

Ireland and the Irish 1838

Ireland Picturesque and Romantic

By Leitch Ritchie Esq

1838

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It was the Author's intention to have named this Work "Ireland and the Irish;" but, finding himself interdicted, for obvious reasons, from entering at large into various interesting topics, he contented himself with a less ambitious title. He hopes, notwithstanding, that from the present and following volume, there may be collected some notions of the country and the inhabitants, sufficiently distinct to serve at least as a ground-work for more important studies.

To a sincere lover of Nature, the tour I have just finished is one of the most delightful in Europe; but to him who, instead of abandoning himself to the poetry of the world, lives and hath his being in the joys and sorrows of his own kind, it will be productive of many a bitter thought, and many a melancholy hour. It is not a little annoying to me, that in a work so intimately connected (in its pictorial part) with the beautiful and imaginative, I should have found it my duty to attempt to dispel some of those poetical dreams which float, like her water-clouds, over the soil of Ireland. I cannot force myself, however, to respect those sympathies which turn away from the present, to waste themselves in melodious regrets over a doubtful, if not shameful past; or to admire those political struggles, the object of which is to heal the "wounded pride" of a few, while the great mass of the people—while the Irish Nation—is steeped in misery and want. I cannot amuse myself with the glories of Brian the Brave, or with Malachi and his collar of gold, while I see their descendants sinking, through neglect and hunger, at my feet. I cannot pant for a seat in parliament or a silk gown, while the cry of a whole nation for bread is in my ear. In fine, I cannot be a Tory, a Whig, or a Radical, or lend myself to any merely political schemes of any party, till I see placed within the reach of this neglected and degraded people the comforts, or at least the necessaries of civilized beings.

In our next volume, I hope to have an opportunity of describing the rest of the island, not only in its picturesque and romantic character, and in its customs, manners, and legends, but in the social condition of the people. I shall also be prepared to contribute my humble mite towards the inquiries that are now found so interesting and important, touching the influence of the priesthood, the moral effect of the two forms of Christianity, the state and progress of literature, education, and general knowledge, and other subjects which at present I have been unable to touch, either from want of space or materials.

—*Extract from Vol 1*

Ireland Picturesque and Romantic

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The present volume concludes the work on Ireland, which it has been attempted to render as complete a picture as possible of the country and its inhabitants. To do this it was necessary to go somewhat at large into various topics not usually discussed at the drawing-room table ; but it is one of the author's theories, that the exclusion of such topics arises from the sullen pride of the men, and by no means from ignorance, or want of womanly sympathy in the other sex.

Perhaps it will not be thought improper to mention here, that the attempt to *add* to the general stock of knowledge has always been a distinctive feature of the Picturesque Annual. Other books of the same class, however high the tact and talent they may display, are merely compilations, made up in the form of imaginary travels ; while the present work consists of narratives of real tours performed by the author. These already comprehend some of the most interesting portions of the Tyrol, the Lombard-Venetian kingdom, Sardinia, Switzerland, Baden, Darmstadt, France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, and Russia. The scene of the last two volumes has been Ireland . . .

It may easily be imagined that the author does not make the above explanation, as if taking any merit to himself for performing so delightful a task as that of visiting, in person, the scenes he describes ; but he thinks it is not overstepping his duty, to endeavour, by this means, to draw attention to the liberality, enterprize, and public spirit of the proprietor.

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*Conversation with a small Farmer—Condition of the People—gilding of poetry
and romance.*

I sit down to give an account of a tour of observation in the northern and western counties of Ireland, without any of the misgivings which attended my task of last year. It turned out that the volume that I then published was *not* too grave, or too stern, or too true for the drawing room. The moral pictures I thought it my duty to intermingle and contrast with the others, were not found repulsive because of their mournfulness. The book was read by those distinguished classes for whom such works are intended, with a sound and healthy feeling ; and the ladies of England felt their womanly sympathies stirred as strongly as unadorned facts, as if these had been embellished, by some more courtly pen, with the gilding of poetry and romance.

The reception of the work by the political journals was another sign of the times. Opposed to all parties, I was treated with unkindness and unfairness by none. The Cerberus of criticism, so far as I have heard, emitted scarcely even a growl. It seemed as if there was something too sacred in the gigantic miseries of a whole nation to admit of inquiry into the unskilfulness of the pen which portrayed them. Men judge of the direction of a storm by the course of a straw tossed up into the troubled air ; and, in like manner, I venture to predict, from the fate of my slight performance, that better days for Ireland are fast approaching.

The physical condition of men has less to do with their moral character, and more with their political freedom, than is usually supposed. Almost all great popular revolts have had liberty for their watchword, but hunger for their ringleader. Direct taxation is the tyrant par excellence, not because it is more oppressive than indirect taxation—for in most countries it

is vastly less so—but because it appears to snatch, with undisguised fingers, at the *residue* of a man's income. Thus in the middle ages, in some countries, the hearth tax, and in others, the poll tax, set all Europe in arms. In France the great revolution was no doubt produced by a variety of concurring causes ; yet, if the people, nobles and all, had not been poor, there would at that time have been no revolution. In England, to this day, the standard of our harmless insurrections is a loaf of bread stuck on the point of a spear.

With the page of history open before us, to expect tranquillity in Ireland, where the great body of the people are starving, would betray a puerility of mind very remarkable in a grown person. To desire it, under such circumstances, would, to coin a mild expression, be un-English. The outrages perpetrated there are frequently shocking in themselves, but they are very trifling effects indeed of such a cause. In south or north Britain, I have no hesitation in saying, that the immediate result would be a general insurrection and massacre.

The proper question ought to be, not why such tilings take place in Ireland, but, why so few take place compared with the exciting cause ? The answer to this will suggest itself to every body. The great mass of the nation were till lately in the situation of a conquered people ; and the houses of the protestant gentry were interspersed like garrisons throughout the country to keep them down. The grandsire, the father, the child, all were born in the house of bondage ; and, like the Israelites in Egypt, when they showed any signs of discontent, their chains were only drawn the tighter. Insurrection after insurrection was quenched in blood, till the spirit of the people was broken ; and hence the *submissiveness* of the Irish character of to-day—a word which I use in defiance of the ridicule of the unreflecting, or the superficially informed.

When I say the physical condition of men has but little to do with the moral virtues, I merely state a fact deduced from my own personal observation in various countries in which I have travelled ; but I have no room to reason upon it here. The Irish peasant has none of the vices which might be thought inseparable from his physical condition. He is honest, so far as the goods of his neighbour are concerned ; he is generous and charitable ; he is a faithful husband, and a tender father. A part of this character, I know, has been denied ; and I notice it the rather, that Mr. Inglis, with whom I agree on numerous points, has fallen into the error. He mentions the “ less affection that exists between man and wife among the country people in Ireland than is found to adorn domestic life in the humbler spheres on the other side of the water ;” and he accounts for it by marriage being in the former country, “ seldom the result of long and tried affection on both sides, but either a rash step taken by unthinking children, or else a mere mercenary bargain.” I suspect that Mr. Inglis heard of the mercenary marriages first, and then described the “ less affection” as a matter of course. However this may be, while admitting the cause, I deny the effect. The ties of family affection are nowhere else in the world more strong than in an Irish cabin. It seems as if mutual deprivation, and mutual misery, served to the hapless pair instead of the links of love ; and, as I have said in last year's volume, that the cottage group drew near to one another, in heart as well as in body, for mutual warmth. In this class of society, conjugal infidelity, more especially on the part of the wife, is almost unknown ; and there are numerous instances of wives emigrating alone to America, or the colonies, and, after years of toil, and pinching economy, sending home a remittance to enable their husbands to join them.

But I by no means intend to represent the Irish peasant as

“ A faultless monster whom the world ne'er saw.”

Being destitute of the hope of bettering his condition, he is lazy and improvident ; being ignorant, he is often brutal and ferocious ; and being brought up in the thrall of oppression, he is almost always insincere. This last taint, indeed, belongs, in a greater or less degree—although, of course, with a multitude of individual exceptions, to the character of the whole nation ; and its origin may be traced with perfect clearness by any one who will take the trouble of wandering through the uninteresting mazes of Irish history.

The people of Ireland, I repeat again and again—the six millions out of eight—are those on whom the eyes of civilized mankind ought to be fixed. No question of political right, or national pride, can by possibility affect a peasantry living on the food of the stall-fed cattle of their masters, and dying from the insufficiency of the supply of that food. The vital question is not the relative position of Ireland with England, but of the labourers of Ireland with the landlords.

Whenever the People of Ireland are mentioned—on the hustings—in the senate—in after-dinner speeches—in political toasts—let it be remembered that the expression designates a people inhabiting huts more comfortless than those of any savages yet discovered, and in general subsisting solely on a limited, and often interrupted supply of the worst species of potatoe. If this indisputable fact be kept continually in sight, the least informed men will be able to judge of the motives of the orator, the aptness of his remarks, and the expediency of his proposals. The upper classes of Ireland have been too long taken for the *people*, the two millions for the eight millions ; and the fulness of time has now arrived for the delusion to cease.

This kind of delusion, however, is widely spread, and deeply rooted. There is hardly a nation by whom its baleful presence is unfelt, hardly a country where it does not retard the progress of liberty and civilization. But it is a delusion, unfortunately, which in some cases is wrought up with our best and holiest feelings. What bosom does *not* respond to the cries of the gallant nobles of Poland in their war of liberty? What bosom *does* feel for the People of Poland, chained like brutes to the soil they cultivate ? The liberty here meant is liberty for the nobles ; for hitherto the serfs, excepting in the ravages of war, have received nothing but benefits from the tyrant Nicholas. Not, it may well be supposed, from public principle, but out of mere revenge ; the autocrat has done more, at one blow, for the people of Poland than the nobles in all their generations. He has converted into useful citizens that portion of the nobility who retained their feudal privileges, even when sunk so low in poverty as to labour on the grounds of the serfs for a morsel of bread ; and by compelling the Jews to serve personally in the army, he has, in a great measure, brought those who before were excrescences and blood-suckers into the pale of the commonwealth. But let me not be understood as finding fault with that chivalrous feeling which unites in brotherhood with the Polish nobles every manly spirit in Europe. I only wish this feeling were extended far enough to embrace the whole nation.

With regard to Russia, again, there are few among us who would not have rejoiced, had the conspiracy against the life of the emperor been successful, provided tyranny had fallen with the tyrant. But what government would have been substituted ? A free government for the few hundred thousand nobles, and tenfold chains for the tens of millions of the people ! The serfs of the emperor are little more than nominally such, while those of the nobles are, to all intents and purposes, slaves. A revolution in Russia ought to commence with the lower classes, who must be made men before they can possibly become citizens. The small body of the nobles are far more illiberal and obdurate taskmasters than the emperor ; and their emancipation from his control would only have the effect of riveting and perpetuating the chains of the people.

These sentiments, I know, will by some be called political heresies, and more especially when put forth by one who has always professed, and advocated, what are called liberal principles. The truth is, I suspect, that my principles are too really liberal to please even my own party. A London journal of the highest talent, and, so far as I know, of un-questioned honesty, reproached me with some bitterness, in a notice of last year's volume, for an alleged affectation of originality in my Irish theories. Now I declare most solemnly, that if they be original—which I cannot believe—I am heartily sorry for it. If I had the advantage of being personally known to the editor, he would not suppose me capable of insincerity on such a subject. I entreat him to take this on my own word for the present; and instead of accusing me of disingenuousness, or even of mere literary trifling, to prove, if he can, wherein I am wrong. But let him understand, that I do not give this challenge either from valour or vanity. I feel deeply interested in the subject; and I shall be as glad to see my opinions examined by an able adversary, as I shall always be ready to defend, or retract them, according as truth and honesty dictate.

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It was my intention, while at Donegal, to have made an excursion to Pettigo, for the purpose of visiting Lough Dergh; but, understanding it was too late in the season for the famous pilgrimage to Patrick's Purgatory, the period for which ends on the 15th of August, I determined to pursue my journey to Ballyshannon. For the advantage, however, of travellers who may be more fortunate than myself, in regard to time, I shall extract from the "Northern Tourist": a brief account of the doings they may expect to witness; only premising that the Lough, about nine miles in circumference, is situated in a most dreary solitude, surrounded by bleak and barren hills.

"The island to which the pilgrims resort, and which lies about half a mile from the shore, is of very limited dimensions, rising a little above the level of the lake, and presenting altogether a barren, forbidding aspect. It is covered with modern buildings, six in number, fitted up, for the most part, as places of worship, and each one dedicated to some particular saint: in the vicinity of these are a number of circular stone walls, from one to two feet in height, inclosing broken stone or wooden crosses, which are called saints' beds; and, around these, on the hard and pointed rocks, the penitents pass upon their bare knees, repeating a certain form of prayer at each. They then visit the chapels, where they remain night and day, performing certain ceremonies, and saying a prescribed number of prayers, which are in proportion to the amount or degree of crime committed. The pilgrim, while engaged in these rites, which generally occupy several days, is allowed to partake of but one meal of bread and water in the twenty-four hours; and while in the prison, in which the individual continues a day and a night previous to quitting the island, food of any description is prohibited. Twenty-four priests are appointed to this place, each officiating for one hour at a time.

"The pilgrims are kept awake at night by a man appointed for the purpose, who, with a small switch or rod, gently taps any one he may perceive disposed to slumber. On the spot upon which the little chapel dedicated to St. Patrick now stands, there is a rock, in which was formerly a cave, capable of holding six or eight persons, where it was believed the pains and torments that await the wicked in another world might be experienced by those who entered it; and which Sir James Ware, in his Antiquities, attempts to prove, was hollowed out by Ulysses, while sojourning in this spot, to enable him to hold converse with some of the inhabitants of the infernal regions. This was the last place visited by the penitents, and in this they had to remain all night. From its closeness, and from want of sufficient air, many persons from time to time lost their lives in it, while others were de-

prived of their senses. In consequence of which, in the year 1630, it was suppressed by order of the Lords Justices, who had it laid open to public view, and the whole affair exposed. It was, however, during the reign of James II., again resorted to as a place of penance, and a new cave hollowed out of the rock ; and it remained so till about the year 1780, when it was closed up by order of the prior, who considered it dangerous on account of the number of persons who crowded into it at once, that they might, by the sufferings they endured in it, escape the torments to be inflicted in another world. The chapel, dedicated to St. Patrick, which is called the Prison-house, is now substituted for this cave.

“ It is almost incredible what crowds visit this island annually during the months of June, July, and August ; it being no unusual thing to see from 900 to 1300 persons, of both sexes, upon it at one and the same time—an extraordinary circumstance, when it is considered that the island does not measure more than three hundred paces in any direction. They are ferried across in a boat, which can carry seventy or eighty persons at once, for which they are charged sixpence halfpenny each ; and yet so inadequate is this conveyance to the purpose, that the shores of the lake are frequently covered with persons waiting their turn—the greater number of whom have arrived from very distant places, many from England, some from France, and others all the way from America. It has been justly observed by an intelligent writer, that a painter who wished to make a drawing of the river Styx, the ferryman and his boat, with the groups of expectant shadows on the banks, could not find a better bodying forth of that imaginary scene than is presented by Lough Dergh. The island has, in comparatively recent times, been rendered notorious by a sermon preached in its favour by Pope Benedict XIV. ; and, in the course of the present year, an advertisement has appeared in the public papers, from a Roman Catholic Bishop, stating his intention of holding a station in it during the present season. Some years since, in consequence of the number of persons who had crowded into the boat, it was upset, when the majority of the unfortunate individuals met a watery grave.”

On leaving Donegal for Ballyshannon, nothing for some distance could be more beautiful, or, to my eyes, more original, than the aspect of the country. The singular mounds, rich with all kinds of vegetation, and the harvest colours of the fields from which, though un-common in themselves, they rose with a natural swell, gave a touch of the fantastic to mere beauty, which heightened its effect. A change at length took place, but softly and gradually. The dark mountains of Sligo, with the magnificent headland of Benbulbin, hove into sight ; and, looking backwards, all traces of the fairy hills had disappeared so completely, that I was tempted to exclaim,

“ The earth hath bubbles as the water hath,
And these are of them.”

Ballyshannon appeared a dozen miles off, the space between resembling a vast plain : but this was an optical illusion of a very common kind ; for, on descending into the plain, it changed into a series of low hills, on one of which the town stood. To the right were numerous sand-hills, and extensive tracts of sand stretching along the sea.

Of Ballyshannon I have nothing to say ; but Mr. Creswick, the reader will perceive, is eloquent on the subject. Except in point of situation, in fact, the town is altogether uninteresting : and, although its salmon fisheries are important, we had enough of that sport at Coleraine.

I was now desirous of seeing Lough Erne, so celebrated for its beauty ; and the best way to do this completely is to seat oneself on the top of the mailcoach for Enniskillen. The road

runs along the edge of the water almost the entire distance, and the traveller has a better opportunity of observing at least the lower lake than when floating on its bosom. For some time we journeyed on by the side of a most uninteresting stream, which I was told was the lake. The land on either side was a mere heath, with here and there cottages as miserable as any I have seen in the Bog of Allen. This, however, was by and by at an end ; for the river widened into a lake, and the hills on the right hand became bolder and loftier. Still I profess myself to have been altogether unable to discover on what the reputation of Lough Erne rests. It possesses, no doubt, the softness of shading that must belong to a large sheet of water, situated in a tract of country which is, generally speaking, without rugged, or otherwise remarkable features ; but even in this respect it is eclipsed by several both of the Scottish and English lakes. There are some fine points of view, and some beautifully wooded islands, but this is all I can say. The islands at length become so numerous that the traveller cannot fail to be struck with the truth of a remark which has been applied to the lake—that it looks like a country laid under water.

I confess, however, that Lough Erne would, in all probability, have appeared more beautiful to me, had not its beauties been so grossly exaggerated. But, such as they are, I fear next year's visitors will see still fewer of them than I did, the islands of a considerable portion of the lower lake being sentenced to lose their trees. That these trees are not in themselves, as wood, of great importance, may be collected from the fact, that they have been bought by a Birmingham house, chiefly for the purpose of making women's *clogs*. Within a mile or two of Enniskillen is Devenish Island, which may be described as a large grassy knoll, without tree or shrub. Here, however, is interest enough without the picturesque ; the whole soil of the island being holy ground to the antiquarian.

Near the summit are the ruins of an abbey, dedicated to St. Mary ; and below, a church, dedicated to St. Molush. There are also a Gothic building, called St. Molush's House, and a stone trough sunk into the ground, called St. Molush's Bed ; and last, not least, a Round Tower, which, as I have observed in last year's volume, is usually, if not always found—when it is found at all—by the side of Christian antiquities. “ The abbey,” says a writer in the *Belfast Magazine*, “ is built of black marble, a material not used in any other edifice on the island ; and it seems, from its style of architecture, to be of more modern date than any of them. A stranger is greatly struck on passing under the fine Gothic arch of the transept, still in excellent preservation, by the sharpness of all the lines of the work, which are so highly polished, and so perfect as to seem fresh from the chisel of the workman.”

Stanihurst accounts for the formation of Lough Erne by the following tradition. A woman came one day to a holy well which was on the spot, and after she had finished her devotions, instead of covering down the lid, she turned away to still her child, who cried. Her omission to cover the well, which should have been done instantaneously, was fatal ; for, in returning, in a fright, to redeem her error, she was met by the water, and drowned in the inundation which took place. Our author adds, that this story is the more probable, from the fact, that fishermen, in a sunny day, perceive distinctly various towers and steeples under the transparent wave.

The Upper and Lower Lake are connected by a comparatively narrow channel ; and, in the middle of this channel, there is an island, on which stands Enniskillen. The situation of the town, therefore, is fine. It is a busy, bustling place, which enjoys a considerable traffic ; but there is no object in the interior which can detain the steps of the traveller.

Singular boundaries of Leitrim and Sligo—Situation of Sligo—Effect of colour on the picture—Sligo during the pestilence—Business of the town—Advantage derived from the Scottish banking system—Library—Lands and Rents—Condition of the People on the western coast—Anecdote—

I left Enniskillen for Sligo, and, till we reached Manor Hamilton, found the road perfectly uninteresting. This is a wretched place, only distinguished by the dreary and extensive ruins of a castle. The country now began to improve ; and, by and by, about the boundaries of Leitrim and Sligo, it presented an aspect not less curious than picturesque.

Had it not been full day-light, with a clear atmosphere, I could have supposed myself to be on the frontiers of a country defended by fortresses. The immense masses of rock, among which the road wound, appeared to be crowned with castles, the grey walls of which rose from the summit as perpendicularly as if they had been built by the square and plummet. Sometimes the resemblance was rendered more complete by round towers, strengthening the angles of the courtine walls. This extraordinary scene continued for some time, till at length, having passed the warlike boundary, we were fairly admitted into the county Sligo, and to the view of its unique and magnificent bay.

The town of Sligo, except for a little space towards the sea, is girded round by a chain of lofty hills, of which Knocknarea on one hand, and Benbulbin on the other, form the two terminations. But what constitutes the peculiarity of the landscape, is not the height of these hills, but their outline, which is only rivalled in savage grandeur by some of the mountains of Scotland. There are only four passes into the amphitheatre formed by this remarkable range. The bottom of the amphitheatre, where the town stands, is one mass of the richest verdure, only diversified by a lake, which, for softness of shading, and all the other attributes of quiet beauty, is not surpassed even in this beautiful country. Lough Gill is only six or seven miles long ; but, to my taste, it is infinitely finer than its gigantic neighbour, Lough Erne.

One great component part of beauty is colour ; and, fine as are the features of the scene before us, I attribute a considerable portion of their effect to the rich and brilliant hues with which nature is here adorned. In this region Ireland is truly the Emerald isle. All is vivid, all is sparkling to the eye ; and the dark mountains, which form the setting of the gem, only increase its lustre by the contrast. Nothing can be richer than the waving fields of Sligo—nothing more beautiful than the undulations of which they form the surface. But—(alas, that there should be a but !) the bounties which nature bestows upon the vegetable kingdom are not always conducive to the welfare of those who inherit it ; and the almost perpetual rains, which here keep the face of the soil for ever fresh and fair, are far from operating in a similar manner upon its inhabitants. At those times when the country is visited by contagion, this paradise of beauty, in consequence, I have no doubt, of the extreme humidity of the atmosphere, is a perfect lazarus-house of disease.

The Asiatic pestilence, which raged some years ago in Europe under the name of cholera, threatened to depopulate Sligo ; and the precautions which it became necessary to observe by the surrounding country, almost deprived the inhabitants of every gleam of hope. A line was drawn round the devoted town, beyond which there was no escape ; and those who attempted to fly were driven back, as if into a grave. Nothing was heard in the streets but sounds of lamentations and despair. Even the phenomena of external nature served for omens and predictions of evil. Some flashes of lightning had heralded the approach of the angel of the pestilence ; but during his sojourn, a heavy cloud brooded over the town. Not a ray of sunshine was visible by day, and not a star by night.

At this juncture men naturally reverted to those feelings of religion which before were dimmed or deadened by the seductions of the world ; and every hour of every day they found the Refuge open for their admission, and the servants of the sanctuary at their post. Catholic, protestant, dissenter—all were alike the ministers of God. On this great day of judgment, there was not one priest of any denomination who shrunk from his perilous duty. Wherever their presence was required, there they took their stand—at the foot of the altar—at the bed of the dying—by the side of the new made grave. Every heart confessed that death was not the master, but the agent of the dispensation ; for, rising high above the sound of his footsteps, as he passed through the houses, came a voice from the many-portalled temple of the Lord Jesus Christ, proclaiming, “ Come to me, and I will give you life !”

During the period of this visitation, only one clergyman—a baptist minister—lost his life ; while the physicians of the body were nearly all swept off. Besides these two classes, the authorities of the town did their duty well and bravely. Mr. Fausset, the provost, rode in every morning from the security of his country-house, with as great regularity as if all had been well, to visit the hospitals, bury the dead, preserve order in the streets, and take his seat as president of the Board of Health. In spite of his unrelaxing labours, he one morning, on reaching the town, saw the grounds of the Fever Hospital covered with unburied corpses ;—and then, as he expressed it to me himself, he felt as if the end of the world were indeed come.

The Board of Health consisted at first of twelve members, who were rapidly diminished to seven. Nearly their whole duty at last was to grant coffins and tarred sheets for the dead bodies, and to see that the stock of those materials was kept up. One day two poor little boys came to beg a coffin for their mother ; and the provost, struck by their forlorn appearance, asked why their father had not come, who would have been better able to carry it ? “ We buried our father yesterday, Sir,” was the reply.

According to the best observers here, the disease was both infectious and contagious. It showed no respect of persons : the rich and the poor shared the same fate—the old and young, the sober and dissipated, the strong and feeble. I know an old lady, ninety years of age, still alive, and well enough to have remembered me after an interval of a dozen years, whose coffin was made, and the tarred sheet brought into the room to wrap round her body.

During the interval I have mentioned, Sligo has at least doubled its business, and it may therefore be considered one of the most flourishing towns in Ireland. Before my visit, a dozen years ago, there was no bank ; now there are *four*. But this is too much of a good thing ; and, after having experienced the benefits of the banking system, Sligo may look for a fair proportion of its evils. If the four offices do even a moderate business each, a false capital must be set afloat ; and we all know that the activity produced by such means is like the energy of intoxication, which gives place in due time to lassitude, exhaustion, and repentance. The notary for all these four banks informed me, that sometimes he was not called upon to protest a single bill for several weeks at a time ; but this is no evidence of commercial health in Ireland. There a simple notice of nonpayment is all that is necessary, and, generally speaking, all that is customary ; while the system of *renewals* is carried on to an extent that is but little known in England.

It cannot be denied, however, that the first bank established here, a branch of the Provincial Bank of Ireland, has done much good. The Scottish plan of lending money on good security, or opening what are technically called cash credit accounts, was exactly what Ireland wanted. It did not introduce proximately new capital into the country, but it put into activity the dormant capital already existing. The effects of this are strikingly visible in the

rising fortunes of more than one country gentleman in the neighbourhood whom I could name. The establishment of these banks throughout the country, I look upon as the greatest step that has been taken in my time towards the advancement of Ireland in wealth and civilization. Dublin is no longer the centre and reservoir of every thing valuable. People are able to look at home even for loans of money ; and the advantages of a metropolis are distributed over the whole kingdom. But it must not be supposed that Dublin falls in anything like the same proportion that the provinces rise—the necessity of which I have heard asserted by superficial reasoners. The benefits derived from the country banks would not, in many cases, have been enjoyed at all but for them ; and thus they may be said to promote the prosperity of the country, without otherwise materially injuring the capital, than by destroying its metropolitan prestige.

A dozen years ago a circulating library had been attempted in Sligo, but failed for want of readers : now there is a public library, on a very respectable footing, kept in a neat and commodious house. The English reader will smile at this boast respecting a wealthy and flourishing town ; but there are not above two or three towns in all Ireland which have the like to say. Even in Sligo the new library is not in a very healthy state ; and when the fact is considered, that there are no good schools for the upper classes in the town, this will not appear surprising. The mania for a Dublin or a foreign education, however, will no doubt subside by degrees ; and each Irish town of respectability will pride itself on instilling into its inhabitants a taste for reading, and on being able to supply them with books to gratify it. For the other classes there is a National school ; but it is in effect a Catholic school, since no Protestant will enter it. The Irish *monomania*, I need not add, is almost at its height in Sligo.

Mr. Inglis has made one or two mistakes respecting this district. The rent of land is by no means exorbitant ; the usual amount, with the exception, of course, of the town parks, being thirty shillings an Irish acre. Mr. Wynne is rather an indolent than a bad landlord ; and, however high he may keep his nominal rent-roll, no one accuses him of attempting to realize it by means of cruelty or oppression. He is one of those individuals who have benefited by the introduction of the Scottish banking system ; and the fact is apparent on his estate.

Very differently is Lord Palmerston situated, of whose property Mr. Inglis gives so glowing an account. If his lordship had still more capital to spend, and still more inclination to spend it for the good of the country, it would take a life-time to bring his tenantry even to a par with those of Mr. Wynne. His lands lie chiefly on the sea-coast, between Sligo and Ballyshannon ; a wild and barren district, where the Dartery mountains are washed by the Atlantic, and where, in many places, the natives have hardly any pretensions to the name of civilized beings. Some persons argue that the misery of the people on this coast proceeds from their own laziness ; and one gentleman related to me the following anecdote in support of this opinion. I, on the other hand, repeat it in support of mine, that the evil arises from the almost brutal ignorance which prevails in such districts. I must premise, however, that I do not remember whether the transaction in question took place on Lord Palmerston's estate ; although it would hardly be injustice to give it a local habitation in almost any part of the western shore.

A gentleman, as my informer told me, commiserating the condition of the people, who patiently endured the pangs of hunger when the sea before them teemed with wholesome and delicious food, purchased a boat for the purpose of making an experiment. He invited some of the most destitute among them to accompany him to the fishing, promising, in return for their share of the labour, to give them a due share of what they caught. They refused to labour without wages ; and, after in vain endeavouring to make them comprehend that his offer was

much better than the ordinary rate of payment, he added to the chance of the fishing a day's wages. On this they consented. The fishing was completely successful ; and, in addition to supplying their families with abundance of excellent food, they made some money by selling what remained. This was all their benefactor wanted. His experiment had succeeded ; for it had convinced the people that they were able, by their own industry, to make a comfortable and independent subsistence.

“ I lend you my boat,” said he, “ till you are able to purchase one for yourselves. Go, and make a good use of it : be industrious, and be happy.”

“ *But the days wages ?*” cried they.

“ The day's wages !” Argument was vain : they demanded a day's wages as before, and would not stir without. Their benefactor gave up his attempt in shame and sorrow, and the unhappy savages returned to their hunger and their despair.

The usual excursions from Sligo are to Lough Gill, to the top of Knochnarea, which commands an extensive view of the coast and the ocean, and to the Glen, a deep chasm at the bottom of this hill. Within the town are the ruins of an abbey of the fifteenth century, exhibiting sculptures of some interest to the antiquary. The only excursion I was able to make myself, on the present occasion, was to Willsboro', the seat of Mr. Fausset, who renewed the kind and hospitable attentions for which I was deeply indebted to him, and most of the other gentlemen of Sligo, a dozen years ago.

All I have to add respecting the town is, that it contains several good inns ; but, to the lovers of home-comfort, I recommend the York Hotel, in Jail Street, kept by a respectable family of five ladies, who exert all the tact which is native to their sex in ministering to the comfort of the traveller.

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I have now brought my task to a conclusion. The task, as I set it down for myself, was, while perambulating the country with my readers, to take the opportunity of giving them such glimpses of that portion of society which forms the great bulk of the nation, as might convey in the aggregate some clear idea of the condition, character, wants, and prospects of the people of Ireland. The nature of the work in which this was to be done I knew would prevent it from being done completely ; but I thought the very attempt would be useful.

The English—more especially the English of those distinguished classes among which such books as mine chiefly circulate—know much less of the Irish than they do of the Hottentots. The Irish, they have been taught to believe, are a nation of turbulent and seditious wretches—aliens in blood, in country, and in religion—who die of hunger because they are too lazy to procure food, and who burn houses, and cut throats, out of mere frolic, or instinctive wickedness.

Now just the reverse of this is the case. In Ireland the descendants of the Scots and English form a very considerable portion of the population, and the remainder is made up—like the entire population of England—of different races. The country of the Irish is an integral part of the British dominions ; furnishing, in due proportion, the army with soldiers, the navy with sailors, and the treasury with money. The religion of the Irish is, like ours, the religion of the Atonement ; and, except in some superstitious practices, extraneous from the matter of the faith, it differs very slightly from that of the Anglican church. The Irish are not lazy because

they are Irish, but because, in the first place, they are only half civilized, and because, in the second place, they are nothing more than predial slaves, working for the benefit of the land-owner, and destitute of the hope of rising into independence. Their condition having descended from century to century without change, the laziness inherited from the father is continued in the son, and so transmitted to posterity. The Irish are not so guilty of turbulence, sedition, incendiarism, and bloodshed, as any other nation in Europe would be under the like circumstances. Their spirit is broken by ages of tyranny. They have crouched so long under the lash that they can hardly stand upright. They are brave from instinct, but cowards from habit ; and the peasantry every day of their lives are guilty of as despicable acts of poltroonery, in their intercourse with the *quality*, as the serfs of the middle ages exhibited in their encounters with the knights. The outrages which the Orange newspapers gloat upon with such delight are the comparatively unfrequent outbreaks of barbarians, too timid to unite in vengeance, and too sharply goaded by insult, oppression, or mere hunger, to unite in peace.

I must now, however, draw to a conclusion these miscellaneous remarks on Ireland and the Irish. What the prospects of the country are it is not difficult to see, at a period when all the elements of a happy change appear to be in motion. Let the reader consult Dr. Robertson's account of the serfs of the fifteenth century, when, for the first time, their bitter draught was sweetened by Hope, and apply it to Ireland.

“ The effects of such a remarkable change in the condition of so great a part of the people could not fail of being considerable and extensive. The husbandman, master of his own industry, and secure of reaping for himself the fruits of his labour, became the farmer of the same fields where he had formerly been compelled to toil for the benefit of another. New prospects opened, and new incitements to ingenuity and enterprize presented themselves to those who were emancipated. The expectation of bettering their fortune, as well as that of raising themselves to a more honourable condition, concurred in calling forth their activity and genius ; and a numerous class of men who formerly had no political existence, and were employed merely as instruments of labour, became useful citizens, and contributed towards augmenting the force or riches of the society which adopted them as members.”

But I have done. I have tried to benefit this unhappy people, not by flattery, but by truth-speaking ; and, although I know I shall receive no thanks, I am quite satisfied with the consciousness of having performed my duty as a citizen of our common country.

Ireland picturesque and romantic (1838)

Author : Ritchie, Leitch, 1800?-1865 ; Maclise, Daniel, 1806-1870, ill ; Creswick, Thomas, 1811-1869, ill

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