

THE WEEK.

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MR. GLADSTONE ON THE UNION.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE WEEK.

SIR,—In the addendum to the new edition of Mr. Gladstone's pamphlet on Ireland, which has just been received, Mr. Lecky and I are cited as witnesses to the historical fact that the Act of Union was carried through Grattan's Parliament by corruption. I should have thought that witnesses were unnecessary, the fact being admitted on all hands. It is only to be said in extenuation that political interests in those days were regarded as property, so that the project of Parliamentary Reform for England took the shape of a plan for buying up the Rotten Boroughs. Mr. Massey has given his authorities for saying that Pitt, at an earlier period, would gladly have carried an Act of Union by fair means through a reformed Irish Parliament. But Grattan's Parliament, by an overwhelming majority, rejected Reform, as it rejected the good measure of commercial concession to Ireland which Pitt had succeeded in carrying through the British Parliament in spite of the factious opposition of Burke. Pitt would have made the Union in all respects just; but his liberal intentions towards the Catholics were defeated by the bigotry of the King. That he got up the rebellion of '98 in order to create a pretext for extinguishing the independence of Ireland, as some Separatists, in their delirious hatred of the author of the Union, do not hesitate to assert, is the most infamous of falsehoods. No man ever lived who was less capable of such a crime. His real spirit was shown by his steadfast support, under no small difficulties, of the humane policy of Cornwallis. The memories of British statesmen are being defiled and the national escutcheon is being defaced to justify Mr. Gladstone and his party in a sudden change of front on the Irish question, which gives them the Parnellite vote.

The Act of Union is one thing, the Union is another. The means by which the Act was passed, and by which alone it could be passed through that utterly corrupt Assembly, though they have left a blot on the transaction, did not prevent the measure itself from being both necessary and beneficent. Let Irish history before the Union be compared with Irish history since the Union. Government has not been able at once to cure the political infirmities of Irish character, which are the same in New York as in Kerry; it has not been able to annul the influence of the Roman Catholic religion, which, in all countries, has retarded progress; or to prevent the heedless multiplication of the people on a soil unfit for grain, which the Church encourages, from producing pressure on the means of subsistence, and when the potato crop failed, famine, which, however, the Government did its best to relieve. But the wars of race and religion have ceased; there have been no more massacres or confiscations; order and justice, on the whole, have reigned; and the Celt has been undergoing a gradual training in Anglo-Saxon self-government, though his native lawlessness has called for occasional sharpenings of the edge of law, mis-called Coercion Acts, since their only object was to uphold the common rules of

civilised life. The process has been hindered by the selfish ambition of demagogues. Renan tells us that in Brittany, where the Celt is in his native state, he prefers anything brilliant and adventurous to dull industry; and as the Celt does in Brittany, so he does in Ireland. Investment, and consequently commercial improvement, is difficult in a land where the investor is apt to be paid in slugs. Absenteeism was also a great evil, and the relations between landlord and tenant undeniably were bad. Long ago, entails which kept Irish estates appended to English estates in the hands of the great families, as well as feudal conveyancing, ought to have been abolished, and it is strange that while violent things have been done, with the usual results of violence, this simple thing should have been left undone. Not that even the old English Land Law itself was otherwise than an improvement on the system of tribal ownership, with coshering chiefs, which must have utterly precluded regular agriculture, and consequently civilisation. Progress, however, was being made, though fitfully, and when this agitation was set on foot, commerce was hopeful, the workhouses were comparatively empty, and the savings banks were full.

When Pitt introduced the Act of Union, government, and almost civil society, in Ireland had perished in a hideous civil war of races and religions. Under exactly similar circumstances Cromwell, recognising the situation, had simply incorporated Ireland with Great Britain and called Irish representatives to the United Parliament. Had Pitt been able to do the same, instead of going through the dirty formality of buying the consent of an Assembly which no longer represented anything or had anything to sell, there would now be no more cavil or misgiving about the unification of the British Islands than there is about the unification of Italy or Germany, in both of which cases the dictate of nature was carried into effect with the strong hand. Mr. Gladstone's principles would hardly be pleasing to his Italian friends.

A worse stain, as I should say, on the transaction than the means by which the morally unnecessary consent of the Irish Parliament had been obtained, was the violation of Pitt's promise to the Roman Catholics. When I first wrote, that promise had not yet been perfectly fulfilled. But it was perfectly fulfilled, and the Union, which before had not been equal or just, was made in all things equal and just by Disestablishment. From that time, as I believe, almost every Irishman, Catholic or Protestant, whose opinion can be deemed a real index to the interest of his country, has heartily acquiesced in the Union. To me this seems moral ratification. Its force is enhanced, if anything, by the opposition of political adventurers, whose aim it is to keep the country disturbed for their selfish ends, and whose funds are drawn from an American conspiracy, the object of which is havoc, while the characters of the men who compose it, like the means which they avowedly adopt, are vile.

Even before Disestablishment, the absence of any deeply-seated sense of political wrong had been shown by the weakness and the farcical ends of all purely political agitations. That the real force of the present movement is not political, but agrarian, is a fact of which the political agitators show themselves conscious by their desperate attempts to prevent the Land question from being settled. Whatever other strength the movement has, save among the excitable and rhetorical population of the cities, is derived from British faction or American gold.

For eighty-six years Ireland has now, by voluntary election, sent representatives to the United Parliament, and taken the full benefit of the Union, with grants of money in her distress, enjoying at the same time the run of the Empire. Grattan himself sat in the United Parliament, and at first as member for an English borough.

If corruption vitiates a legislative compact, does not constraint vitiate an election? "Constraint," says Hallam, "is so destructive of the essence of election, that suffrages given through actual intimidation ought, I think, to be held invalid, even without minutely inquiring whether the degree of illegal force was such as might reasonably overcome the constancy of a firm mind." The last election in Ireland was notoriously held under the terrorist sway of the Land League, backed by the money and influence of its foreign confederates. Yet Mr. Gladstone takes the result as the voice of the people and of God. He treats it as the final doom of the Union. How comes it that he never mentions either the League or the American conspiracy? "Our opponents are not the people of Ireland. We are endeavouring to relieve the people of Ireland from the weight of a tyrant."