

**THE IRISH IN
AMERICA,
A LECTURE**

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The Irish in America, A Lecture by William R. Grace

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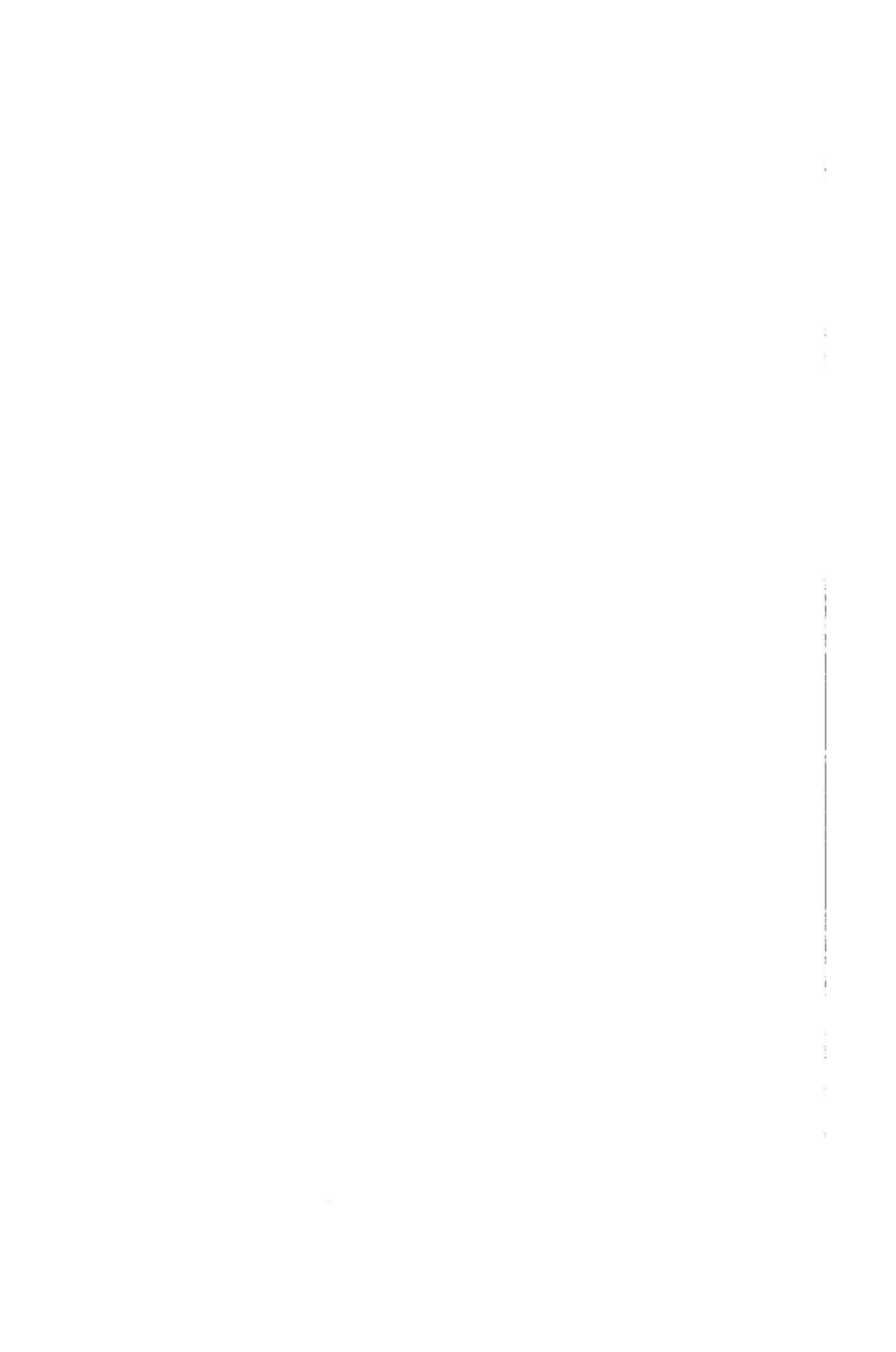
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WILLIAM R. GRACE

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THE IRISH IN AMERICA.

A LECTURE

BY

WILLIAM R. GRACE,

MAYOR OF NEW YORK,

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THE IRISH IN AMERICA.

I DO not purpose to speak to you to-night of what has been accomplished in the pursuits of commerce or of war, in literature or in art, in science or in statesmanship by our countrymen or the descendants of our countrymen whose names have been identified with the growth and development of America. Nor shall I describe the hardships and the triumphs of the early settlers, who, to escape religious persecution at home, or to mend fortunes shattered by the harshness of a discriminating and oppressive English policy, sought new opportunities in a new world. In the one case the roll is long and brilliant; in the other the impress, though largely impersonal is definitely traceable in the history of prosperous municipalities and States; while in both might be found ample opportunity of drawing inspiring lessons from the lives of brave and successful men. There is, however, a phase of the much discussed problem of the Irish in America which is of even more interest to the Irish here, as Irishmen, than the biographies of distinguished compatriots. The American Irish are and have been an important factor in the political history of this and the mother country. They have created and modified public opinion in its relation to themselves and to their kinfolk across the sea, and have influenced and even determined State policy. Active, aggressive, and at the same time loyal to a principle,

their very community of race feeling has given them a facility of organization which, while it may sometimes leave them a prey to unscrupulous politicians, has, in connection with the characteristics named, a permanent political value. They themselves understand this, and have, as a race, made more of it than any of the distinctly foreign elements which compose so large a portion of the population of this country. Thus they have to an extent, though not always in a manner distinctly traceable, contrived to impress themselves upon national conduct, and have in a large measure successfully met and overcome those prejudices against their race and religion with which from the earliest times they have been forced to contend. How bitter those prejudices have been we all know. "The Irish are the spendthrift sister of the Aryan race," says Mr. Froude, the most brilliant as he is the least trustworthy of all anti-Irish historians. And in this sentence he seems to have summarized the judgment which those who have not been brought directly in contact with them have formed. There need only be added to the alleged attribute of improvidence, those of weakness of purpose and of rashness of temper, to complete a picture which to many minds is hardly relieved by that personal loyalty and reckless generosity which even Mr. Froude grudgingly admits to be strong national characteristics.

But the benefits of the moral victory have not accrued to the victors alone. I am firmly convinced that the conduct of the Irish in America has been strongly influential in winning for those at home that moral support which comes from the sympathy of strangers to the blood, and which is in itself almost as valuable as the material assistance which has been so lavishly bestowed.

So, too, the lesson as to the practical value of organization as a weapon of political warfare has not been lost, and coupled with the organized effort of her people here, has enabled Ireland to carry forward a land agitation which, in its beginnings seemed based upon a forlorn hope, but which now, in the light of recent events, seems certain to be crowned with an abiding success. Indeed, the fruits of a struggle renewed again and again during the eighty-five years that have elapsed since the union, are almost within reach, and the land agitation which at first was only a phase of the irrepressible conflict, is likely to prove the key which is at last to solve the problem of a home government for Ireland. Of this result the American Irish may well feel hopeful, and without them it is not too much to say its realization would have been indefinitely postponed.

Hence it is in a double sense that the story of the progress of the Irish in America is of interest. They have shown powers of adaptability to new conditions which have secured to them full recognition, while at the same time, they have preserved their race individuality to such an extent as to have profoundly influenced the course of English politics in relation to the home country. In this twofold aspect, therefore, I desire to consider the subject upon which I have been asked to address you this evening. ~~In the first place, to consider the course of events in the political history of the United States, which has most nearly affected the Irish race in America, and in that connection to describe its industrial condition at the present time. In the second, to sketch its relation to the English politics from the earliest organization of that movement in this country, which has already had so marked an effect upon the fortunes of~~

Ireland, and briefly to suggest the attitude which it is desirable for it to maintain at the present time, when the fruition of its hopes seems so near at hand.

Prior to the American Revolution, though there had been a steady tide of emigration from Ireland to this country, it had not assumed anything like the proportions which this century has witnessed. At different times during the latter half of the seventeenth century there were causes in operation which induced extensive emigration to the various Catholic countries of the Old World, and a few ship-loads of emigrants arrived at Barbadoes. Under the Cromwellian government, ship-loads of Irish men, women, and children had been dispatched to the Colonies, including New England and to the West Indies, under conditions which left them little better than slaves. But with the restoration of the Stuarts there came a suspension, not only of religious persecution, but of the Navigation Laws, which formed a leading feature of a policy for the repression of Irish industries theretofore enforced by England. The expulsion of James II., and the accession of William and Mary to the throne was accompanied by a revival of discrimination against Irish manufactures, and a flood of emigration to all parts of Christendom followed. Protestants and Catholics were alike affected by these laws, and for several years after 1688 several thousand a year found their way to the British Colonies. These emigrants were widely scattered and leave no definite trace behind them until we come to the settlement founded at Logan, in Pennsylvania, which at that time (1699) was a colony that afforded much greater freedom of religious thought than others under British control. From this time, until the close of the eighteenth century, there

was a continuous stream of emigration, which, though steady, was not large. No definite or trustworthy knowledge as to their numbers is, so far as I am aware, obtainable, there being nothing better than contemporary estimates for isolated years, which, however, justify the conclusion that probably not less than five thousand Irish settlers arrived here per annum. Pennsylvania continued to be a favorite point of destination, though various settlements were made in Maryland and Virginia, and even in North and South Carolina, and in Kentucky. In New England strong prejudices existed against the Irish, which found hidden expression in laws governing the alienation of land, and open expression in the courts through proceedings for ejection. Settlers were, however, not deterred from attempting to gain a foothold, and besides adding largely to the population of Boston, succeeded in establishing a settlement at Concord, Mass. The opposition which they were thus forced to overcome sprang largely from race hostility, and was directed against those of Irish birth without distinction of creed. Puritan New England afforded a limited toleration to Catholics of all nationalities, though as a class, it denied to them political privileges. The Irish, nevertheless, favored either by a success attendant upon combined effort, or by a gradual dying out of hostility, demonstrated their fitness to survive, and flourishing settlements were soon founded throughout all the territory of New England.

It will thus be seen that the Irish effected at a comparatively early date, a definite and considerable occupation of most of the colonies. They were not localized, save in one or two instances, as in Pennsylvania and in Massachusetts, and did not, therefore, as a people, in any