

Observations On Ireland 1812

Observations on the character, customs, and superstitions of the Irish ; and on some of the causes which have retarded the moral and political improvement of Ireland

“ Green be thy fields — sweet isle of the Ocean !”

1812

Daniel Dewar

Introduction.

THAT science whose inquiries are directed to the discovery of the sources of human happiness, and to those impediments which ignorance, prejudice, and political arrangements present to its progress, is doubtless worthy of all the study and patient attention which a subject so important demands. And though at present it is only in the infancy of its being, it has bestowed many invaluable blessings on the world.

To discriminate accurately those circumstances and events which may have influenced the national character of any people ; to trace and unfold the causes united in its formation ; and to develop those obstacles which have opposed or retarded these causes in their operation, forms one of those departments of philosophical investigation that can never become useless or uninteresting. The subject, considered in this extended light, is, however, attended with many difficulties. The early history of all nations is necessarily involved in obscurity and fable ; political institutions as well as national habits and peculiarities have had their origin for the most part from circumstances which are now unknown : to form theoretical conjectures, therefore, is all to which any claim can be laid ; which conjectures, however happy, will always be attended with some degree of that doubt and obscurity which they are intended to remove.

Besides, even within the period of authentic history, some of the circumstances which have a powerful influence on the character and destiny of nations are far from being universally obvious. In this respect the history of a people is not unlike that of an individual : a circumstance so trivial as to escape his own attention, may produce a series of events, all of which contribute to form his character and fix the part appointed him to perform in human life. In many cases, however, it must be allowed, that in tracing the origin of national peculiarity and improvement the same difficulties do not exist. That one government will produce one set of manners, and a different government another set, is a fact obvious to every one ; though it is only philosophers who think it of importance to observe the adaptation of these various institutions to the production of a state of things still more various. “ Where the government of a nation is altogether republican, it is apt to beget a peculiar set of manners. Where it is altogether monarchical, it is more apt to have the same effect ; the imitation of superiors spreading the national manners among the people. If the governing part of a state consists altogether of merchants, as in Holland, their uniform way of life will fix their character. If it consists chiefly of nobles and landed gentry, like Germany, France and Spain, the same effect follows. The genius of a particular sect of religion is also apt to mould the manners of a people. The English government is a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. The people in authority are composed of gentry and merchants. All sects of religion are to be found among them. And the great liberty and independence which every man enjoys, allows him to display the manners peculiar to him. Hence the English, of any

people in the universe, have the least of a national character ; unless this very singularity may pass for such.” [1]

A family affords in miniature a good representation of a tribe of people. The principle of imitation and mutual sympathy, so powerful in human nature, leads the little members of this little community to resemble, not merely their parents, but often one another, in disposition, manner and genius. This principle accounts for that similarity of character to be met with among people of the same district, of the same county, and of the same kingdom. We insensibly assume the habits of thinking and action of those with whom we associate. It is not necessary, therefore, to maintain, as some have done, that physical causes occasion the diversity of manners observable in different nations ; this is sufficiently accounted for, and certainly not less intelligibly, by the unbounded influence which moral causes exert on the mind. The laws of association, like those of gravitation are uniform in their action ; their force is felt in the various, scenes and occupations of life ; we may easily assign to their operation, therefore, that variety of moral phenomena which distinguish the different nations of our globe.

As to the obstacles which retard national improvement, they may in general be considered as arising from political institutions, from national religion, or from the prejudices and habits of the people.

(1.) Political institutions. These have an astonishing power in creating or destroying the happiness of mankind ; In augmenting or counteracting, and diminishing national opulence and prosperity. In legislating, therefore, for the human race, it is necessary, not only that statesmen should mean well ; they should of all others be the most enlightened. In this case, benevolence, unaccompanied with general views, and a considerable portion of that foresight which embraces the interests of distant ages, as well as the happiness of the present times, will unfortunately do much harm ; The very eagerness to do good, will, it is probable, prompt to an interference in circumstances in which every such interference must be injurious.

There is no principle in political science more conformable to truth than this, that the prosperity of the community is best promoted by leaving every individual to pursue, without any other restraint than that which eternal justice and equity imposes, his own interest in that way which he may conceive most agreeable to himself. Happy had it been for Europe, and the world, if this maxim had regulated the conduct of its rulers ! Every branch of human industry and labour would then advance in its natural order ; and without entertaining any visionary prospect, we might confidently expect the certain though gradual amelioration of human enjoyment. Men will improve themselves, if the circumstances in which they are placed furnish a stimulus to that improvement ; they will also acquire wealth, if their industry be rewarded and its effects enjoyed ; and, generally speaking, they will become intelligent and virtuous, if the means of obtaining knowledge be fairly placed within their power.

“ What is the species of domestic industry which his capital can employ, and of which the produce is likely to be of the greatest value, every individual, it is evident, can, in his local situation, judge much better than any statesman or lawgiver can do for him. The statesman, who should attempt to direct private people in what manner they ought to employ their capitals, would not only load himself with a most unnecessary attention, but assume an authority which could safely be trusted, not only to no single person, but to no council or senate whatever, and which would nowhere be so dangerous as in the hands of a man who had folly and presumption enough to fancy himself fit to exercise it. [2]

“ That security which the laws in Great Britain give to every man, that he shall enjoy the fruits of his own labour, is alone sufficient to make any country flourish, notwithstanding absurd regulations of commerce ; and this security was perfected by the revolution. The natural effort of every individual to better his own condition, when suffered to exert itself with freedom and security, is so powerful a principle, that it is alone, and without any assistance, not only capable of carrying on the society to wealth and prosperity ; but of surmounting a hundred impertinent obstructions with which the folly of human laws too often incumbers its operations ; though the effect of these obstructions is always more or less either to encroach upon its freedom, or to diminish its security. In Great Britain industry is perfectly secure ; and though it is far from being perfectly free, it is as free or freer than in any other part of Europe.” [3]

It is, no doubt, natural to every being possessed of power, to wish that others should have proofs of its existence. And statesmen must feel inclined to perpetuate their fame and aggrandise their country by the effect of their own legislative authority. But let them recollect, that their country can only be truly aggrandised by removing every obstruction to industry, virtue, and happiness ; and that every effort to obtain these ends by counteracting the established order of nature is worse than useless.

Besides, it ought to be remarked, that political institutions, when injurious, produce evils which cannot be removed by the removal of the institutions. Perhaps, they have given the impetus of the national mind a direction in which it will continue to move for ages, though that direction may be hostile to the interest of the people : they probably have given rise to prejudices which can only be effaced by a length of time and many counteracting principles. In such circumstances, even an enlightened legislator, whose first passion is the love of human kind, may have the deepest cause to regret, that he lives in an age when his benevolent exertions must be limited by the ignorance, folly, and corruption of his predecessors. “ A scheme, however happily imagined, may, by the obstacles which oppose, by the difference of the genius and character of the people, by the force of those law’s they have adopted, and by long custom, which, as it were, stamps a seal upon them, become alike chimerical and impracticable. Time only, and long experience can bring remedies to the defects in the customs of a state whose form is already determined.” [4]

These remarks are illustrated and confirmed by a survey of the history of Europe. It is not my object, however, to enter into detail on this particular ; indeed, without any such details, all will agree as to the truth of the following observations by professor Stewart, which in one sentence expresses all that I wish to advance on this head. Of occasional evils, (or evils over which the bulk of mankind have no controul,) he says, that “ no inconsiderable part may be traced to the obstacles, which human institutions oppose to the order of things recommended by nature.” It is elsewhere observed by the same author, that “ the particular form, which the political union happens, in the case of any community to assume, determines many of the most important circumstances in the character of the people, and many of those opinions and habits which affect the happiness of private life.” [5]

The blessings which are enjoyed under a liberal system of government, are so forcibly described by Brydone in the following passage, that I cannot deny myself the pleasure of quoting it. He is contrasting the wretched condition of Sicily, formerly the granary of the Roman empire, and still, as it merely regards the soil, the finest country in the world, with that of Switzerland, the most mountainous of Europe. “ What a contrast is there betwixt this and the little uncouth country of Switzerland !—To be sure, the dreadful consequences of oppression can never be set in a more striking opposition to the blessings and charms of liberty. Switzerland, the very excrescence of Europe, where nature seems to have thrown out

all her cold and stagnating humours ; full of lakes, marshes, and woods, and surrounded by immense rocks, and everlasting mountains of ice, the barren, but sacred, ramparts of liberty. Switzerland, enjoying every blessing, where every blessing seems to have been denied ; whilst Sicily, covered by the most luxuriant hand of nature ; where heaven seems to have showered down its richest blessings with the utmost prodigality, groans under the most abject poverty, and with a pale and wan visage, starves in the midst of plenty. It is liberty alone that works this standing miracle. Under her plastic hands the mountains sink, the lakes are drained, and these rocks, these marshes, these woods, become so many sources of wealth and pleasure.” [6]

(2.) The state of a nation with regard either to its deterioration or improvement, depends also on its religion. If that be full of bigotry and intolerance ; if its genius be hostile to the progress of knowledge, there can be no question but it will form the best security to corrupt rulers, and a most powerful impediment to the civil liberty and general happiness of the subject. Religious prejudices are of all others the worst, because they are the most inveterate ; and you may as soon attempt to stop the torrent in its headlong course, as instantaneously to change the bias of a nation, when that bias owes its existence to the influence of a narrow and degrading superstition.

It is true, it sometimes fortunately happens, that such a superstition is not very intimately associated with the concerns of life, and, therefore, has less power on the progress of human affairs. When, however, it interferes with the prerogative of the magistrate ; when it presumes to dictate to the sovereign and the senate of the people ; when its leading maxim is that ignorance and incapacity form the security of the multitude ; and when it proscribes as heretics, and punishes as infidels, all who do not adhere to its dogmas, then, indeed, it produces the most baneful effects of the most baneful superstition. And it is difficult to say, what greater curse heaven in its wrath can inflict on mortals : it takes away the power as well as the inclination of noble and liberal exertion ; it destroys some of the most important sources of human happiness ; and unlike the tempest which lowers and darkens only to produce a more brilliant sunshine, it spreads a cloud of night over the land, which the brightest rays of genius may long attempt in vain to penetrate, and the clearer light of revelation be scarcely able to remove.

How unlike the rational, and mild, and beneficial, and ennobling religion which nature approves, and which God prescribes. This is the religion of peace, and joy, and righteousness, of mercy, and forgiveness ; possessing nothing gloomy or forbidding, but all mildness, and gentleness, and love :—destitute of all local peculiarities, of expensive rites, of unmeaning ceremonies, it has no temple, no altar ; it comes like heaven’s fairest gift, forcing itself on the attention of none, refusing violence in every instance for its support, but freely offering its benefits to all. How opposed to all the disgusting pomp and bigotry, and cruelty of superstition. The influence which this religion exerts on civil liberty and national prosperity may be indirect, but it is powerfully efficient. It makes the people more thoughtful and less turbulent, more enterprising and less fickle, more attentive to order and sub-ordination, but more impatient under real oppression and tyranny. To whom are we indebted for British freedom ? to men who could not bear the yoke of ecclesiastical bondage ; to men who may have been called puritans and fanatics, but who certainly possessed a sound judgment, and were animated by a noble enthusiasm. “ Their views, far from being odious, are surely large, and generous, and noble : to their prevalence and success the nation owes its liberty ; perhaps its learning, its industry, commerce, and naval power : by them chiefly the English name is distinguished among the society of nations, and aspires to a rivalry with that of the freest and most illustrious commonwealths of antiquity. [7]

(3.) I have said also that certain prejudices retard the improvement of nations. These have their origin either from political institutions, or from national religion, or from circumstances peculiar to the history of the people who entertain them : all, from the philosopher to the peasant, are, though unconscious to themselves, in a greater or less degree, subject to their influence. There is no profession, no department of life, no literary or trading corporation, which is exempted from their controul, and that has not to contend with the prejudices peculiar to its party, more confined indeed than those which are national, but not less powerful, not less efficient in modifying and forming the character. So much is man the child of habit and influenced in all his conduct by prepossession, that the religious, or political, or literary sect with which he has always associated, may frequently be distinguished, by the direction it has given to the usual current of his ideas, to the predominant bias of his mind, to his pursuits, and taste, and feelings. His very language, without the aid of which he can scarcely form an accurate conception, exercises a power over his thinking habits unknown to himself ; a power which because it is constantly present to every one, and seems as obsequious to the clown as to the orator, is not, as a source of error, often felt or observed, but which on this very account is more universal than any other cause.

The prejudices, however, that are common to a nation are more palpable than such as are peculiar to the several parties into which the nation is divided. In some instances, indeed, it may be difficult to ascertain in what proportions political and moral causes have combined to produce them ; to say where the former began and the latter terminated their operation, since they may be so modified by the varying circumstances of ages as to render their nature complex and their origin obscure. Besides, they may continue in all their force long after the local peculiarities and arrangements from which they had arisen are forgotten. But in all ordinary cases, it is not difficult to trace the more common prejudices, or such as are truly national, to either of the causes already mentioned. And hence the variety of inveterate prepossessions of different nations arise from their various forms of religion, and political institutions : and these, while they become a barrier to the introduction of every thing that is new, present, it may be, an obstacle, in the direction in which they tend to everything that is truly salutary and ameliorating.

It must be allowed, however, that there are cases in which prejudices and popular opinions maybe conducive to individual happiness and national prosperity. If, in the multitude, they are the result of the maxims and institutions of a free country, and are formed with the most favourable aspect to civil and religious liberty, they then come in aid of the sober dictates of reason and philosophy, and give energy and effect to the enlightened deductions of the sage, and the generous efforts of the legislator : and thus combined, they carry on the society, with a silent but irresistible force, through the progressive stages of improvement and opulence, to that consummation of moral and political perfection, which perhaps no nation has ever yet attained. For example, how greatly is the prosperity of Scotland owing to the popular opinion of its inhabitants, that it is mean and disgraceful to them, to permit either themselves or their relatives to become dependent on the public ! This opinion is strictly national, peculiar to the country north of the Tweed ; and to perceive its immense utility, it is only necessary to observe the effects which result from the want of it, not merely in the neighbouring states, but in other parts of our own empire. In England the labouring classes have no such feeling ; they have no apprehension of shame and wretchedness arising from a state of absolute dependence ; they have not, therefore, the same incentive to industry, the same anxiety to make some provision for sickness and old age : they enter the workhouse, if not with pleasurable emotions, certainly with the absence of such as are painful, and seem to consider themselves as respect-able and happy when they receive their food from the parish, as when they procured it by their labour. It is not my business at present to inquire into those causes which produced this popular opinion in the one case, or into those which occasioned the want

of it in the other : I have mentioned it as one instance out of many that may be adduced to shew, how inveterate opinions and prejudices may have a favourable or unfavourable influence on national industry and happiness.

That kind and beneficent Being who has so constituted the mind of man as to make some share of individual happiness compatible almost with any state of society, has provided for his comfort by that very principle of his nature which leads him to form strong prejudices, and which, therefore, when under improper direction, leads him astray. While it prompts him to look with affection on every object to which he has long been accustomed, it tends to reconcile him to the evils which necessarily mingle with his lot, and to produce a greater degree of satisfaction and enjoyment, than otherwise, if placed in the same circumstances, he could have possessed. How happy is it when the objects with which he has always been surrounded are good ; when the political and religious views and opinions to which he has conformed himself, are conducive to the highest moral attainment of man; and when the prepossessions which are interwoven with the very essence of his mind, are such as no one can ever wish to see destroyed !

Though it is not in the power of the legislator to deliver the multitude completely from the dominion of prejudices, he may by his efforts greatly diminish the force of such as are injurious ; as he may, on the other hand, from considerations of policy, give them additional strength by associating them with the best feelings of the heart. The guilt, however, which he incurs, who by his talents or his address fosters the prejudices of the people in opposition to the moral or political good of society, is infinitely greater than that of Cæsar or Alexander, who, for the sake of being accounted the conquerors of the world, sacrificed its interests to their ambition : the guilt of the latter was chiefly restricted to the period which terminated their own dark and destructive career, and without any farther accumulation accompanied them to the tribunal of eternal justice ; but so long as his opinions continue to exert their influence, that of the former is transmitted with increased aggravation to distant ages.

Political institutions which are confessedly bad, combined with ignorance and superstition in the multitude, retard the improvement of nations, chiefly by the prejudices to which they give rise. The institutions themselves may be destroyed by successive revolutions of empires, but unless a similar revolution takes place in the public mind, the same prejudices remain to obstruct the progress of knowledge and civilization, and to render fruitless the best attempts of the patriot and the philosopher. How then is the influence of such prejudices to be diminished ? There seems no way in which this can be done effectually but by the general instruction of the people. To deliver them, indeed, from the power of opinion, it is vain ever to expect ; nor, though it were possible, is it desirable, that such a change in the constitution of society should take place. But it is surely possible by a national system of education, and by other means of communicating information, to make the very prejudices of the people subservient to their political and moral improvement, and to make even the weaknesses of man “ lean to virtue’s side.”

The object of these remarks on political institutions, popular prejudices, and national religion, can scarcely be misunderstood by anyone. Its connection with the design of these pages which is to offer a few observations on some, of the causes which have retarded the moral, political, and religious improvement of Ireland, is very apparent. Let it not be supposed, however, that I mean to enter very profoundly into this intricate subject ; my only aim is to advance some detached hints respecting the difficulties in question, and to point out the means by which they may be removed, or their influence counteracted and overcome.—A tour through that country has enabled me to prosecute inquiries which otherwise could not be conducted with the same facility and advantage. An acquaintance with the Irish language has

put it in my power to enter more fully into the views and prejudices of the Irish nation, than the mere English traveller could possibly have done.—My book, such as it is, I present to the public, with the sincerest desire to promote the interests of a nation, which may, at some future period, be the glory of the British empire.

On The Poverty of The Peasantry and Inferior Orders of The Irish.

THE condition of the inferior orders of a people affords a good criterion by which the prosperity and happiness of the community may be ascertained. Wherever this is wretchedly poor, as in Italy and in Ireland, though there may be many wealthy individuals in the nation, there must be some causes either moral or political which affect the general improvement of the people, and it is our duty to attempt the discovery of these in place of blaming them for obstinate stupidity.

The poverty of the tenantry and labouring classes in Ireland arises from a combination of circumstances, to some of which I have already alluded. There are some subordinate peculiarities in their situation which on this subject should be attended to.—It has been said by travellers that they are indolent, and that their extreme poverty is occasioned by a want of industry. But this is saying nothing to the purpose, since it only informs us that they are poor without assigning an adequate cause. For what is it that makes one people lazy, and another active and industrious ? It is not the physical influence of the climate, (though perhaps where the difference of latitude is great, it may have some slight effect on the human constitution ;) it is motive presented to the mind that makes a nation laborious and rich. A nation is made up of individuals, and as every individual will exert himself in proportion to the stimulus which he has to exertion, so will a whole nation be industrious, in proportion as it has encouragement to industry. Now, as it regards Ireland, the three general causes which retard the improvement of a people, political arrangement, national religion, and inveterate prejudice, will be found to unite.

First, with regard to national religion : and here let it be observed that I call the Roman Catholic the national religion, though it is not the established, since it is professed by the great body of the people. There is one way in which this is evidently injurious to the industry and morals of those who are under its influence ; I refer to the many days of idleness and dissipation which it prescribes. This was remarked by Arthur Dobbs, who wrote a treatise on the improvement of Ireland eighty years ago : referring to the holidays, he says, “ these they spend in idleness, to the loss of the public and their own detriment, half starving their families by not working a competent part of their time. Nor would it be a detriment, if we lessened the number of our own legal holidays, and had more working days : for since the original intention of them is not complied with, to frequent the church for instruction and prayers, the public ought not to suffer the loss, by their making it a cloak for idleness and debauchery.”

“ I shall here beg leave to make a gross computation of the loss the nation sustains by the great number of our holidays and by the still greater number of the popish holidays.”

“ There are twenty-six popish holidays kept in England, more than the thirty-two kept by our law : but by our Irish calendar I apprehend, there are many more ; for in an almanack I have seen some time ago, in which the popish holidays were distinguished, I have observed at least forty-nine more than our law allows ; considering also that the common Irish papists keep St. Patrick’s day, his wife’s, and wife’s mother’s, with many others equally ridiculous, I believe that number is of the least. However, as in all my computations, I have endeavoured to be within the truth, I shall here only suppose them twenty-six as in England, and form a

calculation from that number. I observed before, that there are at least 1,669,644 persons in Ireland. I suppose of this number 1,200,000 are papists of all ages ; and 600,000 of these capable of gaining five pence per day, one day with another, by service, labour, manufacture, or spinning ; there being then twenty-six popish holidays, each person loses ten shillings and ten pence, which multiplied by the number of labouring persons, amounts annually to £225,000, lost to the kingdom by the popish holidays alone.—These days are now spent in debauchery and rioting, by those who ought to labour ; whilst perhaps their children are half starved at home, or turn idle, and beg and steal, to support themselves. Would it not then be more reasonable to lessen the number of our *own* legal holidays, by taking away such days as keep up the spirit of division and parties among us ; than to connive at the idling away of those not allowed by law, which the papists do at present to the great prejudice of the kingdom.”

It is not, however, on the influence of holidays in directly preventing labour and diminishing the national wealth, that I feel disposed to place most stress, but on their tendency indirectly to produce idleness and immorality.

A man who spends a sixth of his whole time at the amusements of holidays, at fairs, and wakes, and funerals, and perhaps on all these occasions drinks whisky to excess, is not very likely to acquire those habits of sobriety, and plodding industry, which in any condition are highly useful, but which, in that of a working man, are essential to competence and comfort. It is not merely the time that is spent idly, it is the manner in which it is spent that chiefly affects national morals, and consequently national wealth. It is probable that in a country such as Scotland, where the people observe the Sunday with religious veneration, and consider every species of levity and intemperance on that day with abhorrence, there is as much work performed in the course of the year, as though every seventh day were devoted to labour. In this case, there is not only an abstinence from those excesses which form bad habits, but there is attention given to the precepts of that pure religion, which forms those that are virtuous and useful. In many counties of Ireland, the Sunday may be added, as it respects the catholic population, to the number of pernicious holidays, since they generally spend the greater part of it, not in acts of devotion, but in drinking, and dancing. and fighting. [8] The morning, indeed, by some, may be employed at chapel, where the priest unfortunately seldom thinks it necessary to impart any instruction, further than an occasional lecture on the heinous and damnable sin of not punctually paying his dues, which contributes little to the edification or improvement of his flock.

From all this idleness arises the habit of drinking spirituous liquors to excess ; or rather, the one and the other operate as cause and effect. The quantity of whisky consumed by the lower orders of the Irish, is so great, as to render the relation of the fact almost incredible. At funerals, in some parts of Ireland, there are many gallons of whisky placed in the church yard, where those who are present at the interment drink often to inebriation. The consequence in all such cases is frequently a battle—As to a wake, whole nights and days are spent in drinking ; the people whose relation is dead are impoverished ; and those who attend lose their time, their health, and their morals : from the time the person is dead till he is interred, whisky is perpetually drunk, and the whole business is concluded by complete intoxication. The fairs present a scene of perfect confusion and intemperance, which is seldom finished without an engagement with the shellela.

It is not to be supposed that the Popish religion directly produces habits of inebriation ; but it sanctions the idleness of an ignorant and superstitious people, by appointing so many holidays, and by making intoxication a trifling offence : and these vices partly occasion that

poverty and wretchedness which cover so great a portion of Ireland. True religion has a much greater influence on national wealth, than most people seem to be aware of. All will readily allow its importance as it regards virtue in general, and a preparation for a future state of existence ; but they do not seem always to recollect, that the virtues which it enjoins are directly calculated to increase opulence and national happiness. It will be found that superstition in every instance is favourable to idleness, obstructive to commerce and manufactures, whilst enlightened piety, and sound morality, promote industry, and every species of improvement. It was to its protestant subjects that France was chiefly indebted for its progress in manufactures and commerce during the sixteenth century ; it is to foreigners, persecuted in their own country on account of their religion, that England owes a considerable share of its eminence in several important branches of trade : and as to Ireland it had little or no manufacture of linen, even for home consumption, till towards the end of Charles the Second's reign, when the persecution then raised against the dissenters in Scotland, forced many of them over to the north of Ireland, where they began the linen manufacture of Ireland. Before that time, and for some years after, the Irish were furnished with considerable quantities of linen from Scotland ; but from that time they began to furnish themselves ; and the persecution set up against the protestants in France, after the revocation of the edict of Nantes, in the year 1685, accomplished what the persecution in Scotland had begun : for after the revolution many of the French refugees settled in Ireland, and greatly improved their manufacture of linens, especially those of the finer sort. Thus the Irish stand indebted for the establishment of their linen manufacture, rather to the bad conduct of their neighbours, than to any good conduct of their own, or to any encouragement from England. [9]

How is the influence of superstition in Ireland, which, if it does not directly produce idleness and vice, affords no principle of exertion and industry, to be diminished and counteracted ? It is evident that this can never be effected by either compulsory, or penal laws ; many favourable circumstances must concur entirely to remove evils which are become so inveterate. Education, however, will accomplish a great deal : it will impart to the mind something by which its powers may be exercised, by which its latent energies will be developed, and by which its activity will be increased and properly directed.

The immediate cause of the indolence of the Irish, is the facility with which they procure the means of subsistence. “ In Ireland,” says Sir William Temple, “ by the largeness and plenty of the soil, all things necessary to life are so cheap, that an industrious man, by two days labour, may gain enough to feed him the rest of the week : which I take to be a very plain ground of the laziness attributed to that people. For men naturally prefer ease before labour, and will not take pains if they can live idle.”—Wherever any people obtain by the labour of four days, potatoes sufficient to feed them for six, it cannot be supposed that they will be industrious during the whole of the week. Though it must be confessed, that this very circumstance tends ultimately to counteract the evils of such a condition, by limiting the quantity of labour to the extent of the capital destined for its support,

I feel a difficulty in saying whether the state of the Irish peasantry in general be greatly improved. Where there is so much poverty, and wretchedness it is nearly impossible to ascertain with much precision the comparative advantages of the present generation, above those of their fathers. It is certain that little improvement has taken place in the comforts of the peasantry and lower orders in many counties ; nor, indeed, is it possible that there should be any great amelioration in their condition, while they continue to give, as they now do, almost the whole produce of the land to the proprietor, content to live on a scanty and comfortless subsistence.

The number of mendicants in Ireland, especially in those parts where the population is chiefly Catholic, is extremely great. The very lower orders of farmers, or, rather, such as in England would be called cottagers, after they have planted their potatoes, often leave home on a begging excursion, and continue their tour till harvest. In such a country, where it is not thought dishonourable to beg, and where it is deemed extremely meritorious to relieve beggars of every description, their number must necessarily be great. In circumstances where such opinions are prevalent, the introduction of a system of poor-rates, like that in England, would only increase and perpetuate the evils of poverty.

In answering the question, how are we to relieve the wants of the indigent without increasing the number of the poor, regard should uniformly be had to the moral and religious instruction of the lower orders. It is this, chiefly, that produces that spirit of independence, which attaches meanness and shame to the provision of a workhouse,—which leads the parent to care for his offspring, and the children to console and support the age of their parents,—and which will render the humblest cottage, the abode not only of comfort, but of virtuous and generous exertion.

[1] Hume's Essay on National Character.

[2] Smith's Inquiry, v. ii. p. 182.

[3] Ibid, v. ii. p. 319.

[4] Sully's Memoirs, v. ii. p. 40.

[5] Outlines of Moral Philosophy.

[6] Brydone's Tour through Sicily and Malta, v, ii. p. 35.

[7] Hume's Essay on the Coalition of Parties, p. 431.

[8] This remark in its application is obviously to be restricted to the inferior orders of the *people*.

[9] Dobbs on the Trade, &c. of Ireland.

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