

THE STUDY OF IRISH ECONOMIC HISTORY.

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The subject of this evening's paper is not one which has frequently attracted the attention of members of this society. This is regrettable in many ways. Often a proper treatment of disease is impossible without an adequate history of the patient. Economic problems cannot be solved unless economic history is studied. Yet Irish economic history, in the full sense of the word, is still unwritten. A few pioneers have dealt with special periods, or with isolated aspects of the subject. But the main work still remains untouched, awaiting perhaps some Lecky of the future. Perhaps in the meantime it may be of interest to indicate briefly what the study of this somewhat neglected subject might reveal, and in how many ways it might help those whose efforts aim at the amelioration of the conditions of life in this country.

In the first place it may be stated that no narrow limitations of period would be possible. It is absurd, for instance to take the middle of the seventeenth century as a starting date. The origins of modern troubles must often be sought much further back. The "land question," for example, probably took its rise at least four centuries before, when the Anglo-Norman feudal system, with its insistence on individual tenancy, its definite scheme of rights, duties, payments and services superposed itself on the Celtic tribal holding, in which land was for the most part held in common. In fact, a satisfactory history would possibly need to commence with a description of the main economic features of ancient Irish life, a mode of existence so different from our own, as to require some effort of the imagination before it can be realized.

There was little or no use of coined money; the chief standard of value was the cow, everything being estimated in terms of that animal. As this fact alone would indicate, the chief occupation of the people was the care of cattle. The pasturing grounds, mostly woodland glades, marshy bottoms or the lower slopes of mountains, were the common property of the tribe. Even the cultivable land was divided amongst the tribesmen, not in permanent estates, but in temporary allotments, liable to redistribution at short recurring periods (every two or three years, according on one author).*

* Joyce, "Social History of Ancient Ireland" I. 187.

were certainly no towns of any size, and probably no large villages. The chiefs had no capitals, in the modern sense, and seem to have collected their taxes mainly by a kind of enforced hospitality exacted in succession from the most important of their subjects. Internecine war hindered the development of trade. The habits of the people were simple. Their food consisted mainly of oatmeal porridge, supplemented by milk and milk products, such as butter and cheese, and occasionally by flesh meat. They lived in wooden houses, and only used stone exceptionally, even for church buildings. They can hardly have made much use of the sea, for the vessel most commonly mentioned is the curragh, a sort of large canoe, covered with hides, ill adapted for long voyages or heavy freights.

Despite some fine achievements in literature and the arts, it is evident that ancient Ireland, economically speaking, was a backward country, on a level, no doubt, with contemporary England, Germany or Scandinavia, but far behind Gaul or Italy. The incursions of the Danes, purely destructive as they seemed to be at the outset, brought about one permanent change, the foundation of the important seaport towns. Their forts, usually built at a defensible position, hill perhaps or marsh-surrounded island, as far up a navigable river as depth of water permitted their shallow-draught ships to sail, seem soon to have become trading places. The hardy pirate, when there was nothing to be gained by fighting, found little difficulty in assuming the role of the enterprising merchantman. At the time of the Norman invasion Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Cork and Limerick were thriving little towns, already, it would seem, possessing the rudiments of municipal government. Their trade was mostly with the large neighbouring island of Great Britain, and it is likely that the increased intercourse between the two countries due to this traffic acquainted the English court with the situation and the possibilities of Ireland, and thus led to the invasion.

The effects of that event were quite as remarkable in the economic, as in the political sphere. The Normans conquered about two-thirds of the country, including all the towns. Their leaders, either by conquest or marriage with heiresses, took the place of the Celtic chiefs; the rank and file were rewarded with lands and minor dignities. The native population, just as in England after Hastings, were reduced to the position of agricultural serfs. Just as *nativus* in England is equivalent to villein, so also *Hibernicus* in mediæval Irish documents comes to stand for serf. The full phrase, indeed, is *Hibernicus et servilis conditionis*, which

implies, as is undoubtedly true, that there were some persons of Irish origin who were not serfs. But the full phrase is so rarely used that it is evident that *Hibernicus* usually connoted servile condition.

The tenant of this grade was a person divested, in a great measure, of civil rights. He was practically denied access to the royal courts, and could only sue and be sued in the private court of his lord. In some respects he seems to have been regarded as a chattel, since compensation for injuries suffered by him was paid not to the *Hibernicus* himself, but to his lord. On the other hand, he could acquire and transmit property, and we find *Hibernici* in possession of considerable numbers of cattle.* For good or evil they lay absolutely in the power of their lord. Probably it was with them as with the slaves of old Rome. Under a kind lord their lot was tolerable, even happy, under a hard or cruel master it became unendurable and fostered discontent and conspiracy. Serfdom was not formally abolished in Ireland until 1605.

From this fact follow important consequences. Many of the saddest and strangest features in Irish economic history may possibly be explained by the consideration that the Irish peasant was for so many centuries a serf to the stranger. Low standards of living, backwardness of agriculture, miserable housing and equipment, reckless increase of population, recurrence of famine, fierce rebellion bloodily suppressed, outrage, ignorance, superstition, conservatism, these are characteristic of countries cultivated by serfs, and may be traced alike in the ancient history of England, France and Germany, and in the comparatively recent annals of Russia.

If the invaders had been able to make a complete conquest of the island, the conflicts of nationality might have ceased. But a whole province, Ulster, was unsubdued. Connaught was too poor and too remote to attract many Normans, and even in Munster and Leinster there were wide districts of mountain, bog or forest, where the native tribes held out, recruited from and supported by the Irish serfs of the Pale, and ever nourishing the hope that some day liberty might be regained. The leading figures of this period are the great landowner, usually of Norman descent, his free tenants, English, Welsh, and in some cases Irish, his Irish serfs, and the wild tribes of the hills and the fen. The latter seem, even despite strong military pressure from time to time exercised against them from Dublin, to have always

* "Calendar Justiciary Rolls, Ireland, 1295-1303, pp. 116, 221.

been able to maintain their ancient system of life. Details of the conditions of life of O'Byrnes or Kavanaghs at this period are, however, not easy to obtain. It would be much easier to reconstruct in some measure the economic life of the settled parts of Ireland at this time.

Perhaps the most important feature is the appearance, for the first time in Irish History, of a strong, organised central government. It was constructed on the English model, and of deliberate, though probably mistaken, policy, set itself to reproduce English conditions so far as possible in the regions under its control. The economic history of the Pale is in many respects analogous to that of England. For instance the prevalence of the manorial system in rural areas and the prominence of the guilds in municipalities is just as marked here as elsewhere. But Anglo-Ireland seems to have been even more agricultural and less industrial than contemporary England. It was a great food-producing country, and often provisioned royal armies, notably those of Edward I. and Edward II. campaigning in Scotland. Furthermore it grew sufficient corn to be able to export extensively. There was a thriving trade with the ports of South-Western France in this commodity, the return cargo being usually wine. Corn was grown very largely in the counties of Dublin, Louth and Meath. Again and again in Irish history this corn-growing in the midlands presents itself and is quite a sufficient answer to those who speak of the country as destined by nature to be a cattle-run. It is possible even to make deductions as to the relative productivity of the land. In 1297 land near Duleek is stated to have produced near 2 crannoes (about $\frac{1}{2}$ ton) of wheat to the acre (probably the Irish acre is meant) and approximately the same average yield of oats.* This is less than half the present produce of a similar area.

The relative unimportance of its manufactures is shown by the high value set on manufactured articles as compared with farm produce. For instance, an ell ($1\frac{1}{4}$ yards) of cloth is equal in value to $1\frac{1}{2}$ bushels of corn (about 80 lbs.), and the cost of a plough iron is estimated at half the price of a bullock. Hides and wool were also cheap and plentiful, and were a profitable source of commerce. Anglo-Ireland, in short, towards the close of the thirteenth century was in a situation very much like that of the American colonies two hundred years ago, or Canada or Australia in more recent times. Its farming and agriculture was prosperous and productive, its industries were non-existent or in their infancy, its towns small and widely separated, almost all on the coast or navigable rivers, its whole life permeated

* *Op. cit.*, pp. 106, 107.

by the ideals of the home country. The colonial analogy is often brought strikingly before the mind in studying early Irish history. Ireland is by no means the only country where colonists have blundered through ignorance or misunderstanding of native customs and feelings, or have failed to resist the temptation to exploit or oppress.

The prolonged invasion of Edward Bruce (1315-1318) carried desolation over Ireland from Antrim to Limerick and reduced the country to a state somewhat similar to that of North France and Belgium at the present time. Houses and tools were destroyed, workmen slain, the crops carried off or ruined, towns burnt or so shattered by war that, as in the cases of Dublin and Drogheda, they had to be restored by grants of money from the State.[†] The central authority was weak and distracted. The native clans became daily more aggressive, and feudal anarchy raised its head within the Pale. There are continual campaigns all along the boundary line, and fierce private war within the borders. In 1330 the justiciar took an army to Kilkenny "to establish peace between the Earl of Ulster and the Le Poers and Barries of the one part and the Earls of Ermund and Dessemun' of the other."[§] The great lords had adopted the Irish customs of exacting maintenance for themselves and their followers, and the colony groaned under the burden of supporting large bodies of troops. Many of the Anglo-Irish nobles, finding themselves isolated in Connaught or West Munster, in the midst of a Celtic population and far from any settlement of Englishmen, took the path of least resistance and adopted the Irish language and customs. Taxes were unpaid, the laws could not be enforced. The Pale grew smaller day by day, its intercourse with England was hindered by Scotch, Breton and Spanish attacks on its merchant fleet, its inhabitants fled in every ship that sailed. The distant rulers of England were too much occupied with wars in France, and later with civil war at home, to be able to attend to the affairs of Ireland. By the end of the Wars of the Roses, the country stood much as it had before the invasion of Strongbow, Irish or Hibernicized chiefs enjoying power everywhere, and the strangers, then Danes, now English, holding the seaports and their immediate vicinity. So completely was the interior in the hands of hostile powers that the English settlements on the coasts could only communicate with each other by sea, and we hear of the southern ports, in default of local

* *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 144, 225. (See note on page 683).

† Pipe Roll of Irish Exchequer, 16 Edw. II. (42nd Report of Deputy Keeper of the Records).

§ Pipe Roll, 2 Edw. III. (43rd Rep. D. K. R.)

supply, obtaining corn from Drogheda and Dublin.* Another curious feature shows the roundabout paths which commerce, never totally to be suppressed, makes for itself in times of unsettlement. The merchants of Drogheda and Chester are found combining to freight a ship to go to Iceland with goods suitable for the inhabitants there and bring back in return a cargo of fish.† Evidently the Irish Sea was not a place to linger in, or it would have been much simpler for these towns to have fished their local waters than to send ships on a voyage of nearly one thousand miles to Iceland.

There is little of economic interest to be noted in this period of slow reconquest, but it must be described, for it lasted over 170 years, and left wide and deep marks on the character of both nations, and by that means profoundly influenced the economic history of the years that follow. One important inquiry, however, which would naturally arise at this stage, would deal with the problem, at present somewhat obscure, of the extent to which the ancient Irish economic system, already described, displaced the English colonial institutions in the reconquered lands. Did agricultural serfdom continue? Was the manorial system swept away? Had the tribal organization become tinged with the ideas of feudalism? What was the experience of important towns, such as New Ross, which fell into the hands of Celtic chieftains? Were they allowed to maintain their municipal institutions, or were they obliged to submit to autocratic government? Such questions as these can hardly receive adequate answer in the present state of knowledge, but they have a decided bearing on Irish economic history. Probably the experience of Gaul and Italy on the fall of the Roman Empire was reproduced in Ireland. The conquerors, though attached to their own type of life, tended to settle into the mould which they found about them. The resultant was probably in the nature of a blending or modification of one system by the other.

However, armed collision on a large scale was soon again to take place. The Wars of the Roses came to an end, and the new dynasty, as soon as it was firm in the saddle, looked to the affairs of its outer dependencies. Ireland, after another protracted struggle of a hundred years, was conquered from end to end, and the authority of the Tudor monarchs was everywhere recognized. But the struggle had left terrible scars on the country. Devastation and famine had been deliberately used as a military measure to enforce submission. Religious animosities had been added to the cause of

† *Ibid*, p. 697.

* "Statute Rolls, Ireland. Henry VI." p. 171.

division, already sufficiently numerous. But, perhaps worst of all, the victors had embarked on a policy, which involved a considerable amount of dispossession. Seeing the old English settlements overrun or fallen into decay, they endeavoured to re-Anglicise, wherever opportunity served, the method adopted being that of planting colonies. The territory of the defeated chiefs was confiscated, and English settlers were brought in. This course seems to have aroused far greater hostility than the depression of status from free tribesman to *Hibernicus* or serf, which had accompanied the Anglo-Norman conquest. Degradation was a less evil than eviction. The Tudor governors were determined to apply English law to Ireland, and disregarded the code of native customs known as the Brehon law. But it was extremely difficult to fit the tribal landowner into the framework of English law. The English lawyers hardly knew whether to regard him as a freeholder (though a freeholder, whose holding changed every two or three years, was a person scarcely contemplated by English law) or as a tenant at will. If he were no more than a tenant at will, his tenancy could be determined by the chief, and thus, when the independent chiefs were in time replaced by men more subservient to the English authority, it became an easy matter to expel tribesmen from the holding of land and to replace them by colonists. The attitude of the government varied from time to time and from place to place. In the days of Elizabeth, we are told, the clansmen of a forfeiting chief were generally recognized as landowners.* But in the famous Plantation of Ulster, during the reign of her successor, the clansmen of the North were considered mere tenants at will and were dispossessed in large numbers to make room for settlers from England and Scotland. It may easily be imagined with what bitter feelings the Ulster Irish regarded those who had driven them from their holdings. Before a generation had passed away the North rose in a great rebellion, the wildest and fiercest, perhaps, in all our stormy history. Before the outbreak could be quelled, the great strife of Cavalier and Roundhead had commenced, and for many years Ireland was a prey to three, if not four, contending parties, Royalists, Parliamentarians, Irish Catholics, and invading Scotch Presbyterians. The parliament raised money and men for the war by promises of estates in Ireland forfeited by rebellion. In 1654 room was made for the "soldiers and adventurers" in the lands east of the Shannon by dispossessing the great majority of the existing landowners and transferring them to Connaught, where

* Butler, "Confiscation in Irish History," p. 34.

they were assigned lands not equal to the value of their former estates, but bearing thereto a proportion varying according to the extent to which they were considered guilty of disaffection towards the Parliamentary government. This was the celebrated Transplantation to Connaught. It must be remembered that it affected chiefly the aristocracy. The actual labourer or tiller of the soil was left undisturbed, but with new masters over him.

After the Restoration in 1660, those who had lost estates in the previous war, began to look for reinstatement. But the Cromwellians took up so threatening an attitude on any attempt to interfere with their acquisitions that the King feared to provoke a rebellion if he proceeded to extreme measures, and the matter was eventually settled by a compromise, the party in possession giving up one-third of their holdings to furnish compensation for those persons loyal to the King who had been dispossessed. But this allocation was not nearly enough for the purpose. Indeed the whole trouble of the time was due to the fact that there were more claimants on Irish land than the total area of Ireland could possibly accommodate. Probably between one-third and one-half of the soil of Ireland changed ownership during this period. Subsequently the close of the Williamite wars was marked by another confiscation on a smaller scale.

The economic results of this period of expropriation are noteworthy. The introduction of new landlords, strange to the country, alien in blood and religion, did not make for rural peace or agricultural prosperity. Such middle class as had existed outside the towns had been ruined by the war, even though not usually affected by confiscation, and had disappeared, leaving the characteristic feature of eighteenth century Ireland, the *grand seigneur* landlord confronted only by an ill-educated, ill-equipped, often oppressed and starving peasantry.

The writings of Sir William Petty give a picture of the condition of Ireland towards the close of the seventeenth century. The population was sparse, only about one million souls. The chief industry was the rearing of cattle and sheep, next in importance being tillage (which probably means, in great measure, the growing of potatoes) and wool manufacture.* There was very little external trade, the most important export being provisions, and the most important import tobacco. The country was largely self-sufficing, as it had always been, and as it continued to be till comparatively recent times. The natural development of its

* "Political Anatomy of Ireland," pp. 11-13.

commerce had been warped and hindered by the policy of England. For instance, a trade had sprung up with that country in live cattle, the same unfattened bullock that is still so prominent in Irish export statistics. The jealousy of English breeders was aroused, and in 1666 a law was passed at Westminster absolutely prohibiting the import of Irish cattle.[†] This turned the attention of the Irish pastoralist to fattening and led to a trade, very important throughout the eighteenth century, in such commodities as salt beef, pork, bacon and butter. Again wool was produced cheaply and in enormous quantity in Ireland. This was a welcome import in England, as it was a raw material for the textile manufacture. But the English clothmakers did not wish any of their continental rivals to have the benefit of raw material grown within the King's dominions, and had secured the passing of a law forbidding the export of home-grown wool, English or Irish, to any foreign country. One outcome of this enactment was a great prevalence of wool smuggling to foreign countries from the Irish creeks and coves. Another more important result was that Irish wool, having only a limited market outside its country of production, was retained at home and converted into cloth by an industry, which was in most of its processes, domestic. The spinning-wheel was a feature of every cottage. Carding and teasing were familiar operations. Dyes were obtained from plants. Even weaving, though it soon came to be concentrated in Dublin and other towns, was to a considerable extent a rural domestic industry. But again jealousy was aroused, and the woollen manufacture of Ireland, so far as export trade was concerned, was practically ruined by an Irish Act of 1698, followed by an English Act of 1699, the one imposing a heavy export duty on woollen goods, the other actually forbidding the export of Irish woollen manufactured goods to foreign countries.* These restrictions were probably the severest economic blow which the country has ever sustained, for the trade was one springing naturally from the conditions of Irish life, and might easily have become the mainstay of the people.

A further illustration of this policy of economic interference is to be found in the working of the English Navigation Laws. These were interpreted as prohibiting trade between Ireland and the colonies, except by way of England. Thus, for instance, a ship from Jamaica or Virginia with cargo for Ireland was obliged to sail past her

[†] 18 and 19 Car II. c. 2.

* 10 Wm. III., c. 5 (I.), 10 Wm. III., c. 16 (E.).

real destination and land her goods for transshipment to the Irish ports, a most circuitous and expensive proceeding. The exchange of goods with the colonies, which might have been glad to barter their sugar, tea or tobacco for Irish butter, beef or frieze, to the mutual advantage of both parties, was made difficult and unprofitable. Furthermore Irish shipping lost a possible field of employment. Miss Murray, in her excellent book on "The Commercial Relations between Great Britain and Ireland" enters very fully into the working of all such restrictions as these and points out that, while doing Ireland injury, often irreparable, they disappointed their authors by resulting in the very considerable detriment of Great Britain. For example, when the Irish woollen industry was discouraged, Irish artisans went abroad and helped to establish in foreign countries industries whose competition was severely felt by the English clothworkers.

This period makes very melancholy reading, only alleviated somewhat by a consideration of the circumstances, the dominant ideas, of the time. The authors of this legislation hardly considered that they were stifling the hopes of an infant industry. Rather they saw themselves as wise planners and contrivers, aiming at the general good, even at the expense of local suffering. Ireland was considered as a colony, England the mother country. The burdens of England, naval and military, financial and diplomatic, were very great. She had, as it were, to be the shield of the whole Empire, and if she were seriously weakened, all would be imperilled. The woollen industry had for centuries been the staple of England. Therefore it must be jealously guarded and preserved from competition, even within the Empire. The statesmen of that time, believing as they did in the effectiveness of State action in fostering and guiding economic development, saw no great wrong in repressing any tendency of Ireland towards industries, in which she would compete with England, and directing her rather to those, in which she would be a useful ally. Thus, for instance, help was readily given to promote the production of linen, and it may be said that the present proud position of that industry is largely due to the steady assistance which it received in its early days. Throughout the eighteenth century, and well into the nineteenth, a special Government department, the Linen Board, watched assiduously over its welfare. The operations of this body cost the country about £20,000 annually. But linen, with its reliance on imported material, did not make up for the restriction of wool. Ireland felt that she had economic grievances to add to those arising from religion and politics.

The colonies, too, chafed under this arbitrary regime. Their attitude was that of adolescent and ambitious sons towards a stern father of the old school, who, because he has made very many sacrifices to rear and protect them through childhood, thinks he should still exercise supreme control, even when his children are grown up. Eventually America rebelled and broke violently away, and at the same period Ireland, by the threat of armed force at a crisis when Great Britain's armies and navies were only too fully occupied, obtained the repeal of the commercial restrictions and the establishment of a political semi-independence.

The loss of the colonies does not seem to have had an adverse influence on Irish commerce. The linen trade with the United States prospered,* and the provision trade, not merely as export, but as victualling for ships making the long three months voyage across the Atlantic, continued to flourish.

The next epoch in Irish economic history is that of the Union. The Irish Parliament after 1782 had encouraged Irish industry in every possible way, and had been rewarded by a very considerable measure of success. They had, for instance, fostered the development of brewing. Several of the leading firms, including Messrs. Guinness, of Dublin, and Beamish and Crawford, of Cork, trace their origin from this period. War and internal disturbance during the closing years of the eighteenth century had not been without their effect on the perhaps somewhat artificial prosperity of Ireland. A few years of stimulus had favoured growth, but sufficient time had not been given to allow Irish industries to establish proper reserves and acquire staying power to face adversity. The commercial provisions of the Act of Union installed eventually complete freedom of trade between Great Britain and Ireland. Irish productions were exposed to the competition of formidable rivals. The result has been that throughout the nineteenth century each country has tended more and more to produce the commodities, in which it has an advantage, Ireland supplying live animals, whisky, butter, bacon, linen, but relying on Great Britain for all other textiles, hardware and manufactured goods.

A further impulse in this direction was given on the great improvement of transit facilities in the second quarter of the nineteenth century consequent on the advent of the steamer and the railway train. The distance factor in the calculation of cost lost much of its importance. Remote producers could compete on comparatively even terms with

* Miss Murray "Commercial Relations," p. 281

those close to the market. The flow of trade across channel increased enormously, and further changes in its character were effected. For example, the eighteenth century trade in salt beef and pork has been replaced by a trade much larger in volume, in live cattle. It must have been extremely difficult to convey cattle in the days of small sailing-ships when the animals had to travel on foot to the port, spend perhaps two or three days at sea, and go by road again on the other side. Now railway and steamer make the whole journey a matter of hours. With the beef and pork trade went such subsidiary industries as tanning and glue-making, now comparatively rare.

A further adverse effect on Irish industry at this time was due to its lack of capital, which caused manufacturers, with the exception of those in the Northern linen industry, to be slow in adopting the improved machinery and methods of production characteristic of the period. In the present day, as Professor Oldham has recently shown our society, the heavily capitalized industries are those which are making the most rapid progress.* Amongst these is the shipbuilding of Belfast, dating only from the middle of the nineteenth century, a curious phenomenon, producing entirely for an external market and relying on imported raw materials, having, as it were, no real link with the economic conditions of Ireland. If such an exotic can take hold and flourish, surely such native industries as the manufacture of woollen and leather goods should soon reassume their former prosperity.

Irish agriculture, like industry, has gone through many vicissitudes during the last two hundred years. The long wars of the seventeenth century proved ruinous to tillage. Corn cannot be grown in a country over which contending armies continually march. Tools were destroyed, buildings burnt, cultivators killed or driven away. Extensive confiscations had taken place, and the new owners felt their titles somewhat insecure. Under the circumstances a much quicker and more certain yield was obtainable from pasture than from tillage. Throughout the earlier part of the eighteenth century rural Ireland devoted itself almost exclusively to animal rearing. There was no longer the necessity felt in the middle ages, for husbandry for the production of bread corn. The potato, which can be grown in almost any soil or situation, in a small garden or in a large field, had displaced oatmeal as the staple food of the Irish peasant. The cattle ranch and the potato garden are the characteristic features of this period. Until 1772 a considerable quantity

* Paper on "Changes in Irish Exports," 14 Feb., 1919.

of corn was imported annually. A curious paradox, but, strange to say, not unparalleled in our own day, that an agricultural country should depend on other nations for its bread. The Irish Parliament endeavoured to foster the growth of corn by giving a bounty on its exportation when cheap and plentiful, or *per contra*, by placing a heavy duty on imported corn except in times of scarcity. This was the policy embodied in Foster's Corn Laws of 1784.* In order to cope with the heavy cost of transport, a remarkably liberal bounty had previously been given on the carriage of corn, both coastwise and by land to Dublin.† This period was also marked by the improvement of ports, and the construction of the two most important canals, the Grand and the Royal, built mainly to provide cheap carriage for the midlands. The great Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars still further promoted the increase of tillage. Great Britain had ceased to be self-supporting as regards its corn supply. Traffic with distant countries, such as those around the Baltic, was liable to interruption by hostile privateers. Ireland accordingly had an exceptional advantage in the British markets. An impulse was given, which continued long after the war was over. By the third decade of the nineteenth century the average annual export of corn was over 2,000,000 quarters. The chief corn-growing countries were Kildare, Carlow, Kilkenny, Queen's County, Tipperary and Limerick. Their production was mainly for export, and the dietary of the peasantry, even in the districts where corn was so largely produced, was unaffected.

It is strange that in this period of outward prosperity the land question, always simmering beneath the surface, should begin to take a more menacing form. As the produce of agriculture increased, the condition of the people grew steadily worse. The cause of this deterioration are not altogether clear and await elucidation by those who may undertake that most important and most difficult task, the study of Irish economic history in the nineteenth century. It appears that, as agriculture prospered, a keen competition for farms sprang up. The landowner drove the best bargain he could and took no further interest in the proceedings. But the leaseholder was only too frequently not the actual cultivator, but a speculator hoping to make a profit by subletting to others. Hence the class of middlemen came into existence, driven into tyranny and extortion by the conditions of their ownership, burdened perhaps by an over-heavy rent

* 23 & 24 Geo. III., c. 19

† The bounty was 4d. per ton per Irish mile for inland carriage (31 Geo. II., c. 3.)

and obliged to grind the faces of their subtenants in order to make a profit.

The rural population increased enormously in number between 1800 and 1847. Again the reasons are obscure. Possibly several causes were at work, the low standard of housing and living, the cheapness and facility of production of the staple food, the desire of landlords to multiply dependent and subservient voters, the effect of religious teaching, which in the interests of morality, encouraged early marriages. Wages were low and employment uncertain. The whole nation, it might be said, certainly the whole of the South and West, was relying on a single crop, whose failure plunged the people into misery, starvation and disease. There had been famines before, but that of 1847 stands out with an awful pre-eminence. The main railways were still in course of construction. The Great Southern and Western, for instance, had not traversed more than half the distance from Dublin to Cork. Hence it was difficult to bring help to such districts as were remote from Dublin and were not close to the sea. It was a time which left an indelible impression on the minds of those who passed through it.

The economic effects were remarkable. Many of the peasantry fled the country, beginning that great tide of emigration, which has continued, though not in the same volume, for over seventy years. The British Corn Laws were repealed, and the markets thrown open to the importation of foreign grain, a measure destined to cheapen bread, but eventually to discourage tillage in Great Britain and Ireland. However the population has certainly adopted a higher standard of living. Bread, even though it be made from foreign corn, has displaced the potato as the staple food of Ireland. There has been a steady decline in the census figures of Ireland since 1847, but as some alleviation it may be stated that the present inhabitants do not live on the margin of starvation like the potato-growing cottiers of 1847. The recollections of the famine aggravated the contentions between landlord and tenant, already sufficiently bitter. For forty years there was a crescendo of strife, culminating finally in the Land War and the Land Legislation of recent years, which has extended liberal State assistance in order to buy out the landowner, the descendant, in many cases, of the Cromwellian or Restoration grantee, and to replace him by the descendants of those dispossessed in the great confiscations of that period.

So far this paper has been devoted to a sketch, in the merest outline, of Irish economic history, intended to attract

interest and to reveal the possibilities of the study. To fill in details would require a book rather than a paper. Many important sections of the subject have gone unmentioned. When, for instance, will some literary banker relate to us the curious and fascinating history of Irish banking and currency, pointing out the debasement of the seventeenth century wars (the Orange toast still praises King William III. as the deliverer of Ireland from "brass money and wooden shoes"). He could show how debasement injures the poor above all others, and could illustrate how easy it was for Dean Swift to inflame popular feeling against William Wood, who had by corrupt means obtained a concession for supplying Ireland with small copper coinage, halfpence and farthings. The worse these halfpence were, the greater the profit would be, coming out of the pockets of the people who most used the small coins, the poor. The astonishing financial shifts and devices of the war periods, the lotteries and ton-tines, the rise of innumerable small banks, each issuing notes for small as well as large sums, the hardships caused by their failure, the foundation of a State Bank, the present Bank of Ireland, in 1783, the lack of currency and the diversity of substitutes used, ranging from restamped foreign coins to tokens issued by municipalities or large employers of labour and having, of course, only a local circulation, the final abolition of Irish currency with the disappearance of the "harp" penny in 1823, all these would provide most interesting chapters. And there are many other attractive side-paths in this study. May we hope that members of this or other learned Irish societies will pursue this branch of knowledge to their own delight and the enlightenment of the general public.