

THOUGHTS

ON READING THE

HON. JOHN P. YEREKER'S PAPER

on

ABSENTEEISM:

A PAPER READ BEFORE

THE DUBLIN STATISTICAL SOCIETY,

ON THE 18TH OF MARCH, 1850.

BY

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DUBLIN:

HODGES & SMITH, GRAFTON - STREET,
BOOKSELLERS TO THE UNIVERSITY.

1850.

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Thoughts on reading the Hon. John P. Vereker's Paper on Absenteeism. By Ebenezer Shackleton, Esq.

EVEN if we grant that Absenteeism is an evil, in an economical sense, what then ? How would you cure it, without interfering with personal freedom ? Who do you call an absentee ? Is it the man who derives rent from one part of the kingdom, and spends it in another—from Ireland, for instance, to spend it in England ? Mr. Vereker speaks of this man as an absentee. Might he not as well call the landlord of an estate in Munster, who reside in Leinster, an absentee ?—or even closer—in the adjoining county, or parish ? An accurate definition is of the utmost importance in the exact sciences. Is political economy one of the exact sciences ? Again, it is said that money spent in the country must do good, and augment its wealth, either directly or indirectly. Now, may it not be spent in many ways so as to do much harm, and hinder the increase of wealth ? If spent in reckless extravagance and vicious dissipation, may not the example of the great man influence the conduct of the lower classes, and thus prevent any accumulation of wealth ? It is not through expenditure, as such, but through savings, that people grow rich. It might be better for a tenantry that a landlord should spend his rents in the gambling houses at Baden-baden. Such a thing is possible, and in point of fact, the tenantry of absentees are more thriving than are the tenantry of some resident proprietors.

But granting that absenteeism is an evil, and the principal impediment to the prosperity of this country, would it not be well to try to ascertain—first, its *cause*, and then its *cure*. Who are these Absentees ? are they not, almost all, men who possess more land than they can cultivate or manage themselves, and, therefore, let either the whole or a large part at a rent ? Surely no one can blame them for that; however much a man might be blamed, who, like «the dog in the manger," holds land which he will neither cultivate himself, nor let to others who would. It seems, then, evident that the cause of absenteeism—in the vague and loose sense in which the term is mostly used—is the possession of large tracts of land by individuals. The owner of a small estate may, and mostly will, reside on it and cultivate it himself. But we cannot expect impossibilities. The owner of several estates cannot be expected to be in two places at once, and to reside on them all; nor even on one of them? if he has let them all to others. Therefore, in strictness, he must be considered that terrible being—an absentee, with respect to every acre of his property, excepting such portion as he keeps in his own hands, and on which, moreover, he must reside. Another question is, whether he must reside all the days of his life within the boundaries of his demesne, in order to escape the opprobrium of absenteeism, or, for how many days in the year may he be allowed to make little excursions of business or pleasure, and how far he may go from home ? This may look like trifling, but it is not so. Is political economy a science? Science does not disdain to seek every, the minutest item likely to effect its calculations.

Besides, when people talk of levying a tax on absentees, they are bound to define the term with the greatest accuracy. In strict reasoning, it would appear that every man who might either inherit or acquire by purchase the ownership of land, must live the life of a snail (only that the snail may enjoy locomotion, and still be at home,) or else be liable to the absentee tax.

It would appear, then, that the great cause of absenteeism is to be found in the prevalence of large territorial proprietorships ; and perhaps the cause of these may be found in the peculiar laws of this country relating to land, which have prevented it from being sold by retail, in portions suited to the means of those persons who are least of all likely to become absentees.

The natural cure for absenteeism does not, then, seem to consist in a tax on the transference of persons from one land to another ; but, on the contrary, the removal of all taxes and impediments to the transference of land from one person to another.

But even if, by some means or other, the present absenteeism could be prevented, and thereby the remittance of those four millions of rent, which is spoken of as the heart's blood of Ireland, could be stopped, how will you prevent these residents from borrowing money on the security of their rentals ? And if this money be borrowed in England, may not the four millions or more have to be remitted for interest due by these caged birds to foreign lenders ? So that while you caulk up the bung ever so tightly, you cannot stop this private leak. You thus only retain the men, but you lose the money. In a merely economical point of view, what does the country gain ?

When we reflect that although a country may possess wealth by means of its productiveness, (for productions alone constitute wealth,) yet as it is only by saving—by expending less than the amount of the annual revenue derived from productions, that a country or an individual can increase in wealth, it would appear to be of much greater importance to consider how these revenues are employed, than where they are expended ; at least, as far as relates to the increase or decrease of the wealth of the country. For instance, there is an evident difference of effect between draining bottles and draining land—between hunting and ploughing—between building modern antique castles and scientific farm-yards and offices. Each may be very desirable, or not; but increase of wealth must depend in a great degree upon the proportion existing between the one mode of expenditure and the other.

After all, it appears to me quite possible for a country steadily to increase in wealth, in spite of absenteeism, and yet for the majority of the labourers—the producers of wealth—to exist in a state of abject poverty ; so that unless political economy embraces the important subjects of manners and customs, morals and education, it can never attain the consummation so devoutly to be wished, "*the greatest happiness of the greatest number.*"

Title: Thoughts on reading the Hon. John P. Vereker's paper on absenteeism

Authors: Shackleton, Ebenezer

Keywords: Absentee landlords

Land ownership

John P. Vereker

Issue Date: 1851

Publisher: Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland

Citation: Shackleton, Ebenezer. 'Thoughts on reading the Hon. John P. Vereker's paper on absenteeism'. - Dublin: Transactions of the Dublin Statistical Society, Vol II, 1849-1851, pp.1-5

Series/Report no.: Journal of The Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland
Vol. II 1849-1851

Abstract: Even if we grant that Absenteeism is an evil, in an economical sense, what then? How would you cure it, without interfering with personal freedom? Who do you call an absentee? Is it the man who derives rent from one part of the kingdom, and spends it in another—from Ireland, for instance, to spend it in England? Mr. Vereker speaks of this man as an absentee. Might he not as well call the landlord of an estate in Munster, who reside in Leinster, an absentee?—or even closer—in the adjoining county, or parish? Again, it is said that money spent in the country must do good, and augment its wealth, either directly or indirectly. It might be better for a tenantry that a landlord should spend his rents in the gambling houses at Baden-baden. Such a thing is possible, and in point of fact, the tenantry of absentees are more thriving than are the tenantry of some resident proprietors.

Description: Read March 18th 1850

URI: <http://hdl.handle.net/2262/7780>

ISSN: 00814776

Appears in Collections: Archive JSSISI: 1847- Complete Collection
JSSISI: 1849 to 1851, Vol. II Transactions of the Dublin Statistical Society
JSSISI: 1847 to 1849, Vol. I Transactions of the Dublin Statistical Society

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