

SHOULD BOARDS OF GUARDIANS

ENDRAVOUR TO MAKE

PAUPER LABOUR SELF-SUPPORTING,

OR SHOULD THEY

INVESTIGATE THE CAUSES OF PAUPERISM?

A PAPER READ

BEFORE THE

STATISTICAL SECTION OF THE BRITISH ASSOCIATION,

AT

IPSWICH, JULY 7<sup>TH</sup>, 1851.

BY

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DUBLIN:

Published for the Dublin Statistical Society,  
BY HODGES AND SMITH, 104, GRAFTON STREET.

1851

Statistical Section of the British Association for the  
Advancement of Science.

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*Should Boards of Guardians endeavour to make pauper-labour self-supporting, or should they investigate the causes of Pauperism?* By W. Neilson Hancock, LL. D.

Whatever speculative opinions may have been entertained as to the necessity of establishing poor laws in Ireland, the subject may be considered as set at rest for the present by the History of the Irish Famine. At no former period of history, and in no other country, was the moral duty which the prosperous classes owe to the indigent more universally or more efficiently recognized. Public contributions of the most enormous amount were raised in England, in the United States of America, throughout the Continent of Europe as far as Turkey, in the British Possessions in India, and in the distant Australian Colonies. These contributions were everywhere given voluntarily, by parties who had no direct or personal interest in the matter, and who ran no risk from the dangers of pauperism, either to their persons or their properties. These contributions were given from motives of humanity and benevolence, from a recognition of the moral duty to relieve all who are suffering from extreme want.

Before the famine, it was thought by many that private benevolence was sufficient to relieve all destitution. Such persons would appeal to the contributions I have noticed in corroboration of their views; but a more careful examination of the subject establishes that these voluntary contributions, together with all the large sums contributed in the same spirit in Ireland, though great in amount, and affording conclusive proofs of a general recognition of the duty of granting relief, would have been by themselves entirely insufficient to meet the calamity, were it not for the sums raised by taxation for the same object.

The publications of the bodies to whom the distribution of these voluntary contributions was entrusted, and especially those of the Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends, establish some very important propositions. In the first place, these bodies became, for the time being, departments of government; they found it necessary, in order to secure the wise management of their funds, to adopt all the administrative precautions which a public board should adopt. Again, these bodies had to avail themselves largely of the information, advice, and active co-operation of the Government officers connected with the relief measures; and, notwithstanding this assistance, they constantly found their operations

paralysed or entirely defeated in some places, for want of local officials to whom to entrust the distribution of their funds

The conclusion that these bodies arrived at, and which any unprejudiced person of intelligence who studies the history of the crisis must arrive at, is, that the pressure of the famine was greatly increased by there not having been a complete poor law and a complete poor law machinery in operation in Ireland before its commencement; and further, that there can be no security for destitution being adequately and completely relieved, unless the relief be undertaken by Boards of Guardians under the control of public officers.

The history of the famine discloses another set of facts respecting destitution, in the great increase of the amount of petty thefts and even of sheep-stealing and cattle-stealing, which the urgency of want gave rise to. These facts show that, independent of the moral duty, poor laws are necessary, as a measure of police, as part of the duty of Government to protect against fraud and violence. So that the necessity of establishing a system of poor laws is demonstrated.

The controversies, as well theoretical as practical, respecting the mode in which poor laws should be administered, have generally arisen from taking too narrow a view of the subject. The all-important question of the nature and extent of the public relief that should be provided for paupers, involves considerations in every department of social science. The decision of this question involves an application of the principles of moral philosophy, of the science of government, of jurisprudence, and of political economy.

Thus the duty of the prosperous to contribute towards the wants of their less fortunate brethren, which I have already dwelt on, is a principle of morals which has a place in every system of moral philosophy. Again, the conception of a poor law as a measure of protection against vagrants, and against the danger of theft and violence arising from large numbers being reduced to absolute want, is an elementary proposition in the science of government. Against individual cases of distress, private charity generally makes a sufficient provision; but for destitution in general, especially for vagrant pauperism, private charity is wholly inefficient. The dangers from leaving destitution unrelieved are sufficiently manifest, and too well established by history to require particular notice. So that there cannot be a plainer or more imperative duty incumbent on the rulers of any country pretending to civilization, than to guard, by adequate public relief, against the dangers arising from pauperism.

Once the necessity of public relief is admitted as an axiom of speculative and practical political wisdom, there arise subsidiary questions as to the manner in which this principle is to be carried into effect. By whom is this relief to be given and paid for? By the nation at large? or by the inhabitants of particular districts? If the latter, then how shall the districts be determined? Again, shall paupers be relieved where they are found destitute, where they have usually resided, or where they were born? Again, shall pau-

pers be relieved who have relatives able to support them? Or if not, to what degree of relationship shall liability be attached? And, lastly, how shall the persons who ought to be relieved be ascertained? Or, in other words, what are the best tests of destitution? Now these are all questions of pure jurisprudence. And their decision leads to laws respecting national rates, (such as the rate-in-aid,) union rates, electoral division rates, laws of settlement, laws attaching liability in the direct and not in the collateral degrees of relationship, and lastly, laws imposing labour tests or workhouse tests of relief.

When the poor laws once get into full operation, new questions arise. The governing classes in the community stand in a new relation to paupers receiving relief, entirely different from the relation between them and independent labourers, free to act and able to pay for intellectual, moral, and religious instruction. This relation involves new moral duties.

These duties are increased if paupers are confined in a workhouse as a test of destitution, and are still greater towards pauper children, who have not only to be fed and clothed, but to be educated and trained up to be useful members of the community. The very name that is given to those delegated with the power of administering poor laws—Guardians of the Poor—implies a large amount of moral duty incident to the office. What are the nature and extent of these duties, and how they ought to be discharged, are questions that are to be answered from the principles of moral philosophy.

Suppose, again, the necessity of a poor law to be admitted, the rules for its administration to be laid down, and the guardians to be instructed in the nature and extent of their moral duties; suppose all this to be in the most perfect operation, still other and more difficult questions remain to be considered. What effect has relief in general, or any particular mode of relief, on the condition of those classes who are not destitute, and who are consequently not directly within the operation of a poor law? What are the causes of destitution? How does it happen that in a highly civilized state of society such large numbers of our fellow-men should be absolutely unable to earn their daily bread?

These questions may, in scientific language, be stated thus:—What effect has a known system of poor laws, or a known mode of administering them, on the wages, the profit, and the rent of those classes who have an income arising from one or all of these sources, in other words, who are not paupers? And again, as pauperism implies the absence of wealth, the inability to get wages, profit, or rent, an investigation into the causes of pauperism is an application of the theories of wages, of profit, and of rent, and of the science of wealth to a particular class of cases; so that these latter questions I am referring to really belong to the science of political economy.

Having premised these general observations, I now approach the

questions to which I propose especially to direct your attention in this paper. Should boards of guardians endeavour to make pauper labour self-supporting, or should they investigate the causes of pauperism?

The first of these questions is beginning to require serious attention. It has been raised in England by the Sheffield board of guardians, and by the Chorlton board. In Scotland it has been raised by Dr. Alison, in the very interesting paper which he read at the last meeting of this Association, on the employment of paupers on waste lands. In Ireland, several boards of guardians, amongst which I may mention those of Cork, Thurles, and Banbridge, have introduced various manufactures, with the avowed object of making the paupers self-supporting, and of undertaking by them a great industrial enterprise. All these movements indicate a desire to try if any thing can be done with the existing mass of pauperism.

The two opinions I have indicated by my questions are not so diametrically opposed to one another, as to be absolutely inconsistent. The same person might endeavour to make pauper labour self-supporting, and might also investigate the causes of pauperism. But the conduct of those who hold the one theory is directly opposed to the conduct of those who hold the other opinion.

Those who believe that pauperism can be made self-supporting do not consider it to be a very serious evil, and attach scarcely any importance to inquiries into its causes. Those, on the other hand, who believe that the existence of an able-bodied pauper class can be entirely got rid of by the effectual removal of the causes of pauperism, attach extreme importance to such investigations, and take very little interest in plans for making pauperism, during its transient existence, self-supporting. Again, those who believe that pauperism can never be made self-supporting look upon it as a most serious and alarming evil, and necessarily pursue with the greatest zeal all inquiries into its causes, as the only complete means of mitigating its effects. So the real point at issue in all these opinions is, can pauper labour be made self-supporting? Or, in other words, can industrial enterprises be successfully carried on by paupers? In considering this point, I propose to direct your attention to those circumstances on which the decision of this question seems to me to depend.

First, the nature of pauper labour;

Secondly, the capacity of boards of guardians to act as capitalists;

Thirdly, the effect of industrial enterprises on the tests of destitution; and,

Fourthly, the connection between self-supporting pauperism and communism.

As to the first point; from the very nature of the case, pauper labour must always be of the most inferior description, must always be the very worst of its class. Paupers consist, in the first instance,

of children, who form the largest class; then of aged and infirm persons; then of able-bodied women; and the smallest class, in every workhouse in Ireland, is that of able-bodied men.

Now the children, as a class, are generally inferior to the same number of children of the working classes outside, from causes that I need not dwell on. The able-bodied women are all fully employed in attending on the children, the sick, and the infirm; in keeping the house clean, and performing the other usual household duties incident to any establishment, great or small. The only class for industrial enterprises is that of the able-bodied men; and in some well-managed unions in the north of Ireland, where there is a reasonable amount of prosperity, there are not now any able-bodied male paupers. In the workhouses where there is such a class of paupers, they are necessarily the men who have been unable to get employment, who have been rejected by private employers selecting others as better workmen.

Here, then, the first difficulty in the way of making pauper labour self-supporting is the inferiority of the labour. When the rate of wages outside the workhouse is so low, as the existence of an able-bodied pauper class proves it to be, how can inferior workmen earn as much in a workhouse as superior workmen outside? And if they do not earn as much, how can their labour be called self-supporting?

But we have next to consider the capacity of boards of guardians to act as capitalists. Now all the objections to public companies undertaking common commercial projects apply to a board of guardians. To those who are familiar with the teachings of Adam Smith on this subject,\* I need not dwell on the point—that it is only those few kinds of business which require enormous capital, which are more profitable than ordinary occupations, and which admit of being reduced to routine, such as banking, insurance, and the making of canals, and railways, that are suited for a public company.

A board of guardians has less chance of being successful than the directors of a company. Besides having an extremely small interest in the result, they are not even paid for their services, and are not elected on account of their knowledge of any particular industrial undertakings. To expect that Boards of Guardians can manage industrial enterprises successfully, so as to make pauper labour self-supporting, when they have to compete with the enterprise and skill of private capitalists, is about the wildest expectation that could possibly be entertained. As to the particular business so strongly advocated in England, and so favourably thought of by Dr Alison, the cultivation of waste land, we have the most conclusive proof of the inability of public bodies to manage such a business, even with paid labour. The Commissioners of Woods and Forests attempted the reclamation of some crown lands near King Wilham's Town in the south of Ireland, but the result turned

\* "*Wealth of Nations*," b 5, ch. 1.

out anything but profitable.\* Again, the Waste Land Improvement Company, under the patronage of noblemen and landed proprietors, was in public favour for several years, but it has turned out a complete failure; and not only the shareholders, but even the creditors of the company, are likely to lose by it † With such examples of failure before us, what hope is there for a Board of Guardians, employing pauper labour, being successful in the cultivation of waste land? Indeed it is not easy to conceive any business more singularly unsuited for such a Board to undertake. The cultivation of waste land requires constant personal industry. Then the whole value of the result of the reclamation is so small, that it will not pay for any expensive superintendence.

I now, however, approach the third consideration—the effect of Guardians undertaking industrial enterprises on the working of tests of destitution. In most of the workhouses where industrial enterprises have been attempted, it has been found necessary to offer some inducement to the paupers employed beyond the support they are entitled to in common with all paupers. And if these enterprises were continued for any time, the guardians would either lose all their trained workmen, and so make the speculation unprofitable, or else would have to offer them inducements, greater than ordinary wages outside, to induce them to stay.

Should this plan be adopted, and there is the strongest temptation to adopt it, nay, at present, its partial adoption is actually proposed by some boards,—should it be adopted, the condition of the pauper would become more eligible than that of the independent labourer; and the industrial workhouse, instead of being a test of destitution, would become a bounty on pauperism.

The advocates of pauper industrial establishments can be reduced to this dilemma. The condition of the pauper engaged in such an establishment must be on the whole either more or less eligible than that of the independent labourer outside. If it be less eligible, how can the pauper be expected to work as hard as the labourer; or should he be able to do so, can he be expected to continue a pauper? If the condition of the pauper be more eligible, will not such a system break down the independence of the labouring classes, increase pauperism, and destroy all the profit arising from a few laborious paupers, by an increase in the numbers of those claiming relief?

This is no imaginary case. Under the old English Poor Law, the attempt to make pauper labour productive, by letting out the paupers to the farmers, produced the very effects that I am suggesting as necessary to be guarded against. The condition of the pauper was made more eligible than that of the independent labourer, and the result was that the labourers of whole parishes

\* Since this paper was read, a parliamentary paper has been issued giving an account of the crown lands at King William's town.

† Notices have recently appeared in the newspapers, of this company being under the operation of the Joint Stock Companies' Winding Up Act.

were pauperized. The rates rose to an enormous amount, and it was to check this evil that the workhouse test was introduced, and the whole machinery of the Poor Law Amendment Act created.

But to come to the last consideration which I mentioned. Those who maintain that pauper labour can be made self-supporting, really maintain that communism can beat competition. For how stands the case? The paupers, being unable to support themselves by competition, seek relief. When brought together in a workhouse, under the management of a board which has very little interest in the result, it is thought that they can immediately become able to support themselves. But the position of paupers in a workhouse, with their remuneration not regulated by the value of their labour, but by the will of a superior order of men, is precisely that of a community on the system of St. Simon. To maintain that they can support themselves in the latter case, and not in the former, is to maintain that St. Simonism is better than competition.

So that, unless inferior labour can beat superior labour, unless companies can beat individuals in common occupations, unless tests of destitution are useless, and unless communism can be more successful than competition, it is vain to expect that pauper labour can be made self-supporting, or that industrial undertakings can be successfully accomplished by paupers.

If we enquire how an opinion so plainly mistaken came to be received at all, we shall, I think, find its existence accounted for by the prevalence of a very erroneous theory brought forward to oppose it; and hence, by a common fallacy, from the falsehood of this theory the truth of the other was inferred.

The theory to which I refer is, that paupers ought to be kept in absolute idleness, or be employed only at unproductive work. Dr. Alison, who has written an elaborate pamphlet\* to disprove this theory, has only partially seen the fallacy of it.

Thus, he says:—"In attending to these subjects, I have long observed that two speculative opinions, adopted I have no doubt in the most conscientious spirit, have in a great measure guided the conduct of most of those who have had power to influence the condition of the poor in these countries, both of which appear to me to be utterly fallacious, viz.—First, the belief that all profitable improvements in agriculture can only be carried into effect in large farms; and secondly, the belief that all labour of paupers ought to be absolutely unproductive; whereas it appears to me that such labour may be both safely and beneficially made productive; provided only that the commodities produced by it are such as, but for its existence, would not have been produced at all, and are therefore added to the productions of the nation; not substituted for those raised by independent labourers."

This notion, that pauper labour ought to be kept unproductive, arose partly from a mistake as to the causes of pauperism,—from a belief that pauperism is caused by over-production; in other

\* *Observations on the Reclamation of Waste Lands*, &c., 1850.

words, from a belief that there can be a general glut of all commodities. But all investigations into the causes of pauperism show that it arises from under-production, or from production misdirected. This notion of the necessity of keeping pauper labour unproductive arose in part, also, from a well-founded conviction of the great evils arising from pauper industrial enterprises, with no adequate tests of destitution. The principle, however, was never completely carried out in practice. The entire domestic work of the various poor-law establishments has always been performed by paupers, and it has never been proposed to substitute paid labour for the labour of paupers in this species of industry, which is as productive as any manufacture that has been carried on in the workhouses.

Dr. Alison's distinction, that paupers should only be employed in the production of those commodities that but for their employment would not have been produced at all, is very difficult to understand. For everything they can possibly produce must be considered as the result of their employment, and as not likely to have any existence but for that employment; and everything produced must have an effect more or less on the demand for the products of independent labour. The truth is, that the more productively the paupers are employed, provided the tests of destitution are not relaxed, the better for the community.

The moral and economical view of this question exactly coincide. It is the duty of the guardians to keep those under their care actively employed, since nothing can be more demoralizing than a life of idleness, and nothing can more effectually weaken the force of the workhouse as a test, than making it a place where indolence is indulged. Again, if the paupers are to be employed, the same moral principles point out that they should be employed as productively as possible. Because nothing could be more dispiriting, nothing could be more calculated to make them sullen and discontented, than to employ them at useless work as a mere test of destitution. They were sometimes employed under the old poor law in England in wheeling stones from one quarry to another, and then back again; but such work was looked upon as being, and really was, mere cruelty.

For moral reasons, therefore, the paupers should always be convinced that the work they do is not imposed on them as cruelty, but is resorted to for the sake of the saving in the expense of their support.

In an economic point of view, the saving of the rates, and the additional amount which the rate-payers will have to spend on the products of paid labour, will be in exact proportion to the degree of productiveness of the labour of the paupers. How it could ever be believed that the wealth of the community would be increased by keeping a number of people in idleness, is difficult to understand. In proportion as their work is productive, or, in other words, in proportion to the saving in the cost of their support, will be the degree of satisfaction that they will have in being usefully

employed, and the degree of moral improvement in their characters. But although pauper labour ought to be made as productive as possible, it is, from the considerations I have already pointed out, hopeless to expect that it can ever be made self-supporting.

From this hopeless enterprise, of endeavouring to make it so, let us turn to the wide field of exertion that is open for the philanthropist and the statesman in the discovery and removal of the causes of pauperism. And it is manifest that it is especially the duty of Boards of Guardians to turn their attention to the investigations that will lead to such causes being discovered and removed.

In a paper\* which I had the honor of reading at the last meeting of this association, I pointed out some of the causes of distress in Ireland. I have dwelt on the same subject in other publications†. But beyond the subjects I have noticed, there are other large fields of investigation, such as those connected with sanitary arrangements, with the savings of the poor, and with intemperance and immorality.

It is only necessary to allude to the intimate connection between the health and the economic condition of a population, to perceive the importance of wise sanitary arrangements. The crowded state of workhouse hospitals, the number of widows and orphans in the workhouses in Ireland, disclose too painfully how much pauperism is produced by the long sickness of the head of a family, or by his early death. In estimating the condition of a country, the wealth arising from the longevity of a population is commonly overlooked. But the advantage of a long-lived over a short-lived population is very great, especially in the value of labour. The same period of helpless infancy, of unstructed youth, of learning to labour, has to be gone through whether the labourers live to an average age of forty or sixty. When to this simple advantage is added the value of practised skill, and of experience in all occupations, it appears at once how great is the increase of wealth that arises from longevity alone.

In Ireland one of the sources of poverty is the early mortality amongst the labouring classes. But instead of investigations into the causes of this calamity, we have idle complaints of one of the effects of it. Thus the question why the poor die at such an early age has been left almost unnoticed, whilst the most learned disquisitions have been written to account for their marrying so young; although some very simple considerations of the effect of the family affections, confirmed by statistical observation, will prove that the average age of marriage in any class is a consequence of the average age of death amongst the same class.

Bad sanitary arrangements, in truth, constitute one of the most prolific sources of pauperism, and from the efforts indicated by the

\* "*On the Causes of Distress at Skull and Skibbereen during the Famine in Ireland:*" Hodges and Smith, Dublin. 1850.

† In the evidence given by me before the Commons' Committee on Poor Laws, 1849, published in the 10th Report of that Committee; and also in the "*Impediments to the Prosperity of Ireland,*" Simms and McIntyre, Belfast and London, 1850.

erection of the model lodging-houses, the passing of health of towns' acts, and by the existence of sanitary committees, it is manifest that this subject is beginning to occupy that share of public attention which its importance demands.

Another most extensive source of pauperism arises from the difficulty the poor find in getting a perfectly safe investment for their savings. Nothing could be more conducive to the welfare of the labouring classes, or could be more effectual in protecting them against becoming paupers, than a general habit of saving. Were such a habit to become generally prevalent, means would be saved from a season of prosperity to provide for a time of sickness, for old age, and for widows and orphans. Since the recent failures of the savings' banks, the want of some perfectly safe mode of investment has become manifest; and although the subject has occupied a large share of public attention for nearly three years, by enquiries before a parliamentary committee, and by discussions of private parties, still no practical good has been done, and the impediments to safe investments of the poor continue as great as ever. Here, then, is another cause of pauperism requiring anxious and careful investigation.

Again, can nothing be done with these large sources of pauperism, intemperance and immorality? Here is a wide field for inquiry and exertion. It may be that direct legislation on the subject is impossible, but can nothing be done indirectly? Is any one warranted in saying, without investigation, that nothing can be done? Would not the mere inquiry, if conducted in a proper spirit, into the nature and extent of these evils, and into their causes, be attended with beneficial results? If their influence could be diminished, if their progress could be stayed, how much would be done for the elevation and improvement of the poorer classes! how much for the diminution of pauperism springing from these prolific sources!

If we consider the matter rightly, it will appear that all social evils, all defects in our institutions, are to some extent, in proportion to their importance, causes of pauperism. The effects of these evils are shifted from class to class, until they come to those in the lowest place. But this class must bear them. So that an investigation into the causes of pauperism includes within its range an investigation into all our social arrangements.

The extent of the field of investigation, instead of deterring inquiry, should rather encourage it. For there is room for every inquirer, however humble his knowledge or ability, to effect something; and every improvement in social arrangements, every cause of pauperism discovered and removed, does a proportionate amount of real good, and has its effect in putting an end to that disgrace to our civilization, the existence of an able-bodied pauper class.

But though private individuals, each one according to his opportunities and capacity, can do much in these inquiries, still it is a

large part of the duty of government to conduct such investigations on the extensive scale on which public bodies alone can conduct them. In modern times this duty has been fully admitted, and to a large extent discharged, by the numerous committees of both houses of parliament and commissions appointed by the crown, that have devoted their labours to such investigations. Even where the information collected by the committees or commissions has not been carefully considered, or fully worked out by those who received it, the publication of the evidence has afforded to private inquirers materials which they would be wholly unable to procure by their own exertions.

The duty of inquiring and disseminating information on important subjects is one that, if honestly pursued, governing bodies can discharge with great advantage and with certain success. And their undertaking it does not transgress any of those limits to government interference, which political economists have discovered and pointed out.

These considerations suggest at once the conclusion which I have already noticed, that it is the especial duty of boards of guardians, as a department of Government, and as the department most directly connected with pauperism, to institute careful inquiries and disseminate accurate information as to the causes of pauperism in their respective districts.

By an enlightened conception of their duty in this important matter, and by a careful and conscientious discharge of it, boards of guardians would do infinitely more for the diminution of poor rates, and for the effectual removal of pauperism, than they will ever effect by the hopeless task of attempting to make pauper labour self-supporting.

The careful conducting of such inquiries, if undertaken from a sense of duty, and if carried out with the single-minded object of arriving at truth, would have a most salutary influence on the entire administration of our poor law. It would encourage a spirit of enlightened benevolence, and put a check to the heartless selfishness that is too often avowed and even carried out in poor law administration. Such selfishness as is manifest in the endless disputes about the settlement of paupers in England; such selfishness as leads to the transmission of paupers from England and Scotland to Ireland; such selfishness as leads men to advocate any scheme of emigration, of law of settlement, of arranging electoral divisions, provided it ends in what is called "getting rid of paupers," or provided it forces some one else, by an extra stimulus on his self-interest, to "get rid of his paupers." Until the prevalence of such selfishness be checked, the successful management of our poor laws will be difficult, if not impossible. And nothing would be so calculated to check it, nothing so calculated to secure the adoption of sound arrangements for the future, as a comprehensive and enlightened investigation into the causes of pauperism.