

PARNELL AND IRELAND

(E. Review 1807)

Historical Apology for the Irish Catholics. By William Parnell, Esquire. Fitzpatrick, Dublin, 1807.

IF ever a nation exhibited symptoms of downright madness, or utter stupidity, we conceive these symptoms may be easily recognised in the conduct of this country upon the Catholic question. A man has a wound in his great toe, and a violent and perilous fever at the same time; and he refuses to take the medicines for the fever, because it will disconcert his toe! The mournful and folly-stricken blockhead forgets that his toe cannot survive him;—that if he dies, there can be no digital life apart from him: yet he lingers and fondles over this last part of his body, soothing it madly with little plasters, and anile fomentations, while the neglected fever rages in his entrails, and burns away his whole life. If the comparatively little questions of Establishment are all that this country is capable of discussing or regarding, for God's sake let us remember, that the foreign conquest, which destroys all, destroys this beloved *toe* also. Pass over freedom, industry, and science—and look upon this great empire, by which we are about to be swallowed up, only as it affects the manner of collecting tithes, and of reading the liturgy—still, if all goes, these must go too; and even, for their interests, it is worth while to conciliate Ireland, to avert the hostility, and to employ the strength of the Catholic population. We plead the question as the sincerest friends to the Establishment;—as wishing to it all the prosperity and duration its warmest advocates can desire,— but remembering always, what these advocates seem to forget that the Establishment cannot be threatened by any danger so great as the perdition of the kingdom in which it is established

We are truly glad to agree so entirely with Mr. Parnell upon this great question; we admire his way of thinking ; and most cordially recommend his work to the attention of the public. The general conclusion which he attempts to prove is this ;—that religious sentiment, however perverted by bigotry or fanaticism, has always a *tendency* to moderation; that it seldom assumes any great portion of activity or enthusiasm, except from novelty of opinion, or from opposition, contumely, and persecution, when novelty ceases; that a government has little to fear from any religious sect, except while that sect is new. Give a government only time, and, provided it has the good sense to treat folly with forbearance, it must ultimately prevail. When, therefore, a sect is found, after a lapse of years, to be ill-disposed to the Government, we may be certain that Government has widened its separation by marked distinctions, roused its resentment by contumely, or supported its enthusiasm by persecution.

The *particular* conclusion Mr. Parnell attempts to prove is, that the Catholic religion in Ireland had sunk into torpor and inactivity, till Government roused it with the lash: that even then, from the respect and attachment which men are always inclined to show towards Government, there still remained a large body of loyal Catholics; that these only decreased in number from the rapid increase of persecution; and that, after all the effects which the resentment of the Roman Catholics had in creating rebellions had been very much exaggerated.

In support of these two conclusions, Mr. Parnell takes a survey of the history of Ireland, from the conquest under Henry, to the rebellion under Charles the First, passing very rapidly over the period which preceded the Reformation, and dwelling principally upon the various rebellions which broke out in Ireland between the Reformation and the grand rebellion in the reign of Charles the First. The celebrated conquest of Ireland by Henry the Second, extended only to a very few counties in Leinster; nine-tenths of the whole kingdom were left, as he found them, under the dominion of their native princes. The influence of

example was as strong in this, as in most other instances; and great numbers of the English settlers who came over under various adventurers, resigned their pretensions to superior civilisation, cast off their lower garments, and lapsed into the nudity and barbarism of the Irish. The limit which divided the possessions of the English settler from those of the native Irish, was called the pale; and the expressions of inhabitants *within the pale*, and *without the pale*, were the terms by which the two nations were distinguished. It is almost superfluous to state, that the most bloody and pernicious warfare was carried on upon the borders—sometimes for something—sometimes for nothing—most commonly for cows. The Irish, over whom the sovereigns of England affected a sort of nominal dominion, were entirely governed by their own laws; and so very little connection had they with the justice of the invading country, that it was as lawful to kill an Irishman as it was to kill a badger or a fox. The instances are innumerable, where the defendant has pleaded that the deceased was an Irishman, and that therefore defendant had a right to kill him ;—and upon the proof of Hibernicism, acquittal followed of course.

When the English army mustered in any great strength, the Irish chieftains would do exterior homage to the English Crown; and they very frequently, by this artifice, averted from their country the miseries of invasion: but they remained completely unsubdued, till the rebellion which took place in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, of which that politic woman availed herself to the complete subjugation of Ireland. In speaking of the Irish about the reign of Elizabeth, or James the First, we must not draw our comparisons from England, but from New Zealand; they were not civilised men, but savages; and if we reason about their conduct, we must reason of them as savages.

‘After reading every account of Irish history’ (says Mr. Parnell), ‘one great perplexity appears to remain : How does it happen, that, from the first invasion of the English, till the reign of James I., Ireland seems not to have made the smallest progress in civilisation or wealth ?’

‘That it was divided into a number of small principalities, which waged constant war on each other, — or that the appointment of the chieftains was elective, — do not appear sufficient reasons, although these are the only ones assigned by those who have been at the trouble of considering the subject: neither are the confiscations of property quite sufficient to account for the effect. There have been great confiscations in other countries, and still they have flourished : the petty states of Greece were quite analogous to the chiefries (as they were called) in Ireland; and yet they seemed to flourish almost in proportion to their dissensions. Poland felt the bad effects of an elective monarchy more than any other country ; and yet, in point of civilisation, it maintained a very respectable rank among the nations of Europe; but Ireland never, for an instant, made any progress in improvement, till the reign of James I.

‘It is scarcely credible, that in a climate like that of Ireland, and at a period so far advanced in civilisation as the end of Elizabeth’s reign, the greater part of the natives should go naked. Yet this is rendered certain by the testimony of an eyewitness, Fynes Moryson. “In the remote parts,” he says, “ where the English laws and manners are unknown, the very chief of the Irish, as well men as women, go naked in the winter time, only having their privy parts covered with a rag of linen, and their bodies with a loose mantle. This I speak of my own experience ; yet remember that a Bohemian baron coming out of Scotland to us by the north parts of the wild Irish, told me in great earnestness, that he, coming to the house of O’Kane, a great lord amongst them, was met at the door by sixteen women all naked, excepting their loose mantles, whereof eight or ten were very fair ; with which strange sight his eyes , being dazzled, they led him into the house, and then sitting down by the fire with crossed legs, like tailors, and so low as could not but offend chaste eyes, desired him to sit down with them. Soon after, O’Kane, the lord of the country, came in all naked, except a loose mantle and shoes, which he put off as soon as he came in ; and, entertaining the Baron after his best manner in the Latin tongue, desired him to put off his apparel, which he thought to be a burden to him, and to sit naked.

‘ “ To conclude, men and women at night going to sleep, lye thus naked in a round circle about the fire, with their feet towards it. They fold their heads and their upper parts in woollen mantles, first

steeped in water to keep them warm; for they say, that woollen cloth, wetted, preserves heat (as linen, wetted, preserves cold), when the smoke of their bodies has warmed the woollen cloth.”

‘The cause of this extreme poverty, and of its long continuance, we must conclude, arose from the peculiar laws of property, which were in force under the Irish dynasties. These laws have been described by most writers as similar to the Kentish custom of gavelkind; and indeed so little attention was paid to the subject, that were it not for the researches of Sir J. Davis, the knowledge of this singular usage would have been entirely lost.

‘The Brehon law of property, he tells us, was similar to the custom (as the English lawyers term it) of hodge-podge. When any one of the sept died, his lands did not descend to his sons, but were divided among the whole sept: and, for this purpose, the chief of the sept made a new division of the whole lands belonging to the sept, and gave every one his part according to seniority. So that no man had a property which could descend to his children; and even during his own life, his possession of any particular spot was quite uncertain, being liable to be constantly shuffled and changed by new partitions. The consequence of this was, that there was not a house of brick or stone, among the Irish, down to the reign of Henry VII.; not even a garden or orchard, or well-fenced or improved field; neither village or town, or in any respect the least provision for posterity. This monstrous custom, so opposite to the natural feelings of mankind, was probably perpetuated by the policy of the chiefs. In the first place, the power of partitioning being lodged in their hands, made them the most absolute of tyrants, being the dispensers of the property as well as of the liberty of their subjects. In the second place, it had the appearance of adding to the number of their savage armies; for, where there was no improvement or tillage, war was pursued as an occupation.

‘In the early history of Ireland, we find several instances of chieftains discountenancing tillage; and so late as Elizabeth’s reign, Moryson says, that “Sir Neal Garve restrained his people from ploughing, that they might assist him to do any mischief.”’ —(p. 98—102.)

These quotations and observations will enable us to state a few plain facts for the recollection of our English readers: 1st, Ireland was never subdued till the rebellion in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. 2d, For four hundred years before that period, the two nations had been almost constantly at war; and, in consequence of this, a deep and irreconcilable hatred existed between the people within and without the pale. 3d, The Irish, at the accession of Queen Elizabeth, were unquestionably the most barbarous people in Europe. So much for what had happened previous to the reign of Queen Elizabeth; and let any man, who has the most superficial knowledge of human affairs, determine, whether national hatred, proceeding from such powerful causes, could possibly have been kept under by the defeat of one single rebellion, — whether it would not have been easy to have foreseen, at that period, that a proud, brave, half-savage people, would cherish the memory of their wrongs for centuries to come, and break forth into arms at every period when they were particularly exasperated by oppression, or invited by opportunity. If the Protestant religion had spread in Ireland as it did in England, and if there never had been any difference of faith between the two countries,—can it be believed that the Irish, ill-treated, and infamously governed as they have been, would never have made any efforts to shake off the yoke of England? Surely there are causes enough to account for their impatience of that yoke, without endeavouring to inflame the zeal of ignorant people against the Catholic religion, and to make that mode of faith responsible for all the butchery which the Irish and English, for these last two centuries, have exercised upon each other. Every body, of course, must admit, that if to the causes of hatred already specified there be added the additional cause of religious distinction, this last will give greater force (and what is of more consequence to observe, give a *name*) to the whole aggregate motive. But what Mr. Parnell contends for, and clearly and decisively proves, is, that many of those sanguinary scenes attributed to the Catholic religion, are to be partly imputed to causes totally disconnected from religion; that the unjust invasion, and the tyrannical, infamous policy of the English, are to take their full share of blame with the

sophisms and plots of Catholic priests. In the reign of Henry the Eighth, Mr. Parnell shows that feudal submission was readily paid to him by all the Irish chiefs ; that the Reformation was received without the slightest opposition ; and that the troubles which took place at that period in Ireland are to be entirely attributed to the ambition and injustice of Henry. In the reign of Queen Mary there was no recrimination upon the Protestants ; — a striking proof, that the bigotry of the Catholic religion had not, at that period, risen to any great height in Ireland. The insurrections of the various Irish princes were as numerous, during this reign, as they had been in the two preceding reigns — a circumstance rather difficult of explanation, if, as is commonly believed, the Catholic religion was at that period the main-spring of men's actions.

In the reign of Elizabeth, the Catholic in the pale regularly fought against the Catholic out of the pale. O'Sullivan, a bigoted Papist, reproaches them with doing so. Speaking of the reign of James the First, he says, 'And now the eyes even of the English Irish' (the Catholics of the pale) 'were opened; and they cursed their former folly for helping the heretic.' The English Government were so sensible of the loyalty of the Irish English Catholics, that they entrusted them with the most confidential services. The Earl of Kildare was the principal instrument in waging war against the chieftains of Leix and Offal. William O'Bourge, another Catholic, was created Lord Castle Connel for his eminent services ; and MacGully Patrick, a priest, was the state spy. We presume that this wise and manly conduct of Queen Elizabeth was utterly unknown both to the Pastrycook and the Secretary of State, who have published upon the dangers of employing Catholics even against foreign enemies; and in those publications have said a good deal about the wisdom of our ancestors — the usual topic whenever the folly of their descendants is to be defended. To whatever of our ancestors they may allude, they may spare all compliments to this illustrious princess, who would certainly have kept the worthy confectioner to the composition of tarts, and most probably furnished him with the productions of the Right Honourable Secretary, as the means of conveying those juicy delicacies to a hungry and discerning public.

In the next two reigns, Mr. Parnell shows by what injudicious measures of the English Government the spirit of the Catholic opposition was gradually formed ; for that it did produce powerful effects at a subsequent period he does not deny; but contends only (as we have before stated) that these effects have been much overrated and ascribed *solely* to the Catholic religion, when other causes have at least had an equal agency in bringing them about. He concludes with some general remarks on the dreadful state of Ireland. and the contemptible folly and bigotry of the English*;— remarks full of truth, of good sense, and of political courage. How melancholy to reflect that there would be still be some chance of saving England from the general wreck of empires, but that it may not be saved, because some politician will lose two thousand a year by it and another three thousand — a third a place in reversion, and a fourth a pension for his aunt!- Alas, these are the powerful causes which have always settled the destiny of great kingdoms, and which may level old England, with all its boasted freedom, and boasted wisdom, to the dust. Nor is it the least singular among the political phenomena of the present day, that the sole consideration which seems to influence the unbigoted part of the English people, in this great question of Ireland is a regard for the personal feelings of the Monarch. Nothing is said or thought of the enormous risk to which Ireland is exposed, — nothing of the gross injustice with which the Catholics are treated,—nothing of the lucrative apostacy of those from whom they experience this treatment: but the only concern by which we all seem to be agitated is, that the King must not be vexed in his old age. We have a great respect for the King; and wish him all the happiness compatible with the happiness of his people. But these are not times to pay foolish compliments to kings, or the sons of kings or to any body else: this journal has always preserved its character for courage and honesty; and it shall do so to the last. If the people of this country are solely occupied in considering what is personally agreeable to the King, without considering what is for his permanent good, and for the safety of his dominions; if all public men, quitting the common vulgar scramble for emolument, do not concur in

conciliating the people of Ireland; if the unfounded alarms, and the comparatively trifling interests of the clergy are to supersede the great question of freedom or slavery, it does appear to us quite impossible that so mean and so foolish a people can escape that destruction which is ready to burst upon them; a destruction so imminent, that it can only be averted by arming all in our defence who would evidently be sharers in our ruin,—and by such a change of system as may save us from the hazard of being ruined by the ignorance and cowardice of any general by the bigotry or the ambition of any minister, or by the well-meaning scruples of any human being, let his dignity be what it may. These minor and domestic dangers we must endeavour firmly and temperately to avert as we best can ; but, at all hazards, we must keep out the destroyer from among us, or perish like wise and brave men in the attempt,

Sydney's footnote, p.1.

* I do not retract one syllable (or one iota) of what I have said or written upon the Catholic question. What was wanted for Ireland was emancipation, time and justice, abolition of present wrongs ; time for forgetting past wrongs, and that continued and even justice which would make such oblivion wise. It is now only difficult to tranquillise Ireland, before emancipation it was impossible. As to the danger from Catholic doctrines, I must leave such apprehensions to the respectable anility of these realms. I will not meddle with it.

p.4.

It would be as well, in future, to say no more of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.