

~~"Third Report of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes (Ireland)." 1885.~~

~~"Report of Royal Commission on Labour." 1886-1894.~~

~~"Evidence and Report of Select Committee of House of Commons on Agricultural Labourers in Ireland." 1884.~~

~~*The Economic Journal*, Vol. xi., p. 511. (An account of the Dutch Dwelling Houses Act.)~~

~~"The Town Housing Problem," by LETTICE FISHER. *Economic Journal*, Vol. xv., p. 23.~~

~~"The Independent Review," Feb. 1904. ("Experience of the Housing Question," by N. G. PIERSON, ex-Premier of Holland.)~~

~~*New Ireland Review*, Nov. 1904, and Nov. 1905. (Articles by N. J. SYNNOTT and W. R. MACDERMOTT.)~~

~~*Social and Statistical Society of Ireland. Journal*, Nov. 1903. (Article by N. J. SYNNOTT.)~~

~~*Hansard* (1883), Vol. lxxix., pp. 1241, &c.*~~

5.—*Suggested Substitutes for the present Poor Law System.*

By CHARLES DAWSON, Esq.

[Read 27th April, 1906.]

THE continual complaints in Great Britain and Ireland of the inefficiency and extravagance of the Poor Law System, have been accentuated of late by the labour crisis and want of employment.

Criticisms abound and commissions of inquiry have been started. I think the present system might, with great advantage, be replaced by the schemes which I shall submit.

However, a brief inquiry into the origin and history of the Poor Law is necessary, before dealing with a remedy.

Undoubtedly, it had its origin in the confiscation of the lands of the monasteries. Though some historians, like Hallam, question the effect of the suppression, yet he and all writers on the subject must refer to the connexion. Hallam's own words on this subject are—"There can be no doubt but that many of the impotent derived support from their charity."† Remark the qualification "impotent" for recipients of charity. Evidently these institutions distinguished between charity for the "can't works" and work the honest "want works." In addition to this early admission of the constitutional historian, we find allusion to the connexion made in the report of the Vagrancy Com-

* See now The Labourers (Ireland) Act, 1906 (6 Ed. 7, c. 37).

† P. 58, Vol. I.

mission published a few weeks ago: * it says, "It is probable too, that the suppression of the monasteries led to a larger increase in the vagrant population." Certainly the sudden removal of millions of acres and, according to Burnet, over £1,310,000 per annum from public uses to Royal or private use was an enormous economic revolution. "The suppression," says Hallam, "poured in an instant such a torrent of wealth upon the Crown, as seldom has been equalled by the confiscation following a rebellion." In Carpenter's *History of the British Peerage*, at pages 46-7 and 550-5, will be found typical cases of the enormous transfer to individuals of lands that had been serving a national purpose. Referring to this transfer, Hallam says, "if we could trace the title of their estates, they seem to have acquired no small portion of them mediately or immediately from ecclesiastical foundations." I think these Church lands were, in addition to alms to the impotent, also performing the function in the supply of employment that the new labour colonies in the present crisis are expected to perform.

The unemployed classes no longer having the help of the religious houses to give work to the able-bodied, or aid to the "impotent," began to give trouble to the State. This trouble became so serious, that the Act 27th Henry VIII. c. 25, provided "that alms should be prevented under heavy penalties." "A sturdy beggar is to be whipped for the first offence, and if he again offend, he shall suffer death as a felon." An act of the 14th of Elizabeth continued the penalties—amendments had to be passed by which the penalties were mitigated, but the principle of treating the poor as enemies was maintained, and at last in substitution for the employment given by the Church on the land—the great source of wealth—the modern Poor Law was established—which made the recipients paupers and supplied their support, not from the pockets of the newly enriched owners of the confiscated land, but out of the pockets of the general mass of the people. As to the repudiation of their responsibilities Hallam says, p. 54, vol. 1., "it was a very natural theme of complaint that such abundant revenues as might have sustained the dignity of the Crown and supplied the means of public defence without burdening the subject had served little other purpose than that of swelling the fortunes of rapacious courtiers—and had left the King as necessitous and craving as before." In 1601 an Act was passed, making a levy or "poor rate," and appointing guardians in every parish in England. Thus commenced the present Poor Law System. The Act was so faulty, it was amended one hundred and thirty times. But it was still bad.

After many failures, came Gilbert's Act of 1782. This revived the wholesome principle of giving employment—not charity—to the able-bodied, for it enacted:* “The guardians are expressly forbidden to *send any, but* the impotent to the poor-house, and were bound to provide suitable employment near the homes of the people.” That was easier said than done. The land—the great and fertile source of employment—was monopolised by the few, and the multitude as far as it was concerned were prevented from carrying out the divine decree, “to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow.” On this subject, of the right to earn, one of the greatest writers on the social questions of the day, the late Pope Leo XIII., said in his celebrated Encyclical on Labour:—“Man is older than the State, and he holds the right of providing for the life of his body prior to the formation of any State.” But failing the means of employing the people on the lands near their homes, a new Act was passed in 1834 providing: “That every able-bodied person requiring relief, shall be relieved only in the work-house of the Union,” and since then really commenced the system of paupers and poor-houses.

The system by its failure to achieve its object is now being challenged in both countries, and is the subject of censure from the Bench and Press, and more than one commission has been appointed to enquire into it. Many of the poor are not employed or fed. An eminent statesman lately declared, that there are in these countries always about 12,000,000 on the brink of starvation. And yet the cost of its administration is excessive. In England, it appears from the account of the Local Government Board for last year as against £4,825,044 spent on relief £2,561,803 or more than 50 per cent. was absorbed in cost of management and other expenses.

The waste is notorious. In its issue of the 21st January last, the *London Daily Telegraph* drew attention to the extravagance in the Poplar Union, where the consolidated rates stand at 12s. 6d. in the pound. Every article of consumption was purchased at the highest figure, and the writer truly said, contrasting the position of those within and those without the poor-house walls: “The whole system is an imposition on the honest working man.” For the working man, be it remembered, pays his rates in his rent, and is thereby affected by their amount. From Poplar in England let me come to Limerick in evidence of the expense and anomalies. In all the boroughs in Ireland, the highest standard Poor Rate under the Local Government Act was struck for Limerick, being 2s. 9½d. in the pound. And what is the opinion of the system from the County Court Judge.

* W. F. Fowle on Poor Law, p. 68.

On a very recent occasion he is reported to have said :—“ That of all the scandals in Ireland, the Work-house System is the most scandalous, and if the Irish people ever get a Parliament of their own, the first thing they should do would be to pull down the work-house.” And here let me say a few words as to its introduction into this country. That took place in 1838. At first O’Connell and the Catholic bishops were opposed to it. But when the great Dr. Doyle, Bishop of Kildare, saw that there was no other refuge for the evicted tenants, he advocated a Poor Law System. His scheme aimed at giving employment to the able-bodied, rather than alms. But the English System was forced upon the country. Dr. Doyle was mindful of the allocation of Church property, for he said :* “ That it was held in trust, that it was bequeathed to our ancestors in part and principally for the education and maintenance of the poor, and that so long as the State withheld it from them, the people should not look for rest, nor the government enjoy repose.” Apart from the opinion of prelates or patriots let me quote the prophecy contained in that learned review, the *Dublin University Magazine*, p. 452, vol. XII., 1838, “ The law will afford no relief, and it will take away heart as well as means from those whose purses are now open, who will be taxed heavily not to relieve distress—but to maintain a costly train of overseers, guardians, and commissioners.”

The short-comings of the system were ably set forth by the late Lord Emly, then Mr. Monsell, M.P. for Limerick, and Dr. Phelan, an ex-Inspector of great experience. But their opinions were set aside and the report of a committee who in comparison with them knew little of Ireland adopted. The extravagance and waste in Ireland is as bad as that in England. In the last Local Government Report it appears that as against £641,553 given in relief no less than £347,180 was absorbed in administration and expenses or, as in England, over 50 per cent. I know that in the latter item some things are included which might undoubtedly be called relief. But the absolute sum spent on relief proper, is as I have given it.

The three classes demanding relief or employment may be divided into the indigent “cant-works,” the honest “want-works” and the hardened “wont-works.”

CANT-WORKS.

For the indigent impotent from any cause there must of course be relief, not work. For this I would suggest local institutions and a central authority for the entire country. I would also suggest not a local but a national rate. The

* Life of Dr. Doyle, by Fitzpatrick, Vol. ii., p. 275.

former becomes an intolerable burden on poor districts, and the greater the poverty the heavier the burden. In France by recent legislation a system is prescribed for this class by a national instead of a local rate. And thus the burden is shared by the wealthy portion of the nation instead of falling entirely on the poorest districts. I prefer a rate to philanthropy for two reasons, first it is not charity, and secondly, the heartless are compelled to pay as well as the kind-hearted.

WANT WORKS.

Next in the category comes the able-bodied "want-works," whose cry in England to-day is "Work, not Charity." It is a curious coincidence that about 60 years ago, before and after the black '47, this was the cry of the Irish people—work, not charity. In his work on the industrial resources of Ireland the late Sir Robert Kane, then Dr. Kane,* tells the following story of Lough Allen district: "The picture, as I saw it some two years since, has never left my mind—the patches of cultivation, small and rare, far from relieving the aspect of the scene, seemed but to render its dreariness more oppressive. The melancholy solitude of my walk was only broken by the approach of some wretched men, who had heard of the phenomenon of a stranger's presence in their wilds, and pressed around, asking whether I was about to do anything for the country,—to give employment. Alas, it was not in my power. As I walked on there lay around my path masses of iron ore equally rich with the best employed in England. I knew that in those hills whose desolate aspect weighed upon my mind, there were concealed all the materials for successful industry. A population starving and eager to be employed at any price."

So also spoke Wm. Smith O'Brien at the approach of the famine. "I congratulate you," he said to the people, "that the universal sentiment hitherto exhibited has been that we will accept no charity. The resources of the country are abundantly adequate to maintain our population, and until these resources have been utterly exhausted I hope there is no man in Ireland who will so degrade himself as to ask for a subscription."

So say the unemployed in England to-day. "Work, not Charity." This problem of developing the resources of nature and employing the people has been well solved in other countries in Europe, and in consequence, employment, forms a substitute for the Poor Law system of this country. In a communication kindly sent me from the

Government officials in Berlin last October: I find "that it is a main principle that persons capable of working are not to be considered as a rule as persons requiring relief." Only in exceptional cases and after careful examination is their case attended to. The examination has absolutely to decide whether the applicant honestly but fruitlessly endeavoured to maintain himself by his own industry. As a matter of course it is the duty of every board to procure work for applicants who are able to work and for the time unemployed. "Thus," he continues, "in late years there have sprung up in Germany numerous employment agencies which are supported in part by the local authorities and in part by philanthropic sources. A working arrangement is offered. We are convinced that the relief of persons capable of work tends to pauperise them and we are therefore very cautious in administering it."

From similar information obtained from the Labour Department in Washington I learn: "Each State has its own system of dealing with employment and relief. The Federal (or, as we would call it in these countries, the Imperial Government), has no jurisdiction." It wisely attends to imperial affairs. The indigent unemployable are classed as "dependent." My correspondent "considers that relief to the able-bodied tends to pauperise them"—and there exists a system of labour bureaus for inquiring where work can be found for the able-bodied rather than charity. But in the States and in other countries there is not much difficulty for the labour bureaus in procuring work. As a typical example of what is done in Europe I may cite Germany. In addition to numerous and increasing town industries there is the great industry of the land. Nearly every rood of cultivable land is tilled, and all waste and mountain land is planted. Any one visiting Germany must be struck by this fact. It certainly did strike the intelligent deputation of artizans who went over from Birmingham to Berlin last year to inquire into the comparative social and industrial position of the brassfounders in that city. Their experience is published in a pamphlet entitled a "Comparison," and is well worth the reading and the rs. paid for it.

In an able introduction the editor, himself a working man, says, "In travelling through Prussia or Northern Germany, one is struck with the condition of the land, hardly an acre is uncultivated. There are five golf links in Germany, and over one thousand in the United Kingdom. It is difficult to find land for a golf course, so well is the country laid out for agricultural purposes. There are no stately oak or elm trees to please the eye, the timber being mostly grown for commerce, and largely for fuel." Regarding the commercial aspect of wood culture alone in Germany,

I may mention that, according to Mr. Nesbit, the well-known arborist, over £18,000,000 worth of timber is annually imported into these kingdoms, which, he says, could be well grown at home.

But, as to employment from this source, German statistics show that 26 per cent. of the country is under wood, and 12 per cent. of the population employed in forest work; and, including allied industries, over £30,000,000 a year is spent in wages, supporting four-and-a-half millions of people. The value of the German forests as a national asset, is computed at £900,000,000. I could cite other instances in many countries, but shall select that of France. The report of the Recess Committee on Industries for Ireland, published in 1896, says* :—

“As an illustration of what has been actually effected upon waste lands within a moderate lapse of time, we may cite the case of the Landes district in France. It was calculated that the planting of those low-lying lands would add some £40,000,000 to the wealth of France. We quote from the report of the County Council of the Garonne to the Forestry Department of the French Ministry of Agriculture in 1882: This is one of the most beautiful pages in the history of civilization and progress—a region which thirty years ago, was one of the poorest and most miserable in France, but which may now be reckoned amongst the wealthy and prosperous. Where thirty years ago a few thousand poor and unhealthy shepherds were walking about on stilts, there are now villages with sawmills, wood-working factories, charcoal kilns; and for more than seventy miles are seen these vast forests interspersed with fertile agricultural land, where farmers and foresters by the thousand are finding a healthy and prosperous existence.” Let us contrast this development in France with the neglect of it in Ireland. In 1885 I was present at the Select Parliamentary Committee on the Industries of Ireland, called after its chairman, the Eardley-Wilmot Committee. Mr. Wm. K. Sullivan, late president of Queen’s College, Cork, the greatest authority on the development of Ireland, gave evidence. In answer to Dr. Lyons, the then member for Dublin, on the subject of planting in this country, he said: “About thirty years ago I recommended the Government to plant the mountain sides instead of spending money on useless Model Schools, but the views of doctrinaires who knew nothing about Ireland prevailed, and nothing was done,” and he continued, “if it had been done, Ireland would be thirty millions richer than she is to-day.” In addition, at the same time, Mr. Howitz, a Danish expert,

*p. 26.

reported to the House of Commons on February 1884: "I think the question of planting in Ireland is one of vital importance to that country, and that instead of having five millions of people, she might have twenty-five." The Recess Committee also says: "Had the forests of Ireland been properly protected and fostered in former times, Mr. Howitz thinks they would now represent a value of £100,000,000."

The thirty years referred to by Dr. Sullivan are gone—and another twenty years and more have passed, and nothing has been done—in a matter which an intelligent expert declared was "one of vital importance to this country."

There is another remedy for want of employment and consequent poverty in England as well as Ireland—and that is the tillage of the uncultivated soil. That substitute is now being adopted in many places in England. That great philanthropist, General Booth, said some time ago: "I will bring the landless man to the manless land." The General meant Queensland—but the rejoinder was made by a "voice," "We have lots of manless land at home." And so attention is now being turned to farm colonies, garden cities, etc. at home. On this subject of manless land, a famous statistician, Prince Krapotkin, says in his work on *The Possibilities of Agriculture*, p. 61:—

' Taking Harrow as the centre of my excursions, I could walk five miles round London, or, turning my back upon it, I could see nothing east or west but meadow land, on which they hardly cropped two tons of hay per acre."

" Man is conspicuous by his absence."

" And that within ten miles of Charing Cross, close to a city with 5,000,000 inhabitants, supplied with Flemish and Jersey potatoes, French salad, and Canadian apples."

" In the hands of Paris gardeners each thousand acres situated within the same distance from the city would be cultivated by at least two thousand human beings, who would produce vegetables to the value of £50 to £300 per acre."

" But here the acres, which only need human hands to become an inexhaustible source of golden crops, lie idle, and they say to us, 'Heavy clay,' without knowing that in the hands of man there are no unfertile soils; that the most fertile soils are not in the prairies of America, nor in the Russian steppes; *that they are in the peat bogs of Ireland, on the sand downs of the northern sea coast of France, or on the craggy mountains of the Rhine.*"

" England in her hour of need will regret the day she let England and Ireland fall out of tillage culture, which could provide ample food for their populations. *Every country in Europe, except England and Ireland, can feed its own population without foreign importation.*"

Lest these ideas may appear extravagant I desire to quote the words of a great authority, uttered in this Society over fifty years ago by the late Judge Lawson. In 1849, he said in referring to the usual cry of emigration as a cure for distress. "Over-population has no existence. There is no over-population, but enough of under-cultivation. There are people able to work, and land able to produce, and they are not brought in contact. It should be our duty to hold out some inducement to our people to remain at home, and devote to the cultivation of our own neglected soil, the energies which are now enriching the Transatlantic world." Therefore, I believe the solution of the present want of employment, and of the worse than useless Poor Law System is to be found in the advice of such reformers as Rider Haggard, the Countess of Warwick, General Booth, and others—"to go back to the land."

However, until this great revolution takes place, we must organize means of helping the indigent can't works by relief—employing the "want works" profitably for themselves and the community, and forcing the "won't works" to earn their bread.

Amongst the many ways in which the "want works" and the "won't works" are dealt with, I found the clearest and most successful in use in Switzerland. It is admirably described in a report of Mr. Preston Thomas presented in 1904 to the then Chairman of the English Local Government Board, Mr. Walter Hume Long, M.P.

The general principle is "that if an able-bodied man is without means and genuinely in search of work—and his papers are in good order—he will on application be supported by the police (or by the Cantonal Union) with food and lodging, and will, if possible, have work indicated to him. If he cannot obtain any he will be passed on to the next town. The papers referred to must amongst other information show that the applicant has worked for an employer within the previous three months. Every traveller must have a certificate from his employer stating the period of his employment.

"No work is expected from the applicant relieved, but the man is assisted to get it and is speeded on his way"—and then the writer of the report says the advice of Victor Hugo is carried out "to give the help which strengthens instead of the alms which debase."

Furnished with his papers in order the workman may wander over most of Switzerland if in genuine search of work, and will be sufficiently fed and suitably lodged on application at any of the stations which the Union has established."

But, as in Germany, the finding of work in Switzerland is not a difficult matter. The reason for this can be found

in the following work of the Hon. G. C. Broderick on the *Land Systems of Europe*, published by the Cobden Club in 1881: "The quantity of land usually held (by small proprietors) varies from six to twelve acres. Yet instead of being pauperised the Swiss are proverbial for successful enterprise at home and abroad. It is difficult to say whether the purely agricultural peasantry of Switzerland or the operative classes living on their own little freeholds in the manufacturing districts offer the most remarkable examples of industry and thrift, intelligence and comfort, widely diffused throughout the whole country—and it may be safely affirmed that if Swiss habits and industry could be transplanted into England agricultural distress would almost cease to be possible."

Manufactures of every kind are going on side by side with agriculture. There are the textile industries, watch-making, machinery, wood carving, giving employment to thousands

THE WONT WORKS.

But even here in this hive of industry not scarcity but the indiscriminate charity of the ceaseless tourists who visit this "play-ground of Europe"—withdrew many from industry to begging. This little well-governed republic has almost rooted out the idle vagrant class. Begging is prohibited, but work in forced labour colonies is provided. Mr. Thomas describes this system very clearly. It contrasts strikingly with the horror of our casual wards under the Poor Law System. He opens his remarks on the subject of forced labour farms by saying: The great fact that mendicancy in Switzerland has of late years declined to an extraordinary extent, cannot be proved by statistics—for they don't exist—but it is generally admitted. "But from my own experience I am able to say since 1861 it has been obvious to me that whereas beggars used to abound they have been steadily decreasing up to the present time."

The police are bound to arrest beggars and to bring them before a competent court. That court may send them to gaol or to a forced labour institution. He then describes one of these, "the farm at Witzwyl. It occupies an area of about 2000 acres in the plain lying at the foot of the Jura mountain. It used to consist of water-logged soil subject to inundations but extensive works of reclamation have been carried out and at the present time at least two-thirds of it is under cultivation, and produces considerable crops. It is under the control of the police of Berne and receives persons sentenced by the criminal courts. It included some convicted of habitual tramping (the vagrants of our country) who refused to work. All inmates *must* work on the farm. There are workshops, but only men brought up to trades

work in them. The guiding principle," says the report, "is to improve the land by man and the man by the land." As to the result to the land Mr. Thomas says, "When the land was originally taken over in 1856 the valuation amounted to £200, it has now risen to £17,385. But" says Mr. Thomas, "the land has been improved by man.—but the more important question is whether the improvement of man by the land is also secured?"

The able and resourceful director, Mr. Otto Kellerhaier, says in answer: "Most offenders are the result of disinclination to work," and he has found that this has been cured by such varied agricultural operations as are carried on. "When a man sees the products of his labour which have grown up before his eyes he is induced to exert himself, and is stimulated in a fashion which contrasts with the leaden monotony of such occupations as stone breaking or corn-grinding." It is certainly better than the oakum picking and stone-breaking of the casual wards, so fully condemned in the last report of the English Vagrancy Commission.

Another and interesting institution is the forced labour farm in the neighbourhood of St. Gallene. A great portion of the work there is planting. Mr. Thomas says: "About half the work of the inmates on the farm is devoted to the growth of trees and shrubs from seeds. Thousands of young pines are annually sold for planting in the neighbouring forests." Summing up his report on the forced labour farm, Mr. Thomas says, "the value of labour is claimed to be equivalent to a sum of four francs per day for each man employed; whereas if the men were allowed to rove about the country they would do nothing useful. But now considerable tracts of land have been converted from almost marsh to a high state of cultivation. Men who have not only been unproductive but troublesome and costly members of the community were at any rate being brought into habits of regular work, and at some of the farms supported not only themselves but the whole establishment." What a contrast to the ruinous social and financial results of our Poor Law System!

It should be abolished. Let the land of England and Ireland be opened up to the labour of the people. Let labour stations be established to indicate employment to the "want works." Let the "won't works" be sent to forced labour farms to make them work, and, at the same time, to develop the National resources and to increase the National wealth.

And these suggestions I humbly submit.