Letters on the condition of the people of Ireland

Foster Thomas Campbell
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BY

THOMAS CAMPBELL FOSTER, ESQ.,

OF THE MIDDLE TEMPLE, BARRISTER-AT-LAW.

("THE TIMES" COMMISSIONER.)

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NOTES, FROM "THE TIMES" NEWSPAPER.

"Half a word, fixed upon the spot, is worth a cartload of recollections."—THE POET GRAY.

"If I might give a short hint to an impartial writer, it would be to tell him his fate. If he resolves to venture upon the dangerous precipice of telling unblased truth, let him proclaim war with mankind—neither to give nor to take quarter. If he tells the crimes of great men, they fall upon him with the iron hands of the law; if he tells them of their virtues, when they have any, then the mob attacks him with slander. But if he regards truth, let him expect martyrdom on both sides, and then he may go on fearless; and this is the course I take myself."—Dr FoE.

LONDON:

CHAPMAN AND HALL, 186, STRAND.

1846.
London:
Printed by STEWART and MURRAY,
Old Bailey.
The letters which form this book were written during a tour of five months over nearly every part of Ireland, and were first published at intervals in The Times newspaper, immediately after they were written, in the period between August, 1845, and January, 1846.

The letters were originally written in consequence of a commission offered to me, by that great public journal, which I undertook to perform, to lay before the public, in a readable form, my impressions during a tour through Ireland, and to state what, of the many prevailing opinions and anomalies, on careful observation, appeared to me to be the true condition of the Irish people.

In undertaking this duty, I was unshackled and undirected by any further instructions whatever. In the course of its fulfilment, I conceived it to be desirable, not only to depict the actual condition of the Irish people, but to examine into the causes which led to that condition, and to suggest, as I proceeded, what appeared to me to be the most feasible remedies.
I commenced the duty, with an anxious wish to avoid, as much as possible, all personalities, and to make the inquiry a calm and philosophical one. I was anxious rather to deal with facts than with individuals; but determined, that should it become necessary to particularise individuals, in order to expose any mischievous system which might generally prevail, and form a marked feature in the social condition of the people, not to "break a fly upon the wheel," and mark out those for censure who were powerless to defend themselves; nor yet to hold up men of insignificant position as examples worthy to be followed, who, because of their position, would be little regarded. The letters which form this book will show that, as far as was compatible with circumstances, I pursued this course.

It was natural to expect, from the mode of immediate publication adopted, that I should be liable to immediate criticism, and to instant praise or blame, encouragement or opposition. This very circumstance rendered it difficult to persevere in the original course which I had determined to follow; and it is a subject of some regret to me that, in one or two instances, I was compelled to abandon the field of philosophical inquiry, and, having been forced into personal collisions with individuals, to take measures to substantiate previous statements, and to repel attacks.

It is said by his friends that I unfairly singled out Mr. O'Connell for attack, when there were hundreds of other landlords in Ireland as neglectful, and having as wretched tenants. For three months, under almost weekly, and to me unaccountable, abuse from that gentleman and his party, I never noticed him, save when compelled in defence of my own character to contradict downright false assertions. I was a "scoundrel," a "liar," a "gutter commissioner," an "ugly fellow," and so on for three months, without a single word in reply from me. Finding that this did not alter my course, a letter was attributed to me which I did not write or
authorize, and of which I knew nothing whatever; and
the terms of that letter were publicly used as an excuse for
unwarrantable personal abuse. It was afterwards also pub-
licly stated that I was "kicked" out of a Roman Catholic
priest's house. These being pure inventions, without a
shadow of foundation, affecting my character, I was com-
pelled to answer them. Still I never wrote one word
against Mr. O'Connell until, when passing his estate,
the wretched hovels of his tenantry were under my nose,
and I could not avoid seeing them. Had I any reason
to be "mealy mouthed" then, with regard to him? "Oh!
but why single him out when others are as bad," say his
friends. If it is necessary in order to expose a system to
single out individuals, you must single some one out. Speak
of the abuses of a class, and the class will laugh at you; it
hurts no one of them in particular, and censure falls lightly
on the shoulders of so many. But particularise an indi-
didual, and hold him up as a sample of the class, and every one
of the class will congratulate himself that he has escaped, and
begin to amend for fear it should, at some future time, be his
turn to be singled out. Besides, such a course is more forc-
ible, it imperatively challenges contradiction if it can be given
by the individual; if it cannot be given, the truth of such an
exposure is made more prominently apparent, and the evils
exposed are more likely to be remedied. I had selected
individuals for comment—for censure or for praise—before
I saw Mr. O'Connell's estate; when I saw that gentle-
man's tenants and their neglected wretchedness, were
there not many reasons for selecting him as a sample
of Kerry landlords? Was he not perpetually reviling
other landlords, and holding himself out as "the very
pink of perfection?" Was he not a public man, on
whom the public eye was fixed, and withal esteemed a
"patriot?" And yet the wretched beings then before me
were his tenants. Above all, would it not have justly been
said, that I had dared to attack those who were comparatively helpless and powerless, but that I shrank from attacking and exposing a man whose wretched tenants I saw,—who had as much misery on his estate, the consequence of his neglect, as any landlord or middleman in Ireland,—because he was able to reply to me and to defend himself. I therefore did not hesitate to state, but without acrimony or personal abuse, the simple truth regarding the condition of Mr. O'Connell's tenantry, as I had done in former instances regarding the tenantry of others. The course taken by him and his supporters in consequence of that exposure—the perfect torrent of abuse which was showered upon me from all quarters, compelled me to resort to measures to substantiate the truth of my previous statements, and to return to the neighbourhood of Mr. O'Connell's estate. It was impossible for me to avoid the course which I took; and though I regret the acrimony and personal collision which thus broke in upon a calm inquiry after truth, yet these untoward incidents were forced upon, and not sought for by me.

It will be seen from a perusal of the following letters, that I do not concur with those who think that Irish distress and Irish misery are to be attributed to the Union of that country with England, or to the "misgovernment" (so called) of Ireland by this country; nor yet entirely even to the faults of landlords as a class. So great is the fertility of the island, so numerous and diversified are its natural advantages, and, compared with this country, with so little difficulty, enterprise, capital, and industry, can those great natural advantages be converted into wealth, that I can arrive at no other conclusion—looking at the general absence of all enterprise and all exertion, and at the general want of industry, which are existing facts that all observers have noticed—than that, for the poverty and distress and misery which exist, the people have themselves to blame. Nor do I think this blame belongs to any one particular class among them.
The landlords are to blame for their neglect of the country and of the people, and for their want of enterprise; but the general misery is not to be solely attributed to them, nor, as M. Beaumont in his book on Ireland endeavours to show, to "a bad aristocracy." England is great with or without its aristocracy, and its greatness is in its middle class—in the men who have sprung from the ranks, and urged themselves onwards to wealth and influence by the sole force of their own industry, persevering energy, and talent. These qualities are the true germs of prosperity and greatness. It is because the mass of the people in Ireland do not exhibit these qualities—because they are not industrious, because they do not labour with persevering energy, that they have no middle class springing from the ranks,—that you rarely find in Ireland individuals, in spite of all obstacles, (with or without an aristocracy,) with an energy of purpose and an enterprising spirit which cannot be chained down and kept back, pushing their way upwards to wealth and influence, and in their united wealth and prosperity accomplishing the prosperity and greatness of their country. It is an unfair conclusion to attribute the evils which afflict Ireland to any influence out of Ireland; and it is an unfair conclusion to attribute its social evils to any one class. All are to blame. Though authors have differed in their deductions on this subject, most of them agree as to the facts. M. Beaumont, an observing French author, who may be fairly supposed to be removed from prejudice, thus writes of the wants of Ireland:—"Capital is wanting; the terror which reigns in the country drives it farther away. Industry alone could raise from indigence the multitude of cottiers that contend for the land; and capital, without which no industry is possible, has fled from poor Ireland for ever."* The ab-

* M. Beaumont's Ireland, Social, Political, and Religious, Vol. i. p. 312.
sence of industry is pointed out, and to its absence the misery of Ireland is attributed by this author; but he commits the error of mistaking the end for the means, when he speaks of "no industry being possible without capital." Capital is the fruit of industry, and without industry there can be no capital realised; though it is quite true that, when realised, it rewards, accelerates, and promotes industry. Capital is not a quality which comes into the world without the instrumentality of man, nor yet is it a fortuitous circumstance. All men at first were equal and without it; and if some obtain it, it is only by effort and industry. Capital is a power acquired and accumulated by persevering industry, care, and economy. But without industry to create it, there can be no capital. It is also a lamentable fact that this much-needed capital, when occasionally accumulated in Ireland, often flies away from outrages and combinations which peril its existence; whilst the superabundant capital of England for the same causes keeps aloof. Kohl, a recent German traveller in Ireland, has expressed similar views as the result of his observation—"It is," he says, "the English who constitute the soul and pith of the British power, and it is to them that the Irish owe it if they are able to participate in the wide spread commerce of Great Britain and to share in all the opportunities and advantages that stand open to a British subject. The vigorous, speculative, and persevering Anglo-Saxons, force the indolent and unenergetic Celts along with them on the road of glory and national greatness; they pull them forward somewhat rudely perhaps, but they do pull them forward."* In other words, it is the industry and persevering energy of England which has accomplished her greatness; it is the want of these qualities which keeps Ireland poor and steeped in

* Kohl's Ireland, 1844, p. 40.