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LETTERS

ON THE SUBJECT OF

THE DRAINAGE OF THE SHANNON.

ADDRESSED TO

THE EDITORS OF 'THE STANDARD' AND 'THE TIMES.'

BY

CAPT. HON. W. LE POER TRENCH, R.E.

FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION.

LONDON:

EDWARD STANFORD, 6 & 7, CHARING CROSS.

1871.



Houses of the Oireachtas

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## INTRODUCTION.

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THE subject alluded to in these letters is one of such importance, and one which appears to be so ill understood, that I have thought it well to reprint them for private circulation. The statements contained in them are simple and unvarnished, only hardly expressed in sufficiently forcible language to quite convey to the stranger the deplorable state of the country affected.

In most civilized countries, the richest pastures, and those pleasing scenes of highly-cultivated lands with farm-steadings, surrounded by an air of prosperity and content, are generally to be met with along those tracts of land which are watered and drained by their rivers; but not so in the Shannon and Suck Valleys: there, with almost every blessing that Nature can confer, we have scenes of desolation and unproductiveness, which are possessed of no charms except to the sportsman—a state of affairs, which, by a stroke of the pen, each succeeding Government for many years past has had it in its power—if accompanied by a little show of earnestness—to rectify.



It is just possible, however, that the various Governments which have been in power since the disastrous effects of the navigation works have been so apparent, may not be so personally responsible as their want of remedial action in the matter would make them at first sight appear to be. One can hardly believe that the working department under which the works were originally constructed, and which has since had charge of their maintenance and of the collection of the tolls on the navigation, has not done its duty in year by year urging upon the Government the necessity, in justice to the country, for dealing with this question; but it is just possible that this department may not have been anxious to expose its own short-comings in connection with the fact, that the original plans and designs for the works sanctioned by Parliament were, in several instances, departed from in some essential particulars.

In most countries boats are built to suit the rivers! but the department I allude to appears to have considered that Ireland was an exceptional country, or one in which the rivers should be made to suit the boats!! for it is a fact, that one of the dams\* was raised another foot in height, by the addition of a timber superstructure, so as to afford draught of water for boats which were almost valueless, when compared with the further yearly damage inflicted

\* That at Meelick.



by throwing an additional foot of water back on a very flat country.

The Board of Works in Ireland may not have had the lamentable effects of the badly-constructed—semi-navigation semi-drainage—works brought forcibly to their notice before the famine years; but they cannot have been ignorant of them since that period, when the laudable desire of the proprietors of the Suck district to expend a large sum of money in the reclamation of 72,000 acres of land by the drainage of that important tributary, for the purpose of giving employment to the famishing poor, so as to tide over that exceptional period of distress and keep them in the country, was not only thwarted, but absolutely quashed, by the said Board of Works refusing to move further in the matter, or to assist in obtaining the Act required for the said drainage, because they found that the Shannon, upon which it was dependent for its outlet, was already in such a state that it could not carry off its own flood waters. Since then that department from which the suggestions for these improvements should, I conceive, emanate, has been strangely, if not remissly inactive in the matter.

The facilities afforded by the Government for the improvement of the thorough drainage of the uplands of the country have been productive of much good in the districts drained; but if they have, the river floods have become liable to rise more rapidly. The



annual havoc committed by these floods is estimated at from 5000*l.* to 8000*l.* a year. Let us take the average at 6500*l.*, then we have the actual destruction of property caused by the works not having been properly completed and adapted to the circumstances of the country, standing at no less a sum than 195,000*l.* for the last thirty years, not to mention the districts left sterile and irreclaimable, and this in the country which paid 300,000*l.* as much on account of the benefits to be derived from the improved drainage, as on account of the advantages to be gained from the navigation.

The advantages which it was expected would have been gained by these works may be judged of by the following words, which fell from the late Sir Robert Peel when this subject was under discussion on the 12th of May, 1837 :—

“The Hon. Member for Liverpool intimated that the proprietors of land on the line of the Shannon would be enabled to undersell the English grower in the corn-market, if the desired communication were effected. Now, it was too much to take money out of the pockets of the English to enable their Irish neighbours to undersell them. If the corn-growers of Ireland were to gain this advantage, it ought to be at their own expense; it was not fair to take the money for carrying the project into effect out of the pockets of those who would be injured by it.”—*Hansard*, vol. xxvii., 3rd Series, page 1038.

The only advantage which the corn-growers in this district of Ireland have gained is, that of *not* being able to grow wheat, except under great dis-



advantages, arising from the humidity of the climate, which is, in a great measure, due to the saturated state of such a vast extent of country, which was rather aggravated than otherwise by the construction of these works.

The corn-growers of England have therefore not suffered much, by the heavy expense which their Irish brethren were put to, as their contribution towards the construction of these works, which for so many years have, agriculturally, been the bane of the country.

It may be said that in the following letters I declaim, but do not suggest. I wish to meet this here, by saying that it would be impossible in the course of a few letters to enter into the particulars and specifications of the works required. When I inspected the river (*en amateur* though it was) I intended to have drawn out in detail the remedies which in my opinion were necessary, supposing that those originally designed (and approved by Parliament) were insufficient. On inspection I saw that the fault lay not so much in the "designing" as in the "carrying out"; and I have no doubt but that had these works been fully carried out according to the approved plans, with one difference only, *viz.* the substitution of "regulating weirs" for "dams," the districts which paid so heavily for them would have had a very fair return for their money, instead



of, as now, being subject to a heavy annual fine, or loss, in consequence of the short-comings of those in whom they trusted.

In my last letter I have suggested the carrying out of Mr. Lynam's plan, as a partial measure ; but, should the question ever be taken up as a whole, I would be inclined to revert to my suggestion in my 1868 letter, and advocate having the river adapted to boats of 3 ft. or 4 ft., instead of 6 ft., draught of water. This further lowering of the river would be found of great value in future years, as, if the water is once drawn off the country, the general level of its at present saturated wastes will, in the course of time, be found to be considerably lowered.

I hope that all the country's well-wishers, who have the opportunity, will visit and travel along the course of this river. If they do, I am sure they will carry away with them a much more forcible impression of the disgrace which it is to a civilized country than I have been able to convey.

I append a Map, showing the "rain-basin of the Shannon" for their information.

W. LE P. T.

LONDON, JULY, 1871.



# THE DRAINAGE OF THE SHANNON.

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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF IRELAND'S RESOURCES.

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TO THE EDITOR OF 'THE STANDARD.'

SIR,

As Fenianism is now brought so forcibly before the public, it will, we must trust, with the energetic steps now taken, be soon stamped out. The next great question will be—"How to prevent its recurrence?" Anything that tends to develop the resources of Ireland, and to increase the prosperity of her inhabitants, will certainly assist in the attainment of this object; for, we all know, through vast districts, the peasantry are miserably housed and their earnings are scant; and with their minds partially opened, as they now are, by education, without any corresponding improvement in their condition, they easily become the dupes of their Transatlantic brethren.

Ireland is essentially an agricultural and stock-growing country, practically without minerals, and to foster anything calculated to develop that upon which her prosperity must depend, will doubtless be the great desire of those in authority and of all well-wishers of that country in the coming session, during



the greater part of which the Irish question is likely to monopolize public attention.

I see, by the perusal of your valuable and influential journal, that you have taken up the question in a spirit which bodes well for the improvement of Ireland, and that you fully appreciate the importance of the furtherance of drainage works in that land of bogs and morasses. It is to enable me to say a few words on this subject that I trust you will be able to afford me space, as, from an intimate local knowledge of a vast district of that country, I am in a position to mention a few facts, which will put any of its inquiring well-wishers upon a track that will enable them to see for themselves the great amount of good which might, at comparatively a small cost, be effected over an immense district of Ireland. The district I allude to is that which nature intended should be drained by the Shannon and its tributaries. It includes parts of fourteen counties, nine of which might be much benefited. The facts are as follow, *viz.*:—

1. The Shannon, which is the natural artery for the discharge of the waters collected within its rain-basin, is, partly from natural causes, which are much aggravated by artificial ones, unable to fulfil its duty. The natural causes are some shoals, which, in these days of large engineering operations, could easily be removed. The artificial causes are the results of works undertaken in 1836–37, and completed, I believe, in 1839, for the development of the internal communication of Ireland by rendering the river



Shannon navigable. To do this it was intended to have cleared away many shoals, and it was expected that the drainage of the country would have been thereby much improved, upon the strength of which expectation the counties affected were rated to the amount of nearly 300,000*l.*, the balance being defrayed by the public.

2. These works were never carried into effect in their entirety according to the original plans and designs; and what little good was done in some places, was more than neutralized by the water being in others dammed up by weirs to raise it sufficiently to provide depth for vessels of six feet draught.

3. Between 1846 and 1849 a survey for drainage purposes was made of the district traversed by the Suck, one of the Shannon's largest tributaries. The works then recommended—which would have enabled 72,000 acres to have been, after thorough drainage, by their owners brought into cultivation, and which would have given a vast amount of useful employment, then after the famine much required—were never carried out, as it was found that the Shannon, banked up as it was (and still is) for navigation purposes, was unable to carry off its own water without the addition of that which would be sent down to it by the drainage of the Suck. From this it will be seen that, until the Shannon is lowered, none of the districts traversed by its numerous tributaries can be properly drained or brought into cultivation.

4. The introduction of railways into Ireland has



so provided the means of transport as almost, if not entirely, to supersede the necessity of retaining the Shannon as a navigable river, as may be seen from the returns, which show that the goods traffic on the Shannon is very small, that there is hardly any passenger traffic at all (most of the steamers of the company might have been a few years ago, and I believe still may be, seen rotting at Killaloe), and that the tolls and wharfage collected are insufficient by nearly one-half to defray the expenses of keeping up the locks and wharves. If the river traffic was considerable, boats of three feet draught would be well able to carry it on, as they do on the Upper Danube.

5. There is plenty of fall upon the Shannon to permit of the river being so lowered as to carry off the drainage of the country dependent upon it, and still be navigable for boats of three feet draught of water.

The idea of improving the drainage of the Shannon has more than once been entertained, but the engineers appointed to report upon it have always been hampered with a provision to this effect, "that the works to be recommended are in no way to interfere with the existing navigation as by law established." The consequence of which is that nothing that has been recommended has ever been carried out. If a commission was issued to provide for "the development of the arterial drainage of the rain-basin of the Shannon, either irrespective of navigation, or providing water for boats of three feet draught," the



works to be recommended would be productive of infinitely greater results than any that could be hoped for, keeping the river at its present level, and the expense would not be materially greater. If this was done, and the works carried out by Government, it would enable the landowners of a vast district to raise and expend capital in the drainage and bringing into cultivation of upwards of 200,000 acres of land, which ought to be the richest in the country, but which at the present time produces hardly anything but wild fowl. Under present circumstances the owners of the soil are powerless to act, there being no fall to enable them to drain their low-lying lands. The consequence of this is that a large area of the country is either waste or marsh, there is a great want of remunerative employment, and want of incentive to the landowners to improve their properties.

The importance of this question was fully realized by the late Sir Robert Peel, who, in the debate on the motion which led to the original navigation works above alluded to, said, on the 12th May, 1835 —“If any great public good, or if an important national object connected with the pacification of Ireland, were to be attained, he would be willing to give a grant of money; but it ought to be demonstrated that the proposition came within the prescribed conditions; otherwise, if a mere local benefit were to be effected, the district interested in it should contribute to its accomplishment,” &c. (vide *Hansard*, vol. xxvii., p. 1037). The district interested did



contribute, as I have already mentioned, largely, though the desired results were never obtained, and without at all subscribing to the doctrine propounded, that works of national importance for the development of the material resources of a country should only be undertaken for its pacification, I think we may say that the undertaking of such works as those referred to, and of any others that would stimulate private enterprise and afford the means of *largely augmenting the amount of permanent remunerative employment throughout the country*, would tend materially towards the pacification and future prosperity of Ireland.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

W. LE P. T.

LONDON, JAN. 4, 1868.

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#### THE SHANNON NAVIGATION.

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TO THE EDITOR OF 'THE TIMES.'

SIR,

From what was said in the House last night upon the subject of the Shannon navigation, one cannot help being impressed with the idea that most of the speakers were but imperfectly informed upon the merits of the case.

I am intimately acquainted with the Shannon valley, and have recently made a careful inspection of the most important part of the river, having with



me the plans of the original works proposed and approved; these I compared with the works executed, and I also made myself acquainted with the effect produced by them on the adjoining country. I therefore trust you will be able to spare me a little space to enable me to assist the hon. members above alluded to in forming a just opinion of the case.

1. Originally, the Shannon Navigation Works were undertaken with a two-fold object—one was the drainage of the vast extent of flat and wet (though naturally rich) country of which the Shannon is the natural artery, and the other was to improve the navigation, so as to meet the requirements of the country in its developed state.

The expense incurred was about 600,000*l.*, one half of which, as stated by Sir M. Beach, was paid out of the Imperial Treasury; and the other half was levied upon the districts affected, in consideration of the vast improvement to be expected.

2. It is beyond a doubt that the results expected were never realized, that the whole undertaking has been an expensive failure, and that this has been in a great measure due to the works not having been carried out according to the original plans. In some instances the depth of water has been increased by raising the weirs, instead of by dredging and deepening the bed of the river, thus throwing the water back upon the country.

Navigation appears to have been the object kept in view irrespective of drainage, and upon the river may now be seen some splendid and expensively-con-



structed navigation works, which, as such, are highly approved by Mr. Bateman; but the drainage is no better, in some instances it is worse, than before the works were undertaken; and the country, for the drainage of which the riparian proprietors paid heavily, remains undeveloped. No trade has sprung up, and the steamers which were originally started have been nearly all destroyed; two remain, and may be seen rotting at Killaloe. I was obliged in my recent trip down the Shannon to navigate the river in an open boat.

3. As the drainage of the uplands develops, so will the floods in the low lands rise with greater rapidity; consequently, every year the evil becomes aggravated, and the loss sustained through floods greater.

4. It is right, also, it should be known that the hands of all who wish to improve the low-lying country in the Shannon valley are completely tied, as the river is in the hands of the Government, and is never allowed to get below what is called its established Parliamentary level, at which level it cannot carry off its own waters. Consequently, a stop is put upon all attempts to improve the naturally rich districts traversed by some of its considerable tributaries.

I may mention, as an instance, that in one district alone ("the Suck") an attempt was made—during or after the famine—in 1848-9 to drain it. The preliminary surveys were made by the Board of Works (at the expense of the proprietors), and 72,000 acres of



excellent land would have been reclaimed, and an immensity of permanent remunerative employment created in the country. Everything went smooth, and it was expected that the object of the proprietors might have been accomplished at their own expense, when it dawned upon the Board of Works that the flooding of the Shannon, which was already so bad, would be much aggravated by the volume of water that would be sent down by the Suck in its improved state. The report and survey were, therefore, shelved, and the district has remained ever since in a cold saturated state, productive of little else than snipe and wild fowl.

I think that when these facts become known to hon. members, they will be glad to assist the Government in their desire to render justice to those who paid so large a sum towards works which were intended to, but never did, benefit them, by permitting them to drain their low-lying lands, which they cannot possibly do in the present state of the river.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

W. LE POER TRENCH,

*Captain, R.E.*

LONDON, JULY 28, 1870.

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THE SHANNON NAVIGATION AND THE DRAINAGE  
OF ITS RAIN-BASIN.

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TO THE EDITOR OF 'THE TIMES.'

SIR,

Last July, fearing that, through the opposition of those who appeared to be unacquainted with the merits of the above question, the good intentions of the Government with regard to it were likely to be frustrated, I addressed to you a letter on the subject, to which you were good enough to give insertion in 'The Times' of the 1st of August. In it I entered at some length into the merits of the question. My fears, it appears, were not groundless, as a few days later the Government Bill was withdrawn.

As there has been no appearance this Session of a renewal of their proposal for dealing with this question, may I be allowed, through the medium of your influential paper, to suggest that, as there can be no doubt that there were good grounds for the Government bringing it forward last year, and of the incalculable benefits that the works proposed would confer upon Ireland, there are still better grounds for the measure being brought forward this year, when it has been found necessary for the Government of the country to have recourse to almost every power that can be given by Parliament?

The Parliament of the country which has been ready to give these powers to the Government would surely be no less ready to pass for them such a remedial measure as that in question.



Parliament, I am sure, must know and feel that the peace and quiet which are derived from natural causes are the most lasting, that by developing the natural resources of the country remunerative employment will be created, and that prosperity and content always follow in the wake of such employment.

If Parliament allows Government to carry out some such scheme as that proposed last year, it will, while removing the barriers to the free discharge from the country of its surplus waters, also remove the barriers which have hitherto stood in the way of the investment of private capital in the reclamation of immense districts of naturally rich country, spread over no less than nine counties, and among them the very county which is at present under the operation of exceptional legislation.

Such reclamation would give an immense amount of not only present, but permanent, employment, and would materially increase the wealth and productiveness of the country.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

W. LE POER TRENCH,

*Captain, R.E.*

32, HYDE PARK GARDENS, W.,

JUNE 7, 1871.

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THE SHANNON NAVIGATION AND THE DRAINAGE  
OF ITS RAIN-BASIN.

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TO THE EDITOR OF 'THE TIMES.'

SIR,

In my letters to you of the 7th instant and of the 28th of last July on the above subject, I did not enter into the question of the remedies to be applied, as I felt certain that, from the fact of the Government having placed the matter in the hands of about the most eminent hydraulic engineer of the day, they would be fully aware of, and would probably lay before Parliament the details of the works required. As, however, it appears that the matter is to be let stand over, and that no partial steps even are to be taken to remedy the evils complained of—which evils, as far as the summer floods are concerned, are liable each year to become greater, through the progress of thorough drainage in the uplands,—I venture to ask you to allow me again to trespass on your space for the purpose of bringing the matter under public notice, and more especially under the notice of those through whose opposition the good intentions of the Government have been frustrated and apparently indefinitely postponed, and of pointing out that it is *not* a question of a grant *to make the river navigable*. It, unfortunately for the country, has been made navigable, and in such a manner as to entirely preclude the successful undertaking of drainage works in vast districts dependent upon it for their drainage,



although the proprietors and occupiers paid no less than 300,000*l.* on account of the expected improvement to their lands.

Although there is little or no traffic on the river, the sufferers do not advocate the abolition of these works, as they may prove useful yet, if fortune ever smiles upon the country and allows of the conversion of that which is in places now a howling wilderness and picture of desolation into a scene of industry and prosperity. What they require, and what was proposed last year, is "That these navigation works created under Government superintendence *only*—for the districts which paid half the expense trusted entirely to the Government, and were in no way represented in the control or superintendence of the works, and are therefore not responsible for the plans approved by Parliament not having been carried out—should be so modified, and such supplementary works executed as would allow of the reclamation of the whole country without injury to the navigation."

As it appears that there is no immediate probability of this scheme, as a whole, being undertaken, I venture now to point out a partial remedy, by which very considerable results could be obtained for a very small expenditure.

If the Government was allowed by the expenditure of *one half only* of the compensatory grant of 100,000*l.*, which they were prepared to make last year towards the expense of the work, to convert the stone dams—which exist at intervals along the river for the purpose of keeping it at its "Parliamentary



level"—into regulating weirs, by the insertion in them of sluices or flood-gates, the following advantages would be gained, *viz.*:—

1. The annual loss to crops, through flooding and saturation, which is estimated at from 5000*l.* to 8000*l.* a year, would be materially reduced.

2. An outlet would be provided for the flood-waters of the Shannon, consequently the bar to the drainage of its tributaries would be removed. (It should be borne in mind that on *one* of these tributaries *only* there are 72,000 acres of land which cannot be reclaimed on account of the state of the Shannon.)

3. Some useful employment would be provided for the staff which the Board of Works is obliged to keep up along the Shannon, for the purpose of working the locks and receiving tolls on the navigation.

These "dams" are, to a great extent, the cause of the mischief, as they have been left with no means of letting the water off; consequently, when there are floods the water is kept banked up in the country, and can only discharge itself *over* them. Their conversion into "regulating weirs" must, or, I think, ought to, form part of any comprehensive scheme for dealing with the question as a whole. Their conversion now need not therefore prevent the work being finished as a whole hereafter, and would in no way interfere with the navigation being carried on in the meantime.

The insertion of these sluices, &c., has more than once been recommended by Mr. Lynam, a civil engineer of high repute in Ireland, who has been employed by



the riparian proprietors in their endeavours to get this evil remedied. He estimates the expense of the conversion, &c., of these eight dams into regulating weirs at 30,000*l*. I have not myself made any detailed estimate, but, taking his figures as approximately correct, we may safely assume that one half of what the Government was prepared to grant last year would fully cover the expense of the work recommended; and I will venture to say, that there seldom has been an occasion on which the expenditure of so small a sum on a national object could be productive of so much immediate and prospective good.

Though late in the Session, it is surely not too late for the Government—which must be in possession of the requisite plans and estimates—to bring forward, even in the partial manner suggested, this measure, the justice of which they so fully acknowledged last year.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

W. LE POER TRENCH,

*Captain, R.E.*

32, HYDE PARK GARDENS, W.,

JUNE 29, 1871.



# Houses of the Oireachtas