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PROSELYTISM IN THE WEST OF IRELAND.

LETTER THE FIRST.

(From the Special Commissioner of the Weekly Telegraph.)

As "the new reformation" in the West of Ireland seems to engross a large share of public attention at present—as the system of proselytism appears to be shrouded in a good deal of mystery—a detailed account of what I have witnessed, during a tour in Connemara, may not be unacceptable to the public. I have travelled over those wild and remote, but interesting districts, which Bishop Plunket and the Church missionaries have made the scene of their evangelical labors. Upon close inquiry and minute investigation, I am now enabled to lay before the public the rise, progress, and working of the entire system of proselytism in West Galway. I will hazard no assertion—advance no statement, which I am not in a position to substantiate. I write from no vague surmise, but from what I have seen and heard.

The present organised mode of proselytism dates from the famine of 1846, and the subsequent fears of distress and destitution enabled its propagators to mature their plans and complete their *modus operandi*. In the most wretched localities and inaccessible districts, where the cheek of youth, paled and shrivelled, and the step of age, shrunk and tottered from the effects of famine—where labor was unemployed, and relief impossible—in the deep recesses of the mountain, and along the wild and desolate sea-board of the Atlantic, where the famished wretches crawled to the shore, and ate (in the language of one of the inhabitants) "the sea weed, and every creeping thing along the beach;" it was there, I say, that the tempter first made his appearance, and, with bribes of meal, money, and clothes, sought to seduce the victims of pestilence and famine from their ancient faith. Until the church of their fathers had been pronounced "damnable and idolatrous"—until the so-called "errors of Rome" had been renounced, and the tenets of Protestantism accepted—the relief which met their famishing gaze was cruelly withheld. In cabins along the roads "Jumper schools" have been established. To each of these a boiler is attached for supplying Indian meal stirabout to the pupils, who are fed like swine out of small wooden troughs or platters. They receive a larger supply and a better quality of rations than they would get in the poor-house, and the more destitute receive, in addition to what is distributed in the school, a half pound of meal to bring to their places of abode. The few adults are induced to attend church, on Sundays, by small donations of money, distributed immediately after the conclusion of service. The begging-box is sent round, which is rather an unusual thing in a Protestant church, and a collection made from the respectable portion of the congregation; and the money thus realised is doled out to the miserable perverts in sums of two-pence, three-pence, and sometimes six-pence. The distribution of food and clothes in the schools, and money in the churches, constitutes the principal items of bribery which I was able to discover beyond doubt or question. To each of the schools both a master and mistress are generally attached. Their salaries amount to £236 and £226 respectively. There are also one or two Scripture teachers, or Bible readers, in connexion with every school, and their business is to expound the word, explain difficult passages, clear up controverted texts of Scripture, and, above all things, to point out "the errors" and "idolatry" of Rome. On those Bible readers, also, devolves the task of training the "readers," who are paid according to the number of persons they can procure to listen to their instruction. The lowest salary of those readers average eight shillings per month. They are generally selected from the elder pupils of both sexes, and they spread themselves over the district in search of persons who will permit them to read in their presence a verse or two of Scripture. The names of such parties are duly entered by the young "readers," who make a return of them to their Scripture teachers, and they are set down either as "converts," or approximating to conversion; and the "readers" are rewarded in proportion to the number of hearers they can obtain. The church mission has a district treasurer, who pays the staff once a month; and if there be any flagging in zeal, falling off in "faith," or any remissness whatever in the discharge of the appointed duties, the amount of remuneration is measured accordingly. The schools are frequently visited by laymen, who have a stake in proselytism, and they are also regularly inspected by the Protestant minister in whose living the school is situated. The education in all the schools which I have visited is of the most wretched kind. The Bible is the sole class-book, and out of it they are taught to spell and read. The greater number of

the pupils cannot read a word, and the more advanced classes read very badly. They are quite ignorant of English grammar and geography. I did not find one pupil in all the schools I inspected who could tell me where Belfast was situated. Some said it was in England—others, that it was the capital of Dublin, and several said it was either in Louth, Galway, or Cork. They are principally instructed in the controversial portions of the Scripture, and imbued with the most horrible ideas of Roman Catholicism. The schools are not furnished with the ordinary requisites, such as maps, books, &c., and Bible instruction, the inculcation of hatred to the Roman Catholic religion, appears to be the sole object of their founders. I observed that the children for the most part were very badly clothed, and I found, on inquiry, that clothes were now partially withheld, in consequence of large numbers, who had formerly received food and clothing, having returned to the Catholic Church during the recent visitation of the Archbishop of Tuam. I was peculiarly struck with the appearance of a large porridge-boiler, erected at one end of a school house, which has been recently "licensed" as a church by Doctor Plunket, whilst the pulpit stood over against it at the opposite end of the room.—After a calm, careful, and unprejudiced review of the whole system, I have come to the conclusion that, so far from making good Protestants, it is merely calculated to produce habits of idleness, dependence, and hypocrisy—to generate infidelity, and cause its dupes to regard religion as a thing of no necessity.

In my next communication, I will begin with the district of Oughterard, which is the key to Connemara, and the first stronghold of "Jumperism." I will give some details of the working of the system, and adduce facts which will enable the public to form a just estimate of its progress and character. Before I bring the account of my tour to an end, I am satisfied that the disclosures which I am enabled to make, and the agencies had recourse to, for the perversion of the starving peasantry of Connemara, which I shall be in a position to unmask, will create such feelings in the minds of the public at large, and make even the English contributors to the proselytising funds shrink from future contact with a thing, which is associated with such an amount of misery and desolation.

OUGHTERARD DISTRICT.

SOCIAL CONDITION OF THE PEOPLE.

The town of Oughterard is pleasantly situated on a little mountain river which falls into Lough Corrib, a short distance below the military barracks. It lies on the direct road from Galway to Clifden, fourteen miles from the former. Previous to the failure of the potato crop, it was a thriving little town, and had the advantage of being the centre of an industrious and independent rural district. From Galway to Oughterard the ground is rough and comparatively unproductive. On the left, a low ridge of barren mountain stretches in a northerly district, whilst, on the right, the land slopes down to the margin of Lough Corrib, and affords some excellent tillage and grazing. Immediately behind the town the mountains present all the rugged features of Connemara scenery. The place now reminds one of "The Deserted Village," where the bustle and animation which are sure indications of progress can no longer be observed.—The only employment that the place affords is to be found amongst the farmers; but as agricultural operations are carried out here on a very limited scale, and entirely suspended during the winter months, the able-bodied laborers are forced to seek shelter and support in the crowded workhouse, which even now contains five hundred and fifty inmates, only two of whom are Protestants. The greatest destitution prevails amongst the peasantry. They are generally lodged in rude huts, which afford not the slightest protection against the inclemency of the weather.—Sometimes we may see a cabin composed of sods and stones, piled up against a bank of earth, with heath or rushes for thatch, and a few boards fastened together to serve as a door. To look into one of those squalid abodes is enough to sicken the heart of any man, no matter how accustomed he may be to such scenes, or how steeled to human suffering.—There are exceptions, however, to this state of things, as the farmers who were enabled to outlive the famine and retain their holdings are rather improved in circumstances. With the solitary exception of A. O'Flaherty, Esq., M.P., the landlords of this district do not recognise the principles of tenant right. Oughterard belongs to the parish of Kileummin. The rural portion comprises an area of 108,734 acres, and in 1841, it had a population of 10,106, and 1,792 inhabited houses; but, from the general appearance of the country—unroofed walls and levelled houses meeting the eye in every direction—I am sure that the population of Kileummin, which belongs to the barony of Moyculien, scarcely numbers 5,000 souls at present. It would be impossible to

draw a true picture of the miserable appearance of the naked and famine-stricken creatures which the traveller encounters along those mountain roads.

PROSELYTISM.

During the famine of 1846 the groundwork of proselytism was laid in the district of Oughterard, its chief seat being at a place named Glan, six miles below Oughterard, on the shores of Lough Corrib. On the 18th of September I visited the proselytising school in Oughterard, and found sixty children present. The children were at breakfast at the time, and the teacher told me that they all got breakfast every day. There is a male and female teacher attached to this school, but there seemed to be no classification of the sexes, as they were all mingled together in the school-room. I only saw two maps, and their class-book was the Bible. The teacher complained of the want of other books and school requisites, but said that the Church Missionary Society had promised him a supply shortly. I examined the most advanced class, which consisted of boys and girls averaging about twelve years of age, and found them extremely deficient in every thing except in controversial texts of Scripture. There is a Scripture teacher permanently attached to this school, whose business it is to explain the disputed texts and difficult passages to the children; and the constructions of this man supersede the interpretation of the learned commentators who have edited the Douay version of the Bible. The school is regularly visited by the Protestant clergymen, who also indoctrinate the minds of the children with their peculiar religious views. As the patrons of this school lay the greatest stress upon the teaching of the Scripture, every other branch of education is comparatively neglected; but it is lamentable to observe how the young minds of those children are perverted on the most sacred subjects. When I asked the teacher if there were any Catholic pupils in the school, a little girl, about thirteen years of age, quickly said, "We are all Catholics, but not Roman Catholics." When asked to define the distinction which she had drawn, she seemed abashed, and remained silent until prompted by the mistress, when she said, "Oh, Roman Catholics believe things that Catholics do not believe, and they do things that Catholics do not; they believe that their church is built on St. Peter, and sure, you know, if it were built on St. Peter, it would be built on Satan, for St. Peter fell." When I asked her if she called St. Peter Satan, she blushed and made no reply. As a proof of the charitable and Christian doctrine with which the minds of those children are imbued, I may remark that one of the smartest of the boys told me, that any one who died outside of the Protestant church would be damned. The salary of the master is £36, and that of the mistress £26. There are a number of "readers" attached to this school, who receive an average salary each of eight shillings per month. I met a boy, aged about thirteen years, proceeding to this school. He said that he had been three years attending it, and during that time he read no book except the Bible. He could not write. He told me that he hated Papists, because they would not give him either Bible or breakfast. He would go to the Catholic school for both Bible and breakfast, but he would not go for the Bible alone. There is a proselytising school in the course of erection at Glengould, under the immediate superintendence of George O'Flaherty, Esq., of Lemonfield, on whose property it is situated. There is not a single Protestant in the neighborhood, but it is feared that Mr. O'Flaherty, following the example of more than one landed proprietor in Connemara, intends to coerce his tenantry to send their children to his school. The poor people make no secret of their apprehensions on this point, but they declare that they will submit to extermination sooner than sacrifice the souls of their children. It is currently rumored that Mr. O'Flaherty intends to become a parson. Another proselytising landlord in Connemara found it convenient to adopt the same course.

On September 20th I visited the proselytising school of Glan, and found fifty children in attendance. The only class-book, as in Oughterard, was the Bible. This school has been established for two years, and is under the patronage of the Rev. Captain Dallas. The pupils get breakfast every morning at the school, and the orphans receive an additional meal. There were only six scholars present who could write. I examined a class in the 22nd chapter of 1st Chronicles, and although they could scarcely read it, they were most expert in quoting controversial texts of Scripture. They stated that they understood nothing about any other religion save that of the Church of England and the Church of Rome. They told me they believed that Roman Catholics were idolaters, and that they would not be saved "unless they came forth from darkness." One of the "readers" stated in reply to a question that an Atheist or a Deist might be saved, but a Roman Catholic could not.

The teacher interposed and said that the boy was ignorant of the meaning of the words Atheist or Deist. The pupils in the class which I examined stated that "belief in the Lord Christ Jesus" was sufficient for salvation; but they gave no reply when asked, if Roman Catholics were excluded from this means of salvation? They were ignorant of the existence of the thirty-nine articles of the Church of England, knew nothing of Presbyterianism, and appeared to be solely trained up in a horror of "Rome" and its "idolatry;" this school is licensed as a church, and has the usual apparatus for the manufacture of stirabout attached. The teacher told me that there were about one hundred "converts" in that district. The proselytes here belong to the convert class who were formerly of most questionable character, and were never overburdened with a large amount of religion. Whenever they happen to possess a small piece of ground it is allowed to return to a state of nature, such is the apathy and indolence which they generally exhibit. They are living in a state of dependence which generates an incurable idleness that will ever after prevent the recipients of the proselytising rations from becoming honest or industrious members of society, and it is feared that many of them will return to their old pursuits—that is, the appropriation of their neighbors' property—when the present source of relief shall have ceased. This is the prevalent feeling among the Catholic population of the district.

At Bunakill, five miles from Oughterard, I found a proselytising school, in a small cabin, at some distance from the road. There were but fifteen pupils present, and of these five were Protestants; the others had been Catholics, but were attracted to the school by the meal of stirabout which was given them as an inducement to attend. The school has been in existence nearly two years, and had a master with a salary of £24 a-year, a Bible reader, and the usual staff of teachers. The Bible was the only reading book in the school, and though some of the pupils were sixteen or seventeen years of age, they were totally ignorant of English grammar, geography, or arithmetic. They could not even spell the commonest words; and when questioned on the portion of the Bible, they were asked to read, exhibited a gross amount of ignorance. One boy said that "Pharaoh was a son of Isaac," though he admitted that he read at the rate of "four chapters a day." None of them could tell who "Gentiles" or "children of Israel" were. I may here observe, that when I asked them to read the passages they were poring over when I entered, I was more than ever convinced of the dangerous consequences to be apprehended from the indiscriminate use of the sacred Scriptures as a school book. I was told by a widow named M'Donough, who resides at Glan, and who had become a convert, that she joined John O'Callaghan's congregation because there were great promises held out to herself and daughter if she would abandon the Church of Rome. She used to get a few pence at church on Sundays, and her daughter got clothes and food at the school. She told me that some of the money and clothes which had been promised were retained for the purpose of making the "converts hold on." This woman and her daughter have lately returned to the Catholic Church.

STATE OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION.

I paid a visit to the national school of Oughterard, which was opened in March 1851, through the indefatigable exertion of the Rev. Mr. Geraghty, C. C., who is the patron. The average daily attendance at this school is ninety boys and sixty girls. The school is well supplied with the necessary requisites, and the several classes which I examined were able to answer well in geography and English grammar. In the girls' school industrial and literary education are combined. They are taught sewing, flowered, knitting, &c., the raw material being supplied by a Dublin house. It is a fact, perhaps worth recording, that Archbishop Whately, one of the Commissioners of National Education, recently passed through Oughterard, and, although he inspected the proselytising school, he never visited the national school, which could not have escaped his notice, as it is a building which attracts the attention of every tourist that passes through the town. There are three Catholic schools in the parish—one at Laim, which has an average attendance of 100 scholars, and one at Glan, with an attendance of fifty, twenty-six of whom are returned "converts." There is also a Catholic school at Coolnamuck, which contains forty children; but this house is totally inadequate to the requirements of this district, which contains about 200 children. From the short time these schools have been in operation it is surprising to find the proficiency which the pupils have made in reading, writing, and arithmetic; but they labor under great difficulties, as they are not as yet placed in connexion with the National Board of Education.