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THE PRESENT
POVERTY OF IRELAND
CONVERTIBLE INTO THE
MEANS OF HER IMPROVEMENT,
UNDER A WELL-ADMINISTERED
POOR LAW
WITH A PRELIMINARY VIEW OF THE
STATE OF AGRICULTURE IN IRELAND.

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“ There is some soul of goodness in things evil,
Would men observingly distil it out.”

K. Henry V. Act iv. Sc. 1.

1838.

§ I. *Introduction.*— *General objects to be kept in view—Evils of Poverty should be made available to good purposes.*

In a country where the great mass of the population is wholly agricultural, it is of paramount importance, to ascertain how any novel economical arrangement, such as a Poor Law, will affect the rural portion of the community. And it is difficult to come to any distinct understanding upon the right means of improving the condition of the poor in Ireland, until some ideas are collected, respecting the present position of the whole agricultural class, and the possible profits of their occupation.

The remaining space will be taken up in considering the effect which the Poor Law proposed for Ireland by Her Majesty's Government may possibly be made to produce, upon the condition of the rural population, and how it will act upon this peculiar state of agriculture : an attempt will also be made to indicate what *sort* of stimulus that measure should supply to the profitable employment of labour in all parts of the country—particularly in the very poorest districts.

For it appears that indistinct views are sometimes entertained, as to the peculiar province of a well-digested Poor Law, and as to the particular description of influence which it ought to exert. It is necessary, therefore, to make a few preliminary and general remarks, in order to explain the method by which a Poor Law may be made to operate beneficially upon the imperfections which may be found in Ireland. So that without being in itself a panacea for existing evils, it may yet be made to promote the application of those specific remedies which the best-informed observers consider alone calculated to effect a permanent cure.

Thus it is asserted that all gratuitous relief to the able-bodied is a positive injury to society ; and the man who asserts this in Ireland, is obliged to put his hand in his pocket the next moment, to give a starving but able-bodied beggar sixpence, because he cannot get work :— let it be admitted that this *is* a very great evil, and let us inquire whether the pro-

posed Poor Law can be made to open men's eyes to its effects, practically as well as theoretically ; and whether it will enable them to relinquish the practice of gratuitous relief, and make them afford a better sort of assistance to the poor, by inducing them to show the able-bodied how they can relieve themselves.

Again, it is said that the poor in towns are brought to destitution by intemperance and by combination, and that we ought to enact laws against these admitted evils : let us inquire whether the proposed Poor Law will not rouse the public attention more actively to these points, and whether the well-intentioned persons who suggest temperance societies—who exclaim in vain against the defects of the licensing system and against combination—will not soon find in all householders, who will be all rate-payers, a much larger class of willing auditors and zealous co-operators, than they have hitherto been able to collect.

Lastly, it may be asserted, that famines are brought on in the west of Ireland by the evils of tenancy in copartnership ; that in every part of Ireland the farmers are poor, and do not give work, because their system of agriculture is defective ;—that a Poor Law of itself will not cure these evils ; and that, if farmers are taxed for the support of the poor before their means of paying that tax are improved, they will become more thoroughly depressed than ever. These are very material objections, and must, therefore, be discussed at some length :—let us admit that farmers, as well as labourers, in Ireland are sadly depressed already, and that they *are* unable to bear any new burthen ; but let us inquire into some of the details of the system by which they carry on their business, and see whether the effect of the Poor Law, if carried out on the principles of the English Bill, will, practically speaking, impose any new burthen upon the farmers.

Some people who expatiate very largely upon such subjects are not equally conversant with these details, and are apt to lose themselves in a labyrinth of reasoning about small farms, and conaces, and agricultural capital, and matters with which they are perhaps not practically familiar ; while others, who know all these details, are not equally well acquainted with the practical working of the English Poor Law. It is essential that the actual condition of the Irish farmer should be viewed with reference to the real principles of the English Poor Law, and that it should be ascertained, whether those principles, carried out to their full extent, will so operate, as—without violent interference with his present condition—to induce him to improve it,—not *by means* of the enactments themselves, for that is impossible ;—*but by supplying a new agency and a new motive*, whereby he will be led *to work out for himself an amelioration of his own condition*.

In order to ascertain what is the nature and extent of the means at his disposal in different districts, it will be necessary to endeavour to sketch out the state of the very poorest parts of Ireland where famine prevails, and to point out how the Poor Law might possibly bring the inhabitants to introduce some essential improvements in their condition, so as to make it resemble that which is found in the less suffering portions of the country : and next, some reference must be attempted to the particular description of poverty which exists in the counties removed *above* the risk of periodical famine. So that we may see by what means such districts may be improved likewise, and by what gradations each state of society may be enabled to raise itself one step in the social scale. The state of the population in great towns, and even in the richer agricultural districts, bears so great a resemblance to that of other countries, that it is not equally necessary to describe it particularly at present. The interests of the richer parts of Ireland are so materially affected by the constant incursions of paupers from the poorer, that it is sufficient to notice, that the former would reap a double benefit by a *successful* introduction of a Poor Law into Ireland ; for they would be relieved, not only by the amended habits of their *own* poor, but by escaping the burthen of the mendicants from the poorer counties.

Before, however, we can enter usefully upon these details, (which will presently follow,) we must pause for a moment, in order to point out the danger of adopting any erroneous general views respecting the real origin of the poverty which is found among the labouring classes in Ireland.

We are so prone to imagine that it requires some new or startling principle to obtain a striking result, and the poverty of Ireland is known to be so great and so extensive, that it is difficult to believe that an apparently trifling remedy, acting very generally, will be sufficient, if free scope be given to it, to restore a healthy vigour to the social system, and bring about all that is desired.

The English have long since discovered in their own case, that the only sure road to wealth is, not to disturb industry, but to leave it to itself. Instead however, of applying this rule to others, they sometimes forget it. And one is always afraid lest their desire to realize British ideas of perfection in Ireland *at once*, will induce the adoption of some well-intended *short cut* towards wealth and comfort, which will really hinder the attainment of the goodly end proposed.

Some confusion has, perhaps, arisen in distinguishing between the causes and the effects of Irish poverty. Thus we find it commonly asserted that the great poverty of the agricultural classes in Ireland proceeds from three causes :—

1. The payment of wages in kind, (in *conacres*,) instead of in money.
2. The prevalence of small farms.
3. The tenacious adherence of the peasantry to their land.

Now it may appear paradoxical to combat this assertion ; but, nevertheless, it is worth while to inquire at the outset, whether these three things, which, abstractedly speaking, may be very bad, are not the effects instead of being the causes of the poverty of Ireland ; and what action the Poor Law will bring to bear upon them.

The Poor Law is understood to be exceedingly unpopular in the rural districts of Ireland at the present moment because it is erroneously supposed that it must of necessity be opposed in its working to a state of things which is there generally believed to be irremediable ; and although the public are not philosophers, they understand full well that any tampering with the free and natural current of affairs, brings nothing but misery in its train. Most fortunately the Poor Law at present proposed, if administered on the same principles as have worked so well in England, will not directly oppose itself to the existing current of things. On the contrary, it will enable the people to make use of the advantages which may be found, even in things which are supposed to be abstractedly bad ; for, in truth, it is easy to extract good out of these three prevailing evils.

1st. Then as to the payment of wages in *conacres* instead of in money,—it is fortunate that the labourers are ready to accept of this sort of payment ; because, though the Poor Law will make it the interest of farmers to employ the poor, for profit, it cannot at once provide them with the means of paying their wages in money. It is fortunate, therefore, that the labourers are willing and happy to accept of the only species of remuneration which their employers can at present afford to give ; and when farmers find their profit in the additional employment which they thus promote, they will gradually (as will presently be shown) come to money payments. They cannot pay in money till labour is more profitable to the employers than it is at present : but it is *not* profitable at present, only *because* they have never yet turned their

attention sufficiently to the means by which it may be *made* so. These means cannot be devised in a day : and the rate of wages cannot experience any permanent or useful rise, till the farmers and labourers themselves are induced to enter upon the discovery of the means of raising it. Any attempt to force up the rate of wages prematurely will be prejudicial to the community, and will fail in its intention. But the Reformers of the Poor Law in England have always discouraged the idea that wages could be forced up by any part of its machinery, without a previous or accompanying rise in profits.

2ndly. It is fortunate that the farms are small, because the capitals engaged in farming are very small. The advantages attending large farms are not abstractedly important ; on the contrary, every agriculturist knows that there are many positive disadvantages attending them : crops must be brought in from a greater distance, the manure must be carried out further, &c. &c. But the great advantage of large farms is, that they concentrate capital, and the energy and skill with which it can be employed. Now the capitals engaged in farming in Ireland, being small, can be much more easily concentrated in small farms : when capital is so concentrated, and expended on labour, it will increase ; and, when increased, *then* farms will be made larger.

The Poor Law, when administered properly, will not encourage, or discourage small farms or large farms, but will discourage the displacement of farming capital by violent means. It will show landlords that it is not for their interest to displace tenants already in possession, except for non-payment of rent ; and it will show them that it is for their interest to demand a fair amount of rent :—they will also instruct their tenants in the best way of making agricultural profits lest the dispossession of tenants, even for non-payment of rent should create a risk of their ultimate destitution. Large farms do not necessarily tend to perpetuate and increase large farms ; for Irish farms were once large, and have gradually become small farms ; and if they were all violently increased to-morrow, and if the same causes for the diminution of agricultural capital, which have been already adverted to, were still left at work, they would all gradually diminish, as now: what is wanted is the introduction of a new principle by which individual capital will be less interfered with than hitherto. The Poor Law, when rightly introduced into Ireland, will serve in the mildest manner to counteract and discourage any violent interference with capital.

3rdly. It is fortunate that the tenacious adherence to land exists in Ireland, because, if well directed, it will induce the peasantry to make such exertions and undergo such privations as the low rate of wages of the present day is insufficient to stimulate, but which are absolutely required in order that they may emerge from their present state of poverty. Were the standard of labouring skill and of wages higher than at present, the same tenacity might be injurious : but as it is only by raising wages that it can be effectually diminished so it is undesirable that it should be lessened *until* the rate of wages is increased. When wages shall be as high as in the other parts of the United Kingdom; there is no reason to suppose that the tenantry will be more attached to land as a means of existence than to any other method of obtaining a livelihood by industry.

Besides, it is perfectly well known in Ireland, that if the tenantry were suddenly to relax, either in their attachment to, or in their competition for land, the landlord would turn their small arable farms into grazing, which, of all known modes of employing capital advantageously, is the one in which the smallest ingredient of labour is required to form a profit ; so that, until some other demand for labour has been created, the community must suffer immediately, if any principle having a tendency to throw land into grass should be extensively developed.

The great object of the promoters of a Poor Law should be, *not to attempt to do too much with it*. Before the small farmers can be induced to give up their diminutive occupations, labour at tolerable wages must be provided for them ; before good wages can be paid, the men must be taught to earn them. The fact is constantly overlooked that men who are accustomed to receive but eightpence for a day's work, are not able to do much more than eightpence worth of work. Sometimes it is their skill, sometimes it is their habits, sometimes it is their bodily strength, which is deficient, and which disqualifies them from giving such labour as will require a higher rate of wages ; and although it is easy, by instruction, attention, and wholesome food, to amend all this *gradually*, it is found, practically, that a native will be more successful than a stranger in effecting this amendment. There are plenty of Irish grazing-farms with the finest soil, where English farmers might employ their capital and skill in tillage, without the slightest danger of being interrupted by Captain Rock : but they know that the employment of Connaught labourers at sixpence or eightpence a day, which is the rate of wages constantly quoted, would not remunerate a capitalist ; so that there can be no well-founded hope of introducing foreign capital, except by way of mortgage or loan.

The promoters of a Poor Law should admit that a population can only be depauperized with certainty, by inducing them to depauperize themselves. People brought up to a particular mode of employment, however faulty it may be, cannot change their occupation or even relinquish their erroneous ideas abruptly, and can only be effectually improved by gentle advances towards amendment. They can only be enriched by slow gradations. But each step towards improvement, though it may appear trifling to the indifferent observer at a distance, is valued most sensibly by the individual who makes it. And it is the aggregate of these apparently trifling steps which constitutes the sum of the happiness of the community.

§ II. *Inquiry as to the facility of obtaining profitable Employment for the Able-bodied.—Sketch of the Agricultural Condition of the extreme West.—Doubtful success of Emigration.—Improvements practicable.*

Let us now advert again to the details of those local circumstances already alluded to. And first let us look into the agricultural condition of the population in Galway, Mayo, Donegal, and generally of those most impoverished districts which extend along the more remote and inaccessible portion of the West of Ireland, and from whence issue that crowd of harvestmen, who spread themselves over the remainder of the kingdom.

Everybody admits, that there are at present a vast number of industrious able-bodied persons reduced to mendicancy during a portion of the year in those particular parts of Ireland ; but it is said that all they want is work. Let us proceed to consider the great collateral advantage of the Poor Law, and the ease with which this work may be discovered for them, as soon as it is made the interest of the rate-payers to get rid of the burthen of supporting paupers unprofitably, when they will begin to think about putting them in the way of supporting themselves.

The relief of the *impotent* poor need not be particularly discussed. After some diversity of opinion and debate, it seems now pretty generally admitted, that it is just and necessary, that districts should be enabled to tax themselves for the support of the destitute, through age, disease, or infirmity ; and that as the tax of alms has hitherto been raised very unequally, it is fitting that an attempt should be made to throw the burthen (as the new Poor Law endeavours to do) more equally over the property of the district. That this in itself will be a very great measure of relief to the small farmers, who have hitherto borne an unequally large share of the burthen, nobody who knows their condition, and the extent of the tax they have had to pay, can doubt for a moment ; nor can it be doubted that it will lead to the very greatest im-

provement in their habits as well as in their means. This part of the subject has been usually overlooked of late, as the question regarding the relief of the able-bodied is considered of so much more vital consequence; and those who are alarmed at the relief of able-bodied paupers assert, the poverty of the population is so extensive, and that the new charge which will be imposed upon the industrious by *that* branch of the measure will be so heavy that it will very much overbalance the advantage they will experience from the diminution of the other burthen.

Let us now see if there is not a leading cause, and also a leading remedy, for the poverty which always pervades and for the famine which occasionally desolates those districts. The details of these matters are as little known to the inhabitants of Leinster, and the richer parts of Ireland, as they are to the inhabitants of Kent or Middlesex.

It is impossible to give a minutely accurate portrait of the existing state of society in the western districts, nor will it be here attempted ; a very faint outline of some of the most prominent deformities of the present system will be sufficient to show the impossibility of doing so : there are many counter-balancing advantages, and some aggravating circumstances also, which there is not space to estimate here. It may perhaps appear uninteresting to go into a detail of such purely local matters ; nevertheless, they form the pith and marrow of the whole question: for if there is any part of the island to which, from local circumstances, the Poor Law shall prove to be inapplicable, one single failure will ultimately destroy the whole fabric ; and certainly, if the Poor Law succeeds in these regions pre-eminent for their poverty, it may be safely pronounced practicable in all the rest of the country.

In these western districts the persons who occupy land independently, form a much larger proportion of the population than elsewhere ; there are much fewer cottiers who depend solely upon their labour for support, than in the richer counties ; and the landlords not having any great inducement (as will presently be seen) for turning them out, they are generally in a state of complete tranquillity. Politics, which are commonly said to be the bane of Ireland, do not enter into their heads ; they are not qualified to reason accurately upon the abstract causes of their poverty : nevertheless, the great majority of the inhabitants are in a condition of more abject and more hopeless penury than can be conceived by anybody who has not been compelled to go among them in a year of scarcity.

A visit to these districts impresses the mind with a degree of sadness and gloom which it requires much exertion to throw off ; and to one who does not attempt to seek out the simple cause of this state of things, it appears as hopeless of amendment as it is unparalleled in extent. It may be added also, that the landlords as a body are, speaking generally, very needy ; the smallness of their fortunes, and the disproportion between their acres and their incomes, is the theme of constant joke throughout the rest of Ireland ; so that those who talk of obliging them to undertake the sole burthen of the improvements required, must be unacquainted with the extent of their means. To return, however, to the farms in these districts, the custom has existed from time immemorial to let the land in co-partnership; and the tenants till it "*in Co.*" as it is called in the West, or in *rundales*, as it is called in Donegal. This had its origin, of course, in the poverty of the original settlers, and in the original intention of occupying it only for grazing, for by this means they were saved the expense of fencing ; and while the population was thin, and when single capitals were insufficient to stock a considerable space, it was the best plan that could be adopted ; but from the total absence of any artificial organization, by which they could of themselves remedy the inconvenience of this arrangement as society changed, and as the evils gradually developed themselves, they have been brought at last to a situation which must be almost incredible to those who have not actually seen many miles of country occupied in this manner.

If patience will permit, it is worth while to describe the effect of holding in partnership, combined with constant subdivision, by supposing the history of some single townland ; premising that, in explaining the different periods in the history of one, we show the state which some of the innumerable varieties of the system assume on different farms in the same district at the present day. It is not to be supposed that *all* are at present equally subdivided, or that the inconvenience of joint-tenancy is felt alike in all : in some few we find joint-tenancy a convenient, though an injudicious arrangement ; in most it is merely a very inconvenient arrangement, while in some it amounts to the certainty of periodical destitution and of actual famine.

In the first generation then, let us suppose that A, B, and C, occupy in common a townland, consisting of a hundred and forty-seven acres. In this generation the occupants are possessed of forty-nine acres each, and may be supposed to make their rents by grazing, cultivating only a small portion of the surface for their immediate use ; and, as they are very poor, this is done in the most slovenly manner : they depend a good deal on oatmeal for subsistence, and they agree to break (or plough) nine acres. Their “*stint*” (or agreed number) of cattle running in common ; each man tills within the common fence ; but the cattle are let in as soon as the crops are off the ground, so that a succession of clover, or turnips, cannot be thought of, as the cattle of each would have an equal right to trespass upon the crop. But A, being rather more industrious than B, and C, wishes to extend his tillage ; *that* the others resist, as it will encroach on the subsistence of their cattle : again he manures his three acres a little, and finds it is in better heart than that of his neighbours, and will give him three crops of oats ; but they, not having manured theirs, exhaust their land with two crops, and then they insist upon shifting the tillage to another part of the common farm : so A is unable to take advantage of his manure, and never attempts that improvement again. The three occupiers “*in Co.*” agree together pretty well, however ; they shift their tillage every now and then over a space of about forty-five acres, the remainder being too remote from their cluster of dwellings, and no road of communication for their common passage, or for the access of sand, seaweed, or lime.

But, in the next generation, we will suppose that A has left six sons and two daughters ; and having never been able to acquire anything for them by his industry,—which he was never allowed to exercise,—he is obliged at his death to divide his ground among them. Each of the sons gets seven acres, and each of the sons-in-law three acres and a half ; but it is not divided off to each, so that each of the sons cultivates a seventh of a third of the nine acres, and each of the sons-in-law cultivates the half of the seventh of a third of nine acres ; and this shifts about alternately over a space of forty-five acres, the parties quarrelling together every year about the choice of their bit of tillage. If B and C have had small families, an intestine broil ensues, for the tillage suited to one party is quite unsuited to the others ; and, after quarrelling for many years, they come to some sort of imperfect partition. But if, as is more usually the case, B and C have also had large families, they mutually agree to change the description of tillage a little : they depend more upon potatoes, and less upon oats ; and do not shift their tillage so often over the forty-five acres, and give the ground more manure. But still no man has an interest in giving more manure than his neighbours ; and when this does not yield them food enough, they at length are obliged to break two more patches of ground, which they contrive to make arable, and each of A’s sons cultivates, in addition to the former tillage, the seventh of a third of the new patches ;—by this they contrive to live. But in the third generation the same cause for subdivision has still continued ; and if one of the sons of A has had seven sons, each of these grandsons can get but one acre : it might be thought that such a scanty provision was insufficient enough, even when farmed in the very best way ; but it is impossible that they should farm it well, and, what is worse, they are not able to till the

half of it. They still cultivate the same patches, and each of these grandsons tills the seventh of the seventh, of a third of forty-five acres, and the seventh of the seventh, of a third of each of the new patches, which may possibly be placed on the opposite sides of the hill.

This description, however tedious, and apparently trifling, cannot be charged with the slightest exaggeration or embroidery, for examples of it are constantly seen ; and a description of some of its effects may be found by referring to the agricultural evidence of the Irish Poor Inquiry Commission, Appendix F, barony of Murrisk, county of Mayo. It will hardly be believed, that they do not themselves know the precise size of their holdings, which have never been properly surveyed ; and they inherit their promised share or half share of the paternal farm, by halves, or thirds, or sixths, as the case may be,—be the acreage more or less. It is needless to say, that a family cannot subsist upon such a diminutive portion of land ; consequently they take to fishing, to collecting kelp, &c. ; but these being very precarious occupations, especially in the rude and imperfect way in which they are followed, they are still obliged to cling to their little inheritance with as great tenacity as ever. Any sort of industry which they can exercise independently, they are ready to engage in ; but to hire themselves as labourers is impossible, as most of the other farms in the neighbourhood are occupied in the same way ; and those farmers who have most ground, have little inducement to exert themselves, and less to employ labourers : so that the whole population, though anxious for work, become quite unused to the systematic exercise of labour. Their time is occupied in interminable disputes about their respective rights ; in running to the magistrates, who may reside perhaps ten miles from the scene ; and their trivial earnings are expended in costs for summonses, surveyors' fees, and actions for trespass.

Besides all this, each and every individual is liable for the rent of the whole farm ; and though it must be admitted that most agents are ready to divide the rent proportionately, and to open a separate account with each small holder, they imagine that *their* duty stops there, and that the tenants ought to agree among themselves to divide their tillage. Instances were by no means wanting, however, even at the period of the Poor Inquiry in 1835, where the agents still neglected to take that trouble, and still insisted upon getting the rent in a lump sum, or distraining the farm generally ; so that even where the bailiff is most anxious to act fairly by each individual, it is impossible but that the richer or more industrious of the common tenants should be made to suffer occasionally for the indolence or dishonesty of his co-partners,—which constitutes another effectual check to improvement.

It must be obvious now, as was stated above, that the landlord has no power, practically, of substituting a good tenant for a bad one, to till the half of a seventh, of a third of several detached patches of land, occupied by cousins and friends.

It is equally impossible also for him to check the subdivision, for it occurs by the mutual agreement of the inhabitants within the common fence, and without the slightest possibility of the landlord's becoming acquainted with it ; so that the population augments with a rapidity truly frightful, and he dismisses a painful subject from his mind by leaving the country.

It is unnecessary to attempt to unravel any further the tangled web of misery, petty litigation, and indolence, which such a system perpetuates. To an unaccustomed eye, the only wonder is, how the people can possibly manage to exist at all under such a system ; but the difficulties which occur in changing it, have hitherto always appeared more insuperable than its continuance. The tenants frequently assemble, and endeavour to come to a partition ; but the interests of each are differently involved in the transaction, according to the quantity of ground which each holds.

Those who hold enough ground, and to whom therefore the immediate necessity for change is not apparent, appeal *to the wisdom of their ancestors* ; [1] while those who have not enough, still fear that the others will take advantage of them ; and even when they are most sincerely anxious for a division, they are sometimes really unable to afford the expense of removing their cabin to the opposite side of the hill, to which there is no road, and to pay for provision during the first year of their change before their new acre is thoroughly reclaimed. Each wishes to get the arable land, which is invariably near the cluster of houses, and is regardless of the unimproved land at a distance ; and if they succeed in dividing by common consent, it is usually found that each man gets his share (whether that share is ten or two acres) in several different places, scattered up and down, according to the quality of the soil, in different parts of the farm : and though such an imperfect change is a great improvement as compared with the former state of things, because he is able to fence and till each part as he pleases ; yet to *him*, a consolidation of his farm would be of infinitely greater advantage than any lessons which could be inculcated in green crops or in house-feeding.

In many cases the landlord has directed the tenants to come to a partition ; but the latter, not being able to bear the expense of removing their houses and making new fences, have opposed his authority ; or they have imagined that he had some secret design of his own, that he would never trouble himself to allot roods or half acres to poor fellows who had no other resource ; or he may have openly said, that he thought no man ought to have less than four acres, and the others ought to find labour elsewhere, which *they* know too well is not to be had ; or that they ought to emigrate, which they are quite unsuited to, having large families, and not being accustomed to hard work : so they have resisted the whole scheme strenuously. Again, in many cases, before a successful partition can be effected, some of the tenants must be located at a considerable distance, and fresh land must be brought into cultivation, to which it is absolutely necessary to make roads, for access to sea-weed, lime-quarries, &c. ; but this is usually beyond the power of an individual landlord, and the road-laws at present are not effective for this purpose. The censure and the praise bestowed on the Grand Jury (or road) laws, has been alike exaggerated ; but it must be admitted by all parties, that they have been inoperative for good in many populous townlands in which, or near which, no new road has been made or repaired since the institution of the Grand Jury laws, and where nevertheless an increasing cess has been annually raised for the advantage of other neighbourhoods. This grievance is of course most particularly remarkable in those isolated and almost forgotten districts of the country where there are no gentry, where the agents as well as the landlords are non-residents, and where there is at the same time the thickest population, and the most abject misery.

It is clear that in a country such as has been just described,—where no motive exists which has hitherto been found strong enough to bring the people to co-operate among themselves, or the landlords to co-operate with their tenants, or with one another,—where the interest of each is at present at variance with that of his neighbour,—the greatest blessing which could possibly be devised, would be any system by which these great masses of population could be organized in such a way, as would admit of their employing their waste time and their common energies in useful concert.

Those who say that emigration is necessary from districts so circumstanced, where literally *everything* still remains to be done—where there are no good houses—no fences—no good cultivation—no roads—no woods planted on the steeps—and no drains made in the hollows ; where there is much land fit to be reclaimed, and much material by which the reclaiming can be effected ; must either underrate the expense of emigration very much, and the number of emigrants who must be sent off; or they must overrate the expense of putting the social machine into healthy motion.

The promoters of emigration maintain that we ought to turn the land into grass, and transport the surplus population to some other country. But at whose expense ? It certainly would be a vast advantage to the emigrants themselves, provided they were well selected ; but for that purpose they ought to be the strongest and most enterprising of the community : and would the departure of *these*, leaving the weaker behind, be equally advantageous to the country ? If the state consents to defray the cost of emigration, it will be readily and voluntarily adopted by the young and the enterprising. If they oblige any class to defray the expense against their will, they will commit the grossest injustice : but if they tell the districts that they may tax themselves for the purpose, (which the Irish Poor Law Bill permits,) one or two experiments will immediately prove to them, not only that it will be easier and better to improve cultivation at home, than to send away the best blood and sinews of the community, but it will prove also,— which is a question of practical arithmetic,—that it is *cheaper* like-wise. This most convincing of all arguments need not be here enforced—it is founded upon the experience of facts ; but can only be satisfactorily proved to the parties themselves, by giving them the power to make the experiment on the spot : and as there may be many exceptions [2] in which it may possibly be advantageous, the proposition to give the power is very useful.

Moreover, it is to be feared that extrinsic capital cannot be easily or advantageously introduced into these districts in their present state ; but if a proper organization is established, they will create capital within themselves ; and when once it is understood that money is wanted, not for dissipation, but for profitable employment, capitalists will lend to landlords, and landlords will lend to tenants, as much as is required to commence the more obvious improvements.

The unparalleled extent of human misery which exists in the western districts is derived mainly from the system of joint-tenancy above described : other systems are bad, but this is of all the worst ; for it creates not only misery, but actual famine. Those who fancy that written laws are omnipotent, would probably recommend a short cut in legislation, and would prohibit joint-tenancy by enactment at once ; but that would be very unjust as well as impolitic, for under some circumstances of capital and land it is advantageous : or they would discourage it by taxation, which would be very oppressive, for the same reasons.

Let us inquire whether the whole system will not gradually melt away of itself, before the mild influence of a Poor Law administered on the same principles as that of England. Let it be remembered, that a Poor Law providing relief for the able-bodied, however well regulated the system of relief may be, *must* have an immediate practical effect in these districts. During eight months of the year the able-bodied population will not require relief ; but, during the remaining, four, a certain proportion of their, number will gradually begin to apply for admission into the work-house, not from indolence or dissipation only, but because their annual stock of potatoes is exhausted, and because they can get no work. The occupier of three or four acres must always be poor, but he is not destitute ; the occupier of one acre “ held in Co.” when he is not strong enough to travel for work, is necessarily destitute during a month or two, and, when he is so, he can have no earthly resource but to “ take his bag on his back,” and become a beggar. It is to that last extremity that they are annually reduced in great numbers, and periodically (when the crop has failed) in crowds. The only difference will be, that instead of travelling far a-field, raising a tax in kind upon those who are but one degree removed from destitution themselves, they will enter the workhouse, (where their support will be defrayed in equal proportion, by farmer and landlord,) and they will be obliged to submit to irksome regulations, which, if their destitution has been occasioned by improvidence, will be a check upon its repetition : but this, which will be a very great improvement, is not all.

The great advantage of the new system is that the pauper *will receive relief from the district to which he belongs* ; for, in truth, every district of tolerable size can give an industrious, able-bodied man an opportunity of working profitably for himself, if a proper organization is given to it to develop its powers ; and, if the persons taxed for the relief of the pauper are the persons who can really enable him to find profitable employment, it must be presumed they will do so. But care must be taken *at the same time*, to stimulate the man's own exertions, by workhouse restraint, or some such sufficient test, so that both parties should feel a common interest in the matter. The parties seeking relief and the parties taxed to afford relief should be mutually impelled by different motives, acting at the same time, to seek out a source of profitable employment. Is it not clear, for example, that if one of the joint-tenancies above described were considered a little union, and were equally taxed to support its own destitute, they would never have continued to occupy their land in such a ruinous manner ? The cogent bond of their common interest would have formed a motive of action, before which all smaller difficulties in arranging the terms of agreement would have vanished, as soon as there appeared a probability that a continuance of the old system of joint-tenancy would reduce some of the co-partners to destitution ; for the richest and largest holders, as they would pay the largest share towards the new tax, would have been as anxious as they have hitherto been backward, in consenting to the division ; and the poorer and smaller occupiers, who could least afford any additional charge, would have been equally zealous on that account.

But *hitherto the joint tenancy has always escaped* the burthen of supporting their own destitute, and any of the co-partners who are reduced to destitution, go to raise alms elsewhere. It is quite notorious that the mendicants in Ireland *always go out of the district* ; and that, when they levy the tax of alms, it is *done unequally* : so that the rich, who have the greatest influence in the employment of the able-bodied, have not a proportionate interest in relieving themselves from the tax which the unprofitable existence of the latter occasions. If the landlords, or the state, or any other body with sufficient power, had been compelled to provide for the destitute, they would also have found means to dissolve such a system, as soon as it threatened to lead to destitution : but it is contended, that neither the landlord nor the state could do it as effectually as the tenants ; for if it was found to be the sole duty of the landlord,—even though it should be evidently for the good of the tenants likewise,—they would contrive to shut their eyes to the fact, and would try to get as much as possible out of the landlord before they consented, and more, perhaps, than he could really afford ; and it would be all difficulty and counteraction :—and this is precisely what has sometimes occurred, when landlords have taken the initiative, from good motives, which were mistaken or undervalued by the people. On the other hand, as it will also be for the advantage of the landlord in the end, that any system which prevents the exercise of labour should be altered,—and as some expenses are to be borne, and as he has necessarily so much more influence and authority, (where the tenants and he feel that their interests are identical,)—it is most important that he should be brought to understand his own interest too, and that he should be induced to take his share of the good work.

It may here be said by objectors, that, practically speaking, it is doubtful whether the evil has not already gone too far ; and whether it is not now too late to introduce regulations which, abstractedly good, from having been delayed too long, are now inapplicable. The extreme poverty of the population on the Western coast is certainly not to be believed unless it is seen ; but, nevertheless, their situation is not so desperate as is sometimes described : there is no joint-tenancy which has not some grazing, bog, mountain, or other outlet, actually attached to it,—on which, if some of the tenants were once placed, they would not be most essentially relieved. But the common rights of the whole tenantry will prevent this, until they

all have become equally anxious for a partition. What is thus true of a joint-tenancy, is more true, of a whole estate, which would be incalculably benefited in the aggregate by an improved arrangement, and is still more true of a union of estates ; for it is singular to remark, that these extensive districts, and each of these undivided farms, are precisely in an analogous position ; large tracts of thinly-peopled grazing, and moor, [3] and bog, are intermingled with tracts of thickly-peopled town-lands : all that is wanted, both in the joint-tenancies and in the whole unions, is organization.

Let us now proceed to inquire what will probably be the course pursued, if the principles of the English Poor Law Bill be practically adopted in Ireland.

In the first place, then, let us assume, for the present, that the combined attention of the Boards of Guardians, and of the Central Commissioners, is able to devise a system of regulation, and discipline, and labour in the workhouse, which (notwithstanding the comparatively good diet which is offered) will effectually dissuade able-bodied persons, who can maintain themselves elsewhere, from seeking admission within its walls ; and that the paupers who may be obliged to enter the house when their stock of potatoes is exhausted, will leave it as soon as they can possibly obtain an independent livelihood. The number of these claimants during the summer months may possibly be considerable at first, as these districts have hitherto been relieved from a great proportion of their able-bodied paupers by the migration of the population as mendicants : a majority of the paupers wander *far away* from these districts, *and the poor from the richer counties never enter them*. So, as the rate-payers will be suddenly called upon to bear an unaccustomed burthen, they will certainly require the particular care and assistance of the central authority. But when the guardians inquire from whence each individual applicant comes, they will, in nine cases out of ten, find that he comes from some over-peopled copartnership ; and when they perceive that they and their constituents have to bear a tax for the support of these poor people, a light will break in upon the evils of joint-tenancy, which they had hitherto striven to exclude from their minds.

The landlords will next be written to ; they will be told of the starving situation of certain town-lands—naming them,—and they will be informed of the expense which the system of joint-tenancy entails on them, as equal sharers in the burthens of the union. There will be no longer any difficulty in ascertaining which town-land is worst—the rent-book will no longer be their only guide ; but (having got an effectual test in the workhouse, of the *bonâ fida* destitution of their dependants,) when the landlords wish to remedy it they will no longer go upon any abstract theory of agriculture, but they will direct their steps forthwith to those particular town-lands where the scarcity of food, as tested by workhouse relief, has proved greatest. Hitherto they have always been looked upon with distrust by their tenants when they have attempted any useful interference with the arrangements of the latter, and it has required years of constant residence to inspire confidence ; but when it is obviously the interest of all parties to understand one another,—when the motive of the landlord cannot be misunderstood,—when the tenants feel that it is no longer his interest to drive them to destitution, but on the contrary, his direct pecuniary interest to raise them above it,—ten years will be gained in one day, and one of the chief difficulties will have been overcome.

It is unnecessary to say, however, that the good work will be gradual ; some townlands will be more easily and quickly managed than others, and some landlords will be inattentive ; but as different estates will be included in the same union, the neighbouring landlords will do their best to stimulate the absentee, to exhort and act as arbitrator for his tenants, and to facilitate the partition by every means in their power.

As the difficulties which attend the dissolution of extensive copartnerships in land are gradually overcome by these united exertions, the more industrious tenants, when each gets the sole control over his own holding, though he has no ready money, will speedily collect more manure, and will then be enabled to let off a portion of his manured ground for conacre (or potato-ground) to those who before were reduced, from want of it, to go into the workhouse, and will *make money* from the labour of the latter which he will take in exchange. For where there are no shops, no butchers, and no bakers, money is rarely wanted except to pay rent. And although theorists argue correctly about the advantage of money-wages, it is certain, that what the labourer here wants is potato-ground, and this is just what the farmer can give ; gradually these labourers will depend more on labour and less on their diminutive holdings, and gradually, as convertible agriculture is next introduced, which will cause a demand for labour,—and as they learn to become more skilful labourers,—they will depend more upon wages and less upon conacre. The landlords too, finding that their exertions are no longer misunderstood, will encourage their tenants to employ labourers on improved cultivation, instead of striving eternally at making large farms,—and they will thereby render the report of the able-bodied to the workhouse unnecessary ; and finding that their rent-rolls improve by this useful sort of superintendence, they will leave Cheltenham and Boulogne, to busy themselves with their practical duties, instead of discussing speculative opinions. They may possibly find themselves impeded in their operations at first by the difficulties which Irish landlords experience in borrowing money, and by the insufficiency of the Grand Jury Laws, and they will apply their minds to suggesting some simple improvements in certain local matters, which will tend to remove these obstructions.

[1] A fact.

[2] Such as female orphans, or young widows, who have no prospect of leaving the workhouse in any other way. is required to commence the more obvious improvements.

[3] A notice might easily be added here, of the facility with which large tracts may be reclaimed by a very trifling outlay, with the aid of the small capitals of the peasantry—but that it is better to refer generally to the instructive little books of Messrs. Blacker and Kennedy on that subject.

The Present Poverty of Ireland Convertible Into the Means of Her Improvement, Under a Well ... (1838)

Author : Robert Bermingham Clements Clements

Publisher : C. Knight, and Co.

Year : 1838

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : Google

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August 29 2011