

The Report describes a vagrant as, *“a person who wanders from (Poor Law) Union to Union, frequently obtaining, in a workhouse, a bed for the night and a meal or two, before resuming his journey. These wanderers, as they journey on foot, are generally known as ‘tramps’ or ‘night lodgers.’*

While in the memories of some of our parents and grandparents many of these ‘wanderers’ are remembered as benign, harmless and colourful characters - often genuinely poor old men or women of the roads - the Commissioners were less sympathetic. A paragraph entitled ‘Characteristics of the Class’ states *‘All old countries have a considerable percentage of ne’er-do-wells among their inhabitants. The chief immediate causes of these failures are drunkenness (most of all) and other vicious habits, idleness or physical or mental inability to do a satisfactory day’s work. These bad habits have a tendency to divert men and women from earning their own subsistence by honest labour, and they readily become dependent upon private charity or upon public rates, unless indeed they turn thieves, robbers or swindlers.’*

While many of these tramps stayed within a relatively small area, others travelled widely and public social events such as fairs and markets, horse racing, sporting events and other gatherings attracted them in large numbers. The Commissioners noted that admissions to Workhouses in towns where such events were taking place increased significantly at these times.

According to the Commissioners, of the 30,000 identified as being in need of, or dependent upon Poor Relief, 2,000, were classified as vagrants or tramps. Four-fifths of these were males. Many of them, *“...sleep in out-houses, hay-barns, or even in the open when the weather is fine.”* They go on to say that the poor householder in the country districts of Ireland is reluctant to refuse a night’s shelter to a wayfarer when asked for charity, especially when the appeal is made *“For the love of God”*.

There were obviously two very distinct types of tramps roaming the country. The one being generally old and infirm basically decent, unfortunate and well known and respected in a clearly defined circuit or area. The other, often young and able-bodied but lazy ne’er-do-wells, dishonest and potentially dangerous particularly to the vulnerable in the commu-

nity, were universally detested and often feared.

Of this latter type the Commissioner states *“All the evidence we received is most hostile to tramps. Witnesses, almost without exception, were in favour of depriving this class of their liberty to march around the country terrorising women while men are in the fields, and collecting food and money to enable them to shirk work and escape any regular exertion for self-support.”*

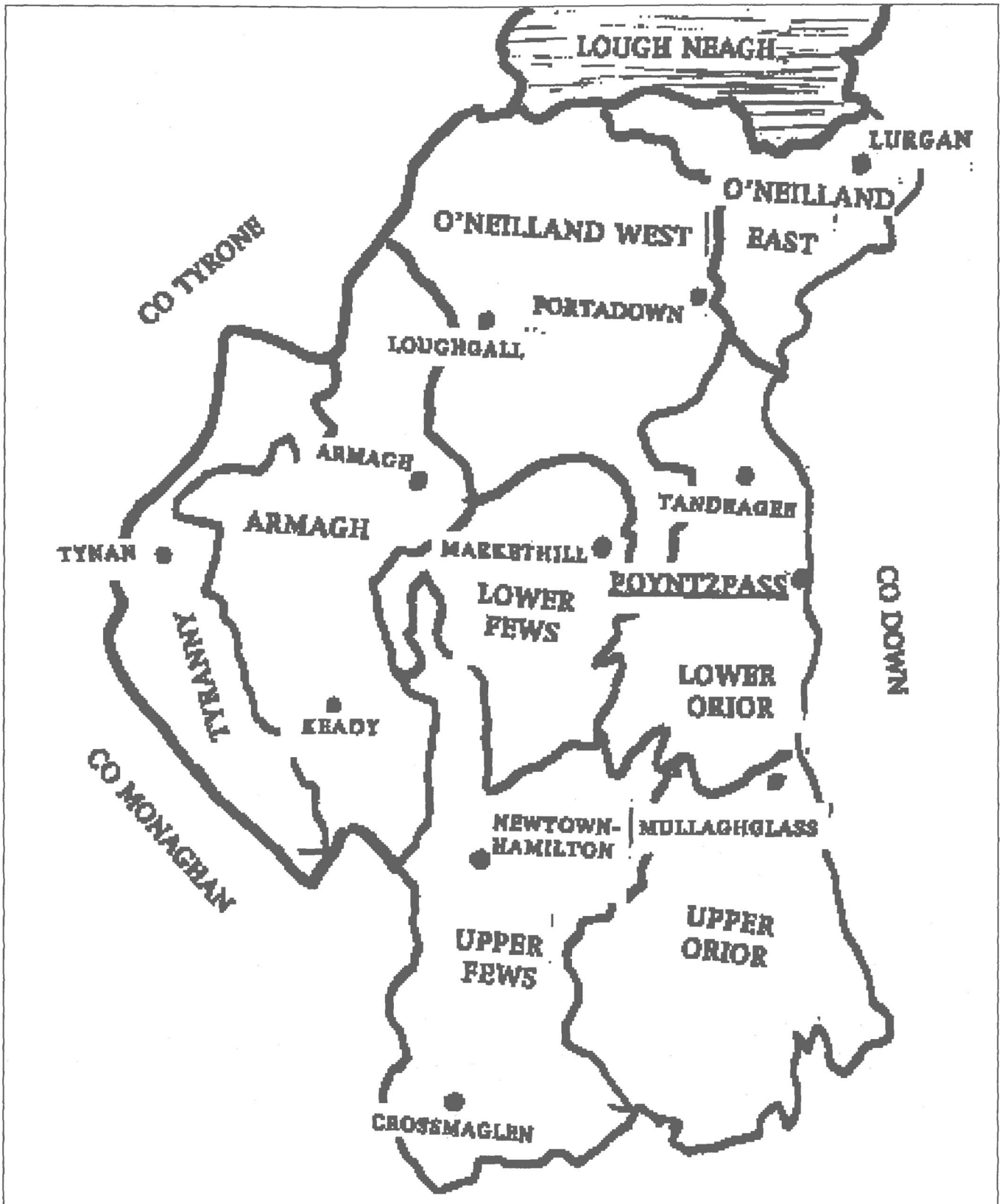
Like many a Commission, before and since, members obviously took their work seriously and their report made recommendations which, no doubt, were read with interest and largely ignored. They were enlightened and humane. *“We would not, however, suggest punishment for the vagrant for his culpable conduct, but restraint and education for his own good It is obvious that these vagrants are homeless wanderers who need kind, firm, wise treatment”*

The commissioners recommended the setting up of ‘Labour Houses’ on the same lines as those apparently current in Belgium at the period. If a person was found by the Courts of Justice, or the police, to be a vagrant he would be sent to serve a period of from one to three years in a ‘Labour House’ where he would acquire the *“habits of sobriety, regularity and industry.”* However, lest they might be thought soft-hearted, they went on to say: *“As regards the Labour Houses we should be sorry to see in them anything suggestive of more comfort than can be derived from very hard work, enough of simple food, clean healthy buildings, fittings and surroundings, but everything of the plainest, roughest kind.”*

The Royal Commission of 1833 had made similar recommendations and had proposed also that those vagrants deemed suitable should be sent *“as free labourers to non-penal colonies.”*

However sending people to Labour Houses for periods of one to three years simply for wandering around the countryside was seen as getting close to an infringement of civil liberties.

The Commissioners recommended that travelling musicians and ballad-singers should be exempted and that those who were confined to ‘Labour Houses’ should, *“.. be taken in hand like children and be, if possible, educated into a capacity for leading a use-*



The Relief Committees in Co. Armagh.

ful independent life. No person has the right to remain idle and live upon the public..."

Some towns seemed to suffer periodic 'invasions' of tramps. According to a report in the *'The Frontier Sentinel'* of December, 1904, Clones, Co. Monaghan enjoyed the unwanted title of *'the Capital of Irish*

Casualdom.' In the report we learn that the Guardians of Clones Union had decided to employ a detective to gather evidence to prosecute the legions of tramps, then infesting the area. We also learn that some tramps actually travelled around on bicycles. Enniskillen was another town to suffer from, what was described in the same paper in 1906, as *'a tramp*

plague. At a meeting of the Enniskillen Union it was stated that providing supper, a bed and breakfast for a tramp cost the Board of Guardians 2½d. At that time there was no work for tramps to do to earn their keep and the Board resolved to acquire 10 tons of stones from Drumme Quarry for the tramps to break.

'The Newry Reporter' and other local papers regularly reported the activities of tramps in the Poyntzpass area and while many of the reports read today may seem amusing, the events surrounding them were certainly not funny at the time. There are many accounts of special courts being convened to deal with tramps in the area and the local justices, obviously with the intention of making the area as unattractive as possible to tramps, passed severe sentences when tramps appeared before them. For begging, two months in Armagh Jail with hard labour was a regular sentence.

Some of those who would come under a general heading of 'tramps' were simply colourful characters and appeared to have considerable education - or at least an impressive vocabulary - as this report from *'The Newry Reporter'* of January, 1903 shows :

An Amusing Application

John Torley, better known as "Jack the Hunt" appeared before the Board, and in his own style applied for a pair of boots. He wanted, he said, some compensation to get a pair of "relievers"- (laughter) - to comfort him in the pursuit of his avocations among the ancient aristocracy in his representative capacity, which as they all knew, was associated with the Newry Harriers (laughter). He hoped with greatest sublimity -(laughter) - that the Honourable members of the Board in their sagacity, coupled with their great benevolence, would do him that one favour, and to maintain the reputation of that co-habitable institution (loud laughter).

The Chairman - What do you want?

Torley - Something to help, aid, and assist, comfort and otherwise sustain my feet in this amphibious weather (laughter).

The Chairman - A pair of boots?

Torley - Please.

Mr. P. O'Hare - Long or short ones?

Mr Toman - A pair of hunting ones.

Torley - Bravo, Mr. Toman. (laughter)

"The Chairman said that he was afraid that they could not legally entertain the application.

Mr. Murtagh - Send round the "hat" and that will settle it.

Mr. Cardwell brought round the "hat" with the result that a sum of 17s - 6p was subscribed, the money handed over to the Clerk, with the request that he should purchase the required articles for the applicant....."

Patrick MacGill the author of several books including 'Children of the Dead End' left his native Donegal with the annual migration of potato gatherers to Scotland. When he lost his earnings through playing cards he was ashamed to return home penniless and so took to tramping. He wrote, "..... *I tramped through the country, hating all men, despised by everyone and angry with my own plight. A few gave me food, some cursed me from their doors and a great number mocked me as I passed. "We're sick o' looking at the likes o' you!" the fat tubs of women, who stood at their cottage doors, said, 'Get out o' our sight or we'll tell the policeman about you....."*

In another of his books 'Moleskin Joe,' MacGill gives details of a tramp he became friendly with. He was told. "My name's Moleskin Joe as I've told you already. I don't mind havin' seen my father or mother, and I was bred in a workhouse. I'm 40 years of age, more or less, and I started work when I was seven. I've been in a workhouse, reformatory, prison and church. I went to prison of my own free will when times were bad and I couldn't get a mouthful of food outside, but it was always against my will that I went to church."

According to Patrick MacGill, the tramp was always on the 'look-out' for opportunities for food or any other plunder which might come his way. He would milk a cow in the field, steal eggs - or even a hen! - take apples or any other crop or fruit the season provided.

In winter or during times of very bad weather Moleskin Joe would break a shop window or commit some other very obvious crime and allow himself to be sent to prison for a period until times got better.

As Patrick MacGill discovered, when a person took to 'tramping' it was extremely difficult to get 'off the road' and back into normal society. With no money, no home and ragged clothes where did he begin?

One class of people much inclined to becoming tramps were ex-soldiers and Kilkenny Union was noted by the Commissioners of 1906 to have more than 20 ex-soldiers as almost permanent lodgers. When their pensions were due they discharged themselves and having spent their money quickly, mostly on drink, had to be readmitted on the grounds of 'destitution.' That none of their pension went towards their upkeep was regarded as a state of affairs "..... *that needs alteration*"

Ocasionally there were cases reported, where tramps, not satisfied with what they could steal on the sly or with what alms was given to them at the door would force an entrance and attack and rob a householder. Most at risk of such attacks were the

old and particularly the old who lived in isolated places.

At Poyntzpass Petty Sessions a tramp called Thomas Finnegan appeared in one such serious case involving a brutal attack on an old woman named Ann McCourt, of Aughtantaraghan . On the night of Sunday 23rd January 1910, Finnegan broke into Ann McCourt's home on the Old Road and "*subjected her to vile abuse, and left her weak and helpless.*" At the Court Ann McCourt was described as being "*a frail, old, crippled woman.*" The case was adjourned to Armagh Assizes where Finnegan was sentenced to nine months hard labour - strangely lenient in all the circumstances.

Misses Minnie and Sarah Savage of Laurelhill, have happier memories of the beggars they were familiar with in the Lissummon area in the years around the time of the Great War.



Laurel Hill House.

“Beggars, as we knew them long ago, were decent, old country people who had worked hard all their days but because wages were so low they could never put any money away for old age. It was hard enough to earn what kept body and soul together. Old age pensions came in about 1909 at half-a-crown a week. The pension was granted to people over 70 years of age. This was a tremendous boon to those old people. Indeed later when the amount was raised to 5/= (25p) per week, one woman told an old uncle of ours that she could live well on the half crown and she wondered was it right to take the *“mate out of some other crater’s mouth.”*”

“We remember old people who came on their rounds occasionally. They probably had a little cottier house or shack somewhere but no help to sustain them. They would have travelled quite a long way, and appeared to have some sort of circuit, calling on the same houses about three times a year. They often carried little linen bags into which they collected wheaten or oat meal and had wee tin boxes for a grain of tea or sugar. One man would ask *“Could you spare a smell of tea?”*”

“Some of the names of the beggars we remember were ‘Jack the Flute,’ ‘Red Margaret,’ ‘Susie The Shoot,’ and Daniel Murnaghan. The latter was noted for repeating ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ as he travelled along. Another lady, Mary Kelly was a small old woman who wore a black cape.

Minnie remembers “When I was three years old one winter’s evening Maggie Anne McGailey came running to our kitchen door shouting *“Mrs Savage, come quick! There is a woman lying dead down the road.”* Mother called to the men in the yard and when she reached the woman she found it was Mary Kelly. Sam Woods of Ballinaleck happened to be coming from Newry in a horse and cart, so he helped our men. They hooked off the byre door to use as a stretcher to carry Mary up to the house and they laid her in front of the kitchen stove.

“ I had hidden myself up the hall as the talk of a dead woman was too much for me. After she had sipped a little warm milk she was able to sit to the table and eat a meal. Mother wanted her to sit by the stove till morning but she said she ‘must push on.’ Before she left she presented me with a penny. I remember wondering if I should accept it from one

so poor, but mother nodded for me to accept it knowing that it was innate honesty and independence which prompted the gift. My sister Sara thought Mary Kelly was from Whitecross way where she had a shack. Father left her home in the horse and trap.



Maggie Anne McGailey.

“Nailey Rice was really a tinker by trade and still carried solder and a soldering iron. He was a very lean old man who had, at one time, a house and a wife, although it was said she had left him. He had a service to offer mending tin cans and buckets that had developed holes (nothing was thrown away in those days). These were kept until Nailey’s next visit. Nailey had a loud voice and shouted a lot, children were afraid of him. On one occasion Nailey was at a house where there was a feeble-minded old man, his daughter came out and said *“Nailey don’t shout so much it annoys father’s head.”* Nailey gave one leap off the road and hit the tin with the soldering iron and bellowed, *“What would he do if there was thunder?”* During the First World War ‘Pheasant’ Brand margarine was used. Nailey asked for something to eat and was given two slices of bread and margarine, he said *“Mem, that’s old cart grease”* and threw it away.



Tommy McGailey.

“ Mother told me about a woman who called at her mother’s home. This woman had lost both arms in a flax beetling mill. There wasn’t any law of compensation in those days. My grandmother always had a new chemise (vest) made from flower bags, laid by for this old woman, and took her in and washed her and put on the new garment. She would have eaten haws from the hedge as she went along being able to pull them off with her mouth. The only things she feared were dogs. Other beggars were ‘Red Margaret’

a big old woman and a lady called ‘The Green Shawl Woman.’ Also ‘Praying Bidy,’ who was from Mountnorris.

“I mentioned tramps asking for a grain of meal. This could have been oaten or yellow maize meal. All went into the bag. Sometimes when our own supply of oat meal ran done and Mother added a little yellow meal she would say, “*You are getting tramp’s porridge.*” When they asked for help maybe a penny was enough to satisfy them, or bread or sugar.

“‘Jack the Flute’ was known to run a piece, then stand and look around the countryside talking to himself. Somebody listened to him behind a ditch and he was saying ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ like Daniel Murnaghan. ‘Sonly Mary’ dealt in cures (Sonly means big, plump and comfortable looking) whether by charm or natural procedure is not known but when animals were ill she was sent for. A friend of mine once told me the following:

An old tramp who did his rounds twice or three times a year came to a certain farmhouse. The mistress was counted pretty thrifty, or “near” of herself. The tramp was given a butter box to sit on in the scullery as the mistress was afraid of fleas coming off the tramp. She always gave him a round of loaf buttered and a mug of tea. On this occasion she had had visitors the night before, and the tramp nearly fainted when he found a leg of chicken on his round of loaf. He waited until she had gone “up the house” then he called the servant girl over and said “ *I say Kate, what happened the auld hen?*”