Ian Miller

Abstract How adequate was the mid-Victorian workhouse diet? Basing their arguments on modern nutritional analyses of dietary tables, some historians have concluded that the workhouse diet fulfilled the basic nutritional needs of inmates and that the idea that workhouse dietary regimes were inadequate is the result of a “mythology” created by contemporaries—including Charles Dickens. In these accounts, Dickens’s infamous scene where Oliver Twist becomes so overwhelmed with hunger that he asks for more food is construed as an exaggerated rendering of workhouse life. This article argues that efforts to impose modern nutritional techniques onto past configurations can produce misleading results and generate simplistic historical interpretations. The cultural categories historically surrounding food demand thorough attention and must be reconciled with modern scientific approaches if the boundaries between workhouse realities and mythologies are to be rendered less obscure.

How adequate was the mid-Victorian workhouse diet? According to an article published recently in the British Medical Journal by Smith, Thornton, Reinarz, and Williams that garnered international media attention, it was indeed adequate. Basing their argument on modern nutritional analysis of dietary tables, they conclude that the workhouse diet provided in England and Wales fulfilled the basic nutritional needs of inmates. The authors’ aim was to demolish the “medical myth” of workhouse dietary regimes that they believe to have been created by contemporaries—in particular, Charles Dickens. The paucity of Oliver Twist’s diet was fictitious, they argue, because his diet failed to correspond with dietary tables outlined in official sources. Accordingly, the authors construe Dickens’s infamous scene in which Oliver becomes so overwhelmed with hunger that he asks for more food as an exaggerated rendering of the quantities of food allocated to paupers in mid-Victorian workhouses. The results of this inquiry largely confirm conclusions reached in key texts on the New Poor Law. Anne Digby, for instance, also dismisses Oliver Twist as an iconographic but

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essentially mythological piece of imagery. Digby asserts that because institutional diets tended to be superior to the diets typically consumed in the community, sources such as *Oliver Twist* need to be discarded and, in Digby’s phraseology, be “assigned an honourable place in classic mythology.”

This article argues that, on the contrary, efforts to impose modern nutritional techniques onto past configurations can produce misleading results and, in turn, generate simplistic historical interpretations. In this instance, the use of nutritional analysis has popularized imprecise understandings of mid-Victorian workhouse practices. In such accounts, the historical and cultural construction of dietary regimes remains unaccounted for. Although nutritional analysis of historical dietary trends serves a useful function, when used alone it often resoundingly fails to encompass the immediate and important meanings that surrounded the issue of workhouse feeding and that permeated the heated debates sparked by the implementation of the New Poor Law. This omission is problematic. The cultural categories historically surrounding food demand thorough attention and must be reconciled with modern scientific approaches. Historians need to synthesize nutritional analysis with rigorous historical scrutiny if they are to formulate more precise understandings and, in this instance, to reconcile workhouse realities and mythologies.

Problematically, the aforementioned article published by the *British Medical Journal* is also based on a remarkably narrow evidence base. Its conclusions are gleaned primarily from analysis of one source alone: the recommended dietary tables drawn up by the Poor Law commissioners in the late 1830s. The extent to which institutional managers adhered to these recommendations and the ways in which workhouse dietary regimes evolved after their inception remain unconsidered. Integrating these concerns with the *British Medical Journal*’s findings would allow historians to problematize and reconsider conclusions reached via nutritional analysis alone. Indeed, to add matters such as these to the equation reveals the fluid and complex nature of workhouse feeding. Furthermore, if dietary arrangements were indeed “adequate,” as claimed by Smith, Thornton, Reinarz, and Williams, why then did the emotive topic of workhouse food become so central to critiques of workhouse management? In other words, why did these “myths” develop? Certainly, key figures—including Dickens—made use of a critical narrative that placed food center stage. Can we simply dismiss his choice of representation as a biased articulation of anti–Poor Law sentiment, and if we decide to, are deeper layers of historical reflection bypassed?

This article argues that institutional adherence to the commissioners’ dietary recommendations cannot be assumed and that persuasive evidence exists that demonstrates how workhouse feeding practices often diverged dramatically from official recommendations—in many instances falling far below an “adequate” standard.

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4 Ibid., 146, 229–32.


6 Dietary tables can be located in *Second Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners*, Reports of Commissioners, Cmd., 1836, vol. 29, pt. 1.1 (595), 38–40.
Overzealous frugality and regional variation also hindered the full provision of recommended house diets. Factors such as these are minimized by those historians who seek to consign contemporary criticism of workhouse feeding to the dustbin of mythology. Inadequate feeding generated very real concerns about the well-being of physically vulnerable institutionalized groups such as the young and the elderly. To further complicate matters, this article maintains that Poor Law authorities did not in fact design their dietary recommendations in light of an understanding of the need to promote nutritional health. In the 1830s, nutritional well-being was not a prime goal of the New Poor Law; it was instead subordinated to driving principles of discipline and deterrence, and closely intertwined with the behavioral policing and governing of paupers. Poor Law commissioners used dietaries to avoid institutional starvation and to sustain life, but they rarely considered their potential functions in terms of safeguarding pauper health. This can be ascribed not so much to a lack of empathy toward the institutionalized but instead to the incipient nature of medical frameworks of nutrition in the 1830s. This problem begs the critical question of whether twenty-first-century notions of “good nutrition” can be unproblematically mapped onto historical debates about the New Poor Law, given that early nineteenth-century understandings of nutrition by no means corresponded with our own. It is certainly interesting to analyze, and roughly estimate, the nutritional health of institutionalized paupers. But to adopt this somewhat anachronistic approach risks fostering significant misunderstandings of how individuals in the nineteenth century themselves understood the function of institutional feeding. Certainly, contemporaries operated within different conceptual frameworks, linking food to very different sets of values and beliefs than our own.

The need to provide nutritionally “adequate” food only became clear as the New Poor Law system evolved. Between the 1830s and the 1860s, the criteria for “adequate” feeding altered dramatically as food gradually became encrypted with new meanings. In this period, ideas on nutrition sharpened while medical authority in food consumption expanded. From the 1840s onward, the doctrines of a recently created but burgeoning nutritional science began to acquire significant influence. Around this time, key scientific figures—including prominent German chemist Justus von Liebig—devised new ways of analyzing food and, in turn, enabled the chemical contents of foodstuffs and their effects on the body to be deciphered. In Britain, Liebig’s ideas were widely disseminated by scientists, including prominent chemist Lyon Playfair. The “Hungry ’40s” also spawned a wealth of literature on diet and digestion that sought to inform the public how to eat healthily and efficiently within an industrializing, modernizing society. Closer empirical examination of the stomach and its digestive ailments strengthened the authority of physicians in advising on the benefits of consuming certain foods. Contemporaneously, medical influence in the workhouse increased. Ideas drawn from the dietetic and nutritional sciences had an increasing impact on discussions of workhouse feeding practices.

9 Ruth G. Hodgkinson, The Origins of the National Health Service: The Medical Services of the New Poor Law, 1834–1871 (London, 1967); Michael W. Flinn, “Medical Services under the New Poor Law,” in The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century, ed. Derek Fraser (London, 1976), 45–66; Digby, Pauper Palaces,
Notably, during the 1830s, dietaries tables had been drawn up with reference to deterrence and behavioral regulation, an issue that fostered deep resentment among institutionalized populations. Yet the scantiness of these provisions clashed increasingly with the burgeoning dietetic and nutritional consciousness of the 1840s and the 1850s. Shifting interpretations of the bodily value of nutritious feeding ensured that the question of precisely what constituted an “adequate” diet evolved into a contentious, contested topic of lively debate, a development that in turn forced new interactions between Poor Law authorities and medical figures operating both inside and outside of the workhouse.

Overall, this article argues that the national diversity of institutional feeding practices and shifting contemporary views on what quantities and qualities of food needed to be provided complicate the sweeping judgments being made on mid-Victorian workhouse diets. It also maintains that significant conceptual changes relating to food occurred between the 1830s and the 1860s that complicated definitions of what it meant to be adequately fed. Analysis of these changes suggests that retrospective assessments made on the apparent paucity of workhouse diets in the years surrounding the publication of Oliver Twist bear less relevance to later time frames. Hence, although I am in firm disagreement with less critical accounts of workhouse dietary arrangements of the 1840s, or at least their methodologies, I maintain that if historians, for whatever motivations, wish to recast Poor Law dietary provisions as scientifically “adequate,” then this could be more convincingly achieved by investigating time frames from the 1860s onward.

CONSTRUCTING WORKHOUSE DIETARIES

The New Poor Law implemented in England and Wales during 1834 was designed to reform older forms of poor relief by introducing uniformity and centralization. It was structured to channel relief principally through the workhouse and strove to achieve equitable and efficient treatment of paupers. The Old Poor Law that preceded it had become widely criticized: on the one hand, for perpetuating institutional cruelty and abuse toward workhouse inmates and, on the other, for an unregulated benevolence that seemed to have encouraged reliance upon charity. In the eyes of the Poor Law commissioners, diet had been particularly unrestrained in the old system, the consequence being, according to an inquiry that took place in 1834, that “the young are trained in idleness, ignorance and vice,” and “the able-bodied maintained in sluggish sensual indolence.” Without strict governance or classification, paupers, so Poor Law reformers insisted, were either not fed enough or, worse still, were able to procure diets that exceeded that consumed by independent laborers. The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act was therefore designed to

10 For a fuller statistical analysis, see Valerie Johnston, Diet in Workhouses and Prisons, 1835–1895 (New York, 1985).
12 Report from His Majesty’s Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws, Reports of Commissioners, Commons, 1834, vol. 27.1 (44), 31.
implement a regulated system that deterred and discouraged able-bodied workers from entering the institution and becoming reliant upon public relief. To facilitate this ideological goal, reformers reconstructed the management, architecture, and living conditions of union workhouses based upon the premise that life inside was not to equal the conditions of the poorer class of able-bodied laborers residing outside the workhouse.\(^\text{13}\)

In terms of dietary arrangements, the resolution of the tensions between centralization and regionalism proved complex. Poor Law reform was by no means designed to eradicate local differences but instead to make them more manageable.\(^\text{14}\) The provision of inferior food was central to the New Poor Law. To guarantee this, Poor Law commissioners deemed it necessary to analyze and comprehend the diet of the able-bodied poor. One of the first actions taken by the Poor Law Commission in the 1830s was the undertaking of an impressive social survey that investigated the diet of laborers. The commissioners identified significant geographical diversity in eating habits across England and Wales, and proved mindful of this situation when recommending particular dietaries. Hence, despite an ideological desire to assure uniformity, the New Poor Law encouraged dietary conformity while simultaneously allocating room for regional variations in food provisions.

Assistant Commissioner Charles Mott's report, penned in 1836, offers an illuminating resource for understanding the perspectives of Poor Law authorities on workhouse feeding. Mott depicted national uniformity of institutional diets as an unattainable and unnecessary aim, a conclusion reached on the basis that provincial habits were difficult to conquer. “The labourers of Norfolk and Suffolk would hardly be prevailed upon to forego their dumplings, or the Cornish men their pies,” he insisted. Mott foresaw that workhouse disorder would be the most likely result if inmates were given alien foodstuffs toward which they shared certain cultural preconceptions or prejudices. Hence, he presented attentiveness to regional diversity as an important strategy for dissipating pauper hostility in the workhouse. To emphasize his point, Mott remarked upon the Marquess of Lansdowne's attempts to provide food to his Irish tenants during a recent period of scarcity. He recalled that the populace had gratefully received potatoes and oatmeal because they were familiar with these foods. In contrast, Lansdowne's efforts to disperse rice had proven unsuccessful because the local populace had no idea of how to prepare or consume rice. The issue had reportedly become so vexed that a public consultation had been held, at which the locals condemned the supply of rice for being deliberately intended to cause sterility and unanimously agreed to throw their supplies into the sea.\(^\text{15}\) Anecdotes such as this encouraged sensitivity to regional preferences, if only to ensure institutional order.

Mott disregarded medico-scientific opinion on food as a suitable framework for considering dietary provision. According to Mott, medical scientists were prone to formulating dietetic rules designed to apply to all, an approach that resolutely failed to account for an obvious multiplicity of individual, local, and national dietary needs and preferences.\(^\text{16}\) Mott emphasized that regional dietary preferences


\(^{15}\) *Second Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners*, 313.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 315.
could be best judged by local boards of guardians. This point is significant. Clearly, the ideal of nutritional health was not formative to the construction of workhouse diets, so long as institutionalized paupers were prevented from starving to death. Indeed, there is little reason why we should expect nutrition to figure prominently in the 1830s, a period when nutritional science was still in a relatively nascent state. Furthermore, medical influence more generally was relatively weak at this historical juncture, not least because the medical community did not yet command widespread public recognition of being a respectable, unified profession—a position that it only gradually acquired in subsequent decades.

Accordingly, the commissioners emphasized the quantities of food required by paupers instead of concerning themselves with matters such as nutritional quality. For Mott, the weight of food needed by paupers was relative to the physical intensity of the work that they had performed prior to becoming institutionalized. In this context, the combined weight of foodstuffs was more important than its content, so long as diets met the strict criteria of being unappealing and deterrent. Accordingly, Mott constructed a model of various laboring bodies with different intake requirements based upon work intensity. He estimated that agricultural laborers typically consumed seventeen ounces of food per day; that urban “mechanics and manufacturers” consumed between eighteen and twenty-four ounces; and that men employed in jobs demanding physical exertion, such as mowers, sawyers, and prizefighters, consumed up to thirty ounces. Mott sought to apply these findings to workhouse scenarios by suggesting that a graduated dietary scale of institutional diets could be introduced. Accordingly, he permitted paupers accustomed to work involving little exertion to receive food provisions weighing between twelve and eighteen ounces per day; those accustomed to moderate labor would receive between eighteen and twenty-four ounces; and those used to hard labor would receive between twenty-four and thirty ounces. He foresaw the imposition of this standardization as being able to halt the unregulated system of workhouse management evident in the Old Poor Law where there appeared to be no limit to quantity, a system that Mott denounced as “pot-bellied philanthropy.” Mott claimed that as much as sixty-six ounces of food had been provided daily in some of the worst pre-1834 workhouses. From hereon, food was intended to be more central to regimes of bodily discipline. Newly imposed eating rituals simultaneously disciplined the pauper mind. A rigid observation of silence while eating, lining up in a queue for food (in which time it might have turned cold), and a strict timetabling of meals all contributed to an ethos intended to inculcate habits of self-restraint among the pauperized.17

In 1835, the Poor Law Commission dispersed a circular detailing six workhouse dietary tables intended as guides for boards of guardians, the content of which serves as the basis for Smith, Thornton, Reinartz and Williams’s evidence. Regional circumstances dictated how these house diets were adopted. In theory, paupers from regions characterized by heavy manual work would be supplied with the highest quantities of food permissible. However, regardless of local dietary customs, workhouse diets were to be universally bland, being made up of

combinations of bread, gruel, potatoes, soups, suet, and small amounts of cheese, broth, and meats. Clearly, workhouse dietary systems were formulated with close reference to the underlying ideological principle of serving as a disincentive. A sense that nutritional well-being should be promoted played little role in the initial formation of feeding regimes, so long as enough food to sustain life was supplied.

THE WORKHOUSE DIETARY SYSTEM IN PRACTICE

In theory, the Poor Law Commission’s recommended dietaries certainly provided inmates with enough food to avoid starvation and can, perhaps, be perceived on this basis as “adequate.” Yet the six circulated dietary tables were intended as guidelines only. Historians such as Digby have suggested that these recommendations provided for a fuller, more varied diet than was often available outside of the workhouse, thus confirming notions of “workhouse mythology.” However, her perspective obscures problems such as lower quantities being allocated in practice and the regular reduction of provisions to discipline. The degrees of variation allowed within the New Poor Law system sometimes benefitted paupers. In 1839, a severe winter, economic depression, and regional food scarcities meant that barley was widely substituted for wheat in many areas of Britain. The continuing provision of wheat products in workhouses therefore meant that the quality of institutional food became, in many instances, superior to its equivalent outside.

Differences in urban and rural institutional food supplies also benefitted some paupers. For instance, an apparent dichotomy between London and provincial food provisions was a recurrent bone of contention. In 1841, radical medical journalist and politician Thomas Wakley argued in the House of Commons that the allowances given to London’s paupers differed remarkably from their equivalents throughout much of England and Wales. Wakley considered it disgraceful that “the poor agricultural labourer, after a long life of toil, should be cast into a dungeon, and placed upon worse than a gaol allowance,” while London mechanics were given a relatively good diet. Wakley noted that London boards of guardians allocated bread, porridge, meat, vegetables, cheese, suet, and beer three times per week. In contrast, “the poor were all but starved” in rural regions. Wakley used this disparity to form the basis of a broader criticism of the lack of uniformity in the New Poor Law system. Accordingly, he lambasted the commissioners as “incompetent to administer the law” on the basis that they had failed to understand the true principles of the New Poor Law. In fact, Wakley’s analysis was itself flawed in that it failed to recognize that urban laborers were often more accustomed to meat than were the rural poor and that commissioners, including Mott, recognized the

18 First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, 63–66.
20 Fifth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, Reports of Commissioners, Cmd., 1839, vol. 20.1 (239), 1–2.
importance of maintaining relationships between institutional and communal diets. Nonetheless, Wakley’s statements help to demonstrate the significant levels of variation in workhouse dietary tables throughout England and Wales.

Although some paupers benefitted from residing in institutions offering richer, more diverse food, most did not. In practice, food provisions were often significantly lower than the dietary recommendations specified by the commissioners, a scenario that complicates simplistic assessments of the “adequacy” of workhouse diets. The reports of the 1837 Select Committee into the Poor Law Amendment Act abounded with criticism of the alleged manipulation of dietary tables by workhouse masters, normally in order to secure financial savings. In 1837, paupers at the Petworth and Westhampnett Unions successfully petitioned for extra rations of bread and the replacement of meat pudding with bacon on Saturdays. Yet in most workhouses, food was allocated parsimoniously. In Droxford Union, workhouse chefs were reportedly preparing puddings with the residue of broth rather than the recommended suet. In Soberton Workhouse, the workhouse master reportedly thickened the soup with potatoes only on the days when the board of guardians visited. Closer investigation revealed that the broth specified in the dietary tables in fact consisted of the leftover water in which pork had been boiled earlier that day. Paupers reportedly refused to eat this, choosing to dip their bread into their water allocation instead. Moreover, they claimed that the broth had made them feel “bad on the inside.” It was later discovered that just one joint of meat was being purchased weekly to feed the entire house and that, even then, bones had been weighed in with the meat allowance.

Food provisions might also be temporarily reduced to discipline disobedient paupers—a procedure susceptible to overzealousness and abuse on the part of workhouse masters. To a certain extent, confusion may have been caused by the commissioners having categorized discipline and diet together in the same section of their workhouse rules and regulations. Being supplied with food was conditional upon appropriate self-conduct. Paupers might be subject to severe dietary restrictions if they broke the required mealtime silence, used obscene language, feigned sickness, or refused to clean or work. The utilization of such punishments was meant to be reported to the commissioners within twenty-four hours of commencing but often this was not in practice. Children were particularly vulnerable to punishment by food withdrawal. This situation was potentially problematic, because there were

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26 Seventh Report from Select Committee, 19–22.
27 Crowther, Workhouse System, 212.
28 First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales, Reports of Commissioners, Cmd., 1835, vol. 35.107 (500), 60.
29 Ibid., 61.
no specific guidelines on dietary provisions for those aged nine and under. The feeding of inmates of this age group was left to the discretion of workhouse masters and medical officers.31

Tellingly, evidence given to the Select Committee on the Poor Law Amendment Act (1837) stated that workhouse masters punished dirty children at Fareham Union workhouse thrice weekly by lowering food allowances and placing children into stocks while wearing a fool’s cap with the word “dirty” written on it. Further investigations established that dietary allowances for the young had sometimes been cut to half of that of the adult inmate, a revelation that led the committee to conclude that the workhouse master was “armed with much too large a discretion.” Consequently, the committee accused workhouse medical officer John Blatherwick of great neglect because of his failure to inquire into the diets of children and to examine their health, leading to his subsequent resignation. In response to controversies such as these, the commission distributed a circular in 1837 in which it asserted that although punishment via dietary reduction was an available option, it was still compulsory to provide an appropriate amount of food. For instance, masters could disallow a particular food item, but only if they substituted it with a blander item such as bread.32 Nonetheless, overzealous food withdrawals persisted as a controversial topic. In 1841, the commission felt compelled to distribute a second circular to boards of guardians that further criticized some workhouse masters for acting with “culpable rigour” and for having “abused the discretion left to them.” The commissioners then prepared an order that curtailed the free reign of workhouse masters to punish children with specific reference to the issue of dietary restrictions.33

The punishment of workhouse children not only elicited strong emotions but also was ideologically problematic, which in part explains how and why the child became so central to anti-Poor Law rhetoric. As Alysa Levene demonstrates, ideas that children were blameless for their impoverished condition had guided the management of youths in the Old Poor Law system.34 In theory, a relative leniency toward children was meant to have transferred into the New Poor Law. In an official report published in 1838, Commissioner James Philip Kay specified that “the pauper children maintained in Union workhouses are dependent, not as a consequence of their errors, but of their misfortunes. They have not necessarily contracted any of the taint of pauperism.”35 Accordingly, the workhouse was intended to shelter institutionalized children from immoral influences, expose them to suitable moral influences, and maintain bodily strength in order to protect British society in the future by adequately rearing the young.36 Excessive disciplinary methods that weakened young bodies clearly challenged these principles. Given this context, it is perhaps unsurprising

31 Ibid., 45.
33 Sevenths Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, Reports of Committees, Cmd., 1841 Session 1, vol. 11.291 (327), 73–75.
36 Ibid., 229.
that contemporaries such as Dickens focused so intently upon the child when expressing his views on the Poor Law system. *The Times*, too, routinely conjured up stories of children being forced to eat mice, of women subsisting in a state of semistarvation, and of emaciated skeletons being discovered in workhouses.\(^\text{37}\) Even in those institutions where the young might be apportioned more generous portions, children faced a sudden switch to the recommended adult diet upon reaching the age of nine (*Oliver Twist*’s age). Depending on the generosity or the parsimoniousness of individual workhouse masters, this could entail anything between a rise in quantity or a significant drop. Concerns such as these were paramount to anti–Poor Law rhetoric throughout the late 1830s and the early 1840s, and cannot be too easily dismissed as an example of workhouse mythology.

Apprehension about the long-term physical impact of sustained underfeeding also arose. Critics routinely depicted workhouse dietaries as pauperizing establishments in themselves by pointing to the detrimental health consequences of long periods of sparse feeding, a perspective that persuasively challenged ideas that workhouses discouraged poverty. In particular, concern arose toward those using the workhouse as a temporary or seasonal form of relief. Upon leaving the workhouse, previously healthy men and women were feared to have become so incapacitated by institutional dietary regimes that they could no longer function effectively as social beings, their bodies having become too frail for them to secure useful employment. In 1837, the governor of Blything Union complained to his board of guardians that the recommended diets were insufficient for able-bodied men who were employed for eight hours each day in the workhouse corn mill. Furthermore, he maintained, the physical weakening created by insufficient feeding permanently damaged health and reduced the potential of paupers to return to work upon leaving the workhouse.\(^\text{38}\) This issue evolved into a nationwide debate in Spring 1838 after the Dudley Board of Guardians petitioned Parliament. The guardians argued that owing to the intensely physical nature of employment in the area, many of those compelled to temporarily rely upon workhouse relief were unable to resume useful employment upon leaving because they had been slowly physically weakened in the workhouse. The guardians asserted that local paupers previously employed in forges or mines were accustomed to substantial amounts of food and that the prescribed dietary was proving inadequate. Accordingly, the guardians had adopted a table used by London Union workhouses. A heated debate ensued in the House of Lords that focused once again upon the extent to which regional diversities were undermining the principles of uniformity that underpinned the Poor Law.\(^\text{39}\)

Overall, the diversity of workhouse diets complicates conclusions drawn from nutritional reasoning and selective material. It is clearly difficult, if not impossible, to accurately determine how much food was provided in practice, given the varying quality of foodstuffs, the widespread use of disciplinary restrictions, and significant and often controversial regional variation. Furthermore, retrospective


analysis is less useful for determining whether restricted food intake produced chronic long-term problems, an important concern for contemporaries. Documentary evidence indicates that variation and flexibility in food provision contributed to a public ethos of skepticism toward workhouse dietaries and that the “myths” of workhouse diets that developed were grounded in some, if not a high, degree of reality. It is by setting critiques of workhouse food against this wider backdrop that we can more thoroughly comprehend the motivations of Dickens and others in placing institutional food practice center stage in their discussion of the New Poor Law.

**MEDICAL IDEAS AND WORKHOUSE FEEDING**

Dickens’s analysis was very much grounded in the conditions and discourses of the early 1840s. To a certain extent, it can be understood as a response to the teething problems of the New Poor Law system. Clearly, food had particular uses within the workhouse and was provided in a way that promoted a penetrative ethos of deterrence and bodily discipline. However, despite the admittedly bleak picture depicted above, workhouse feeding conditions did improve after the 1840s, steering closer to what modern historians might choose to define as “adequate.” Initially, workhouse dietary regimes were undeniably dreary for many paupers, yet efforts were made to resolve some dietary concerns during subsequent decades. Hence, from here on it is perhaps more useful to ask not whether workhouse feeding systems were “adequate” at any given historical moment but, rather, how and why ideas relating to workhouse feeding adapted in response to external criticism and to changes in the Poor Law system. Further, how did shifting expert opinion on what constituted nutritional feeding help to redefine what constituted an “adequate” diet?

Vernon has identified the 1840s as a period that witnessed the emergence of a humanitarian critique of hunger—stemming in part from anti–Poor Law rhetoric—and that continued to influence popular thought on hunger throughout the nineteenth century. Although his analysis of the interplay between emerging cultural sensitivities to starvation and medical science is restricted principally to the 1890s onward, the emergence of an increasingly visible and sympathetic “medicalized” food discourse can in fact be observed in earlier decades. This arose from the investigations into food made by Justus von Liebig in the 1830s and the 1840s, and their subsequent popularization in the decades that followed. In this period, food and food intake became subject to empirical scientific analysis, a development that allowed physicians and medical scientists to extend their authority in day-to-day matters of consuming. These new food discourses helped to instill a comprehension of food used to challenge the perspectives shared by the architects of the New Poor Law.

In the 1830s, the remarkably limited influence of medical science in the planning of dietary tables angered the *Lancet*. One editorial expressed fury at a public statement made by Prime Minister Lord Melbourne. The anonymous journalist—quite possibly Thomas Wakley—declared that “if Lord Melbourne had said that the opinions of military or naval men in professional matters were contradictory, and

41 Ibid., 81–117.
of no value—if he had used the same language with reference to lawyers, or parsons, twenty noble lords would have been on their legs in a moment to protest against the gratuitous attack.” As a counterargument, the editorial insisted that institutional dietaries were an important matter for both the interests of society and the health of the poor, adding that “the whole may be considered as a great physiological experiment, conducted at the public expense, in which physiologists have only to observe facts, and to deduce general results.”

The author firmly distinguished between lay observations and expertly formulated dietary ideas produced by physiologists and physicians based upon empirical study. Medical practitioners, the Lancet maintained, were in fact remarkably well positioned to inform the Poor Law Commission on the dietary and nutritional needs of inmates at different stages of the life cycle and to offer invaluable information on the connection between insufficient feeding and particular illnesses.

The Lancet’s complaints fed into wider efforts to promote a strong sense of medical responsibility and to carve out an authoritative place for medical communities in managing bodily concerns. In the 1830s, this attempt at claiming dietetic authority mostly fell on deaf ears. Yet as Liebigian organic chemistry and dietetic science evolved from the 1840s onward, an increasingly sophisticated expert framework was developed that provided new ways of comprehending the bodily function of food. The influence of this development became increasingly discernible in later medico-journalistic criticism of the Poor Law. In 1844, the British and Foreign Medical Review expressed scepticism toward insufficient pauper feeding by demonstrating how institutional feeding practices failed to conform with professional understandings of food espoused by experts operating in blossoming fields of inquiry, including organic chemistry. The Review also presented the susceptibility of underfed paupers to disease as especially problematic. To counteract such occurrences, the author warned that close attention needed to be paid to the weight and bulk of each individual inmate: his powers of producing heat, his previous habits, the relative size of his organs, and the degree of molecular activity in his vital tissues. As part of a plea to extend medical influence in the Poor Law system, the anonymous author recommended that only medical officers with practical experience and with an understanding of food chemistry should be appointed to apportion meals.

In the 1830s, medical understandings of nutrition competed unsuccessfully with lay understandings of appropriate feeding. However, in subsequent decades, medical scientists provided increasingly convincing arguments for providing certain quantities and qualities of food at different stages of the life cycle. This development had important implications for opinion on how vulnerable groups within the Poor Law system should be fed. In his widely read Treatise on the Physiological and Moral Management of Infancy (1840), Andrew Combe, Scottish physician to the queen, depicted the workhouse child as possibly the worst fed of all children. Specifically referring to children born and reared in workhouses, Combe insisted that poor

43 Ibid., 22.
45 For more on children in workhouses, see Driver, Power and Pauperism, 95–105. For the elderly, see Digby, Pauper Palaces, 161–79; Englander, Poverty and Poor Law Reform, 68–72; Pat Thane, Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues (Oxford, 2000), 165–93.
institutional feeding produced only stunted, weak bodies and impaired, degraded minds. Combe proceeded by arguing that overly rigid systems of workhouse economy resulted in physical and moral deterioration among the pauperized young, a scenario that would ultimately create further pauperism because future generations would be compelled to seek Poor Law relief, being unable to secure gainful employment.\footnote{Andrew Combe, \textit{A Treatise on the Physiological and Moral Management of Infancy}, 6th ed. (Edinburgh, 1847), 29.} In Combe’s words:

It is in workhouses that the evil is seen in its glaring form. These are peopled by the children of the lowest, most sickly, or most improvident parents. From birth they are the worst fed and most miserably clothed, and, in consequence, their bodies are stunted and weak, and their minds and morals impaired and degraded. If the children in any workhouse are contrasted with the children at even a common country school, their physical and moral inferiority is seen to be very marked, and in the expression of innate heartiness and enjoyment peculiar to early youth, the difference is still more striking.\footnote{Ibid., 73–74.}

References to sickness and physical debilitation were not only emotive but also implied a need for greater medical intervention.

Critics also increasingly recognized that workhouse managers simply gave female paupers less food than men and paid scant attention to the health of elderly residents. As detailed above, workhouse dietaries had been constructed primarily to deter the \textit{able-bodied} relief applicant. Hence, provisions for groups who did not fall into this category tended to be de-prioritized. As Karel Williams has suggested, able-bodied adult men became practically shut out of the workhouse system, and unemployed men found poor relief virtually unobtainable during the late nineteenth century.\footnote{Karel Williams, \textit{From Pauperism to Poverty} (London, 1981), 6.} Consequently, the Poor Law system increasingly found itself responsible for providing an array of welfare services intended for the sick, infirm, aged, and young. Because these groups were increasingly resorting to indoor relief, the workhouse unexpectedly transformed from a deterrent social mechanism toward something approaching a state hospital system.\footnote{Flinn, “Medical Services under the Poor Law,” 45–66.} Tellingly, Anne Crowther has estimated that by the 1860s, able-bodied men accounted for just 5 percent of the British workhouse population.\footnote{Crowther, \textit{Workhouse System}, 72.}

Justifying quasi-disciplinary food policies became ever more difficult as workhouses tepidly transformed into sites that primarily housed groups for whom they had not originally been intended.\footnote{Ibid., 73.} As Pat Thane argues, children, women, and the sick constituted an increasingly important section of the workhouse population from around the 1860s.\footnote{Pat Thane, “Women and the Poor Law in Victorian and Edwardian England,” \textit{History Workshop Journal} 6, no. 1 (1978): 35.} Contemporaneously, the potential role that Poor Law medical officers could play in monitoring dietary regimes rose. These officers were often brought face-to-face with the medical complaints that commonly arose from

\footnote{Andrew Combe, \textit{A Treatise on the Physiological and Moral Management of Infancy}, 6th ed. (Edinburgh, 1847), 29.}
\footnote{Ibid., 73–74.}
\footnote{Karel Williams, \textit{From Pauperism to Poverty} (London, 1981), 6.}
\footnote{Flinn, “Medical Services under the Poor Law,” 45–66.}
\footnote{Crowther, \textit{Workhouse System}, 72.}
\footnote{Ibid., 73.}
insufficient diets. In response, many of them strove to alter institutional conditions and to foster an environment more conducive to health. Medical officers not only intimately appreciated the conditions in which paupers lived but also were often anxious to improve their own working conditions—concerns that motivated a number of them to construct informed cases for improved medical care and health provision.53

Evidence of the medical officer’s increased role in managing diet mostly postdates the Andover Workhouse scandal of 1845, notably exposed by Wakley. This controversy erupted following revelations that workhouse master Mr. M’Dougal had withheld food to such extremes that, upon inquiry, paupers were discovered sucking the dried-up marrow from the bones that they had been employed to crush, while children were detected consuming raw potatoes thrown out for the pigs.54 The select committee that investigated these harrowing claims focused intently on the negligence of the medical officer and his resounding failure to offer adequate advice on food allocations.55 Documentary and archival evidence suggests that following the Andover scandal, many medical officers made concerted efforts to engage productively with workhouse management, quite possibly in response to heightened public criticism. These officers did not constitute a coherent group with shared aims and agendas. But from around 1848 onward, their institutional duties seem to have been taken more seriously, a development that allowed them to take on a more active role in monitoring and regulating diet. For instance, in September 1848 at the Kidderminster Union Workhouse, complaints were made by a visiting committee that the workhouse matron had made regular unauthorized reductions of butter allowances and that both the master and the matron had exercised arbitrary authority with regard to provisions. The committee accused the master of providing allowances of tea, sugar, and butter to his favorite inmates but not to others—even those with particular dietary needs. Paupers at Kidderminster seemed confident about the work of their medical officer, Thomas Thursfield, having directed their grievances only at the matron and the master instead. In his report on the institution, John Thomas placed full confidence in Thursfield, who was ultimately acquitted of charges of blame and neglect.56

Notably, since at least 1842, Thursfield had made concerted efforts to increase bread and potato rations throughout the union. He negotiated his stance on this matter by demonstrating that prescribing low diets ultimately increased Poor Law expenditure because underfed inmates required medical treatment if they had been physically weakened.57 Clearly, Thursfield took great care to express his awareness of the ideological and financial concerns of the New Poor Law while simultaneously demonstrating, through an attempt to lead by best practice and example, that issues of health and nutrition could be compatible with frugality and deterrence.

55 Report from the Select Committee on Andover Union, 1846, Reports of Committees, Commons, vol. 5, pt.i.1; vol. 5, pt.ii.1 (663–i; 663–ii), f. vii.
Thursfield’s views on feeding appear to have been ascribed higher moral esteem than those of his fellow employees. Certainly, Poor Law inspectors, in this instance, proved attentive to the potential utility of the union’s medical officer as a figure who might help to stem the dietary problems that had become so publicly visible during the Andover scandals. The Poor Law board commended and sanctioned his attempts at banishing bowel complaints by temporarily altering Kidderminster’s Poor Law Union’s diets in 1849. Revealingly, on this matter Thursfield maintained that “the state of the inmates now and indeed for some weeks past fully justifies the precautions taken and the extra expense incurred.”

Archival evidence further demonstrates that many medical officers shared concerns about the dietary needs of the institutionalized. In 1856, a sympathetic medical officer in Southwell Union, in conjunction with the workhouse master, proposed subdividing allowances for the young on the basis that that those between the ages of two and five, and between five and nine, should be allocated different quantities and qualities of food. In the opinion of this officer, children under age two had vastly different appetites than did nine-year-olds. Liverpool Union adopted a similar system in the same year to account for the different needs of those between the ages of two and seven, and those between the ages of seven and fifteen. Apprehension about the feeding of workhouse children also mounted as physicians identified correlations between restricted diets and the onset of particular medical conditions. For instance, in May 1849, Llanfyllin Union Workhouse medical officer David Evans identified oatmeal and poor-quality gruel as key contributory factors to outbreaks of diarrhea and skin disease among the institutionalized young. Evans suggested to various Poor Law authorities that workhouse bread needed to be prepared with barley flour, that gruel should contain milk, not water, and that boiling bones for broth or soup was an undesirable practice. Similarly, in 1853, Thomas N. Firmin, clerk at the Southampton Union, successfully requested permission from the Poor Law board to temporarily alter the dietaries of the young in response to a severe outbreak of “scabatic eruptions.” He recommended a fuller diet consisting of mutton, vegetables, rice, molasses, and vinegar, all combined with a supply of bread, milk, cheese, and beer.

These developments broadly corresponded with the evolution of the workhouse into a proto-welfare system, as diligently detailed by Williams and Crowther. Nevertheless, in many cases, progress in improving dietary arrangements was hindered by the inherent challenge that dietary changes posed to Poor Law ideologies and the need felt by many workhouse masters and boards of guardians to maintain a disciplinary environment. At worst, bitter tensions could emerge between medical officers and workhouse masters. During the course of his employment, medical officer

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58 Letter from Henry Saunders to the Poor Law Board, 17 February 1849, TNA, MH/12/14019/346, ff. 532–33.
59 Draft letter from Poor Law Board to John Kirkland, 12 September 1856, TNA, MH 12/9531/112, f. 120.
61 Letter from David Evans to the Poor Law Board, May 1849, TNA, MH 12/16545/182, ff. 251–55.
Patrick Mackey of Southampton Union made vast improvements to children’s diets during a period of skin disease outbreaks. Mackey suggested that breakfast should from hereon consist of five ounces of bread with milk and water; lunch of three ounces of cooked fresh meat, with vegetables and bread; and supper of bread and cheese. Yet in 1853, Mackey made complaints against the master, who had made discourteous remarks about his dietary recommendations, in addition to being abusive when he had attempted to call a chaplain to attend a female patient in her dying moments. At a meeting with the board of guardians about these matters, a long and stormy discussion ensued, and the meeting broke up in disarray. Irvine Loudon convincingly argues that for many medical officers, the Poor Law medical service was, on the whole, a miserable, degrading system. This ultimately led to the formation of the Poor Law Medical Officers Association in 1868, a group who campaigned to improve the conditions of service. Mackey’s experiences confirm that dietary improvement was an uneven process, not least because of the resistance it met from other institutional authorities. However, in other instances, ideas that diets should be improved were received relatively favorably, not only by workhouse masters, but also by boards of guardians. Certainly, following the Andover scandal, allegations of negligence were made far less frequently toward medical officers, and a piecemeal system of improvements appears to have been initiated from within the workhouse system. Hence, dietary provision can be seen as having evolved in line with the wider evolution of the New Poor Law, albeit with diversity—an outcome that renders efforts to form clear judgement on the “adequacy” of Victorian workhouse dietaries even more difficult.

REFORMING WORKHOUSE DIETS

The 1860s proved to be a transitional period. Changes made to food provision in that decade were intrinsically connected to broader changes being made to the Poor Law system, combined with shifting cultural attitudes toward poverty. Opinion on poverty had slowly evolved since the 1830s. Initially perceived as a voluntary condition created by deliberately abstaining from work, periodic economic booms and crashes—coupled with events such as the Lancashire Cotton Famine—slowly eroded a belief that those applying for poor relief had in some way chosen destitution. In the early 1860s, a series of harsh winters and heightened concern about urban poverty sparked renewed discussion about the Poor Law. Legislative measures implemented in this decade also provided a wider, more secure financial basis for workhouses, affording an impetus for the restructuring of institutions to cater to special groups of paupers. Shifting notions of citizenship were intertwined with all of these developments. Lynn Hollen Lees, in her discussion of issues of rights

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63 Letter from Thomas N. Firmin to the Poor Law Board, 28 July 1854, TNA, MH/12/11000/233, ff. 433–34.
64 Extract from Hampshire Independent, 27 August 1853, TNA, MH 12/11000/88, f. 166.
and exclusion, suggests that during this decade, the legitimacy of the Poor Law declined as citizens’ rights widened and as environmental explanations of poverty supplanted moral ones. This allowed questions to be raised about the extent to which the law could deny certain groups the right to subsistence on the basis of character, age, physical condition, and so on.68

These developments led to questions being raised about the competence of Poor Law inspectors in matters of education and health, particularly when these involved children and the elderly.69 For many critics, it seemed that the mixed workhouse was not an environment in which individual special needs or circumstances could be easily taken into account. Poverty was now widely recognized as a complex, multifaceted entity, while awareness of the specialized treatment often required by children, the sick, women, and the aged had increased.70 Jose Harris has convincingly argued that the exclusion of the able-bodied from the Poor Law unleashed sympathetic attention for the vulnerable groups that remained within it.71 By the late 1860s, the Poor Law board members themselves had become concerned with establishing new management systems for vulnerable institutionized groups and had identified certain groups as unsuitable targets of deterrent policies.72

Poor Law historians have acknowledged an increased medical presence in workhouses as medical officers operating within the Poor Law system gradually gained greater influence over the management of institutional conditions.73 Reformers—particularly those from within the medical profession—made efforts to refashion the workhouse environment to maintain the health of pauper bodies, a strategy perceived in such a way as to prepare paupers for their reentry into British society as healthy citizens.

By this period, the medical profession had equipped itself with a sophisticated body of knowledge relating to food, and had thus considerably strengthened its dietetic authority since the initial inception of the New Poor Law. Diet itself had transformed into a “medicalized” topic, knowledge of which could be applied to uphold the health of the social body.74 In the 1860s, these “medicalized” frameworks increasingly converged with workhouse practice. The topic of workhouse feeding once again transformed into an emotive issue of public debate in this decade, although attention now tended to be directed less toward demonizing the Poor Law and more toward questions of how best to transform the workhouse from within to promote health.

69 Driver, Power and Pauperism, 35.
71 Harris, Private Lives, 239.
72 Crowther, Workhouse System, 168.
73 Lees, Solidarities of Strangers, 16.
74 See Ian Miller, Reforming Food in Post-Famine Ireland: Medicine, Science and Improvement, c.1845–1922 (Manchester: 2014), chaps 1, 3–5.
This approach was made evident by the *Lancet* in 1865 which asserted that society in England has undergone many important changes of late years, but in no respect is it more remarkably modified than in regard to the exchange of sympathy and kindly feeling between the higher and middle classes and the poor. In this changed state of public feeling the medical profession has borne an active part; and in manifesting at the present time a special interest in the care of those poor persons who are thrown upon the State for their maintenance in the helpless condition which sickness, added to destitution, produces.75

The journal’s investigators criticized a lack of classification in mixed workhouses and lambasted circumstances of widespread overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, a paucity of qualified medical staff, and a problematic reliance on pauper nurses.76 The *Lancet Commission on Workhouse Infirmaries*, published in 1865, also articulated mixed views toward workhouse feeding arrangements. Although the commission generally approved of the diets being given to the sick, house diets repeatedly raised concern. At worst, investigators presented the beef supplied in some metropolitan workhouses as consisting of “those tough and leathery morsels technically known as clods and stickings— an unpleasant name for a very unpleasant and indigestible thing.” The *Lancet* also strove to direct attention toward the diets allocated to the elderly. One contributor vigorously asserted that it was an injustice to serve elderly paupers boiled beef and “indigestible pea-soup and suet pudding,” as recommended in the house diets. He identified a vegetative state resulting from undernutrition as prevalent among this age group, described as “ward-fever.”77

Unsurprisingly, the *Lancet* congratulated those guardians who recognized the fact that sickness and old age were not crimes, and that elderly populations should be treated more respectfully and compassionately.78 Overall, however, the *Lancet* dismissed workhouse diets as being based upon “very imperfect scientific information.”79 Documentary evidence reveals continuing tension between the medical community and Poor Law administrators. For instance, in 1866 the *Medical Times and Gazette* stated that “the medical officers have, by the Poor Law Regulations, a finger in the composition of the pauper pie,” but it argued that their views were widely contested by many boards of guardians. From the journal’s perspective, this limited the extent to which medical officers could amend workhouse diets, especially in workhouses managed by guardians who “have in view no higher object than the depression of the poor rate.”80

A key turning point in approaches to institutional feeding was the Poor Law board’s appointment of Edward Smith to compile a report on workhouse diets, published in 1867. Smith had previously acquired a staunch reputation in both medical and political circles, having investigated prison diets as well as the nutritional well-being of laborers affected by the Lancashire Cotton Famine. His report

76 Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor*, 52–53.
recommended numerous changes to be made in the design and management of
workhouses, and suggested that closer attention needed to be paid to the health
needs of different inmate groupings.81 Upon publication, the Medical Times and
Gazette heralded his report in the hope that it might encourage scientifically
defined forms of pauper feeding that would replace feeding regimes based on disci-
pline.82 A close reading of Smith’s report reveals that he was careful to meticulously
satisfy the demands of both competing food discourses, instead of simply attempting
to impose medical standards onto disciplinary feeding practices.83 Smith clearly
aimed to make use of an expert knowledge of food to improve workhouse diets,
but he also perceptively aimed to avoid tensions that might have been created
should he have sponsored a system entirely incompatible with discipline and deter-
rence. Accordingly, his report can be interpreted as a carefully penned compromise
that aimed to satisfy various, sometimes conflicting, institutional needs: the improve-
ments in medical care desired by the medical profession; the economic savings
sought by many workhouse masters; and an adherence to Poor Law principles
espoused by the Poor Law Commission.

Smith sought to achieve these aims by redefining some of the key terms associated
with workhouse management: “uniformity,” “economy,” and “waste.” For instance,
he recommended the adoption of a national universal standard of food supplies based
upon nutritional quality instead of quantity and weight. “One pint of soup,” Smith
maintained, “could provide the same amount of nutriment in each workhouse.” In
his view, different ingredients could be used to prepare gruel, soup, puddings, and
pies, but these could, and should, contain a fixed level of nutrients.84 This approach
would adhere to the Poor Law board’s ideological desire for uniformity and provide
the nutritional standards deemed necessary to sustain healthy pauper life. Smith also
applied partially “medicalized” definitions of “waste” and “economy,” arguing that
the latter should be concerned, not with how much food could be purchased at a
given price, but instead with how much nourishment the pauper body could
obtain from it at that price.85 By subtly shifting the parameters of the meaning of
“economy,” Smith sought to relieve institutional apprehension that paying attention
to nutrition entailed significant financial outlay.86 Smith’s employment of the term
“waste” was more complex. Throughout his report, he constructed a vision of the
workhouse in which the physical waste of the institution and the physiological
waste of the pauper formed important elements of an interactive system. For
instance, Smith argued that distasteful foods would either pass out of the body
unused or be left to be thrown away. Hence, the concept of “waste” worked on
two levels: the physiological and the institutional. In this model, the pauper and

81 Driver, Power and Pauperism, 69. For Smith, see Theo C. Barker, Derek J. Oddy, and John Yudkin, The
83 This theme has been touched upon in Joyce L. Huff, “Corporeal Economies: Work and Waste in
Nineteenth-Century Constructions of Alimentation,” in Cultures of the Abdomen: Diet, Digestion and Fat
in the Modern World, ed. Christopher E. Forth and Ana Carden-Coyne (New York and Basingstoke,
84 Workhouse Dietaries: Papers relating to Workhouse Dietaries, Accounts and Papers, House of Commons,
1867, vol. 60.57 (435), 9.
85 Ibid., 16.
the institution were depicted as elements of an interconnected system, both of which could be medically managed.  

By portraying the pauper’s physiological system as interlinked with institutional surroundings, Smith was able to embed his ideas about nutrition in a strategy that simultaneously promoted a reconfiguration of workhouse space and living conditions. Smith maintained that the power of the body to obtain nourishment varied according to certain external conditions. Hence, good dietary health depended upon improving institutional life more generally. For instance, he argued that exercise increased the appetite and quickened digestion. On this basis, he recommended meaningful open-air employment to improve health, as opposed to pointless tasks such as oakum picking and mat making. Likewise, Smith argued that cheerfulness had a conducive effect on digestion. In a state of depression, he explained, the appetite and vital functions languished. He described “mopishness” as an emotional condition that arose from confinement within high walls, and from neglect and harsh treatment. Conversely, he presented mental instruction, reading, and religious exercise as activities that induced an emotional state of cheerfulness. Warmth, meanwhile, was depicted by Smith as sustaining the vital actions, an argument intended to facilitate the provision of suitable clothing and fires, especially for the young and old. Overall, Smith referred to contemporary theories of digestion and nutrition as potentially empowering vehicles of workhouse reform and made use of them in calls for change in institutional management and pauper experience.

This metaphoric device was particularly evident in Smith’s discussion of heat. He claimed that close attention should be paid to heat, both in the institution and within the pauper body, if the workhouse system was to function effectively. Smith insisted that “heat is a kind of food.” He described lukewarm food as wasted within the body, because it failed to provide the full potential of its physiological benefits. It also became repulsive to pauper appetite, Smith claimed, simultaneously producing workhouse waste. Analogies of bodily and institutional heat provided Smith with a means with which to push for wider changes to be made to the structure of workhouse space and activity. He noted, for instance, that food was often prepared in kitchens that were distant from the dining rooms and sick wards, and that the subsequent weighing of food for large numbers of people to conform with dietary specifications consumed time, the result being that paupers were often served with cold food. Furthermore, food tended to be consumed in cold rooms with open doors, and served on open plates, which allowed cold air to reach it, or in tin pannikins, which rapidly lost heat. Smith recommended that food should not be placed on the tables prior to the admission of inmates to the dining room. Help in distribution should be obtained, and a rapid meat carver could be selected, he insisted.

Implicitly embedded within these recommendations was an attempt to civilize the pauper inmate through the creation of refined eating environments and by the inculcation of more sophisticated eating habits. By making these changes, Smith intended to induce changes in workhouse environments that would render them

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87 Workhouse Dietaries, 12.
88 Ibid., 13.
89 Ibid., 15.
90 Ibid., 16.
distinguishable from environments of punishment and deterrence. Hence, his insistence that fluid foods such as soup could be carried into the dining room and distributed at the table was rooted in his concern not only with the insulation of heat but also with the creation of “a more homely character.” Similarly, Smith recommended that tin plates should be replaced with pottery. Although discussed in the context of bodily heat, this step was also intended to partly remove the sense of degradation that he associated with this practice. Finally, Smith’s insistence that inmates should be assembled in their places before their food was served at their dining table articulated his belief in the improved sense of values that might result from eating food in a civilized manner, rather than from culinary habits designed to instill an ethos of punishment. Nonetheless, Smith’s ideas remained in accordance with long-standing assumptions that workhouse life was to encourage certain forms of moral behavior and self-restraint.

Pauper appetite was a further integral part of Smith’s “medicalized” workhouse system. Repulsive food, he claimed, would be wasted. In addition, he described the digestion and assimilation of unpalatable foods as “less perfect” than that of agreeable food. Smith maintained that it was “sound economy” to provide agreeable, ordinary, and varied food, and that dried herbs could be added to soups—steps that would maintain relish and the capacity to eat among paupers. Yet providing appetizing food entailed changes in the structure of the workhouse kitchen. Accordingly, Smith argued that staff employed there should have a basic knowledge of nutrition and digestion if they were to contribute productively to the running of the institutional system and suggested that workhouse cooks should learn to prepare palatable food to avoid waste and by softening food to aid digestion.

Finally, Smith addressed the issue of vulnerable groups residing in workhouses. He subtly argued that an ideological emphasis on deterrence was by now outdated and unsuitable as a foundation upon which to construct dietary frameworks. Instead, he argued, dietaries should be concerned with “the maintenance of growth, health and strength,” and the most economical ways in which to achieve this. To strengthen the moral force of his argument, he insisted that the greater prosperity of the country, and the improved moral tone and thrift of the population, meant that able-bodied laborers now tended not to use the workhouse, meaning that there was less reason to fear that the relief system could be abused. He depicted these vulnerable groups as consisting of individuals whom the state was required to protect rather than punish. For Smith, fulfillment of this duty entailed seeking out, not those foods with the cheapest market value and that provided a bare minimum to sustain life, but instead foods that yielded the largest amount of nutritional value at the cheapest cost, that were most “perfectly” digested, and that encouraged growth, health, and strength.

Children were of special interest to Smith, who sought to establish modes of workhouse feeding that would guarantee that the young did not acquire tastes that could not be gratified later in life—that they would grow up strong and healthy, and that

91 Ibid.
92 Ibid., 13–14.
93 Ibid., 14–15.
94 Ibid., 9.
95 Ibid., 12.
they would be able to serve their future employers and earn a living. Ominously, Smith warned that poorly fed children would one day procreate, the product being a future generations also dependent upon indoor relief at public expense. The weakening of the mental capacity of children owing to insufficient feeding in early stages of life would, in Smith’s view, render them inferior specimens once they left the workhouse. Infants under twelve months, he maintained, had limited digestive powers, being unable to digest flour, arrowroot, and starchy foods. He stressed that a “mess of water, bread and sugar” often supplied in workhouses was insufficient to maintain health. Smith also argued that between nine and twelve years of age was precisely the period when the young required a full diet. They required carbonaceous supplies of bread, milk, and meat that would, in turn, supply the body with nitrogenous and carbonaceous foods necessary for growth that would be sustained throughout life. Smith also argued that the aged and infirm had impaired appetites and digestion, and a lessened power to maintain bodily heat. Hence, their food should be moderate in quantity, digestible, flavorful, and consumed hot. He recommended a diet consisting of tea or coffee, bread and butter, cooked meat without bone, potatoes, and bread four days per week, with meat and potato pie, soup, bread, cheese, suet pudding, and broth on the others.

On the basis of Smith’s report, the Poor Law board distributed a circular that led to some uniformity in diets, although it did not interfere with the discretion of the boards of guardians in selecting diets that conformed with consumption trends in different regions. This also requested that guardians, from time to time, establish whether improvements had in fact been implemented. Did these changes have any practical influence? A comprehensive analysis is beyond the scope of this article, but archival evidence certainly reveals that a new dietary ethos did indeed begin to permeate workhouse management after 1867. For instance, in 1847, a Workhouse Inspection Report Form deemed general medical provision at Reeth Workhouse as unsatisfactory. Medical officer John Corson had made no entries since his appointment, while dietary tables were inadequately implemented. Although closer medical attention appears to have been given to inmates from then onward, in 1856 the board of guardians vigorously objected to changes in child diets instigated in various other workhouses. On the contrary, the guardians argued that a child of two years would consume as much as a child of nine and that, if anything, the young were more likely to waste their food. Because there was seldom more than three children of the ages alluded to, adding another class to the dietary tables, the guardians insisted, would cause confusion. Yet the board of guardians did adjust the dietaries in 1868, providing meat in soups for all inmates rather than just the aged and infirm, and providing a mixture of porridge, milk, cooked meats, suet puddings with sweet

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96 Ibid., 26–27.
97 Ibid., 27.
98 Ibid., 8.
101 Dietary tables A and B, 6 August 1857, TNA, MH 12/14589/21, f. 300.
sauce, peas, soup, and bread for children of all ages in higher quantities than previously.\textsuperscript{102} Of course, Smith’s recommendations did not necessarily result in improvement in all workhouses, but they certainly stimulated improvement and can be considered emblematic of a new way of thinking about institutional feeding. Significantly, however, changes from the late 1860s represented a full articulation of preferred associations between diet and health in the management of workhouse food. They embodied the burgeoning influence of an ethos designed to displace older approaches to institutional management and that paid closer attention to issues of health and nutrition by providing nutritionally adequate diets.

\textbf{CONCLUSIONS}

Oliver Twist’s encounter with the workhouse often forms the basis of assumptions about the benevolence of the mid-Victorian workhouse. Its fictional nature has encouraged historians to refer to \textit{Oliver Twist} in order to revise and add complexity to ideas that the New Poor Law produced a harsh, degrading system. However, evidence suggests that historians should be careful not to be too quick in assigning the representations constructed by Dickens and others to mythology, because they were often deeply rooted in very real anxieties surrounding institutional feeding. Retrospective analyses of pauper health pay little attention to issues such as the extent to which workhouse masters adhered to recommended dietaries and the long-term health impact of subsisting upon institutional food. In fact, this created considerable public concern in the 1840s. Nor do they fully address how contemporaries themselves perceived an “adequate” diet and how this changed considerably in the decades following the implementation of the New Poor Law. Criticism of workhouse feeding was set against significant changes in thought on food. From around the 1830s, food became increasingly considered in terms of its nutritional value and consistency. The matter of “adequate” or “inadequate” workhouse feeding cannot be oversimplified, and a full understanding of the subject can only be achieved through carefully reconciling historical analysis with retrospective nutritional analysis in order to produce a more nuanced and persuasive historical picture.

\textsuperscript{102} Letter from James Robinson Tomlin to Reeth Poor Law Union, 10 September 1868, TNA, MH/12/14590/245, ff. 336–44.