This month’s ‘From the Archives’ document is an extract from the minute book of the (Irish) Belgian Refugees Committee, established in October 1914 as part of the wider British response to the flow of civilian refugees flooding out of Belgium in the weeks after the country became the epicentre of the twentieth century’s first global conflict. Two months ago, August’s ‘From the Archives’ document found Tom Kettle standing on the pier at Ostend, arranging for the transport of rifles from Belgium to Ireland while Belgian forces were struggling to hold back the invading German army. After Kettle had departed war-torn Belgium, the quays of Ostend were again swarming with activity but this time it was people, not rifles that were being crammed onto boats.

For Britain and Ireland alike, the case of ‘poor little’ or ‘Catholic’ Belgium was a strong mobilising factor in the early months of the war. Reports of atrocities being carried out against nuns and the destruction of the historic library at Louvain were especially powerful in motivating Irish people to support the war. Just as with the Battle of Waterloo almost a century beforehand, Belgium in 1914 became the stage for a European and eventually global conflict where rival imperial armies clashed. The battle lines in Belgium and Northern France moved so little during the four years of conflict that, for the duration of hostilities, many Belgians had nowhere to go back to as their cities and towns were transformed into a warzone. Ireland took in a modest overflow contingent of Belgian refugees, primarily from Antwerp, from October 1914 onwards. The initial effort was coordinated by an entirely voluntary committee before being taken over by the Local Government Board. This month’s document is an extract from the minute book of that committee. It is a rich source in telling part of the story of civilian contributions to the humanitarian relief effort that inevitably followed the outbreak of the war.

To the author’s knowledge, only one detailed academic study of the Belgian Refugees Committee in Ireland exists: a 2007 thesis by Elizabeth Quinn. In this work, Quinn details the reception and treatment of the refugees who found themselves cared for by a committee comprised of an unusual mix of Anglo-Irish gentry, members of the
urban and provincial middle classes of both religions and sexes as well as a number of Catholic clergy.

In Britain, society was well prepared for the reception of refugees owing to the ironic fact that committees had been established to care for persons displaced from a very different conflict that was expected but never came to pass. In the summer of 1914, British unionists were planning to receive women and children fleeing the expected war in Ulster. Ultimately, Ireland narrowly avoided civil war and British volunteers found themselves catering for Belgian Catholics rather than Ulster Protestants.

Ireland was very much an overflow destination for refugees and the numbers arriving here were small in comparison to the larger influx into Britain. Quinn notes how the sinking by torpedo of the refugee ship the *Amiral Ganeaume* on 26 October 1914 became a landmark moment for refugees in Britain. Onward passage by sea, to Ireland or elsewhere, was now deemed out of the question by many refugees and it placed preparations for the reception of subsequent Belgian refugees in Ireland into confusion and jeopardy. Quinn notes that the chair of the Irish Belgian Refugees Committee was a Mrs Helen Fowle, one of the small pre-war Belgian-Irish community. Her connections, as well as her ability to speak Flemish to refugees greatly assisted a committee which found that their linguistic as well as class preconceptions were not met when refugees began to arrive in Ireland.

Amusingly, some Irish families saw in the refugees an opportunity to get cultured and sophisticated live-in domestic helpers who could also assist children or other family members with learning French. The majority of those arriving in Ireland were Flemish and, as the extracts reproduced here demonstrate, a number of the refugees arriving in Ireland were deemed ‘undesirable’ and funds were allocated for their repatriation to Belgium. It seems that certain well-to-do Belgians took up residence in the homes of Irish gentry, including with Lords Meath and Castletown as suggested in the minutes reproduced here. The ascendancy were also involved in finding accommodation for refugees through the Irish poor law system. Quinn notes that Lady Fingall personally taxied refugees from the train station to the workhouse in Dunshaughlin, county Meath.
From a Church perspective, it seems the overriding concern for refugees arriving in Ireland was that family units be kept together. The Irish Catholic hierarchy had opposed a scheme for the evacuation of Dublin children to Britain during the 1913 Lockout on the grounds that families were being separated and now the policy had to be followed through when Ireland became a host country for refugees. Reliance on the workhouse for the majority of refugees arriving coupled with this necessity for families to stay together meant that an ad hoc system of providing families with a partitioned area or room within the workhouse became the mainstay of housing policy for Belgian refugees.

The policy of housing refugees in workhouses was by no means a perfect fit. Accommodating Belgian families together went against the principle of gender segregation practiced with Irish inmates and the provision of different meals for ordinary and refugee residents also led to tensions and calls of inequality of treatment. Finally, Belgian refugees had a negative impact on recruitment efforts as the presence of many male refugees of military age reportedly prompted some in Ireland to question why Ireland was being asked to send soldiers to fight in Belgium while these men avoided return to the conflict zone. Quinn records that numerous children and young adults among the Belgian refugees were afforded an opportunity to continue their studies while in Ireland, not only through special classes arranged by other refugees who had been teachers but also through enrolment in several prestigious secondary schools nationwide and even at the National University.

One religious community which relocated from Belgium to Ireland was a group of around one hundred Benedictine monks from Maredsous, south east of Charleroi. Their Abbot, Columba Marmion, had been born in Ireland of Franco-Irish parentage and had been educated in Dublin prior to undertaking further study in Rome. The community settled in Edermine House, county Wexford. In his *Dictionary of Irish biography* entry on Marmion, Placid Murray notes how the community continued to send monks back to Belgium where they were needed as stretcher bearers for the Belgian army. Marmion later assisted in the relocation of another religious community from Belgium when a community of nuns was forced to flee Ypres. Having first found
accommodation in Oulton Abbey, Staffordshire by January of 1915, the Bishop of Ferns, John Browne, arranged for their relocation to his diocese. Notably, one of this congregation was Dora Howard (Dame Theresa), niece of the Irish Parliamentary Party chairman, John Redmond. Redmond had personally written to Bishop Browne expressing his ‘personal interest in this community, by reason of the fact that my niece is a member of it’ (15 Dec. 1915, NLI MS 15,173/2). Whereas Abbot Marmion’s monks left Ireland after the war, the Benedictine nuns remained. In 1920 they purchased Kylemore Abbey in Connemara, county Galway. In 1923 the first intake of female students enrolled in what became one of the most prestigious female boarding schools in the state. The school remained open until 2010 and Benedictine nuns have had a continuous presence at the Abbey from 1920 until the present day.

Many associates of John Redmond’s appear to have involved themselves in the housing of refugees. One family which became heavily involved in relief efforts were the Leslies of Castle Leslie, Glaslough, County Monaghan. In a focus on Belgian refugees, the website of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) notes how Leoline Leslie, mother of Shane Leslie, brought fifteen Belgian refugees over to Ireland and housed them in Monaghan town after her other son Norman was killed in the battle of Armentières. The refugees were settled in a purpose built new development which was named Belgian Square and still exists today.

In terms of employment, Elizabeth Quinn has shown, using not only the UCD minutes but also reports of the local government board and records of the Dunshauglin union, how able bodied refugees found employment in mining at Arigna and other Irish mining firms as well as at Kynoch’s munitions factory in Arklow, county Wicklow. Some refugees found their skills in demand when they arrived in Ireland and the UNHCR mentions that three of the refugees living in the small community in Monaghan town used their knowledge of lace-making to established a lingerie factory in the town.

Moving away from the historical towards the contemporary, in 2003, Leslie Page Moch wrote that the outbreak of the First World War inaugurated ‘the century of the refugee’. Analogous terms such as ‘the century of the homeless man’ have been
current since the mid-1950s. If 1914 began that century of dislocation and displacement, it can hardly be said that the era of the refugee is over in 2014. In Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, active conflicts produce fresh refugees every day. From restrictions on crossing borders to the level of treatment received in the provision centres of host countries, forced and conflict-driven migration remains a facet of life in almost all modern societies. One hundred years since they were written, the records of the Belgian Refugees Committee still constitute a highly illuminating case study, into the complex class, religious, and linguistic difficulties that beset efforts to accommodate these refugees. The story of Belgian refugees in the First World War stands as an early and important chapter in the history of humanitarianism and voluntarism in the modern age. These minutes provide an Irish context to this wider, international story. By moving away from experiences of Irish soldiers in Belgium to investigate the experience of Belgians on the home front, the Irish experience of the First World War is diversified and internationalised. It also shows how there were elements of the reception of refugees in Ireland that were quite distinct to the experience of refugees in Britain.

Conor Mulvagh
UCD School of History and Archives
October 2014

Further reading

Elizabeth Quinn, ‘Belgians in Ireland during the First World War: social and economic aspects of a forgotten refugee movement’ (University College Dublin, BA thesis, 2007)

Peter Calahan, Belgian Refugee Relief in England during the Great War (New York, 1982)

Catriona Pennell, A kingdom united: popular responses to the outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland (Oxford, 2012)

UNHCR, ‘The Monaghan lingerie factory that 3 Belgian refugees helped build’ (April 2014, available [here](#))


Monday 19th October 1914

[1] At a meeting of the above committee held this day (present Mrs Fowle, The Countess of Fingall, Mr Gaisford St Laurence Miss Fitzgerald Kenny and Mr E. White) It was resolved that Mrs Fowle Mr Gaisford St Laurence and Miss Fitzgerald Kenny should be appointed Trustees of the Fund and that all payments should be sent to Mr. E. White 16 Molesworth Street to be lodged by him to the credit of the Fund in the National Bank and by whom all contributions are to be acknowledged

It was also resolved that payments out of the fund [end p. 1] should be made by cheque signed by any two of the trustees, and that the balance of The Belgian Relief Fund collected by Mrs Fowle, after payment of Expenses received in connection with same, and deducting the £2000 paid thereout by her to the Belgian Minister should be transferred in the National Bank to this account, and the Bank notified accordingly.

Proposed by the Countess of Fingal & seconded by Miss Fitzgerald Kenny that Miss Mary Boland of 13 Earlsfort Terrace Dublin be asked to join committee, & carried.

Proposed by Mrs Fowle & seconded by Mr. E. White that Mr. Murphy Belgian Consul in Dublin be asked to join the Committee.

Arrangements made for reception and distribution of first refugees arriving on Thursday were discussed and approved of

Helen Fowle
20/10/14 [end p. 2]
Tuesday 20th October 1914

At a meeting of the Committee held this day there were present Mrs Fowle in the chair, Miss Fitzgerald Kenny, The Countess Fingall Mr Gaisford St Laurence, Mr Leach, (Local Government Board), Miss Boland, and Mr E. White.

The minutes of the previous meeting were read and confirmed.

An acceptance by Mr Murphy, the Belgian Consul, to act on the Committee was read.

It was proposed by Mrs Fowle, seconded by The Countess Fingall & passed, that Mr Michael Murphy (son of the Belgian Consul) be added to the Committee. Arrangements were made for the reception and disposal of the Belgian Refugees to arrive to-morrow. [end p. 3]

Lady Malony attended and stated the satisfactory arrangements which had been made at Laytown for the accommodation of the Refugees sent there to-day.

Proposed by Mr Leach, seconded by Miss Fitzgerald Kenny and passed, that Father Nolan be added to the Committee.

An offer of the Local Government Board that Mr Johnston would act as Secretary to the Committee was accepted also an offer of voluntary assistance from Mr Farraw.

It was arranged that a paragraph should be inserted in the newspapers requesting that presents of clothing should be sent to the Office of the Committee at Great Brunswick St.

Helen Fowle
21-X-14 [end p. 4]

Wednesday 21st October 1914

At a meeting of the Committee held this day there were present Mrs Fowle in the chair, Lady Fingall, Miss Fitzgerald Kenny, Miss Boland, Mrs Rushton, Father Nolan, Mr Gaisforth St Laurence and Mr Murphy junior.

The minutes of the previous meeting were read and confirmed.

The question of the receipt & distribution of clothing for the Refugees was discussed and it was arranged that Miss Boland should form a sub-Committee to deal with the matter.
Mrs Fowle stated that “Replies to Queries” cards would be tabulated and arrangements made later for supplying refugees as suitable accommodation permitted and the general arrangements to be made were discussed. Offers for accommodations from Lord Meath and Lord Castletown were before the meeting, and Father Nolan stated the arrangements which he had made for the accommodation of Refugees.

A letter was written to Sir Henry Robinson requesting to know what weekly sum would be allowed for maintenance also requesting authority to return to England male refugees whose families, from whom they had been separated, were on the continent in order to give them a better opportunity of getting into touch with their families.

Arrangements were also made for the number of Refugees to be sent to-morrow to Celbridge Union & Balrothery Union and that Mrs Fowle and Father Nolan be approached to select such Refugees.

A letter from Lieut Col. Hennessy offering his medical services was read & an acknowledgement directed to be sent.

Helen Fowle

Monday

Wednesday 26th October

Present in the chair

Present- Lady Fingall, Miss Boland, Miss Fitzgerald Kenny, Rev. Fr. Nolan, Mr Gaisford St Laurence, Mr White & Mr Murphy (jnr.)

Several letters addressed to Mr White relating mainly to the collection and absorption of funds by local committees were read.

A discussion arose as to the presence of men eligible for the Belgian Army among the Refugees coming to Dublin & their was a general concensus of opinion that the Military Authorities should be approached with a view to having these men trained at the Curragh (or other training depôt) so as to form a Belgian Brigade or other accretion to the British forces. The President undertook to approach the Military Authorities in Ireland on the subject.
It was also determined that the money necessary to send undesirable Refugees out of the country should be paid out of the Fund [end p. 8]

It was likewise resolved that an appeal be made through the Press to the Public for clothes suitable to both sexes and particularly for warm underclothing, and Miss Boland was authorised to spend from the Fund, up to £20 in the purchase of necessary clothing not otherwise obtainable

The next meeting was fixed for the 28th inst. at 3.30 P.M.

Chairman
F.[?] Nolan
prop Mrs Fowle

[end p. 9]


Father Nolan opened the meeting & afterwards President took the chair. Other members present Lady Fingall Miss Boland, Miss Fitzgerald-Kenny, Mr White & Mr Murphy (Jnr.)

The minutes of the previous meeting having been read the Committee discussed several desirable offers of hospitality and decided the places to which the prospective arrivals of Refugees were to be allotted.

Authority was given to the President to return a not too desirable Refugee family, from Laytown to Belgium and to defray the necessary cost out of the fund.

A bill (£1.13.4) for the L. & N.W.R [London and North Western Railway] for breakfasts was authorised to be paid.

A further sum of £20 was authorised to be transmitted to Mrs Taylor for the provision of certain necessary articles of clothing for the use of the Refugees in Rathdrum Union.

The next meeting was fixed for the 2nd prox[imo]

H. Fowle

Chairman 2/11/XIV
Belgian Refugees’ Committee

Minutes

Monday 17th October 1914

At a meeting of the above committee held this day (present in person, The Countess of Fingask, Mr. MacIvor, St. Lawrence, Miss Fitzgerald, Kitty, and Mr. E. White). It was resolved that Mr. Telford, Mr. MacIvor, St. Lawrence, and Miss Fitzgerald, Kitty, should be appointed treasurers of the fund. That all payments should be made to Mr. E. White at 16 Montgomerie Street to be lodged by him to the credit of the fund in the National Bank and by whom all contributions are to be acknowledged.

It was also resolved that payments out of the fund should be made by cheque signed by any two of the trustees, and that all the balance of the Belgian Relief Fund created by Mr. Telford, after payment of expenses incurred in connection with same, and deducting the £300 paid thereon by the Belgian Minister should be transferred to the National Bank to this account, and the Bank notified accordingly.

Proposed by the Countess of Fingask; seconded by Mr. E. White, that Mr. Fitzgibbon, Kitty, and Mr. E. White or any two of them be allowed to join any committee of the fund.

Proposed by Mr. Telford; seconded by Mr. E. White, that Mr. Telford be allowed to join any committee of the fund.

Arrangements made for reception and distribution of the goods arrived on Thursday were discussed and approved of.

Signed:

Helene Telford

20/10/1914
Tuesday 20th December 1914

At a meeting of the Committee held this day there were present: Mr. Foley as the Chair, Miss Fitzgerald Kenny, Mr. Cummins Fitzgerald, Mr. Macfarland, Mr. Lees, Mr. F. O'Neill (Local Government Board) Misses Nolan, and Mrs. E. White.

The minutes of the previous meeting were read and confirmed.

A resolution adopted by Mr. Lees that the Belgian Consul, to whom the Committee was read the minutes, was thanked.

It was proposed by Mr. Foley, seconded by Mr. Cummins Fitzgerald that Mr. A. H. Murphy (son of the Belgian Consul) be added to the Committee.

Arrangements were made for the reception and disposal of the Belgian Refugees to arrive tomorrow.

Lady Foley attended and stated the satisfactory arrangements which had been made at Derry town for the accommodation of the Refugees and their biddy.

Proposed by Mr. Lees, seconded by Miss Fitzgerald Kenny and passed that Father Nolan be added to the Committee.

An offer of the Local Government Board that Mr. Bunton would act as Secretary to the Committee has been accepted and an offer of voluntary assistance from Mr. Farran.

It was arranged that a paragraph should be inserted in the newspapers requesting that presents of clothing should be sent to the Office of the Committee at Great Brunswick St.

Helen Foley

01-X-14

Minute book of the Belgian Refugees’ Committee
UCD Archives, IE UCDA P105
Wednesday 24th October 1914

At a meeting of the Committee held this day there were present: Mr. Flower in the chair, Arnold, Miss Hugon and Henry: Mr. Boland, Mr. Puckett, Father Nolan, Mr. Gurnett & Lawrence, and Mr. Wansley junior.

The minutes of the previous meeting were read and confirmed.

The question of the receipt & distribution of clothing for the refugees was discussed, and it was arranged that Miss Boland should form a sub-committee to deal with the matter.

Mr. Flower stated that “mouseenter” cards would be fabricated and arrangements made later for supplying refugees with suitable accommodation permitted.

The general arrangements to be made were discussed. Offers for accommodation from Lord Wexford and Lord Castlereagh were before the meeting, and Father Nolan stated the arrangements to which he had made for the accommodation of refugees.

A letter was written to the Hon. Mr. Robinson requesting to know what weekly accommodation was allowed for maintenance of refugees as many efforts of hospitality did not include maintenance also requesting authority to return to England with refugees whose families from whom they had been separated since the continent in order to give them a better opportunity of getting into touch with their families.

Arrangements were also made...
for the number of Refugees to be sent tomorrow to Enniscorthy Union and that Mrs. Fowke and Father Nolan be appointed to select such Refugees.

A letter from Dr. J.C. Kenny offering his medical services was read and an acknowledgment desired to be sent.

Helen Fowke.

Monday, November 26th, Tuesday.

Present in the chair.

Present—Lady Frizell, Miss Ireland, Miss Fitzgerald, Kenny, Rev. F. Nolan, M. Girdwood Lawrence, P. White, J. Murphy (min.

Several letters addressed to P. White relating mainly to the collection and absorption of funds by local committees were read.

A discussion arose as to the presence of new eligible for the Belgian Army among the Refugees coming to Dublin. It was a general consensus of opinion that the Military Authorities should be approached with a view to having these men trained at Enniscorthy or the training depot so as to form a Belgian Brigade, or other auxiliary to the British forces. The President undertook to approach the Military Authorities in this matter.

It was also determined that the money necessary for sending undesirable Refugees of the country should be paid out of the Fund.
It was likewise resolved that an appeal be made through the Press to the Public for clothes suitable to both sexes and particularly for warm underclothing, and that the Committee was authorised to spend from the Fund, up to £25, on the purchase of necessary clothing with otherwise obtainable. The next meeting was fixed for the 20th inst. at 3.30 p.m.

Chairman

[Signature]

[Signature]
Wednesday 28th Oct.

Father Nolan opened the meeting & afterwords Prayers
took the Chair. The members present Lady Fitzgerald
Mrs Boland, Miss Fitzgerald Kenny, M. White &
M. Murphy (Jnr.)

The minutes of the previous meeting having been
read, the committee discussed several desirable
effects of hospitality & decided the places to
which the prospective arrivals of refugees was
be allotted.

Authority was given to the Resident to return a bill
to desirable refugee family from France to Belgium &
to defray the necessary cost out of the fund.

A bill (£13.15.6) for the £18.10.6 for breakfasts
was authorized to be paid.

A further sum of £20 was authorized to be
transmitted to M. Taylor for the provision of
certain necessary articles of clothing for the use
of the refugees in Rathdrum Union.

The next meeting was fixed for the 29th Oct.

Chrmn.,

[Signature]