

## Curious Hibernia 1764

*Hibernia curiosa. A letter from a gentleman in Dublin, to his friend at Dover in Kent. Giving a general view of the manners, customs, dispositions, &c. of the inhabitants of Ireland. With occasional observations on the state of trade and agriculture in that kingdom... Collected in a tour through the kingdom in the year 1764.*

John Bush

1769

The province of Connaught, the most western province of Ireland, and in form and situation, not much unlike Wales in England, is the least inviting to a traveller of any part of the kingdom. Our curiosity carried us only through the eastern counties of Roscommon, Sligoe, Gallway, and Clare, that border on the Shannon, which are the best and most civilized parts, and as far on as to Gallway, the capital of the province.

The province of Connaught is the thinnest of inhabitants of any part of Ireland. Their agriculture is chiefly grazing. There are immense numbers of sheep and bullocks bred in this province ; particularly in the counties of Clare and Gallway. We were at one of the largest stock fairs, at Ballynasloe, a small town in the eastern part of the province, that perhaps is to be seen in the king's dominions, which continues for a week. The toll of the stock brought to this fair, which is kept twice in the year, in the Spring and at Michaelmas, is worth, to the possessor, on an average, 600*l.* per annum.—I think it is a penny a head for bullocks, and six-pence per score for sheep, for all that are brought.—The most distant parts of the kingdom are supplied in general from this fair.

The Shannon is the greatest river in the kingdom, and considerably larger than any river in England, running from north to south upwards of 300 English miles ; and, in its course, spreads out into many large and beautiful lakes of different extent, from five to ten and fifteen miles, ornamented, some of them, with fertile and beautiful islands. There are several considerable towns situated upon this river, the principal of which are Limerick and Athlone.

The river abounds, also, with salmon and pike, &c. of a very large size. But the navigation is stopped at about 60 or 70 miles up the river by a cataract, or fall of the water over a ridge of rocks that extends across the river about 20 miles above Limerick.— If in any part of the kingdom there are any wild Irish to be found, it is in the western parts of this province, for they have the least sense of law and government of any people in Ireland, I believe, except that of their haughty and tyrannic landlords, who, in a literal sense, indeed, are absolute sovereigns over their respective towns and clans, which the western part of this province may not improperly be said to be divided into. Their imperious and oppressive measures, indeed, have almost depopulated this province of Ireland. The will and pleasure of these chiefs is absolute law to the poor inhabitants that are connected with them, and under whom the miserable wretches live in the vilest and most abject state of dependance.

This account, however unfavourable, is not exaggerated, I assure you, for it is taken from some of the more sensible people of the very province. Too much, indeed, of this is seen throughout the kingdom to be pleasing to an English traveller. I never met with such scenes of misery and oppression as this country, in too many parts of it, really exhibits. What with the severe exactions of rent, even before the corn is housed, a practice that too much prevails here among the petty and despicable landlords, third, fourth and fifth from the first proprietor (of which inferior and worst kind of landlords this kingdom abounds infinitely too much for

the reputation of the real proprietors, or the prosperity of agriculture ;) of the parish priest, in the next place, for tythes, who not content with the tythe of grain, even the very tenth of half a dozen or half a score perches of potatoes, upon which a whole family, perhaps, subsists for the year, is exacted by the rapacious, insatiable priest. I am sorry, to tell you the truth, that too many of them are English parsons.—For the love of God and charity, send no more of this sort over, for here they become a scandal to their country and to humanity.—Add to these, the exactions of, if possible, the still more absolute catholic priest, who, though he preaches charity by the hour on Sunday, comes armed with the terrors of damnation and demands his full quota of unremitted offerings. For, unhappily for them, the lowest class of inhabitants in the south and west parts of the kingdom are generally catholics, and by that time they are all satisfied, the poor, reduced wretches have hardly the skin of a potatoe left them to subsist on. I make no doubt, this has been the principal source of the many insurrections of the White-boys, as they are called, in the south, from my own observations and enquiries in the midst of them, and likewise drives them, in swarms, to the high roads, which, throughout the southern and western parts, are lined with beggars ; who live in huts, or cabbins as they are called, of such shocking materials and construction, that through hundreds of them you may see the smoak ascending from every inch of the roof, for scarce one in twenty of them have any chimney, and through every inch of which defenceless coverings, the rain, of course, will make its way to drip upon the half naked, shivering, and almost half starved inhabitants within.

This is no exaggeration of the whole truth, upon my honour, and it is the most disagreeable scene that presents itself to an English traveller in this kingdom. Happy would it be for the lowest class of people (whom oppression and want of employment too often and unjustly subjects to the imputation of being idle) if the method of parochial provision in England were introduced into this country, especially the southern parts of it, where the poor really are infamously neglected. And the case of the lower class of farmers, indeed, which is the greatest number, is little better than a state of slavery, while the priest and subordinate landlords, in ease and affluence, live in haughty contempt of their poverty and oppression, of which the first proprietors are but too seldom, indeed, for the interest of this kingdom, spectators.—The natural consequences of this scene of things among the inhabitants, is visible even upon the lands in this country in general ; which, though by nature, a very considerable part of them, rich and fertile, yet they almost universally wear the face of poverty, for want of good cultivation, which the miserable occupiers really are not able to give it, and very few of them know how if they were : and this, indeed, must be the case while the lands are canted (set to the highest bidder, not openly, but by private proposals, which throws every advantage into the hands of the landlord) in small parcels of 20 or 30<sup>l</sup>, a year, at third, fourth, and fifth hand from the first proprietor.—From the most attentive, and minute enquiries at many places, I am confident, that the produce of this kingdom, either of corn or cattle, is not above two-thirds, at most, of what, by good cultivation, it might yield. Yet the gentlemen, I believe, make as much or more of their estates than any in the three kingdoms, while the lands, for equal goodness, produce the least. The consequences of this, with respect to the different classes, are obvious,—the landlords, first and subordinate, get *all* that is made of the land, and the tenants, for their labour, get poverty and potatoes.

With respect to grazing, which is, at present, the most profitable kind of agriculture, and which annually extends in this kingdom (and is an inexhaustible supply of Irish chairmen in London,) that insatiable avarice of most of the stock farmers, as they are called here, after black cattle (bullocks,) will, in time, spoil much of the best pasturage in Ireland. The advantages of grazing, I should imagine, would be much greater if sheep-grazing, which is almost confined to the province of Connaught, and two or three counties beside, were more extensively introduced and understood.

Ireland would, indeed, be a rich country if made the most of, if its trade were not reduced by unnatural restrictions and an Egyptian kind of policies from without, and its agriculture were not depressed by hard masters from within itself.

Indeed, how the encreasing wealth of this kingdom, from whatever source, should be injurious to England, with which it is so closely conected, or that the putting it into the power of the former to derive such immense additional sums to the public wealth, in which both kingdoms must participate, should be injurious to the general welfare of either, I own is intirely beyond my comprehension.

To prohibit the importation of such commodities as our own country shall be already sufficiently provided with, must, even to an Irishman, appear just and reasonable, but that they should be excluded from, or restricted in their trade to almost all the rest of the world, is a species of policy, the wisdom of which, with deference to our administrators of the Hibernian department, I own, is to me, not easily intelligible.—However, this is a subject I by no means profess to be a competent judge of, and have only thrown together a few observations on the subject, as they were suggested to me from a general view of the state of things in the country.

And thus much for trade, agriculture, and poverty, which, in this kingdom, appear to have too great a connexion, either for its own interest or that of any country it is connected with.

As to the customs, and dialed of the inhabitants in general of this kingdom, there is such an universal sameness almost from north to south, that Ireland affords the least entertainment in this view of it, perhaps, of any country, of like extent, in the king's dominions. I have met with greater variety in some two or three counties in England, in these respects, than in all the three eastern provinces of Ireland.

English is the universal language of the country among people of any fortune, and very few of the lower class are met with that cannot speak it. In regard to language, indeed, they exceed the highest sort of people, who, in general, are too genteely bred to understand any thing of the language of their native country, which seems to be the nearest to the Welch of any language upon earth ; whereas you'll meet with thousands of the lowest rank, who speak both English and Irish with equal ease, and, what you will hardly credit, perhaps, they really speak better English than the same class in England, The reason is obvious, here, the lowest class have, many of them, learned it from schools, in which there may be supposed a general sameness throughout the kingdom.

But this superiority is, in my opinion, far from being discoverable among the people of higher rank any where. Tho' the inhabitants of Dublin, indeed, have the ridiculous vanity of pretending to speak better English than those of London. From the most attentive and frequent observation, however, on the language of the coffee-houses, and places of public business, in Dublin, compared to that of similar places in London, I can see not the least reason for this vain presumption : as little does it appear from a comparison of the language of the pulpit or of the courts of judicature in both cities. The language of the theatres I exclude from the comparison, for that is all prescription in both. And if their English be even as good, their pronounciation, I am sure, is much worse, even amongst the genteelest of them. I should not have taken such particular notice of this circumstance, but from hence, that an Englishman can hardly pass a day in Dublin, if he much frequents the coffee-houses, without finding this the topic of conversation somewhere, in one or other of them, the superiority of the Dublin English to that of London.

Nor is this the only preheminance which the citizens of Dublin, in particular, arrogate to themselves to those of London. If you will believe them, their gentility as much exceeds that of London as their language. For invariably, almost, whenever the subject is introduced, if the gentility of Dublin is spoken of, with any view to a comparison with that of London, it is with an air and manner that plainly bespeaks a presumed superiority on the side of Dublin. Indeed, I have often thought there was something characteristic in this *Hibernian importance*, as I would chuse to call it, or, in the language of orator Henley, this *Dublin assurance*, that, if any thing among them can be thought so, is really original. But how the Devil the inhabitants of this metropolis, whose dress, fashions, language, and diversions are all imported from London, should come at a superiority in either, unless from a natural genius or capacity to improve upon their originals, is beyond my comprehension. That Hibernian importance, which I have taken notice of, I make no doubt includes in it a presumption of such a capacity. But here, likewise, as well as in the matter of fact, that they really have made such improvements, they must forgive me if I take the liberty of dissenting ; nor will I pay such a compliment to their vanity at the expence of my own country, as to suppose that their talents or genius for improvement upon any originals whatever are in any degree superior to those of the English.

You will readily conceive that the observations from which I have made the preceding remarks, were taken of, and entirely refer to the middling class of gentry, and the people in trade. For it must be between the classes of these ranks that, in the present question, any comparison can be made. The nobility, and people of quality, *in*, or rather *of* this kingdom, are to all intents and purposes, almost, very Londoners.—This is too well known in Ireland.

The part of the kingdom whose inhabitants, in their manners and dialect, are the most like those of the English, is the province of Ulster ; which including within itself almost the whole, or by far the greater part, of the linen manufactory, the best branch of trade in the kingdom, they have consequently the greatest intercourse with England : an Englishman in some parts of it, indeed, will imagine himself in his own country, from the similarity of their language and manners.

The roads of this kingdom are generally tolerably good for riding, but by no means equal to the English for a carriage. Turn-pikes are established on all the principal roads in the kingdom ; and at the inns, though they are very far from making the appearance of these in England, yet the English traveller will universally, almost, meet with civil usage, good provisions in general, and, for himself, clean decent lodging. But an English horse. could he speak as well as Balaam's ass, would curse the country, for most of these articles.—Their oats, indeed, are, for the most part, tolerably good ; but their hay and litter are the worst I ever met with ; for excepting two or three counties in the east of Leinster, and one or two in Ulster, almost every handful of straw the earth produces, goes on upon their houses and cabbins.—Their litter is generally the bottoms of their hay-stacks, and the spoiled hay from the rack, which the greater part of it often is before it comes there, from their injudicious method of harvesting it, the provision of the rack is seldom much better than what goes under their feet, and thither one half of it, at last, generally goes.

I absolutely did not get above one bed of clean dry straw for my horse in the three eastern provinces ; and that was at a farmer's who kept an inn at Lurgan, near Lough Neah in the county of Armagh, one of the prettiest little market towns in the north, and the most like some of our spacious thoroughfare towns on the high roads near the capital of any that I met with in all the country. His men happening to be thrashing of barley and throwing the straw out plentifully just by the stable door, I was determined that once in the kingdom my horse should have a clean and warm bed. I don't exaggerate, I assure you, nor depart in the least

from truth, when I tell you, that excepting at my landlord's, at, if I mistake not, the Crown and Wheat-sheaf, at Lurgan, I did not once get any thing like a good bed of straw for my horse in the kingdom. It may seem a little remarkable this, but it is no less true, nor do I intend by it a reflection upon the rest. In general, they have not the requisite provisions for a horse upon the road.—They are very far from having a sufficiency of straw, and their hay is almost universally badly harvested. But they might have plenty of both very good ; and 'tis an infamy to the proprietors of this fertile country that they have not, who suffer some of the best land in the king's dominions to be torn to pieces, and cultivated in the vilest manner by a set of abject, miserable occupiers, that are absolutely no better than slaves to the despicably lazy subordinate landlords.

We are generally apt to think every thing favourable of a place where we have been agreeably entertained. Not only those of our horses, but our own accommodations likewise, at the Wheat-sheaf were so remarkably decent, comfortable, and friendly, the disposition to oblige us in our agricultural host and hostess, was so conspicuous, that I cannot help wishing to perpetuate the memory of a place where we spent two or three days with as much pleasure as in any town in the kingdom. They seemed indeed to exert themselves to support the reputation of their town, which, from the similarity of its general figure, of the language, manners, and dispositions of its inhabitants to those of the English, had for many years acquired the name of *Little England* ; and an Englishman at Lurgan, indeed, will think himself in his own country.

Its situation is extremely pleasant, in a fine fertile and populous country, and in the midst of the linen manufactory. It stands on a gentle eminence, about two miles from, and commanding a fine prospect of. *Lough Neah*, the largest lake in the kingdom.

The inhabitants are genteel, sensible, and friendly ; and though the town is not very considerable, yet, from a general concurrence in the same sociable disposition, they have established a very sociable and entertaining assembly, to which, throwing aside all the ridiculous distensions and exclusions on the circumstances of birth and fortune, the offspring of pride, upon vanity and ignorance, every person is welcome, who is qualified to appear with decency and to behave with good planners.

The country, from hence to the eastward, by Lisburn, on to Belfast and Antrim, is rich, fertile, and as well cultivated and enclosed, as any in the north part of Ireland. But the greater part of the north of Ulster, as well as of the most southern parts of Munster, and almost the whole of the province of Connaught, are open and mountainous.

The province of Leinster, and the middle parts of the kingdom in general, are the best cultivated, and the most generally enclosed. Over some of these open countries the turn-pike roads are laid out, for 10 or 15 miles together, as strait as a line. Woods you meet with but very few of in this country, though a soil, by nature, capable of producing very fine.—I make no doubt there is as much wood and timber growing in the county of Kent as in the whole kingdom of Ireland.

There are but few large, populous, or well-built towns in this country.—The second city in Ireland is Corke, in the south-west part of the kingdom, in the county of the same name, which is by much the largest and most populous, next to Dublin, in the kingdom ; and, next to the capital, has by far the greatest trade of any, and, indeed, is in the best situation for commerce of any town in Ireland. Its exports, which are the principal parts of its trade, of beef and butter, are greater, I believe, than those of any town in the king's dominions. 'Tis amazing the quantity of beef that is killed here from Michaelmas to Christmas.—For three

or four months at this time of the year a stranger would imagine it was the slaughter-house of Ireland.

Corke is very nearly, or altogether, as large as Bristol in the west of England, but infinitely better situated as to its navigation, at the bottom of a large, capacious and well sheltered bay or cove. A very considerable part of the city, and the principal mercantile part of it, is really situated on a flat, that was originally a moras or under water, which by the industry of the inhabitants has been raised several feet ; many spacious streets have been built on this new made land, to which they are annually making additions, and extending the town farther over the flat by the sides of the navigation.

But what contributes greatly to the beauty, as well as convenience, of this part of the town and its trade, is the channels that are carried through most of the principal streets ; so that the merchandize of every kind can be brought by water to, or shipped from the very ware-houses of the merchants, who reside chiefly in this lower, and modern part of the city, in houses really magnificent and superb, that at the same time exhibit the wealth of their owners, and are an ornament to the city.—A large and elegant theatre has been lately built here, for the entertainment of the citizens, with dramatic performances, which have hitherto been under the management of Mr. Barry, from the theatre royal in Crow-street, Dublin, who, with his company, exhibits here during the summer vacation at the capital.

Cork, indeed, may very justly be esteemed the most flourishing city in Ireland, The houses, in general, are well built, but the streets are many of them too narrow. Its churches are unexceptionably the neatest and the most elegantly finished, of any in the kingdom, for the number it contains. But excepting this city, and the metropolis, there are few towns in Ireland that are larger than the town you live in , though there are many indeed, that are nearly of that extent ; amongst which, the cities of Kilkenny, Waterford, and Limerick, in the south, and Galloway, Athlone, Sligoe, Inniskillen, Belfast, and Derry in the west and north, are some of the principal.

The city of Kilkenny, in the south, is very pleasantly situated on the river Neor, a navigable river, that discharges itself into the Haven of Waterford. 'Tis, indeed, one of the most considerable and populous inland towns, in Ireland.—You have heard, I make no doubt, of the four peculiarities, as they are deemed, that are remarked of this city ; two of which, are founded in truth, the other two in imagination. That its air is without fog ; its water without mud ; its fire without smoke ; and its streets paved with marble.

The two latter, are, indeed, matter of fact. They have in the neighbourhood a kind of coal, that really burns from first to last, without smoke, and is not much unlike our Welch coal. And their streets are actually paved with marble, almost throughout the city, and with a very good sort of black marble, of which they have large quarries near the town, that takes a fine polish, and is beautifully intermixed with white granites. But, the two former peculiarities, appeared to me to be such only in imagination. The air, indeed, is certainly good and healthy ; but I saw no reason to think it very remarkably clearer than in many other parts of the kingdom. Here is the ancient seat of the Ormond Family, and is an ornament to the city. The country, in general, about it for some miles, appear very fertile, and their agriculture some of the best, I met with, in the kingdom.

The cities of Waterford, and Limerick, are large and populous, and well situated for trade and navigation. The former, on the river *Sure*, about 15, and the latter, on the *Shannon*, about 60 miles, from the sea.

But what spoils the figure and appearance of the much greater number of even their largest towns in Ireland, is the generality dirty entrances into them, and the long strings of despicable huts, or cabbins, that most of them are prefaced with. The inland towns especially, into which you are generally introduced through a line of 50 or 100 of these habitations of poverty and oppression, on either hand ; a whole street of which, might be built for 150*l.* for absolutely the materials and workmanship together, of many of them, are not worth 20 shillings. Even the metropolis itself, on several of its most publick entrances, is not without this disgraceful deformity, that at one view exhibits the poverty and wretchedness of the tenants, and the mean-spiritedness of the landlord, who, too generally, for their own or the reputation of their country, impose the building the houses on their lands, upon a set of people, whose abilities will not enable them to build with better materials, than clay or straw, and to the infamy of the proprietors may it be said, that most of the farm Houses in Ireland, are constructed of no better materials. The towns in the province of Ulster, have, in general, much the least of this Rustic deformity : there are many, indeed, in this province, that have hardly any, and that are neat and well built.

The city of *Derry*, in particular, is perhaps, unexceptionably the cleaned, best built, and most beautifully situated of any town in Ireland, and, excepting Cork, as conveniently as any for commerce, foreign, or domestic ; and, but for the restrictions on the trade of Ireland, would, in a few years, become a flourishing and wealthy city. It is situated on a gentle eminence, of an oval form, and almost a peninsula at the bottom, and in a narrow part of Lough, or Lake Foyle, which surrounds, for a quarter of a mile broad, two thirds or more of the eminence, and might easily be brought entirely round the city. Through this Lough, it communicates with the sea, on the very north of Ireland.

The whole grounded plot of this city, and its liberties, belongs to the twelve trades of London ; from which circumstance, it has obtained in our maps, the name of *London-Derry*, but by the natives in, and about it, it is commonly called by its original name of *Derry*.

It is memorable, and for ever memorable it ought to be, for the severe siege it nobly sustained for thirteen weeks, in the reign of king William, in defence of the glorious cause of Liberty. Indeed, I make no doubt, that from its natural situation, it is capable of being made one of the most tenable and defensible cities in the kingdom.

In this severe siege was exhibited one of the most infamous specimens of French policy and catholic humanity, that the history of their own, or any other the most gothick and savage nation can furnish.—Not content with starving the natives and gallant defenders of the city, the French general, under James, collected together the inhabitants of half a dozen counties round, and drove them, men, women, and children, old and young, like sheep to the slaughter, before the walls of the city, there to be starved with the besieged.

Happily for the citizens, in this alarming and desperate situation, they had just before this event, taken, in a sally from the town, several noblemen and gentlemen of the first distinction belonging to the army of James, For these a lofty triple gallows was constructed, and, by order of the governor, erected on an eminent part of the city, conspicuous to the army in their camp, and a messenger was dispatched to the French general to certify the governor's determination, that if those miserable wretches were not immediately suffered to return, he would, the next day, in sight of the army, hang up every gentleman among the prisoners, of what rank or distinction soever. This message had its desired effect. The army mutinied in favour of their several friends and relations who were among the captives, and the general was obliged to permit that miserable multitude, to pass from whence they came to their respective homes.

This enabled the besieged to subsist 'till relief arrived from England ; immediately upon which the siege was raised.

From this general account of the country, its inhabitants, &c. in which I have been as comprehensive and concise as I could, confidently, with giving you a general view of Ireland in these respects ; nor have I, in any instance knowingly, departed from truth ; I will now proceed to the greatest source of entertainment to an English traveller in this kingdom, its natural curiosities, of which this island has the greatest number, I believe, of any country of equal extent in the king's dominions, and some, perhaps, superior, in their kind, to any in the known world ; and as it is from this part of my account of Ireland that I know your expectations of entertainment will be raised the highest, I will give you a particular description of some of the greatest of every kind, as they have occurred to me.

And having just made a transition to the north, before we leave the neighbourhood of Derry, our first description shall be of a natural curiosity on the most northern point of Ireland, in the county of Antrim, of which it would be unpardonable in me not to give you the most particular account that I am capable of, as we made it our business twice to visit and examine it while we were, in the neighbourhood, at a little town called *Bush*, situated on a river of the same name about two miles from it, I mean that most superlatively curious and astonishing work of nature, the *Giant's Causeway* ; which is perhaps unexceptionably one of the greatest and most singular of natural curiosity in the known world, for it is, indeed, the only exhibition of the kind that was yet ever met with in the known world.

The situation in which this most extraordinary phaenomenon is discovered, is in the most northern extremity of the island, and close by the sea, into which it runs out, for 200 yards, in a direction very nearly north from the foot of a lofty cliff, that projects to an angular point between two small bays, which are about half a mile wide, and about half that distance deep. The situation of the causeway between these two bays or rocky lofty amphitheatres, on either hand, has something peculiarly striking, and adds greatly to the natural curiosity of the causeway itself.

There are really no traces of uniformity or design discovered throughout the whole combination, except in the form of the joint, which is invariably by an articulation of the convex into the concave of the piece next above or below it ; nor are there any traces of a finishing in any part, either in height, length, or breadth of this curious causeway.

Yet what is very extraordinary, and equally curious in this phaenomenon, is, that notwithstanding the universal dissimilitude of the columns, both as to their figure and diameter, and though perfectly distinct from top to bottom, yet is the whole arrangement so closely combined at all points, that hardly a knife can be introduced between them either on the sides or angles. And it is really a most curious piece of entertainment to examine the close contexture and nice insertion of such an infinite variety of angular figures as are exhibited on the surface of this grand parade. From the infinite dissimilarity of the figure of these columns, this will appear a most surprizing circumstance to the curious spectator, and would incline him to believe it a work of human art, were it not, on the other hand, inconceivable that the wit or invention of man should construct and combine such an infinite number of columns, which should have a general apparent likeness, and yet be so universally dissimilar in their figure as that, from the minuted examination, not two in ten or twenty thousand should be found, whose angles and sides are equal among themselves, or of the one column to those of the other.



That it is the work of nature there can be no doubt to an attentive spectator, who carefully surveys the general form and situation, with the infinitely various figuration of the several parts of this causeway. There are no traces of regularity or design in the outlines of this curious phænomenon ; which, including the broken and detached pieces of the same kind of workmanship, are extremely scattered and confused, and, whatever they might originally, do not, at present, appear to "have any connection with the grand or principal causeway, as to any supposeable design or use in its first construction, and as little design can be inferred from the figure or situation of the several constituent parts. The whole exhibition is, indeed, extremely confused, disuniform, and destitute of every appearance of use or design in its original constiuction.

The circumstance of its being the only phænomenon of the kind that has yet been discovered is no disproof of its *natural* origin, or it is an equal presumption against its being the work of human art. For neither art or nature, perhaps, in any part of the known world has exhibited a construction like it.—That there is nothing of the same kind to be met with makes this, indeed, the more extraordinary, and the more justly deserving the notice and admiration of the curious ; but nothing can be inferred from thence alone as to its origin.

The romantic supposition of its having been a causeway from Ireland to Scotland is ridiculous and absurd at first view. The nearest coast of Scotland to this place is at least 30 miles ; if any use or design of this kind can be imagined ever to have taken place, it must have been to some island not far from the shore, which the sea has swallowed up. But the general form and construction of the several parts is at the utmost distance from favouring such a supposition.

Nor is the ridiculous opinion that is met with in some of the old natural histories of this kingdom less absurd, on a comparison that is made of this to Stonehenge on Salisbury-plain, that this, as well as that, may have been originally a Druid temple, or some ancient place of worship, for there is no more likeness in the comparison than would be found between two of the most dissimilar productions of art or nature.—Into such ridiculous fancies will men suffer themselves to be led, who have never seen the originals, of which they pretend to give a description ; but implicitly write from the authority of others, equally with themselves, unacquainted with them.

The truth is, that from the most exact survey, and the minutest examination, of this most singular and curious phænomenon, the total absence of every appearance of design or use that can be discovered, it may justly be looked upon as a *lusus naturæ* ; if there are any exhibitions in nature that may be called such, this is supereminently one of them. With respect to the manner of its original production, it should seem to be a rocky concrecence or vegetation, of a similar natural process with many sparry or lapidar productions that are found in some parts of both England and Ireland. This, however, I speak with diffidence, and submit to the judgment of more curious naturalists. That stones of many (and perhaps of all) kinds do really grow from a lesser to a larger size, is, at this time a well known truth. Whether these have increased in their magnitude since the memory of man, there have been no observations made, that I could find, by any gentleman in the country : though such easily might have been made, with respect to any particular pillar or column, a little detached from the rest.

Nor is this the only deviation of nature, in this island, from her common methods of working ; it seems, indeed, to have been her favourite spot for exhibiting a sportive and extravagant fancy in the finishing her operations of many kinds.

What I have already wrote will be sufficient to give you a general idea of the country, both in a civil and natural view of it.—If the present sketch should afford you entertainment enough to excite a curiosity for a farther acquaintance with it, I may, perhaps, in some future packet, enter more extensively into the natural history of Ireland. Indeed, the infinite variety of subjects of natural history, that are found in this kingdom, very justly recommends it to the attention of the curious.—’Tis a country in which nature seems to have exerted herself for the entertainment of her curious votaries, and in which, consequently, the gentleman of leisure and curiosity, will find the most ample scope for the gratifying his taste for the simple, artless, beauties of nature, for here she presides an uncontrouled sovereign. The greatest efforts of art, a very few instances excepted, have, as yet, extended themselves very little farther than to deface the simplicity of nature.

’Tis a country through which a gentleman may travel at an easy, or moderate expence, and well deserving of much more notice and attention than has been generally paid to it by the curious, on the eastern side of St. George’s channel.—The inhabitants, even of the lowest class, are generally civil. Need and oppression, indeed, have introduced among them a degree of ferocity and untowardness that is rather against them at first view. By nature too, perhaps, they are too sanguine and irascible, and, when intoxicated with liquor, these unhappy natural propensities, if indeed they are from nature, will too frequently break out into mischievous effects. Nor is this observation to be restricted to any particular class of the natives—duels are more frequent here, I believe, than in any part of the king’s dominions.—If there is any honour in running a man through the body, or perforating his skull with a brace of balls, for an accidental, inadvertent offence, which the aggressor is often obliged to defend at the hazard of his life, to escape the imputation of timidity, the gentlemen of this country, of every class, from the barber’s apprentice up to the colonel, whose hair is dressed by him, have as great a right to be called gentlemen of honour as any in the king’s dominions, or out of them.—I have heard, at a coffee-house, a couple of journeymen, or shopmen, talk as coolly and familiarly of the convenience of a room in a certain tavern, for the *exercise* of a brace of points or pistols, as of an alley for a match of nine-pins.—And the gentlemen of the higher class in this country will excuse me, if, in this truly gentleman-like point of honour, of deciding every little trivial dispute by the point of the sword, I have given them but an equal share with the inferior class of Gentlemen at the blocks or behind the counters.—’Tis a savage point of honour this, that cannot be too much ridiculed, or too severely treated.—If a gentleman that wears a sword is attacked by an assassin, he has a right from honour and humanity, which should ever be perfectly consistent, to defend himself.—But his honour, if it really has any mixture of humanity, does not, I should suppose, require him to have recourse to his sword, for the decision of every trivial dispute, or breach of friendship, or good manners, at even the *equal* hazard of his own, and the life of the aggressor, and it is easy to make it appear, that not one duel in ten, if in fifty, is fought on *equal*, and therefore not on *fair* terms.—To speak frankly and ingenuously, I am sorry to have been so naturally and justly lead into this seeming digression, or that a country, so famous for its hospitality, should be so remarkably tenacious of this gothic, sanguinous point of honour. But, while sober, and free from the maddening stimulations of whisky, even the lowest class are civil and frank; give them but importance, and to refuse them this is an offence unpardonable with every class, and a little of your cash, and you may do any thing with them: and the Englishman of temper and discretion will meet with as few difficulties in travelling through this kingdom, as his own; especially if he has but good nature enough to ride into the dirt himself rather than drive a foot passenger into it.

To this general or cursory view of the natural, I will subjoin another piece of the civil history of this country. You have frequently met with accounts, in the public papers, of the insurrections of the White-boys, as they are called in this country. From the people of fortune who have been sufferers by them, and who, too generally in this kingdom, look on the miserable and oppressed poor of their country in the most contemptible light, the accounts of these insurgents have, for the most part, been too much exaggerated to be depended on.

—I have just hinted in the former part of this letter, that the severe treatment and oppression the lowest class of the inhabitants, in some parts of this kingdom, have met with from their priests and subordinate landlords, was the principal cause of those disturbances they have met with from them. I have but too much reason to believe this remark was well grounded, from the observations I had an opportunity of making in the midst of the country where these insurgents have given the greatest disturbance.

The original of their denomination of White-boys was from the practice of wearing their shirts withoutside of their cloaths, the better to distinguish each other in the night-time.—It happened that we were at Kilkenny, in our road to Waterford, at the very time of the last considerable insurrection of these unhappy wretches, in the south of Kilkenny county, not far from Waterford. I was naturally led to enquire into the cause of these insurrections, and the pretensions of the insurgents themselves for creating these disturbances. From the people of easy and affluent circumstances it is natural to suppose the accounts would be very different from such as were given by those of the same class with the delinquents. By comparing these, however, with the obvious appearance of things in the country, I soon had sufficient reason to believe their disquiet arose, in general, from the severe treatment they met with from their landlords, and the lords of the manors, and principally from their clergy. Our road to Waterford lay through the very midst of these unhappy insurgents, and we were, consequently, advised to take a different rout.—Why, whence should be the fear?—we have neither deprived them of their common-rights nor their potatoes—They have no quarrel with us, who have never injured them. Persuade your insatiable priests, of every denomination, to act themselves the precepts of charity and humanity they preach, and they will be as safe in their houses by night as we shall probably be, in the midst of them, by day.

We rode through the country, in which they were assembled in great numbers, but the very day before the last considerable engagement they had with the troops quartered at the towns in the neighbourhood ; but met with no molestation from any of them.—The very next day after we came to Waterford, the news was brought of this engagement, about four or five miles from the town. The opinions and representations of the inhabitants of the town were various on the merits of the affair ; but it was easy to distinguish the sentiments of the humane from the aggravated representations of those whose inveterate prejudices against these unhappy sufferers, instigated them to set these disturbers of the peace of their country in the worst point of view ; and, without any apparent candour in their representations, to place the rise of them in an idle, turbulent, and rebellious disposition of the insurgents.—The very officers of the troops wished they would drive the whole fraternity of parsons out of the country ; and with good reason ; for if the parson cannot live here on the great tythes of the corn, and about which they have seldom any disputes with their parishioners, how is the unhappy peasant to subsist on the produce of 10 or 15 perches of potatoes, the whole provision, perhaps, for a twelvemonth, for himself and family ; yet even the very tenth of these is demanded by the insatiable, unrelenting priest as his due by the law—of what?—not of charity or humanity, I think.

On the day after the engagement we left Waterford for *Carrick on Sure*, and, in our way, met with some of the troops that had been engaged with the White-boys, and were asked if we had seen any of them lurking about in companies. But their enquiries were ill directed ;

for we would sooner have headed them, and attacked the first parson's house we had met with, than discovered their retreat.

I made it my business to enquire, in the most friendly manner, of some of these unhappy sufferers of the lowest class, as they fell in my way, the reason of their exposing themselves to so much danger, by raising such disturbances in their country :——To which their answers were invariably to this effect——That their lives were of little value to them—that the severe and hard dealing they had met with from their priests and lords of the manors had made them desperate—that the former wanted to reduce the small subsistence they had to live on, and the latter deprived them of the very few privileges and common rights they had, for time immemorial, enjoyed——that against these only were their resentments pointed, and to recover their long standing privileges was the sole cause of their exposing themselves, or other people, to any danger, and not from any disposition to rebel against their king or the peace of their country,

I cannot but acknowledge, in favour of them, that the general civility of the people, with the apparent honesty and candour of their accounts, gave the greatest credit to their representations.

There are many little commons, or vacant spots of ground, adjacent to the road, upon which the inhabitants of the cabbins by the highway side have been used, from time immemorial, to *rare*, as they express it, a pig or a goose, which they have bought very young, the sale of which has help'd to furnish them with a few necessaries. Many of these have been taken into the fields or enclosures on the road side, by the landlords, who have farmed, or purchased, them of the lords of the manor.

From an impartial view of their situation, I could not, from my soul, blame these unhappy delinquents. They are attacked and reduced, on all sides, so hardly, as to have barely their potatoes left them to subsist on.

The tything of potatoes has been a contest of long standing between the priest and inhabitants of this country.—'Tis greatly to be wished that the parliament of Ireland would take this subject into their consideration, and decide, at lead the dispute about the right—was it only so far as to exempt the penurious cottager from the hard terms of having his scanty subsistence reduced a tenth by unfeeling, unrelenting affluence.

With respect to their complaints about losing their common rights, the merits of the case is more questionable.

You have daily disputes in England, at this time, on the same subject : On an impartial and altogether disinterested view of the case, and favourable as I have appeared to the poor of this, and as I would ever appear to the same class in both kingdoms, were I to decide on the case, I should give it against them.

'Tis certain, on a general reasoning on the subject, that the better the lands of any country are cultivated, the greater plenty will be produced for the inhabitants. 'Tis equally certain, that by enclosing of commons, either by the highway-side or in large and extensive common fields, they may be much better cultivated than it is possible for them to be in their natural or common state, where every occupier has a right throughout the whole, and where, consequently, no one can make any improvement without sinking the advantages of it among the whole ; and a concurrence in any plan of improvement of a great number of occupiers of a common, can never be expected.

If the improvements in any country do not encrease in proportion to the encreasing popularity of it, 'tis very certain that an increased distress of the inhabitants, from want of employment, must be the natural consequence. This observation is true, with respect to agriculture specially, and is particularly applicable to the country I am writing about ; which, from want of good cultivation, universally wears the face of poverty, but little work is done upon it, and the produce is in proportion.

The difficulty that is frequently objected against a much greater produce, from the want of a market, must appear ridiculous to every person of sense that considers the connections, and present state of this country.—If corn, in Ireland, sold even at one half the price it generally goes at, and as much more was produced, and I have scarce a doubt that as much more might be produced, if but all the lands now in tillage were properly cultivated there requires no great penetration to see that in this, or in any maritime country like this, a double produce, to the present, would be for the advantage of the inhabitants in general, from the greater quantity of employment in the first place, and of corn, draw, manure, &c. that are all useful and necessary.—Besides that, if a greater quantity was really produced, than the consumption required, and there was no call for it among the neighbouring inhabitants of England, there could arise no objection, I should suppose, to its being exported from Ireland to any foreign market that could be found, which would necessarily call for a great number of hands that are now unemployed. And 'tis the real want of employment, in this country, that is the general source of the distress and poverty among the lowest classes of the inhabitants.

In England, the farms, at present, are, many of them too large. This is a growing evil, introduced by and for the security of the landlord ; but, I make no doubt, will be found by experience to be in its natural consequence extremely injurious to the public.—I am not at leisure now to give you my reasons at large for this observation—when I am, I will.—In Ireland, the farms are as much too small. In the former the lands are monopolized—in the latter, too much divided. Though in both countries the disadvantages arising to the public, and to the lowest classes of the inhabitants in particular, are not, perhaps, directly from either of these extremes taking place, but from incidental circumstances attending them—in England, from the too frequent monopolies of grain, and the consequent partial and temporary scarcities that will, in many places, be introduced. I say partial and temporary only, for with a plentiful crop, a universal or lasting scarcity of grain can never take place, while the consumption is confined at home, which, in my humble opinion, it ought to be, as soon, at least, as it gets to five shillings a bushel Winchester measure. In Ireland, the public suffers from the *poverty* of the *occupiers*, by their being so much reduced and so far removed from the first proprietors.—A farmer, in Ireland, of 20 or 30*l.* a year, at a 3d, 4th or 5th remove from the first proprietor, and by far too many of them are as far removed as this, is little better than a slave to the lowest class of landlords, and cannot possibly cultivate his land in the best manner ; and the publick suffers for want of the produce the land might yield.

The following observation will be thought very just by every person who is extensively acquainted with either England or Ireland,—That where the lands are best cultivated there is the greatest number of people employed, that is to say, in the arable way ; and consequently, in general, those parts, in either kingdom, will be found the most populous, where agriculture is in the greatest perfection. The particular cafes of manufacturing counties are, without doubt, excepted here.

If any one of these subaltern landlords in Ireland, of some property, were to take half a dozen of these portions of slavery into his own hands, instead of setting down supinely in the midst of a village of slaves, upon 30 or 40*l.* a year, the whole income, perhaps, that he makes by firming them out under his next superior,—if he understood his business, he might make

double the present produce, and employ to advantage three times the hands that now work upon the lands, which would naturally call in many of the distressed mendicants by the high roads, whose employment would produce them a much better subsistence than the fortuitous benevolence of travellers, or than the profits of bringing up either pigs or geese upon the commons.

The same contest, about the tything of potatoes, gave rise to a much more considerable insurrection a few years since, in the province of Ulster, in the north of Ireland, under the denomination of Oak-boys, from a practice of distinguishing themselves by wearing a branch of oak in their hats.—But in this case, from the much greater popularity and spirit of liberty in this province, the vast numbers of the inhabitants engaged in the contest, carried the point in favour of the planter ; for in this northern contest there were many thousands assembled in defence of their potatoes ; and though they were suppressed, and many of them taken prisoners, yet the vast numbers of the defendants made it unsafe to punish them. And the tything of potatoes, in the north, has been relinquished ever since.

From my heart I wish they could as easily carry their point in the south ; for the priest, if he has any of that charity he preaches, may very well be contented with the tythe of what grows above ground.

And with this unclerical, though, I hope, not uncharitable observation, I will close my Hibernian packet.

If the contents should furnish you with a little agreeable amusement for a leisure hour, I have my wish, and shall think myself amply compensated, by that circumstance, for the trouble I have been at in collecting the materials for your entertainment.

I am, dear Sir,  
With great esteem,  
Your affectionate,  
Humble servant,

J. B.

Lucas's Coffee-house, Dublin,  
30th Novemb, 1764,

*Hibernia curiosa*. A letter from a gentleman in Dublin, to his friend at Dover in Kent. Giving a general view of the manners, customs, dispositions, &c. of the inhabitants of Ireland. With occasional observations on the state of trade and agriculture in that kingdom ... Collected in a tour through the kingdom in the year 1764 .. (1769)

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