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## "THE IRISH EMIGRATION OF 1847."

A Lecture delivered before the N. Y. Catholic Institute.  
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About five years ago, while surrounded on the shores of the St. Lawrence, with the victims of hunger and ship-fever, I was given a copy of a lecture delivered in New York, on "The Antecedent causes of the Irish Famine." I had then before me a truthful commentary to these elegant pages; my only regret in perusing them was, that their illustrious author had not been an eye-witness of the scenes in which I was nightly and daily privileged to take an active part. What an inspired energy his eloquence would have caught from their contemplation! What a lesson his revered voice could have read to Europe and America, on the working of that Government, which but a very short time ago, we heard praised up in our midst as the very perfection of political liberality, wisdom and enlightenment! How the dungeons of Naples and the cruelties of Sicily would have sunk into the shade before the horrid realities of Grosse-Isle!

Still is it not on these horrors that I wish to dwell. I only mean to touch them lightly. But I do intend even that little to remain on record as an irrefutable instance of the practical philanthropy of that model government, whose great men have overflowing sympathies for the down-trodden of every clime save their own, and who love the negro so ostentatiously and noisily in order to dispense themselves from loving their own brethren.

My purpose in appearing before you, is a higher one. I wish to disburden my soul of the conviction which I felt even in the lazar-houses and fetid ship-holds of Canada,—that Providence would bring some mighty good out of all that suffering. Yes; I read that assurance in the sublime virtues which it was then given me to witness. That alone enabled me not to curse the oppressor—and this was much; it gave me also hope for Ireland—and this was more; but, above all, it made me rejoice for America.

Nor must you deem this to be the illusion of a youthful enthusiasm, on the effect of an overweening love of country. I had not then touched the soil of the United States. But since that happiness has been vouchsafed me, my previous convictions have acquired the evidence of a mathematical demonstration.

They have assumed the form of this consoling truth. That the heart of a Nation tried by suffering so unparalleled in duration and intensity, and giving all the whole unflinching evidence of superhuman fortitude, is destined for some great end; and that, moreover, where Providence forces such a nation, under such pressure, to diffuse abroad a portion, and a large portion, of her vital energies; it must be in a design of kindness to the regions towards which these energies are made to flow.

Such is the two-fold truth, or fact, which will stand out from the following statement.

In making them, I shall not promise to be unimpassioned; for that would argue that I would be without feeling, and without feeling on a subject where every thing so powerfully moves the sympathies of a manly and christian heart; nor shall I promise to be impartial in this sense, that I will show no predilection for my unfortunate country, for this would be unnatural indeed:—but I do promise that every fact which I shall adduce, will be incontrovertible. And you will bear witness, before the end of this lecture, that far from drawing a highly colored picture, or pressing facts to their obvious conclusions; I have, on the contrary, exerted no small industry in keeping out of sight the most revolting details, and in thrusting aside the exciting reflections that crowded under my pen.

That we may fully appreciate the longanimity of the Church of Ireland, and see clearly her position in 1847, allow me to bring you back three hundred years, to the time of Elizabeth.

Ireland, we know, was then recalcitrant to the will of the British Queen; we know, too, what means the latter took to break Ireland's spirit and overcome her conscientious resistance. The heart sickens in passing over the history of that struggle; let us merely ascertain the motives of the persecutors.

Lord Clare, who was no friend to Catholics, thus spoke in the Irish House of Peers, towards the close of the last century: "Persecution, or attempts to force conscience, will never produce conviction; they are calculated only to make hypocrites and martyrs; and, accordingly, the violence committed by the Regency of Edward, and continued by Elizabeth, to force the Reformed Religion on Ireland, had no other effect than to foment a general dissatisfaction to the English Government."

So much for the character of the persecution. Now listen to some of its results, in a description from the pen of the Secretary of Lord de Grey, Elizabeth's Lieutenant:

"Notwithstanding that the Province of Munster was a most plentiful country, full of corn and cattle, yet ere one year and a half, they were brought to such wretchedness as that any heart would rue the same. Out of every corner of the woods and glynns, they came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legs could not bear them; they looked like anomalies of death; they spoke like ghosts crying out of their graves; they did eat the dead carrions, happy when they could find them. Yea! and ate one another soon after, insomuch as the very carcases they spared not to scrape out of their grave; and if they found a plot of water-cresses and shamrocks, there they flocked as to a feast for the time, yet not able to continue there withal. So that, in a short space, there was none almost left, and a most populous and plentiful country left void of man and beast."

"That country," another un-Catholic writer says, "which, under a protecting government, could have contributed to enrich the royal treasury, and to supply its inhabitants with every comfort, presented one unvaried scene of wretchedness and desolation, the solitude of the desert and the tranquillity of the grave. *Cum solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant.*"

Then it was, a third author informs us, that the Protestant University of Dublin was founded. "The artful Minister of Elizabeth recommended this . . . as the chief monument of her antipathy to the ancient religion of Irishmen. Under the fascinating robe of national education, she concealed the design of establishing a bank of national apathy on which England might draw without possibility of exhaustion."

One could imagine all this to have been expressly written for the year 1847, instead of the year of Grace, 1580.

So that after well nigh three centuries of gigantic struggles and suffering, a nation of eight millions and a half stands before the civilized world as a mendicant for universal charity; her population starving while her granaries and warehouses are filled with her own grain and provisions, which she is not allowed to touch; while in the treasuries of the Imperial Government are piled up heaps of gold, which Ireland may touch only in such a miserable pittance, that the proffered relief becomes a cruel mockery, or which she may share in sufficient quantity only at the price of her conscience.

Now let us allow facts to speak of the heroic endurance of the children, as they wandered abroad in hunger and disease, as well of the long agony of the mother at home.

Early in the spring of 1847 the tide of emigration set in through the valley of the St. Lawrence. The local authorities in every part of Ireland had been anxiously watching for the time when the Canadian navigation usually opens, in order to rid their wharves, poor houses, crowded hospitals, and the hulks at anchor in every seaport, of the living mass of misery for which they could not or would not find shelter and relief. The landlords, too, throughout the country had begun their work of wholesale demolition and extermination; some gave to their famishing tenants a mere trifle, on condition that they should take the road to the nearest place of embarkation; others put into their hands pretended cheques on Canadian mercantile houses, to induce them to give up their little farms, while all employed every means of persuasion and coercion to urge their dependents to the sea side.

And, south to say, the tenants, whether they found themselves absolutely penniless, or still possessed of some little money, were not loath to hurry away to the great Republic of the West, where loving friends awaited them, and whence, during that dreadful winter, they had been sent such generous although insufficient assistance. They crowded, therefore, improvidently and recklessly into every vessel that was advertised to sail for America. Nor did the ship owners, nor the emigrant agents, make any scruple of receiving more passengers than the law permitted; the law was notoriously and most shamefully violated.

In the colonies, meanwhile, Government and people were quite unprepared for the frightful amount of sickness and destitution which the Eastern winds were hurrying to their doors. More than ordinary precautions had, indeed, been taken; and, I am confident, no necessary expense and pains would have been spared by the Canadian Executive, had timely notice been sent, and it was so easy and so urgent to do so! But, as it was, there was not accommodation for one-fifth of the sick and dying that the months of April and May deposited on the barren rocks of Quarantine.

The military authorities, at the first fearful tidings, with characteristic promptness and generosity, sent every tent which their stores contained. But the workmen hired to erect sheds had soon caught the contagion. Higher, and the very highest wages were

offered to others; who, in their turn, sickened and died after a few days, so that, at the very height of the disease, no bribe could induce mechanics to approach the island.

The fierce Canadian summer had now come, attended with unusual sultriness. Thousands upon thousands of the sick, melting under the united influences of long confinement, hunger, fever and dysentery, kept pouring in at Grosse-Isle.

Not one drop of fresh water was to be had on the island—there was no lime juice—no clean straw, even, to protect the patients from the wet ground in the tents, or the rough boards in the hospitals; while in the beginning of July, with the thermometer at 98° in the shade, I have seen hundreds landed from the ships, and thrown rudely by the unfeeling crews on the burning rocks, and there I have known them to remain two whole nights and days, without shelter or care of any kind.

Without shelter or care of any kind—for the few trustworthy persons whom the zeal of the clergy, or the prospect of a large salary, induced to go down at the beginning, were soon exhausted; want of sleep, of proper nourishment, and the pestilential atmosphere in which they had to move continually, had soon laid them prostrate. How, then, were skillful, careful sick-nurses to be found? I blush, I weep to say it, the common jail was opened, and its loathsome inmates were sent to watch the death-bed of our pure, helpless, emigrant youth.

This it was—together with the hope of earning fully the crown which they all expected—that made the clergymen who attended the station in turns multiply themselves by day in ministering to the wants of both soul and body, and spend their nights in relieving, as they might, the unspeakable wretchedness of that multitude whose groans arose like a hoarse and mighty murmur in the stillness, making sleep a thing not to be thought of. One devoted priest—the Rev. Hubert Robson—an only son, too, of an infirm and doating mother—after the fatigues of confessing, anointing, consoling the sufferers, was wont to spend his few recreation hours, in carrying in his arms and on his back, the sick from the beach to the hospitals. One very sultry day, overcome by this labor of love, he lay himself down on the shore, beside a rock, to snatch a moment's sleep. Alas! he awoke with a raging fever, and, the first of the long list of those Canadian priests who laid down their lives for the emigrant, he went to his early reward in heaven. The grief of the poor people on learning his death, was as moving as it was universal.

Meanwhile the multitudes who had strength enough to baffle the scrutiny of the visiting physicians, proceeded to Quebec, Montreal, and the cities of the upper Province, spreading the infection on their way. The hardships of their long exposure on a steam-boat deck had soon developed the latent germs of the malady. Alarm and death were everywhere.—The cholera, in its most malignant form, did not visit with death and desolation half the families which ship fever caused to mourn. It was sufficient to give the new comers, how healthy soever in appearance, hospitality for a single night, to meet them even on the road, or to inhale the miasmas which clung to their persons and luggage, in order to contract the pestilence. Whole families were swept away in return for a single act of kindness done the passing emigrants.

Despite the vigilance of the municipal officers, every Canadian city soon presented the same spectacle of disease and suffering as Quarantine.

From the outset, the Canadian clergy felt that an opportunity had come for them to display the sublime virtues which Catholic charity inspires. Their presentiments and hopes were not disappointed.—Every one of the clergymen who had been summoned, or who had volunteered, to meet the danger, during the two first months and a half, was either dead or dying, or slowly recovering. The Bishop of Montreal and his coadjutor gave the example of spending the entire night in confessing and anointing the sick who came up by the evening boats. The Nuns of the General Hospital and the Sisters of the Asylum of Providence were the first to offer themselves to share in the good work. Although very numerous, their whole community could not suffice, and their cloistered Sisters of the *Hotel Dieu* soon came to relieve them at the pillow of the emigrant. For months did the whole city behold these devoted women, moving like angels of light and peace through the crowded sheds, and wading literally knee deep in the mire from tent to tent on the low and marshy ground, until at length the Nunneries themselves were converted into hospitals for the perishing sisterhood, where the few who retained their strength could scarcely tend their own sick and dying.

I cannot trust myself longer on this part of my narrative. Yet, before I turn away from it, I owe it to truth, and holiest gratitude, to declare:—That

with the facts of every plague and epidemic of ancient and modern times, vividly present to my memory. I do believe such suffering never before existed—and that such an instance of devotedness and magnanimity has never been exhibited to the world, as by the Bishops, Priests, Nuns, and people of Canada, in 1847.

I say the *French Canadian people*; for, not satisfied with collecting for the relief of Ireland, some £8,000 sterling—so strongly were their sympathies aroused towards the emigrant—that although most parishes already wept for their dead, or feared for their sick Pastor, and that it appeared certain death to take an emigrant under one's roof; still, as each Parish Priest returned from Quarantine, or from Montreal, the parishioners came to meet them at the landing places with long trains of carriages, to escort the Priests and his numerous orphans home. And touching was the meeting of these French mothers with the little children misfortune gave them; and warm and happy the homes they were brought to.—But these recollections unnerve me.

There is, however, one other instance of generosity, that I must place on record. I do so the more willingly, as the whole course of this narrative must tell the more severely against other official personages. The Governor-General of Canada, the Right Honorable, the Lord of Elgin, at the very moment when the thought of approaching Grosse-Isle, appalled the stoutest hearts, went down himself to examine into the state of things; and he went through every ward and tent fearlessly, and cheerfully. During the winter he zealously adopted every suggestion made for the relief of the sick and poor, and provided with a fatherly solicitude against the contingencies of the approaching Spring. The Sisters of Charity of the *Asylum of Providence*, who had borne a conspicuous part in the labors and sacrifices of the two Sisterhoods already mentioned, now offered to go down to Quarantine, and superintend the Hospital Department; they were destined to an equally meritorious duty in the Hospitals of Montreal.

The Spring did, indeed, bring fever; and with it came the dreaded Cholera. The noble-hearted Governor would trust to no one but himself the duty of securing the comfort of the emigrant sick. When Cholera and Ship-Fever were raging together at "the Sheds," he would be seen passing through the wards, going with the Nuns from bed to bed, to inquire into the condition of the patients. But this is only what we should expect from the descendant and representative of the Royal Bruce.

Thus passed the Spring and Summer, in one continuous influx of pestilence, terror, and misery indescribable; fleet after fleet of passenger vessels, bearing their cargoes of dead and dying up the Canadian waters. Some ships had lost 100, some 200 persons, since they had sailed; some had lost all, or nearly all their crew; so that they lay below in the stream, carried up and down with the tide, until discovered by chance from the shore, or until pity induced the Canadians from the neighboring villages, to work them up to port.

In many cases, as where these ships had been laden from the hulks and poor-houses, the passengers had never left the hold, very many had never stirred from their berths from the hour they had lost sight of Ireland, to their casting anchor at Grosse-Isle. The dead were dragged up by means of a grapple or hoat-hook, and cast into the deep. You may fill up the picture that met the eyes of the Missionaries when they descended into this living mass of putrefaction to strive and strengthen the living.

And now the Autumn had arrived. Many a Parish was left without its Pastor. Montreal had wept its Vicar-General; its two Bishops were long despaired of; well-nigh twenty of its Priests, with a far greater number of Nuns, had died in the work of mercy. Quebec, too, saw many of its most pious and promising Clergymen sink under their labors; Bytown, Kingston, and Toronto, paid also their tribute to death and charity. The indefatigable Bishop Power closed the heroic list. He went to join his fellow-martyrs, after months of obstinate and super-human fatigue, leaving his young diocese long widowed and inconsolable.

About the beginning of September, two emigrant ships were obliged to put in to the nearest ports of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. They had taken out the tenants of a Minister of the Imperial Crown; but so dreadful was the state of all on board, that the Municipal authorities, after furnishing the Captains with the most pressing necessities, compelled them to put once more to sea.

In the beginning of November, when the St. Lawrence was already covered with floating ice, a vessel was observed beating about the mouth of the Saguenay; she was evidently in distress. The Canadian Pilots whose Catholic sympathies had been al-