

*A Notice of the Theory "That there is no Hope for a Nation which Lives on Potatoes."* By W. NEILSON HANCOCK, LL. B., Archbishop Whateley's Professor of Political Economy in the University of Dublin.

The theory "that there is no hope for a nation which lives on potatoes," has been put forward by Sir C. E. Trevelyan, in his recent work, called "The Irish Crisis," as if it were an established doctrine of political economy which no one would venture to controvert. Thus he writes; "If a few months ago an enlightened man had been asked what he thought the most discouraging circumstance in the state of Ireland, we do not imagine that he would have pitched upon Absenteeism, or Protestant bigotry, or Roman Catholic bigotry, or Orangeism, or Ribbonism, or the Repeal cry, or even the system of threatening notices and mid-day assassinations. These things, he would have said, are evils, but some of them are curable, and others are merely symptomatic. They do not make the case desperate. *But what hope is there for a nation which lives on potatoes?*" And again, in another passage, he says: "So far as the maladies of Ireland are traceable to political causes, nearly every practicable remedy has been applied. The deep and inveterate root of social evil remained, and this has been laid bare by a direct stroke of an Allwise and All-merciful Providence, as if this part of the case were beyond the unassisted power of man." Now, it certainly would require a miracle to convince any one who reflects on the subject, that the potato is a curse, and the root of all our social evils, "because it yields an unusually abundant produce as compared with the extent of ground cultivated, and with the labour, capital, and skill bestowed upon its cultivation:" in other words, because it is usually cheap and plenty. And yet it is to this fact that Sir C. E. Trevelyan attributes "the important influence which has been exercised by this root over the destinies of the human race." To use the words of our vice-president, Dr. Longfield, "the presumption is entirely in favour of potatoes. He who argues against them should make out a very strong case. Providence has bestowed on the world a prolific, wholesome, and palatable vegetable. These qualities must insure its general cultivation in all countries adapted to its growth; and it is a hard matter to believe that the introduction of this plant should naturally and almost inevitably introduce general distress. It would be a singular instance of permanent national unhappiness being introduced by anything except a course of irreligion, folly, or vice."

I do not propose to enter into an elaborate refutation of the arguments by which Sir C. E. Trevelyan's theory is usually supported. This has been most ably done by Dr. Longfield, in the note on this subject in his Lectures on Political Economy, which

contains the passage I have just quoted. But I wish, in the first place, to show that Sir C. E. Trevelyan's theory is not so generally admitted as he seems to suppose, and then to point out the mistakes in which it originated.

As to economic authorities against the theory, it will be sufficient to quote two. Dr. Longfield, in the note which I have referred to, says: "It is certain that in any given state of the population, the cheapness of food arising from a facility of production cannot be injurious to the inhabitants;" and again—"Some political economists even hint that the poverty of Ireland is in a great measure to be attributed to the use of potatoes. The reader may form some idea of the horror with which they have been viewed, by looking to the index to Mr. M'Culloch's edition of Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, where, under the title potatoes, he will find a reference to "the rapid and alarming progress of potatoes in France." "Such language, (and the observation applies with equal force to Sir C. E. Trevelyan's language) would be more applicable, *if they eat men instead of feeding them.*" Such is the opinion of one, who, combining the highest attainments in Economic Science, with practical local knowledge, is best fitted to form a sound judgment on the subject. But the language of him, who may well be called the Newton of Political Economists, is no less conclusive: "The improvements in agriculture," observes Adam Smith, "introduce many sorts of vegetable food, which requiring less land, and not more labour than corn, come much cheaper to market—such are *potatoes* and maize, or what is called Indian corn, *the two most important improvements which the agriculture of Europe*—perhaps which Europe itself *has received* from the great extension of its commerce and navigation."

Such being the conclusive of opinion of the highest economic authorities on the theory, it remains to consider the mistakes in which it originated. These are well pointed out by Dr. Longfield. "What gives an appearance of plausibility to the common declamations against the use of potatoes is, that they confound the custom of living chiefly upon potatoes with the poverty which introduces that custom." And again, in noticing the evils arising from the manner in which the supply of potatoes is regulated in Ireland, which are usually laid to the blame of the potato, he says, "Our customs of husbandry are the principal cause of them." Or, in other words, the mistakes are, that of representing the use of inferior food as the cause instead of the effect of poverty, and that of ascribing to the potato itself the effects of the conacre system, and precarious tenures under which it was grown. The extent to which a writer may be led by the adoption of a paradox, was never more fully exhibited than by a passage in which Sir C. E. Trevelyan has pushed the first of these mistakes to its utmost limits:—"One main cause," he says, "of the fact which has been so often remarked, that the Irishman works better out of Ireland than in it is, that when he leaves his native country and obtains regular employment elsewhere, he commences at the same time a more

strengthening diet than the potato." In the last century there were similar speculations respecting the difference between English and Scotch labourers, the latter being fed on very inferior diet, and Adam Smith's answer to such speculations is as applicable now as it was then. "This difference, however," he observes, "in the mode of their subsistence is not the cause but the effect of the difference in their wages; though, by a strange misapprehension, I have frequently heard it represented as a cause. It is not because one man keeps a coach while his neighbour walks a-foot, that the one is rich and the other poor, but because the one is rich he keeps a coach, and because the other is poor he walks afoot." Just so, the Irish labourers work hard in Canada, because they are well paid; and they live better, because the high wages give them the means of doing so. But Sir C. E. Trevelyan is quite mistaken in saying, that the Irish labourers work better out of Ireland than in it; for some intelligent railway contractors have tried the plan of paying high wages in Ireland, as much as 1s. 4d. a-day in the North, where the ordinary wages are only one shilling, and they found the labourers worked as well as they do in England or in Canada; and wherever they got the high wages, they spent them in obtaining better food. I may observe, too, that the rate of wages in Ireland varies from sixpence a day to one shilling a day, and that where the wages of the labourers are high enough to enable them to purchase other food than potatoes, they invariably adopt a mixed diet. It is quite absurd to talk of teaching the people the use of better food. Try any of them with a dinner of roast beef and plum pudding, and see if he will refuse it. Give them the means of eating meat every day, and there is no fear but the taste for it will grow fast enough. It is the business of the intelligent portion of the community to inquire into the causes of low wages and want of employment, and not to be interfering with the mode of living adopted by the poor. Such interference is not less at variance with sound principle than impolitic in practice, for it generates ostentatious intermeddling by the rich, and sullen discontent amongst the poor.

But in speaking of the potato as unsuited to the wants of mankind, the history of its cultivation seems to have been entirely overlooked. When it is considered that the potato was not brought from America till the end of the 16th century, and yet, since that time, without the slightest government interference to promote its use, its cultivation has extended throughout Europe, it must have proved on the whole, one year with another, a more profitable crop to the cultivators than those crops which it displaced. But it could not have been more profitable unless it were better calculated to satisfy the desires of mankind, since that circumstance is the first element of that demand for a commodity, which raises its price and makes its production remunerative.

To deny the force of this reasoning, is to deny the fundamental principle of economic science, that human wealth and human welfare will be best promoted when the production of the various

commodities is left to take the course which the self-interest of the producers dictates. But we may be certain that it never would have been denied, had the effects of conacre and of the other social arrangements respecting the occupation and cultivation of the land in Ireland been rightly understood. The full appreciation of the evils arising from such arrangements suggests an investigation into the causes of their adoption, and the remedies by which these causes may be removed. But the injurious effect the potato-theory produces on those who admit it, is to lead off their attention from this line of investigation. Instead of inquiring whether the unwise arrangements respecting the growth of the potato do not arise from legal interference with private enterprise, they spend their time in vain attempts to discourage the recultivation of the crop; and with very slight knowledge of the circumstances of each district give general advice as to the crops to be grown. I believe these attempts will be vain, because, as far as I was able to ascertain, I find that those who planted the potato last year realised large profits, and consequently it is likely to be very extensively cultivated this year. Should the potato again yield an average crop, those growing it will again realise large profits, and so its cultivation will have a constant tendency to return to its original amount. But whether it does or not, the amount cultivated is beyond the control of learned advice or legislative interference. It will be regulated by those natural causes, which determining the relative value of commodities, give the stimulus to increased cultivation in the shape of profits, and place a check to its progress by the loss arising from diminished produce or a fall in price. But what the intelligent portion of the community can do is, to inquire into the causes of such unwise arrangements as conacre and precarious tenures. What legislation can effect is, to remove any of these causes which arise from legal principles or enactments being still retained in force, though framed before the received maxims of economic science were understood or thought of as guiding principles in legislation.

After calling the attention of this society in so marked a manner to this theory of Sir C. E. Trevelyan, it is but justice to him to express how strongly I feel that the public are much indebted to him, for the indefatigable manner in which he must have devoted his time and his abilities to the important duties which he had to discharge, in connexion with the gigantic measures of public and private charity, adopted for the relief of our distressed fellow-countrymen. His writings, too, exhibit the most enlightened philanthropy and the warmest interest for the advancement and prosperity of Ireland. But in proportion to the high reputation which he so justly enjoys, is the injury done by any scientific error which has received the sanction of his name. I have felt myself bound, therefore, to bring the subject under the notice of this society; for we must make our respect for persons give place to the more important duty of promulgating and advancing the truths of science.

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