



MINUTES OF EVIDENCE TAKEN BEFORE THE
POOR LAW INQUIRY COMMISSION FOR SCOTLAND

PARISH OF BALFRON.

Rev. Alexander Niven – 13th November 1843

Population in 1841 1970 Paupers relieved in 1842, 77
Sum distributed amongst. them, £203, 5s.

Rev. Alexander Niven, Minister of the Parish of Balfour

has been minister of the parish of Balfour for eighteen years. There has been a legal assessment for the relief of the poor since 1836. Previous to that time there was a voluntary assessment, confined entirely to the landward heritors. Some of them refused to pay; two factors took the matter up, and eventually forced the introduction of a legal assessment. The assessment is half upon real rental, and half upon means and substance. Every individual who can earn 10s. a week is assessed upon his means and substance.

The mode of levying the assessment gives great dissatisfaction, inasmuch as it is thought that the poor operatives and weavers who are obliged to pay it, are next door to paupers themselves; and that, moreover, by the present system, those who are taxed on means and substance consider that they are taxed higher in proportion, than the heritors who are taxed on the real rent. I am unable to state the precise amount in the pound of the present assessment. The poor funds in my parish are managed by a board, which is elected in the following way :- The heritors, feuars, minister, and the kirk-session, assemble at the statutory meetings in August and February and nominate, for the ensuing six months, a committee of five or six individuals, to whom the exclusive management of the poor fund is entrusted for the next six months. The allowances of the paupers on the permanent roll are fixed by the majority of the whole board at their half-yearly meetings; however, both the heritors and feuars vote by proxies.

There are as many as twenty-two feuars; they outvote, at the half-yearly meetings, the heritors, and the kirk-session. Some of these feuars have not property in the parish above 30s. a year; there are only three who are above 12*l.* a year. These

feuars have disagreed with and disgusted the principal heritors and the kirk-session ; and they nominate individuals on the committee with whom respectable heritors do not act. The Convener of that committee is at present a sheriff-officer. This committee does not distribute occasional relief except in very rare instances indeed; its duties seem confined simply to the payment of the poor according to the allowances fixed at the general meetings. They have a Collector, with a fixed salary, who actually pays the money; so it is difficult to say what is the use of the committee, though they are the nominal head. They say that they have not the power of granting interim relief; and poor people sometimes come to rue complaining bitterly of their having been refused relief by the committee. I have, at the half-yearly meetings, often brought forward the question of whether the committee ought not to grant interim relief in cases of urgency; but the question has always been decided against me and the session.

I have known instances of suffering resulting from the refusal of interim relief. For example, I know an individual of the name of John Graham; he is seventy-five years of age, and is bed-ridden. I visited him last winter, and I found him without either fire or food. He was attended merely by a grand-nephew, a boy ten or twelve years of age, whose mother is dead, whose father is transported, and who is therefore in the same situation as an orphan. The allowance for them both was only 2s. a week. His rent is about 1*l.* a year. He told me he had again and again applied for interim relief; and had been refused. The usual allowances to an old person (eighty years of age) past work and not bed-ridden, are about 1s.6d. a week.

Besides John Graham, already mentioned, there are two persons on the roll bed-ridden. One is widow Maitland, aged eighty, whose allowance is 1s. 6d. a week. Her rent is about 1*l.* a year. She lives with her son, a weaver, who, I am perfectly sure, cannot earn more than 3s. a week. He is an inferior weaver, and of inferior character; he is delicate in health.

Again, there is widow Graham, aged ninety-nine. Her allowance is 1s. 6d. a week. She lives with her daughter, who is married to a weaver, and has a family. Her daughter and son-in-law have often applied for a larger allowance for her, on the ground of her requiring almost constant attendance both night and day ; and thus rendering it impossible for the daughter to work steadily. I have made a proposition at the general meeting for increasing her allowance. Such a proposition has been always negatived.

There are a few cases of widows with young children on the roll. One is widow McGregor, who has five children with her; of whom two at least can earn nothing. Her allowance is 3s. a week. She is able to work herself. She sews, and winds pirns

as much as she can, by which she can earn about is. 1s.6d. a week more. Perhaps her other children might maintain themselves in food ; they could not, however, maintain themselves in clothing: they obtain clothing from benevolent individuals. With 4s.6d. a week for herself and her two children, I do not know but that she might be as well off as the lowest class of labourers.

Again, there is widow Kelly, who has two infant children. Her allowance is 1s.6d. it week. She can work very little, as both her children are very young: the eldest is not more than thirteen months old. It is, indeed, difficult to say how she subsists. She does what she can, and winds pirns.

There are two orphan families on the roll. One consists of three sisters of the name of Cameron; the youngest is eight years of age, and the eldest about eleven. The allowance for them altogether is 4s.6d. a week. They live with their grandmother, who is bed-ridden, and is not on the roll. She has grown-up daughters working at the cotton-mill. One of the orphan children was at the week-day school; and the other two received their education chiefly at the Sabbath school.

There is another family of orphans on the roll: two children of the name of McNicol, who receive together 1s.6d. a week. They are eight or ten years of age. They live, I believe, with an elder brother, who is a weaver, is married, and has a family.

We have several fatuous persons on the roll. One is James McClintock; he receives 1s. a week, and lives with his brother, who is a weaver, is likewise married, and has a family. Another is Alexander Yule; his allowance is 4s. a week. He is fifty years of age, and lives with his sister, who is unmarried, and winds pirns, by which she earns about 1s. 6d. a week. Another fatuous person on the roll is Miss Thompson, who is boarded with the convener of the committee for 6s. a week, who is a weaver as well as a sheriff-officer. Miss Thompson was in the Glasgow lunatic asylum three or four years. Besides these, there is another fatuous person, who is boarded as a pauper in a private lunatic asylum at Greenock. We have one deaf and dumb person on the roll named Margaret Dunoven, aged thirty. She is occasionally quite deranged. She lives with her father, Robert Dunoven, who is an old man – an old sickly creature, occasionally confined to bed himself. All that is allowed for both of them is only 2s. a week.

There is one blind person on the roll; a woman, aged about thirty, who lives with her mother. The blind woman's allowance is 2s. a week. I do not know what are the sources of income of the mother.

We defray the funeral expenses of paupers; 10s. are allowed for the coffin and shroud. We never provide a doctor for the sick poor from the poor funds. I do not remember above two or three instances in which a doctor was called in to a pauper. I generally doctor the poor myself. When I was residing in Edinburgh I attended medical classes. We do not provide nutritious diet or cordials for the sick poor, except in very rare instances.

The children in the parish are generally vaccinated. The medical man in the parish does that gratuitously. The bulk of our population consists of hand-loom weavers. The second most numerous class is cotton-spinners. We had a good many able-bodied persons out of employment. We raised a relief fund. All the heritors paid five per cent. on their valued rent; and we obtained assistance of about 100*l.* from London and Edinburgh. Our distress was owing to the stagnation in the weaving trade. I will send a statement of the numbers who received relief.

I knew almost all the operatives who were seeking relief; they were all required to work in return for the relief; they were employed in repairing the parish roads. A great number of them were of good habits, and temperate. I feel a difficulty in stating that they were generally provident in their habits, although this was the case with many of them. Indeed, some of those out of employment had been exemplary and provident.

The wages, however, of our hand-loom weavers are very low. The wages, just at present, of an able-bodied skilful weaver, are 6s. a week; but that is higher than they were during the late depression of trade. They send their children very early to the loom ; and the standard of education has been very much lowered in consequence. Were it not for the Sunday schools, some of the children would not be able to read at all, as many of them are sent to the loom as early as eight or nine years of age, and they are even sent younger to be drawboys.

I have no farther statement to make on the operation of the poor laws, except to remark, that different persons who claim assistance, and those from seventy to eighty years of age, have been rejected by the half-yearly board, upon the ground that they have children who are either at the cotton-mills or are weavers. The wages of these children are very often not sufficient to maintain themselves; and I do not think they ought to be taken into consideration.

There is a great deal of begging in the parish amongst paupers on the roll. Those of our paupers, who are able to go about, beg constantly. A great number of others in the parish who are not on the roll likewise beg. We have, moreover, many beggars from other parishes. These beggars are of all ages, including the young as well as

the old and the able-bodied. We are not now much troubled with many beggars coming with passes. We had applications from an immense number of able-bodied operatives with passes during the late depression of trade.

I remember cases of persons who had been brought to our parish, who were not in a fit state of health to be removed. For example, I remember a case of a woman being brought in a cart to us, either from Kippen or Fintry, who was in a kind of low fever. It appeared to me that she ought never to have been removed from her bed. She did not belong to our parish; but we thought her so ill that we gave her relief, until she was in a fit state to be forwarded. This case occurred before the committee had a share in the management. I have known, however, cases in which our committee have forwarded improperly individuals, who were in a state of sickness at the time of their being brought to us. I am of opinion that the regulations respecting the removal of sick paupers are very defective. I have no doubt that disease is often propagated by the system at present in use, not to mention that the parties removed are themselves often exposed to great suffering by that system.

I wish to add, that, in my opinion, a change ought to be made in the system of administration in our parish. It is palpably unreasonable that our committee should not act, as having a discretionary power of granting interim relief to paupers. Their excuse is, that we ought to meet such cases from our church door collections; but these collections have been necessarily affected to a natural extent by levying the assessment on so low a class of the population. Our collections originally averaged about 32*l.* a year; and now they do not average 1*s.* a week, with a greater population attending church. I will merely add that the rents of paupers are never paid; and it happens but rarely that they allow anything for clothing. I would also state that the admitting proxies to vote at a general meeting seems to be quite contrary to law.

Our population is probably one of the poorest in Scotland; but it is a curious fact, that, according to a calculation which was made by a very competent person, nearly 3000*l.* were spent last year for whisky alone.