

*On the Condition of the Irish Labourer.* By W. NEILSON HANCOCK, LL.B., Archbishop Whately's Professor of Political Economy in the University of Dublin.

I propose in this paper to submit to the consideration of the society, the results of some applications of economic principles to an investigation of the causes on which the condition of the Irish labourer depends. The chief results are—first, that the condition of the Irish labourer at present depends chiefly on the state of agriculture in Ireland—secondly, that any artificial interference to promote native manufactures would be injurious instead of beneficial to the labourers—and thirdly, that it is unscientific and erroneous to describe the population of Ireland as excessive.

The whole question of the condition of the labourer, as far as it is distinct from the question of the condition of the community at large, resolves itself into a consideration of the natural laws which regulate the value of labour, and of the application of these laws to the special circumstances of the country. When labour is valuable, it procures a large return in the shape of wages, and the labourers, as a class, are well off. When any cause, such as an increase in the demand for labour, or an increase of the force of the causes which limit the supply of labour, raises the value of labour, the labourers are relatively better off; and when an opposite set of causes occurs, such as a diminution in the demand for labour, or a decrease of the force of the causes which limit the supply of labour, the value of labour falls, and the labourers are relatively worse off.

This abstract reasoning may be readily illustrated by what happens in the manufacturing districts in England. A favorable harvest at home and abroad places the population in such easy circumstances as to food, which forms the first necessary of life, that they have more value than usual to spend on clothes, which forms one of the second necessities of life. This demand for clothes raises the price of cotton goods amongst others. The manufacturers, in order to take advantage of the rise in the price, endeavour to manufacture as much cotton as possible; but, to increase their manufacture, they must employ a greater quantity of human labour. Here, then, is an instance of an increase in the demand for labour, and its effect is to make labour more valuable; or, in other words, the manufacturer must give more wages in exchange for labour, in order to induce the labourers to work a greater number of hours,

or to leave other occupations and turn to cotton spinning. If a pestilence should carry off one-fourth of the labourers, it would be an illustration of an increase of the force of the causes limiting the supply of labour. Another instance of the same would be readily afforded, if the suspension of free trade between England and Ireland should stop the regular migration of Irish labourers to the manufacturing districts. In the case either of the pestilence or of the stoppage of Irish immigration, the wages in the English manufacturing districts would rise, as labour would become more valuable, in consequence of having become more scarce.

If we take the opposite set of events—a bad harvest diminishes the immediate demand for cotton goods, in the same way as a good harvest, increases it. After a bad harvest the manufacturers find the prices of cotton goods falling. They have, consequently, less occasion for labour; the wages of the labourers fall, from the diminution of the value of their labour, consequent on the decreased demand for it. If, at the same time, a calamity such as we have witnessed in Ireland, should lower the value of labour in Ireland still more so as to increase, instead of diminishing the amount of immigration, the result would be, a further fall in wages in the English manufacturing districts in consequence of the value of labour being diminished, by the decrease in the force of the causes which limited the supply of labour.

To proceed, however, with a consideration of the natural laws which regulate the value of labour. They, like all other natural laws, are discovered by observation, and inductive reasoning. The most general law of value that has been as yet discovered, is that the value of labour, as of all other articles of wealth, depends on two sets of causes—those which make labour useful, and those which make it limited in supply, or scarce. Let us apply this law to the case of Irish labourers, and inquire first, what are the causes which render the labour of Irish tradesmen, manufacturers, fishermen, and agricultural labourers useful?

The utility, or, in other words, the demand for the labour of tradesmen, depends in a great measure on the well-being of the bulk of the population. When the most numerous classes in the community have abundance of food, and high wages and high profits, as in the United States of America, the facility with which their primary wants are supplied leaves them a large surplus to expend on their secondary wants; hence there is a great demand for tradesmen and servants, who minister to those wants. This explains the high price of articles of clothing, indicating a high rate of wages to tailors, shoemakers, and others, in America, and the high wages which are paid to servants there. The condition of American tradesmen and servants, when compared with that of the same classes in England, will convince you how much more the value of this kind of labour depends on the general well-being of the great body of the population, than on the expenditure, however lavish, of wealthy landlords, merchants, and manufacturers. This same fact is established by the great prosperity which attends the

trades that supply common articles of necessary use, and the precarious, unhealthy state of the trades confined to the production of articles of luxury. Now, the labour of the tradesman in Ireland is of small value, and consequently badly paid, on account of the extreme poverty of the bulk of the Irish population, shown in a remarkable manner by the number which received public relief during the past year.

The demand for *manufacturing* labour is only slightly different from that of the labour of tradesmen; for the name manufactures is applied to some trades which, on account of their great extent and facilities for consolidation, have afforded means for an extensive application of the principle of division of labour. The demand for this kind of labour, therefore, depends, in a great degree, on the wealth of the bulk of the population, and accordingly, we find that the districts of Ireland where the farmers and labourers are best off, comprising the eastern counties of Ulster, is the seat of the principal manufacture—the linen trade. But the products of manufacturing industry admit of being *exported* more readily than those of other trades; so that the demand for them must depend in some degree on the demand for Irish manufactures abroad. This demand, however, depends in a great measure on the extent to which foreign commodities are consumed in Ireland; for the bulk of Irish exports is given in exchange for the tea, sugar, wines, manufactures, and other commodities imported for the consumption of the middle classes of the population. The amount of these imports, of course, depends on the well-being of the middle classes. Therefore the demand for the labour engaged in manufacturing for the export trade depends on the wealth and prosperity of a large class of the Irish population.

The *fishermen* in Ireland are in precisely the same position as the tradesmen and manufacturing labourers; the value of their labour depends on the value of the fish; this depends on the demand for fish, which depends on the wealth of the bulk of the population; for fish is only a secondary article of food—people do not eat fish unless they have enough to buy bread or potatoes.

This was shown by the fact that famine, instead of increasing, diminished the demand for fish in the poorer districts. This fact was forced on my attention in a way to satisfy me of its truth, and it is to be accounted for in the manner above suggested. The losses by the potato failure impoverished the people who usually bought fish, so that it took all their means to buy the more necessary kinds of food, such as meal and bread; and they had little or nothing to expend on any thing else.

To say that the demand for agricultural labour in Ireland depends on the condition of the bulk of the population, seems equivalent to saying that the condition of the agricultural labourer depends on the condition of the agricultural labourer—for this class forms a very large portion of the population, as will at once appear by the statements in the census of 1841. It is there stated that, of the entire number of families in Ireland, 926,501 were dependant on manual labour for their chief means of support,

whilst the rest of the families whose means depended on any other source numbered only 546,286. These facts show the preponderance of the labouring population; but the preponderance of the agricultural population is still greater; for there were 974,183 families whose pursuits were chiefly agricultural, whilst only 500,000 were supported by other pursuits.

But this apparent identity contains a scientific truth in it; for if the condition of the agricultural labourers should be improved by any demand for their labour, this would operate to increase the value of it not only in the direct way, but also in an indirect way, similar to that of other employments. The increased wealth of this great body of the population would increase the consumption of agricultural produce, and would also increase the exportation of that produce, to exchange for the increased quantity of foreign and colonial produce required. This two-fold demand would raise the price of agricultural produce, and so increase the demand for agricultural labour, and consequently raise the wages of the agriculturalist.

It appears, therefore, that so far as the causes which affect demand for labour are concerned, the condition of labourers of all classes depends on the wealth and prosperity of the bulk of the population; which, in Ireland, consists of those engaged in agriculture, as nearly two-thirds of the population derive their support from it. The correctness of this scientific reasoning is fully borne out by the facts which have been observed with regard to different parts of Ireland. In the eastern counties of Ulster, where the prevalence of tenant-right, and the freedom from penal laws in past times, have made the agricultural population comparatively wealthy and prosperous, the ordinary wages for labour are one shilling a day in summer, and tenpence a day in winter; whilst in no other part of Ireland, except in Carlow and Dublin, do they rise beyond tenpence in summer and eightpence in winter; and in fully one-half of the rest of Ireland the ordinary wages do not exceed eightpence a day.

The agricultural population consists of two classes—the farmers and the labourers; and in a given state of demand for agricultural produce, and a given state of knowledge of agriculture, the condition of both these classes will depend on the security that is afforded for the employment of capital in agriculture. Because the greater this security, the greater will be the amount of capital employed, and the greater will be the consequent demand for agricultural labour. This intimate connexion between the condition of the labourer in Ireland and the state of agriculture is constantly overlooked. Thus, the various economic questions respecting the sale, tenure, and occupation of land are commonly supposed to be matters of some importance to farmers and landlords, and of but slight interest to the rest of the community. Yet, in all these questions, the labouring classes in Ireland, and as I shall show presently in England also, are directly interested. Whatever impedes the application of capital to land, whatever lowers the condition of the

farmer, and of the agricultural labourer in Ireland, injures the labouring classes generally, both in England and Ireland.

Such being the result of our investigation into the causes which affect the demand for labour, our next inquiry must be, what are the causes which render labour limited in supply? Now the supply of labour of tradesmen and manufacturing labourers in Ireland is influenced in two ways; first, it is diminished by the migration of these classes to England, to take advantage of the high wages there; and secondly, it is increased by the influx of agricultural labourers from the same or poorer counties in Ireland. The first cause has a constant tendency to raise the wages of Irish tradesmen and artisans; the second has a constant tendency to lower them. The force of the first cause depends on the difference between the wages of the same trades in England and Ireland. When this difference is great, large numbers migrate, and so the supply is diminished in Ireland until the wages rise in it and fall in England; then the decrease of the difference has a tendency to stop the migration, and in this way every improvement in the condition of the labouring classes in England would produce a permanent effect in Ireland: but, unfortunately, the extremely low value of agricultural labour produces an influx to the various trades as soon as wages begin to improve in them, and this lowers the wages; the fall being only limited by the low amount of agricultural wages, with a small difference on account of the skill and time necessary to learn the trades. This fall in the value of labour in Ireland produces a renewed migration to England, and a consequent fall in the value of labour and wages there, and in this way we arrive at some conclusions of no small importance. First, that the Irish artisans, tradesmen, and manufacturing labourers are directly interested in the prosperity of English manufactures and trades; as everything that contributes to such prosperity contributes to raise their wages. Secondly, that the same classes of Irish labourers are still more interested in the prosperity of the agricultural labourers in Ireland, as whatever promotes their advancement prevents a diminution in the wages of the tradesmen; and, thirdly, the labouring classes in England are interested in the state of the agricultural labourers in Ireland, as it is the migration of Irish labourers, consequent on the wretched condition of the agricultural classes in Ireland, which keeps down the wages of labour in England.

These theoretic conclusions, as to the migrations of the labouring population of Ireland, are fully verified by the observations made by the Census Commissioners in 1841. It appears that the migration from Ireland to England had then reached the extraordinary amount of 419,256, which was the number of persons who had been born in Ireland then residing in England and Scotland. The number of native Irish resident in Great Britain is at present much greater, on account of the extensive employment on railway works since 1841, and the distress in Ireland last year. This migration is the more remarkable, as it exceeds the entire amount of all the migrations from different counties in Ireland to

other counties. There were, in 1841, only 405,365 persons in Ireland residing in counties different from those in which they had been born.

If we extend our investigation to the causes limiting the supply of labour in the class of agricultural labourers, we shall find that whilst that supply is decreased by migrations to England, there is no lower class from which an increase to it can come. The great extent of the temporary migrations to England for harvest work is proved by the census of 1841. The number of deck passengers to England in that summer was 57,651. Of these, 25,118 came from Connaught, and 10,430 from the single county of Mayo.

These migrations of labourers afford the strongest proof of the energy, industry, and foresight of the Irish labourers. They are willing to undergo every toil for good pay. One-half of these harvest labourers every year traverse and retrace Ireland, from Connaught to the eastern ports, for sake of the high wages for harvest work. The self-denial which they practice while in England, in order to save all they can of their wages to provide support for their families during the winter, is the strongest proof of their providence. But the extent to which they understand the economic principle of buying in the cheapest market is illustrated by some observations of the Census Commissioners:—"The singular thrift and foresight which has so frequently been remarked as characterising these people (the harvest labourers), is curiously illustrated by this table, in which it will be seen that no less than 12,256 Connaught labourers embarked at Drogheda, and only 8,308 at Dublin. This unusual circumstance is attributed to a small reduction in the fare from Drogheda, a few weeks before the season commenced; which reduction was industriously made known in all the towns through which the stream of labourers was likely to pass in its progress from the west."

But the supply of labour in Ireland is also influenced by the permanent migration of labourers to America. The census of 1841 estimates that the total colonial and foreign emigration from Ireland in ten years between 1831 and 1841 was 403,463. The Irish labourers are, therefore, interested in the prosperity of American agriculture. The repeal of the corn laws will raise the wages of agricultural labour in America. This rise in wages will lead to increased emigration from Ireland, which will consequently raise agricultural wages here.

In investigating the economic resources of Ireland, there can be no conclusion of more importance than the one at which we have arrived—namely, that the condition of the Irish labourer depends chiefly on the state of agriculture in Ireland. This conclusion at once indicates where the chief cause of the wretched condition of the population is to be sought, and, consequently, where we may expect to find remedies likely to be of permanent utility.

It remains to consider how far this conclusion is borne out by the facts observed in Ireland.

The Land Occupation Commissioners report:—

"In adverting to the condition of the different classes of occupiers

*Increase & migration from Ireland*

in Ireland, we perceive, with deep regret, the state of the cottiers and labourers in most parts of the country from the want of certain employment. It would be impossible to describe adequately the privations which they and their families almost habitually and patiently endure. It will be seen in the evidence, that in many districts their only food is the potato, their only beverage water; that their cabins are seldom a protection against the weather; that a bed or a blanket is a rare luxury; and that nearly in all, their pig and their manure-heap constitute their only property."

This description of the Irish labouring population you will recollect was given at the beginning of 1845, before any failure of the potato had reduced the labourers to an even worse state, by depriving them of the pig and manure-heap which the commissioners so graphically describe as their only property. Such being the condition of the labourers, let us inquire what is the state of agriculture in Ireland? Lord Devon, the chairman of the Land Occupation Commissioners, has recently published a digest of the evidence taken before them, containing the following account of agriculture, which I quoted in a former paper, but which cannot be too often noticed:—

"The general tenor of the evidence given before the commissioners proves, that with the exception of some districts in the north, and some particular localities and estates, or individual farms in other parts of the country, the usual agricultural practice throughout Ireland is defective in the highest degree; whether as regards the permanent preparation and improvement of the land essential to successful tillage, the limited selection of the crops cultivated, or the relative succession and tillage of those crops. But it likewise gives, at the same time, encouraging proofs that where these exceptions exist, where judicious exertions have been made to improve the state and texture of the soil, and to introduce a more desirable and extensive succession and rotation of crops, these exertions have been attended with the most striking success and profit."

Thus the scientific conclusion is completely borne out by the facts, for the distress of the labourer is not more remarkable than the neglect of agriculture which chiefly contributes to produce it. The districts in the north, which are mentioned as an exception in exhibiting agricultural improvements, have been already noticed as the parts of the country where wages are highest and the labourers consequently best off. Having established, therefore, that the condition of the Irish labourer depends chiefly on the state of agriculture in Ireland, I proceed to consider the plan of giving artificial encouragement to native manufactures by promoting their exclusive use, to which its authors have given the name of "Protection to home industry."

The popularity which this plan has enjoyed, although when tried as a voluntary system some years ago it entirely failed, arises from looking to its immediate effects on one class of the population, without considering its injury to the community at large, or even the ruin it must ultimately bring on the class proposed to be bene-

fited. There can be no doubt that if the use of Irish manufactures were substituted by law for that of English manufactures, the immediate effect would be a rise in the wages of the Irish manufacturing labourers. Thus far all seems favorable; the condition of the artisan is improved. But this artificial interference with the ordinary course of trade would diminish the amount of Irish exports, whether agricultural produce or linens, and would diminish the demand for exportable products, and consequently the demand for the labour employed in their production. Thus, the wages of the labourers so employed would decrease. Their competition would lower the wages of agriculturalists and linen weavers generally. These classes would enter into competition with the artisans engaged in domestic manufactures, and soon lower their wages from the artificial height, produced by protection, to a common level; higher, indeed, than the depressed rate of agricultural wages produced by the diminution of the demand for exportable commodities, but lower than the original rate of wages before any interference was attempted. The last proposition is a simple deduction from the well-known principle, that the ultimate effect of state interference with the direction of industry is always to diminish the general rate of wages, and, consequently, to deteriorate the condition of the labouring classes.

The proof of this principle may be stated in the case we are considering. Thus it is obvious that in the present state of knowledge, manufactures, agriculture, and other matters, the labour of the Irish agriculturalist is more productive than the labour of the same person would be if employed as an artisan. Because, if it were not so, why does he not become an artisan? There is no legal restriction to prevent his adopting the occupation supposed to be more profitable. The effect, therefore, of *forcing* a body of agriculturalists to become artisans, would be to turn them from a more productive to a less productive branch of industry. And yet this is what is proposed by the home manufacture plan. This is called "Protection to native industry." Destruction of native industry would be a more appropriate title.

When it is thus shown that the labour of the Irish agriculturalists is more productive *at present* than that of the same persons employed as artisans, some people foolishly conclude that Ireland is not suited for any manufactures. Sir Robert Kane, in his *Industrial Resources of Ireland*, has very properly opposed this most mistaken conclusion. Every improvement in the condition of the agricultural classes in Ireland will give a real and substantial stimulus to the development of manufacturing industry; because the increased wealth of the people will create a demand for the products of manufacturing industry employed in the natural resources of Ireland—resources which now remain unemployed, because present poverty renders their products, however calculated to gratify the wants and passions of mankind, of so little value as to make it at present *unprofitable*, and therefore unwise, and, without artificial aid, impossible to develop them. Ireland will, at no distant day, contain a thriving and prosperous people, ac-



tively employed in turning to the utmost account the resources that surround them. But every interference with the natural course of industry will retard that happy era—every removal of interference in the abrogation of existing restrictions will hasten its approach. Consider the backwoodsman of America toiling, in coarse raiment, at the clearing of the soil, returning at evening to his log cabin and coarse furniture, almost entirely deprived of intercourse with his fellow-man, whether by the direct communication of roads or the indirect connexion of the works of the mind. Would you tell him to neglect the soil, and commence making nice furniture and elegant clothes, and the construction of a fine road of many miles in length to the next town? Would you tell him, as the Irish labourers have been told, “to pass from an occupation yielding little employment to those which create most demand for labour?” To such advice he would reply:—“I cannot complain of want of employment; in fact I have rather much of it, for at present it requires the labour of myself and all my family to raise as much food as will keep us alive during the winter. In another year or so, I expect to have so much ground cleared and well cultivated, that I will be able to raise enough of food without employing them all. As soon as that time comes, I will set those whom I can spare to improve the log cabin, for fine clothes would be of no use to us when we have such a wretched habitation. But by the time we get a comfortable house, the produce of the farm will be so abundant, that I can send some of it to the next market, and buy better clothes and furniture. The journey will be very tedious and expensive, as the road is so bad; but, then, all the food we could send out for some time, would not make it worth my while to work at the road. But after some years, when the produce of the farm increases very much, and when we are able to buy with it tea, sugar, wine, and other little luxuries which we could not produce on our farm, except at an extravagant cost, and when we want to get a great deal of furniture and machinery, then the saving of labour in carrying all these things by a good road, instead of a bad one, will make it profitable to employ some of my family in improving the road.”

The case of the backwoodsman is the case of the majority of the population of Ireland. Until the land is properly cultivated, so as to produce that abundance of food of which it is capable, it is useless to tell the people to begin building houses, making clothes, or forming railways. When increased fertility gives food with less labour, the extra food will soon be exchanged for timber and slates. Improved habitations will arise. The next step will be the demand for clothes. A peasantry must be well fed before we can expect them to be well clad—and last of all will come the demand for railways.

In conclusion, let me observe that it is not easy to exaggerate the scientific importance of all investigations respecting the labouring population, and such inquiries are of especial interest in Ireland. Amid the natural resources of our country the labour of the population has been too often overlooked. Some persons have

been led to represent the superabundance of labour as a calamity. But as the bulk of the labouring classes have not regular and continuous employment, it is manifest that it is the demand for labour which is deficient, and not the population which is excessive.

It is a sinful expression of discontent with the dealings of the Almighty to describe the population as excessive, when labour, the great primary instrument for the production of wealth, although existing in the same proportion as the extent of the population, is left unemployed. If we found in any country a constant demand for all the labourers—if we found every instrument of wealth employed to the utmost that existing knowledge could devise—if we found every arrangement based on the soundest principles that human science could discover—and if, along with these things, the food which such a country could procure for its inhabitants, either by direct production, or indirectly by commerce, was so deficient as to lead to misery, want, and starvation, then we might with truth say that in such a country there was overpopulation. But are any of these things the case with Ireland? Is there a constant demand for all her labourers? Are all her instruments of wealth, the savingness of her people, the fertility of her land, turned to the best account? Are the economic arrangements prevailing here based on the soundest principles? If not, then vainly shall we endeavour to conceal from ourselves the consequences of human folly, by representing the misery and distress produced by man's neglect as inevitable dispensations of the beneficent Author of our being.