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A VOICE FROM THE WEST;
OR,
THE CONDITION AND CLAIMS OF CONNAUGHT.

The following narrative of a Journey through CONNAUGHT has been addressed to the DUBLIN and LONDON COMMITTEES of the IRISH EVANGELICAL SOCIETY, by the REV. J. D. SMITH.

GENTLEMEN,

Having just returned from an extensive tour through Connaught, I am anxious to make known to you a few of my convictions respecting the misery of the people, their moral and spiritual destitution, their willingness to receive religious instruction, and the efforts needful to be made on their behalf.

CONNAUGHT, as you are aware, comprises the five counties of Leitrim, Roscommon, Mayo, Sligo, and Galway. It is the smallest of the four provinces, and by far the worst circumstanced. Dwelling for the most part in the midst of immense tracts of mountain and sterile land, the people are lamentably poor, and have for numbers of years been subject to periodical returns of famine. The great Atlantic rolls at its extreme west, and is met by huge masses of mountain and rock, which are penetrated by deep inlets of its waters. In this province is Connemara, proverbial alike for the poverty of its people and the beauty of its scenery. It occupies a most romantic peninsula, formed by the western portion of Galway. The traveller cannot but be delighted by its thousand physical charms. The lovers of Scotland's Argyshire would be amply repaid by a sunny month of summer in this enchanting region. The tourist who sits down to map out a journey to the Continent would do well to alter his plan, if he has not been to Connemara. Here are islands which, as the people say, are as numerous as the days of the year. Here are lakes (one of which is 20 miles long, and full of lovely islets,) surrounded by pleasant shores, and land-locked by immense mountains. Here, too, is an interesting population—simple, rude, hardy,—sons of the mountain and the sea,—somewhat given, it is true, to old feudal feelings, and tales of superstition: yet they are daily rising into a promising condition.

The principal towns of Connaught are Galway, Westport, Castlebar, Ballina, Sligo, Tuam, and Ballinasloe. The inhabitants of these places are mostly poor, whilst the condition of the labouring classes is becoming worse and worse. The buildings which principally attract the eye of the traveller are those of Religion. In Galway are monasteries belonging to the Franciscan and Augustinian Orders. In Tuam is the celebrated Saint Jarlath. The poor-houses and Protestant churches are easily distinguished. The trade of the towns is principally local. The population of the entire province previous to the horrible famine-year of 1847 was estimated at 1,500,000.

My journey to Connaught extended from the channel coasts to the shores of the Atlantic. As I travelled about 500 miles, principally on an open car, I had ample opportunity of beholding the general aspect of the country, including numerous miserable dilapidated cabins and depopulated villages, with large tracts of land (in some



places thousands of acres) lying neglected. The highways in many parts were occupied by the dying and the dead. Roscommon, Mayo, Galway, and Sligo Counties appeared in a lamentable condition. Constantly was I reminded of Ireland's monster anomaly,—that in the midst of a noble land of 21,000,000 acres, the 8,000,000 of its people are strangely complaining for want of *life-room*; that in the midst of 5,000,000 of sleeping acres, 4,000,000 of people are ever on the borders of a miserable famine; and that over mines of the most valuable ore, as yet untouched by the hand of industry, and beside the mightiest rivers running idle to the ocean, numbers of the unemployed are dropping down dead from absolute starvation!

But how can I describe the misery of the people? I beheld hunger in its most dreaded forms, and scenes of horror which the pen of fiction could never in its imaginings portray. I beheld developments of disease and death which no human hand is able to stop. At Tuam, close by the walls of Saint Jarlath's, the dying and the dead were many. It was during the bitter cold and frost of January when I drew near the city. It was evening. Sheltered by a little straw, and under the side of a hedge, I saw the dying prostrate on the ground. A young man was fast expiring from hunger, attended by his worn and emaciated mother. On the same line of country, and on the highroad, a mother lay dead: her little ones were gathered around her, crying piteously (but in vain) for food, and weeping over the cold face of the corpse. For two days and a night the body remained unburied on the highroad. The town itself seemed full of the most aggravated distress. In Castlebar and its neighbourhood several bodies have been found dead upon the roads. Pieces of raw turnip were found in the pockets of one poor corpse. In the electoral division of Drum a body lay unburied for seven days. Hundreds who are victims of hunger and disease bend their way to the various poor-houses: it is heart-rending to witness their disappointment. As a last resort, they apply for admittance and food: this denied them (from want of accommodation), they can resist the inroads of hunger no longer; and as they bend their way to their miserable cabins, perhaps for miles along a rugged mountain region, they lie down and die. But as misery usually seeks seclusion, the worst is not seen by the eye of the traveller. Hundreds (and even thousands, it is believed,) are singly and silently perishing in their own wretched hovels. The horrible famine-year of 1847 was not more mortal than January and February 1848: there is this fearful difference,—Charity has closed its hand, not only on account of the wicked ingratitude of an ignoble few, but partly because of its utter inability to reach the evil, even were it to "bestow all its goods to feed the poor."

The scenes I beheld between Roscommon and Tuam, and Tuam and Ballina, and thence on to Sligo, were unspeakably affecting. The "daughter of Erin," once in the bloom of beauty, I now saw with drooping head and haggard look, stretching out her emaciated hand to the nations, exclaiming, "Pity me, pity me!" But how did my heart rejoice, when I remembered that into that miserable hand our noble denomination had placed nearly £20,000. of its money, and that thus thousands of precious lives had been saved! Vast numbers in Connaught now live who delight to bless the name and labours of our Irish Evangelical Society. This is especially the case in Ballinasloe, Castlebar, and Sligo. The fruits of its charity will long exist, and prove of the highest importance, as was evident in all parts of my tour.

Here, however, I must pause awhile, and dwell for a moment on a tract of country situated in the far-west of Connaught. The mail-coach could not travel for the snow, which in some places was three feet deep. As the Queen's business was urgent, as

also was mine, the mail-bag, an Irish-speaking minister of our Connaught Mission, and myself were sent on our journey of 60 miles, on an open single-horse car drawn by two horses "*tandem*." Our route lay for many miles through a mountainous region, and along the wild and rugged shores of two immense lochs. Tall mountains, with deep ravines on their sides, and huge boulders of limestone in the form of large tombs on their summits, encompassed the waters in every direction. In the distance were seen Croagh,—Patrick, and Nephin, with their guardian hills and surrounding lakes. The whole region, to the least exercise of imagination, as well as to the eye, was most imposing; for just beyond those hills nothing save the great Atlantic interposed between us and the "New World" of America, whilst we in our position were literally at the back of the "Old World." As we here and there paused, (especially where our route lay along an elevated ground, and the mountains opened to the west,) we heard the loud and majestic falls of the ocean,—not the separate voices of the channel waves, but the full, constant, and unbroken roar—

"Nature's eternal bass;"

and then, as if to complete the *sublime* of this panorama, two immense eagles, at some distance from each other, were standing on the heights immediately above us. With an air of conscious greatness they surveyed the entire scene. How desolate and miserable did the condition of man appear when compared with the sufficiency, mightiness, and freedom of these kingly birds! My delight in *nature*, however, soon subsided, as I beheld the degradation and disabilities of suffering *humanity*. Heavier woes had fallen upon it here than were included in the curse. God had said, "By the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread;" but here, notwithstanding their toil of limb and labour, men are failing for lack of food. It appeared to me that vast numbers of the population would soon be reckoned among the million of the famine-year who had either died or emigrated. I was moved to the deepest compassion on their behalf. They are shut up to want. "I know that the ignorance and vice of the "people will be alleged against them; but if the punishment is to be that they shall "remain in that condition wherein they will inevitably continue ignorant and vicious still, "*their fate is indeed mournful,—VENGEANCE COULD HARDLY PROMPT A SEVERER RETRIBUTION!*"* Indolence, however, was *not* a characteristic of this portion of the Celtic family: nor were they marked by the grosser crimes; but, *owing to the failure of their produce*, they were thrown into utter want. And now, alas for these "Wilds of Connaught!" Alas for the once rude and hardy dwellers on the mountain and the vale! Where is their former joy? In days gone by, in every highland fastness,—and along the waters which mirror the browsing goat upon the rock, or the imperial eagle,—health and beauty, playfulness and wit had their abode! Where are they now?—

"Where are the features that I once admired,
The joyful look, the loftiness of air?"

The cheerful face and stalwart limb are now exchanged for the haggard countenance and emaciated frame. The living are in want. The dead are many; and where they have died without a covering or a home, they have lain morning and evening, evening and morning, unwept and unburied,—the ocean billow alone chimes a *requiem* over their departure!

* JOHN FOSTER on Ireland.

How affecting are the voices of the dead! They speak of the *spirit-land*. They bring us into a closer communion with Judgment and Eternity,—Heaven and Hell. The *unseen worlds* irresistibly absorb us. There are voices here which speak to us across the abyss of centuries; telling of thousands of mankind whose mental and moral darkness had continued up to the moment of their death, and who in such condition had spiritually perished. Singly and silently they dropped into Eternity. There we may presume they uttered, as a first declaration of their misery, “*No man cared for our souls!*” Patriotism and Piety stand absorbed at the thought; and the language of compassion must be, “Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” Then there are the *living*, who have not yet gone to the dread tribunal, but who have been hitherto, by the awful neglect of the Churches, consigned to a merciless ignorance, and who are likely to die for lack of bread, and for lack of knowledge. What can be resolved for them? We can but adopt the utterance of our own Doddridge,—

“My God, I feel the mournful scene,
My bowels yearn o’er dying men,
And fain my pity would reclaim
And snatch the firebrands from the flame!”

But what shall be said of the *destitution of Connaught generally*? I speak advisedly, when I say that for miles and miles (in one district for 21 miles, and amidst a wide-spread population,) I could discover no place of worship, either Romanist or Protestant. For as many miles, moreover, the people I was assured never see a minister of religion but perhaps once a year, when some one may demand his “*dues*” or his “*tithes*.” THERE IS NOT A NONCONFORMIST MINISTER FOR EVERY 51,000 SOUL. THERE ARE UPWARDS OF 800,000 WHO HAVE RECEIVED NO EDUCATION. Out of the million and a half of Connaught, a large portion understand only the native tongue. For them scarcely any provision exists. In many of the sequestered parts, and throughout WHOLE ISLANDS, education and religion have everything to do. Darkness overspreads the masses of the people in all directions. The Lord Shrewsbury complains bitterly of this, in his strictures on the neglect of the population by his Grace of Tuam and the Church of Rome. Other parties are equally guilty. It will be pleaded that something is being done in the towns and larger villages. Doubtless there is; but it is only a *little*. Let the stranger go into any part of the wilds of the province, and let him ask the peasant to read, or to distinguish between a *New Testament* and a *Novel*, and the probability is he will not be able. As to the saving doctrines of religion, we hesitate not to affirm, they are utterly unknown to the vast majority. Here, indeed, *multitudes are perishing for lack of knowledge!*

BUT WHAT CAN BE DONE? This is an important enquiry, and demands an explicit reply. We answer, much in many ways. The land is open for action, and the great encouragement is this,—that *whatever is suitably attempted is succeeding.*

1. SCHOOLS MAY BE ESTABLISHED. “Our school is increasing very much,” writes a friend; “we have now about 200 Roman Catholics attending.” Another remarks, “We have been praying that the Lord would open a door to the people; WE CAN PRAY SO NO LONGER. *Our school is full to overflowing; and hundreds more could be instructed, had we accommodation.*” The Sligo “*Ragged School*” is crowded to excess. I saw a noble young army on my visit to that town. From Sligo to Ballina, from Ballina to Castlebar,

and thence to Ballinasloe, a dozen schools may be at once established, and at a very limited cost. Such a movement would be life from the dead. Besides being useful to the young, it would be of great use in aiding other efforts of an evangelizing character. For *it* the wilderness would literally rejoice; for KNOWLEDGE IMPARTS ENTERPRISE, and ENTERPRISE LEADS ON TO INDUSTRIAL PROSPERITY.

2. CONGREGATIONS MAY BE OBTAINED. Of this I am an *eye-witness*. The Lord is opening up the way of your agents in a most wonderful manner. In whatever direction they turn, the door is open to the preaching of the Gospel. Should the present disposition of the people long continue, and the friends of Truth prove worthy of their trust, that intellectual and moral renovation may be diffused which would speedily make the people new; and with a new people would come a new Ireland. I preached in every place to crowded congregations. The Roman Catholics attended in unprecedented numbers. I preached Christ as the only ground of a sinner's acceptance with God; Christ as having by the shedding of his blood paid "the uttermost farthing,"—the whole debt for our discharge from condemnation; Christ without pains and penalties, or tears; Christ alone, and Christ sufficient. I proclaimed *faith in Christ* as the instrument by which the merits of Christ are made available for the salvation of the sinner. Such glad tidings I preached, without let or hinderance; and I have reason to know that many, both Romanist and Protestant, heard to their joy and rejoicing. Whilst preaching to overflowing audiences in Galway County, where all parties crowded to the services, the order of the congregation was once and again interrupted by the involuntary exclamations, "*And that's true.*"—"And may the blessing of the Virgin be upon him!" And though the Virgin could not bless me, it was well it was in their hearts that I should have a blessing. I have the most sacred memory of the scenes I witnessed. I felt I had a thirsty people; and it was delightful to draw water for them from the wells of salvation. At Ballinasloe, just by a few hours' notice, two rooms and a passage were crowded to excess. In Castlebar the large room in which I preached, besides a spacious hall, were crowded to excess. Many were obliged to retire from want of accommodation. This was much to be regretted, as several of them had walked three or four miles under the clouds of a cold winter's night. But for the bitterness of cold, and snow, I should have taken my stand outside, and, beneath the dark canopy of heaven, have proclaimed the doctrine of reconciliation through a crucified Saviour. I saw in Connaught nothing but encouragement,—I received nothing but gratitude; and my belief is that no messenger of the Churches need retire from it exclaiming, "Who hath believed our report?"—rather should he pray the Lord of the harvest to thrust forth more labourers into fields so white to the harvest.

3. NEW PLACES OF WORSHIP SHOULD BE BUILT. The work of building chapels in Ireland is confessedly great, and requires prudence, courage, and liberality. But build we must, if we intend either to give permanency to what has already been gained, or to benefit as we might the millions of immortal beings by whom we are surrounded. In some places we have promising congregations, but *no chapel*. The kind of church accommodation which we have given in many parts is enough to forbid all progression. At present, by even a limited effort, the great interests we have at heart may be doubled in their value and extent. Not to build, in some of the places now loudly demanding our aid, would be to reject the plain openings of Providence, and prove reckless of the wants of perishing men. Bad as are the times, there are those amongst us who are ready to "arise and build." In one night, in a small room, during my visit to Sligo, nearly

£300. were subscribed for a suitable erection there.* The people generally will, doubtless, soon aid the movement. The *Sligo Journal*, a Church of England paper, in commenting on this effort, remarks, "That the labours of the Rev. Noble Shepperd are fully appreciated by all classes of Protestants, and, indeed, also by the Romanists. His arduous and incessant labours during the frightful famine-year of 1847 are not forgotten; and that it reflects shame, not alone on the Independents themselves, but on the town of Sligo, that a minister of energy, piety, and talent should be smothered in so miserable a place of worship as the one they now occupy." And why, we may ask, should the Congregationalists of this capital of the North-west be buried in a hole and corner? Simply because they cannot compass by their own means all that a suitable erection would require. The large town of Castlebar, again, is fully prepared to engage in a similar effort. The people at present meet for worship in a private apartment. I had the use of two spacious rooms and a passage on the occasion of my recent visit. Concerning that visit, and the absolute need of a suitable place of worship, the *Connaught Ranger*, a Roman Catholic paper of the town, remarked, "The Rev. J. D. Smith will arrive this day in Castlebar. We understand the Society (Irish Evangelical) have it in contemplation to build a suitable place of worship. We have often had to make honourable mention of the *Evangelicals* during the past year, when our poor were so fearfully starving. We cannot forget either the manner of their distributing their bounty, without reference to creed or party. When the Society begin to build, we have no doubt they will meet with that support and encouragement from the public which their conduct so justly entitles them to expect from all professing Christians." All honour for the praiseworthy and catholic manner in which our generous denomination expended its nearly £20,000. among Ireland's perishing poor!

And now, with Protestant and Romanist urging that denomination to extend its own rightful efforts, it would be melancholy indeed were we ourselves unraindful of what so vitally concerns us. In other parts of the land also, what we have gained must eventually be lost, unless we can afford proper accommodation for worship. This is the case with Waterford, a city of 30,000 souls.† Kingstown, too, is of this description.

Now the whole of these four erections, including the schools above referred to, would cost not more than £5000. Amidst all our poverty and misery, the places concerned will provide for at least £2000. Were our Churches in Great Britain and Ireland (the same Churches that gave the £20,000. for the poor) to give only ONE POUND EACH, the remaining £3000. would be forthwith obtained; and thus this whole work—this amazing gain—be accomplished. How easy the method! how unspeakably valuable the result! Without some such simple method, several pastors must withdraw from their urgent labours (and never were their labours more urgent), and be subject to the humiliating work of begging from door to door, perhaps through the three kingdoms, and for the space of an entire year. Let but the thing be fairly entertained by the conscience and heart of the people, and success is indubitable. "TO BE" then, ye generous Churches, or "NOT TO BE!" FOUR NEW PLACES OF WORSHIP. TEN OR TWELVE NEW SCHOOLS. At once your memorial and thank-offering. Your memorial of the famine of 1847,—your thank-offering for the happy union of the two Mission Institutions consummated in the same year.

* Since which the subscriptions have amounted to £500.

† £200. were subscribed during my recent visit to that city.

Look, then, at Sligo. Consider its long-trying minister. Contemplate its 13,000 souls. Look at Castlebar,—an Irish and English-speaking Mission,—a noble centre for the most valuable operations.

Look at Waterford, with its 30,000 immortal beings. Consider its devoted minister, with a promising Congregational Church, *without a sanctuary!*

Look at Kingstown. From its locality it is capable of being at once a *key* to this land, and a bond of union between *this land and England*.

And look, too, at the self-denying *men*. Long and nobly have they counted the cost of their arduous position. Next to the approbation of their LORD, they seek their joy in the salvation of souls, and in the extension of their time-honoured faith. At this peculiar crisis, the hearts of many are turned towards them. The very least you can do is to afford them aid, in their efforts for the needful auxiliaries to success. Else, in their own insufficiency and dejection, they may retire from the field. Else, also, the triumph of their great principles may be yet farther postponed.

In conclusion, let me entreat the friends of Ireland to be steadfast and immovable. Let nothing move them. There are obstacles; but labouring for the spread of Righteousness and Truth, we are—we *must be*—on the winning side. Of this there are infallible assurances uttered by Prophets and Apostles. Sin and the Devil are to lose their present hold on the mental and moral nature of man. The work of GOD must stand. Let us then have faith in *Him*,—and not in the *Father of Lies*, as if he were too mighty for defeat. Neither let us throw any suspicion over the efficacy of the atonement, or on the adequacy of the Gospel to recover even the most helpless and hopeless of Ireland's sons. Let us remember that *millions of souls are dying*. Let us think of the never-to-be-diminished value of but one immortal soul. Let us ponder over the awful sentence of condemnation which falls at death on every impenitent sinner,—that signal of everlasting departure to all who know not God and obey not his Gospel. Let us listen to the ceaseless moanings that ever and anon ascend from the lake of agony,—that grim and dreary imprisonment whose barriers are closed impenetrably and for ever on the hopeless outcasts of vengeance. Then let us fly to the rescue of the living, and pluck them as brands from the burning. We have the *Commission*: "GO, PREACH MY GOSPEL TO EVERY CREATURE." We have the *Promise*: "LO! I AM WITH YOU." The *scene of labour* is before us: "THE FIELD IS THE WORLD."

That God may bless you in your noble undertaking is the sincere prayer of,

GENTLEMEN,

Yours to serve in the cause of Ireland,

KINGSTOWN, DUBLIN.

J. D. SMITH.

It is confidently hoped that every one who reads this statement will contribute to the sum required, or obtain aid from the Church to which he belongs. Promptitude is absolutely necessary. Subscriptions will be thankfully received by REV. T. JAMES, English Secretary, Congregational Library, Blomfield Street, London, and REV. J. D. SMITH, Irish Secretary, 3 Grafton Street, Dublin. The Subscriptions will be duly acknowledged.

The Plan herein suggested possesses the following Recommendations:—

1. The places of worship are absolutely required: without them our labours hitherto have been *misplaced*.
2. It will not interfere with the ordinary efforts of the Society's auxiliaries.
3. It accords with the recommendations of the *Plymouth Mediating Committee*.
4. It requires no minister to leave his post of labour on a collecting expedition,—an expedition often disastrous to the work it professes to promote, and always *expensive*.
5. The plan is available for *small Churches*. Ireland will do its utmost. Scotland, Wales, and England possess limited congregations, who complain that no deputation for Ireland ever visits them: they would rejoice in being summoned to so noble an effort as the one proposed.
6. Larger Churches could send the statement round for reading and subscriptions, as a book circulates in a reading society; and thus make up for the deficiency of any who may neglect the call, or may be incapable of responding to it.

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