

Ireland in Revolution

I.

Any attempt at understanding the operation of the forces which have produced and moulded the British working-class is valueless if it fails to take account of the wrong done to the Irish peasantry by their exploiters, whether British or native in their origin. The Irish problem has been not only the skeleton at the feast of British politics, but the ever-present bane to the advancement of the British workers. The pity of the whole problem lies, moreover, in the success achieved by the enemies of both Irish and British workers in prejudicing their minds and inflaming their racial and religious passions against one another. The fate of the two peoples has been so much affected by the same influences and the same causes that it is one of the great tragedies of history that they should have been so skilfully pitted against each other and kept disputing over superficial antagonisms, whilst their common oppressors benefitted by their deception and disruption.

Now, when once again the political and social systems of the United Kingdom are about to go into the melting pot of a great change, it is in the highest degree essential that the workers of all the four countries should realise their identity of interest and draw together for joint action against their masters. And to bring them together, we must disabuse their minds of the insidious propaganda which has been used to confuse them. We must point out the facts of the case and show how their false friends or their recognised enemies have been one and the same, plundering the Irish people in order that these might do for them the dirty work of beating down the wages of the British workers whom they inflamed against these helpless tools of their own infamy.

We shall see, when we come to write of "Revolution in England," * how, from the 15th to the 19th Centuries, the common people were shut off from access to the soil, and hence compelled to resort to wage-labour, some in agriculture and more in industry. From the beginning of the Tudor Period, the landed proprietors and prosperous merchants of this country sought to increase their revenues by means of enclosures, rearing of sheep, make and vend of woollen yarn and woollen cloth, trade with overseas plantations, cultivation of produce in distant parts any and every possible means of augmenting the scanty surplus to be wrung from workers who, in a land like this, could make little value with the indifferent tools of the years before the Industrial Revolution. France and the French estates being definitely and finally lost, the Crown and the gentlemen of England made the most of what they could appropriate to private use at home, and then looked across the Irish Channel to the fertile island in the west. From early times there had been an import of coney (rabbit) skins and hides from Ireland into England. Now, when the craze for enclosure at home had somewhat satiated itself by the closing years of the 16th Century, English adventurers began to break in upon Ireland and to disturb the landed system of that country. During the reign of James I. the Irish land customs of tanistry and gavelkind were abolished. In old Ireland, under the Brehon laws there had been no recognition of separate absolute rights of property. The sept or the clan had vested in itself proprietorship of the soil, and though, in practice, "the lords of many cattle" had virtually dissolved the old communal economy and polity, yet, for all that, the soil was, in law, the inalienable property of the sept. The new English ordinance pushed aside the Irish law and substituted for it feudal tenure such as had long been customary in this country. Then, in the North, companies of English merchants acquired tracts of land confiscated from

* Two articles on "Scotland in Revolution" appeared in the *Plebs* for March and April last.

rebellious Irish chieftains, whose property, according to English ideas—very convenient ideas—was private, but according to Irish law was held in trust.

In 1641 the Irish people revolted against the detested invader, to be punished later by further immense confiscations. Prior to the revolt one-third of Ireland was in the possession of aliens and two-thirds in that of Irish or early Anglo-Irish settlers, though many of these were chiefs to whom Elizabeth had "granted" the tribal lands which were not hers to give or theirs to accept. After the revolt, two-thirds of Ireland was included in the confiscated area. Thus, step by step, the Irish as clansmen and then the Irish as rebels against the invader, were expropriated and driven off into the fastnesses of Donegal, Connemara and Kerry, whilst the civilising soldiery of England and Scotland settled down to enjoy the lands of "the wild Irishry." It was not long, however, before the common soldiers of Protestantism discovered, what the soldiers of Republican America found over a century later, that speculators and arm-chair warriors have a wondrous way of dispossessing simple soldiers and adding field to field to make great estates. By political intrigue and other jugglery, many of the English soldiers and their families found themselves in Ireland in little better plight than the natives, compelled to work for wages on the land they had been given "for services rendered."

Up to the "Glorious Revolution," however, the tenants on the filched estates could not be interfered with in the occupancy of their customary feudal tenures. True, they were, legally, landless, except on payment of a rent, but they could not be ejected as long as they paid that rent in accordance with custom. With the expulsion of James II. and the accession of William III., a change brought about in Ireland after a fierce and sanguinary struggle, came further confiscations of lands held by Catholics, and hard upon these the outrageous Act of 1695, an Act, however, no more brazen than laws that the same revolutionary class was passing in England and in Scotland at this time. Everywhere the merchant and landed classes were interpreting Liberty as the right to loot the estates of the Crown (theoretically held in trust for the people) or to steal—by law, of course—lands and properties to which their only titles were those that they themselves created.

This Act of William III., Session i., Chap. 12, said that

"All classes, estates, interests, freeholds on terms of years, or any uncertain interest of, into, or out of any messuage, manors, lands, tenements or hereditaments made and created by livery of seisin only or by parole and not putting into writing and signed by the parties so making and creating the same . . . shall have the force and effect of leases and estates at will only."

"The result of . . . the change of law and the confiscations," says Mr. Geo. O'Brien,* "was that, at the beginning of the 18th Century the greater part of the Irish land was owned by a class of alien landlords, and that numbers of the tenants were degraded to the position of mere tenants at will. The land, instead of being a property, the ownership of which entailed duties as well as rights, was looked upon simply as a source of revenue." In the whole of Ireland, outside of Ulster, the peasant became, for some two centuries, a tenant liable to be set adrift at any time, having no incentive to improve his land and every reason to hate his alien tormentor. In Ulster, things were different. There, customary tenures were recognised in law, thus making for that "spirit of improvement" which is supposed to characterise the Ulsterman in contra-distinction to the Irish people proper.

In these measures of expropriation, some sanctioned by the opinion of interested Irish lords, willing enough to betray the sept to profit themselves,

* *The Economic History of Ireland in the 18th Century* (Maunsell & Co. Ltd., Dublin). 10/6.

and others imposed by the rascal crew from whom are descended the Lansdownes, Londonderrys, Devonshires, Abercorns, Beresfords and others of our chivalrous, idealistic and scrupulously reputable Counter-Revolutionaries of the present day, we have the prime cause of Ireland's undoing, and the release of her millions of " spalpeens " (migrant labourers) to flood the labour market and swell the plunder of the British landlord and capitalist classes.

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(To be continued.)
