

My life in Connaught :

with sketches of mission work in the west

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1906

I

It is now just forty-four years since I left my native town of Monaghan for Connaught and Ballina. My father was a leading member of First Monaghan congregation, as were indeed my ancestors for several generations. I was brought up under the ministry of the Rev. John Bleckley, to whom also I owed my education. He kept a classical school, and trained many candidates for the ministry. After being licensed by the Presbytery, I preached my first sermon in the church to which I belonged before my own school companions and play-fellows. It was rather a trying ordeal, but I survived it. The times were not very cheering for probationers ; they were some eighty in number, while the vacancies were not more than eight or ten. The Colonial Mission was a thing of the future, and there was nothing to relieve the congested list. The pay for supply was even still smaller than now. I travelled part of two days by coach and car, preached twice on the Sabbath, addressed the children, visited through the congregation for three days, conducted the Wednesday evening service, and was handed the munificent sum of ten shillings as my remuneration, viaticum, etc., and this, too, in the County Down ! However, I did not get the call—it was given doubtless, to one more worthy of the place and pay. For about twelve months I preached for the ministers of the Presbytery all around, who took their ease for the day, and considered their hospitality quite sufficient recompense for my services. Getting dissatisfied with this sort of work, I applied to the Board of Missions to give me an appointment in the South or West. I was offered the supply of Ballina Mission Station for two months, which I accepted.

Connaught was at that period an almost unexplored region. There were no railways. The long Bianconi car was the great locomotive of the province, if an occasional mail-coach be excepted. The proverbial poverty and wildness were deterrent to travellers, and the inhabitants of the other provinces rather looked down on a Connaught-man with undisguised contempt. My dear mother bade me good-bye, with her blessing, but could not conceal her forebodings that I would either be starved in that wretched country, or—equally horrid alternative—marry a Connaught woman. One of her predictions was really fulfilled. It is not necessary to say which of them.

On a dark and dismal night in the month of November, 1845, I left Monaghan by the Belfast and Enniskillen mailcoach—a vehicle famous neither for its rapidity of motion nor for its comfort and safety. Drawn by two horses, it dragged its slow length along through the tedious night, the journey being diversified at irregular intervals by a breakdown or an upset into the ditch. Next day the Bianconi brought me to Sligo, which I entered in a torrent of rain, thoroughly drenched. Our worthy minister, Rev. James Heron, sought me out, as I was preparing to resume my journey to Co. Mayo, and I enjoyed his kind hospitality for a couple of days. I, then and subsequently, formed the acquaintance of several of his people, settlers, some from Ulster, and others from Scotland, who occupied a prominent and respectable position in the town and neighbourhood. There were the Ramsays, Culbertsons, Fergusons, Balfours, Robertsons, and others, all now gone, leaving none of their name or race in the Presbyterian Church there. Their places, however, have been occupied by others who worthily represent and sustain our cause in that important locality.

On the last Sabbath of November I preached for the first time in Ballina to a congregation of eight souls. The place of meeting was used by the Episcopalians as a school during the week, and rented to us for the Sabbath. Previous to my arrival, an occasional service had been conducted on Sunday evenings by the Rev. David Rodgers, minister of Killala. [1] In this way a connection was kept up with a number of Presbyterians who attended the Episcopal or Methodist Church on the Sabbath mornings. It was found, however, that this plan, which was in operation for nine years, was not satisfactory in its working, as many lived in the country and could not attend in the evenings. The Board of Missions, therefore, decided to have regular ministrations both morning and evening, and appointed the Rev. Archibald Lowry, a licentiate of the Down Presbytery, to take charge of the station, which he did in August, 1844. He had also the oversight of the old Irish schools. The duties of both parts of his work Mr. Lowry discharged with strict conscientiousness until his removal to Roundstone, Co. Galway.

At this date the Presbytery of Connaught reckoned five congregations—Sligo and Ballymoate, in Co. Sligo, Killala, Westport, and Turlough, in Co. Mayo. The Presbytery itself was organized by the Synod of Ulster in the year 1825. But Presbyterianism was little known throughout the West, and in some places not highly respected. The cause had, indeed, been well and worthily represented in several districts, but in others, I am constrained to say, without unduly reflecting on the departed, it was otherwise. Our ministers were placed in trying circumstances. Isolated from one another, having only occasional meetings of Presbytery, without the solace and cheer of a friendly visit from their more favoured brethren in the North, no wonder that, having little ministerial work to engage their efforts among their scanty flocks, they should fall into a state of indolence and indifference.

Nor were the Episcopalian clergy any better. Not a few earnest and devoted men, the survivors of a period of evil manners and culpable neglect of duty, were to be found, but others were unworthy of their sacred calling. Some rectors kept hounds, and were as regular at the hunting field as in the pulpit. One of them I knew spent his Sabbath evenings playing ball with his boys at the gable of the parish church. I was seriously advised by a gentleman to buy a hunter and don a red coat, he assured me I never would succeed as a clergyman unless I followed the hounds. Still greater offences than those referred to were alleged against others, who were boon companions of the priests, and partakers in the evil habits of a godless gentry. No wonder that large defections from Protestantism resulted. Intermarriages with Roman Catholics were not infrequent, the effects, as a rule, being favourable to Romanism. It was to me a melancholy sight to read on the signboards of our western towns names strictly Scottish and Presbyterian borne by devoted adherents of Rome. The Methodists, with commendable zeal and activity, supplemented the lack of service of the Established Church and kept alive in many places the fire of pure religion. For their successful efforts in preserving many from perversion they got scanty thanks then or since.

In Ballina matters were rather different. The rector was one of the high and dry school, an aristocrat, who only visited among the gentry class, and that not as a pastor, but as a friend. His stock of sermons numbered twelve. In this respect, however, he was in advance of his predecessor, an arch-deacon, who had only six. But he had two curates, for his was a union of seven parishes. These men were thoroughly evangelical in sentiment, good Christians and faithful workers. The Methodists had two preachers of the usual stamp, and there was a Baptist minister, more pious than strong. These three were very indefatigable in their visitations of Presbyterians, as well as of their own flock.

The Presbyterians were few in number, composed mainly of the shopkeeping and farming class, or employés of the gentry. Some had joined the Episcopal Church, had formed such social connections that could not be severed.

Such was the situation. Great difficulties to be overcome, and few encouragements. I had purposed to return to the North at the expiry of my two months' appointment, but, neglecting to give due notice to Mr. Bellis, the secretary, I felt bound in honour to remain for another two months. The attendance at our meetings improved considerably. All the available Presbyterians were gathered in, rather to the vexation of my ministerial brethren, whose congregations were thus somewhat thinned. Members of other communions became attached to our cause, and in the month of March a call was made out in my favour. I considered that the finger of Providence had pointed out my way, so with no small fear, yet in faith, I accepted the call, and was ordained the first minister of Ballina on May 6, 1846.

In the ordinary course, all would apparently have gone on well. The congregation, though small in number, was vigorous and hopeful. Measures were taken to procure a suitable site for the erection of a church and manse, when events occurred which necessarily postponed our plans, seriously affected the congregation, and in a more widespread sphere scattered desolation and death throughout the land. I refer to the memorable famine and fever years, whose horrors I witnessed, and which have left an impression on my heart that can never be effaced. The effects on the congregation were disastrous. The members who were in business nearly all left the town. The employés of the gentry were discharged. The farmers were ruined. The stipend sank from the £60 promised to £20, which sum was all I received for years, and as the R.D. had not been obtained, I was dependent on the Mission grant for support. The amount was small—£70—and it was irregularly paid.

II

AT the period referred to in 1845 the social condition of the Province was very low. One thing that especially struck me was the teeming population, even in the poorest localities, where it was manifest human existence could not be maintained with any amount of comfort. The dwellings of the people were, as a rule, very humble cabins, in some instances cut out of the surrounding bog which formed natural walls for three sides; the front was made up of the sods dug out of the soil, and the whole thatched with heather. The inside was bare and cold, the furniture hardly deserving the name. But the house was normally full of children, to say nothing of the pigs and other domestic animals herding together day and night.

This state of things was largely accounted for by their mode of living. The potatoes constituted the food. This crop, easily produced and requiring little labour, had been for years remarkably abundant. There was no inducement to industry. The young people got married very early in life. The driver of the Bianconi from Sligo to Ballina said: 'As soon as a lad gets his first brogues or has his first shave, his next thought is to have a wife.' I asked: 'But how do they live?' 'Why,' said he, 'the parents give them some ridges of land, on which they plant potatoes and cabbages. They put up such a cabin as you see. Their furniture consists of a pot, a big stone for a table, and a lock of straw in the corner for a bed.' This was hardly an exaggeration as concerning a considerable number. So the four 'P's,' as they are called, went on in due order potatoes, population, poverty, Popery.

The landlords were largely to blame in permitting the minute subdivision of land. The priests were not averse to it, for as their revenues were mainly derived from fees for marriages and baptisms, it was their interest to encourage early matrimony. The landed proprietors, with a very short-sighted policy, allowed their tenantry to sub-let their little farms among their families. They had the temptation of getting for the time a higher rent. Some years after, when there was a revival after the famine, a young man said to a landlord in my presence: 'Will you take the offer I have made for the vacant farm?' 'I have,' said the landlord, 'got a higher bid than yours.' The man replied: 'Sir, the highest offer you get, I will give more.' Both were wrong, the one in undertaking a rent he could not pay, the other in

taking a tenant who in a short time must fall into arrears and incur the penalty of eviction. But this 'earth hunger' on the one part and bad management on the other, were factors in producing ultimate ruin to both. As to the landlords, while many were wise and prudent men, and kindly in their dealings with the tenants, not a few were the very reverse. Inheriting estates overwhelmed with debt and mortgages, from the extravagance and reckless prodigality of their predecessors, some were utterly unable to be generous, not to say just. Others inherited the vices with the pecuniary liabilities of those who had gone before them. The younger sons of the gentry were too proud to enter into business, and hung about the paternal domains in idleness and immorality, till at last, and suddenly, the judgment came the famine which consigned the peasantry in thousands to an untimely grave, deprived the owners of the soil of their properties, reduced many to beggary, and transferred their ancestral estates to the hands of others. This result would have inevitably come in process of time by the working of economic laws. Poverty and distress would also have been gradually intensified among the lower classes. The famine but hastened the catastrophe.

In the autumn of 1845, there had been a partial failure of the potato crop, causing some distress, but not enough to excite alarm or instigate to preparations for the future. There was no Joseph to warn of the coming famine, and prepare to meet and mitigate the consequences. In August, 1846, I drove some miles to the neighbourhood of Killala, accompanied by a friend, in connection with an interesting event in the domestic life of one of us. [2] Returning in the evening, we observed a damp, dense mist covering the country on all sides. The next day I had occasion to travel a considerable distance in the direction of Castlebar and Westport. Everywhere the fields presented a melancholy sight. The leaves and stalks of the potato were all smitten with blackness, and already a sickening stench was emitted. This was the beginning of sorrows. For a while the intensity of the calamity was not realized, but ere long it came with fearful force to the minds and hearts of all. At first the poor remnants of the crop left unhurt were utilized, and the oats provided meal. Before many months, however, these supplies were exhausted, and death stalked abroad with rapid strides. Multitudes died of sheer starvation. The ordinary rites of burial were neglected. Bog-holes and ditches by the wayside received the wasted remnants of poor mortality, and the pall of dark despair shrouded the land. .

But was no effort made to meet the case and rescue the perishing ? Yes ; I believe all was done that was possible in the circumstances. The clergy and gentry of all denominations, with merchants and men of business, cooperated most harmoniously in the work of procuring food for the starving. Relief committees were formed, and money subscribed most liberally ; and appeals were sent to Britain and America which were largely and generously responded to. But then there were not the facilities of transit which now exist. There was no steam communication with America, and not a mile of railway in Connaught. It took a long time to arrange for sending out the orders for food, and a longer time to collect the supplies at the ports and ship them to Ireland. Then, too, while seaport towns were relieved, the remote districts were badly off. The food had to be sent by horse and cart for many long miles, so that the interior parts of the country necessarily suffered more in proportion.

In Ballina, at an early period, the Relief Committee was in full and vigorous operation. The Episcopal clergyman, the Roman Catholic priest, and myself, were joint secretaries, and were thoroughly sustained by our fellow-townsmen of all creeds and classes. The town was divided into districts, which were periodically visited by the members of Committee. The scenes thus witnessed were horrible and heartrending. On one occasion I, in company with a respectable merchant, a member of the well-known Dillon family, visited our district. In every house was want and woe. In one wretched cabin we saw some twenty-five men, women, and children huddled together on rotten straw, of whom half were dead, and the

remainder met the same fate ere the night was over. My kind friend distributed his money with a free hand, and on giving up the work for the day, he said : ‘ I gave yesterday my subscription of five pounds. Here is a cheque for twenty-five pounds, on condition you never require me to go through such a harrowing work as that of to-day.’ How I was enabled to do it I can hardly now understand. The sight of gaunt and hunger-bitten poor creatures in the streets by day was shocking, and at night their cries were so heart-rending that I removed my sitting-room from the front to the rear of the house, if so I might shut out the piteous sounds. As I have said, the ordinary decency of burial was neglected. For instance, one day I saw a man carry the body of his wife, wrapped in a sheet, and, scraping a hole in the old Abbey Graveyard, he deposited her remains. This practice became so frequent that the Relief Committee got the ground covered over with heaps of earth, carted in, in order to prevent the inevitable plague arising from the multitude of decomposing corpses.

Blame has been attached to the Government for not being more early and energetic in giving the much-required help. I do not altogether adopt such views. The Government may have been slow to move in the first instance, but when the melancholy facts became known, they did, in my humble opinion, all they could. Parliament voted a sum of eight millions of pounds sterling. The efforts of the various relief committees were, therefore, largely supplemented ; and, finally, the Government undertook to feed the entire necessitous population, giving a ration of one pound of meal per day to each person not a very generous dole, but sufficient to stay the cravings of hunger and sustain existence. Some thought the Royal Navy should have been employed in carrying food from foreign ports to ours. I was of a different opinion, and believed that the wiser and more expeditious course was adopted in encouraging commercial enterprise to render that service. The event showed the propriety of this course, as food was provided more quickly and distributed more extensively than the Government could have done.

British benevolence contributed munificently, to the amount of hundreds of thousands of pounds. Among the many charitable associations organized in every part of England and Scotland, that of the Society of Friends deserves special notice. Not only did they send large quantities of food and clothing, but many came personally, not merely to visit and see for themselves, but individually to engage in the arduous work of administering the relief. It was my good fortune to come into close and intimate relations with several of these truly benevolent Christians. One of them, particularly, was well known for his tenderness of heart and deep sympathy with the poor. He visited them in their homes, with his own hands giving food to the hungry and clothing to the naked. His son, who acted as his secretary, and worked with his father in self-denying deeds of charity, obtained in later years a high position in Parliamentary and official life the able, but much-maligned and misrepresented Chief Secretary for Ireland, the Right Hon. W. E. Forster.

Nor was American aid wanting. Contributions came in money and kind, of which Ballina got its share directly as well as indirectly. Two ships of war were given by the United States Government to carry the food provided by the people to our shores. Private individuals also sent cargoes of flour, meal, and rice. The husband of a lady who had been born in Ballina, a member of an old and respectable family, sent a cargo for the special benefit of her native town, which came at a most opportune time, and was thankfully acknowledged. Not the least noteworthy of our benefactors was the Rev. Dr. Edgar, of Belfast. His ‘ Cry from Connaught,’ in its powerful and pathetic pleading, touched many a heart and opened many a fountain of sympathy and aid. I do not know how many thousands of pounds were entrusted to him as almoner, but they amounted to a very considerable sum. The moneys received by him were sent with impartiality to clergy of all denominations, gentry, and others. The ladies were largely made the agents of distributing his grants. Nor did he confine his philanthropic efforts to the rescuing the poor from starvation and the grave. He awoke the attention of the Church

to the spiritual need of a people perishing for lack of knowledge, and, by originating the Scriptural and industrial schools, and other agencies, largely contributed to the promotion of the true welfare of that province, whose interests were so dear to his heart.

III

I HAVE referred to the united and earnest efforts of the various classes of the community in relieving the abounding distress. One section I omitted to notice namely, the landlords. This class has of late received a large amount of censure, and been made to suffer, not only for the sins of the present generation, but also for those of their fathers. I have not hesitated when occasion served, and to their face, to point out their grievous errors and harsh and high-handed dealings with their tenantry. But let justice be done. As a rule, in the famine years the landlords did their duty. They took a leading part in the administration of relief. Many, doubtless, did desert their posts, and joined the ranks of the absentees, and others who remained were indifferent or heartless. Yet the majority proved themselves worthy of their position by that kind sympathy and self-denying effort which were well appreciated by those conversant with the circumstances. If their pecuniary help was not very large, or in proportion to their nominal income, they were not to be blamed. They were receiving no rents, and did not for years. Their estates were heavily mortgaged, and the demands on them for interest were severe and urgent, leaving little means to support their households or to give in charity. One worthy gentleman told me : ‘ My rental till now was £5,000 a year, well paid. I will hand you over my property if you secure to me for life £250 per annum.’ He was one of those who, by exposure to the risk of the diseases which accompanied and followed the famine, fell a victim to the prevailing fever.

The Poor Law system nearly broke down under the pressure. The then Ballina Union extended about sixty miles in length, from Dromore West, in Co. Sligo, to Belmullet, in Erris, there being but one workhouse for the Union, where since there are four. It was an absurd arrangement at any time, but it was fraught with fearful consequences during the period now being noticed. First of all, the Ballina Workhouse, built to accommodate 1,200 persons, was overcrowded. Then what were called Auxiliary Houses were provided, some of them new erections, others the stores which, under the old system, were to be found in many places, [3] where the grain was deposited waiting for vessels to convey the produce to Britain. These were now empty, and were utilized for the reception of the poor. In them lay a vast number of impotent folk, whose gaunt and wasted frames and ghastly, emaciated faces were too evident signs of the sufferings they had endured. The little boys and girls presented a hideous sight. In many instances, their heads had become bald and their faces wrinkled like old men and women of seventy or eighty years of age. Some had even the aspect of semi-savages, showing how, in process of time, even a civilized people might, through privation and suffering, degenerate into an inferior type of humanity.

In the latter end of 1846 Government started relief works, the principal of which were draining of the land and making of roads. Many thought the people would have been better employed cultivating their own farms, or in some reproductive work. But the laws of political economy forbade. Winter had set in before the preliminary engineering and other arrangements were completed. The people were then reduced to a condition of emaciation and weakness. Often they made their way to the place of working with no small difficulty, and the amount of labour they could accomplish was very little indeed. The pay-clerks weekly gave the workers the earnings to which they were entitled. Sometimes their arrival was delayed, and they came too late to save life. Inquests were occasionally held, and no uncommon verdict was that of murder or manslaughter against the pay-clerk or the Prime Minister of the day, Lord John Russell. After a huge expenditure of public money, little was seen in return

but extensive tracts of earthworks, intended as the foundation of roads which were never completed.

It is hard to say which was more demoralizing, the gratuitous distribution of food and money, or employment on what the workers knew well enough was utterly useless. I have had considerable experience during many years of both methods, for periodical seasons of 'distress' have occurred since the famine, though not so extensive or severe. Labour as a test of destitution is right enough, but there is a difficulty in providing work suitable and profitable. Mere gratuitous help on anything like a large scale tends to degrade and demoralize the recipients.

When the Government undertook to feed the people, the Ballina Relief Committee resolved to suspend operations. We had then about 1,000 on hands, and the question arose, How should this be expended? As gratuitous relief was no longer needed, the idea was entertained of giving some *industrial* employment. Part of the Committee advocated agricultural labour, and to have a model farm a very desirable thing in a region where agriculture was in a very rude state. The majority, of whom I was one, adopted another plan. There had been in the town and some country places a number of weavers. Several of these were Roman Catholics who had fled from the north in the troublous times at the beginning of the present century. It was thought this industry might be revived. Accordingly, one of the grain stores was rented, and called and known under the rather pretentious title of 'The Factory.' An intelligent young man, thoroughly acquainted with the trade, was brought from Belfast, and weaving began briskly. A damask loom was set up, and it was fashionable to purchase table-cloths, which were certainly of an excellent make and finish. Some of these are still in existence.

But it did not pay. The cost of bringing the raw material, the yarn, from Belfast, and of sending the webs to the market, along with the impossibility of the hand-loom competing with the power-loom, made the enterprise end in failure. It was also evident that a combination of work and charity does not do. So, finding our capital rapidly diminishing, the project was abandoned, and the remnant of the money distributed in blankets and coal during one winter of peculiar inclemency. The Ballina Relief Committee thus closed its career.

In recalling the proceedings of this Committee, I cannot but record my agreeable recollection of the harmony and goodwill and hearty co-operation of all its members. The chairman, Colonel, afterwards Sir Arthur Knox Gore, Bart., a most able and practical man; the rector, the Rev. Joseph Verschoyle, not marked by high talent, but kindly and courteous; his curate, the Rev. Joseph Kinkead, an eloquent preacher and diligent minister of the Gospel; the Rev. Hugh Conway (died 1892), then Roman Catholic Administrator of the Parish, now, as I write, Bishop of the Diocese; and many others, professional men, doctors, lawyers, and merchants these met to plan and work, animated with one common purpose, and with one heart to relieve the abounding wretchedness. I do not think there was at any time a serious difference among us. If any, it was on mere matters of detail, and caused no bad feeling. The questions of religion or politics, though outside conflicting views on both subjects sometimes caused sharp collision, yet in the committee-room found no place. We came together, and parted as gentlemen and Christian philanthropists. As an evidence of the good impressions left on all, many years after, at a time of severe distress and suffering, the Roman Catholic Bishop proposed me as president of another Relief Committee, which honour I of course declined in his favour; but I was unanimously appointed vice-chairman. Of that committee of 1846 he and I are the solitary survivors, and we still cherish mutually the good opinions, formed by each of the other's qualities.

The events of the Committee were usually of a sad character the consideration of the starving poor, how best to procure the needful funds, and how efficiently to meet the necessities of the case. Occasionally, topics of another and even of a ludicrous nature came up. On one occasion a man who had been a recipient of relief applied for a second ration. It appeared that he had got married on the calculation that his young wife would thus be supported. As marriages, hitherto so frequent, had entirely ceased, the additional ration was unanimously and cordially voted.

There was no small difficulty in getting people to use the Indian meal, now for the first time introduced into the country. The first day it was distributed there was tremendous excitement. From want of knowledge, the cooks had turned out the porridge without having it sufficiently boiled. It had the appearance of sawdust in water. The people, imagining they were going to be poisoned, began to assault the officials and threaten the Committee. I had been reading on the subject, and saw where the fault lay. I calmed the people by ordering the stuff to be thrown out, and told them to leave and return at a certain hour, when proper food would be provided for them. The creatures gave me cheers, and left quite content. I then directed the meal to be put again in the boilers and properly cooked. At the appointed time the people came back, and were supplied with the selfsame food, which was both palatable and nutritious. They were quite satisfied, and the Indian meal was henceforth the staple food of the community.

IV

THE famine was accompanied and followed by pestilence. Both fever and dysentery were regular epidemics, and multitudes thus perished. This was in one sense worse than the famine, for it affected all classes, the rich as well as the poor. The Rev. Mr. Kinhead, one of our secretaries, fell an early victim, and others of the clergy and laity caught the fever when visiting the poor. Fever sheds were erected, but these soon became as over-crowded as the Workhouse. The medical men did their duty nobly, attending the patients in their own cabins with self-denying zeal. But such was the dread of contagion that numbers were left by friends and neighbours without care and attention. Many families perished without a helping hand. When dead, the neighbours buried them by pulling down the roofs of their cabins perhaps the best mode of sepulture in the circumstances, as the spread of the disease was so far prevented.

Emigration was the resort and refuge of many. The cross-channel steamers were crowded, and the manufacturing towns of Britain replenished to excess by those who were flying from hunger. Others, whose little means had not been exhausted, or who were assisted by friends already in America crossed the Atlantic, and in Canada, but chiefly in the United States, found a means of livelihood. Entire parishes became almost depopulated. The places of worship that once were crowded were emptied. Farms over the country were unoccupied, the deserted homes presenting a dreary and affecting aspect. The walls, instead of being thrown down, were left to stand as melancholy signs of the widespread desolation. The population of the towns was also greatly diminished, and long ranges of crumbling ruins in the suburbs occupied the place where once were crowded, if not very comfortable, dwellings. Ballina did not suffer proportionately as much as Castlebar or Westport and other Western towns. But in one section of it, called Ardnaree, in the Sligo side of the Moy, the inhabitants were reduced from 1,600 in 1841 to 500 in 1851.

Over the whole country the diminution was remarkable. The census of 1841 gave a population of 8,175,124. At the same rate of increase of previous periods the population should at least have been 9,000,000 in 1851. It was found to be only 6,515,794. In other words, the decrease in five years was 2,500,000. Of this the famine destroyed 1,000,000, the

remainder 1,500,000 were removed by emigration. I cannot give the exact statistics of my part of the country, but its share was to the full as much as any other part of the island.

In accounting for the decrease of the population, besides famine, fever, and emigration, an important factor to be dealt with is what is called 'The Clearing System.' The holdings of the tenantry were very small, and the enlarging of the farms most desirable, both for the sake of owner and occupier. This had been felt for some time, but the tenacity with which the peasantry clung to the soil presented an apparently insurmountable obstacle. The famine period provided an opportunity which was largely taken advantage of. Much of the land had been vacated by death or emigration; still, much remained in the occupation of the holders. Recourse was then had to eviction, and there would have been wisdom in this course if carried out with kindness and care. Provision should have been made for these humble people to enable them to emigrate with comfort to another land where their toil would be repaid by prosperity and comfort. But, as a rule, this was not done. Entire families were turned out on the roadside without a shelter, sometimes even in the cold and rain of the winter-time. 'The Crowbar Brigade' unroofed the houses and broke down the walls, so that the poor creatures had nothing to protect them from the inclemency of the weather, even in the ruins of their old homes. This process was carried out on a most extensive scale. Whole townlands were thus cleared out day after day. There was a mania to form large grazing farms, in the hope of constituting a tenantry possessed of capital, and who would be a greater security for the payment of rent.

Had the process been carried on in a much more moderate way, it might have done well. But, apart from the hardships inflicted on those who were so rudely and ruthlessly driven from their dwellings, the overgrown farm system did not prove a success. The grazier or gentleman farmer is all very well, but it would be better for the country at large had a substantial yeomanry been created, who could live in reasonable comfort with their families on farms of a much smaller size than that aimed at by this 'clearing system.' The mode of carrying out clearings was such as to leave a sting of bitterness in the hearts of the evicted, which they carried to other lands, and still rankles in their breasts. I have seen crowds of peasantry, as they were about to take their seats on the long Bianconi car, kneel down in the open street of Ballina, and invoke the direst curses on those who had forced them into exile. 'Going with a vengeance' became a proverb, which subsequently was, with a certain hope and expectation, turned into, 'Coming with a vengeance.'

A young peasant in my neighbourhood had emigrated, but not exactly in the circumstances described, as his father had remained in occupation of the farm. One day a letter came from the son, and as the old man could not read, he brought it to his landlord to read it for him. After the usual preliminaries, the letter goes on: 'Dear father, pay no more rent. I belong to an army of 90,000 Fenians, and we are about to land in Ireland to exterminate the landlords. The first man I will shoot is Captain ——,' the gentleman who was reading the letter, and who did not deserve such a doom, as he was proverbially not only a just and fair, but a kind and indulgent landlord. I knew him well.

A splendid opportunity was at this time presented of, settling or colonizing the West of Ireland. Vast tracts were unoccupied and left to waste and desolation, which might have been re-peopled with a better class than before, without risk or danger. There were no claimants for the lands, for the former occupiers had disappeared and left no representatives to claim the succession. I urged the landlords to avail themselves of the situation, and they were willing enough. Several came from Ulster and Scotland to explore the country, and found they could readily get lands on very low terms, and at long leases. But one fatal obstacle lay in the way: there were no farm buildings. The Scotchmen would not do without 'a steading,' but they would not expend their capital on stone and lime. The landlords were too poor to provide the

requisite structure, and so the project fell through. Some of the gentry who were able to do what was required would not. With a strange infatuation, they dreaded the advent of a race of sturdy and independent men, who would not stand hat in hand to them nor crouch at the office door in subdued servility. They were told by these, ' We will pay a fair, rent, but we will not be serfs. We wish to live with our families in decent comfort, in good houses, and in a way such as human-beings ought to do,' and so on. This the proud aristocrat could not brook.

I was greatly disappointed. A dream, not a fanciful one, but quite feasible, was dispelled. The chance was gone. Very speedily the population began to increase and multiply with marvellous, yet quite Irish, rapidity. The lands were reoccupied, and the hope of a Protestant settlement of Connaught utterly gone.

Yet some immigrants did arrive not, indeed, in such great proportions as I had wished for. By these existing congregations were well replenished, and new ones formed, to the number of eight Creevelea, Boyle, Clogher, Hollymount, Newport, Dromore West, and Ballinglen. Of the settlers, several were practical farmers, who, by their intelligence and industry, have prospered, and have not only done well for themselves, but have done good to the country, in setting an example of a better state of cultivation, which has been copied by their neighbours with good results. Nor have they been molested or injured. Coming into occupation of lands from which there had not been evictions of the previous tenants, there was no bad feeling towards them of taking land ' over other people's head.' Then, too, acting as they did in a kindly and fair manner with those around, they secured the respect and goodwill of their neighbours. I know many such cases.

Others of the newcomers were of a different stamp and type, such as retired merchants, professional men, bankers and others, who had some capital, but no previous or practical knowledge of farming. They worked by book, and were dependent on the guidance of a local Irish manager, who was not always trustworthy, or of a Scotch steward, who often made mistakes as to the conditions of Irish climate and soil. They occupied the deserted mansions of the lord of the soil, and lived rather in some sort of style. These did not prove a success, and, after an interval of gradual declension, went their way to the place whence they came, ' sadder if not wiser men.'

V

DURING this dreary period of famine and its accompanying sorrows I pursued my congregational work to the best of my ability, though without much to cheer or inspire hope. The times were out of joint. Our Scottish friends had nearly all gone. Business was very bad, and the new settlers had not yet come. The congregation was reduced to a skeleton. The stipend shrivelled down to some £20. I would have left, I think, were it not that in August, 1846, my dear mother's prediction was fulfilled, and I had formed a domestic connection which I felt had bound me to the locality. Yet, though I could not see it, there was a light streak in the cloud, and Providence was preparing the way for a revival of our congregational life.

Other events were occurring in connection with the Roman Catholic department of the Mission which gave a new turn to that cause, and ultimately led to most important results. The Rev. Michael Brannigan had been selected by the students as their missionary, and was appointed by the Board of Missions to take the oversight of the Irish schools, and also to act as itinerant missionary over an extensive district, comprising parts of the counties of Mayo and Sligo. He had come and taken up his residence in Ballina as the most convenient place for headquarters, and I was brought into very close and intimate relations with him and his special work. But Mr. Brannigan demands and deserves a distinct and special notice ; and I

purpose later to give a sketch of his life and of his operations in Connaught, including an account of the *old* Irish schools.

Meanwhile, there are some matters bearing on the social condition of Connaught which some of my friends have asked me to notice, and they will, I think, be novel to most of my readers, and prove interesting if not also instructive. An old friend writes from Dublin reminding me of the mode and cost of living at that time. He says : ‘ You and I had lodgings of two rooms each for £12 or £13 per annum. The best beef was 2d. to 3d. per pound ; eggs, 4d. per dozen ; butter, same price per pound ; turbot, 1s. each ; other fish in proportion. In those days a kid could be had for 10d., and, dressed in a savoury manner, was a favourite dish, and kept one in dinner for a week. Thus, a small income went a long way.’ This will account for my undertaking on such limited means the cares and responsibilities of a household. My friend adds : ‘ Then the country people would run or stand on their heads, or do anything to oblige.’ What a change in all these respects ! Facilities of communication have equalized prices over the kingdom, so that a Connaught minister is no better off than any of his brethren. The political movements of later times have also affected the tone and the temper of the peasantry in a very unpleasant way.

There has been a great improvement of late years in the cultivation of the land, though still agriculture is not in such an advanced state as in the eastern and northern provinces. I was struck by hearing a phrase which sounded strange in my ears namely, ‘ Striping the land’ that is, giving to each tenant his holding in one place, with his cottage on it, and his farm separated by proper fences from his neighbour. This was necessitated by the wretched system of *rundale* tenure which then largely prevailed. This system has been thus described : ‘ In some instances a tenant having part of a townland had his proportion in thirty or forty different places, and without fences between them, it being utterly impossible to have any, as the portions were so numerous and so very small that not more than half a stone of oats was required to sow one of those divisions.’ Fights, trespasses, and disputes unavoidably resulted, with endless law procedures and consequent expense. All attempts at improvement were effectually hindered. It is obvious that the one remedy was the ‘ striping’ or squaring of the lands. This also put an end to the clustering of the cottages or cabins in what was dignified by the title of ‘ *villages*,’ but really a medley of dirt and disorder.

There were two classes of persons in the community whom I omitted to notice. These are the ‘ Middlemen’ and the ‘ Gombeen’ men. With regard to the former, there was a great lack of the middle class in the proper sense of the term that is, of men of moderate means, equally removed from the extreme of wealth and luxury on the one hand, and the harassing anxieties of comparative poverty on the other, but combining the intelligence of the higher with the industry of the lower. But there were middle-men in another sense that is, persons who held, say, a townland or more from the owner, who was usually an absentee, and sublet in small farms to the occupiers of the soil. This was easy for the head landlord, as he had but one person to deal with, but it was injurious to the tenants, as the middleman had to make his profit off them, and accordingly charged exorbitant rents. Moreover, by this system there was no direct relation between the real owner and those living on his property, and he felt relieved of any responsibility about them. The operation was to infinitesimally subdivide the land, and thereby intensify poverty. All, however, went well for the middleman till the famine came. The poor people had no money to pay him, while he was held strictly responsible for the head rents. As a consequence, they were completely ruined, and as a class obliterated. While there were many worthy men among them, this treble ownership was essentially bad, and the extinction of this order of squireens was not to be regretted.

The ‘ gombeen men’ were usurers. The system of borrowing money from loan offices and gombeen men was and is still largely practised, and as the rate of interest was fearfully high,

the unfortunate people who had recourse to this mode of raising money were constantly and increasingly embarrassed. These usurers were sometimes of the peasant class, who, having gathered some amount of money, lent it out at a usurious interest. Shopkeepers also followed the practice, insisting on a portion of the loan being taken in goods, which were given at a high price. The charge say, for a loan of £1 was 1s. for interest, 5d. for the card and IOU, and 1s. for the first instalment, so that the borrower received money or goods to the amount of 17s. 7d. Nineteen shillings were then to be paid in weekly instalments of one shilling each, with a fine of 1d. per week in case of being a defaulter. To these terms must be added the cost connected with bringing in two men as securities, to say nothing of the loss of time to all the parties. The unfortunate borrower had thus to pay, I think, at least 15 per cent, per annum. But the gombeen man, by receiving the weekly payments, and lending out again and again, must have been in receipt on his capital of well, it would take an *actuary* to calculate it. When the famine came, and the borrowers became penniless, the gombeen man were ruined. I confess to having but small sympathy with these horse-leeches. Unfortunately, there are still some of the same harpies preying on their hapless victims.

VI

FOR ten years prior to 1845 the *Irish* schools were in operation, not only in Connaught, but in the mountains of Tyrone and the glens of Antrim, and in Kerry. They were so termed because the object was to instruct the Irish-speaking people to read the Holy Scriptures in their own loved tongue. It is not to be supposed that there were regular buildings, where during fixed hours children were taught the ordinary branches of education ; but the scholars, of all ages and both sexes, met the teacher in his own house, or in each others' houses, usually at night, after the day's work was over, or on holidays, and on the Sabbath. During the long winter nights little companies were gathered round the blazing bogwood or peat fires, and, by the help of the mountain rushlight, and through summer by the light of the sun in the fields, reading in the Irish Scriptures ' the wonderful works of God.' The teachers were almost exclusively Roman Catholics. The schools were examined three times each year by Irish-speaking inspectors, who knew and professed Gospel truth, and by whom returns were made to the minister superintendent of the progress of the scholars, with their names, ages, and residences. After each inspection a gratuity was awarded to each teacher, varying from 10s. to £2, for the four months, according to the evidence afforded of his diligence, fidelity, and efficiency. Also, when the teachers were assembled to receive their payments, they were examined and instructed by the superintendent ministers on a previously prescribed portion of the Word of God, and on some leading doctrine of the Gospel. Free conversation, or even discussion, was invited and encouraged. This simple, if not rude agency resulted in much fruit. Not a few teachers and scholars renounced the errors of the system in which they had been born, and made open profession of the reformed faith.

In connection with these schools, *Irish* Scripture-readers were employed. They were not colporteurs (for that was an unknown agency), but merely Scripture-readers who expounded and explained, as opportunity served, the plain truths of the Gospel in a style of thought and illustration adapted to the capacity of the people. Not only the frequenters of the schools, but others who could not or would not learn, had an open door for these men, who found an access to their homes and hearts.

Besides these, a licentiate or student of our Church was a resident in each school district. He assisted the inspector in his work, and exercised supervision over him ; he also held meetings with teachers and scholars for reading and expounding the Scriptures, with catechetical instruction and prayer, aiming more or less directly at their conversion, not to a sect, but to Jesus Christ as the one Mediator, ' able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him.'

I had an opportunity of becoming personally conversant with this work, especially after the arrival of Mr. Brannigan, whom I accompanied in his tours ; and though not an adept in speaking Irish, I could read it with some ease. I also took part in addressing the teachers assembled for examination in Ballina, Castlebar, Dromore West, and elsewhere. The exact number of teachers in Mayo and Sligo I cannot now recall, but I think they counted up some 200, while the scholars were several thousands.

This system had many excellencies, and was adapted to the time and the circumstances of the country, but it was far from perfect, and not free from abuses in its working. While many of the teachers became spiritually enlightened, yet they were all on their appointment Roman Catholics.

From the nature of the schools, proper inspection was hardly practicable, and there was reason to fear that some of the returns were inaccurate. Then the famine wrought havoc with the attendance, and the spread of national and other schools made the English the vernacular of the rising generation, and hastened the decay of the Irish tongue. Hence, the old system was gradually brought to an end, and ceased entirely in 1854. Meanwhile, a new and better one, more suited to the altered condition of the country had been formed. The former had done its work, and, having served its day and generation, gave place to what is well known as the Connaught Scriptural and Industrial schools.

It is well here to mention the curious fact that in Ulster the Irish schools of Tyrone owed their origin to the circumstance of a beggar having found an Irish Testament by the wayside ; so those of Connaught may be traced to a Bible which an English sportsman presented to a peasant. This Bible soon came into great request in a district where nothing of the kind had previously been seen. One after another borrowed the wonderful Book, and neighbours gathered round the winter hearth to listen to its marvellous tales of the love and life of the Son of God. It is said that three connections of the man who first got the Bible were savingly converted.

- [1] In severe winters Mr. Rogers used to rent a house in Ballina that he might remain all night ; but some time before Mr. Armstrong went to Connaught he was getting too infirm to go regularly, so that an occasional service only was held.
- [2] His first marriage, to Miss Teresa C. Smith, daughter of Dr. Smith, Ballina.
- [3] In Killalee every corn-store was occupied. It was sad to see faces, tier above tier at every little window, trying to look out, and thus gain some little amusement from seeing the passers-by.

My life in Connaught : with sketches of mission work in the west (1906)

Author : Armstrong, Thomas, 1845-1897

Subject : Armstrong, Thomas, 1845-1897 ; Presbyterian Church in Ireland; Ireland — Church history

Publisher : London : Elliot Stock

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : University of California Libraries

Collection : cdl ; americana

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/mylifeinconnaugh00armsrich>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

January 3 2012