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“*Balfourian Amelioration.*”

A REPLY

TO

THE RT. HON. HORACE PLUNKETT.

BY

JAMES WILSON.



DUBLIN:

WILLIAM MCGEE, 18 NASSAU STREET.

LONDON:

SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, HAMILTON, KENT, AND CO., LTD.

1901.

PRICE THREEPENCE.

Houses of the Oireachtas

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PREFACE.

WHEN Mr. Horace Plunkett's article on "Balfourian Amelioration" appeared in *The Nineteenth Century* of December, 1900, some of those who had opposed him in the election for South Dublin last October requested me to reply. I then wrote to the Editor, asking him to allow a reply to appear in the January number. To this request I received a refusal in the ordinary printed form, "for want of space." This I thought unfair, especially under the circumstances, as it places his readers under a great disadvantage in judging the matter for themselves. To repair this disadvantage to some extent, I have written the following short reply, in which I have only dealt with some of the more important of Mr. Plunkett's statements.

JAMES WILSON.

CURRYGRANE,
EDGEWORTHSTOWN,
January, 1901.

“BALFOURIAN AMELIORATION.”

A REPLY

TO

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE HORACE PLUNKETT,

HAD Mr. Horace Plunkett's article in the December number of *The Nineteenth Century* appeared in a magazine circulating only in Ireland, it would have done but little harm. But as it has doubtless been read by thousands of educated Englishmen and Scotchmen, who do not know Mr. Plunkett's peculiarities nor the facts of the case, it is well they should be informed of these before they decide on this question.

They will not be surprised to find that Mr. Plunkett in his article has not furnished them with the facts sufficiently fully or impartially when they know that he had just passed through a rather hotly contested election in South Dublin, and, moreover, is an enthusiast on the subject of advancing the industries of Ireland. Let me give some proofs that his enthusiasm sometimes leads him astray. On page 896 he says:—“The humour and pathos of it” (Mr. G. Balfour's political life from 1895 to 1900) “all should be preserved long after we have forgotten the rancour and stupidity which, to all appearances, allowed such a man to leave a country, not usually ungrateful, ‘unwept, unhonoured, and unsung.’” Here it will be perceived that, after due consideration, he can find no sufficient reason beyond “rancour and stupidity” why Mr. G. Balfour has left Ireland “unwept, unhonoured, and unsung.” Now, I hope to show further on that there were reasons for this of a sufficiently grave character, which are not mentioned by Mr. Plunkett. But let me say here that if the

English and Scotch readers of *The Nineteenth Century* only knew Lord Ardilaun, Mr. Ball, Professor Dowden, Sir Malcolm Inglis, and others who were active in their opposition to Mr. Plunkett, as they are known in Ireland, they would agree with us in feeling that the ascription to them of "rancour and stupidity" is so grotesquely absurd that it could not be made honestly except by a man whose enthusiastic nature blinds him to the plainest facts; and this becomes still more clear by the fact that during the election these men—though somewhat doubtful as to the realization of his sanguine anticipations—spoke highly in praise of Mr. Plunkett's efforts to improve the industries of Ireland.

Here is another proof: When he was blamed for appointing to a lucrative office a man who had taken an active part in robbing the landlords by the "Plan of Campaign," Mr. Plunkett excused himself by saying that he had searched amongst the loyal men of Ireland, and had failed to find anyone so competent as Mr. Gill. Again, I have no doubt but that Mr. Plunkett made this statement quite honestly; yet it is so amazing it could not have been made honestly, except by a man whose vision was distorted. For, consider this: the Loyalists of Ireland number nearly 1,500,000; and they have produced more than their proportion of such men as Goldsmith, Edmund Burke, Wellington, Lawrence, Nicholson, Mayo, Dufferin, Wolseley, and Roberts!

I shall not dwell on the last proof I shall give, for Mr. Plunkett is not inhuman; yet in one having no distorted vision it would be accounted inhuman to sneer (as Mr. Plunkett does at page 903) at those who have cried out against the brutal cruelty so often inflicted upon some dumb animal because it belonged to a farmer who dared to break the law of the Land League, or of the present United Irish League.

Having now given reasons why his readers should be on their guard, I shall endeavour to show that very important facts, unmentioned by Mr. Plunkett, furnish a better reason than "rancour and stupidity" why Mr. G. Balfour left Ireland "unwept, unhonoured, and unsung."

LAW AND ORDER.

On page 896 Mr. Plunkett quotes largely from a speech of Mr. G. Balfour made at Leeds, on 16th October, 1895, shortly after he became Chief Secretary. He had just returned from the west

of Ireland, where he was cordially received whilst seeing for himself the happy results of the efforts of his brother, Mr. A. J. Balfour, to relieve the chronic distress of the congested districts. He said: "I have not the slightest doubt that if they [the Irish people] had to vote again on the subject to-morrow, they would again vote for Home Rule, as they voted for it at the last election; but I think I cannot be mistaken when I say that I do notice a real and important change in the spirit of the people of Ireland. I think they are gradually becoming tired of political agitation; I think they are beginning to feel that they will do better to turn their energies to some projects by which they will obtain material benefit for themselves; and I am sure they are prepared to receive in a kindly spirit—a spirit of welcome—anything which Parliament may be able to do for them." He then says: "This change . . . has gradually extended itself to their political leaders;" and he ends with this sentence: "We should be glad enough, no doubt, to kill Home Rule with kindness if we could; but whatever may be the results of our efforts, our intention is to do our utmost to introduce and pass such measures as will really promote the interests of the material prosperity of Ireland." Mr. Plunkett's remark upon this is: "To some of us the attitude here taken up towards the people of Ireland was simply ideal." So that we have here an explanation of what he means by "Balfourian amelioration." And no one who reads this quotation carefully can fail to see that Mr. G. Balfour was then persuaded that his first duty as Chief Secretary was to "introduce and pass such measures as will really promote the interests of the material prosperity of Ireland;" and that he thought that even if he did not "kill Home Rule with kindness," he would at least soften the rancour of discontent, and reduce the elements of disturbance, both social and political, below the dangerous point. This is clear from what he said on May 25, 1900, in the House of Commons—"I have been convinced, and am still firmly convinced, that the illegal operations of the League must break down from their own weight." It was natural enough for a clever man like Mr. G. Balfour to think so, for he lacked that experience which alone can give a knowledge of the peculiar nature of the Irish people. Events, however, have unfortunately disappointed him. During his administration the United Irish League has sprung up, and shows signs of increasing strength so similar to the Land League in its early days, as to cause just alarm as to its future. The Attorney-General for Ireland last October proved by statistics to his own satisfaction that the power of the United Irish League was never strong, and is waning. Yet

two months later (December the 4th) the Lord Chief Justice, in addressing the Cork Grand Jury, spoke strongly of the increase of agrarian crime in the counties covered by the Munster Winter Assize, especially mentioning the number of derelict farms, "that is to say, abandoned both by landlord and tenant." Of these there are in Clare alone forty-seven. And although the Chief Justice subsequently (December 9th) said that, in his opinion, the Attorney-General had acted rightly in not up till now proclaiming the United Irish League, he mentioned certain powers which he considered the Attorney-General ought to have and to exercise in the present serious state of things in the south of Ireland. And giving the total number of farms derelict in the whole of the Munster Winter Assize county as 168, he said: "This is the serious condition of things that I had occasion to refer to in my charge to the Grand Jury; and I wish to be very accurate." So much as to the south. It is no better in the west. Mr. Justice Kenny, in his charge to the Grand Jury of Sligo on December 4th, having referred to the agrarian crimes, such as firing into houses, destruction of hay, maiming of cattle, in one instance by blinding, in another by cutting off the ears, said: "But no one had been made amenable to the law for these crimes. Another feature was that in a large majority of these cases the injured parties refused to make any information. This was an unfortunate state of things. It meant that there was a combination of no small weight and magnitude existing in their midst—a combination that enforced its mandates by criminal methods." Perhaps Mr. Balfour may now be sorry for having turned a deaf ear to the warning given him on April 5th, 1900, by the Duke of Abercorn, Edward Dowden, and Andrew Jameson, the Chairman and Vice-Chairmen of the Irish Unionist Alliance, when, having enumerated the facts which were even then of a threatening character, they said: "The permitted revival of the old methods of local tyranny, the indifference of the Administration to wrongs suffered by law-abiding subjects of the Queen, the bestowal of office upon a person disqualified for trust by participation in a criminal conspiracy, have produced a feeling of indignation among Irish Loyalists, the strength and volume of which the Alliance can testify to, and which, whether it be viewed as just or unjust, must be reckoned with as a force."

The fact is, Mr. G. Balfour made a mistake, which marks him as a politician as distinguished from a statesman. He found Ireland poor, and in parts very poor, and he made the common mistake of thinking direct relief the best remedy. He forgot that disturbance and lawlessness, by driving capital away is the most powerful cause of

poverty in any country ; and that the first and most important duty of the Executive is the strict enforcement of law and order. And it seems unaccountable that in this elementary duty he did not follow the excellent example of his brother, Mr. A. J. Balfour, who was Chief Secretary shortly before him.

THE LAND QUESTION.

But I must hasten on to our social troubles. The chief of these, beyond all others, in Ireland, is the Land Question, not only because we are nearly all agriculturists, but because it lies at the bottom of, and gives its strength to, the cry for Home Rule. Well, it seemed to us that in 1895 the Unionist Government, with its powerful majority (152), had a fine opportunity of putting this difficult but most important question on its way at least towards solution. And Mr. G. Balfour himself seemed to think so. For in a speech at Leeds, on 4th July, 1895, after mentioning his intention to make some alterations in the Land laws, he said he himself rested his hope for the future chiefly upon the voluntary transfer of their farms to the tenants by purchase.

The Irish Landowners' Convention soon afterwards submitted their views and suggestions on these matters to Mr. Balfour and the Lord Lieutenant, and pointed out especially the obstacles which stand in the way of voluntary sales.

One of these obstacles is so great that in the case of the poorer landlords—who are the great majority—it is practically prohibitive. It consists in the delay, trouble, and expense of clearing title. This step is necessary before a sale; but the whole expense entailed by it is thrown on the landlord, although its object is to carry out a great State policy in transferring the ownership to the tenant.

We, therefore, asked that the State should undertake the task of clearing titles all over the country at the expense of the Government (as was done in Prussia in 1872) ; that the State should recoup itself by a moderate scale of fees on future transactions ; and that all titles, when thus cleared, should be forthwith placed on the Registry of Title under the Local Registration of Title (Ireland) Act, 1891.

So far this reasonable request has been refused. Its refusal is not merely an obstacle to individual landlords, but also to the proper working of the policy of the Congested Districts Board, as may be seen by reference to the Reports of that Board.

Again, we suggested that in addition to the purchase of the fee the tenant might be offered a perpetuity lease at one-half his present rent, the State advancing at a low rate (say $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. or less) sufficient capital to purchase the other half. This State advance to become a first charge on the farm. In this way the State would have perfect security, and its money do double the work it does now in purchasing the fee; the tenant would get possession of his farm for ever at a reduction of about 15 per cent. off his rent, and entire freedom from all anxiety and doubt arising from the periodical revision of rents; and the landlord—especially when encumbered—would be considerably relieved, and, continuing to enjoy the royalties on his estate, have an inducement to remain resident. This suggestion was made by a deputation from the Landowners' Convention to Mr. A. J. Balfour in 1891; and, curiously enough, the principle of perpetuity leases had also been adopted by Mr. Parnell. Most unfortunately, it was not then carried into law. In 1896, however, Mr. G. Balfour did introduce the principle into the Act of that year, but entrusted the shaping of it to the law officers, who have so maimed it that I believe in no instance has it been carried out.

Another suggestion was that, as the State would largely benefit by the extension of purchase, it should offer to add to the price which the tenant is willing to give, say, one-tenth more. This would facilitate purchase immensely, and be a boon to the tenant and some compensation to the landlord for the loss of that part of his property which in 1881 was taken from him by the State for a public purpose. Other suggestions were made; but I think I have said enough to show that "Balfourian amelioration" in Ireland has left almost untouched the Land Question, which is the question of questions in Ireland.

The result is disheartening. People are losing hope in voluntary sale. Every member representing an agricultural constituency in Ireland, except Colonel Saunderson, is pledged to support compulsory sale; and Mr. T. W. Russell, Member for South Tyrone, has put forward a scheme of so extravagant a kind that nothing like it has ever been carried into law, except by a bloody revolution. A result so disappointing may even change Mr. Plunkett's own mind, and he may no longer look at Mr. G. Balfour's administration as "simply ideal."

THE LAND ACT OF 1896.

I cannot deal with Mr. Plunkett's misleading references (on page 897) to the Land Act of 1896 in any detail. But this I may say that, contrary to his repeated denunciations of the Act of 1881, Mr. G. Balfour has increased its severity on the landlords.

One instance will show this: Mr. Gladstone always refused to allow grazing holdings of more than £50 valuation to come under the Act of 1881, on the ground that the Act was meant to protect the smaller and weaker tenants only. Yet Mr. G. Balfour gratuitously admitted grazing holdings of £100 valuation. And again, when Mr. Plunkett asserts that "the reductions made (by second-term fixing of rents) were falsely attributed to the Land Act of 1896," he makes a statement which, so far as my knowledge goes, is absolutely without foundation with regard to landlords or tenants.

THE FRY COMMISSION.

Well, then comes the question of the Fry Commission, whose most valuable Report Mr. Plunkett dismisses with the remark, that "almost all the recommendations which did *not* involve fresh legislation have been already adopted, while many have been found on examination to be undesirable and unsound." This statement is so incorrect that I must contradict it as flatly as courtesy will permit. The Report of the Irish Landowners' Convention, published on the 27th April, 1900, is open before me, and it gives the fullest information available as to "the changes in procedure, &c., adopted by the Irish Land Commission since the issue of the Report of the Fry Commission." "No official statement has apparently been issued by the Land Commission, either for the use of its staff or of the public;" and it gives, therefore, as its authority "the lists of Parliamentary publications, the debate in the House of Lords on the 27th April, 1899, and a memorandum subsequently furnished by the Land Commission to the Lord Chancellor of Ireland, and forwarded by him to the Earl of Mayo." Well, these authorities show that nine changes of procedure have been made, all of comparatively a minor kind, such as:—measurements to be made of tenants' improvements, drains to be tested, legal decisions of importance to be circulated amongst Sub-Commissioners, valuers' reports to be communicated to parties concerned, alternative procedure in fair rent cases, qualifications

of Sub-Commissioners to be tested by Civil Service examination, and a few others. Whereas the changes recommended by the Fry Commission, and not adopted, consist of twenty, some of a very important character, such as, the meaning of "fair rent" should be defined, all Sub-Commissioners and valuers should be well-paid permanent officials; that in fixing "fair rents" "every relevant circumstance of the case, holding, and district," should be considered; that the present restriction on purchase imposed by the Land Purchase Department should be greatly relaxed, &c. No one comparing the nine changes with the twenty could honestly say that "almost all the recommendations which did not involve fresh legislation have been already adopted." It would be more correct to say that the changes "which did not involve fresh legislation" numbered more nearly fifty than nine. This statement of Mr. Plunkett is therefore so great an error that it may be fairly called absurd. Yet the proper sources of information were at Mr. Plunkett's command. Now, just consider that this Royal Commission was presided over by Sir Edward Fry, assisted by an English and a Scotch valuator of the highest standing, and one gentleman to look after the interests of the tenants, and one the interests of the landlords; that it examined witnesses on behalf of the Land Commission, the landlords, the agents, and the tenants, in the most painstaking manner, and that its Report is unanimous; and yet Mr. Plunkett is hardy enough to lightly dismiss this Report by saying that many of their recommendations "have been found on examination to be undesirable and unsound"! Who ever heard of "an examination" of a Report of a Royal Commission? What court of inquiry made it? One is forced to answer that the court consisted probably of Mr. Plunkett himself, in secret conclave with Mr. G. Balfour. And just think that the suggestions thus pigeon-holed were made unanimously by a Royal Commission, presided over by such a man as Sir Edward Fry! Here is a chink through which one may peep into the inner machinery at work producing "Balfourian amelioration"!

LOCAL GOVERNMENT.

Not much need be said about the Local Government Act of 1898. The majority of the English and Scotch Unionist Members, during the struggle against Home Rule, pledged themselves to vote for a Local Government Act for Ireland, which, therefore, became a political necessity. Mr. G. Balfour cleverly piloted it through the House of

Commons, honourably insisting upon carrying out a plan to protect Irish landlords from the danger of being taxed out of existence by the future County Councils. This plan—suggested, I believe, by his brother, Mr. A. J. Balfour—was to relieve Irish landlords from the payment of their half poor-rates, and the tenants from their half county cess. Several suggestions were, however, made to him to make the wholesale transfer of all power over county matters, from the upper to the lower classes, somewhat less sudden and drastic, which, however, he rejected. The Irish Landowners' Convention, the Grand Jurors and Peers, and the Irish Unionist Alliance, suggested in vain that the minority should be secured by fair representation, so as to give the larger ratepayers at least a chance of speaking and voting against objectionable proposals. The illiterate voters—who, under the Parliamentary Franchise, have in Ireland so grossly abused their privilege—were retained under this Local Government Act, still further diminishing, in a most objectionable way, the chance of the larger ratepayers having any influence whatever in county matters. However, it is too soon to judge of the working of the Act, and quite too soon to justify Mr. Plunkett in his customary over-sanguine anticipation on page 900, where he says:—“The new bodies have, on the whole, fulfilled the preliminary work of reconstruction with intelligence and efficiency; and though it is premature to speak of the permanent effects of so vast a revolution in local government, it can hardly be doubted that the reformed system will ultimately prove an enormous advance on the one it has replaced.” And I am afraid some doubts of this will remain in the minds of those who remember that at the first elections almost all Unionists—men who had experience as Chairmen of Boards of Guardians, and were well qualified to manage fiscal business—were rejected solely on the ground that they refused to pledge themselves for Home Rule, &c.

CONCLUSION.

I now leave my readers to judge for themselves of what Mr. Plunkett rather clumsily calls “Balfourian amelioration.” To enable them to do so, I have furnished them with some important facts necessary for a full consideration of the subject, but unmentioned by Mr. Plunkett.

But I greatly desire to take this opportunity of expressing my own feelings with regard to the state of affairs in Ireland. I have lived for nearly forty years amongst the peasants of Ireland; and my experience

has taught me that a more cheerful, hearty, courteous, homely, and docile peasantry cannot be found. I know that many will cry out against my last adjective, and ask: How, then, can you account for the constant discontent and frequent disturbances in Ireland? Well, though a staunch Unionist, I am compelled to account for these things by the careless misgovernment of England. Scotland, one hundred and fifty years ago, was still more discontented and disturbed; but she is thoroughly loyal now. It was that heaven-born statesman, Lord Chatham, who first touched the heart of Scotland; and the great magician did it by persuading England not to turn away in cold, selfish scorn from their brothers.

“Be to their faults a little blind;
Be to their virtues very kind,”

he cried out in the House of Lords, and touched the great heart of England. How long shall we have to wait for such a master to rouse the sympathy of the English people towards their Irish brothers, to teach them that their own happiness and the strength of their great empire is involved, and that a noble reward awaits them as soon as they throw off their present weariness and reluctance, and learn for themselves the facts of this great subject? Then, but not till then, will poor Ireland be delivered out of the hands of the politicians, whose similar action in South Africa has been so nearly fatal. Oh! if you only roused yourselves, and looked into the present state of things in Ireland, as you are now watching those in South Africa, you would no longer send us your second-rate men, whose object is to get round a tight corner in the House of Commons, but you would send us men of your first rank—men not touched by that effeminacy which loves to pose as relieving distress, but of that masculine stamp which, grasping a firm hold of the facts, acts with kindness, indeed, but also with unflinching courage in maintaining law and order; men such as the late Sir Bartle Frere, or the present Sir Alfred Milner, who have the qualities of statesmen, the courage and independence of English gentlemen, and who will search patiently for the real causes that make a people—not naturally so—troublesome and discontented.

