

**A VISIT TO CONNAUGHT IN THE
AUTUMN OF 1847: A LETTER
ADDRESSED TO THE CENTRAL
RELIEF COMMITTEE OF THE
SOCIETY OF FRIENDS, DUBLIN**

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A Visit to Connaught in the Autumn of 1847: A Letter Addressed to the central relief committee of the society of friends, dublin by James H. Tuke

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JAMES H. TUKE

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1831

A VISIT

TO

C O N N A U G H T

IN THE AUTUMN OF 1847.

A LETTER ADDRESSED

TO THE CENTRAL RELIEF COMMITTEE OF THE
SOCIETY OF FRIENDS, DUBLIN,

BY

JAMES H. TUKE.

Second Edition.

WITH NOTES OF A SUBSEQUENT VISIT TO ERRIS.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

REPRESENTATIONS made to me respecting some of the statements in the former edition of this pamphlet, induced me personally to re-investigate the occurrences referred to. This second visit, whilst it has enabled me to correct some particulars, has served essentially to confirm my previous statements of the condition of Ireland and of the evils which appear to be among the radical causes of her misery, and I trust that the careful revision which the pamphlet has undergone, together with the additional information obtained during the recent visit, will entitle it to the confidence of the public, and will render this edition more worthy of the attention of those who kindly expressed their approbation of the former.

York, 3rd mo. 8, 1848.

A LETTER,

&c.

WHEN I had the pleasure of meeting you, a few weeks ago, in Dublin, on my return from a journey through a considerable portion of Ireland, you expressed a wish that I should communicate to you the result of my observations on the condition of those parts of the country which I had visited, and their prospects during the coming winter. To gain information on these points, and to ascertain the working of the new poor-law, and the probability of its being brought into efficient action in the worst districts of Ireland, were the chief objects of this tour. I thought these objects would be most effectually attained by devoting my attention chiefly to Connaught; and accordingly, though I visited several other districts, my time was mostly passed in that western province.

This province being, as a whole, by far the poorest and most destitute in Ireland, I thought that it was most important to ascertain particularly its condition and prospects. If Connaught could be effectually raised in the scale of society, many would cease to despair of the future elevation of Ireland in general. I cannot suppose that the views which I have taken, and which I have ventured to express in the course of this letter, will be of value to you, who are so well acquainted with the state of Ireland; but I hope that in an emergency like the present, it may not be deemed wholly impertinent to throw into the general treasury a few imper-

fect suggestions as to the means by which some, at least, of the miseries of Ireland may be alleviated or removed.

Few things have struck me more since I have become personally acquainted with Ireland, than the very inadequate knowledge which prevails among my countrymen generally, of the great variety in the circumstances and condition of the people, which is found throughout that country. The North and East indeed, are generally distinguished from the other parts, but that these differ among themselves as much as the North differs from the South, seems to be generally overlooked. All of these are considered by many persons as equally the seats of poverty and violence. The horrible outrages of Tipperary and Roscommon are often charged alike upon the more peaceable inhabitants of Donegal and Mayo. I believe that you will agree with me, that Ireland, to be understood, must be considered in its separate parts.

Before proceeding to the particular notice of Connaught, I would venture to express my sincere satisfaction in the recent measure of Parliament, by which the long debated question, as to whether the property of the country should be chargeable with the support of the poor, is decided. At the same time, the question, whether the wants of the poor can immediately be thus provided for, cannot, I believe, be answered by a simple affirmative or negative. Before replying to it, we must divide Ireland into two great portions, and consider the question with reference to them, separately. The first portion would include the county of Donegal, the province of Connaught, comprising Leitrim, Roscommon, Sligo, Mayo and Galway, and the greater portion of Clare, Limerick, Kerry and Cork, which may be considered as embracing three millions of the population: the other—including the remaining districts of Ireland,—with a population of about five millions. In each of these divisions there may be districts which do not belong to the class in which they are placed, but generally speaking it may be considered, that there is, in the second division, sufficient wealth to meet the claims of the Poor-Law, particularly after so abundant a harvest as the past. The chief difficulty appears to arise from the reluctance of the proprietors and occupiers of land to carry out, in good faith, the provisions of the act.

With respect to the larger portion of the first division, it does appear very doubtful whether there exists either the wealth or the necessary machinery for the carrying out of

this law; and it will doubtless be to this division that your attention, as the administrators of relief, will be principally directed during the approaching season of renewed suffering and misery. A very large portion of this suffering will be found among the wretched inhabitants of Connaught.

As this letter may probably fall into the hands of some persons who are less acquainted than yourselves with the statistics of Ireland, it may be well to state, that Connaught contains an area of 4,392,043 acres, with a population, in 1841, of 1,418,859; the net annual value, according to the Poor-Law valuation, being £1,465,642 17s. 6d., and the province is divided into 19 Unions. Leinster, with a population and area but little larger, is valued at £4,624,341 15s. 4d., and is divided into 33 Unions. A consideration of these facts, coupled with the circumstance that considerably more than half of the population of Connaught reside in mud cabins of the worst description, with only one room, and that there are 67,000 labourers with little or no employment, exhibit strongly its general poverty. By the report of Lord Devon's Commission, it appears that there are in this province 1,906,000 acres (nearly half the whole) of unimproved or waste land, of which 1,156,000 might be drained and reclaimed for cultivation or pasturage, leaving 750,000 acres considered incapable of improvement at a remunerative cost. And let it not be supposed that the other half of the province, described as cultivated, is so in the sense which that term implies in Dublin or England: a well-cultivated farm is as rare in Connaught as the reverse is in the county of Lincoln or in the Lothians of Scotland. Here and there amid the wilderness of waste land and half-cultivated farms, the eye is gladdened with one, which would be creditable in England, rendering doubly painful the contrast which the desolate and weed-choked fields around it present. Galway and Mayo, the two largest counties in the province, contain 1,500,000 acres of unimproved land, nearly two-thirds of which is capable of profitable reclamation. Of this district, the report above alluded to remarks, "That it contains a larger extent of unimproved waste land than any other portion of Ireland, yet a large portion of it presents unusual facilities for reclamation and cultivation, particularly in the baronies of Erris, Burrishoole, Ross, Ballinahinch, &c., which being partly situated on the west coast, can procure manure in abundance." Here and there, especially in Gal-

way, I was cheered by noticing considerable agricultural operations in progress: in Connemara, upon an extensive estate recently purchased, the owner by giving long leases, and offering his land at moderate rents, has induced several wealthy farmers from Scotland, England, and other parts of Ireland to settle upon it, and they are rapidly converting a dreary wilderness into fruitful fields. A large portion of this estate is what is termed bog land, easily drained and improved, and producing large crops of corn, turnips, wurzel, or parsnips. I never remember to have seen more abundant or more magnificent green crops than on some patches of land which had apparently been newly reclaimed from the bog. From 1s. to 2s. 6d. per acre is the rent obtained, with a long lease, for the farms (or rather for the large uncultivated tracts marked out for such), on this estate, comparatively few of which are yet occupied. From the little knowledge of farming which I possess, I do not hesitate to express a belief, that to an enterprising farmer of capital these wastes of Connemara offer a highly profitable investment. The security of life is as great here as in England.

The cultivated land in Connaught is generally divided into very small farms. In Mayo it is so minutely divided, that out of about 46,000 farms, 44,000 are under 15 acres, and held by men too poor to employ any hired labourers. It must always be remembered how much the division of land in many parts of Ireland, has been promoted by the landlords to increase their own political influence. Throughout Mayo and Galway (especially the former) there is a very considerable portion of land left waste and uncultivated, which in other years had produced crops. This is no doubt in part owing to the decrease in the population, which is much more perceptible than I had anticipated; the inmates of whole villages have been swept away, and in Mayo alone the diminution of the population, by death or emigration, is estimated by many persons at 100,000, or one quarter of the whole. Mayo, it is well known, is the county of all others, which has furnished England each year with the largest proportion of Irish reapers; and it is also from this district that a very large proportion of the crowd of wretched paupers came, who, during the past year have added so heavily to our poor rates, and spread fever throughout England. Not, indeed, that I blame them for coming. Had they quietly remained in Ireland, to die of starvation, the usual

charge of "helplessness" would have been more properly applied to them.

Throughout the province of Connaught, the total quantity of corn and green crops is very small, compared with the wants of the population; and in Galway and Mayo especially, it seemed to be the common opinion that not more than a three months' supply existed. And so great is the present dearth of food among the poorest classes, and the consequent insecurity of the crops, that in almost every field of turnips or potatoes worth protecting, a hut is erected for the accommodation of a watcher. Potatoes were generally scarce, and selling at a famine price, though many persons were hastening the sale of their stock, as the disease had made its appearance. In some places the crops of mangel wurzel and turnips were really good; but, in general, owing to the entire ignorance of the cultivation of the turnip, the farmers and cottiers have sown the seed like grass, and, having omitted almost all care or thinning, it has grown entirely to top, with a small taper root like the radish. Notwithstanding this, the value of the distribution of this seed can hardly be over-estimated; even the tops and scanty root of the turnip have formed the diet of thousands of poor people, many of whom would otherwise have perished, and multitudes are daily looking with anxiety to the failure even of this subsistence.* At least one-fourth of the rural population of Connaught are at present existing upon these turnips or turnip-tops, boiled with a few half-decayed potatoes; on the sea coast they eke out this miserable food with sea-weed and sand-eels. Num-

* By a return kindly furnished me by William Todhunter, who last year so energetically undertook the distribution of the green crop seeds (principally turnips), placed at the disposal of the Committee of the Society of Friends by the government, it appears, that 36,196 lb of seed were distributed to 40,903 persons, and that 9,352 acres were cultivated with these crops in various districts of Ireland.

In the county of Mayo 16,686 lb of seed were distributed by W. Todhunter, and 15,680 lb by the late Lieutenant White, making a total of 32,346 lb of seed in this impoverished county alone, by which at least 8000 acres were sown, the produce of which is estimated at 190,040 tons of food. It is probable that the whole of the land upon which it was grown would have remained untilled had it not been for this timely grant on the part of the government. The subscribers to the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends will be interested in hearing that this Committee has purchased £5000 worth of turnip-seed for distribution amongst the poorest classes during the coming spring, and that arrangements have already been entered into for its distribution.