

THE IRISH CRISIS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649616220

The Irish Crisis by C. E. Trevelyan

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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BY

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REPRINTED FROM THE "EDINBURGH REVIEW."

No. CLXXV., *January*, 1848.

LONDON:
LONGMAN, BROWN, GREEN & LONGMANS.
1848.

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THE time has not yet arrived at which any man can with confidence say, that he fully appreciates the nature and the bearings of that great event which will long be inseparably associated with the year just departed. Yet we think that we may render some service to the public by attempting thus early to review, with the calm temper of a future generation, the history of the great Irish famine of 1847*. Unless we are much deceived, posterity will trace up to that famine the commencement of a salutary revolution in the habits of a nation long singularly unfortunate, and will acknowledge that on this, as on many other occasions, Supreme Wisdom has educed permanent good out of transient evil.

* We have endeavoured to gather up all the threads of this strange tissue, so that every circumstance of importance connected with the measures of relief may be placed on record; but our narrative does not, except in a few instances, extend beyond September 1847, and the progress of events after that date will form the subject of a separate article.

If, a few months ago, an enlightened man had been asked what he thought the most discouraging circumstance in the state of Ireland, we do not imagine that he would have pitched upon Absenteeism, or Protestant bigotry, or Roman Catholic bigotry, or Orangeism, or Ribbandism, or the Repeal cry, or even the system of threatening notices and midday assassinations. These things, he would have said, are evils; but some of them are curable; and others are merely symptomatic. They do not make the case desperate. But what hope is there for a nation which lives on potatoes?

The consequences of depending upon the potato as the principal article of popular food, had long been foreseen by thinking persons; and the following observations extracted from a paper on the native country of the wild potato*, published in the Transactions of the Horticultural Society of London for the year 1822, are a fair specimen of the opinions which prevailed on the subject previously to the great failure of 1845.

“The increased growth of the potato, not

* The author of this paper was the late Mr. Joseph Sabine, the Secretary to the Horticultural Society.

only in these kingdoms, but almost in every civilised part of the globe, has so added to its importance, that any information respecting it has become valuable. With the exception of wheat and rice, it is now certainly the vegetable most employed as the food of man; and it is probable that the period is at no great distance, when its extensive use will even place it before those which have hitherto been considered the chief staples of life. The effect of the unlimited extent to which its cultivation may be carried, on the human race, must be a subject of deep interest to the political economist. The extension of population will be as unbounded as the production of food, which is capable of being produced in very small space, and with great facility; and the increased number of inhabitants of the earth will necessarily induce changes, not only in the political systems, but in all the artificial relations of civilised life. How far such changes may conduce to or increase the happiness of mankind, is very problematical, more especially when it is considered, that since the potato, when in cultivation, is very liable to injury from casualties of season, and that it is not at present known how to keep it in store for use beyond a few months, a general failure of the year's crop, whenever it shall have become the chief or sole support of a country, must inevitably lead to all the misery of famine, more dreadful in proportion to the numbers exposed to its ravages."

The important influence which has been exercised by this root over the destinies of the human race, arises from the fact that it yields an unusually abundant produce as compared with the extent of ground cultivated, and with the labour, capital, and skill bestowed upon its cultivation. The same land, which when laid down to corn, will maintain a given number of persons, will support three times that number when used for raising potatoes. "A family in the West of Ireland, once located on from one to three or four acres of land, was provided for; a cabin could be raised in a few days without the expense of a sixpence; the potatoes, at the cost of a very little labour, supplied them with a sufficiency of food, with which, from habit, they were perfectly content; and a pig, or with some, a cow, or donkey, or pony, and occasional labour at a very low rate of wages, gave them what was necessary to pay a rent, and for such clothing and other articles as were absolutely necessary, and which, with a great proportion, were on the lowest scale of human existence. The foundation of the whole, however, was the possession of the bit of land; it was the one, and the only one thing absolutely necessary; the rent consequently was high, and

generally well paid, being the first demand on all money received, in order to secure that essential tenure; and only what remained became applicable to other objects. Although of the lowest grade, it was an easy mode of subsistence, and led to the encouragement of early marriages, large families, and a rapidly-increasing population, and at the same time afforded the proprietor very good return of profit for his land*."

The relations of employer and employed, which knit together the framework of society, and establish a mutual dependence and good-will, have no existence in the potato system. The Irish small holder lives in a state of isolation, the type of which is to be sought for in the islands of the South Sea, rather than in the great civilized communities of the ancient world. A fortnight for planting, a week or ten days for digging, and another fortnight for turf-cutting, suffice for his subsistence; and during the rest of the year, he is at leisure to follow his own inclinations, without even the safeguard of those intellectual tastes and legitimate objects of ambition which only imperfectly obviate the evils of leisure in the higher ranks of society.

* Sir John Burgoyne's letter to the "Times," dated 14th October, 1847.