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THE CONGESTED DISTRICTS BOARD.

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A WORD FOR DONEGAL:

BY

JOHN H. H. SWINEY,

CIVIL ENGINEER,

*Bachelor in Arts and Engineering, Trinity College, Dublin; Associate  
Member of the Institution of Civil Engineers; Fellow of the Royal  
Meteorological Society, &c.*

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Belfast:

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Houses of the Orzechas

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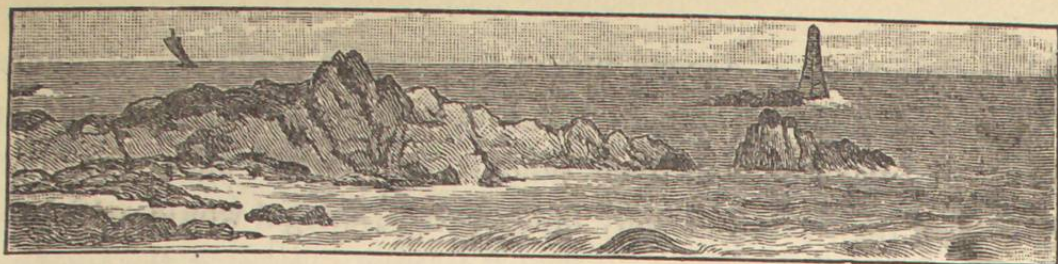
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## P R E F A C E .

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**M**Y acquaintance with the County of Donegal, its people, with all their faults, failings, and good points, their general condition and requirements, began with my first powers of observance and has not yet ceased. I have for years been professionally employed in it, improving land by drainage and reclamation, laying out roads and railways, reporting on river and harbour improvements, embanking lands from the sea, &c. ; so that if long and intimate knowledge of the physical features of the country and the social condition of its inhabitants would give weight to my suggestions, they may not be wholly unimportant.

When the Congested Districts Board was formed I thought of publishing these notes as a letter, but although cut down to the narrowest limits consistent with giving even a digest of my opinions, I found they would exceed the space I could reasonably expect any daily paper to give, and so considered it best to publish them in their present form. My excuse must be the interest I take in my native county, a land for which nature has done everything, man little. Its coast is unsurpassed for rugged grandeur, from the point where Slieve League rises 1,900 feet out of the deep, to the famous Horn which drops 800 feet sheer into the Atlantic. But its very beauty is danger to the mariner and luckless fisherman who seek shelter from the sudden storm on its rockbound coast, there being long stretches without any refuge. Indeed, from Killybegs Harbour on the south, to Lough Swilly and thence to Lough Foyle there is not a single safe anchorage for fishing or other craft.

Inland, the mountains of Errigal, Muckish, Slieve Snaght (north and south), Dooish, Lough Salt, the Glendowan and Bluestack range, rear

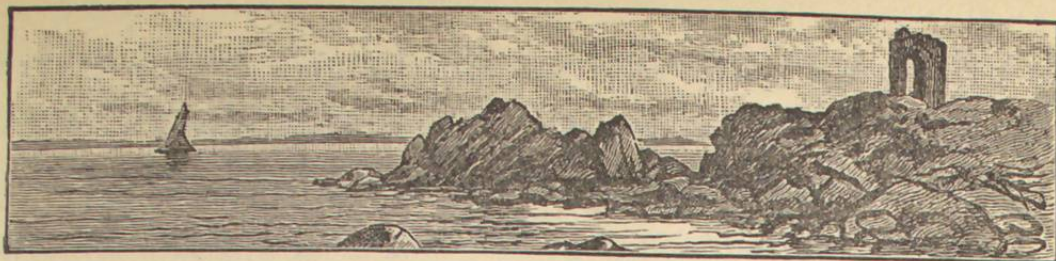
their lofty summits. Ascend one of these and a panorama of innumerable lakes and silvery streams is spread before you. Did anglers only know of the treasures contained therein, or tourists once revel in the enjoyment of its bold and lonely landscapes, Donegal would, with proper railway accommodation, become as well known a resort of the sportsman and tourist as many less deserving places in Scotland and elsewhere. The botanist will find much to interest him there, many a rare Alpine plant having its *habitat* on the cliffs or rocky mountain slopes; while the croak of the raven and cry of the chough is no unusual sound in the lonely glens, over which still circles the noblest of all British birds, the golden eagle.

I trust, then, my time may not have been altogether spent in vain committing to paper these few ideas as to the best means of improving this beautiful country and developing its resources, and I hope it may have the effect of directing the attention of the Congested Districts Board to it, and stirring its members to immediate action. With no wish to hamper them in other undertakings, and knowing the somewhat limited extent of their resources, I think much may be done by strong recommendations to Government, who would, I feel certain, lend a willing ear to the suggestions, and liberally supplement the grants of their local Board.

J. H. H. S.







## CONGESTED DISTRICTS BOARD.

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### *A WORD FOR DONEGAL.*

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THE Congested Districts Board is now an accomplished fact, and composed of such members as may well satisfy the public that the interests of the several districts coming under the definition "congested" will be well looked after.

The definition of a Congested District, as given in the Act of Parliament, is "an electoral division of which the total rateable value when divided by the number of the population gives a sum of less than one pound ten shillings for each individual." Taking this, then, as the basis, we have, I submit, in the County Donegal the most congested district in Ireland. What may be called the western seaboard of Donegal consists of the parishes of Glencolumbkille, valuation per head 8s 11d; and Inishkeel, valuation 12s 9d; the whole of the barony of Boylagh, valuation 9s 2½d; and the parish of Tullaghobegley, valuation 8s 3d. This district is bounded on the east by a high range of mountains, which begins at Crowkeeragh in the south, and passing on through

Crocknapeaste, Binbane, Silver Hill, Gaugin, Moylenanav, and Slieve Snaght, terminates in Errigal and Muckish on the north. Intercourse with this isolated region is effected either by the coast or through passes crossing the mountains at considerable elevation, through which all traffic has hitherto been conducted by carts at enormous cost. Quite recently, owing to the enterprise of a private gentleman, a small steamer calls occasionally, weather permitting, at one or two places, and carries on a fair trade with Londonderry. What has been done by the State in the past, or what can be done in the future, to mitigate the sufferings or improve the condition of the inhabitants of this wild and inhospitable region? What has been done in the past may shortly be summed up thus:—The construction of a few fishery piers and boat-slips at a total cost of about £13,000, out of which must be deducted about £3,250 contributed by the district, by private individuals, or other funds. If we omit the pier at Teelin, which is the most southerly limit of my boundary line, where the expenditure was £8,000, we have what I must call, considering all the circumstances, the beggarly sum of £5,000 spent, and not always wisely spent, on this the most congested district of Ireland. (I omit mention of funds provided for supplying seed potatoes, which is supposed to be repaid, and funds provided by private donations.) I cannot deny that this little has been useful; but piers constructed where these are may be compared to the erection of a house in some inaccessible place without means of ingress or egress; and this naturally brings me to the question of the means of transit.

When, under the beneficent rule of Mr. Balfour, the Light Railways (Ireland) Act, 1889, was passed, Donegal came forward

with several schemes, among others as specially affecting this district, a line known as the Donegal Central Railway, which would have brought the whole of the western and part of the southern seaboard within reach of railway accommodation. Part of this line was recommended by the Royal Commissioners, and the other part by the Commissioners appointed by the Board of Public Works. Another line put forward was that known as the North-west Donegal Light Railway, which would, if made, at least have benefited the northern end. A part only of the former line was granted a subsidy; but as this terminates at Glenties, an inland village, twenty-two miles as the crow flies from the southern end, and twenty-five miles from the northern end of the district, it cannot be said to have solved the question of transit either for ordinary produce or for fish. Although the result to the bulk of the population, who are crowded on the coast, is small, still it is a step in the right direction; but until railway accommodation is considerably extended, I fear the construction of piers, the instruction of the peasantry in better ways of agriculture, or the inception of any industrial undertaking, will be futile, as with indifferent markets for the produce of their industry, no matter how improved, the people will lose heart and cease a work that begun under other circumstances would lead to permanent success.

What, then, can be done for this large district, with a population of over 38,000, whose property bears an annual rateable value per head of under 9s. 2d., and this property, mark, practically their only means of support?

The drift of my recommendations may be inferred from my previous remarks—continue the railway either from Glenties or

Fintown (I prefer the latter) to the neighbourhood of Burton Port or Kincaslugh,\* which lie about midway between the north and south limits of the district, and there construct a deepwater harbour to accommodate the largest-sized fishing boats necessary for the successful prosecution of fishing off the coast. A fishery industrial school, with curing establishments, on the lines of that so satisfactorily managed by Father Davis, at Baltimore, should also be built, for the purpose of instructing the people how to fish, and cure large takes, which often occur, and now go to loss. At the present time I read of fine turbot being cut up for bait, and herrings used for manure, at Burton Port. Although fishing, as an extensive industry, has not hitherto been carried on, still there is a great number of small boats which, in time, would give place to large and more suitable craft, for the fish are undoubtedly there, if only a market could be found for them. This the railway would give, and would also pass through a country noted for a granitic formation, than which, for monumental or other work, none finer exists. These quarries have already been worked, but, although the quality of the stone was excellent, they had to be abandoned owing to the difficulties and expense of transit. It may be interesting here to mention a recent article in the *Mining Journal*, which, after stating that the Rosses granites embrace 40,000 acres, continues—"This property yields some of the most handsomely-figured, dappled, and fine texture granites in Europe. Exhibits from this immense property were awarded a diploma of gold medal at the International Mining Exhibition, at the Crystal Palace." To the harbour would come, besides special boats, were sufficient inducements

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\* If this line were not made, that recommended for the north-western district might be continued from Gortahork.

offered, the Glasgow and Liverpool steamers, which pass within a few miles eight times weekly. These boats in fine weather occasionally put in to Gola Roads, a little to the north, but there is neither harbour nor pier, and goods and passengers are often carried on to Glasgow, Liverpool, or Sligo, as the case may be.

Suitable means of accommodation seaward and landward being established, I now turn to some other possible means of improvement. The land over nearly all this district is bog, in some places very thin, and owing to the possibility of supplementing a precarious existence by fishing, the bulk of the population is on the coast, where division and sub-division of the holdings has been carried on to such an extent that the land, be it ever so good, could not support the people living on it. I see that, among other things, the Congested Districts Board may recommend the Land Commissioners to facilitate the amalgamation of small holdings. This is good, so far as it goes; but I think some more stringent measures should be adopted to prevent any future sub-division below a certain point, which I would fix at fifteen acres of arable land. Many of the holdings here contain a large proportion of rough mountain grazing and bog, either held directly by the tenant, or in common with others, as grazing. Some of this land lends itself readily to reclamation by draining, liming, and sub-soiling, sub-soil being generally only found on cut-out bog. By suitable cultivation, however, I have known surprising results from pure bog, and, indeed, one has only to go to this district to see the result of generous and enlightened treatment of the soil. There are thousands of acres of such land lying waste and unproductive now; and could Government see its

way to take possession of suitable lots and reclaim them, they could be sold at such prices as would go far to repay the outlay. Reclamation and fencing would cost from £10 to £12 per acre, and I have known these lands, partially reclaimed, sell at over £20 per statute acre, and this under rent. The question of reclamation, with migration and stoppage of sub-division, is a difficult one; but difficulties are not impossibilities, and means might be devised by legislation and proper administration to overcome them. Planting on a large scale might also be carried out for the purpose not only of giving employment, but also instruction and encouragement to the people to plant for shelter on their own holdings. Plantings, if properly done and well watched, would, long ere ready for thinning, become remunerative as shootings, the value of which appears to be steadily increasing. Large tracts of country which is, from its ruggedness or elevation, unsuited for reclamation, might in this way become a source of profit to Government, while giving immediate employment in the district.

In the way of arterial drainage something might also be done, but, except in those districts actually taken up by Government, there are so many contending interests that until the law is altered there would be considerable difficulty in carrying out works of this kind. It would, however, be wise to ascertain by proper surveys what can be done, so that if a sudden call during periods of distress were made the Board would be in a position to take action at once, and not rushed into an expenditure of money on works, the utility of which ceases with the labour. Evidences of this are apparent in many of the so-called relief works through the country. These remarks as to surveys for the information of the Board apply with equal force to the alignment of new

roads, the necessity for which is well known to those acquainted with the district.

Up till about fifteen years ago flax was grown rather extensively, and were the people instructed how to grow and prepare it with greatest advantage, I see no reason why they should not again do so, seeing the amount of profitable labour it would give them at their own doors. I recollect when nearly every available stream had its flax mill, but now ruins alone attest the existence of a once flourishing industry. What is the cause of this? Two reasons may be assigned. First, the quality of the flax was not of the highest order, and second, it had to be carted over long distances up to and exceeding forty miles. The cost of this became prohibitive, as freights in better districts, owing to extension of railways, became less. Were it possible to start a small spinning mill and instruct the peasantry in weaving, a very large amount of employment might be given. I understand the best and most valuable linens are still produced from hand-looms in the neighbourhood of Belfast.

Oats is a crop which, when properly treated, does remarkably well on this land, but as it does not lead to any general industry I do not further notice it.

Encouraged by the private enterprise or philanthropy of individuals, the spinning of wool, knitting of stockings, and weaving of flannels has spread pretty generally over the district; and this industry might be further supported, so as to obtain for the producers better prices, which at present for many reasons are very small.

On the wastes and mountains are found a peculiarly small nondescript breed of sheep. These can be bought in the country fairs from twelve to eighteen shillings each, and when put on

better pasture for a little yield mutton of the most delicate flavour. It may surprise some to hear that quarters of this mutton are *posted* by butchers regularly to England; and were the matter only placed on better footing I think a dead-meat trade might be started, profitable alike to the undertakers and those who breed the sheep.

Any attempts to improve the breeds of cattle, horses, or fowl, I would consider premature, owing to the poverty and ignorance of the peasantry, who never half-feed their stock. This, however, might proceed step by step with the gradual improvement of the land, the increase in the size of holdings, and clearer notions of agriculture, of which latter only the most wretched and primitive prevails, not one-half the possible produce being taken out of the ground.

I have not touched on the question of moss-litter, peat fuel, or mines, of the working of which latter there are several indications through the district in the way of old shafts, &c. In all the inquiries I have made from time to time as to the reason of their stoppage I have never yet heard it was from want of ore; but either from mismanagement or want of facilities of transit.

To sum up, then, the suggestions I offer are these:—(1) efficient means of transit by extension of railways; (2) at least one good deep-water fishery pier and harbour at the termination of the railway; (3) a fishery industrial school and curing establishment; (4) stringent measures to prevent subdivision and encourage amalgamation; (5) the purchase by State of waste lands, with the reclamation and planting of such lots as are suitable; (6) the erection of an industrial and technical agricultural school on one such lot; and (7) to provide for any



emergency, the surveys for arterial drainage, new roads, or other works.

It will, no doubt, be said that this will require more money than the Congested Districts Board has at its disposal, or could fairly allot to one county. A beginning could, however, at once be made by grasping thoroughly the end in view, and letting the inception of all works tend towards this ultimate object. If possible get one or two small industrial centres, and it is wonderful how these affect and spread their influence over surrounding parts. The State might very reasonably be called upon to make the railway and harbour while assisting the other works, all of which would, if not actually repay outlay, at least give some return, while the improvement in the economic condition of the people would be such as might satisfy the most sanguine.

This large but wretchedly poor tract of country being disposed of as having the first claim upon the funds and exertions of the Congested Districts Board, I may mention two others which also need its serious attention. I will designate them the "Northern" and the "North-Western," in distinction to the first described, which may be called the "Western."

The northern district comprises the parishes of Clonmany and Clonca, with part of the parishes of Donagh and Culdaff, and is also shut off by mountains on the landward side. Its coast, though exposed to all the fury of Atlantic storms, had not one single refuge, even for small boats, until quite recently, when, owing chiefly to the energy of the local parish priest, a small pier was built at Malinmore. I have not seen this pier, but understand, as a refuge for fishing boats, it is useless, being too small; yet this is the only work assisted by State in the whole district. Here, again, I would urgently

press the necessity of railway extension, which could easily and economically be done by continuing the existing railway from Buncrana to Carndonagh. This line was recommended by the Royal Commissioners, and was the only line in Donegal recommended in its entirety by the Commissioners appointed by the Board of Public Works; yet, much to the surprise of everyone, it did not get a grant. At Rockstown Harbour (a natural bay) a deep-water pier and shelterage might be constructed. The parish of Clonmany, although not the poorest in point of valuation, supports per acre in proportion to its valuation a higher population than any of the other districts; so that it may be said to be doubly congested.

The north-western district comprises the parishes of Raymonterdoney, Clondevaddock, Clondahorkey, Meevagh, Kilmacrenan, and Gartan, but is not so isolated, at least in part, as the two before described. However, railway accommodation is badly wanted, and could best be met by the extension of the Letterkenny Railway through Gartan and Dunfanaghy to Crossroads or Gortahork. The suggestions I have already made for the improvement of the western district by land reclamation, planting, arterial drainage, &c., are equally applicable to the northern and north-western; but from five-and-twenty years' experience of them, it is the western which, in my opinion, has the first claim to attention, if not in Ireland, at least in Donegal.

J. H. H. SWINEY.

*Belfast, December, 1891.*



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