

‘Our Herodian City Fathers and their baby-killing tenements’

Perspectives on Dublin’s Housing crisis in 1917

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- Dublin's tenements – a long history
- The Slums and the Rising?
- 'Baby-killing tenements'
- 'City fathers' housing schemes
- The on-going struggle

Dublin's tenements

- Tenements already existed, e.g. Whitelaw 1798
- But now mass exodus of prominent citizens, property market goes into freefall:
 - 1791 – £8,000
 - 1801 – £2,500
 - 1849 - £500 (Kearns, 1983, p. 41)
- Crude conversions by slum landlords
 - Shared w.c. and water pump in yard
 - Owners from every social strata, including small businessmen, politicians (Irish people!)
 - Complex ownership structure

Tenements... (1879)

‘the tenement houses of Dublin appear to be the **prime source and cause of the excessively high death rate**; ...they are not properly classified, registered, and regulated; ... they are dilapidated, dirty, ill-ventilated, much overcrowded, and ... disease, a craving for stimulants and its consequences – drunkenness and extreme poverty, are thereby fostered...’

(quoted Eason 1879)

Tenements in Dublin 1879

Number of Tenement Houses in Dublin	9,760
Number of Persons in Tenements	117,000
Average Persons per House	12
% of Dublin's population in Tenements	47%

Fragmented urban governance

Middle-class suburban **'townships'**

Independently governed

Rates paid directly to Township (not to City Corporation)

...by contrast:

City of widespread slums, especially one-roomed tenements, where

'No inconsiderable number of the poor get out of their beds, or substitutes for them, without knowing when they are to get their breakfast, for the simple reason that they have neither money nor credit' (Cameron, 1913)

Findings of the 1913 Housing Inquiry

- First Class ‘structurally sound’
27,052 persons
 - Second Class ‘decayed or so badly constructed’,
‘approaching the borderline of unfit for habitation’
37,552 persons
 - Third Class ‘unfit for habitation and incapable of
being rendered fit’
22,701 persons
- **14,000 houses required, in suburban locations**
- **£3.5 million needed – beyond the scope of the Corporation, required Government action**

'Dublin alone has sent some 14,000 men to fight the Empire's battle. Are they to find the Empire's gratitude on their return represented in the refusal of the Government to allow the Corporation to lift their wives and children from the horrors of life in dilapidated tenement houses or cellar dwellings into the atmosphere of light and life in a sanitary, self-contained, comfortable home?'

'digest of the case for immediate housing loans for Dublin', Ald. T. Kelly, Dublin Corporation Housing Committee, 1915

‘And why, oh why didn’t the artillery knock down half Dublin while it had the chance? Think of the insanitary areas, the slums, the glorious chance of making a clean sweep of them! Only 179 houses [destroyed] and probably at least nine of them quite decent ones. I’d have laid at least 17,000 of them flat and made a decent town of it!’ (G.B. Shaw)

THE RISING AND DUBLIN’S SLUMS

Housing Committee response...

‘...any amount of money could be found for the re-building of Sackville street, but ... the operations in the slum areas [are] more important’

(Alderman T Kelly at meeting of Dublin Municipal Council, September 1916)

Dublin Chamber of Commerce

- Established a 'housing reform committee' in October 1916
- 'It was urged... that the housing question should not be taken seriously in hand until after the war, so as not to divert energy from the latter...'
- *BUT* 73,000 persons 'were herded together in 12,000 single rooms, six to a room, in surroundings of disease and dirt which hardly bore description'
- Lockout and Rising seen as 'sinister indications of much worse troubles to follow...'

Daily Mail

(reported in Freeman's Journal, 16 May 1916)

The leaders of the Rising 'knew that there were 16,000 families in Dublin living on less than one pound a week. They saw the infinite misery of the Dublin slums, the foulest spot in Europe, where a quarter of the total population are forced to live in the indescribable squalor of one-room tenements... and they believed that this was due to England's neglect... and that the Irish Republic would end these things'

‘The rebellion of 1916, with its terrible results in loss of life, vast material waste, the re-birth of dying antagonisms, the creation of new enmities, and the setting back of the clock in many most vital movements for the welfare of Ireland might possibly have been prevented if the people in Dublin had been better housed’

P.C. Cowan, Report on Dublin Housing (1918) p. 31

1917: 'BABY-KILLING TENEMENTS'

- By 1917, looking towards post-war period
- Although Lord Mayor Laurence O'Neill committed to solving housing problem, difficulties:
 - War-time shortages
 - Funds diverted to city centre reconstruction
 - Strained relationship with LGBTI (controlled funding)

- Deaths from T.B. in Dublin, 1917: 1,071
- Rate of death depended on class
- Linked to living conditions
 - ‘professional/independent class: 1.43
 - ‘middle class: 2.08
 - ‘artisan/petty shopkeepers: 2.95
 - ‘general service class: 3.25

Dublin's Babies

- Highest infant mortality in Ireland
- 146 per 1,000 births
 - 88 for Ireland as a whole
 - today rate is 3.7)
- 8,102 babies born in Dublin in 1917,
- 1,184 deaths aged under 1 year,
- 1,973 deaths aged under 5 years

'Baby Week' - July 1917

- High child death rate clearly linked to tenement system – infant mortality will not reduce until every working-man and his family occupied a house of their own (Mr Kaye-Parry)

The Blame game

- Dr Oliver Gogarty:
- The Corporation of Dublin are **directly responsible** for its housing conditions; the Government less directly but more culpably
- It is the confusion arising from these two sources that has so long misdirected effort and prevented improvement. One helps the other in maintaining a state of affairs that is an outrage on humanity...

- Ironically they blame the Government for things that are merely a result of the dereliction of the Corporation's duty; while the Corporation, in its turn, is held up as an example of what might be expected here under Home Rule
- 17 members owned 91 tenement houses...

- The Corporation mainly small traders, who had a vested interest in preventing the removal of the population of overcrowded slum areas to healthy lanes and fields on the border of the city
- Building in central areas rather than suburbs a problem (see map)

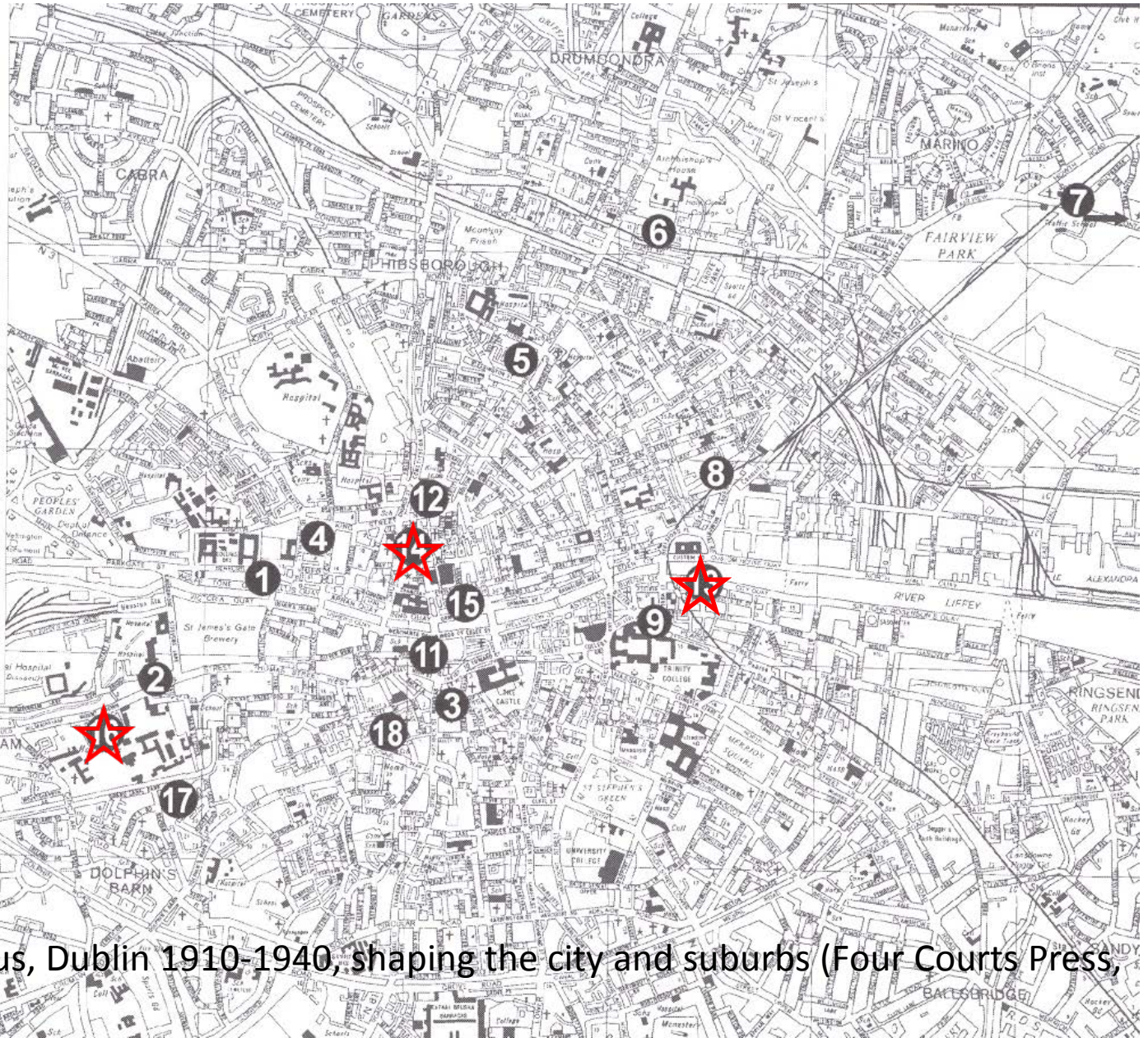
'CITY FATHERS': HOUSING SCHEMES

Pre 1914

1. Benburb Street
2. Bow Lane
3. Bride's Alley
4. Blackhall Place
5. St Joseph's Place
6. Elizabeth Street
7. Clontarf
8. Foley Street
9. Townsend Street
10. Inchicore (Oblate Site)

1914 - 1921

11. Cook Street
12. Lurgan Street
13. Trinity Ward (various)
14. Church Street
15. Ormond Market
16. Ceant Fort
17. Colbert Fort
18. Spitalfields



Source: Ruth McManus, *Dublin 1910-1940, shaping the city and suburbs* (Four Courts Press, 2002)

THE ON-GOING STRUGGLE

North City Survey (1918)

- Matters had worsened since 1913 Inquiry
- 29% of population living in slums,
i.e. 87,000 people
(one-third 'unfit for human habitation')
- Over 20,000 people in one-roomed tenements
- Illness spread easily: T.B., diphtheria,
smallpox, typhoid
- Ongoing problems into 1960s, further
tenement collapses...