

Chapter XIX from "A History of the Irish Settlers in North America from the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850," 1852

The Irish Famines of 1846-7 and 1848 – American Sympathy – Meetings in Philadelphia, Boston and New York – National Meeting in Washington – the Macedonian and Jamestown – Reflections.

The most affecting event, in the connexion (sic) of Ireland with America, is the conduct of the latter towards the victims of the Irish famine, which began in the winter of 1846 and 1847, and endured, in its worst forms, till the close of 1848.

The famine is to be thus accounted for: The act of union, in 1800, deprived Ireland of a native legislature. Her aristocracy emigrated to London. Her tariff expired in 1826, and, of course, was not renewed. Her merchants and manufacturers withdrew their capital from trade and invested it in land.* The land! the land! was the object of universal, illimitable competition. In the first twenty years of the century, the farmers, if rack-rented, had still the war prices. After the peace, they had the monopoly of the English provision and produce markets. But in 1846, Sir Robert Peel successfully struck at the old laws, imposing duties on foreign corn, and let in Baltic wheat, and American provisions of every kind, to compete with and undersell the Irish rack-rented farmers.

**Between 1820 and 1830, two thirds of all the manufactories in Ireland were closed, and abandoned, as ruinous investments.*

High rents had produced hardness of heart in "the middleman," extravagance in the land-owner, and extreme poverty in the peasant. The poor law commission of 1839 reported that 2,300,000 of the agricultural laborers of Ireland were "paupers;" that those immediately above the lowest rank were "the worst clad, worst fed, and worst lodged" peasantry in Europe. True, indeed! They were lodged in styes, clothed in rags, and fed on the poorest quality of potato.

Partial failures of this crop had taken place for a succession of seasons. So regularly did these failures occur, that William Cobbett and other skillful agriculturalists had foretold their final destructions, years before. Still the crops of the summer of 1846 looked fair and sound to the eye. The dark green crisp leaves and yellow and purple blossoms of the potato fields were a cheerful feature in every landscape. By July, however, the terrible fact became but too certain. From every townland within the four seas tidings came to the capital that the people's food was blasted—utterly, hopelessly blasted. Incredulity gave way to panic, panic to demands on the imperial government to stop the export of grain, to establish public granaries, and to give the peasantry such reproductive employment as would enable them to purchase food enough to keep soul and body together. By a report of the ordnance captain, Larcom, it appeared there were grain crops more than sufficient to support the whole population—a cereal harvest estimated at four hundred millions of dollars, as prices were. But to all remonstrances, petitions, and proposals, the imperial economists had but one answer, "they could not interfere with the ordinary currents of trade." O'Connell's proposal, Lord George Bentinck's, O'Brien's, the proposals of the society called "The Irish Council," all received the same answer. Fortunes were

made and lost in gambling over this sudden trade in human subsistence, and ships laden to the gunwales sailed out of Irish ports, while the charities of the world were coming in.

In August authentic cases of death by famine, with the verdict “starvation,” were reported. The first authentic case thrilled the country, like an ill-wind. From such inquests were held, and the same sad verdict repeated twenty times in the day. Then Ireland, the hospitable among the nations, smitten with famine, deserted by her imperial masters, lifted up her voice, and uttered that cry of awful anguish, which shook the ends of the earth.

The Czar, the Sultan, and the Pope, sent their roubles and their Pauls. The Pasha of Egypt, the Shah of Persia, the Emperor of China, the Rajahs of India, conspired to do for Ireland, what her so-styled rulers refused to do,— to keep her young and old people living in the land.

America did more in this work of mercy than all the rest of the world. On the 9th of November, 1846, a number of gentlemen assembled at the Globe Hotel, South Sixth street, Philadelphia, convened by the following circular, issued by the venerable Alderman Binns:

“In Ireland, the men, women and children at this time are, everywhere, from the north to the south, and from the east to the west, falling victims to hunger and the diseases consequent upon hunger. The heart sickens in the knowledge that thousands of people, among the most hospitable on the earth, are perishing from famine! We are in a land abounding with food of all sorts, good and wholesome, for man and every creature that lives.

“It is thought to be the duty of this city, which has so often been among the foremost in works of mercy and charity, to do something for the famishing people of Ireland. What that something shall be, we do not undertake to say. To consider what is best to be done, and the best way of doing it, a meeting will be held in South Sixth street, between Chestnut and Walnut streets, at the Globe Hotel, on Thursday evening, at seven o’clock; at that time and place, you are requested to attend. As this meeting is intended to be select, and that business shall be entered upon at the hour proposed, you are requested to be punctual in your attendance.”

“This is believed to have been the first meeting of a public character, held in America, on the subject of Irish relief.”* An important public meeting followed, which was addressed by the most distinguished citizens including Mayor Swift and Hon. Horace Binney, in favor of a general contribution throughout Pennsylvania.

**Report of the Gen. Ex. Committee of Philadelphia, p. 5.*

Alderman Binns concluded a few apposite remarks with the following preamble and resolution, which were adopted unanimously:—

“In 1775, before these United States had existence,— before her stars had lighted her to glory, or her stripes had been felt by her foes,— before the voice of independence had been heard on her mountains, or the shouts of victory had echoed through her valleys,— her statesmen and patriots assembled at their seat of government, in their future Hall of Independence, and, by a public address, made known to the world her grateful and affectionate sympathy and respect for the Parliament and people of Ireland, kindly inviting her people to come and inhabit ‘the fertile regions of America.’ Many thousands accepted the invitation, and by their toil and their sufferings, their sweat and their blood, assisted to make ‘Great, Glorious, and Free,’ the country which had adopted them.

“Since that invitation, threescore and ten years have passed, and the United States have become a great nation; her stars and stripes float freely over every sea; she is a sure refuge, yea, a tower of strength for the oppressed of every clime, and her voice is respected among the mightiest powers of the earth; but dark, deep, and general distress, with the gloom of night overshadows unhappy Ireland; her people perish under the pangs of hunger, and are swept by pestilence; they exist in shelterless cabins, with scant garments to cover them, and fall by thousands into unwept, too often uncovered, graves. A knowledge of their miseries has crossed the Atlantic, and touched the hearts of the statesmen and patriots of the United States, and again they have assembled at their seat of government, and invited their fellow-citizens to meet in their cities, towns, and villages, to consider, compassionate, and relieve the heartbroken, the famishing, the dying men, women, and children of Ireland; therefore be it, it hereby is,

“*Resolved*, That the statesmen and patriots of ‘the low and humble and of the high and mighty’ states of America have, in the conduct stated, given illustrious examples to those of all nations of the earth, deserved the thanks of the people whom they have faithfully represented, and reinsured to them and to their country the heart-warm gratitude and renewed attachment of the people of Ireland.”

An influential city committee was organized. By May, 1847, they had received above \$48,000 in cash, and \$20,000 in articles suited for shipping. They loaded three barks and four brigs, for various Irish ports, all which safely arrived. Munster and Connaught received the greater part. In their closing report, at the end of 1847, the committee, among other resolutions, passed the following:—

“While we gratefully acknowledge the services cordially rendered to us and to the cause of humanity, by individuals in various parts of Pennsylvania and Ohio in particular, we feel ourselves called upon in an especial manner to make known our high sense of the very important assistance given to us by our esteemed friend and fellow-citizen, Allen Cuthbert. Not only have we had the free use of his warehouses for the deposit of breadstuffs, but the benefit of his constant and anxious services and experience in receiving them from every quarter, and in shipping them to Ireland. Conduct such as this confers honor not only on himself, but on the community of which he is a worthy member.”

New York and Boston were not behind Philadelphia, nor the Grinnells, Lawrences, and Everetts, behind the Cuthberts and Binneys.* In the spring of 1847, a national meeting was held at Washington, at which Mr. Dallas, Vice-President of the United States, took the chair. Mr. Webster, Mr. Cass, and other eminent senators, spoke. The government places two vessels of war, “The Macedonian” and “The Jamestown,” at the disposal of the committee sitting in Boston and New York. Boston and New England, it is calculated, contributed nearly a quarter of a million of dollars, and New York city and state an equal amount. The Protestant as well as the Catholic pulpit resounded with appeals for “aid to Ireland.” Sect and party were forgotten, and all-embracing Charity ruled the New World, unopposed. American was even more blessed in the giving, than Ireland was in receiving, such assistance.

**In his address on the subject, in Boston, Mr. Everett recalled a reminiscence of Colonial times, which must have told powerfully on his audience. In the prosecution of the Narragansett war, with King Philip, the Cape towns, in which were already some Irish families, contracted a heavy debt. The city of Dublin, being made aware of the condition of the settlers, remitted £124 10s. “for the relief of such as were impoverished, distressed, and in necessity, from the war.” – Pratt’s Hist. of Eastham, Wellfleet, and Orleans. Yarmouth 1844. Another writer add: “The donation from Ireland, is a gratifying proof of the generous influence of Christian sympathies, and is supposed to have been procured through the exertions of the Rev. Nathaniel Mather, at that time a minister of the congregational denomination in Dubmit.” – Ibid.*

It was the noblest sight of the century, those ships of war, laden with life and manned by mercy, entering the Irish waters. England's flag drooped above the spoil she was stealing away from the famishing, as the American frigates passed her, inward bound, deep with charitable freights. Here were the ships of a state but seventy years old, – a state without a consolidated treasury, – a state, but the other day, a group of unconnected struggling colonies. And here, in the fullness (sic) of her heart and her harvest, she had come to feed the enslaved and enervated vassals of Victoria, in the very presence of her throne. If public shame or sensibility could localize itself on any individual of so vile and vast a despotism, what must not that individual have felt!

Those who know what it requires to feed an army, may imagine that, abundant as was America's gift, it was not effectual to banish famine. Oh, no! tens of thousands, served many thousands of precious lives, and gave an undying feeling of redemption to come, to all who lived at that day, in Ireland. The Central Relief Committees of Dublin and Cork accounted for the trusts committed to them. The "Irish Confederation" made national acknowledgment of Ireland's indebtedness to Mr. Dallas, and to Captain Forbes of "The Jamestown."* Many an Irish soldier on the battle-fields of Mexico, did the like, in deeds, instead of words.

**It is a source of sincere satisfaction to the present writer, that both addresses were prepared by him, and adopted by a committee, of which Duffy, O'Brien, Meagher, and Mitchel, were members.*