

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XLV

ISSUED IN FEBRUARY 1964

No. 2

Copyright 1964 by The State Historical Society of Iowa



The Irish Homeland

Ireland has been called the "soft, green isle of the ocean." Her mountains and her lakes have long been noted for their beauty. To most people the Emerald Isle suggests romance and charm. In reality, the song of Erin's harp has been one of melancholy. In proportion to total population, no other country has lost so many people by emigration.

Ireland was first invaded in 1169. Since then the country has been conquered several times. Land was confiscated and distributed to new owners time after time. In the middle of the seventeenth century, the Irish were near extinction. After Cromwell's conquest and resettlement of the island only about one-half million Irish survived.

Many thought Ireland's status would improve with the enactment of the Act of Union of 1801. The two countries, England and Ireland, were made one. The Irish economy was to be assimilated into that of England, and the Parliament at Westminster would legislate for both.

Actually, the result was very different. Ireland seemed to be brought more into subjection. To many, Ireland was "the lonely and the lovely Bride, whom [the English] have wedded, but have never won." At the time of Union, she was compared to an heiress who was dragged, protesting, to the altar.

Ireland had a phenomenal growth in population during the early 19th century. Between 1779 and 1841 the increase has been estimated at 172 per cent. At the time of the famine in 1845 there may well have been nine million Irish.

Two-thirds of Ireland was largely dependent upon agriculture. Farms were divided and subdivided frequently. In 1841 forty-five per cent of the people had only one to five acres and only seven per cent had over thirty acres. One man in Donegal had his land in forty-two places. In Lisceanawn, County Mayo, there were 167 acres divided into 330 portions, each of 110 inhabitants having three portions.

Manufacturing was largely limited to the Belfast linen industry. Flax growing and weaving were carried on in the surrounding districts. Fisheries were as yet undeveloped.

Poverty and misery were common. It was reported,

In many districts their only food is the potato, their only beverage water . . . their cabins are seldom a protection against the weather . . . a bed or a blanket is a rare lux-

ury . . . and in nearly all their pig and a manure heap constitute their only real property.

In parts of Ireland more than three-fifths of the houses were one-roomed, windowless mud cabins.

Another writer described conditions as follows:

Cabins of single rooms are frequently occupied by a large family, with sometimes a widow or an old man lodging with them, or occupied altogether by several widows, or by one or more, and one or two old men, and all (pigs included) sleeping in the different corners of the room. The families are those of labourers, who generally get but very little employment; and the old men and widows subsist chiefly by begging, except those who are wholly or in part supported by their children, who give them all that they can spare of the wages they earn at service.

The evicted and the unemployed — more than two million had no regular employment — put roofs over ditches, burrowed into banks and existed in bog holes. Others swarmed into the slums of the towns where “they die in a little time.” Furniture was a luxury. In 1837 the nine thousand inhabitants of Tullahobagly, County Donegal, had only ten beds, 93 chairs and 243 stools among them.

The pre-famine Irish were not all gloomy. Sir Walter Scott said “their natural condition is turned toward gaiety and happiness.” He found “perpetual kindness in the Irish cabin; buttermilk, potatoes, a stool is offered, or a stone is rolled that your honour may sit down.”

Long winter evenings were spent in their cabins, fiddling, talking and telling stories. Illicit whiskey apparently was plentiful. "If there be a market to attend, a fair or a funeral, a horse race, a fight or a wedding, all else is neglected and forgotten."

As has been mentioned, potatoes were eaten by all. With a spade one could grow enough on an acre and a half to feed a family of six for a year. This was unfortunate when the potato blight appeared in 1845. In October of that year several counties reported that "potatoes bought a few days ago, seemingly remarkably good, have rotted."

The next year was worse. In Galway the people "were like walking skeletons, the men stamped with the livid marks of hunger, the children crying with pain, the women, in some of the cabins, too weak to stand. . . . all the sheep were gone, all the cows, all the poultry killed; only one pig left, the very dogs had disappeared."

Another wrote,

Some of the women and children that we saw on the road were abject cases of poverty and almost naked. The rags they had on were with the greatest difficulty held together, and in a few weeks, as they are utterly unable to provide themselves with fresh clothes unless they be given them, they must become absolutely naked.

Bishop Loras, when he visited Ireland in 1849, was moved by the misery of the Irish.

The scene of poverty in some quarters was wonderful; and I am told it is still worse in other counties. I saw many

cottages covered with straw and half buried in the ground, and occupied by poor Catholic tenants who cultivated in the sweat of their brow small fields divided by poor green hedges or half tumbled walls. . . . Many of these cottages were crumbling in ruins and abandoned by their tenants, who had emigrated to some more hospitable shore.

By 1851 Ireland had $2\frac{1}{2}$ million less people than a decade earlier. At least a million had probably died from the famine. Nearly 360,000 mud huts had also disappeared.

Many writers noted the contrasts before and after the famine. In County Donegal

there was no trade in the world then but some man of Beltany could try it—the best weavers in the country were there; there were masons, carpenters, coopers, thatchers, and every kind of trademan you could name in this townland; and after the famine years neither tale nor tidings of them was to be found. They all went into strange and distant lands and never returned since; the ruins of the houses were there until the land was divided and they were cleared and fences made of the stone, leaving no trace of them to be seen now.

The impact was far reaching and has continued long since. “Sport and pastimes disappeared. Poetry, music and dancing stopped. They lost and forgot them all and when the times improved in other respects, these things never returned as they had been. The famine killed everything.”