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*From the Author*

IRELAND SINCE 1850

AND

**Her Present Difficulty**

BY

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## IRELAND SINCE 1850

**T**HIRTY years have now elapsed since 1850, the period immediately succeeding the great Irish famine of 1846-7. That country was then slowly recovering from the staggering blow it had experienced, under which, although several previous warnings had been received from partial failures of the potato crop, almost every interest in Ireland was disorganised and prostrated.

As is well known, various legislative measures were adopted to deal with the consequences of this great calamity, notably the Act for the Sale of Encumbered Estates, which some years later was extended to that of all landed estates. Under these Acts many millions' worth of land changed hands, many old estates were broken up, and although great individual hardship was suffered, yet it was believed that a mass of entangled interests and encumbered property was set free, new blood and capital introduced, and incalculable good done to the country. In fact a *tabula rasa* was to a great extent made, and Ireland commenced from a new starting-point.

Although the principal effect of these changes was comparatively little felt in the north of



Ireland, still landowners in every part of the country felt more or less that it was incumbent upon them to adopt a new system, and to make efforts and sacrifices to ensure a better state of things for the future.

A proof of this is shown in the large amount of Government loans for drainage and other improvements which were taken up for some years after the famine.

For a long period it was an habitual thing on all well-managed estates for landlords to sacrifice a considerable portion of the rent in order to consolidate farms that were too small or subdivided, to assist the smaller holders to emigrate, and to help those that remained by draining and by gifts of timber, slates, and building materials to improve their houses and farm buildings. There are many large tracts, in the northern counties especially, where the slated roofs and neat appearance of the buildings are to a great extent the effect of the exertions and liberality of the landlords of that period.

While the population thus decreased, much to the advantage of those who went and of the country which received the emigrants, the condition of those left behind vastly improved. Wages rose, slowly but steadily, until they had more than doubled, and a few years since, considering the quality of the work done, the price of labour was little behind that of England or Scotland. In the



meantime the workhouses were almost empty, and the poor-rates sank to a minimum point. The deposits in banks and savings-banks steadily rose, and the food, clothing, and general condition of the people were immensely improved.

There was one sad exception to this general improvement: the cottier houses, the abodes of the agricultural labourer, although diminished in number, remained much the same; and the Irish are still the worst-housed people in Europe. To a great extent this class is beyond the power of the landlord, its badly housed state the consequence of very small farms.

All this time emigration continued, and those who at first were assisted to emigrate in order to relieve a country which could no longer maintain them, remitted large sums to bring out their relations to join them in America, actuated both by the praiseworthy motive of natural love and affection, and by the wish that those they held dear should share in the high wages and prosperity of their newly adopted country.

At this time, about fifteen years since, if the writer had been asked which of the two countries, England or Ireland, possessed the fairest prospect, and which country had made the largest proportionate advance in prosperity and civilisation during the previous twenty years, he would undoubtedly have given the palm to Ireland. At that time important lines of railway were being



rapidly opened up, the mistakes committed in England in the early days of railways had been escaped in Ireland, and although much more was required in the extension of the existing lines, still what were made were in the right directions, and the gauge, intermediate between the broad and narrow ones of England, was the best in the world.

Various additional circumstances also combined in favour of Ireland. The repeal of the Corn Laws and consequent reduction of the price of wheat, however serious to England, had no effect upon a country which grew little or none. The prosperity of the world's trade created a constantly increasing demand at high prices for the horses, cattle, and butter of Ireland. In the great towns of the north, Belfast in particular, the American war and cotton blockade, which brought such misfortunes to English manufacturers, produced nothing but prosperity; the number of spindles employed in the linen trade having doubled in a few years, concurrently with a great extension of wealth and population.

The general state of affairs at the period I mention was that the country was contented and prosperous, farms larger and better cultivated, the people better paid, the law respected, the conditions of landed property, although very different in different localities, still greatly improved, and every class was hopeful for the future.



The first serious check to this prosperous condition of affairs in Ireland arose from the conclusion of the civil war between the North and South, the two great divisions of the United States of America. That war, fought with so much determination, and with so utter a disregard of life and cost, ended, as is well known, after the collapse of General Lee, in the disbanding of vast numbers of soldiers, men who for three years had lived the exciting life of war. Thousands of these, in the army of the Southern States especially, were of Irish nationality, and their occupation being suddenly gone, they found themselves disinclined for the peaceful pursuits of agriculture or trade, ready to believe in the delusive hope held out to them of a new and successful campaign in Ireland, a speedy conquest of the island from the Saxon, and the partition of the soil amongst the soldiers of the invading army.

Large sums were subscribed in America amongst the Irish for this purpose, and the excitement and alarm were kept alive both in Ireland and England for a considerable period; but with the exception of a few of the large towns, little interest was felt in the Fenian conspiracy in Ireland itself. We have however lately learnt from a high authority, that of Mr. Gladstone himself, that the Disestablishment of the Irish Church was the direct consequence of the Fenian conspiracy of a few years previous.



From this time, a new period of excitement, political and social, set in, which with little interval has lasted ever since.

Without entering into the arguments by which the Irish Church Bill was supported or opposed, the Act itself produced the natural result of any fundamental change in the constitution of a country: it unsettled men's minds, producing great exasperation on one side, and disappointing many hopes on the other, while the surplus, as it is called, or a part of it, which will remain of the endowment after the claim of life-interests has been satisfied, continues to the present day a prize for contending factions, to the great injury of the country.

In the following year Mr. Gladstone proposed his great measure, the Reform of the Land Laws, and without inquiring into the effect likely to be produced by so sweeping a measure, the Land Act was carried, which was to bring peace and prosperity to the country, but which, though intended to remedy all injustice and insecurity of tenure, contained some principles in direct violation of the laws of political economy.

The limitation of the power of contract especially was disliked by many of the Scotch representatives, who saw in it a principle that might be dangerously extended, and they were only reconciled to it by allegiance to the Liberal party, and by the assurance of Mr. Gladstone that it was



necessary to ensure the fair working of the Act. The most improving of Irish landowners, who had endeavoured to raise the condition of their tenantry by slower, though more certain means, feared, as has since taken place, that their occupation would be gone, and that farmers, once taught to look for prosperity to legislative changes, would by no means be satisfied with the powers they had already obtained.

Two years later the ballot became the law, favoured by many of the Conservative party who conceived that it would work to their advantage by destroying the power of the great manufacturing employers of labour, as well as by abolishing intimidation and bribery. The result has so far been in England no loss to the Conservatives, but it has produced a greater fluctuation and uncertainty in elections, lessening the influence of property and experience, and in Ireland leaving the great mass of the electors to be swayed by the cry of the day, and by violent articles in the press.

Notwithstanding several years of good trade and favourable seasons, combined with high prices for all agricultural products, the Land Act was soon found to have produced anything but peace and good will. A new struggle commenced between the landowners on one side, many of whom had purchased in the Landed Estates Court, and who were anxious by raising their rents to share the benefits of the higher prices for farm produce



prevailing, and the tenants, who, having secured great advantages from the Land Act, began to strive for perpetuity of tenure, and to become the practical owners of the fee-simple of the soil.

A new Irish difficulty was thus created, and an agitation, commenced by the late Mr. Butt, primarily with a view to a new and more extended Land Act, escaping his control developed itself into a strong feeling for nationality, and a separation from anything more than a nominal connection with Great Britain.

After the death of Mr. Butt, Mr. Parnell with a few extreme adherents cast off all disguise, and, failing in coercing the House of Commons, has taken advantage of a miserable season, an unfavourable harvest, and the pressure which bad trade in England with low prices had brought upon the country, to advise the people to repudiate their liabilities, thus defying the law and bringing the relations between the various classes into utter confusion.

It has been necessary to take this survey of the course of events in Ireland for the last thirty years in order to look with fairness at the present condition of that country.

What will be the result of the expectations that have been raised on one side, and the disappointed hopes on the other, it is hard to say: the more enterprising class of landowners, whose object has been to raise Ireland from its unfortunate condition



in 1848, with its barbarous cultivation and immense population depending solely upon the potato, are naturally profoundly discouraged.

Whichever political party obtains the Government of the State will find itself face to face with the Irish difficulty, but however pressed they may be, it is of the utmost importance that, disregarding haste and panic, they should enter upon no new legislation without first obtaining the most reliable information.

A Royal Commission has been appointed for Ireland, as for England, to investigate the causes of agricultural depression, and to ascertain, if possible, how long and to what extent the competition and low prices that have lately prevailed are likely to be permanent.

The report of Messrs. Read and Pell will no doubt be extremely interesting, but the prices of agricultural productions depend upon so many conditions that are constantly changing, that much guidance will hardly be obtained from any report however able.

In the case of Ireland a far different investigation is necessary, and in the interests of all classes, landlords, tenants, and labourers, as well as of Great Britain, which has so large a stake in Irish prosperity and contentment, it is most important that the inquiry should be of the fullest, fairest, and most impartial description, so that the remedies to be adopted may be just and well considered, and



not leave the last state of the country worse than the first.

Up to the present time the accusations against Irish landlords and the system of which they form part have remained comparatively unanswered, although many of these have been of a very serious description.

Landowners, as a rule, are averse to enter into controversy, especially about their own affairs, and have neither the means nor inclination to disprove general imputations, however much they may know them to be untrue.

They are now, however, awake to the danger, and a large amount of valuable information is being collected by a committee composed of noblemen and gentlemen of all politics, on the subject of land tenure and rent, the nature and extent of tenants' holdings, and the relative duties performed by the two classes of landlord and tenant. It is to be hoped that the condition of the labourer, of whom so little is heard in Ireland, although the class contains two-fifths of the population, will not be overlooked in this inquiry.

No objection can be fairly made to the collection of statistics of this nature, for there is nothing in it hostile to the tenant, and while so many tenant-associations exist, and a powerful press largely hostile to the landowners, it is only right that the other side should be heard.



It was to be expected at such a time of pressure as the present that the most strained and divergent remedies should be prescribed.

The two million of acres of reclaimable waste land said to exist, have been proposed by one writer to be purchased at the cost of the State, and divided into farms of twenty acres each, thus providing for 100,000 families. The great reclamations in Holland are quoted as instances of what may be done with advantage by the State, but the cases are very different. The lake of Haarlem, for instance, was drained as a matter of necessity, for the waters were yearly increasing upon the surrounding land; the soil too was generally a rich alluvial deposit, from which the water only required to be drained to be most productive. The great work now in process of formation, the embankment of the North Sea Canal, which has already reclaimed a large tract from the ocean, was really undertaken for the purposes of navigation, and as a shorter outlet for the trade of Amsterdam.

Few of the public are aware, at any rate in England, how much of the two million acres in Ireland of waste land consists of bleak mountain, high above the level of profitable cultivation, subject to constant rain and the gales that blow in from the Atlantic. It is to be feared that the 100,000 farmers or peasant proprietors would find



their task most difficult, and that the security of their tenure would by no means compensate them for the insecurity of their crops.

It is seldom considered how much climate has to do with mountain cultivation; and the same stony slopes where with a southern exposure and the bright sun of the Riviera ripen the olive, the orange, and the grape, if transferred to the western coast of Ireland would, at the same elevation above the sea, produce little but disappointment, although planted with the most hardy grain-crops and cultivated with equal care and industry.

The bogs of Ireland, again, it is not generally known, are far from being the useless tracts they are considered. Vast quantities of peat or turf, most excellent fuel, are annually dug out of them; in many parts they are the most valuable property, indeed the supply of fuel which they afford is every day becoming scarcer and more expensive.

The great discovery of the day and general remedy for all misfortunes of the country, seems, however, to be that of Peasant Proprietorship; and seeing that so much of the land in Ireland, though cultivated in small farms, is owned in large masses by a few proprietors, it is a natural conclusion that if the ownership and cultivation went together, a better result might be obtained.

So far from landlords generally being opposed to this proposal, the danger is more likely to exist in the opposite direction. There appears at the



present day to be little or no advantage in the ownership of land over other kinds of property; the certainty of a fixed return no longer exists, nor does the possession of land give the political power or status that was formerly the case.

In fact, in Ireland at the present time a popular writer in the press, a political lawyer, or even a complete stranger (as was the case in the late return for the County Donegal of Mr. Lea, a rich manufacturer from Kidderminster), men without the slightest stake in the county, seem to have a better chance of being elected representatives in Parliament than any landowner, however long resident and personally respected.

There are no feudal rights remaining in Ireland, and game, which is so great an attraction to residents in the country both in England and Scotland, except upon a few mountains can hardly be said to exist; while the disadvantages in the way of education and advancement in life are very great.

But can the country afford to do without the landowners who do exist, and who, few as they are, even now perform duties of the utmost importance in their districts? Should their numbers be seriously diminished their places must be filled by Government officials to administer the law as in France, and complete political centralisation be established.

What is most urgently required is a greater



number of persons of education and property, not afraid of public opinion, residing in the country, good jurors, poor-law guardians, and magistrates, and serving as centres of civilisation and improvement. At the same time, although no one can doubt that the ownership of immense tracts of land by a few individuals is an anomaly, many striking instances exist of the care and expenditure given by large absentee proprietors in some of the Irish counties.<sup>1</sup>

A considerable admixture of smaller proprietors would be an advantage, but they must be men who, by care and forethought, have accumulated some capital, and to whom assistance to buy their land may be safely given. A class of this description would be a great security to the country, and would form a conservative body, perhaps even too much averse to any change or expenditure of public money.

Peasant proprietorship is an experiment which should hardly be tried on a great scale: the experience of France and other European countries may not apply to Ireland, and the bad harvest of 1879 has caused in many parts of the Continent and of Italy in particular, great suffering and distress.

<sup>1</sup> Whatever may be said at the present day of the utility to Ireland of the large estates still owned by some of the London Companies in County Derry, we believe it can be easily proved that the annual expenditure upon their property is very large—in some cases even closely approaching the amount of their rental.



If a fair inquiry is made into the present cause of Irish distress, it will be found to have no connection whatever with rents, even where they are called exorbitant, or indeed with the present system of tenancy.

Speaking generally, it can be shown that the average rent of land in Ireland is below that of other countries similarly circumstanced, and in a great proportion of instances it has not been materially increased for a long period. Perhaps there is no point on which Irish landowners have been more misrepresented than on this.

It is hardly likely that the recommendation lately given to agriculturists to direct their attention to the growth of vegetables and garden produce will be possible to any extent in Ireland. Supposing the climate to admit of it, there does not exist that local demand which there is for it on the Continent. Belgium and part of France in particular are studded with large towns, and contain a population accustomed to that kind of food, but, with the exception of the potato, the Irish care very little for any kind of vegetable, and a complete change of taste and habit is not at all probable.

Of what avail would the ownership of land have been to the farmer during the past unfortunate year? in Ireland the crops planted would have been the same, and have equally suffered from the season.



But however much landowners may desire the system of peasant proprietorship, to relieve them of their present responsibilities, and enable them to sell their estates, the change is not likely to be made on a large scale without careful and extensive inquiry.

No attempt was made by Mr. Shaw Lefevre's Committee of 1878 to ascertain how far the system was likely to work well in Ireland, the greater part of the evidence being directed to find the best mode of putting it into operation. It was taken for granted that times would always be good, and no difficulty be experienced in paying the interest and instalments of purchase-money. The sales of glebes to occupying tenants under the Church Act were at that time of too recent occurrence to be of value, but some evidence was given, which was by no means encouraging, of the present condition of some tracts of land in the North, upon which many years ago leases in perpetuity had been granted at nominal rents, making the tenure equal to freehold.<sup>1</sup>

Surely, with all the faults of the present system of tenancy, it would be extreme rashness to break up the existing order of things, under which, during the last thirty years, much progress has

<sup>1</sup> The employment suggested by Mr. Shaw Lefevre's Committee of 1878, of the smaller peasant proprietors as labourers during a portion of the year either in England or Ireland, seems from present experience to be precarious, the failure of crops and want of demand for labour being simultaneous.



been made, without at any rate having a tolerable certainty of the success of the substitute to be proposed.

All these questions, however, should be fully investigated; the prosperity, almost the existence of Ireland is bound up in no rash measure being adopted, and Mr. Gladstone himself has recently stated that he could not yet "see the practicability of expropriating the landlords, with compensation," for the benefit of the country.

What then, it may be asked, is suggested in the present necessity? Humanity forbids that any should perish: but to avert the distress that seems to prevail in some districts, the landowners and residents, however willing, being themselves severely crippled, have not the power.

A distribution of the Irish Church surplus, advocated by many, would be demoralising and unjust; and the larger portion of it coming from a few northern counties, such a distribution to distant localities would in reality constitute a rate-in-aid. The hardship of this is apparent. One parish alone, to the writer's knowledge, in a northern county, between tithe-rent charge and perpetuity rent, formerly paid to the Bishop of the Diocese, now to the Church Commissioners in Dublin, is annually mulcted to the extent of about 1200*l.*, or nearly a fifth part of the valuation, a drain which cannot but have eventually a serious effect.

As the present misfortune is a national one,



brought about, in spite of Mr. Parnell's opinion, not by the landlords, but by the cold and wet summer of 1879, which so universally prevailed, and by the general depression of trade and prices, the pressure upon the population should be mitigated as far as possible, in the first instance by funds to be provided by Parliament. These, in the shape of small loans to the localities most affected, should be advanced at a low rate of interest, through the Boards of Guardians, and under the superintendence of the Local Board Commissioners, for any works of utility in the district; the repayment charged equally upon landlord and tenant, and spread over a series of years.

This would give to both classes an interest in their proper expenditure and in the adoption of measures to prevent the recurrence, as far as possible, of these difficulties in the future.

Stability is the great want in Ireland; organic changes have been of such frequent occurrence in that country that those who have done their best to improve it, are unable to form any plans for the future, it being impossible to anticipate with any degree of certainty what legislation may come next, and whether their exertions will meet with success.

A fair and comprehensive inquiry is therefore urgently called for, supported by the leaders of both parties, and conducted by men of the highest character, representing various interests.



This should be no question of politics, the violence of which has already been so great an injury. The inquiry may not suit theorists whose minds are already made up, nor those professional politicians who exist by setting one class against another, who have no practical knowledge of the difficulties of agriculture, and who have themselves little or no stake in the country.

If reliable information is thus obtained, great faith may be placed in the good sense of John Bull, who, when not acted upon by panic, is a generous and impartial judge. The great majority too of the Irish people, the industrious and sturdy farmers of Ireland, have no desire to upset the established order of things, if once fully convinced that the condition of their country will be fairly inquired into, and a just and well-considered remedy adopted.

England, the great mother of nations, has not insisted that her teeming population should remain tied to the land of their birth ; or, as in the case of France, that the *morcellement* of its soil should put an artificial check to the natural increase of its population.

If it is proved that Ireland is able, without manufactures, to support in comfort a larger population than at present, every lover of his country will rejoice to see it, and will assist in removing with fair compensation such artificial obstructions as are shown to be injurious.



Although prosperity is not to be secured by the violation of natural conditions, the spectacle of a happy and contented Ireland would be one of inestimable value, and might even induce the most determined Nationalist or the bitterest Home Ruler to tolerate the British connection.