The Background

The World Health Organisation estimated that in 1995 there were more deaths from tuberculosis than in any previous year in history. In 1996 there were eight million cases of tuberculosis worldwide. A disease, which by the 1950s was in retreat in developed nations, largely because of the emergence of effective therapeutic drugs, has reemerged in recent decades as a major health problem, particularly in the undeveloped world, but increasingly in nations which were once considered to be effectively free of the disease. This current epidemic has been caused by the emergence of multi-drug-resistant strains of the tuberculosis bacterium and its spread accelerated by HIV infection which weakens resistance to infection. For AIDS patients tuberculosis is the leading cause of death by disease.

Tuberculosis is an ancient disease with a long history of association with human societies. There are records of death from tuberculosis in Ireland going back to the seventeenth century and other, admittedly more ambiguous, references, in documents in mediaeval Irish. Tuberculosis epidemics take place, however, when the rate of mortality begins to climb. Historically this has generally occurred with the transition of human societies from small and dispersed groups into larger more concentrated centres of population. Tuberculosis epidemics generally follow a long slow curve, rising and then falling over several generations. One estimate is that it takes around fifty to seventy-five years for a tuberculosis epidemic to peak. Inherited resistance eventually causes mortality to fall but, without any form of medical or social intervention, tuberculosis would cause an annual toll of deaths much higher than we now experience in developed countries.

Little is known about the history of tuberculosis epidemics with the exception of those which came to an end in Europe and the United States in the 1950s. Tuberculosis made a major contribution to high mortality in most European countries and the United States in the nineteenth century. By the late-nineteenth century, however, tuberculosis appeared to be in decline. This happened in the United States from around 1850 whilst, from the 1870s, mortality from
tuberculosis was also falling in England and Wales. In the 1860s it was higher in Scotland than in England and Wales but, after peaking in the early-1870s, mortality also began to decline in Scotland though at a slower rate than in England. In France and Germany too there appeared to be a fall in mortality from tuberculosis towards the end of the nineteenth century, a pattern repeated in other, though not all, European countries.

In Ireland, however, mortality from tuberculosis, from being lower in the 1860s and 1870s than in England, Wales and Scotland, steadily rose throughout the 1880s and 1890s eventually peaking in the year 1904. In a post First World War survey of the tuberculosis problem in France, the Rockefeller Foundation estimated that in 1912, 10 percent of the total deaths in France were from tuberculosis. In Germany the figure was 8 percent, in England 7 percent and Belgium 6 percent. In Ireland in 1911 tuberculosis accounted for 13 percent of all deaths and pulmonary tuberculosis alone for 10 percent. From 1904 mortality from tuberculosis began to fall decade by decade but it was still higher in Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s, the era of the therapeutic revolution, than in many other European countries.

The problems of making valid international comparisons are formidable. However, for the period 1906-10, the British statistician Major Greenwood placed Ireland fifth in a table of sixteen countries ranked by their tuberculosis death rate. Only France, Hungary, Finland and Austria had a higher death rate although, in the case of France, only the figures for towns over 5,000 persons were calculated, thus inflating France’s national tuberculosis death rate. In the inter-war years Irish statisticians also examined Ireland’s relative position, finding only France, Norway, Czechoslovakia, Austria and Japan more seriously affected.

This makes Ireland unique among the nations of the British Isles and one of the few developed countries to see mortality from tuberculosis still rising at the turn of the century. There are other national exceptions to the pattern of falling mortality from tuberculosis from the mid-nineteenth century. Norway saw a 46 percent increase in tuberculosis over the same period that Ireland experienced her epidemic. Japan, which, by the end of the nineteenth century had joined the ranks of the developed nations, also experienced a rise in tuberculosis mortality. William Johnston in a major study of Japan’s tuberculosis epidemic has described a ‘take off’ stage in the late-1880s when mortality from tuberculosis was rising, a period around 1919 when mortality peaked, followed by a