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WHAT IS TO BE DONE

FOR

IRELAND?

BY

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THE present condition of Ireland—the nature of the changes which are occurring beside us and before our very eyes—the means of averting the utter ruin which is impending over entire provinces, and of protecting and maturing such germs of improvement as appear to retain vitality in the midst of the general confusion,—these are topics of such engrossing importance, and, at the same time, of such portentous difficulty, that no man who is interested in the fortunes of the British Empire can well avoid to consider them, while very few can with any confidence pretend to offer a solution for the perilous problems which they suggest.

It will lessen the appearance of presumption on the part of a writer unknown to political controversy to state, that in the following pages

I shall scrupulously avoid all personal, party, and sectarian questions. My object is simply to lay before the intelligent and well-disposed in either country a plain statement of authentic facts, having reference to the economical and social difficulties of the present crisis; not merely to awaken their attention, for this I believe has already been sufficiently accomplished, but further to assist them in arriving at practical conclusions by giving the results of anxious and painful inquiry and consideration—results based upon personal experience, assisted by frequent discussion with many of those most distinguished by knowledge, ability, and zeal for the public welfare.

I shall not be expected to enter into details, descriptive or historical, for the purpose of making known the condition of this country, or the causes which had produced that condition, at the period when, owing to the failure of the potato crop in the years 1845 and 1846, the social revolution commenced whose progress we still contemplate and whose results must for a long period decide our destinies. The entire world has resounded with our complaints; in every civilised tongue our miseries, our dissensions, our wrongs, and our vices, have been discussed and recorded. Those who do not already know whatever may be learned by mere reading are little likely to be informed by any attempt

of mine. The sequel of our history up to the spring of the present year is scarcely less well known, and may be summed up in a few pages.

The partial failure of the potato crop, in the spring of 1846, was met by the timely introduction of a moderate supply of Indian corn meal*. The able-bodied poor who had lost their only means of subsistence were employed upon public works. The entire cost of relief during this season was £.733,372, of which sum £.368,000 is repayable to the Treasury from the county rates. The local subscriptions officially reported to the Government amounted to £.98,000; but allowance must be made for other private expenditure for relief purposes, and a large addition for the value of grain consumed in Ireland, which would, under ordinary circumstances, have been exported, and there will not be much error in estimating the direct cost of the first failure of the potato crop at about a million sterling.

The history of the succeeding year is even better known. In a few weeks the staple food of a population of five millions was all but utterly destroyed. A famine, perhaps the most fearful in its extent of any recorded in history, followed with awful suddenness. To say that the measures adopted by the Government were

* The amount provided for the relief service was 98,810 quarters, of which 84,235 quarters were sold up to August 1846.

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insufficient to prevent misery, disease, and actual starvation, is not a ground of just reproach, for the visitation was one which no amount of legislative or administrative skill could effectually relieve. The system of employment upon public works, which had been used with tolerable success during the preceding season, was adopted with some modifications of detail. Whether from a reluctance to credit the estimated extent of the failure, though derived from the most authentic sources, or from an erroneous calculation of the resources existing in the country, the inevitable consequences of this measure were not perceived. Introduced by the Government at the close of the session, the Bill passed without a word of warning or remonstrance from any of the Irish members of the House of Commons*. The obvious and direct objections to a system of public works, as a means of relief during a period of general famine, are—the increased cost, amounting to fully double that of direct relief in food; the impossibility of effectual superin-

* In the House of Lords, Lord Monteagle pointed out the dangerous consequences of the proposed measure, and before the Bill had passed a strong remonstrance was drawn up and forwarded to the Prime Minister, at a meeting at which were present, the Earl of Devon, Sir Richard Bourke, Mr. Spring Rice, Mr. Monsell, Sir Vere de Vere, Sir David Roche, and several others of the most influential proprietors of the county of Limerick; these partial efforts were, however, completely unheeded.

tendance where a large portion of the population become applicants for relief; the hardships and the demoralisation caused by assembling together all the applicants for relief, whether able-bodied, infirm, or diseased, and requiring them to go through the form of out-door work in the midst of an inclement season; and, worst of all, the permanent injury to the habits of the labouring class, when, through the want of sufficient check and inspection, they become familiarised with a system of *sham-work*, and lose every incentive to earnest industry.

But in addition to these evils there was another, which has not yet been generally understood in England, and which can be fully appreciated only by those conversant with the peculiar condition of this country.

In spite of unfavourable circumstances, arising from political and social causes, a period of industrial improvement had commenced in Ireland. Amongst other indications, the formation and progress of the Irish Agricultural Society sufficiently proves that a considerable number of proprietors had become alive to the necessity for improvement in the art of the cultivation of land, which had continued in a wretchedly imperfect and semi-barbarous state*. Some amongst them,

* Once for all I should remark, that, from most general statements, such as that given above, I except the more fortunate districts of Ulster and Leinster, where favourable

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prompted by feelings of duty or of enlightened self-interest, had also begun to exert themselves in earnest to improve the condition of the poorer classes, whether small farmers or labourers, upon their estates. Upon the whole, gradual and steady, though not rapid progress was apparent throughout nearly the whole of Ireland ; every year was marked by an increased expenditure of capital in farming ; and gradually the tenant farmers were beginning to lose the prejudices and the ignorance which have proved an effectual bar to all improvement on their part. It was necessary that a certain number of persons of superior capital and education should take the lead in a movement of this nature ; their influence could only gradually be felt upon the general mass, and it was obvious that a long period must elapse before the farmers could be got to feel any real interest in the amelioration of the condition of the labouring class.

circumstances acting upon an industrious race have produced, and still maintain, a considerable degree of material prosperity. One of the difficulties that arise in speaking or writing about Ireland proceeds from the fact that scarcely any assertion can be made which is generally true. Not only the whole island, but almost every separate county, exhibits within it the most strange contrasts in respect to the condition of its inhabitants. Variations, as marked as those which distinguish Tuscany from the most impoverished districts in Poland, may be found within the space of a few miles.

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In proportion as it has been natural to feel indignation at the manner in which a large proportion of the proprietors of this country have forgotten their duties, neglected opportunities, and sacrificed their own interests and those of their successors to careless indolence or self-indulgence, so it was but just to prize the conduct of those who have pursued an opposite course, and upon whose exertions the progress of civilisation must for a long period materially depend. Men of the class here described had for the most part supported the poor of their own neighbourhoods during the spring of 1846 by subscriptions, to which some additional grants were made by the Government; but in the autumn of the same year they found that the only adequate means provided for the relief of a population which had suddenly lost their chief and almost exclusive means of subsistence was by public works. The presentments for the purposes of this Act were made by the magistrates and cess-payers assembled at Sessions, for each respective barony, half-barony, county of a city, or county of a town, in which relief was required. A barony in Ireland includes, upon an average, an area of about 65,000 acres, and a population of about 25,000. The rate-payers of each of these large districts were held jointly responsible for the support of famishing multitudes, and at a time when proprietors received but a small per centage upon

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their rents, and when all but the large farmers were in a state bordering on destitution, they were required to contract loans often exceeding in amount the entire annual value of the district, repayment of which loans as they were informed would be rigidly enforced.

Although no one can without hesitation differ from so high an authority as Sir Charles Trevelyan, I confess that I cannot concur in his opinion that the measure here described was calculated to induce, or even to permit, of an increased expenditure of capital upon the cultivation and improvement of land*. Such an idea must have rested upon one of two suppositions, each of which appears to me equally untenable. Either it was supposed that a general co-operation of individuals and classes, resident and non-resident, solvent and insolvent, proprietors, middle-

* “The plan of the Labour Rate Act (9 & 10 Vict., c. 107) was based on the supposition that the great majority of the landlords and farmers would make those exertions, and submit to those sacrifices, which the magnitude of the crisis demanded, leaving only a manageable proportion of the population to be supported by the Board of Works; and the Act would probably have answered its object, if a larger instead of a smaller number of persons than usual had been employed in the cultivation and improvement of the land, and the Relief Committees had only put those who were really destitute upon the lists.” (*Irish Crisis*, p. 31.) It will be recollected that the same opinion was expressed in a letter written by Lord John Russell, and published in the newspapers during the winter of 1846.