

337. THE CONDITION OF IRELAND [27]

John Stuart Mill MORNING CHRONICLE, 7 DEC., 1846, P. 4

THE RETURNS in our Saturday's paper of the number of persons receiving relief from the Irish Government in the form of public employment, and the weekly expense of that relief, are calculated to inspire serious thoughts in the most reckless promoter of an extended poor-law for Ireland.¹

Three hundred thousand able-bodied Irishmen now receive wages, and what is called employment, from a public authority; and the expenditure for the purpose has nearly reached half a million per month. It is difficult to imagine how under such circumstances it could be less. Eight months have to elapse before the next harvest; whatever may be the distress now, it must become greater during all that time, and if the distress did not, the clamour for assistance undoubtedly would. Four millions therefore are the smallest outlay we have still to look forward to, in addition to the whole of what has already been expended. But great as is the present amount, it is a less alarming symptom than the rapidly progressive increase, and even *that* is less formidable than the effects already produced on the minds and conduct of the labouring class. The bitterest enemy of a poor law with out-door relief could hardly have anticipated so instantaneous and rank a luxuriance of every form of demoralization which could have been expected from the worst permanent poor-law ever proposed. The whole Irish people are rushing with one impulse to fasten themselves upon the taxes. No one will consent to work, except for Government wages. No wonder—they are higher than any other description of wages, and the work well known to be nominal. The small farmers, though they pay no rent, do not even sow their lands. A few days ago we quoted the assertion from a Kerry paper, that the county *en masse* had discontinued agricultural operations.² What need that any one should provide food for himself? The Government is to feed everybody.

We should like to know in what manner this initiatory specimen of what is to be expected from the proposed Irish poor-law can be explained away by its promoters. The system now in temporary operation differs in no material feature

¹"Ireland. The Public Works—Official Return," *Morning Chronicle*, 5 Dec., p. 6, reported that public employment on relief work projects had grown from 26,193 on 3 Oct. to 273,023 on 28 Nov.

²In "Ireland," *ibid.*, 4 Dec., p. 6, such an observation was cited from a private letter from Cork; there is no relevant citation of a Kerry paper. See, however, "Neglect of Agriculture," *The Times*, 3 Dec., p. 6, which quotes a Kerry paper.

from what they desire to introduce into the permanent institutions of the country. Whatever difference there may be is to the advantage of the temporary system. They demand a law which shall guarantee wages and out-door employment to all the destitute. The present arrangement only differs from this in holding out, not the certainty, but only the hope of wages and employment. If the mere hope has the effects we now see, what may we not expect from the certainty? There is another difference: the poor-law project would lay the obligation of finding wages and employment upon each *parish* in Ireland; the present arrangements impose the burthen upon each *barony*. We know not what inexplicable idea haunts some people, of a wonderful difference in efficacy between these two words; but "parish" will raise a spirit as soon as "barony," and every day's experience is giving additional means of judging what sort of spirit it will be.

The present moment is, without exaggeration, the most critical in the history of England's dealings with Ireland. The whole fruits of centuries of oppression and neglect are coming home to us in a single year. The entire population of the country are coming upon us to be fed. And we are called upon to decide instantaneously whether we will or will not undertake the office. There is no retreating, no putting off. The burden of Irish destitution is now to be borne by us. Ireland can no longer suffer alone. We must take our full share of the evil, or put an end to it. For a few weeks or months longer we have the choice which. Wait a year, and we may have it no longer. Wait a year, and the mind of the Irish population may be so thoroughly pauperised, that to be supported by other people may be the only mode of existence they will consent to. There may be a *Jacquerie*, or another ninety-eight, in defence of the rights of sturdy beggary. It may require a hundred thousand armed men to make the Irish people submit to the common destiny of working in order to live.

Under such a mass of impending evil it is no longer enough not to make the eleemosynary system permanent. That system must be promptly put an end to. We must give over telling the Irish that it is our business to find food for them. We must tell them, now and for ever, that it is *their* business. We must tell them that to find or make employment as an excuse for feeding those who have a head to seek for work and hands to do it, is a thing they are *not* to expect either from the Government, or from the barony, or from the parish. They have a right, not to support at the public cost, but to aid and furtherance in finding support for themselves. They have a right to a repeal of all laws and a reform of all social systems which improperly impede them in finding it, and they have a right to their fair share of the raw material of the earth. They have a right to that part of the earth's surface which is as much theirs as any man's, since no man made it,³ and no man has ever used or improved it. Millions of acres are lying waste,

³Cf. No. 315 for what is probably the first use of this maxim of Mill's, which he employs in several of his works.

requiring little more than labour to render them productive, and to avoid giving these acres to the destitute, we are giving them, instead, many millions of pounds sterling. We are paying gold with both hands to destroy such industry, independence, and self-reliance as they already have, and we withhold what would cost us little or nothing, and would be to them the fountain spring of those virtues for all time to come.

We have read with ineffable disgust the statement made by that highly respectable paper, the *Dublin Evening Post*, of its reason for not having yet advocated the location of the peasantry as proprietors on the waste lands.⁴ It classes the scheme with that of an extended poor-law, as two things on which it has not declared itself, because it sees almost insuperable difficulties in the way of both. Those of the poor-law we need not recapitulate; those of the waste lands consist in the almost insurmountable aversion which, the *Post* says, it cannot disguise from itself the existence of, as to any project for giving up those lands to a peasant proprietary. We look upon this simple assertion as equivalent to the most bitter of the denunciations of which the Irish landlords complain that they are so often the objects from this side of St. George's Channel. And these dogs in the manger, who will neither use the land nor let others use it, expect sympathy and money from England! And one of them at a public meeting dared to invoke the precedent of the twenty millions which the nation cheerfully paid for the freedom of the negro!⁵ As much and more would it pay, and pay gladly, for the freedom and comfort of the worse than serf, the Irish cottier. But its gifts are not for the serf's master. It did not pay twenty millions to the slaveowner and leave the slaves no better than they were before. And we are much mistaken if it will go on long paying half a million a month without insisting on having full value for the money, in the shape of a permanent improvement in the industrial and economical system of Ireland.

⁴Leading article on Irish Land Reform, *Dublin Evening Post*, 1 Dec., 1846, p. 2.

⁵In the Emancipation Act, 3 & 4 William IV, c. 73 (1833). John MacHale (1791-1881), Archbishop of Tuam, made the remark in a public meeting, and repeated it in a public letter to Lord John Russell (21 Aug., 1846), *The Times*, 24 Aug., p. 6.