

**Virginia Crossman.** *Politics, Pauperism and Power in Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006. 256 pp. \$74.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7190-7377-9.



**Reviewed by** Cara Delay

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**Commissioned by** Nicholas M. Wolf (New York University)

In *Politics, Pauperism and Power in Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, Virginia Crossman has produced a solid and convincing analysis of Ireland's late nineteenth-century poor law system. Crossman examines the politicization of the system, arguing that, by the end of the century, it evolved into a vehicle for nationalist regeneration. In the process, local government became a test for Irish national self-governance. Although, as Crossman notes, the sources for Ireland's nineteenth-century poor law system are "patchy," *Politics, Pauperism and Power* is carefully researched (p. 2). Crossman's sources include newspapers, private papers, and correspondence between the Chief Secretary's Office and the Local Government Boards.

Crossman is clear that her work hopes to fill gaps in the existing historiography. She attempts to provide more than an institutional and administrative history, instead delving into the ideologies underlying poor relief; the interplay, and often conflicts, between local and national authorities; and the "issues of power and identity," in-

cluding gender and class, that informed poor relief (p. 4). Crossman, who reminds us that most work on the Irish poor law system focuses almost exclusively on the few years of the Famine, centers her examination on the pivotal yet less examined post-Famine decades, and particularly the 1880s and 90s. This emphasis allows Crossman to concentrate on the relationship between local governance and nationalism.

After a brief introduction, the first few chapters of *Politics, Pauperism and Power* compare and contrast the British and Irish poor law systems and trace the evolution of legislation and ideologies in the nineteenth century. Crossman describes a key shift, outlining how nationalist guardians committed to Irish self-rule came to take their place at the center of poor law administration in the 1870s, while unionist guardians were "largely relegated to the wings" (p. 4). The role of nationalist guardians and their subsequent conflicts with representatives of the Local Government Board and landlords form the focus of chapter 3. Here, Crossman provides ample evi-

dence that the poor law system often was utilized by nationalists for their own purposes. She discusses the role played by nationalist guardians in the Plan of Campaign, pointing out that the guardians used their positions to support evicted tenants and to censure evicting landlords. This pitted the guardians against their Local Government Boards, with the guardians deliberately embarking on a “campaign of resistance and defiance” against the boards’ authority (p. 79).

Next, Crossman outlines emergency relief policies in the 1880s and 90s, describing the government’s attitudes toward central vs. local control. Overall, century emergency relief was largely effective in alleviating poverty and warding off starvation and deaths, but politically, it was far less successful for the central government. The government proved reluctant to oversee emergency relief, instead preferring, in most cases, to charge the guardians with such tasks; this resulted in a nationalist outcry. Nationalists used this controversy to argue that the central government was shirking its responsibilities, thus buoying their larger political cause.

Chapter 5 presents the poor law system as “an engine of social change” through an analysis of laborers’ housing (p. 144). By the late nineteenth century, the deplorable living conditions of laborers had central and local authorities once again debating the role the government should play in poverty alleviation. Nationalists took the lead in supporting legislation that would provide for new laborers’ cottages and would later spearhead the building of cottages. Here, again, Crossman places the actions of the local administrators within a larger political context, claiming that, at least for a while, “the labourers acts did help to maximise support for, and promote unity within, the nationalist movement” (p. 175).

In chapter 6, Crossman adds gender to her analysis through a discussion of elite women’s campaigns to gain entrance into local administration. These attempts would be successful by 1896,

when women secured the right to stand for election as guardians. Still, as Crossman relates, the Irish public remained ambivalent about women’s role in local governance. Together with chapter 5, this investigation demonstrates that poor law administration was used to foster national unity but not to advance the cause of the lower classes or women. Class and gender divides remained intact and would ultimately become foundational to the new Irish state.

Crossman’s contention that the poor laws offer us a unique opportunity to study the intersections of “nationalism, class and gender in shaping Irish politics and society” is certainly true (p. 4). She has done much to advance our knowledge of nationalism and has opened new inquiries into class and gender in the pivotal post-Famine decades. The book’s strengths lie in its successful attempts to illuminate local vs. national tensions, shifting attitudes toward poverty, and the connections between the poor law system and the evolution of Irish nationalism. Less effective, however, is Crossman’s treatment of the poor themselves, who are not as much of a focus as Crossman promises in her introduction. With a few exceptions, this monograph does not elaborate on the ways in which the poor experienced relief, interacted with local authorities, or attempted to negotiate the poor law system.

Overall, *Politics, Pauperism and Power* adds new dimensions to the political history of late nineteenth-century Ireland. Although nonspecialists and undergraduates without a strong background in Irish history may have some difficulty following Crossman’s detailed analysis, this text will certainly prove useful to specialists of modern Irish and British history and will likely become essential reading for graduate students in these fields. As Crossman reminds us, what is at stake in an analysis of nineteenth-century local governance is a better understanding of the birth of the modern Irish state.

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