalgically comfortable and free from social conflict, and which proved hugely popular with early Victorian audiences. Cobbettite radical authors, such as William Howitt, also contributed in the 1830s to the popular idealisation of the Elizabethan as an era of social cohesion, and promoted its architectural heritage as a shared cultural patrimony.<sup>33</sup>

Wilkinson justified his design choices for the Irish workhouses rather blandly in his report published as an appendix to the 1839 Poor Law Commissioners' report. The buildings were to be (where possible) constructed of local limestone, combining durability with a 'characteristic appearance' that would not be overly obtrusive, despite the extensive sites the workhouses would demand. His 'gabled roofs and elevated chimney shafts' were, he stated simply in this official document, designed to give the workhouse 'a pleasing and picturesque appearance'.<sup>34</sup> The front building, a feature of all but the smallest houses, which would house the boards of guardians' meeting rooms and the workhouse porter and be most visible from the street, were given decorated bargeboards and moulded door and window lintels.<sup>35</sup> This would be echoed, with less elaboration, on the front facade of the main building.

While this exterior display was in stark contrast to the 'economical' savings to be made in the workhouse interiors, it nevertheless drew criticism in parliament for the 'reckless extravagance' entailed in what the radical Irish M.P., William Smith O'Brien, attacked as the 'spurious Elizabethan' detailing, and which would be saddled as a future burden on Irish ratepayers.<sup>36</sup> Visiting the south-west Cork town of Skibereen in 1842, the novelist and satirist W. M. Thackeray was also scathing of the 'bastard-Gothic' design of the newly-opened workhouse, with its 'profusion ... of cottage-ornée roofs, and pinnacles, and insolent looking stacks of chimneys'.<sup>37</sup> 'Bastille' or no, it was not always the Benthamite aspects of the Irish workhouse that drew the fire of critics.

<sup>32</sup> A. W. N. Pugin, *Contrasts, or a parallel between the noble edifices of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and similar buildings of the present day; shewing the present decay of taste* (London, 1836); for the illustrative contrast between friary and the panopticon-workhouse added in the 1841 edition, see Driver, *Power*, pp 61–2.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Mandler, *The fall and rise of the stately home* (New Haven, 1997), pp 40–51.

<sup>34</sup> *Fifth annual report*, pp 81–3.

<sup>35</sup> For the stylistic variations in front buildings within the 'Elizabethan' template, see Gould, 'George Wilkinson and the Irish workhouse', p. 137.

<sup>36</sup> *Hansard's parliamentary debates*, 3rd ser., lxxvii, col. 1352 (23 Mar. 1843).

<sup>37</sup> W. M. Thackeray, *The Irish sketchbook, 1842* (London, 1857 ed.), p. 98.

Yet Wilkinson's workhouses, and the measure they embodied, also elicited statements of support from some observers. The Irish writers Samuel Carter Hall and Anna Hall expressed their enthusiasm for the new system at length in the third volume of their popular illustrated account of the scenery and character of Ireland, published in 1843. For them, the newly-minted Irish workhouses should be regarded as badges of national pride, not shame:

In England, the workhouses have acquired the name of 'bastilles,' chiefly on account of their construction, the windows being very small, and placed above the height of the inmates to prevent their seeing out of them; the yards also have been much too confined in this respect. In Ireland the houses are in size greatly beyond those erected in England ... [and] being of immense size, appear to have been designed with a view to render them picturesque, and to diminish the appearance of their real magnitude; the rooms are placed in double width, to ensure effective superintendence. The style of most of the buildings is that of domestic Gothic, being the best suited for the materials available in their construction, the walls being built of rubble masonry ...

Wilkinson was singled out for his 'efficient zeal and upright and honourable conduct' in successfully overseeing the simultaneous construction of over 100 houses in the face of self-interested criticism by local landed elites.<sup>38</sup> Despite the ravages of the Famine and much negative (and accurate) reporting of workhouse suffering in the later 1840s, positive impressions of the system did not entirely disappear. Touring Ireland in 1852, the eminent Scottish medical man Dr John Forbes commented favourably on both the architectural quality of the buildings and the orderliness of their management, looking 'as if they had been purposely set up as patterns for imitation by the cottagers'.<sup>39</sup>

Pre-famine resistance to the new Irish poor law came from two distinct sources. There was a sharp, but relatively brief spurt of active resistance in 1842–3 led by Daniel O'Connell and involving significant numbers of smallholders. The focus of this resistance was principally the imposition of rates at a time of agricultural crisis rather than the workhouses themselves, and this movement faded as O'Connell's attention turned towards Repeal, the Catholic clergy declined to support it, and the government lifted the weight of poor rates from half the tenant farmers in 1843, transferring the payment burden for holdings valued under £4 annually to the landlord.

More sustained was the resistance from much of the landed class and established social elites, as expressed both in parliamentary agitation and non-cooperation from a number of boards of guardians. The Irish Tory press and M.P.s seized on every available irregularity or failing of the new system to attack Nicholls and his staff, and soon Wilkinson's workhouses came into the firing line following complaints from boards about cost overruns, defective construction and disputed responsibility for repairs.

Some of these problems arose from the failures or limitations of local contractors, but fault also lay partially with Wilkinson (drainage arrangements in particular were not his strong point), and with the Commission which had sought the near simultaneous construction of over 100 buildings, many more than one architect and his small staff, or Nicholls and the assistant

<sup>38</sup> Mr and Mrs S. C. Hall, *Ireland: its scenery, character, etc.*, vol. iii (London, 1843), pp 344–8.

<sup>39</sup> John Forbes, *Memorandums made in Ireland in the autumn of 1852* (2 vols, London, 1853), i, 144–5, 275, 279–80; ii, 228.

commissioners on personal tours of inspection, could supervise effectively.<sup>40</sup>

As early as 1839 the *Dublin Medical Press*, mouthpiece for the anti-poor law Conservative medical interest in Ireland, was taking up criticisms of Wilkinson voiced loudly by the Edenderry Board of Guardians in King's County; interestingly this Tory-led assault was republished in the Chartist *Northern Star*, which was aligned with the English anti-poor law movement.<sup>41</sup> This was just the start of a torrent of attacks on the new Irish institutions. The outcome was a series of parliamentary inquiries into specific complaints initiated under Peel's administration in 1843, 1844 and 1845. They first commissioned a report from the Irish Board of Works architect Jacob Owen which was largely supportive of Wilkinson,<sup>42</sup> but the subsequent reports by James Pennethorne (architect to the English Office of Works) and Lt-Col. George Barney of the Royal Engineers, were more critical on a number of heads such as damp-proofing, window-fitting and flooring, and led to compensation payments being made to the guardians of certain unions. Pennethorne was, however, at pains to dismiss the claim that the workhouses had been excessively ornamented in an 'Elizabethan' style, but agreed that some decorative outlay had been desirable 'to give these buildings a more cheerful aspect than prisons'.<sup>43</sup> Specific criticisms of Wilkinson (further brought home when he was summoned to give evidence before a Commons committee in 1844), principally that he had pursued 'economy' to a counterproductive extent, had failed to supervise shoddy workmanship by some contractors and had underestimated the costs of fitting-up, led to the architect preparing regular rebuttals for publication alongside the annual reports.<sup>44</sup> Although defended in the official report of the commissioners, Wilkinson found it difficult to answer the central charge, however, that it was the very rapidity with which the massive workhouse building scheme was undertaken that had led to corners being cut and mistakes made, not least in the siting of some workhouses on unsuitable, poorly-drained, plots.<sup>45</sup>

The experience of creating the Irish workhouse system left both the resident commissioner and architect scarred. Nicholls was scapegoated by his colleagues

<sup>40</sup> Nicholls was inclined to blame poor weather for the delays, while asserting that most had been completed in reasonable time and to a high standard of finish (*Irish poor law*, pp 259–60, 271–2, 284–5).

<sup>41</sup> *Northern Star*, 5 Oct. 1839.

<sup>42</sup> *Copies or extracts of correspondence between the chief secretary to the lord lieutenant of Ireland and the commissioners of public works, relative to the workhouses at Londonderry, Strabane, and Castlederg: also, copies of reports made by Jacob Owen, esq., architect to the Board of Public Works, on the state of these buildings, and the cost of their erection*, H.C. 1843 (244) xlvi.659.

<sup>43</sup> *Report from the select committee on union workhouses, Ireland*, H.C. 1844 (441), xiv.495; *Report of the commission for inquiring into the execution of the contracts for certain union workhouses in Ireland*, H.C. 1844 [562], xxx.387.

<sup>44</sup> *Appendix D. to the eighth annual report of the Poor Law Commissioners*, H.C. 1842 [399] xix.119, pp 196–202; *Appendix to the report of the commissioner appointed to inquire into the execution of the contracts for certain union workhouses in Ireland*, H.C. 1844 [568] xxx.551.

<sup>45</sup> *Tenth annual report*, pp 36–7; Gould, 'George Wilkinson and the Irish workhouse', pp 65–6. Balrothery was one of a number of workhouses identified by the inspectors as suffering from poor location as well as shoddy workmanship: Sinéad Collins, *Balrothery poor law union, County Dublin, 1839–1851* (Dublin, 2005), pp 25–7.

on the commission, withdrawn from Ireland in late 1842, and suffered health problems subsequently (although this did not prevent him from publishing a self-congratulatory history of the Irish poor law in 1856). For his part, Wilkinson felt obliged to append a superfluous 'note' to his 1845 treatise on the practical geology and ancient architecture of Ireland, lamenting his treatment at the hands of recalcitrant boards and parliamentary inquiries. Much of the objections, he asserted, had been made by men with strong ideological objections to the poor law initiative, 'stopping at nothing by which it could be impeded or prevented'. Any implied criticisms made in the official reports had been unfair and petty, and his (and the poor law administration's) achievement in Ireland risked being obscured:

under adverse circumstances, and a complicated accumulation of difficulties probably never before encountered in building operations, 130 of the most extensive edifices in the country have been simultaneously erected, and solely by the contractors, tradesmen and labourers of Ireland; and while they afford a greater degree of classification, more spacious yards and lofty apartments, than the majority of English poor-houses, they have, considering the quality of the materials employed, been erected at much less cost than any public buildings of similar capacity in England or Ireland, and have been completed with fewer casualties than commonly attend extensive operations of a similar character.<sup>46</sup>

Wilkinson's pride in the health and safety record of his operations may have been little consolation to those thousands crammed into the pestilential interiors of his workhouses in the following years. He was not, however, to suffer professionally. The Poor Law Commission retained him as its architect until the second wave of workhouse construction was complete in 1855 (and then reluctantly let him go in response to a Treasury economy drive); his abandonment of Elizabethan decoration for a plainer Italianate style for his second generation buildings may have been the consequence of changing public tastes as well as the critical drubbing he had received during the years 1842 to 1845. He subsequently acquired a lucrative private practice in Dublin, winning numerous railway station contracts (including the Italianate Harcourt Street terminus in Dublin), before being appointed as architect to the Irish asylums board in 1861.<sup>47</sup>

Despite all the criticism of shoddy workmanship from interested parties, Wilkinson's constructions proved durable, and were to dominate (as intended) the market town and urban environment of Ireland for a century or more. If they failed to acquire the local popularity which Wilkinson and Nicholls had vainly hoped for (the civic celebrations of the laying of the foundation stones of Galway and Castlebar workhouses in 1840 appear to have been isolated events),<sup>48</sup> the solidity of the buildings came to embody a social institution that acquired at least a begrudged legitimacy over several generations. Many of his workhouses have disappeared or been allowed to fall into ruin in the twentieth century, but several dozen continue to be in public use, forming the kernel of many district hospitals throughout the island.<sup>49</sup> Although unloved, these edifices

<sup>46</sup> Wilkinson, *Practical geology*, pp 153–5.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Gould and Ronald Cox, 'The railway stations of George Wilkinson' in *Irish architectural and decorative studies*, vi (2003), pp 183–201.

<sup>48</sup> *Connaught Journal*, 29 June, 30 Oct. 1840.

<sup>49</sup> The post-poor law usage of each Ulster workhouse is listed in Gould, *Workhouses of Ulster*, pp 18–28. For further information see Peter Higginbotham's comprehensive listings at <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/>.

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were built to last, and were capable of adaptation for welfare purposes that greatly exceeded, but were perhaps grounded on, the formative principles of the Irish poor law.

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