

Crisis Relief 1879-80

The Irish Crisis of 1879-80.

Proceedings of The Dublin Mansion House Relief Committee

1880

GENERAL REPORT

THE Mansion House Relief Committee was honoured by being entrusted with the largest share of the magnificent funds which the charity of friendly nations poured into Ireland during the last winter and spring, to stop the path of famine. Sums to the amount of £181,330 5s. 8d. were subscribed upon its appeals, and were distributed in more or less degree among 512,625 people, through the agency of 840 Sub-Committees. It was a great and onerous trust. It is due to those who, from the depths of remote continents, proffered their money unquestioningly at the first cry of want ; it is due also to those who took the responsibility of standing as almoners between those distant benefactors and a population on the verge of famine—that, in rendering this final account of our stewardship, we should place on permanent record the circumstances which extorted our appeals to the charity of the world, the area and quality of the distress to which that charity was applied, the manner in which it was administered, the precautions by which it was guarded against partiality or imposition, and the blessed results which, under the favour of Divine Providence, have delivered Ireland from a ghastly period of suffering and death. Heretofore the reports of committees like this have been the melancholy records of efforts either undertaken too late, or, with all their noble generosity, undertaken upon too small a scale, to do more than palliate the horrors of almost unbridled pestilence and famine. We share with the other great charitable organizations of 1880 the satisfaction of believing that now, for the first time in a history painfully fruitful of famine precedents, a crisis which rendered 500,000 of the population foodless paupers has been grappled with and got under by the almost unaided arm of private benevolence. This has not been achieved without a terrible ordeal of suspense and suffering, during which thousands of lives hung upon the hazard of a weekly alms. The fearful imminence of the danger, while the recollection of it will always fill Irish hearts with gratitude to their deliverers, attaches a peculiar interest to the history of the extraordinary outburst of human sympathy, without limit of race, or creed, or distance, by which the force of the calamity was broken.

Causes of The Movement.

The condition of Ireland, when the harvest of 1879 lay ruined, was of a character to dismay men of cool and moderate judgment. When the memory of facts has become less sharp, it will not be easy to realise by what an accumulation of old and new misfortunes a country of much natural fertility, inhabited by only 5,362,000 people over a cultivable area of at least 16,000,000 acres, was, towards the close of the nineteenth century, reduced by the mischances of three seasons to solicit the bread of charity for its people. It was, indeed, a crushing, and we may hope an altogether exceptional load of disaster, smiting every species of industry simultaneously. The tiller, the grazier, the commercial man, suffered alike under the blow. Bad seasons alone had destroyed £20,000,000 worth of crops within three years. In the single item of potatoes—still the staple food of the peasantry—the small cultivators had lost £11,570,000 upon the average value of the crop within the period, or £21,199,000 compared with a favourable year like 1876. [1] The REGISTRAR-GENERAL estimated the entire value of the crop of 1879 at £3,341,000, against an average value of £9,251,000. Agriculture of most other kinds had been steadily dwindling down ; 519,807 acres out of a total tillage area of

5,500,000 acres had gone out of cultivation in ten years. The wheat culture was ruined. “ In 1816, when this country had eight millions and a half of population, we were exporting £6,000,000 worth of cereals ; in 1879 we had to import over £8,000,000 worth of the same produce to feed a population one-third less than it was then.” [2] The breadth of land even under oats had declined by 320,000 acres, and the yield, from 21,125,552 cwts. in 1870, had sunk to 15,532.628 cwts. in 1879. [4] 50·2 per cent, of the entire surface of the country, and two-thirds of its wealth, were devoted to the raising of cattle ; and the cheap transatlantic freights and the startling growth of the American live cattle trade had for the moment driven Irish cattle from the markets unsaleable. At the great fair of Ballinasloe in 1878 there were 52,597 sheep sold, and 6,378 unsold ; in 1879, there were 29,777 sold at a depreciation of £1 10s. per head of ewes, and 15,186 unsaleable upon any terms. At the Banagher fair, in 1878, there were 17,000 sheep sold, and 1,550 unsold ; in 1879, there were 2,900 sold at a loss, and 13,091 unsold. In the opinion of moderate and competent judges, £15,000,000 would not fully represent the depreciation in Irish stock during the year. Irish butter proved to be as ruinous a speculation as Irish stock and produce. The deep-seated depression in English trade had not merely reacted on the towns and paralysed commercial enterprise. It had dealt a fearful blow at the Irish butter trade by all but destroying the demand or turning it into foreign channels. By the double agency of lessened production and falling prices, the Cork Butter Market alone sustained a dead loss of £308,000 on the season’s operations, and the Tipperary Market a loss of £140,000 more.

Even before autumn revealed the ruin of the crops of 1879, a cry of suffering akin to panic ran through the agricultural classes, and was re-echoed in Parliament and in the Press by those who were most conversant with their condition. The first outlet of relief sought was an abatement of rents. Memorials, public meetings, and resolutions of Boards of Guardians appealed to the forbearance of landlords (and did not appeal in vain) upon the unvarying plea that the losses of two disastrous seasons, the depreciation of their stock and produce, and the stress of American competition had pressed the farmers to the earth. The Catholic clergy, assembled in their several deaneries, verified and reiterated the appeal. As early as June the 16th the clergy of the Catholic diocese of Galway put forth a declaration “ from an intimate knowledge of the wants of our people,” that “ the present dire distress has not been equalled since the famine years.” “ Most humbly and respectfully do we implore of those in whose hands are placed the very lives of these poor people,” said the clergy of the deanery of Cahirciveen about the same time “ to come forward promptly and effectively to their relief.” Eighty-seven traders of Cahirciveen published a declaration that “ not since the dreadful famine years has the position of the farming class reached so low a level. Unable, as a rule, to meet liabilities already incurred, our forbearance saves numbers of them from total ruin.” The clergy of Ossory, on the 3rd of July, called on the Government “ to apply an efficacious and immediate remedy ; otherwise the country will be exposed to a renewal of the horrors of the famine years.” From Tralee, Killaloe, Dungarvan, Achonry, Cloyne, Tuam, and Ross, the cruel truth of the farmers’ representations was no less unequivocally endorsed. It was not disputed : it was confessed, and even in many instances anticipated by the large, and often wholly spontaneous concessions of a considerable number of landlords, whose remissions of rent, ranging from 10 per cent, to a whole half-year’s, began to fill a daily column in the newspapers from the commencement of June. The fear, however, that the crisis would outrun the power of private liberality, was already sinking into the public mind. On the 28th of June, in his place in the House of Commons, Mr. O’DONNELL called the attention of the Government to “ the resolutions of numerous Boards of Guardians and public bodies, and of the Catholic clergy, declaring the inability of the tenantry to pay existing rents in the present severe distress,” and asked “ whether the Government proposed to take any steps to alleviate the existing distress in Ireland ?” The Chief Secretary for Ireland (Mr. LOWTHER) in his reply said : “ It is a matter of satisfaction to the Irish Government that we have reason to believe the distress has not been so acutely felt in Ireland as in other parts of the United Kingdom,”

adding, “ with regard to the last paragraph of the honourable gentleman’s question, if he means by that, whether the Government have any intention of introducing a Bill in Parliament for the reduction of rents la Ireland, I may say we have no such intention”—a statement which was received with “ laughter.” The apprehension that the Executive had not quite realised the gravity of what was approaching, stimulated several Irish members before the breaking up of Parliament to utter impressive warnings that, in the words of Mr. GRAY, on the 8th of August, “ The condition of affairs in Ireland was so grave as to call for the most earnest attention of the Government to the duty of devising some means of relief for the starving tenantry.”

Things had come to this pass while the growing oat-crops were still reported to be luxuriant and before the blight had yet breathed upon the potatoes. It was felt that even a bountiful harvest would afford to the peasant farmers no barrier against a three years’ accumulation of losses ; and it turned out to be upon the whole the very worst harvest experienced in the present generation. The year was the wettest, and the temperature the lowest upon record. [4] The ripening months were simply a dreary procession of cold and broken showers. “ The mean temperature of July was 3·9° below the average of the previous ten years, while that of August was 25° below the average.” There were 17 wet days in August ; 22 in September ; 22 in October. During the six months ending September 30th, on whose character was to depend the fate of the harvest, cold rain fell upon 125 days out of 183—“ that is to say,” says the Registrar-General—“ on two out of every three days.” Notwithstanding the deplorable evidence of the weather, and the reports of blighted potato-fields, and inundated river- alleys, and rotting corn, which came fast and thick from every part of the country early in September, an impression in some manner gained ground among certain of the wealthier classes that either the alarm about the harvest was unreal, or that the extent of the damage to the crops was grossly exaggerated. Many benevolent persons at first suffered under the apprehension that the reports of a deficient harvest were simply forged to suit the purposes of political agitation, or to defraud the landlords of their rents, and that the fear of an absolute dearth of food was altogether chimerical. Incredulity of this description has been at all times in Ireland a clog upon the efforts of those who would open the eyes of the Government to the premonitory symptoms of distress, and has too often succeeded in creating a spirit of lethargy and suspicion which nothing short of the death-cries of a population in the pangs of famine could remove. A speaker was on his legs denying the existence of distress in Newry at the commencement of the Great Famine, when word was brought in that a man had just fallen dead of hunger on the streets ; [5] and it was remarked, that, throughout that time of horrors, official persons chose every mincing term in the dictionary, except “ famine,” to describe the power which was slaying miserable victims around them by the thousand. We shall presently see how serious an impediment to charitable effort was this dead-weight of cynical unbelief, which, beginning by deriding the testimony of public speakers and newspaper writers, was no less stubborn when that testimony came to be solemnly endorsed by 1,404 Catholic Priests, 835 Protestant Clergymen, 722 Justices of the Peace, 508 Medical Officers, 977 Poor-Law Guardians, and the 6,171 other Members of the Local Relief Committees. Not the least evil of thus discrediting the moderate testimony of those who are versed in the affairs of the people is that the very exaggeration which is deprecated is directly encouraged ; and men who, to a sympathetic hearer, would speak under the responsibility of weighing well their words, are sometimes driven into loose or heated statements in the hope of gaining an audience for truths which they have a burning interest in making known ; the result commonly being to increase the suspicions and confuse the facts on both sides.

About the main facts of the condition of Ireland when the harvest was gathered, however, there was no longer room for confusion. The harvest was the worst since the famine years. Two-thirds of the potato-crop were rotted and gone, and the 250,000 people, to whom it was the staff of life, would, by the beginning of the new year, be without food or the means of

buying it ; 500,000 people more stood upon the verge of ruin. A gloomy foreboding settled down upon the people's hearts. Some vague sense of drifting towards an abyss took possession of them. The portents which preceded the Great Famine seemed to be slowly reproducing themselves ; cries of warning, incredulity, reproaches, delays, unpreparedness, and all the while the spectre of a foodless winter drawing nearer. A famine like that of the winter of 1846 no sane man expected in the winter of 1879, no more than those who raised the alarm in 1815 anticipated so horrible an extent of calamity a year afterwards. But that men did not exaggerate when they proclaimed that a calamity, comparable to nothing since the famine years, had overtaken the country, and, that as far as human foresight went, there was as much to dismay a thoughtful Irishman, looking abroad over his country, in the autumn of 1879 as in the autumn of 1845, and more, we shall make abundantly clear by the official figures. The three substantial guarantees against any wholesale reproduction of the scenes of the Great Famine were, that the population was less, that Indian meal was to be bought in any quantity at moderate prices, and that a considerable part of the agricultural classes had raised themselves above the condition of absolute dependence on the potato. An advantage that, perhaps, counted for still more, was a Government which accepted the responsibility for the lives of the people, and, behind that Government, an active and organised public opinion, prompt to discern danger, eager in its criticisms, constant in its admonitions to officials, and commanding, by the medium of the telegraph, an instant influence over the sympathy and assistance of nations at opposite ends of the globe.

Upon the other hand, the Irish problem, in the autumn of 1879, was beset with perplexities which were altogether absent in 1845. The one all-embracing misfortune of the famine years was the failure of the potato-crop. The grain-crops of 1845 and 1816 were favourable, even abundant ; and, until the abrogation of the duty on foreign corn had a monopoly of the markets. The winds and rains of 1879 not alone destroyed 2,500,000 tons of potatoes, they wrought a deficiency of 800,000 cwts. of wheat (four-ninths of the fair produce), 5,000,000 cwts. of oats, and 1,500,000 tons of turnips. That is to say, according to the Chancellor of the Exchequer's official computation in the House of Commons, the Irish farmers had suffered a dead loss under all heads by the years' tillage alone of £10,000,000 sterling [6] — being more than the total loss in 1816, and being “ nearly equal to the whole valuation of the land of Ireland, exclusive of buildings.” [7] Remember that this blow descended upon a class who had already lost £1,671,000 worth of potatoes alone the year before, and £3,989,000 worth the year before that ; whose cattle had been depreciated in value by at least £15,000,000 in a single year ; whose butter trade had sustained a loss of at least £700,000 ; who had drawn £3,699,000 of their savings out of banks to stop the gap [8] within the same period ; and whose losses in the matter of potatoes alone in the three years equalled in the aggregate the whole estimated losses when the famine of 1846 was at its height. Nor does this represent the depth of the calamity Two classes of losers have to be carefully distinguished from one another—the class who hardly suffered directly at all in 1845-47, and the class who, to the kind of losses incidental to those years, added new ones no less crushing. True, the large farmer class had grown larger and wealthier since 1845 ; 70 per cent of the small holdings had been consolidated with that object in the meantime ; but, whereas that class remained in almost undiminished affluence after the potato failure of 1815, and stood as bulwarks of employment and charity among their famine-stricken countrymen, it was they who now reeled under the heaviest pecuniary (although not the most immediately vital) losses ; whose capital had been for three seasons running out by millions to pay rents which were not earned, and cover losses extending over every branch of their business; who were feeding cattle at a loss, raising dairy produce at a loss ; and whose very existence was threatened if the gigantic competition of America should go on increasing. These men were themselves above the dread of hunger, if it should come to the worst, for a season or two more, but their resources were gone, their courage crushed ; they had cut down their expenditure to the point of much personal privation ; as an employing class they were for the moment effaced, and the

90,000 or 100,000 agricultural labourers who looked up to them for employment became suddenly aware that there was no employment to be had upon any terms wherever they turned their despairing eyes. Thus, even in favoured districts, removed from the traditional area of distress, there arose the double phenomenon of a farming class paralyzed by losses and the fear of further losses, and a landless labouring population huddled together in the towns, without the smallest prospect of subsistence.

And if this was the condition of those parts of the country emancipated from dependence upon the potato-crop, let us now try to realize to what a condition those vast tracts along the western seaboard had sunk, to which the potato-crop was still the vital condition of existence, when that crop lay miserably rotting in the fields and pits. To say that the farmers lost £8,000,000 by the potato-crop of 1879 as compared with a good year like 1876, or that they lost £20,000,000 on that head alone in three years, conveys no adequate measure of the disaster unless we remember that proportionately the overwhelming preponderance of that loss fell upon the shoulders not of the wealthier class of large farmers, with whom the potato was an altogether subsidiary article of produce, but upon the small holders, to whom it was the prop and mainstay of existence. To understand this, let us look a little more closely at the figures. The immense county of Donegal, which has an area of 585,000 nominally cultivable acres (mostly mountain grazing lands) against 564,000 acres of unproductive bogs and barren mountains, lakes, rivers, roads, and fences, had 47,734 acres under potatoes in 1879, with 31,485 occupiers and their families to be fed thereon. The county of Kildare, with 355,936 cultivable acres to less than 40,000 worthless ones, devoted only 8,764 acres to potatoes, and had only 8,948 occupiers, of whom 4,095 held above fifteen acres a-piece. [9] Again contrast the case of the unhappy county of Mayo, 1,318,129 acres in extent, valued in all at £314,302, with the rich county of Meath with little more than a third the area (578,247 acres) valued at nearly double that figure (£544,883) ; the one with 44 per cent, of its surface a barren wilderness, the other with 1.9 per cent, of bog and marsh, and .0 per cent, of barren mountain land ; the one having to sustain 37,027 families of occupiers out of its poverty, the other only 11,730 comparatively flourishing occupiers of the richest lands in the island. Mayo staked 58,067 acres of potatoes upon the chances of the harvest ; Meath only 12,069. That is to say, three-fourths of the destruction of the potato-crop fell upon the counties of the western coast, which were both the poorest and the most vitally dependent upon it ; upon a race of small farmers, moreover, whose store-cattle had lain upon their hands as so many useless food-consumers ; who were, therefore, proportionately as severe losers in this respect also as the graziers ; who, in two of the poorest counties of Connaught alone, had lost £250,000 [10] of English wages, and within about fifty of the poorest parishes in those counties had lost £50,000 more by the collapse of the kelp trade. At the same time it became known, to the horror of the public, into what a condition of life this avalanche of misfortunes had already sunk some 50,000 of those cottier-tenants ; driven, for the most part, by the events which followed the Great Famine from the more fertile tracts into the waste boglands and the crevices of the rocky seaboard, and weighted with considerable rents even here : supporting life upon the food of animals in dwellings to which civilized communities would not consign their dogs ; able to grow little except potatoes on their sterile patches ; forced to put down year after year the same constantly deteriorating race of seed upon the same worn and exhausted soil ; wrestling, season after season, with hunger ; feeding half the year upon potatoes, and lying at the mercy of small dealers to tide them over the remaining six months with advances of Indian meal upon whatever terms of credit they chose to dictate ; forced to borrow more, and able to repay less after each of these three last calamitous seasons, and now at last beaten to the very brink of the gulf, without food, money, or credit.

The discovery of the universal extinction of credit it was which precipitated the crisis. Famine had been staved off from January to August, 1879, by almost desperate credit. Two food-dealers alone in the little town of Castlerea had £40,000 due to them by the peasants,

although they had only been repaid 15 per cent, of the previous year's credits. [11] Advances to the amount of £14,000 were totted up in the traders' books in the poor village of Oughterard, the valuation of the entire Union in which it is situated being only £14,897. But the credit of peasantry and shopkeepers alike had now touched bottom. The remnant of the potato harvest once eaten out, nothing stood between the western peasants and an unspeakable fate—nothing, except the power of the State or the charity of the world. Still another terrible menace—one which Sir STAFFORD NORTHCOTE, in his speech at the Dublin Mansion House, on October 9th, anticipated would turn out to be the most serious of all ; was the prospect of a fuel famine ; the peat, which alone can be burned in the cabins of the western peasantry, having lain for months, even to the verge of winter, at the mouths of the cuttings in the bogs drenched through with moisture.

Foundation of The Committee.

The summary of the situation, then, in the autumn of 1879, was this :—that, if the landlords and the shopkeepers, themselves sorely pressed, chose to exercise their legal right of seizing upon the harvest in satisfaction of their debts, all the conditions of wholesale famine were at hand ; that, considering the sacrifices to which the forbearance of both these classes had already submitted, and the solemn sense of brotherhood in misfortune which had come over nearly the entire community, this was happily an improbable contingency ; but that even if the landlords should (as they afterwards did) forego several millions of rent, and the shopkeepers several millions of debt due to them, there would still remain, beside 100,000 of the pauper labouring class, immense tracts along the entire western coast from Donegal to Cork, where the population were drifting straight into the horrors of a famine. It followed that, although no moderate thinker could apprehend that the approaching winter would see the country desolated to anything like the extent of 1846 and 1847, the premonitory conditions were in almost every respect more depressing than those of 1845, [12] and that an equal disregard of those conditions now would produce in the following years a still more terrible calamity than that which followed the blundering apathy and vain warnings of 1845.

Long before the Mansion House Committee was formed, most of the men who afterwards contributed to establish it foresaw that such a movement was inevitable. It was for three reasons deferred to the last moment to which it could be safely deferred. In the first place, the landlords having remitted (as is calculated) at least £3,000,000 of rents, and the traders having almost nowhere attempted to exact their accounts by force of law, the potato harvest, such as it was, might be trusted to keep the people alive until about the opening of the new year, while a few weeks providential dry warmth in October turned a considerable portion of the sodden peat into fuel, and so to a great extent dissolved anxiety on that score. In the second place, the persistence with which in some quarters the harvest was still asserted to be an average one, and the distress decried as partly or even wholly an imposture, as well as perhaps the exaggerations into which the sense that their danger was ignored or made light of threw the panic-stricken people, disposed many to wait until the course of events should reveal the precise character of the crisis in a way that would put all further controversy on the subject to silence. Above all, it was felt that not alone would such charitable funds as we had any right to count upon be in all probability inadequate to the emergency, but that private charity, even if it could be made a principal means of coping with a widespread national calamity, would both breed the vices of mendicancy among the people and absolve the State from what was generally conceived to be the duty of meeting a national catastrophe out of the national funds.

The Central Relief Committee, analogous to our own, which was founded in Dublin in the years of the Great Famine, was only able to collect £83,934 17s. 11d., of which £20,000 was

granted from a British charitable organization ; and it was conceded that if the descriptions of the impending distress were not wicked fictions, it would take a million of money even to appease the pangs of hunger with the coarsest and scantiest food. Nobody dared to anticipate the golden tide of charity which the first cry of destitution, received with coldness and suspicion nearer home, set flowing from two mighty young nations at the furthest ends of the globe. Nobody had the right to anticipate it. The country had been already at least twice in this century paraded before the world poured balsam into its wounds. The kindly burst of sympathy from our kith beyond the seas, the ready pledge of brotherhood from generous strangers all the world over, had brought no bitterness and had left no memories but those of gratitude and love. Nevertheless, there was a certain pang of humiliation and shame in the thought of appealing for the alms of distant nations before any sufficient attempt was made to utilise the resources of our own. The country was suffering deeply in every part, dangerously in some parts. But it was not bankrupt. It had reserves of capital. The unappropriated surplus of the Church Temporalities Fund represented a sum of £5,000,000 of Irish money, specially dedicated to extraordinary Irish needs. The country formed part of the wealthiest empire in the world. The self-respect of the people themselves revolted against the idea of national mendicancy. "Work, not alms," was the burden of the cry which resounded through the country all the autumn and winter from public meetings, Boards of Guardians, and assemblages of the Catholic clergy. A meeting of the Irish Catholic Hierarchy, held on the 14th of October, deputed four prelates of their body—the Archbishops of ARMAGH and DUBLIN, and the Bishops of ELPHIN and CLONFERT—to wait upon the LORD LIEUTENANT, at Dublin Castle, in order to urge upon his Grace that a prompt system of employment upon useful public works was the main requirement of the time. The Corporation of Dublin, with only one dissentient, adopted a resolution on the 30th of October, on the motion of Mr. GRAY, pressing the Government to make timely provision for the approaching emergency, and declaring : "That in the opinion of this Council the best means of discharging this primary duty of Government without pauperising and demoralizing large numbers of the industrial population of the kingdom, is by the prompt institution, on an adequate scale, of reproductive works by which employment would be provided for the people." Seventy Irish members of Parliament signed a memorial to the EARL OF BEACONSFIELD, the Prime Minister, in which they most earnestly urged upon the Government, through him, the necessity of taking immediate steps to prevent or mitigate as far as possible the threatened calamity. "We believe," said the memorialists, "that this can be best done by affording assistance to works of a permanent and useful character. Promptness is absolutely necessary, as delay will only result as on former occasions in ill-considered and unproductive expenditure. If the law does not give the Government power to meet the emergency we would urge the desirability of summoning Parliament for a short winter session." The MARQUIS OF HAMILTON headed an influential deputation of noblemen and gentlemen of all political hues to the CHIEF SECRETARY to solicit a loan from the Treasury for the institution of a great and useful public work in southern Donegal. In fact, the general conviction in Ireland was that £1,000,000 advanced out of Irish funds and expended either in the autumn or in spring upon a comprehensive and well-considered scheme of public works or assisted industry in the more afflicted districts, would break the back of the more urgent distress ; that that amount distributed in wages would practically replace the exhausted credit of the peasantry, at least in the article of their humble food ; that, instead of sinking under the temptations of organized and recognised beggary, the people would spring eagerly at the chance of feeding themselves and paying their way by honest labour; that trade confidence would revive with the circulation of money in districts from which money had almost disappeared ; and that not only would a dangerous emergency have been thus tided over without suffering or demoralization, but that a permanent addition to the producing power of the country would have been made, by the extent of land that would have been drained and reclaimed, by the railways, roads, and fishery piers that would have been constructed in the very districts where those advantages were most lamentably wanting, and where the ordinary course of enterprise could never have

supplied them. A similar course of policy was urged in vain upon the Government of Sir ROBERT PEEL in 1845, when famine was preventible, and was embraced the next year when famine had become ungovernable.

In the meantime, evidence was piled upon evidence to show that widespread distress, and over extensive districts absolute destitution, was at hand ; and the sense of gloom and uneasiness grew deeper. The Catholic Clergy of the diocese of Clogher, comprising the Priests of Monaghan and of large districts of Fermanagh, Tyrone, Donegal, and Louth, came to a remarkable resolution, “ commending the melancholy state of the country to the consideration of our rulers, who are bound to look to us, and calling on the Irish Members of Parliament to force our condition on the attention of the Government before it is too late.” The Bishop and Priests of the diocese of Kilmore, in a declaration published on the 16th of October, spoke of it as “ a question which we know to be one of life or death to many persons,” and—speaking of the labouring population of a district which was supposed to be one of the most comfortable in Ireland—“ without money, without credit, and without work, they must, if not soon and generously aided, become the victims of famine, pestilence, and death.” The Government, meanwhile, maintained an attitude of watchful reserve. They undertook the responsibility of dealing with the emergency as it arose. A popular impression ran abroad that they were not fully persuaded of the reality of the danger, and that their distrust, as well as perhaps the feelings engendered by an intense agrarian agitation in Ireland, had communicated an equal degree of incredulity in England. *The Times* announced on the 17th of September—“ There is the best reason for believing that the losses of the Irish farmer have been trifling compared with those of the English farmer. Food has been and is everywhere cheap and plentiful.” On the 27th of September, wrote the *Daily Telegraph*—“ The harvest in Ireland has not turned out badly on the whole, for the rains that have deluged England, have more or less avoided the sister island, where the amount of moisture has not much exceeded the usual average.” [13] The LORD LIEUTENANT, in his speech, at the Newry Cattle Show Banquet, on the 17th of August, had described the occasion as one “ marked by very great commercial, and, to a certain extent, agricultural depression ;” adding, “ I believe the agricultural distress which exists in England is far more oppressive and far more severe at the present time than it is in Ireland.” The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Sir STAFFORD NORTHCOTE), speaking at a banquet in the Dublin Mansion House on the 9th of October, declared “ that there had been a good deal of exaggeration of the loss or failure of the harvest in many parts of the country,” and seemed to attach more importance to the prospect of a dearth of fuel. Mr. MITCHELL HENRY, M.P., a Member of the Royal Agricultural Commission, stated in public, that the two Assistant Commissioners (Professor BALWIN and Major ROBERTSON), whom the Government had appointed to visit the western coast, had been “ so horrified with the impending destitution,” that they had made a special report to the Government. This was some days before the deputation of Bishops went to Dublin Castle to ask for public works. They received a discouraging reply. The PRIME MINISTER was unable to find leisure to receive seventy Irish Members of Parliament upon , the subject. November passed. Employment had almost vanished. Crowds of hungry labourers in Skibbereen, Kiimallock, Dungarvan, Kilkenny, and other places, invaded the workhouses, clamouring for work or food. In the more stricken districts the small farmers were actually consuming their seed potatoes. The instinct of charity was already stirring. People in the Australian cities were straining eagerly for some definite hint of how much was needed, and when. Early in December, the COMPTE DE PARIS sent £10 into Connemara. Still, earlier, the BISHOP OF DETROIT, U.S., remitted £824 15s. to the ARCH-BISHOP OF CASHEL, as the contribution of his diocese, and a first instalment of £200 reached the BISHOP OF ROSS from the diocese of Cleveland, Ohio. On the 16th of December, the LORD MAYOR OF DUBLIN received a telegram from Adelaide, South Australia, inquiring whether assistance was needed, and who would receive it ? It was the first act in the history of the Mansion House Committee—the first presage of that extraordinary outpouring of sympathy which was, in a few months, to fill the

coffers of this Committee with more Australian money than the Central Relief Committee of the Great Famine time could collect from the whole world.

Two days afterwards the people of England were startled by a letter in the *Times* of the 16th December, from Her Grace the DUCHESS OF MARLBOROUGH, making an eloquent and urgent appeal to English benevolence for the relief of distress in Ireland. "There will be extreme, misery and suffering," she wrote, "among the poor, owing to the want of employment, loss of turf, loss of cattle, and failure of the potatoes, unless a vigorous effort of private charity is got up to supplement the ordinary system of Poor Law relief." "After anxious consideration," Her Grace had decided to form a committee of ladies, over which she would herself preside, to take charge of whatever funds should be entrusted to her for distribution, and she entreated her countrymen of the sister isle "generously to contribute to the relief of the miserable sufferers by the inclemency of the season which, added to the rainy climate and ungenial soil of the West, have well nigh produced a famine of food and fuel." Two days subsequently Her Grace solicited the LORD MAYOR OF LONDON to aid her, impressively adding: "The distress will, I fear, be terrible this winter unless private benevolence will come to our assistance." Her Grace's action, inspired, as it was known to be, by the fullest official knowledge of the situation, created a deep impression of surprise, and awakened a great response in England; and the courage with which the DUCHESS OF MARLBOROUGH initiated her appeal, the zeal with which she prosecuted it, the unflagging energy with which she undertook a principal part in the vast operations necessitated by the large funds entrusted to her, and the spirit of anxious sympathy with the people which inspired and sustained her, will always remain among the most gracious recollections of these gloomy months.

It was now evident that no large scheme of public employment was to be looked for; and that not alone was charity left to be the only weapon against starvation, but that charity, to be effectual at all, must be sought at once. A great land-owner like the Hon. Col. KING-HARMAN, M.P., might still declare in the *Times*: [14] I cannot hope, nor dare I write a word to express a belief, that the (Duchess of Marlborough's) demand, however well responded to, will meet the present crisis," and might exclaim: "Allow the worst against us and this remains—our people are starving and are willing to work." The BISHOP OF ACHONRY, aching with the sight of three hundred pallid faces gathered about his door on Christmas Eve, beseeching food, might cry out with a terrible force: "We, Irish priests and bishops, are custodians of morality and order. It is our duty to counsel peace and preach loyalty. But it is hard to instil loyalty or promote peace when there is question of empty stomachs and an unsympathetic Government." But "our people are starving" was the one imperative fact of the moment. Fifteen hundred applicants "to our horror" swarmed into Clifden on the 21st December to share the £12 10s. which was all that the local Relief Committee had to give them. Mr. MITCHELL HENRY, M.P., had "never seen men so changed" as the peasants of the Letter hills; "pale, thin, bloodless, and without a smile, their condition is absolutely without hope." It was no longer a time for national punctilio or sighs for what might have been. Upon Christmas Eve the citizens of Dublin were summoned hurriedly together in the Oak Room of the Mansion House by the then Lord Mayor (Sir JOHN BARRINGTON) to deliberate upon the situation. A short adjournment was found necessary owing to the inconvenience of the day and the informal manner in which the meeting had been summoned; in order also to arrive at settled opinions whether the charitable movement to be here inaugurated was to be an independent organization or should constitute itself ancillary to the Ladies' Committee formed by the DUCHESS OF MARLBOROUGH; whether it should confine its operations to the dangerous distress which was gaining head in Dublin itself or extend them to the whole field of Irish misery. The adjournment was made still further desirable by the fact of its being the eve of the periodical change in the Mayoralty, when the new Lord Mayor, on whose responsibility the movement must be carried on, was about to accede to office. So strongly did the feeling run even still that private charity could only purchase off the danger for a time, and that State employment on

reproductive works was the only thorough-going specific for the crisis, that Mr. V. B. DILLON, Jun., and several other gentlemen called on the meeting not to separate without addressing some representation to that purport to the Government. The meeting, however, preferred not to embarrass itself before it was well formed with a subject which might either have been thought to fall outside the strict bounds of a charitable movement or have occasioned contro-versy among men who had no controversy as to the existence of dire distress, and the neces-sity of grappling with it promptly. Upon this last point, which was the main point, the meet-ing thought as one man. “ I have come up from the West within a few days,” said Sir ARTHUR GUINNESS, M.P., “ and I can say most truly that any subscriptions to any amount, however large, that can be obtained will be very inadequate to meet the necessities of the case. There are hundreds—for all I know, thousands—of families whose supply of potatoes has been nearly consumed. Their credit is at an end, and what is to happen to these people unless the hand of the charitable comes in to afford relief to the starving, I don’t know.”

The adjourned meeting was held on Friday, the 2nd of January, 1880, in the OakRoom of the Mansion House, where only the previous day the incoming Lord Mayor of Dublin (the Right Hon. EDMUND DWYER GRAY, M.P.) had been receiving the congratulations of the citizens on assuming office. There was a complete fusion of creeds, ranks, and parties in the attendance. The Protestant Archbishop of Dublin (the Most Rev. Dr. TRENCH) was present to assist at the foundation of a movement in whose operations for many months his matured wisdom, hearty sympathy, and conciliatory spirit bore a constant and influential part. The Catholic Archbishop (the Most Rev. Dr. McCABE), who was unavoidably absent, commissioned the Rev. T. J. O’REILLY especially to represent him. The Consarvative and Liberal members for the City and the University ; numbers of leading Catholic and Protestant clergymen ; the ex-Lord Mayor (Sir JOHN BARRINGTON, D.L.) ; the High Sheriff (Sir J. W. MACKEY) ; the RECORDER OF DUBLIN ; members of Parliament, magistrates, and other influential persons of every political and religious denomination, mingled cordially in a union which has never onca been broken, even by a division, daring the trying vicissitudes of six anxious months. The ARCHBISHOP OF DUBLIN moved the LORD MAYOR into the chair. In doing so, he congratulated them all that the honour and the responsibility of guiding this movement had fallen to one who, they were all connfident, would bring it to a successful issue. That the movement was essentially non-political and non-sectarian was the first point emphasized in the short speech of the LORD MAYOR. That there could by any possibility be a rivalry between it and kindred charitable organisations he disclaimed in the most distinct way. “ I take it that every man who has come here,” he said, “ recognises in the most grateful spirit the gracious and generous manner in which Her Grace the DUCHESS OF MARLBOROUGH has acted on this occasion (hear, hear) ; and if it be the view of this meeting that another relief fund should be originated, I presume you will select men to form a committee of the fund who will take care that there shall be no clashing between the two organisations (hear, hear).” It was the unanimous view of the meeting that another fund should be originated—that, in the words of Sir ARTHUR GUINNESS there was “ room—ample room”—for both of them, and ample need for every penny they could glean—that, in fine, while the DUCHESS OF MARLBOROUGH would appeal, it was hoped successfully, in quarters where an Irish committee might fail of influence, a committee representing all ranks and sections of Irish opinion would possibly command a readier access to unbounded fields of Australian and American assistance. So that point was settled. The question whether the movement was to be a civic or a national one was decided by the very composition of the meeting. The grand object was to create a committee who should command confidence ; over what area or in what manner they would distribute relief might be safely confided to their discretion, and could be limited only by the limit of distress, wherever it showed itself. The resolution which called this committee into existence was in the following terms :—

“ That the poorer classes in many parts of Ireland must, during the coming season, suffer great distress, involving absolute destitution, if extraneous aid be not liberally and promptly supplied ; and that, without interfering with the beneficent efforts for a similar purpose already instituted, a Fund be now opened for the Relief of Distress in Ireland, to be called ‘ The Dublin Mansion House Relief Fund.’ ”

It was proposed by Sir ARTHUR GUINNESS (now Lord Ardilaun) ; and Mr. P. J. SMITH, M.P., who seconded it, and who “ felt, very profoundly, that dire necessity alone could justify the appeal for extraneous aid,” confessed with sorrow that that dire necessity had arisen. Incidentally it was mentioned that the BISHOP OF RAPHOE declared that already in ten at least of the twenty-five parishes of Donegal, “ the condition of the people could not be much worse, short of absolute famine ;” and Mr. GEORGE BROWNE, M.P., stated that he knew, from personal experience, that, in the greater part of Mayo, the crop of potatoes was already exhausted, and in two months more the people would be without food, or the hope of buying it. But nobody any longer dreamed (if debating the necessity for the new organization : its composition was the chief business of the meeting. A representative Committee was nominated, the Treasurers and Secretaries appointed, and a subscription list commenced upon the spot.

[1] This is clearly demonstrated from official statistics in Dr. W. NEILSON HANCOCK’S Papers on Ireland, 1880, p. 10. See also Dr. SIGERSON’S Final Report, *infra*.

[2] Debate in Dublin Corporation, October 8, 1879.

[3] Agricultural Statistics of Ireland for 1879. p. 12.

[4] Dr. MOORE’S Records “ Meteorological Report,” I. A. S., p. 19.

[5] Father O’RORKE’S “ History of the Great Famine.”

[6] The estimated value of the Irish crops had decreased from £32,758,000 in 1878 to £22,743,000 in 1879—and 1878 was itself a year of disaster,

[7] Dr. NEILSON HANCOCK’S Papers on Ireland.

[8] Statistics on Savings in Ireland, 1880.

[9] Agricultural Statistics, p. 34.

[10] Dr. NEILSON HANCOCK’S Paper on Irish Migratory Labourers.

[11] This apparently incredible fact, which was first stated in the *Freeman’s Journal*, was afterwards verified by the special correspondent of the *Daily News*, and by Professor BALDWIN, Assistant Commissioner to the Royal Agricultural Commission, who inspected the books.

[12] Dr. NEILSON HANCOCK’S Papers on Ireland, p. 9.

[13] Dr. MOORE’S Official Returns show that there were 22 rainy days in that month in Ireland.

[14] December 25th.

The Irish Crisis of 1879-80 : Proceedings of the Dublin Mansion House Relief Committee, 1880 (1881)

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