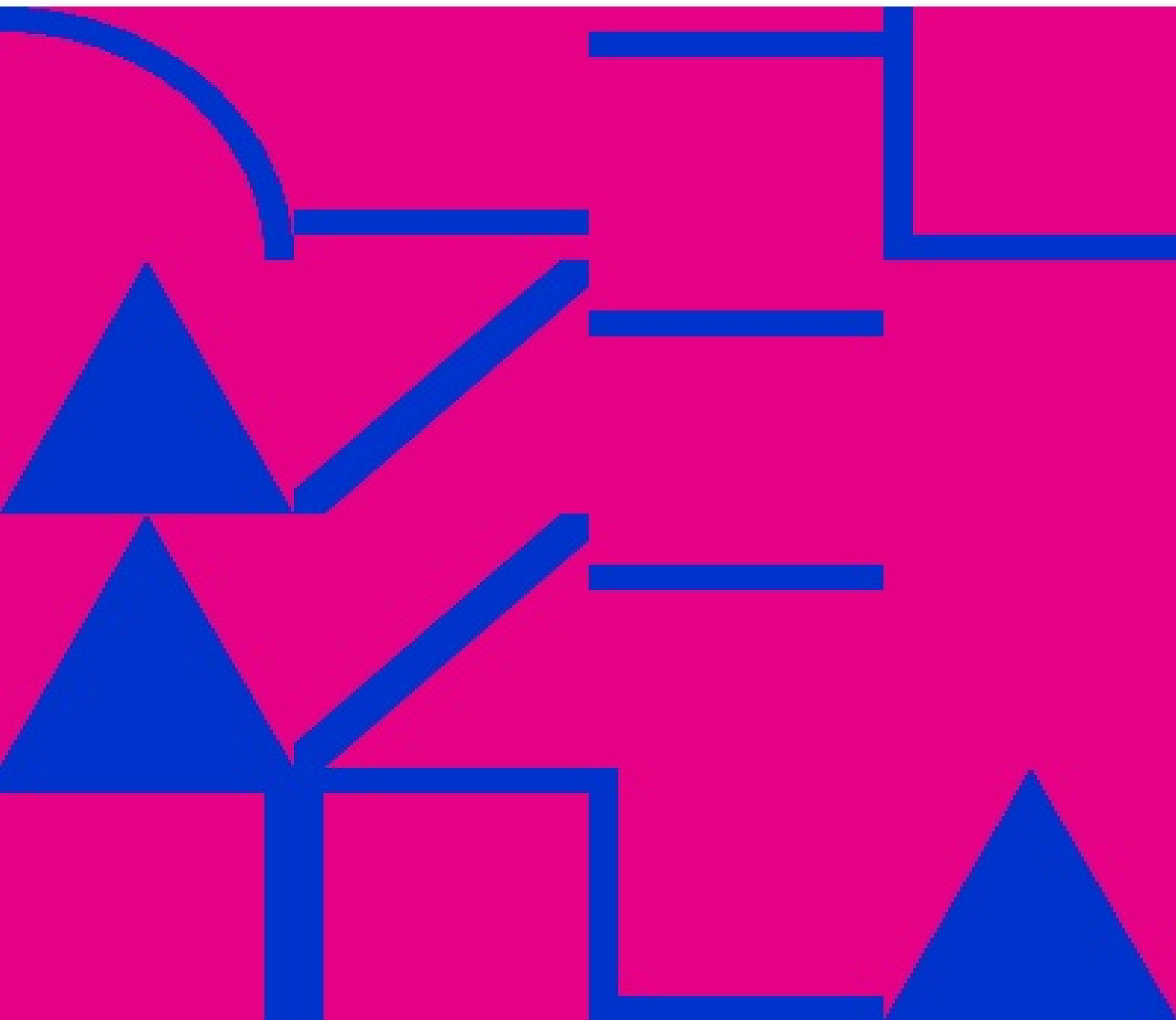


Ireland and Poland

A Comparison

T. W. (Thomas William) Rolleston



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IRELAND AND POLAND

A COMPARISON

BY

T. W. ROLLESTON

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IRELAND AND POLAND

The United Kingdom is composed of four distinct nationalities. Each of these has retained its own distinct character, its own national history, its own patriotism and self-respect. Their affairs, great and small, general or local, are administered by one Parliament in which each is fully represented. A large majority of the Irish people have, however, asked that in addition to some representation in the united Parliament they shall be granted a local Parliament for the management of their own internal affairs. The fact that this demand, which has an important imperial as well as local bearing, has not yet been complied with has constantly been used by the enemies of the Entente Powers to represent as false and hypocritical the claims of those Powers to be regarded as the champions of the rights of small nationalities; and the case of Ireland has been compared with that of Prussian Poland, as though the peoples of these two countries were suffering the same kind of oppression, the same injustice, the same denial of the right of every man to live and prosper in his own land on equal terms with his fellow-citizens in every other part of the realm.

The best answer to this charge is to tell plainly, without contention or exaggeration, what the united Parliament has done for Ireland since the beginning of the period of reform nearly fifty years ago. That is what is here attempted, so far as it can be done in a few pages. It must be fully understood that on the Home Rule question the present statement has no bearing whatever. That difficult problem lies in an altogether different sphere of politics, and must be judged by considerations which cannot be touched on here. Without, however, trenching in any degree on controversial ground, it may be pointed out that the crucial difficulty of the Home Rule question lies, and has always lain, in the fact that in Ireland a substantial and important minority amounting to about 25 per cent. of the population, and differing from the rest of the country in religion, national traditions, and economic development, has hitherto been resolutely opposed to passing from the immediate government of the imperial Parliament to that of any other body. This minority being, for the most part, grouped together in the North-east counties, the late Government attempted to solve the difficulty by offering immediate Home Rule to that section of Ireland which desires it, while leaving the remainder as it is until Parliament should otherwise decree. This proposal was rejected by the general opinion of Nationalist Ireland, which was firmly opposed to the partition of the country for any indefinite period. The question, therefore, remains for the present in suspense, until a solution can be found which will not only ensure the integrity and security of the Empire but reconcile the conflicting desires and interests of Irishmen themselves.

Ireland Fifty Years Ago

So much to clear the ground in regard to the Home Rule controversy. I shall now ask the reader to glance for a moment at the condition of Ireland fifty years ago. At that time almost the whole agricultural population were in the position of tenants-at-will, with no security either against increased rents or arbitrary eviction. The housing of the rural population, and especially of the agricultural labourers, was wretched in the extreme. Local taxation and administration were wholly in the hands of Grand Juries, bodies appointed by the Crown from among the country gentlemen in each district. Irish Roman Catholics were without any system of University education comparable to that which Protestants had enjoyed for three hundred years in the University of Dublin. A Church which, whatever its historic claims may have been, numbered only about 12 per cent. of the population was established by law and supported by tithes levied on the whole country. Technical education was inaccessible to the great bulk of the nation; and in no department of public education, of any grade or by whomsoever administered, was any attention paid to Irish history, the Irish language, Irish literature, or any subject which might lead young Irishmen to a better knowledge and understanding of the special problems of their country and its special claims to the love and respect of its children.

That was the Ireland of fifty years ago. It is an Ireland which at the present day lives only on the lips of anti-British orators and journalists. It is an Ireland as dead as the France of Louis XIV. Of the abuses and disabilities just recounted not one survives to-day. The measures by which they have been removed place to the credit of the United Kingdom a record of reform the details of which, for the benefit of friends or foes, may be here very briefly set down.

Religious Equality

In 1869 the Protestant Episcopal Church was disestablished and disendowed, and is now—many Churchmen believe to its great spiritual advantage—on the same level as regards its means of support as every other denomination in Ireland. It may be mentioned that the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland was long in the enjoyment of a State subsidy for the education of its clergy, a subsidy commuted in 1869 for a capital sum of £370,000.

Land Reform

As comparisons have been drawn between the systems of government in Ireland and in Poland, let us consider for a moment the condition of the Polish rural population under German rule. It must be noted that the recent promises of Polish autonomy made by Germany—obviously for military and temporary reasons—refer only to those portions of Polish territory held by other States. No change is to be made in the position of Prussian Poland. Here, for many years, it has been, and still is, the avowed object of the Prussian Government either to extirpate or forcibly Teutonise this Slavonic population, and to replant the country with German colonists. The German Chancellor in 1900, Prince von Bülow, defended this anti-Polish policy in the cynical saying that "rabbits breed faster than hares," and the meaner animal, the Pole, must therefore be drastically kept down in favour of the German. Between 1886 and 1906 the Prussian Government was spending over a million sterling a year in buying out Polish landowners, great and small, and planting Germans in their stead. The measure proved futile; the "rabbits" still multiplied, for the Poles bought land from German owners faster than the Government did from them. In 1904, in order to check the development of Polish agriculture and land-settlement, the Government took the extreme step of forbidding Poles to build new farmhouses without a licence. A still more oppressive measure came in 1908, when, in clear defiance of the German Constitution, the Prussian Government actually took powers and were voted funds—from taxation paid by Poles and Germans alike—for the compulsory expropriation of Polish owners against whom nothing whatever could be alleged except their non-German nationality. These powers have been put into operation, and every Pole in Prussia now holds his patrimony on his own soil on the sufferance of a Government which regards his very existence as a nuisance, because he occupies a place which a German might otherwise fill.

During precisely the same period the British Government in Ireland has been bending the wealth and credit of the United Kingdom to objects precisely the reverse. Ireland, owing to the wars and confiscations of the seventeenth century, had come to have a land-owning aristocracy mainly of English descent with a Celtic peasantry holding their farms as yearly tenants. The object of British land-legislation has been to expropriate the landlords, so far as their tenanted land is concerned, and to establish the Irish peasant, as absolute owner of the land he tills. The Irish tenant is now subject only to rents fixed by law; he can at any time sell the interest in his farm, which he has, therefore, a direct interest in improving; he is also assisted by a great scheme of land-purchase to become owner of his land on paying the price by terminable instalments, which are usually some 20 per cent. less than the amount he formerly paid as rent. Under this scheme about two-thirds of the Irish tenantry have already become owners of their farms, while the remainder enjoy a tenure which is almost as easy and secure as ownership itself. It is not surprising, then, that a German economist who has made a special study of this subject should declare that "the Irish tenants have had conditions assured to them more favourable than any other tenantry in the world enjoy"; adding the dry comment that in Ireland the "magic of property" appears to consist in the fact that it is cheaper to acquire it than not.^[*] That magic has been worked for Ireland by the British Legislature and by British credit. As in Prussia, compulsory powers (limited by certain conditions and to certain districts) stand behind the schemes of the Government; but the compulsion is exercised not against the Irishman in favour of the English settler, but against the (usually) English landlord in favour of the Irish tenant. The State is now pledged to about £130,000,000 for the

furtherance of this scheme, the instalments and sinking fund to the amount of about £5,000,000 a year being paid with exemplary regularity by the farmers who have taken advantage of it.

FOOTNOTES:

[\[*\]](#) Professor M. Bonn, of Munich University. "Modern Ireland and her Agrarian Problem," pp. 151, 162, translated from "Die irische Agrarfrage." *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft*; Mohr, Tübingen.

The Congested Districts Board

In the poorer and more backward regions of the West it has been felt that the above measures are not enough, and a special agency has been constituted with very wide powers to help the Western farmer, and not only the farmer, but the fisherman, the weaver, or anyone pursuing a productive occupation there, to make the most of his resources and to develop his industry in the best possible way. This Board commands a statutory endowment of £231,000 a year. A system of light railways which now covers these remote districts has given new and valuable facilities for the marketing of fish and every kind of produce.

The various Boards and other agencies by which these measures are carried into execution are manned almost exclusively by Irishmen.

The Agricultural Labourer

There is a world of difference between the present lot of the Irish agricultural labourer and his condition in 1883, when reform in this department was first taken in hand. Cottages can now be provided by the Rural District Councils and let at nominal rents. Nearly nine millions sterling have been voted for this purpose at low interest, with sinking fund, and up to the present date 47,000 cottages have been built, each with its plot of land, while several thousand more are sanctioned.

Of the results of the Labourers' Act a recent observer writes:

"The Irish agricultural labourer can now obtain a cottage with three rooms, a piggery, and garden allotment of an acre or half an acre, and for this he is charged a rent of one to two shillings a week ... These cottages by the wayside give a hopeful aspect to the country ... flowers are before the doors of the new cottages and creepers upon the walls. The labourer can keep pigs, poultry, and a goat, and grow his potatoes and vegetables in his garden allotment."^[*]

FOOTNOTES:

^[*] Padraic Colum: "My Irish Year," pp. 18, 19.

Local Government

In 1898 a Local Government Bill was passed for Ireland which placed the administration of the poor law and other local affairs for rural districts on the same footing as in England. The rule of the Grand Juries, which had lasted for two and a half centuries, and which had, on the whole, carried on local affairs with credit and success, was now entirely swept away, and elected bodies were placed in full control of local taxation, administration, and patronage. In the case of the larger towns free municipal institutions had already existed for some sixty years. In these the franchise was now reduced, and is wide enough both in town and country to admit every class of the population. Since 1899 the new elective bodies have had important duties to fulfil in regard to the development of agriculture and technical instruction.

The Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction

This new Irish Department of State grew out of a demand formulated after long inquiry and discussion by a voluntary Irish committee representing both Unionist and Nationalist opinion. It was established in 1899, and now commands the large endowment of £197,000 a year, with a capital sum of over £200,000. The annual endowment is clear of all charges for offices and staff, which are on the Civil Service Estimates. Its head is a Minister responsible to Parliament, but associated with him are Boards of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, two-thirds of which are elected respectively by County and Borough Councils. Without their concurrence no expenditure can be undertaken, and local work is largely carried on through committees appointed by these Councils. The people at large are therefore intimately and responsibly associated with the work of the Department, the annual meetings of which form a kind of industrial Parliament, where the whole economic organisation of Ireland can be reviewed, debated, and developed. The Department works by teaching, by inquiry, by experiment, and has an immense field of activity in dealing with cattle diseases, the improvement of stock, the control of creameries, the marketing of produce, etc. It has also brought facilities for technical instruction into every important centre of population.

University Education

This important question was settled in 1908 by the foundation of a new University, the "National University," with its central authority in Dublin and colleges in Dublin (the old Catholic University of which Cardinal Newman was rector), in Cork, and in Galway. The University is open to all creeds, and may not impose religious tests upon its students, but its government is mainly in the hands of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and it is accepted as a fair settlement of the question of Catholic higher education in Ireland. In the management of its internal affairs, the appointment of professors, the selection of textbooks, etc., the National University is wholly autonomous and free from Government interference. One of its most remarkable features is that the Irish language has been made an obligatory subject for matriculation. The endowment of the University, with its constituent colleges, amounts to £74,000 a year, and it was voted a capital sum for building and equipment of £170,000. It need hardly be said that no parallel to this institution exists in Prussian Poland.

Language and Native Culture

In this as in other respects a comparison with the theory and practice of German administration may help to place the policy of the United Kingdom in its proper light. When at the Congress of Vienna, 1815, Prussia definitely acquired her present share of Polish territory, King Friedrich Wilhelm III promised for himself and his successors, "on my kingly word," that the Poles should have religious freedom, the use of the Polish language in administration, in the Law Courts and in the schools, and be in all respects on an equality with their German fellow-citizens. We have already seen how these promises were kept in regard to the vital question of the ownership of land. They have been no less flagrantly broken in regard to the national language. The use of Polish is strictly prohibited at all public meetings. No Polish deputy to the Reichstag may address his constituents in the only language they understand. Since 1873 German alone may be taught in the national schools. The language of instruction must be German wherever half the pupils are capable of understanding it, and after 1928 it is decreed that no other language must be heard in the schoolroom. A decree of 1899 forbids teachers to use Polish even in their own family circles. Anyone who is caught teaching Polish, even gratuitously, is punished by fine or imprisonment. Polish literature found in the houses of private persons is confiscated, and its possessors imprisoned, if the police consider it to bear the least trace of any propagandist character.^[*]

All this, it will be seen, is merely the drastic execution of the policy laid down by Treitschke, the prophet of modern Germany, and more recently urged by the most popular living representative of Prussian ideals, H. S. Chamberlain.

"There is," writes Chamberlain, "no task before us so important as that of forcing the German language on the world (*die deutsche Sprache der Welt aufzuzwingen.*)" The German has "a twofold duty" laid on him: "never must a German abandon his own speech, neither he nor his children's children; and in every place, at every time, he must remember to compel others to use it until it has triumphed everywhere as the German Army has done in war. ... So far as the German Empire extends, the clergy must preach in German alone, in German alone the teacher must give his lessons ... Mankind must be made to understand that anyone who cannot speak German is a pariah."^[†]

FOOTNOTES:

^[*] "The Evolution of Modern Germany," by W. H. Dawson, brings together in its twenty-third chapter most of the facts relating to this question. See especially a letter from a prominent member of the Polish aristocracy quoted on p. 475.

^[†] "Kriegsaufsätze," 1914.

Such are the ideals and such the practice of the people whom Roger Casement and one or two other enthusiasts for Gaelic culture in Ireland have sought to make the dominant power in that country, because it will rid them of "English" rule.

Let us now see what "English" rule (it is not really English at all, but the rule of the United Kingdom) is actually like in regard to this particular subject. Up to the decade 1830-40 it may be said that the Irish

language was spoken by fully half the population of Ireland. No restrictive measures were in force against it. But during that decade a general system of elementary education was introduced, and in the Board Schools the language withered away with astonishing rapidity. At the last census (1911) only 16,000 persons were recorded as speaking Irish alone, while the number of those who knew anything of the language was only about 13 per cent. of the population. Whether this change was a blessing or a bane to Ireland is a subject which is outside the range of this discussion, but whatever it was the Irish people themselves had a full share of responsibility for the result. With scarcely an exception, the abandonment of Irish was approved by the clergy, the political leaders, and the masses of the people "The killing of the language," writes Dr. Douglas Hyde, "took place under the eye of O'Connell and the Parliamentarians, and, of course, under the eye and with the sanction of the Catholic priesthood and prelates ... From a complexity of causes which I am afraid to explain, the men who for the last sixty years have had the ear of the Irish race have persistently shown the cold shoulder to everything that was Irish and racial."^[*] Their attitude is easily understood. Irish had long ceased to be used for literary purposes. No Irish newspapers, no Irish books were printed; English was regarded as the only available key to the world of modern culture, and Ireland became an English-speaking country without a struggle and almost without a regret.

FOOTNOTES:

^[*] "Beside the Fire," pp. xliii, xlv (1890). Dr. Hyde was the first president of the Gaelic League, and is now Professor of Modern Irish in the National University.

In the early 'nineties, however, a popular movement took shape for the rescue of what still remained of the language and for its restoration, so far as was practically possible. Classes for the study of Irish were formed all over the country, folk-tales were collected, MSS. of half-forgotten poets were disinterred and edited, the first scholarly and adequate dictionary of modern Irish was compiled,^[*] and plays, poems, and stories began to be written in the re-discovered language. These activities were mostly organised and directed by the Gaelic League, a body founded in 1893. One can easily imagine how a Prussian Government would have dealt with such a movement, especially as a certain disaffected element in the country immediately began to make use of it for its own ends. The British Government looked on not only calmly but approvingly. When a general demand arose for the effective teaching of Irish in the elementary schools—though at this time only about 21,000 old people were recorded in the census as ignorant of English—it was at once agreed to. Irish had been permitted and paid for, though not markedly encouraged, since 1879. It was now placed on a list of subjects which might be taught in school hours, and extra fees were allotted for teaching it at the rate of ten shillings per pupil—twice the amount allowed for French, Latin, or music. Grants are also made to certain colleges where teachers of the language can be trained. All this began in 1901, and since that time over £12,000 a year has been paid for Irish teaching directly from Imperial funds—about twice the amount collected in the same period by voluntary contributions from Ireland and the rest of the world. Nor is this the limit of the grant; it is limited only by the willingness of school managers and parents to make use of it. Indirectly, the State is paying much more, for the various professorships and lectureships in Irish subjects—language history, archaeology, and economies—established under the National University account for well over £3,500 a year. Taking the direct expenditure on elementary education alone, the State has paid for Irish teaching since 1879 a sum of no less than £209,000. It may therefore be claimed that in cultivating her ancient language and native traditions, Ireland enjoys the fairest and most liberal treatment ever accorded to a small nationality incorporated in a great Empire.

FOOTNOTES:

^[*] By the Rev. P. S. Dineen; published by the Irish Texts Society.

Reforms and Their Results

On the reforms which have been thus briefly sketched, one or two general remarks may be in place.

It has sometimes been contended that except by violence, or the menace of violence, Ireland has never obtained anything from the English Legislature. It would be truer to say that she has never obtained anything at all. England is not a sovereign Power, and does not administer Irish affairs, nor even her own. What has been gained has been gained from the Legislature of the United Kingdom, in which Irishmen, like every other race inhabiting that kingdom, have had their full share of representation and of influence. And if in Ireland, as in other countries, the necessity of reform has sometimes been made evident by disorder, it is wholly untrue to say that this has been always or even usually the case. Land-reform in its earliest stages, like trade unionism in England, was accompanied by disorder. But the greatest measure of Irish land-reform—the Wyndham Act of 1903—was worked out on Irish soil by peaceable discussion among the parties concerned, and Parliament acted at once upon their joint demand. It was in precisely the same way that the Department of Agriculture came into being; nor did the great measures of Local Government, of University education for Catholics, of the Labourers' Acts, or the recognition extended to the Gaelic movement, owe their origin to any other cause than the wholesome influences of reason and goodwill.

The internal condition of Ireland already shows a marked response to the altered state of things. It is visible, as many travellers have noticed, in the face of the country; it is proved by official records and statistics. Emigration has declined to its lowest point; education has spread amongst the people. Irish emigrants, when they do leave their own shores, take higher positions than ever before. A population of some four millions, largely composed of small farmers, has lent forty-seven millions sterling to the Government; and, what is still more significant, the deposits in Post Office Savings Banks have risen from six millions in 1896 to over thirteen millions the year before the war. The new War Loan is reported to have had an extraordinary success in Ireland. On the last day of subscription a single Dublin bank took in one million sterling.^[*] With some self-appointed champions of Ireland abuse of the British Empire is a very popular amusement, but the Irish farmer and the Irish trader put their money in it, and with it they stand to win or lose.

FOOTNOTES:

^[*] The Times, Feb. 17, 1917.

Irish agriculture, partly owing to climatic conditions and partly to the fact that Ireland has a monopoly of the export of live cattle to England, has developed hitherto rather in the direction of cattle-raising than of tillage; and cattle have increased since 1851 from three million to over five million head, and sheep from two millions to three million six hundred thousand. Poultry have nearly quadrupled in the same period. The gross railway receipts—another significant symptom—were £2,750,000 in 1886. In 1915 they had risen to £4,831,000. The co-operative agricultural associations, in which Ireland has shown the way to the English-speaking world, now number about 1,000, and do a trade of well over five millions a year. The thousands of labourers' cottages which have sprung up, each with its plot of land, have been to the

Irish labourers what the Land Acts have been to the farmer—they have completely transformed his economic status in the country.

Accompanying these symptoms of material progress, we have witnessed in recent years a striking outburst of intellectual activity. Irish literature, in poetry and drama, has attracted the attention of the whole world of culture, and exact and scholarly research in history and archæology have flourished and found audiences as they were never known to do in Ireland till now. This has not been the work of any one section of the people, either in creed or in politics; but the whole movement has been inspired by an Irish patriotism which no sane person regards as conflicting in any degree with allegiance to the Empire under the shelter of which it has grown and prospered.

The circumstances above set forth do not pretend to be the whole story about modern Ireland, nor do they show that the millennium has arrived in that country. Apart from Home Rule, which is outside our present field, much still remains to be done—there is elementary education to be advanced, commercial facilities to be developed, land-purchase to be completed. But it is contended that the real facts about Ireland are wholly and absurdly inconsistent with the picture of that country which the friends of Germany circulate so industriously at the present time. Ireland is not an oppressed and plundered nation, ground under the heel of a foreign Power, and with her individual life deliberately stifled like that of Poland in the German Empire. Only through ignorance or malice could such an illusion gain currency, and it needs only the touch of reality—reality which every one can easily see or verify for himself—to dispel it for ever from the mind of every candid inquirer.

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