

III.—*Memoir of the late William Neilson Hancock, LL.D., Q.C.*
By J. K. Ingram, LL.D., S.F.T.C.D.

[Read 22nd January, 1889.]

THE President, in his address at the opening of the present session, referred in a few apt and sympathetic words to the loss we had sustained in the death of our distinguished member, Dr. Hancock. But he and others have thought that in this society, of which Hancock was the founder, some fuller memorial notice—some detailed account of his life and labours ought to be given, and they expressed a wish that I, as one of his oldest and most intimate friends, should undertake the task of preparing it. This I have gladly done; I only regret my inability to accomplish it in a manner worthy of the man we desire to honour. I will at least try to state accurately the main facts of his personal history, to recall some of his most important labours, and to give the impression of his character which our long and familiar intercourse has left upon my mind.

WILLIAM NEILSON HANCOCK was born at Lisburn, in the County of Antrim, on the 22nd of April, 1820. He was the second son of William John Hancock, by his marriage with Mary Neilson, daughter of Samuel Neilson, of Belfast. His ancestors on the father's side had been members of the Society of Friends. His great grandfather, a prosperous linen-bleacher at Lambeg, founded about the middle of the last century the Quaker school known as Prospect Hill, Lisburn. His grandfather, John Hancock, who died in 1823, was a really remarkable man. In the library of Trinity College may be seen a volume of his tracts on religious and moral questions, published in 1822-3. In these he explains the reasons which led him to withdraw from the Society of Friends. The tracts show, notwithstanding some narrowness of view, an earnest love of truth, and much originality and independence of mind, as well as elevation of sentiment. Public testimony was borne at his funeral to the purity of his life, and his habits of active benevolence, and in particular to his philanthropic exertions on behalf of the poor in seasons of distress. Neilson Hancock's maternal grandfather, Samuel Neilson, was also a well-known man. He was one of the founders of the *Northern Star* newspaper, and took part in the insurrection of 1798; his biography will be found in Dr. Madden's *Lives of the United Irishmen*.

William John Hancock, father of the subject of the present memoir, was agent of the Lurgan estate, until he was appointed an Assistant-Commissioner under the Irish Poor Law Act of 1838.

Young Hancock was sent in 1830 to the Royal Academical Institution, Belfast, where he was a boarder in the house of the English head-master, the Rev. Henry Montgomery, D.D., a conspicuous figure in northern religious and political controversies. He remained there for nearly four years, and in 1834 became a pupil at the Royal School, Dungannon, under the Rev. John Darley, D.D., afterwards Bishop of Kilmore. He entered Trinity College, Dublin, in 1838. At his entrance he obtained a Royal

School Exhibition of fifty pounds per annum, which he continued to hold during the five succeeding years. He was highly distinguished in mathematics, obtaining many honors of the first rank, and a Senior Moderatorship (gold medal) at the Degree Examination.

It was in the last year of his undergraduate course, that I had the good fortune to make his acquaintance. We were then studying mathematics together under that estimable man and excellent teacher, Mr. Mulcahy, afterwards Professor at Queen's College, Galway. Hancock, however, was by no means altogether absorbed by his scientific pursuits; he took the liveliest interest in public affairs, and was filled with ardour for political and social reform. He was a member of a Historical Society, which at that time met outside of Trinity College, and had its temporary habitat in a building in Marlborough-street.* Several other gifted young men, some of whose names afterwards became well known, were amongst its members. With the Nationalist politics which then strongly attracted many enthusiastic spirits of the student class, Hancock was not in sympathy; and I may add that to the end of his life, whilst intensely patriotic in feeling, he maintained his original attitude, which was that of a resolute supporter of the British connexion on its existing basis. In an article in the *Fortnightly Review* for January, 1880, by a curious anticipation of a phrase now familiar, he described himself as a "Liberal Unionist."

He took part pretty often in the debates of the society; and, according to my recollection, exhibited promise as a speaker, which was not realized in later years, when he devoted himself almost altogether to labour with the pen.

His family was at that time resident at Balbriggan; and I had opportunities, in common with some of his other young friends, of becoming acquainted with his domestic circle. It was an eminently happy and united household. The atmosphere which prevailed in it was one of keen interest in intellectual pursuits and in the progress of science, along with an earnest faith in liberal principles, and what might be described as a combative zeal on their behalf. There was, perhaps, a trace of asperity on questions of party politics, arising from hardly contested struggles in which the elder members had participated in previous years, especially in defence of religious liberty, or assertion of religious equality. Hancock's mother was endowed with a vigorous and searching intellect, and marked by independence in thought, and a strong sense of duty. With these qualities were combined much feminine charm and refinement of feeling, and great sweetness and attractiveness in personal intercourse. She was certainly one of the most gifted and noble-minded women I have known; and contributed, I believe, to Hancock's nature some of its finest traits.

His father was a man of fine person, and commanding presence. He struck me as possessing great practical energy and resolution, though without the speculative talent of his wife; and as feeling a lively sympathy with the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed.

* Hancock was President of the society for the year 1842.

Hancock took his degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1843, and was called to the Irish bar in the following year, becoming a member of the North-East Circuit. His first appearance as an author was in 1845. The evidence given by his elder brother, Mr. John Hancock, before the Landlord and Tenant Commission on the subject of Tenant-right, had attracted much attention. Some of my hearers will, perhaps, remember the impression made by his declaration that "if systematic efforts were made amongst the proprietors of Ulster to invade tenant-right, he did not believe there was force at the disposal of the Horse Guards sufficient to keep the peace of the province." The subject was one in which Neilson Hancock took a deep interest; and in 1845 he read before the Dublin University Philosophical Society, and afterwards published, an essay, entitled, "The Tenant-right of Ulster Considered Economically," appending to it his brother's evidence. In this essay he explained the Ricardian theory of rent, and applied it to the vindication of the system of tenant-right.

This essay showed how much attention he had given to the study of Political Economy, which was held in high esteem in his family circle, and for which he had always manifested a marked predilection. Archbishop Whately had founded in 1832 a Professorship of that science in Trinity College, Dublin, on the model of the Drummond Professorship at Oxford, which he himself had held; and the Dublin chair had been filled successively by Mountfort Longfield, Isaac Butt, and James Anthony Lawson. The professor was elected by competitive examination, and held his office for a term of five years. The chair became vacant in 1846, and Hancock was the successful candidate. The professor was bound to deliver an annual course of at least nine lectures, and to print and publish at least one lecture in each year.

An introductory lecture on Political Economy, delivered at a later period (1848) shows, I think, that he would have been eminently successful as an expositor of the general principles of economics. But Archbishop Whately had suggested to him that he should in his lectures from the chair investigate the application of economic doctrine to the special case of Ireland. And this advice fell in with his own impulses, as was shown by his first publication already referred to, and by the general character of his communications to this society in later years. Accordingly, in 1847, he published three lectures which he had delivered as professor, on what was then an urgent question—"Should the principles of Political Economy be disregarded at the present crisis?" The crisis was that produced by the potato failure, and the policy he advocated was that of abstaining from any governmental interference with the provision trade by the establishment of depots for the sale of food, whilst at the same time supplying adequate relief in money to all the destitute. In this way, he argued, the provision trade would be extended into every district by the foresight and enterprise of private dealers, stimulated by the rise of prices, whilst the means of purchase would be in the hands of the population.

The year 1847 was marked by the foundation of the Dublin

Statistical Society. It was essentially Hancock's creation. Amongst those who welcomed the suggestion when he put it forward, and gave the society their hearty support in its early years, were Archbishop Whately, who was its first president, Captain (afterwards Sir Thomas) Larcom, and Dr. (afterwards Judge) Longfield, who were the first vice-presidents, Sir Robert Kane, Mr. Jonathan Pim, Mr. James Haughton, Mr. Edward Barrington, and Mr. (afterwards Judge) Lawson, the last being joint-secretary with Hancock. The first meeting for the reading of papers was held on the 21st December, 1847. The papers then read were one by Lawson, "On the Connection between Statistics and Political Economy," and one by Hancock, "On the Use of the Doctrine of *Laissez Faire* in investigating the Economic Resources of Ireland." He had at that time a stronger faith in the doctrine of *laissez faire* than most economists now entertain—a faith which was, I think, a good deal modified in his later years. Though convinced that the policy he at first advocated, had it been carried out with sufficient promptitude and completeness, would have effected every desirable end, yet, when such reforms had been unreasonably delayed, he did not disapprove of the more heroic remedies which have since been resorted to. In these earlier writings he made the best use of the doctrine of *laissez faire* to which it could be applied, by urging that wherever existing legal arrangements stood in the way of economic improvement, the first thing to be done was to amend them; that natural forces, which tend towards progress, should not be impeded by factitious difficulties, which it is in our power to remove.

The view which he put forward in this first paper, and which he afterwards maintained with great energy and persistence was, that the real source of Irish distress was the wretched state of its agriculture; and that this was due neither to the ignorance of the people, nor to any perverse disposition inherent in the Celtic race, to peasant rents fixed by competition (as J. S. Mill asserted), to over-population, to absenteeism, to sub-division and sub-letting, to the existence of middlemen, to the prevalence of combination, or other causes frequently alleged, but to the state of the law, which impeded the free transfer and sale of land, and prevented or discouraged the application of capital to agricultural improvement. He would not have denied, and indeed in a later paper he admitted, that some of the other causes just enumerated were in a certain degree really operative, but he regarded them as comparatively unimportant. I believe that the source to which Irish distress and difficulties may most truly be traced was the long-continued violation or neglect of social duty by all classes, especially by the higher ranks. But, no doubt, one of the gravest forms of this neglect was the absence of careful study of the conditions of successful agriculture, and of earnest effort to realize them through legislation—a neglect, let me add, for which not merely the proprietors of the soil, but the leisured and cultivated classes generally, and particularly the men of speculative talent in the country, must bear a share of responsibility. The state of the law was, doubtless, the cause most immediately within human control, and

Hancock was right in trying to fix attention on this ; had his counsels, and those of other friends of the country, been earlier listened to and carried into effect, much of our subsequent trouble might have been averted, and the necessity for more violent remedies might, perhaps, have been obviated.

This first general statement of his opinions on the Irish question he followed up by a series of lectures delivered in Trinity College, the substance of which was afterwards embodied in papers read before this society in 1848-9, and published separately in 1850, with the title *Impediments to the Prosperity of Ireland*. This was a most weighty and valuable contribution to the study of Irish social politics, and was fitted to be a handbook for the use of every Irish reformer. In it he pointed out, in full detail, all the vices or defects of legislation which hampered the efforts of the life-owner or the tenant of Irish land, and hindered the application of capital to the cultivation of the soil. Testimony to the high value of the work was borne by so competent a judge as the late Sir Robert Peel. A deputation from a great tenant-meeting in the Belfast Music Hall, in 1850, having waited on that statesman, he said in his reply, that he had derived immense information on the Irish land question from the writings of the young statistician, Professor Hancock.

These views of the Irish land question he lost no opportunity of pressing, and he brought to their enforcement and illustration materials from every available source. Thus, for example, when he visited Scotland, he inquired, with the help of a distinguished jurist, into the conditions which produced, or at least made possible, the successful agriculture of the Lothians, and studied the causes of the recurring distress of the Crofter districts of the Highlands ; and in publishing the results of those investigations, he did not fail to point the moral which they suggested in relation to the case of Ireland.

It would be impossible here to enumerate all the economic subjects on which he threw new light or suggested new ideas. One to which he recurred more than once, and which he regarded as of great importance, was the reform of taxation—a topic which has now ceased for the time to attract much public attention, but which cannot but come to the surface again ; and Hancock's views of it will then deserve a careful consideration. He was opposed to all indirect taxes, as interfering with the natural movement of industry and impeding the intercourse of nations, and he proposed to raise the entire revenue of the country by what he called a perfect income tax. The principal objection to the income tax, as now levied, has always been the unfairness of its equal incidence on permanent and life incomes. This unfairness is, however, greatly mitigated by the imposition of duties on successions, and Hancock thought that these two forms of taxation should be fused into one. His idea was that when property, of whatever kind, passed from one person to another, whether by gift, bequest, or inheritance, the whole value of this property should be treated as income for the year in which it so passed, and the tax should be paid on the entire amount, only the revenue from the property being taxed in subsequent years. He thought the percentage should be the same in every case—with-

out distinction, that is, between real and personal estate—and without difference of rate arising from the relationship of the new owner to his predecessor, or, in the case of ordinary annual income, from the lowness of its amount. The least income on which the tax should be charged ought, in his opinion, to be fixed by the consideration whether the cost of collection would, or would not, absorb the whole produce of the tax. He calculated that an income tax of ten per cent., framed on these principles, would suffice to pay the entire expenses of the central government, and would make it possible to abolish all customs and excise duties and other then existing taxes—and it is characteristic of him that the ones he named as the first that should be dealt with on the introduction of the new system were those at that time commonly known as the taxes on knowledge.

There were two other subjects to which he devoted much attention. One was the great annual migration of Irish labourers to England and Scotland, from which he drew this, among other inferences—that there was on the part of our population no indisposition to work, when the remuneration was assured and fairly adequate. The other, which will soon become one of pressing interest, was the necessity—in case of the establishment of a system of peasant proprietors—of special local arrangements for facilitating their dealings with their interests in the land,—arrangements without which, as he thought, the system could not continue to exist.

But it was not merely, or even chiefly, economic questions, properly so-called, that occupied his mind; he was deeply interested in those which are specially known as *social*; indeed economic measures interested him chiefly on account of their social reactions. He warmly sympathised with the efforts of the Northern States of the American Union to throw off the incubus of slavery, and in a paper read before us refuted the often-repeated assertion that emancipation had been a failure in the West Indian Colonies. But the subjects of this class which most attracted him were those which arise out of the conception of the family as the unit of society, and of domestic life as the most effectual engine for the moral education of human beings.

In 1855 he read a Paper “On the Workhouse as a mode of Relief for Widows and Orphans.” He maintained that for widows outdoor relief should be the rule, and the workhouse the exception, and that the same rule should apply to orphans, the relief being given through the mother so long as she remained a widow and discharged her family duties, and provision being made, by cheapening the probate of wills, for the guardianship of the children of the poor after the death of the father. In 1859 he submitted to this society a plan for rearing destitute orphans in families, instead of in the workhouse; and pointed to the successful results of the boarding-out system, as adopted by the Protestant Orphan Society, and by some Roman Catholic charities. The disastrous consequences of violating the family principle in the case of adult labourers, he illustrated in the same year by a study of the bothy system, as it prevailed in some parts of Scotland. In 1860 he considered the employment of women in occupations attended with publicity, with the view of showing that women should not be

regarded, like men, as able and bound in ordinary circumstances to support themselves and their children—that men are the true bread-winners of families, and that women should, as far as possible, be restricted to the domestic work “on which so much of the health, comfort, and moral well-being of society depends.” In 1861 he contrasted the Aberdeen Industrial Schools with the Irish workhouses as places for the rearing of the young, much to the disadvantage of the latter, the essential difference being that family ties were cherished in the schools, and violated in the workhouses. In 1862 he gave collateral confirmation to his views by considering the physical results of workhouse training, and in the same year pointed out the greater harshness of the Irish than of the English Poor-law in the treatment of women, as well as of unemployed labourers, showing that it tended to break up homes, and do irreparable injury to families. It will thus be seen how large a share of his thoughts this subject, in all its branches and relations, occupied for a number of years in the full maturity of his powers. I believe that with no other subject—not even with the Irish land question—would he have been more willing that his name should be permanently associated. I think it well deserved the attention he gave it. Many estimable persons seem to me to have gone a good deal astray on the subject of the employment of women; and I am sure that the right determination of their proper sphere, and of men’s duties towards them, whilst of great importance for all ranks in society, will be found to be more closely connected than anything else with the moral and social elevation of the working classes.

Whilst preparing the present memoir, I have had occasion to go again over the publications of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Societies, the latter of which was a temporary off-shoot of the former. I have been struck, in doing so, with the mass of careful investigation and ingenious suggestion which they contain. Much that is recommended in them has since been carried out in legislation; but I think a statesman bent on improving the economic and social condition of Ireland would still derive important aid from the study of these volumes. Many of our members—some of them very distinguished men—contributed valuable matter to their contents, but for by far the largest share we were indebted to Dr. Hancock. And not merely did he thus enrich our “Transactions” with the fruits of his research, but he constantly watched over the interests of the society, took an active part in its management, and guided its proceedings by his judicious counsels.

Having been in 1849 appointed to the chair of Political Economy and Jurisprudence in the recently established Queen’s College at Belfast, he fixed his residence for a time in that city. With the help of some of its inhabitants, who were interested in such studies, he founded, in 1851, the Belfast Social Inquiry Society, on a plan closely corresponding to that of our society, and it was before this new body that he read the papers already mentioned on the “Agriculture of the Lowlands,” and the “Distress in the Scottish Highlands.”

But we must now turn to consider another aspect of Hancock’s

life. There was joined with the speculative faculty in his nature a large element of practical ability, and the combination of these eminently fitted him for the work which he did during many years as a public servant. He was employed from September, 1851, to April, 1853, as Secretary to the Dublin University Commission, over which Archbishop Whately presided. After an interval of about a year, during which he had to act as land agent to Lord Lurgan and other proprietors—thus increasing his familiarity with the land question—he again acted as secretary to a Commission—that which inquired into the Endowed Schools of Ireland, and published in 1858 its voluminous report, containing full particulars as to the history and legal status of all the educational endowments in the country. Whilst still occupied with this task, he was, in 1855, appointed by Lord Chancellor Brady to the office of Clerk of the Custody of Papers in matters of Idiots and Lunatics in the Court of Chancery, and continued to discharge its duties till the resignation of Lord Palmerston in 1858. On the return of Lord Palmerston to power in 1859, he was re-appointed, and filled the office till the resignation of Earl Russell in 1866. He became in 1861 one of the Secretaries of the English and Irish Law and Chancery Commission, and immediately afterwards of the Irish Admiralty Commission, and in 1867 Secretary to the Railways (Ireland) Commission, in which capacity he visited Belgium for the purpose of making inquiries and obtaining information on the railway system of that country.

Meantime, in 1863, he had been charged with the task of collecting, compiling, and reporting on Judicial and Criminal Statistics in Ireland. These duties were in part transferred to other departments at the end of 1873, and his work was thenceforward limited to the preparation of a report, and the advising on the forms to be used in the collection of the statistics. In order to procure correct accounts of the Local Taxation of Ireland, steps were taken in 1867 to obtain returns similar to those annually laid before Parliament for England and Wales, and Dr. Hancock addressed reports to the Lord Lieutenant on the results of the returns for the years from 1865 to 1872.

In the above enumeration I have made no mention of his Report on the Alleged Progressive Decline of Irish Prosperity, published in 1863, nor of the Statistics of Deposits and Cash Balances in Joint Stock Banks, and of Savings in Ireland, which he was from time to time engaged in preparing. I ought not to omit that I have seen a document under the hand of the Civil Service Commissioners, in which it is stated that Dr. Hancock “reorganised the whole system of keeping accounts in the Irish Court of Chancery.” He was made one of her Majesty’s Counsel in May, 1880, and in October of the following year ceased to practise at the Bar, entering then on his duties as Keeper of the Records of the Irish Land Commission. He was finally appointed in 1882 to the office of Clerk of the Crown and Hanaper. From this position he retired in consequence of illness some years before his death, and on his resignation received a special pension as a mark of his many valuable services.

To the list of these services, already given, must be added the work

of editing, in 1865 and 1869, in conjunction, first, with the late Dr. O'Donovan, and afterwards with Professor O'Mahony, two volumes of what are popularly known as the Brehon Laws, under the superintendence of the Commissioners for the Publication of the Ancient Laws and Institutes of Ireland.

When the disestablishment of the Irish Church had been undertaken, he actively supported the measure, which had always commended itself to him on grounds of even-handed justice and general policy; but after the passing of the Act, he laboured strenuously, especially in his own parish of St. George's, to put the finances of the Church to which he belonged on a satisfactory foundation.

Dr. Hancock had married, in 1858, Nannie, daughter of the late James Haughton, a man well known as an earnest labourer in the cause of social reform, and whose venerable aspect and benevolent countenance were for years familiar to us at the meetings of this society. When Hancock came to Dublin, at the age of eighteen, he was a weekly guest at Mr. Haughton's house. He said long afterwards that at no table did he meet such a variety of minds discussing the various social and moral questions of the day, and that the constant search after right and truth which he found there had produced a powerful impression on him at his entrance upon life. As the marriage was founded on affection, so it was the source of great and lasting happiness; when in Hancock's later years he suffered from failing health, everything that the most entire and self-forgetting devotion could prompt was done to soothe and comfort him and brighten his declining days.

His death came in the end somewhat unexpectedly. A considerable improvement in his health had been apparently established, and he had gone to spend a part of the summer in Scotland in the hope of his entire restoration, when he was seized with an affection of the heart which proved fatal within a few hours of its appearance. He died at the residence of his brother-in-law, Professor James Thomson, of the University of Glasgow, on the 10th July, 1888, in the sixty-ninth year of his age. He was buried in Harold's-cross Cemetery, a large body of sorrowing friends accompanying his remains to their resting-place.

It is natural that in this society our principal attention should be given to Dr. Hancock's intellectual work and public services; but I must say a few words before closing on his moral nature, on which, in my personal recollections of him, I dwell with peculiar pleasure. As I have already said, he was a true patriot, in the best sense of that much abused word. He was thoroughly Irish in heart—he loved the country and its people, and never allowed unjust censure or depreciation of either to pass without challenge and reprobation. His constant thought was how to serve the interests of Ireland, how to increase the well-being of her population; his brain, which by a necessity of his nature could not remain inactive, was ever busy with projects for their good. To those with whom he was officially connected it is not enough to say that he was uniformly kind and considerate; he felt a strong personal interest in their success and gave them his best aid and advice; and I know that several of his

younger assistants, now in different parts of the kingdom and the colonies, some of them occupying honorable posts, still feel the warmest gratitude for his friendly counsel and his ready help. He was ever thoughtful for others, anxious to do justice to all, and perfectly free from jealousy or any spirit of unworthy rivalry. He was prompt to offer solace to the weak or suffering, and guidance to any, especially to women, who were in difficulty or perplexity; and I have been more than once struck by the chivalrous delicacy and tenderness with which his services to them were rendered. His life was from his boyhood singularly pure. I knew him intimately in our college years, and I had the happiness of his friendship and of frequent intercourse with him to the end of his life; and I can truly say that I have known no better man.

His life was a useful and a noble one; and when we look back upon the record of it, the judgment which rises spontaneously to our lips is—"Well done, good and faithful servant." Every Irishman should think of him with feelings of gratitude and respect. But he has special claims on our society; and remembering all he did for it, and for the cause it has at heart, it will, I am sure, always hold his memory in affectionate esteem. The worthiest tribute we can pay him is to follow his example. It is not often that we can hope to find among our members an investigator with the native sagacity and the scientific training which he possessed, or with his singularly extensive and accurate knowledge of all the elements of the social economy of Ireland. But I trust that many will be found to work in the same spirit which animated his labours—with the same love of truth, the same honesty of purpose, and the same earnest zeal for the highest interests of our country and of mankind.

IV.—*Irish Intellect, and its Geographical Distribution.*

By D. Edgar Flinn, Fellow & Examiner, R.C.S.I.

[Read 22nd January, 1889.]

It is difficult in a paper of this nature to estimate who shall be deemed worthy of being included in a list of those who have contributed to Ireland's roll of fame; and I have undertaken the task of making an analysis in this direction with some hesitation, thoroughly appreciating the difficulties that attach to it, and feeling that to draw a hard and fast line as to who might, or who might not be considered to be a person of eminence, would be arbitrary and presumptive. Yet taking such books as *Men of the Time*, *Celebrities of the Century*, *Men of the Reign*, *The Compendium of Irish Biography*, *The Cabinet of Irish Literature*, as a guide as to who would be considered a person of eminence, or of distinguished intellect, and adding the names of those who, although not adjudged worthy of a place in these lists, are yet eminent, and of considerable reputation, we find the number to be 215—the Province of Leinster