

A Visit

To

CONNAUGHT

In The Autumn of 1847.

A Letter Addressed

*To The Central Relief Committee of
Society of Friends, Dublin.*

By

James H. Tuke

With Notes of a Subsequent visit to Erris.

LONDON :
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ADVERTISEMENT.

REPRESENTATIONS made to me respecting some of the statements in the former edition of this pamphlet, induced me personally to re-investigate the occurrences referred to. This second visits whilst it has enabled me to correct some particulars, has served essentially to confirm my previous statements of the condition of Ireland and of the evils which appear to be among the radical causes of her misery, and I trust that the careful revision which the pamphlet has undergone, together with the additional information obtained during the recent visits will entitle it to the confidence of the public, and will render this edition more worthy of the attention of those who kindly expressed their approbation of the former;

York, 3rd mo. 8, 1848.

A LETTER,

&c.

When I had the pleasure of meeting you, a few weeks ago, in Dublin, on my return from a journey through a considerable portion of Ireland, you expressed a wish that I should, communicate to you the result of my observations on the condition of those parts of the country which I had visited, and their prospects during the coming winter. To gain information on these points, and to ascertain the working of the new poor-law, and the probability of its being brought into efficient action in the worst districts of Ireland, were the chief objects of this tour. I thought these objects would be most effectually attained by devoting my attention chiefly to Connaught ; and accordingly, though I visited several other districts, my time was mostly passed in that western province.

This province being, as a whole, by far the poorest and most destitute in Ireland, I thought that it was most important to ascertain particularly its condition and prospects. If Connaught could be effectually raised, in the scale of society, many would cease to despair of the future elevation of Ireland

in general. I cannot suppose that the views which I have taken, and which I have ventured to express in the course of this letter, will be of value to you, who are so well acquainted with the state of Ireland ; but I hope that in an emergency like the present, it may not be deemed wholly impertinent to throw into the general treasury a few imperfect suggestions as to the means by which some, at least, of the miseries of Ireland may be alleviated or removed.

Few things have struck me more since I have become personally acquainted with Ireland, than the very inadequate knowledge which prevails among my countrymen generally, of the great variety in the circumstances and condition of the people, which is found throughout that country. The North and East indeed, are generally distinguished from the other parts, but that these differ among themselves as much as the North differs from the South, seems to be generally overlooked. All of these are considered by many persons as equally the seats of poverty and violence. The horrible outrages of Tipperary and Roscommon are often charged alike upon the more peaceable inhabitants of Donegal and Mayo. I believe that you will agree with me, that Ireland, to be understood, must be considered in its separate parts.

Before proceeding to the particular notice of Connaught, I would venture to express my sincere satisfaction in the recent measure of Parliament, by which the long debated question, as to whether the property of the country should be chargeable with the support of the poor, is decided. At the same time, the question, whether the wants of the poor can immediately be thus provided for, cannot, I believe, be answered by a simple affirmative or negative. Before replying to it, we must divide Ireland into two great portions, and consider the question with reference to them, separately. The first portion would include the county of Donegal, the province of Connaught, comprising Leitrim, Roscommon, Sligo, Mayo and Galway, and the greater portion of Clare, Limerick, Kerry and Cork, which may be considered as embracing three millions of the population : the other—including the remaining districts of Ireland,—with a population of about five millions. In each of these divisions there may be districts which do not belong to the class in which they are placed, but generally speaking it may be considered, that there is, in the second division, sufficient wealth to meet the claims of the Poor-Law, particularly after so abundant a harvest as the past. The chief difficulty appears to arise from the reluctance of the proprietors and occupiers of land to carry out, in good faith, the provisions of the act.

With respect to the larger portion of the first division, it does appear very doubtful whether there exists either the wealth or the necessary machinery for the carrying out of this law ; and it will doubtless be to this division that your attention, as the administrators of relief, will be principally directed during the approaching season of renewed suffering and misery. A very large portion of this suffering will be found among the wretched inhabitants of Connaught.

As this letter may probably fall into the hands of some persons who are less acquainted than yourselves with the statistics of Ireland, it may be well to state, that Connaught contains an area of 4,392,043 acres, with a population, in 1841, of 1,418,859 ; the net annual value, according to the Poor-Law valuation, being £1,465,642 17s. 6d., and the province is divided into 19 Unions. Leinster, with a population and area but little larger, is valued at £4,624,341 15s. 4d., and is divided into 33 Unions. A consideration of these facts, coupled with the circumstance that considerably more than half of the population of Connaught reside in mud cabins of the worst description, with only one room, and that there are 67,000 labourers with little or no employment, exhibit strongly its general poverty. By the report of Lord Devon's Commission, it appears that there are in this province 1,906,000 acres (nearly half the whole) of unimproved or waste land, of which 1,156,000 might be drained and reclaimed for cultivation or pasturage, leaving 750,000 acres considered incapable of improvement at a remunerative cost. And let it not be supposed that the other half of the province, described as cultivated, is so in the sense which that term implies in Dublin or England : a well-cultivated farm is as rare in Connaught as the reverse is in the county of Lincoln or in the Lothians of Scotland. Here and there amid the wilderness of waste land and half-cultivated farms, the eye is gladdened with one, which would be creditable in England, rendering doubly painful the contrast which the desolate and weed-choked fields around it present. Galway and Mayo, the two largest counties in the province, contain 1,500,000 acres of unimproved land, nearly two-thirds of which is capable of profitable reclamation. Of this district, the report above alluded to remarks, " That it contains a larger

extent of unimproved waste land than any other portion of Ireland, yet a large portion of it presents unusual facilities for reclamation and cultivation, particularly in the baronies of Erris, Burrishoole, Ross, Ballinahinch, &c., which being partly situated on the west coast, can procure manure in abundance." Here and there, especially in Galway, I was cheered by noticing considerable agricultural operations in progress : in Connemara, upon an extensive estate recently purchased, the owner by giving long leases, and offering his land at moderate rents, has induced several wealthy farmers from Scotland, England, and other parts of Ireland to settle upon it, and they are rapidly converting a dreary wilderness into fruitful fields. A large portion of this estate is what is termed bog-land, easily drained and improved, and producing large crops of corn, turnips, wurzel, or parsnips. I never remember to have seen more abundant or more magnificent green crops than on some patches of land which had apparently been newly reclaimed from the bog. From 1s. to 2s. 6d. per acre is the rent obtained, with a long lease, for the farms (or rather for the large uncultivated tracts marked out for such), on this estate, comparatively few of which are yet occupied. From the little knowledge of farming which I possess, I do not hesitate to express a belief, that to an enterprising farmer of capital these wastes of Connemara offer a highly profitable investment. The security of life is as great here as in England.

The cultivated land in Connaught is generally divided into very small farms. In Mayo it is so minutely divided, that out of about 46,000 farms, 44,000 are under 16 acres, and held by men too poor to employ any hired labourers. It must always be remembered how much the division of land in many parts of Ireland, has been promoted by the landlords to increase their own political influence. Throughout Mayo and Galway (especially the former) there is a very considerable portion of land left waste and uncultivated, which in other years had produced crops. This is no doubt in part owing to the decrease in the population, which is much more perceptible than I had anticipated ; the inmates of whole villages have been swept away, and in Mayo alone the diminution of the population, by death or emigration, is estimated by many persons at 100,000, or one quarter of the whole. Mayo, it is well known, is the county of all others, which has furnished England each year with the largest proportion of Irish reapers ; and it is also from this district that a very large proportion of the crowd of wretched paupers came, who, during the past year have added so heavily to our poor rates, and spread fever throughout England. Not, indeed, that I blame them for coming. Had they quietly remained in Ireland, to die of starvation, the usual charge of " helplessness" would have been more properly applied to them.

Throughout the province of Connaught, the total quantity of corn and green crops is very small, compared with the wants of the population ; and in Galway and Mayo especially, it seemed to be the common opinion that not more than a three months' supply existed. And so great is the present dearth of food among the poorest classes, and the consequent insecurity of the crops, that in almost every field of turnips or potatoes worth protecting, a hut is erected for the accommodation of a watcher. Potatoes were generally scarce, and selling at a famine price, though many persons were hastening the sale of their stock, as the disease had made its appearance. In some places the crops of mangel wurzel and turnips were really good ; but, in general, owing to the entire ignorance of the cultivation of the turnip, the farmers and cottiers have sown the seed like grass, and, having omitted almost all care or thinning, it has grown entirely to top, with a small taper root like the radish. Notwithstanding this, the value of the distribution of this seed can hardly be over-estimated ; even the tops and scanty root of the turnip have formed the diet of thousands of poor people, many of whom would otherwise have perished, and multitudes are daily looking with anxiety to the failure even of this subsistence. [1] At least one-fourth of the rural population of Connaught are at present existing upon these turnips or turnip-tops, boiled with a few half-decayed potatoes ; on the sea coast they eke out this miserable food with sea-weed and sand-eels. Numbers are daily added to the class of turnip eaters, for the scanty supply of potatoes or of oats is rapidly diminishing. Employment the labourers of Connaught cannot obtain, although they would cheerfully work at 6d., and even less, per day. Numbers assured me that they would gladly work for their daily food, and I heard of many instances where one quart of meal was all the remuneration that able-bodied men received for their day's work. Unless some immediate steps, therefore, be taken to give remunerative employment to districts like these, I can only look forward to the coming winter as even far more fearful and more fatal than the past. One shrinks from the thought that these dreadful scenes are to be repeated. During that period, the roads in many places

became as charnel-houses, and several car and coach drivers have assured me that they rarely drove anywhere without seeing dead bodies strewn along the road side, and that in the dark they had even gone over them. A gentleman told me that in the neighbourhood of Clifden, one inspector of roads had caused no less than 140 bodies to be buried, which he found scattered along the highway. In some cases, it is well known, that where all other members of a family have perished, the last survivor has earthed up the door of his miserable cabin, to prevent the ingress of pigs and dogs, and then laid himself down to die in this fearful family vault.

The soil and climate of Connaught are, generally, peculiarly suited to the growth of flax, but until the present season comparatively little attention has been paid to the cultivation of a crop so highly important to Ireland. It is pleasing, however, to notice that in the county of Mayo, 2,499 acres are reported in the constabulary returns for this year. Half of this large quantity has been grown in the neighbourhood of Newport (where three years ago hardly 50 acres of flax could be found), upon the estate of Sir R. O'Donnell, who has done much towards proving the truth of the statement, that the annual import of flax into Great Britain and Ireland, amounting in value to four or five million pounds sterling, might be grown in Ireland, and saved to the kingdom. Less than 300,000 acres of the waste lands of Connaught would be sufficient for this purpose. Sir R. O'Donnell's name has been so frequently mentioned in connection with the growth of flax in Mayo, that it may be well to state a few particulars relative to the proceedings on his estate.

At the time of my visit to the neighbourhood of Newport, nearly *one thousand* persons, principally women, were engaged by Sir R. O'Donnell, in harvesting the crops ; the women earned 4d. per day and the men 8d. Even at this miserable rate of wages, I have seldom seen more cheerful or industrious labourers. In some places this work was just ending, and I was much struck with the earnest appeals, which the poor creatures made to us, to obtain work for them, during the coming season, supposing, from the inquiries made, that we had some power of assisting them. " If we don't get work we will all die, your honour." " Won't your honour get us work for the winter, or we will all starve," was the constant and touching appeal ; and yet this was from the people whom we daily hear branded as idle and unwilling to work.

Nearly half of the flax grown around Newport is in Sir R. O'Donnell's own hands, and he is purchasing the remainder from his tenants, at the rate of £5 to £7, and in some cases £9 per acre. The rent of the land on which the flax is grown, is often from 30s. to 35s. per acre. The seed costs about 25s., and the two diggings and other expenses which are required may be reckoned at 28s., to which must be added the cost of the extra quantity of manure after so exhausting a crop as flax. After these outlays there can be but little left for the tenant to live upon. At the same time my other inquiries left no doubt on my mind that the value of a crop of flax did mostly leave a very handsome remuneration, after the payment of all the charges attendant on its cultivation. [2] Several growers in the neighbourhood stated to me that their crops were worth from £16 to £20 per acre. Sir R. O'Donnell, amongst other considerable improvements, is building a flour and skutchiug mill at Newport. [3] Whilst writing upon Newport, I ought not to omit to mention the exertions of the protestant clergyman there (G. R. Gildea) ; they are indeed above all praise. He has established a small linen manufactory, which employs a considerable number of hand-loom weavers. During the past winter, nearly 700 women were engaged in hand skutching and spinning flax, who earned from 3s. to 3s. 6d. per week. This gentleman, like many others, most strongly objected to the distribution of gratuitous relief. But this doctrine, of course, implies that work must be provided for the starving people, who are wholly unable to provide it for themselves.

The landlords of Mayo, as well as of many other portions of Connaught, as a class (there are many noble exceptions who feel and see the impolicy and evil of such proceedings), are pursuing a course which cannot fail to add to the universal wretchedness and poverty which exist. The corn crops, bountiful as they may be, are not sufficient to meet the landlords' claim for rent and arrears contracted during the last two years of famine, and it is at least not unnatural for the tenant to be unwilling to give up that, without which he must certainly perish. In every direction, the agents of the landlords, armed with the full powers of the law, are at work—everywhere one sees the driver or bailiff

“canting” the small patches of oats or potatoes—or keepers placed over the crop, whose charges, in some cases amounting to as much as the rent distrained for, must be paid by the unfortunate tenant. Even the produce of seed, distributed through the agency of benevolent associations, has been totally swept away. To add to the universal distress caused by this system of seizure, eviction is in many cases practised, and not a few of the roofless dwellings which meet the eye have been destroyed at the instance of the landlords, after turning adrift the miserable inmates ; and this even at a time like the present, when the charity of the whole world has been turned towards the relief of this starving peasantry. Whilst upon the island of Achill, I saw a memorable instance of this course of proceeding, at the wretched fishing village of Kiel, belonging to Sir R. O’Donnell. Here, a few days previous to my visit, some twenty families had been ejected, making, as I was informed, with a previous recent eviction, about forty. [4] A crowd of these miserable ejected creatures collected around us, bewailing, with bitter lamentations, their hard fate. One old grey-headed man came tottering up to us, bearing in his arms his bed-ridden wife ; and, putting her down at our feet, pointed in silent agony to her, and then to his roofless dwelling, the charred timbers of which were scattered in all directions around. This man said he owed little more than one year’s rent, and had lived in the village, which had been the home of his forefathers, all his life. Another man, with five motherless children, had been expelled, and their “boiling-pot” sold for 3s. 6d. Another family, consisting of a widow and four young children, had their only earthly possession, “a little sheep,” seized, and sold for 5s. 6d. ! But it is needless to multiply cases ; instances sufficient have been given to show the hardships and misery inflicted. From this village alone, at least one hundred and fifty persons had been evicted, owing from half a year’s to a year and a half’s rent. What prospects are there for these miserable outcasts ? Death indeed must be the portion of some, for their neighbours, hardly richer than themselves, were principally subsisting upon turnip-tops ; whilst the poor-house of the Union at Westport is nearly forty miles distant. Turnips taken—can we say stolen ?—from the fields, as they wearily walked thither, would be their only chance of support. Some indeed would never reach their destination—death would release them from their sufferings, and the landlord from his burden. This was the case in one instance, a few days before my visit. A strong active man was found dead from exhaustion on the road side, within a short distance of a house, which he had vainly endeavoured to reach. Whilst attending the meeting of the Board of Guardians, at the poor-house at Westport, I had the opportunity of hearing a number of these cases examined and sifted ; and from each heard a repetition of the same dismal tales of want and cruel treatment, affecting, by their peculiar harshness, even those who were daily witnesses of similar scenes. Of the 100 persons admitted that day, nearly one-half were the evicted tenantry of Kiel ; and during the previous week 75 cases were admitted from Achill, nearly the whole of them the evicted tenants of the same landlord. It may be proper to state, that nearly all of these poor people were provided by the “driver” who ejected them with a recommendation to the workhouse, but the Union of West-port, like almost every other in this part of Ireland, is terribly in debt, in fact bankrupt ; and the master of the house strongly remonstrated against further admissions, declaring that he had “neither clothes nor bedding for the women and children,” who formed five-sixths of the admissions.

How little the landlords of this part of Ireland are cognisant of the circumstances of the population on their vast uncultivated or neglected estates, may be judged of by the fact that Sir R. O’Donnell stated in my presence that he was entirely ignorant of the evictions which had taken place in Achill, about 25 miles distant from his residence at Newport, although the poor creatures, in coming to the union-house, must necessarily pass through the town where he resided.

I have stated these circumstances as affording a striking example of the working of laws relative to landed property, over which the hereditary owner has no controul. He is the inheritor of very extensive entailed estates (130,000 acres), deeply encumbered before coming into his possession, and few men of his class are struggling more earnestly or working more zealously to obtain a sound position, and few men would be more benefited (and of this I believe he is sensible) by the removal of every restriction, and every privilege by which the system of mere nominal ownership is maintained in Ireland. To be able to sell every acre of land on which he has not the capital to enable him to discharge the duties of ownership, would be alike a blessing to himself and people of Mayo. His lands, if brought under fair remunerative cultivation, would supply employment directly and indirectly, to all the unemployed thousands living upon them ; and the human beings whom it now seems to be his

policy to drive from his property, would then become a source of wealth, and their petty holdings might resemble the cottage allotments of some portions of England. Sir R. O'Donnell has, brought several considerable farms upon his estate, which are let to good tenants, under very fair cultivation ; but the difficulty which usually exists on these embarrassed estates, of giving adequate leases for the investment of capital for considerable improvements, is a great barrier to this course of proceeding, and I believe that a great portion of the wretched cultivation which prevails throughout Ireland, may be traced to this circumstance. If lands in Mayo were as secure to the farmer as they are on the banks of the Mississippi, I see no reason why they should not be "settled" and cultivated by the men who are crossing the Atlantic to extend the cultivation and increase the resources of the United States. Nor have I been able, after the most careful inquiries and consideration of the subject, to find, in the conduct of the men of Connaught, a justification of the opinion that they would be less industrious in the glens and on the mountain sides of their own loved Erin, than they are found to be in the land of strangers.

I have asked the emigrant Irish farmer in America, why he did not toil at home, from "sunrise to sundown" as he does there, and I have asked the emigrant about to leave his native shore for the unknown West, why he did not employ his little capital and labour in improving the land of Ireland ? The answer invariably has been that they would much prefer toiling and expending their little capital at home, if they had land at a fair rent, and leases which would enable them to enjoy with certainty the fruits of their labour. The small farmers of Ireland are, too generally, rack-rented tenants at will, and have no confidence in the justice or mercy of those who have the land in charge.

It is probable that one-fourth, *at least*, of the whole population of Connaught will require to be supported during the coming winter ; in Mayo, as well as in some of the Unions of Galway, Leitrim, Roscommon and Sligo, nearer one-half. The total inability of many of these Unions to collect a rate, at all commensurate with the wants of their population, may be easily shown by the instance of the Union of Westport, which with a population, in 1841, of 77,953 persons, is valued for the poor's-rate at £38,876, giving little more than 10s. per head for every person in the Union ; a rate of 7s. in the pound had just been struck. During the seven months of the operation of the Temporary Relief Act, a sum, larger than the whole annual value of the Union was expended, £43,617 ; whilst at one period more than two-thirds of the population, 57,253 persons, received daily rations. The net annual valuation for the whole of Connaught does not give more than about 20s. per head for the whole population, while in Leinster it is nearly £3, There are, it must be observed, some electoral divisions in Connaught, which give little more than 5s., and some in the county of Donegal are as low as 3s. It will not then be a matter of surprise, that nearly the whole of the Unions in this province are deeply in debt, and many bankrupt, and that several of the poor-houses, with scarcely a sixth of their full number of inmates, have been closed against further admissions. At Clifden, in Galway, the Union is bankrupt, and I found that a few days previous to my visit, the wretched inmates of the poor-house had been expelled and the doors closed. Many of these poor creatures had taken up their abode in some holes or cavities in a hill side adjoining the town, where gravel appeared to have been dug. Their sunken faces and wasted forms told too clearly the tale of hunger and privation, and reminded me of the worst scenes I had witnessed, whilst visiting some parts of the country last winter. I cannot easily forget the countenance of one poor lad, about fourteen years of age, who with a hollow choking voice begged of me " a little meal to keep the life in him." The ghastly livid face and emaciated form, wasted with hunger and sores, of this breathing skeleton, told me that to him this world would soon pass away.

The estates which compose the Union of Clifden are (like most others in Connaught) mortgaged to nearly their full value. The nominal owner of a rent-roll of thousands, lives either in Dublin or abroad, or shut up in his castle, the dependant of the mortgagees, who allow him a pittance of a few hundreds a year. The system of nominal ownership, either of bankrupt residents or of absentees, is certainly one of the greatest impediments to the improvement of Ireland. But, whatever may be the poverty of the nominal possessor, the land has yielded and will yield its produce to some one ; and is not he who receives the produce of the soil, whatever relation he may stand in, bound to exercise the duties which belong to ownership ?

The difficulty which exists in carrying out the provisions of the new Poor Law in Connaught, arising from its poverty, is greatly increased by the ignorance and want of honesty on the part of many of those elected to fill the office of guardian. This difficulty has been partially met by dissolving the local boards in three of the five Unions in Mayo, and appointing paid guardians. The Poor Law Commissioners appear to have been peculiarly fortunate in the selection of officers for the very onerous duty of superintending these Unions. Happily, the other Unions of Mayo have at least one gentleman, in himself a host, who presides over or attends to both, [5] and who, one of the few good resident landlords of Mayo, has done much by his straightforward example and honourable conduct to carry out the intentions of the government. I am sure the name of George Vaughan Jackson will occur to you ; and I may say that he considers the new poor-law will require for its beneficial application to this district, various modifications before it can be at all properly adapted to a state of society so different to that which exists in England, or the more comfortable portions of Ireland. Here poverty and destitution are the unvarying lot of the mass—comfort and independence are hardly known.

The opinion of this gentleman and of several others who have paid deep attention to the subject is, that if the poor-rate were collected entirely from the landlords, thus making it a rent charge, as is the case with the tithes, it would be placed upon a much better footing. Increased facilities for recovering the rate from the estates or property of an absentee proprietor, where he is a head landlord, would be needful, and are so, I think, in any case. This gentleman, like others who are really working for the improvement of the country, felt deeply annoyed and discouraged by the load which the unemployed poor on the estates of absentee or mere nominal proprietors, brings upon him. If each proprietor was responsible only for the rates on his own land, he would, in many cases, soon free himself from the burden of pauperism by profitable employment of the labourers on his estate. It appears to me, however, that there are serious objections to making the poor's rate a rent charge, and also to the further division of rateable districts.

The difficulty of obtaining suitable collectors, or of collecting a rate when struck, may be inferred from the fact, that in one Union in Mayo, although a commission of 2s. 6d. in the pound, or £1,000 for collecting £8,000, was offered, it was quite a matter of uncertainty whether any one could be found to accept of the office.

I will here refer, although somewhat out of place, to the condition of the union-houses of Connaught. I have already stated that owing to the want of funds, great difficulty exists in many of the Unions in providing for the inmates, but I am happy in being able to state that a large number are well managed, and are in an improved condition, as compared with last year. The Union-houses of Sligo and Boyle are in beautiful order. The worst which I visited was that of Carrick-upon-Shannon : it was in a miserable state, and the doors were closed against further admissions ; and although built for seven hundred, had but two hundred and eighty inmates ; the gates were besieged by seventy or eighty wretched beings who in vain implored for admission. Numbers of them were in various stages of fever, which was terribly prevalent in the neighbourhood, and the fever sheds over-crowded. Two months before my visit, the doors of the poor-house were opened and the inmates expelled, entailing upon them most dire misery. Stern necessity has, in a considerable degree, overcome the strong prejudices of the poor people to enter these houses, and they are now generally full. [6]

Nearly two-thirds of the inmates of the Union-houses of Connaught are, as may be expected, children, many of them orphans. The neglected condition of the children in the Union-houses is a subject which often struck me as deserving serious attention. In many Unions, owing to their bankrupt state, there are no books, and no means whatever for providing the necessary books and school requisites ; and thus we may see hundreds of children wholly idle and unemployed, where a few pounds expense would enable them to be taught. It is to be regretted that the Irish National School Society allows so favourable an opportunity for educating a large portion of the rising generation to pass away. It is probable, that in the one hundred and thirty Union-houses of Ireland, there are, at least, thirty thousand children under sixteen years of age ; and although it is by no means intended to be inferred that the whole are untaught, yet it is a fact, that a large number are either inefficiently taught or wholly uneducated. In the nineteen houses of Connaught there are about six thousand children, and although in some there are really first-rate schools, the majority are quite insufficiently

supplied with books or teachers, and several are entirely without books—three of the five Unions of Mayo, containing eleven hundred and fifty children (of whom three hundred and fifty are orphans), are thus circumstanced. As these Unions are deeply in debt, we cannot feel surprised that the feeding of the inmates has absorbed all their attention ; and unless private charity or the National School Society supply this want, these children will be still left wholly uneducated ; nor is school learning the only part of education required for these unfortunate children—industrial employment, especially in handicraft trades, might fit them for earning their bread when they leave the house, and employ them profitably whilst there. From the number of able-bodied men and boys who are compelled to enter these Union-houses, agricultural schools or model farms might, I believe, be most beneficially established, and profitably carried out in connexion with them. The value which the farmers place upon agricultural knowledge, or upon skilled agriculturists, has been shown in the few instances where agricultural schools have been established, by their great anxiety to obtain, as servants, the boys educated in them. This subject seems to be well deserving the notice of the Commissioners.

The enormous size of the Unions of Connaught is also a subject which deserves attention ; I have before mentioned that Leinster, which contains nearly the same area and population, has nearly double the number of Unions, and, of course, Union-houses. The Union of Ballina (county Mayo) is about 60 miles in width by 30 in breadth, or nearly three times the size of Middlesex, containing an area of 509,154 acres, with a population of 120,797 persons, and a net annual value of £95,774. Let us suppose an Union stretching from London to Bucking-ham or Oxford in one direction, and from London to Basingstoke in another, with a poor-house at St. Albans, and we shall have a good idea of the extent of the Ballina Union. A consideration of these facts, or a glance at the map, will convince any one how impossible it is for the wretched paupers of the extreme or even central portions of this mammoth Union to receive the relief which, by law, is designed for them. Look to the parish of Belmullet in the barony of Erris, itself as large as the county of Dublin, and conceive for a moment the hard-ships of those who travel 50 miles or more to the poor-house at Ballina. The barony of Erris alone is clearly large enough for one Union, and ought to have its poor-house at Belmullet. [7]

I must be allowed to dwell at some length upon the peculiar misery of this barony of Erris, and parish of Belmullet, which I spent some days in examining. Afflicting as is the general condition of Mayo—fearful as are the prospects of the province in general, there is here yet a lower depth in misery, a district almost as distinct from Mayo as Mayo is from the eastern parts of Ireland. Human wretchedness seems concentrated in Erris, the culminating point of man's physical degradation seems to have been reached in the Mullet. It may seem needless to trouble you with particular descriptions of the digress I have witnessed ; for these descriptions are but repetitions of the far too familiar scenes of the last winter and spring ; although the present seem aggravated by an earlier commencement ; nevertheless; such a condition as that of Erris ought, however painful, to be forced on our attention until remedies are found and applied.

This barony is situated upon the extreme north-west coast of Mayo, bounded on two sides by the Atlantic ocean. The population last year was computed at about 28,000 ; of that number, it is said, at least 2,000 have emigrated, principally to England, being too poor to proceed to America ; and that 6,000 *have perished by starvation, dysentery, and fever*. There is left a miserable remnant of little more than 20,000 ; of whom 10,000, at least, are, strictly speaking, on the very verge of starvation. Ten thousand people within forty-eight hours' journey of the metropolis of the world, living, or rather starving, upon turnip-tops, sand-eels, and sea-weed, a diet which no one in England would consider fit for the meanest animal which he keeps. And let it not be supposed that of this famine diet they have enough, or that each of these poor wretches has a little plot of turnips on which he may feed at his pleasure. His scanty meal is, in many cases, taken from a neighbour hardly richer than himself, not indeed at night, but, with the daring of absolute necessity, at noon-day. [8]

On entering the houseless and uncultivated region of Erris, the traveller is reminded of the wilds of Canada : for some miles hardly an acre of cultivated land or the appearance of human residence greets the eye. Yet this district is reported by the Waste Land Commissioners as peculiarly capable of improvement. After some miles ride I found a resting place for my horse, and leaving him to bait, explored, in the mountains, a village upon the property of Sir R. Palmer, a non-resident proprietor, who

is said to have an income of many thousands from this county, but is doing nothing to improve his estate, or to give employment to this starving portion of his tenantry. Most of the inhabitants of this village were owing a year and a half's rent, for their "sums" of land (uncertain quantities), for which they generally paid from £3 to £8 per year. The condition of the people was deplorable ; and the last year had not left them the means of meeting this demand. The landlord's "driver" was pursuing his calling, seizing almost every little patch of oats or potatoes, and appointing keepers whose charges, amounting to 45s. for the fifteen days allowed between seizure and sale, are added to the rent, and unless the tenant can raise a sum sufficient to satisfy the landlord and his bailiff, his whole crop is liable to be "canted" and himself and family to be evicted.

One poor widow with a large family, whose husband had recently died of fever, had a miserable patch of potatoes seized, and was thus deprived of her only resource for the en-suing winter. What could she do ? The poor-house was thirty miles distant, and it was full. Though many of these ruined creatures were bewailing their cruel fate, I heard nothing like reproach or reflection upon the author of their misery, and the bailiff told me that he had no fear of molestation in pursuing his calling.

In this village fever was terribly prevalent, and the food such as before described, but wanting the sand-eels and seaweed. Advancing further in Erris, the desolation and wretchedness were still more striking. One may indeed at times imagine oneself in a wilderness abandoned to perpetual barrenness and solitude. But here and there scattered over this desolate landscape, little green patches appear unexpectedly where no other sign of man presents itself to you ; as you walk over the bog, and approach nearer to the spot, a curl of smoke arises from what you suppose to be a slight rise on the surface.

To use the graphic language of a late European visitor, "Let the traveller look where he is going, however, or he may make a false step, the earth may give way under his feet, or he may fall into—what ? into an abyss, a cavern, a bog ? No, into a hut, a human dwelling-place, whose existence he has overlooked, because the roof on one side was level with the ground, and nearly of the same consistency,—if he draws back his foot in time, and looks around, he will find the place filled with a multitude of similar huts, all swarming with life." [9] Of what is this human dwelling-place composed ? The wall of the bog often forms two or three sides of it, whilst sods taken from the adjoining surface form the remainder, and cover the roof. Window there is none, chimneys are not known ; an aperture in front, some three or four feet in height, serves the office of door, window and chimney—"light, smoke, pigs, and children, all pass in and out of this aperture." The moment a stranger is observed, the inhabitant retreats within the dwelling ; and if you would converse with its occupant, or explore its interior economy, it is needful to follow him. Do not be afraid, however, for although the only decently-dressed man who may have visited him before is the landlord's driver, the inhabitants of these bog-holes are a quiet harmless race. Stoop low enough, or you may carry away the door-post ; it is perhaps safest to enter on all-fours, as I have had to do—the darkness and stifling turf-smoke for awhile prevent the use of the eyes, and unable to distinguish whence comes the welcome which accosts you, of "God speed your honour," you instinctively grope forward ; beware, however, of too suddenly regaining an erect posture, or your hat may appear through the roof ; for in no part does the height exceed five or six feet. Accustomed by this time to the darkness, which the inmates in vain endeavour to dispel, by lighting small reeds or the pith of rushes, you are able to discern the size of this human burrow : and in a space from seven or ten feet square (I have measured them even less), you may find a family of six or eight persons, men, women and children, in this filthy stinking hole, kneeling or squatting round the peat fire, or lying on the damp ground. As for furniture there is none—one or two broken stools and the "boiling-pot," and in some a slightly raised space, upon which is spread a little damp dirty straw, oftener upon the cold ground, and a ragged coverlid, constitute in many cases the whole. Surely, then, the inmates must be clothed in skins, to protect them from the cold and damp. Alas ! no—rags and tatters are their only garments, and nakedness even is the portion of some, who are obliged to remain in-doors or borrow from their neighbours. I asked a poor inhabitant of one of these hovels near Belmullet, whose dropsy-swollen body showed the effects of "the hunger," what he and his family, six or seven in number, had to subsist on ? In reply to my question, he pointed to some withered turnip-tops lying in the mud, at the door of the cabin, "Upon these."

“ And what else ?” I asked. “ Yonder’s one of the family, seeking for sea-weed, on the beach,” said he, stretching out his skinny arm in that direction, where his daughter was busily engaged. “ And are there many so badly off ?” “ Yes, worse, aback in the mountains ; they are dying there every day.” How could worse be, when he seemed to be enduring a daily death ? But indeed I knew that there were many worse off “ aback in the mountains,” and that deaths from starvation had actually occurred.

At Bangor, through the kindness of your correspondent, W. T. Campbell, I obtained several accurate particulars relative to the state of the barony, from the police returns. In one district, “ where last year 650 families existed, there are now only 500, half of whom are existing upon the small turnips” before described ; and of this food “ not sufficient to last the whole for two months.” [10] In one town-land, “ there are eighty-five landholders, and but *two* stacks of oats, hardly any potatoes, and but few turnips.”

In another parish, there are “ whole villages depopulated,” “ whole town-lands uncultivated,” “ scarcely 400 families remaining out of 587 last year ;” and, on an average of the whole barony, it would be safe to say, “ that one acre is not this year cultivated to forty in ordinary seasons,” and that “ there is not food for the whole for six weeks.”

From Bangor to Belmullet, a distance of twelve miles, the same dreary waste of uncultivated and neglected land extends. In only one place did I observe any sign of improvement or superior cultivation. This was upon an estate of a proprietor named Atkinson ; and as this is the only instance in the barony of any attempt to adopt a perfect system of drainage, it is the more observable, presenting, as the land does, a pleasing contrast to the desolation around it. I never saw what appeared to me more complete or excellent work. It has been executed under the superintendence of a Scotch steward. The earnings of the labourers, indeed, were low enough, barely 6d, per day, but this employment was a great boon to them. It may safely be said of the landlords of Erris generally, that there appears as much want of willingness as of ability on their part to do anything for the benefit of their starving tenantry or wasted estates. Erris affords one of the most perfect specimens of the mischiefs connected with that vicious system, by which landed property remains in the hands of those who are wholly unable to discharge its duties, or even to open the door to allow others to perform them. [11]

At Belmullet, the capital of the district of Erris, a crowd of almost naked perishing creatures were congregating in the streets, in a state of “ perfect destitution,” as the landlord of the inn assured me ; they had no homes, no shelter, no land, no food ; they slept at night in the streets, and begged for support during the day, of neighbours hardly richer than themselves. He told me also that “ six persons had died in the streets in the few previous nights ;” and I am sure that several whom I saw there are now beyond the reach of earthly calamity. The ghastly smile which momentarily played on the countenances of these living skeletons, at the prospect of a little temporary relief, I cannot easily forget. It rendered still more painful the expression of intense anxiety and bitter misery which was exhibited in their livid and death-set features.

Although so much has already been said about evictions, I can hardly omit to mention one instance connected with that system of extermination which many Irish landlords think them-selves justified in adopting. The extreme western portion of Erris is a narrow promontory, called the “Inner Mullet :” upon this wretched promontory, a proprietor named Walsh, re-siding in another part of the country, has an estate, from which he was desirous of ejecting a number of tenants. [12] As no less than one hundred and forty families were to be turned out, and cast forth to beg or perish (for the poor-house was fifty miles distant, and could not have contained them), it was natural to expect some resistance, even to the preliminary process, from persons with such prospects. The landlord, therefore, summoned the sheriff to his assistance—the stipendiary magistrate was requested to call out the police : but a maddened tenantry might overcome a handful of police ; and as it was thought the “ kindest” way to prevent bloodshed by showing a superior power, fifty soldiers, headed by the commanding officer of the district, were added to the force. Surely to the minds of these poor ignorant people, law, police, military, magistracy and proprietary must have seemed alike confederated against them. [13]

I have no particular information respecting the character of these tenants, and it is of course not improbable that some of them may have been far from “ fulfilling their duties :” be this as it may, it is impossible for an Englishman to contemplate one of these wholesale evictions without feelings of the deepest pity for the sufferers and indignation towards the inflictors.

The rent which has usually been obtained from these little tenants has never left them more than the barest means of subsistence upon potato diet ; the corn which they may have grown and the pig which they have fed have always gone to the owner of the soil, and yet the loss of these little plots of land has been and still is a question of existence. Miserable as is the usual condition of the little farmer or cottier, yet when he loses his little holding he is thrown into a condition in comparison of which his former position was highly privileged. The mere labourer, where there are no employers, is an utter outcast, driven to beggary in a country in which the only givers are the poor cottiers or farmers, from whose station he has fallen. It may be said, that this extraordinary visitation presses as heavily upon the owner as the occupier ; and we freely admit that the well-disposed owner, who is in many cases the heir to a deeply-encumbered estate—the result perhaps of a long-continued system of the most reckless extravagance—is truly an object of our sympathy ; nevertheless, the consequences of their ancestors’ course must be considered as a part of their entail. And, where land has been held for generations by tenants who have paid all which they could raise beyond a bare subsistence, is not the landlord morally liable for the risk of extraordinary providences ?

In a country labouring under such complicated evils, it may fairly be doubted whether the ordinary exercise of the rights of property, as practised in England, can be equitably and morally carried out.

Self-preservation is a primary law of our nature, and that course of proceeding, in any community, which powerfully calls that principle into antagonistic action, and leads to resistance on the part of honest men, must be itself unsound. I cannot, therefore, whilst pitying the impoverished landlord, justify his course of proceeding towards his tenants ; [14] and if the primary duty of a good Government be the protection of life and property, is not legislative interference called for to prevent the misery, disease and death, which are inseparable from these wholesale evictions ?

This barony of Erris, as previously remarked, forms part of the large Union of Ballina, and the poor-house is at least forty miles from Belmullet,—forty miles across a wild and dreary waste. The annual value of the barony gives little more than 10s. per head, for a population of whom two-thirds at least will require relief. While in the neighbourhood of Belmullet, I called upon several of your correspondents, who confirmed even the worst accounts I had heard of the wretchedness of the district. They appeared completely dispirited and worn out, and regarded the coming winter with gloomy forebodings and despair. The fever, which is raging throughout this district with unabated severity, prevents their employing the poor women, or visiting their neighbours as heretofore. I hardly visited a family among the more respectable classes, in which I did not find that several of its members had been attacked, or were mourning the loss of their nearest friends. In Belmullet especially, it might truly be called a plague ; and I was warned of the danger of entering the town, as every other house was said to be more or less infected by its deadly presence. If it be thus prevalent among the upper classes, what must it be among the inmates of the miserable hovels, crowded together upon, filthy straw on the mud floors of their cabins, without suitable nourishment or care ! In one family seven were lying prostrate, in another five, in another three were sick ; so fearful were the poor of the infection, that they frequently warned me of entering their cabins. However, the precaution, in particular cases, is hardly needed ; for as it was frequently remarked to me, infection once in these hovels is almost certain to remain.

The very great mortality of the past year in this district was confirmed by all with whom I conversed ; and the belief seems to be general, that unless immediate steps be taken to relieve the people, deaths will be even more numerous, and the effects of famine far more terrible during the coming winter ; and that instead of twenty thousand inhabitants, ten thousand only will be left. It is a state of things which makes one unhappy to write about, how much more to witness. At Belmullet, upon the inner Mullet (that *ultima Thule* of human misery), at Bangor, at Rossport, at Pullatomas—everywhere

I witnessed the same extent of waste land—the same neglect of cultivated land—every-where crowds of wretched beings imploring vociferously for food or work,—“ Feed us or we die,” seems written on the countenances of every one. [15] I have visited the wasted remnants of the once noble Red Man on his reservation grounds in North America, and explored the “ negro quarter” of the degraded and enslaved African, but never have I seen misery so intense, or *physical* degradation so complete, as among the dwellers in the bog-holes of Erris.

“ Who shall enumerate the crazy huts
 And tottering hovels, whence do issue forth
 A ragged offspring, with their upright hair,
 Crowned like the image of fantastic Fear ?

 Shrivelled are their lips ;
 Naked and coloured like the soil, the feet
 On which they stand, as if thereby they drew
 Some nourishment, as trees do by their roots,
 From earth the common mother of us all.
 Figure and mien, complexion and attire.
 Are leagued to strike dismay ; but outstretched hand
 And whining voice denote them suppliants
 For the least boon that pity can bestow.”

It is impossible to view the scenes which we have vainly endeavoured to describe, and even those of a less aggravated character, which present themselves to the traveller in so many parts of Ireland, without earnestly inquiring what can be done for such multitudes of our fellow-creatures, whom we are bound to view as claiming the consideration of brethren, not only by the ties of our common humanity, but also by the peculiar ones of national fellowship ; nor can we restrict ourselves to the question, how the present calls of their hunger may be appeased, but we instinctively inquire how their condition may be permanently improved ? These feelings must be my apology for now referring, not only to present remedies, but also to some of the measures which appear to be absolutely required as the first steps in the elevation of the people.

[1] By a return kindly furnished me by William Todhunter, who last year so energetically undertook the distribution of the green crop seeds (principally turnips), placed at the disposal of the Committee of the Society of Friends by the government, it appears, that 36,196lb of seed were distributed to 40,903 persons, and that 9,652 acres were cultivated with these crops in various districts of Ireland.

In the county of Mayo 16,666 lb of seed were distributed by W. Todhunter, and 15,680lb by the late Lieutenant White, making a total of 32,346 lb of seed in this impoverished county alone, by which at least 8000 acres were sown, the produce of which is estimated at 190,040 tons of food. It is probable that the whole of the land upon which it was grown would have remained untilled had it not been for this timely grant on the part of the government. The subscribers to the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends will be interested in bearing that this Committee has purchased £5000 worth of turnip-seed for distribution amongst the poorest classes during the coming spring, and that arrangements have already been entered into for its distribution.

[2] Since the publication of the first edition Sir B. O'Donnell has informed me, through a mutual friend, that the flax grown upon his estate was sown too late in the season to produce an average crop, and that in its growth and purchase he was merely acting on behalf of a firm in Manchester, which he had induced to enter extensively into the cultivation of the flax crop. The former fact will of course account for the low price given. Sir R. O'D. also informs me, that the rent stated by me to be paid by the tenants is greatly above the average. I must, in justice to myself, say, that the statement of rent and cost of cultivation given above was the result of very particular inquiries amongst the flax growing tenantry.

[3] In Belgium, from which country I am informed *the finest and highest priced flax is imported*, the

skutching and dressing of the material are conducted entirely by hand labour. Why should not this be the case in Ireland, where labour is so superabundant ? The seed is also in general strictly preserved, which is not the case here.

[4] Sir R. O'Donnell has also informed me, with regard to this transaction, that, being only the *nominal* owner, he was not personally responsible. This circumstance, whilst it may acquit Sir R. O'D. of any personal blame, does but exhibit still more strongly the fearful evils resulting from the present encumbered condition of much of the landed property in Ireland, and from which it cannot be relieved without legislative aid. This explanation will reconcile the reader to the seeming incongruity of Sir R. O'Donnell's exertions for his tenantry around Newport, with the very opposite transactions at Kiel, &c., and confirms the remark previously made, that I believe few landlords in Mayo are working more zealously than he is to obtain a sound position, and which, I might add, his exertions entitle him to.

[5] Since the first edition was published the local Board of Guardians of one of the two remaining Unions (Ballina) has requested to be freed from the very onerous duties which devolved upon it, and a board of paid guardians has been appointed in its place. The Swineford Union is therefore the only one in Mayo remaining in the hands of local guardians.

[6] The following extract from an address to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, signed by the Relief Committee of Swineford Union, county Mayo, presents, in a very striking light, the condition of the people and of the Union-houses last year : “ In this Union, Swineford, the prejudices of the population to a poor-house were so deep and inveterate, that the house was a long time before one pauper could be induced to enter it. Famine, however, came on with such unrelenting severity, that in a short time the house was filled with the number (seven hundred) it was intended for. On the dreadful 10th of November, one hundred and twenty were admitted beyond the regulated number, hundreds were refused admission for want of room, some unhappy beings perished on the high roads and in the fields. Influenced by terror and dismay—leaving entire districts almost deserted—the better class of farmers, in numbers, sold their property at any sacrifice, and took flight for America, and the humbler classes left the country in masses, hoping to find a happier doom in any other region. This awful state of things continued during the winter and spring, in a greater or less degree. In this Union, three hundred and sixty-seven persons died in the poor-house ; the master of the house also died. In an adjoining Union, Ballina, two hundred were admitted to the house beyond the number it was built for (twelve hundred) ; hundreds were refused admission for want of room, and *eleven hundred and thirty-eight died in the house* ; the medical officer of the house was also carried off. In another adjoining Union, Ballinrobe, all the officers of the house were swept away, and two hundred and fifty-four inmates of the house perished.”

[7] Since the publication of the previous edition this Union has been divided as mentioned above ; the electoral divisions of Binghamstown and Belmullet forming an Union, with a temporary poor-house at Binghamstown, and it is intended to build the Union-house at Belmullet. An Inspecting Officer and Vice-Guardian have also been appointed, whose indefatigable exertions for the relief of this distressed district are and have been instrumental in saving the lives of numbers of its wretched inhabitants.

[8] The Inspecting Officer in his reports to the Poor-Law Commissioners, written about a month subsequently, thus forcibly bears out this statement : “ During the past week I have visited every portion of my district except the extreme part of Belmullet electoral division, and I regret to state that distress—indeed judging by the appearance of the people, I may say starvation—appears nearly general, but more particularly in the electoral division of Binghamstown (the Mullet), where the poor really are in a sad state, their only food bad turnips, and their supply of them limited, many having nothing to subsist upon but the roots of weeds.”

The most pressing necessity has, to a great extent, been relieved, by carrying out an extensive system of out-door relief under the new Poor-Law, and by the feeding of the children in schools maintained by the funds of the British Association, which were placed at the disposal of

Government. There are nearly 3,000 children thus fed, and 7,000 persons in receipt of relief from the Poor-Law. The turnips are long since eaten.

[9] Kohl.

[10] A printed document relative to this district, Ballecroy, now before me, states—1st. That there are no resident gentry. 2nd. There is no resident minister. 3rd. There is no market town—a poor man may have to travel forty-four miles for a stone of meal. 4th. There is no medical man or dispensary within twenty-two miles.

[11] A short time previously to my second visit, the owner (nominally) of a rent-roll of £ 500 a-year died of fever, in the capacity of master of the temporary poor-house at Binghamstown. He was formerly a Justice of the Peace. In another case, the owner of 300 acres of land applied to the Board of Guardians for out-door relief. The Government Inspecting Officer, under date of the 13th of November, says of this district, in his Reports to the Poor-Law Commissioners, “ *There is no proprietor who takes the least interest in the welfare of the unfortunate poor of this district.*”

[12] The practical operation of the laws in relation to ejectment in Ireland is *particularly severe*, much more so than in England.

[13] For further detail respecting this cruel eviction, the reader’s attention is particularly requested to the postscript above referred to, containing the particulars, obtained in a very recent visit to the scene.

[14] At the sessions in Belmullet (which terminated on the day of my arrival there), a civil bill was granted against a wretched creature for £2, 5s.—a half year’s rent, due in May last. A milch cow, the only support of the family, had been seized and sold for this rent, for 17s., although worth £2, 10s. The balance was decreed for ! The barrister acting as judge strongly commented upon the harshness of the case.

[15] It is impossible for any charitable association to supply the vacuum caused by the expiration of the “ Temporary Relief Act,” which, whatever may be said of it, doubtless saved *multitudes* of lives. It will no doubt be grateful to the reader to know that the particular attention of the “ Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends” has been directed to this suffering district, and that even at this time numbers were relieved by its grants. The very small number of persons to whom funds for distribution in this and similar districts can be entrusted, renders it absolutely impossible to do all that can be desired.

A Visit to Connaught in the Autumn of 1847: A Letter Addressed to the ... (1848)

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