

24.5081.010

Canon John O'Rourke

The Great Irish Famine

ORIG. PUB. 1874

VERITAS

eagerly watched to see if the breath of life still came from their nostrils. Her apprehensions were but too well founded, she had lost some of her dear ones during the night.'

The mournful poetry of this simple narrative must touch every heart.

Ass and horse flesh were anxiously sought for, even when the animals died of disease or starvation. In the middle of January it was recorded that a horse belonging to a man near Claremorris, having died, was flayed and the carcass left for dogs and birds to feed upon; but, says the narrative, before much of it was consumed it was discovered by a poor family (whose name and residence are given) and used by them as food. Father, mother and six children prolonged life for a week upon this disgusting carrion and even regretted the loss of it when the supply failed; and the poor mother said to the person who made the fact public, 'the Lord only knows what I will now do for my starving children, since it is gone!'

A fortnight earlier a most circumstantial account of the eating of ass flesh was given by a commercial gentleman in a letter addressed to the Premier, Lord John Russell, and dated 'Ballina, Christmas-eve' (!) In this case the poor man killed his ass for food, the skin being sold to a skin dealer for 8d. The writer of the letter visited the skin dealer's house in order to make sure of the fact. It was quite true and the skin dealer's wife told him this could not be a solitary case, 'as she never remembered so many asses' skins coming for sale as within the month just past.'¹²

Mr Forster, in his report to the Society of Friends, said of the conditions of Westport in January 1847 that it was a strange and fearful sight, like what we read of beleaguered cities; its streets crowded with gaunt wanderers, sauntering to and fro, with hopeless air and hunger-struck look; a mob of starved, almost naked women were around the poor house, clamouring for soup-tickets; our inn, the headquarters of the road engineer and pay clerks, was beset by a crowd of beggars for work.¹³

The agent of the British Association, Count Strezelecki, writing from Westport at this time, said no pen could describe the distress by which he was surrounded; it had reached such an extreme degree of intensity that it was above the power of exaggeration. 'You may', he added, 'believe anything which you hear and read, because what I actually see surpasses what I ever read of past and present calamities.'¹⁴

The weather in March became mild and even warm and sunny; some little comfort, one would suppose, to those without food or fuel. But no; they were so starved and weakened and broken down that it had an injurious effect upon them and hurried them

rapidly to their end. A week after the passage quoted above was written, Count Strezelecki again wrote and said he was sorry to report that the distress had increased; a thing which could be hardly believed as possible. Melancholy cases of death on the public roads and in the streets had become more frequent. The sudden warmth of the weather and the rays of a bright sun accelerated prodigiously the forthcoming end of those whose constitutions were undermined by famine or sickness.

'Yesterday', he wrote, 'a countrywoman, between this and the harbour (one mile distance), walking with four children, squatted against a wall on which the heat and light reflected powerfully; some hours after two of her children were corpses and she and the two remaining ones taken lifeless to the barracks. Today, in Westport, similar melancholy occurrences took place.'¹⁵

Some years ago, during a visit to Westport, I received sad corroboration of the truth of these statements. I met several persons who had witnessed the Famine in that town and its neighbourhood and their relation of the scenes which fell under their notice not only sustained but surpassed, if possible, the facts given in the above communications.

A priest who was stationed at Westport during the Famine was still there at the period of my visit. During that dreadful time the people, he told me, who wandered about the country in search of food frequently took possession of empty houses, which they easily found, the inmates having died, or having gone to the Workhouse, where such existed. A brother and sister, not quite grown up, took possession of a house in this way in the parish of Westport. One of them became ill; the other continued to go for the relief where it was given out but this one soon fell ill also. No person heeded them. Everyone had too much to do for himself. They died. Their dead bodies were only discovered by the offensive odour which issued from the house in which they died and in which they had become putrefied. It was found necessary to make an aperture for ventilation on the roof before anyone would venture in. The neighbours dug a hole in the hard floor of the cabin with a crowbar to receive their remains. And this was their coffinless grave!

This same priest administered in one day the last Sacrament to thirty-three young persons in the Workhouse of Westport; of these there were not more than two or three alive next morning.

Mr Egan, who at the date of my visit was Clerk of the Union, held the same office during the Famine. The Workhouse was built to accommodate 1,000 persons. There were two days a week for admissions. With the house crowded far beyond its capacity, he had repeatedly seen as many as 3,000 persons seeking admission

on a single day. Knowing, as we do, the utter dislike the Irish peasantry had in those times to enter the Workhouse, this is a terrible revelation of the Famine; for it is a recorded fact that many of the people died of want in their cabins and suffered their children to die rather than go there. Those who were not admitted — and they were, of course, the great majority — having no homes to return to, lay down and died in Westport and its suburbs.

Mr Egan, pointing to the wall opposite the Workhouse gate, said: 'There is where they sat down, never to rise again. I have seen there of a morning as many as eight corpses of those miserable beings, who had died during the night. Father G. [then in Westport] used to be anointing them as they lay exhausted along the walls and streets, dying of hunger and fever.'¹⁶

The principal aim of the Society of Friends was to establish soup-kitchens and give employment to the women in knitting. As soon as their committee was in working order they sent members of their body to various parts of the country — more especially to the West — to make inquiries and to see things with their own eyes. Their reports, made in a quiet, unexaggerated form, are amongst the most valuable testimonies extant as to the effects and extent of the Famine.

The delegate who was the first to explore portions of the West wrote that, at Boyle (a prosperous and important town), the persons who sought admission to the Workhouse were in a most emaciated state, many of them declaring that they had not tasted food of any kind for forty-eight hours; and he learned that numbers of them had been living upon turnips and cabbage-leaves for weeks. The truth of these statements was but too well supported by the dreadfully reduced state in which they presented themselves, the children especially being emaciated with starvation and ravenous with hunger.

At Carrick-on-Shannon he witnessed what he calls a most painful and heartrending scene — poor wretches in the last stage of famine begging to be received into the house; women, who had six or seven children, imploring that even two or three of them might be taken in, as their husbands were earning but 8d. a day, which, at the existing high price of provisions, was totally inadequate to feed them. Some of those children were worn to skeletons; their features sharpened with hunger and their limbs wasted almost to the bone. Of course, he said, among so many applicants (110), a great number were necessarily refused admittance, as there were but thirty vacancies in the house. Although the guardians exercised the best discrimination they could, it was believed that some of those rejected were so far spent

that it was doubtful if they could reach their homes alive — those homes, such as they were, being in many cases five or six Irish miles away.

This kind-hearted gentleman, having expressed a wish to distribute bread to those poor creatures, that they might not, as he said, 'go quite empty-handed', forty pounds of bread were procured, all that could be purchased in the town of Carrick-on-Shannon. They devoured it with a voracity which nothing but famine could produce. One woman, he said, was observed to eat but a very small portion of her bread and, being asked the reason, said she had four children at home to whom she was taking it, as without it there would not be a morsel of food in her cabin that night.

What struck him and his fellow-traveller in a special manner was the effects of famine on the children; their faces were so wan and haggard that they looked like old men and women; their sprightliness was all gone; they sat in groups at their cabin doors, making no attempt to play.

Another indication of the Famine noticed by them was that the pigs and poultry had entirely disappeared. To numberless testimonies as to the spirit in which the poor people bore their unexampled privations, this good man added his: 'To do the poor justice', he wrote, 'they are bearing their privations with a remarkable degree of patience and fortitude, and very little clamorous begging is to be met with upon the roads — at least, not more than has been the case in Ireland for many years. William Forster' (his fellow-traveller), he added, 'has completely formed the opinion that the statements in the public newspapers are by no means exaggerated.'¹⁷

Although Donegal is in the Ulster division of the kingdom, in the famine time it partook more of the character of a Connaught than an Ulster county. A gentleman was deputed by the Society of Friends to explore it, who gave his views upon the Irish Famine with a spirit and feeling which do him honour as a man and a Christian. Writing from Stranorlar he said: 'This county, like most others in Ireland, belongs to a few large proprietors, some of them, unhappily, absentees, whose large domains sometimes extend over whole parishes and baronies, and contain a population of 8,000 to 12,000. Such, for instance, is the parish of Templecrone, with a population of 10,000 inhabitants; in which the only residents above small farmers are the agent, the Protestant clergyman, the parish priest, a medical man and perhaps a resident magistrate with the superintendent of police and a few small dealers.'¹⁸

Writing from Dunfanaghy in the midst of snow, he said: 'A

portion of the district through which we passed this day, as well as the adjoining one, is, with one exception, the poorest and most destitute in Donegal. Nothing, indeed, can describe too strongly the dreadful condition of the people. Many families were living on a single meal of cabbage and some even, as we were assured, upon a little seaweed.

'A highly respectable merchant of the town called upon this gentleman and assured him that the small farmers and cottiers had parted with all their pigs and their fowl; and even their bed clothes and fishing nets had gone for the same object, the supply of food. He stated that he knew many families of five to eight persons, who subsisted on 2.5lb. of oatmeal per day, made into thin water gruel — about 6oz. of meal for each!'

'Dunfanaghy is a little fishing town situated on a bay remarkably adapted for a fishing population; the sea is teeming with fish of the finest description, waiting, we might say, to be caught. Many of the inhabitants gain a portion of their living by this means, but so rude is their tackle and so fragile and liable to be upset are their primitive boats or coracles, made of wicker-work, over which sailcloth is stretched, that they can only venture to sea in fine weather; and thus with food almost in sight the people starve, because they have no one to teach them to build boats more adapted to this rocky coast than those used by their ancestors many centuries ago.¹⁹ This is but one among many instances of the wasted industrial resources of this country which, whether in connection with the water or the land, strike the eye of the stranger at every step'.²⁰

To Glenties Mr Tuke and his companions made their journey through a succession of wild mountain passes, rendered still wilder by the deep snow which covered everything. They put up at Lord George Hill's Gweedore hotel and endorsed all they had previously heard about the admirable zeal and enlightened benevolence of that nobleman, who had effected great improvements both in the land and in the condition of the inhabitants of one of the wildest portions of Donegal.

'We started at daybreak', he wrote, 'for Glenties, thirty miles distant, over the mountains; and after leaving the improved cottages and farms on the Gweedore estate, soon came upon the domain of an absentee proprietor, the extent of which may be judged by the fact that our road lay for more than twenty miles through it. This is the poorest parish in Donegal and no statement can be too strong with respect to the wretched condition, the positive misery and starvation in which the cottiers and small farmers on this immense domain are found. We baited at Dungloe. A more miserable and dilapidated village or town I

never saw. What a contrast did its dirty little inn present to the hotel at Gweedore.'

There was not a single pound of meal, Indian or oat, to be purchased in this miserable place, whilst thousands were depending on it for their supplies. It was crowded with poor people from the surrounding country and from the island of Arranmore, who were crying with hunger and cold; the next market town was thirty miles from them, and the nearest place where food could be obtained was Lord George Hill's store at Bunbeg, some twenty miles distant. Surely this extreme wretchedness and neglect must be, to a great extent, attributed to the want of a resident proprietor.

'Leaving Dungloe,' said Mr Tuke, 'we proceeded to Glenties, still on the same property; and throughout our journey met with the most squalid scenes of misery which the imagination can well conceive. Whilst thousands of acres of reclaimable land lies entirely neglected and uncultivated, there are thousands of men both willing and anxious to obtain work but unable to procure it.'

On the following morning, William Forster had an interview with the resident magistrate, as well as with the rector of the parish and some other gentlemen, who gave distressing accounts of the poverty existing around them. Their attention was directed to the necessity for the immediate establishment of soup-kitchens, the employment of women in knitting and the formation of local committees for their relief, extending over several parishes.

'We visited the poorhouse at Glenties, which is in a dreadful state; the people were in fact half starved and only half clothed. The day before they had but one meal of oatmeal and water; and at the time of our visit had not sufficient food in the house for the day's supply. The people complained bitterly, as well they might, and begged us to give them tickets for work, to enable them to leave the place and work on the roads. Some were leaving the house, preferring to die in their own hovels rather than in the poorhouse. Their bedding consisted of dirty straw, in which they were laid in rows on the floor; even as many as six persons being crowded under one rug; and we did not see a blanket at all. The rooms were hardly bearable for filth. The living and the dying were stretched side by side beneath the same miserable covering! No wonder that disease and pestilence were filling the infirmary, and that the pale haggard countenances of the poor boys and girls told of sufferings which it was impossible to contemplate without the deepest commiseration and pity.'

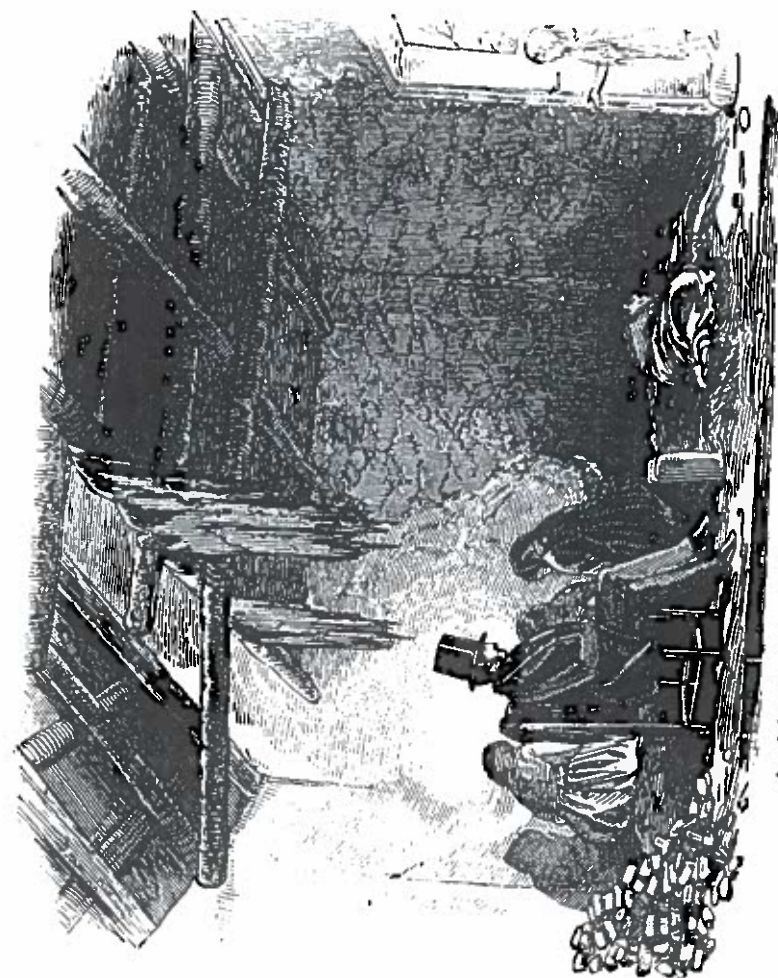
The carelessness and neglect of their duty by Irish landlords, have so often come before us during the progress of the Famine, that it is a pleasure to meet with something worth quoting on

the other side. 'Throughout Donegal we found', said Mr Tuke, 'the resident proprietors doing much for their suffering tenantry; in many cases, all that landlords could do for their relief and assistance. Several of them had obtained loans under the late Drainage Act, and with this or private resources are employing large numbers of labourers for the improvement of their estates. We met with several who had 100 men employed in this manner. Many of these landlords, as well as the clergy, are most assiduously working in all ways in their power. They have imported large quantities of meal and rice which they sell at prime cost, there being in many districts no dealers to supply those articles; and are making soup at their own houses, and dispensing daily to their famishing neighbours'.²¹

In the South, after Skibbereen, Schull, its neighbour, seems to have suffered most. To cross from Cape Clear to Schull — partly rowing, partly sailing — in a stiff breeze is very exciting and might well cause apprehension but for the crew of athletic Cape men or Capers, as the people of the mainland call them, in whose hands you have placed your safety. With them you are perfectly secure. Those hardy, simple-minded people are as used to the sea as a herdsman is to green fields. Even when they are not actually upon its stormy bosom, they are usually to be seen in groups about the little harbour, leaning against the rocks, quietly smoking their pipes, watching the tide and the weather, and discussing the proper moment for 'going out'.

It is some five miles from Cape Clear to the town of Schull. The distance is not long, but without skill and local knowledge the passage is dangerous, for what seems only a light gale elsewhere makes the sea almost tempestuous among the bluffs and rocky islands of this wild coast, where many a foundering barque has been rescued from destruction by the brave and trusty oarsmen of Cape Clear. Leaving Roaring-water Bay to the northeast and getting in shelter of the land, a church tower, humble in design and proportions, rises in the midst of a graveyard, crowded in one part with tombstones, and almost entirely devoid of them in the other. There rest the mortal remains of many generations of the people of Schull; but it is especially worthy of notice as the burial-ground which had to be doubled in size in order to receive upwards of half the population within its bosom in a single year; and yet all were not interred there: many found a grave in the fields nearest to which they died; many others, among the ruins of their dismantled cabins.

The parish of Schull is situated in the barony of West Carbery, in County Cork, and is very large, containing no fewer than 84,000 acres. The town, a small one, is on the shore in the portion of



A visitor in the cabin of the Mullins family at Schull.

the parish called East Schull; West Schull runs inland towards Skibbereen, and in this division is the village of Ballydehob. The town of Schull is built upon a piece of low level ground, a short distance from which, in the direction of Ballydehob, there is a chain of hills, the highest of which, Mount Gabriel, rises 1,300 feet above sea level.

A correspondent of the Southern Reporter, writing from Ballydehob during the first days of January, gave the most piteous account of that village; every house he entered exhibited the same characteristics — no clothing, no food, starvation in the looks of young and old. In a tumbledown cabin resembling a deserted forge, he found a miserable man seated at a few embers, with a starved-looking dog beside him that was not able to crawl. The visitor asked him if he were sick; he answered that he was not, but having got swelled legs working on the roads, he had to give up; he had not tasted food for two days; his family had gone begging about the country and he had no hope of ever seeing them again.

Efforts were still being made at this place to get coffins for half the people; many were tied up in straw and so interred. This writer mentioned what he seems to have regarded as an ingenious contrivance of the Galeen relief committee, namely the use of the coffin with the slide or hinged bottom, but such coffins had been previously used in other places.

He related a touching incident which occurred at Ballydehob, at the time of his visit. Two children, the elder only six years, went into a neighbour's house in search of food. They were asked where their father was and they replied that he was asleep for the last two days. The people became alarmed and went to his cabin, where they found him quite dead, and the merest skeleton. The mother of those children had died some weeks before and their poor devoted father sacrificed his life for them, as the neighbours found some Indian meal in the place, which he was evidently reserving for his infant children, whilst he suffered himself to die of starvation.

But a common effect of the Famine was to harden the hearts of the people and blunt their natural feelings. Hundreds, remarked this correspondent, were daily expiring in their cabins in the three parishes of this neighbourhood, and the people were becoming so accustomed to death that they had lost all those kindly sympathies for the relatives of the departed, which formerly characterised their nature. Want and destitution had so changed them that a sordid avarice and a greediness of disposition to grasp at everything in the shape of food, had seized hold of the souls of those who were considered the most generous and

hospitable race on the face of the earth. As happened in other places, no persons attended the funerals; those who were still alive were so exhausted that they were unable to inter the dead, and the duty of doing so was frequently left to casual passers-by.

About the middle of February, Commander Caffin, of her Majesty's ship Scourge, visited Schull, in company with the rector, the Rev. Robert Traill Hall. After having entered a few houses, the Commander said to the reverend gentleman: 'My preconceived ideas of your misery seem as a dream to me compared with the reality.'

And yet Captain Caffin had only time to see the cabins on the roadside in which the famine was not so terrible as it was up among the hills and fastnesses where, in one wretched hovel, whose two windows were stuffed with straw, the Rev. Mr Hall found huddled together sixteen human beings. They did not, however, belong to one family — three wretched households were congregated into this miserable abode. Out of the sixteen, two only could be said to be able to work; and on the exertions of those 'two poor pallid objects' had the rest to depend. Eight of the others were crowded into one pallet — it could not be called a bed, being formed of a little straw — which scarcely kept them from the cold mud floor. A poor father was still able to sit up but his legs were dreadfully swollen and he was dead in two or three days after the Rev. Mr Hall's visit. Beside him lay his sister and at his feet two children — all hastening to eternity.

Captain Caffin wrote to a friend an account of his visit to Schull and his letter was published in many of the public journals. 'In the village of Schull', he wrote, 'three-fourths of the inhabitants you meet carry the tale of woe in their features and persons, as they are reduced to mere skeletons, the men in particular, all their physical power wasted away; they have all become beggars. Having a great desire to see with my own eyes some of the misery which was said to exist, Dr Traill Hall, the rector of Schull, offered to drive me to a portion of his parish. I found there was no need to take me beyond the village, to show me the horrors of famine in its worst features. I had read in the papers letters and accounts of this state of things, but I thought they must be highly coloured to attract sympathy; but I there saw the reality of the whole — no exaggeration, for it does not admit of it — famine exists to a fearful degree, with all its horrors. Fever has sprung up consequent upon the wretchedness; and swellings of limbs and body, and diarrhoea, from the want of nourishment, are everywhere to be found.'

Again: 'In no house that I entered was there not to be found the dead or dying; in particularising two or three they may be

taken as the picture of the whole — there was no picking or choosing, but we took them just as they came.' A cabin which he entered had, he said, the appearance of wretchedness without, but its interior was misery. The Rev. Mr Hall, on putting his head inside the hole which answered for a door, said: 'Well, Phillis, how is your mother today?' Phillis answered, 'O Sir, is it you? Mother is dead.' Captain Caffin adds — 'And there — fearful reality — was the daughter, a skeleton herself, crouched and crying over the lifeless body of her mother, which was on the floor, cramped up as she had died, with her rags and her cloak about her, by the side of a few embers of peat.'

They came to the cabin of a poor old woman, the door of which was stopped up with dung. She roused up, evidently astonished. They had taken her by surprise. She burst into tears and said she had not been able to sleep since the corpse of the woman had lain in her bed. The circumstance which destroyed her rest happened in this way: Some short time before, a poor miserable woman entered the cabin and asked leave to rest herself for a few moments. She got permission to do so. She lay down, but never rose again. She died in an hour and in this miserable hovel of six feet square the body remained four days before the wretched occupant could get any person to remove it. It is not much to be wondered at that she had lost her rest.

'I could', said Captain Caffin, 'in this manner take you through thirty or more cottages that we visited, but they, without exception, were all alike — the dead and the dying in each; and I could tell you more of the truth of the heartrending scene, were I to mention the lamentations and bitter cries of each of those poor creatures, on the threshold of death. Never in my life have I seen such wholesale misery, nor could I have thought it so complete. All that I have stated above', he concluded 'I have seen with my own eyes, and can vouch for the truth of. And I feel I cannot convey by words the impression left on my mind of this awful state of things. I could tell you also of that which I could vouch for the truth of, but which I did not see myself, such as bodies half eaten by the rats; of two dogs last Wednesday being shot by Mr O'Callaghan whilst tearing a body to pieces; of his mother-in-law stopping a poor woman and asking her what she had on her back, and being replied it was her son, telling her she would smother it; but the poor emaciated woman said it was dead already, and she was going to dig a hole in the churchyard for it. These are things which are of everyday occurrence'.²²

Taking Ballydehob as a centre, there were, at this time, in a radius of ten or twelve miles around it, twenty-six soup kitchens — at Skibbereen, Baltimore, Sherkin and Cape Clear (three);

Creagh, Castlehaven (two); Union Hall, Aghadown (two); Kilcoe (three); Schull (two); Dunmanus, Crookhaven (two); Caheragh (two); Durrus, Drimoleague, Drenagh, Bantry, Glengariff, Adrigoole, Castletown, Berehaven, and Ballydehob. They were making and distributing daily about 17,000 pints of good meat soup. They did great good but it was of a very partial nature.

Mr Commissary Bishop tells us 'they were but a drop in the ocean'. Hundreds, he said, were relieved, but thousands still wanted. And he added that soup kitchens had their attendant evils: an important one in this instance was that the poor small farmers were selling all their cows to the soup kitchens, leaving themselves and their children without milk or butter.

There seems to have been an understanding among the employers that the true state of things, in its naked reality, was not to be given in their communications to Government. It was to be toned down and modified. Hence the studied avoidance of the word 'famine' in almost every official document of the time. Captain Caffin's letter was written to a friend and marked 'private'; but having got into the newspapers, it must, of course, be taken notice of by the Government. Mr Trevelyan lost no time, but at once wrote, enclosing it to Sir John Burgoyne. To use his own words on the occasion, the receipt, from the Commander of the 'Scourge', of 'the awful letter, describing the result of his personal observations in the immediate neighbourhood of Schull', led him (Mr Trevelyan) to make two proposals on the part of the Treasury. And indeed, it must be said, well meant and practical they were.

The first was to send two half-pay medical officers to Schull to try and do something for the sick, many of whom were dying for want of the commonest care; and also to combine with that arrangement, the means of securing the decent interment of the dead. The second proposal was to provide carts for the conveyance of soup to the sick in their houses in and around Schull; a most necessary provision, inasmuch as the starving people were, in numerous cases, unable to walk from their dwellings to the soup kitchen; besides which, in many houses, the whole family were struck down by a combination of fever, starvation and dysentery.

Sir John Burgoyne, as might be expected, picked holes in both proposals. In the carriage of soup to the sick Sir John saw difficulty on account of the scarcity of horses which were, he said, diminishing fast. He added that several, if not all of the judges, who were then proceeding on circuit, were obliged to take the same horses from Dublin throughout, as they would have no chance of changing them as usual.

Then, with regard to the decent burial of the dead, Sir John thought there were legal difficulties in the way and that legislation was necessary before it could be done. He failed to produce any objection against the appointment of the medical officers. In a fortnight after, a Treasury Minute was issued to the effect that Relief Committees should be required to employ proper persons to bury, with as much attention to the feelings of the survivors as circumstances would admit, the dead bodies which could not be buried by any other means. How urgently such an order was called for appears from the fact that, at that time in the neighbourhood of Schull, none but strangers, hired by the clergy, could be found to take any part in a burial.²³

The incumbent of Schull, the Rev. Robert Traill Hall,²⁴ a month after Captain Caffin's letter was published, said 'the distress was nothing in Captain Caffin's time compared with what it is now'. On reading Captain Caffin's letter, one would suppose that destitution could not reach a higher point than the one at which he saw it. That letter fixed the attention of the Government upon Schull and yet, strange result, after a month of such attention the Famine was intensified there, instead of being alleviated.

Mr Commissary Bishop had charge of the most famine-visited portion of Co. Cork (Skibbereen always excepted), including West Carbery, Bantry and Bere. He seems to have been an active, intelligent officer and a kind-hearted man; yet his communications, somehow, must have misled the Government, for Mr Trevelyan starts at Captain Caffin's letter, as if suddenly awakened from a dream.

Its contents appeared to be quite new, and almost incredible to him. No wonder, perhaps. On 29 January, a fortnight before the publication of Captain Caffin's letter, Mr Bishop wrote to Mr Trevelyan: 'The floating depot for Schull arrived yesterday and has commenced issues; this removes all anxiety for that quarter.'

On the day before Captain Caffin's letter was written, Mr Bishop said: 'At Schull, in both east and west division, I found the distress, or rather the mortality had pretty well increased.' And this, notwithstanding the floating depot. Yet in the midst of the famine-slaughter described by Captain Caffin, Mr Bishop was still hopeful, for he said: 'The Relief Committees at Schull and Crookhaven exert themselves greatly to benefit the poor. There is an ample supply of provisions at each place.'²⁵

How did they manage to die of starvation at Schull? — one is tempted to ask. Yet they did, and at Ballydehob too, the other town of the parish; for, three weeks after the announcement of the 'ample supply of provisions', the following news reaches us

from the latter place, on the most reliable authority. A naval officer, Mr Scarlet, who was with the *Mercury* and *Gipsy* delivering provisions in the neighbourhood of Schull, on his return to Cork, wrote on 8 March, to his admiral, Sir Hugh Pigot, in these terms: 'After discharging our cargoes in the boats to Ballydehob, we went on shore and, on passing through the town we went into the ruins of a house and there were two women lying dead, and two, all but dead, lying along with them. When we enquired how it was that they did not bury them, a woman told us that they did not know and that one of them had been dead for five days. As we were coming down to the boat, we told the boat's crew if they wanted to see a sight to go up the street. When they went, there were four men with hand-barrows there and the men belonging to the boats helped to carry the corpses to the burial ground, where they dug holes, and put them in without coffins.'

At this period of the Famine, things had come to such a pass that individual cases of death from starvation were seldom reported and, when they were, they failed to attract much attention, deaths by wholesale had become so common. To be sure, when Dr Crowley wrote from Skibbereen that himself and Dr Donovan had interred, in a kitchen garden, the corpse of a person eleven days dead, the case, being somewhat peculiar, had interest enough to be made public; but an ordinary death from hunger would be deemed a very ordinary affair indeed.

I will here give a specimen or two of the way in which the progress of the Famine was chronicled at the close of 1846 and through the winter and spring of 1847.

The correspondent of the *Kerry Examiner*, writing from Dingle on 8 February said: 'The state of the people of this locality is horrifying. Fever, famine and dysentery are daily increasing, deaths from hunger daily occurring, averaging weekly twenty — men, women and children thrown into the graves without a coffin — dead bodies in all parts of the country, being several days dead before discovered — no inquests to inquire how they came by their death, as hunger has hardened the hearts of the people. Those who survive cannot long remain so — the naked wife and children of the deceased, staring them in the face — their bones penetrating through the skin — not a morsel of flesh to be seen on their bodies — and not a morsel of food can they procure to eat. From all parts of the country they crowd into the town for relief, and not a pound of meal is to be had in the wretched town for any price.'

This parish (Ventry, Dingle) contained, six months since, 3,000 souls; over 500 of these have perished and three-fourths of them

for the view on that day will be five shillings each, to be distributed by the Lord Mayor in charity; after which the kitchen will be closed, M. Soyer being obliged to leave for the Reform Club, London.'

This smacked very much of a 'positively last appearance'. Referring to it, a Dublin journal exclaimed: — 'Five shillings each to see paupers feed! Five shillings each to watch the burning blush of shame chasing pallidness from poverty's wan cheek! Five shillings each! When the animals in the Zoological Gardens can be inspected at feeding time for sixpence!'⁴

A few gentlemen gave M. Soyer a dinner and a snuff box before he left, and so his Irish mission was brought to a close; but his name was not forgotten, for Sawyer's soup was long a standing joke with a certain class of the Dublin people. Had the word come into popular use at the time, there is little doubt that M. Soyer's undertaking to feed the starving Irish would have been called a fiasco.⁵

Philanthropists of a stamp different from M. Soyer brought forward schemes for the good of Ireland at this time. They related chiefly to the reclamation of her waste lands. At the opening of Parliament in 1847, Lord John Russell, as we have seen, proposed to introduce a Bill on this subject, one million being the first grant to be made for the purpose. The plan on which the reclamation was to be carried out is given in the resumé of Lord John's speech at the opening of the session. It was the very best of the Premier's measures for the permanent improvement of Ireland; but, according to Mr Disraeli, it was faintly proposed and finally abandoned in deference to the expressed opinion of Sir Robert Peel who, at the time, governed from the Opposition benches.

The area of Ireland is 20,808,271 statute acres. Of these it is commonly admitted that 18,000,000, or thereabouts, are susceptible of cultivation. In 1845, somewhat over 13,000,000 of acres were in cultivation, whilst nearly 5,000,000, which could be brought under culture, lay barren. Referring to the estimate of those writers who held that Ireland contained 4,600,000 acres of waste, which could be made arable, Dr Robert Kane, author of *Industrial Resources of Ireland*, said he did not think the estimate too high; and this opinion was quoted approvingly by Lord John Russell.⁶

But the question might still remain, — could those 4,600,000 acres be profitably cultivated? Would their cultivation give remunerative interest on the capital expended? That is the purely commercial view of the matter; but there is another which should not be overlooked: Would it not be wise policy to increase the resources of a country — to increase its area of cultivation — to

extend the means of employing and feeding its population, even though the work did not actually make a very remunerative commercial return? English capital has gone to make canals and railroads and harbours, and open mines for the antipodes, often with little or no return; not unfrequently with total loss; surely as much risk ought to be taken for home improvements, in which patriotism should come to the aid of commercial enterprise.

It would seem to be a question well worth the consideration of statesmen, whether or not, in the reclamation of wastes, it would be the true and enlightened policy to act upon the commercial idea alone.

From whatever cause, Irish landowners did not, to any considerable extent, take up in earnest the question of the reclamation of waste lands. Roused by the pressure of the times and the impending poor-rate, the majority of them looked 'for salvation' to other means — to the eviction of their numerous tenantry — the clearing of their estates from the seemingly superfluous population by emigration or ejection.

The readers of these pages cannot forget that Mayo suffered as much as, if not more than any other county during the Famine; yet here was the state of its surface at the time of that dreadful visitation: entire area of the County Mayo 1,300,000 acres; of these only 500,000 acres were under cultivation, 800,000 acres being unreclaimed; of which 800,000 acres, Griffith says, nearly 500,000 could be reclaimed with profit — that is, just half the county was cultivated.

The Dean of Killala gave the following evidence about the same county before the Devon Commission:

Quest. 73. 'Is there sufficient employment for the people in the cultivation of the arable land?'

Answer. 'No; it does not employ them half the year.'

Quest. 74. 'But there would be employment for them in reclaiming the waste?'

Answer: 'Yes; more than ample, if there was encouragement given. Where I reside there are many thousands of acres waste, because it would not be let at a moderate rent.'

Quest. 75. 'Is the land with you termed waste, capable of being made productive?'

Answer: 'Yes, every acre of it.'

On this same question of the reclamation of Irish waste lands and redundant population, Commissary-General Hewetson, one of the principal assistants of Sir Randolph Routh, wrote in the height of the Famine: 'The transition from potatoes to grain requires tillage in the proportion of three to one. It is useless, then, to talk of emigration, when so much extra labour is indispensable

to supply the extra food. Let that labour be first applied, and it will be seen whether there is any surplus population. If the waste lands are taken into cultivation and industrious habits established, it is very doubtful whether there will be any surplus population, or even whether it would be equal to the demand.

'Providence', he added, 'has given everything needful, and nothing is wanting but industry to apply it.'

From causes which can be only guessed at, there seems to have been always a passive but most influential opposition to the reclamation of the waste lands of Ireland. Its opponents never met the question in the field of logical argument, yet, somehow, they had power enough to prevent its being carried into effect.

When Lord John Russell proposed the million-pound grant to begin the work, Sir Robert Peel said he thought some more useful employment could be found for that sum, but he did not even hint at what it was.

On the other hand those who were favourable to the reclamation of our waste lands were rich in facts and arguments. In the Parliamentary Session of 1835, a Committee of the House of Commons on public works reported that 'no experiment was necessary to persuade any scientific man of the possibility of carrying into effect the reclamation of bogs.' Nor is this strongly expressed opinion to be wondered at, founded, as it was, upon such evidence as the following:

Mr Richard Griffith deposed that:

'The mountain bog of the south of Ireland — the moory bog — varies in depth from nine inches to three feet, below which there is a clayey or sandy subsoil. On the average, about £4 per statute acre is required to bring it from a state of nature to one of cultivation and then it will fetch a rent of from 5s. to 10s. per English acre.'

Again: '£1 4s. an acre is the highest estimate for the draining of this land in covered drains; the remainder of the expense consists in the trenching up the surface, turning up the subsoil, and mixing it with the bog; no manure is wanted, a portion of the bog being burned for that purpose.'

With regard to deep bogs, his testimony was as follows: 'The expense of reclaiming deep bogs per acre may be estimated thus: Drainage of an English acre, in the most perfect way, about £1 4s., which is about 40s. the Irish acre; that includes the under drain: the levelling and digging comes to about £1 10s; and afterwards the claying comes to about £6 12s. per statute acre.'

Finally, he said: 'The reclamation of mountain land is very profitable, and easily effected; but the reclamation of deep bog land is attended with a much greater expense and requires both

care and judgment. But both are certainly reclaimable, and would give a successful return when judiciously treated.'

What grave mysterious reasons of State, then, have prevented the Irish wastes from being reclaimed? In the Famine, our roads were torn up and made impassable to apply a labour test to destitution: food was next served out without any such test; M. Soyer was sent over to make cheap soup for the millions; the bone and sinew of the country were shipped off to spend themselves in trying to subdue the wildernesses of another hemisphere, or die in transit, or on Grosse Isle and such charnel-houses, whilst nearly five millions of reclaimable acres in their own fertile land were still left as nature had left them.

The second report of the Relief Commissioners bears the date 15 May. For practical purposes it may be looked upon as the first report, the one called the first being merely preliminary. We learn from it that only 1,248 electoral divisions had come under the operation of the Act up to that date, a state of things with which the Commissioners expressed themselves dissatisfied, for they say the Act should have been, at the time of their report, in full operation over the whole country. They found a difficulty in establishing soup kitchens, because dry meal was universally preferred; and they further say that relief by food instead of by public works was extremely unpopular with every class. All works, they announce, had been stopped on 1 May.

The second report of the Relief Commissioners, embracing a most trying period of over two months, is very curt and unsatisfactory. The dismissal, within six weeks, of nearly three quarters of a million of workmen, representing more than three millions of people, could scarcely be effected without the infliction of considerable suffering. The Government were right in compelling labour to apply itself to the production of food by the cultivation of the land, and they began this movement in the spring, the proper time for it, but they began too late. The twentieth of March was far too late for the first dismissal of twenty per cent for much of the spring work ought to have been done then. They should have begun a month earlier at least, which arrangement would have had the further advantage of enabling them to make the dismissals more gradually, and therefore with less inconvenience to the people.⁷

It was either great negligence or a very grave error on the part of the Government that they began to close the public works against the people before any other means of getting food was open to them. The Relief Act, 10 Vic. c.7, was intended to take the place of the public works, and that immediately on their cessation; but this was far from being the case, — a point upon which this

The Great Irish Famine

Two American ships of war, the Jamestown and Macedonian, carried cargoes of provisions to Ireland, for which no freight was charged. The Jamestown, a sloop of war lent by the government for the voyage, was freighted by the people of Massachusetts with 8,000 barrels of flour. She sailed from Boston on 28 March 1847 and arrived at the Cove of Cork on 12 April, after a most prosperous voyage. The people of Cove immediately held a public meeting and adopted an address to her Commander, Captain Forbes, which they presented to him on board. The citizens of Cork addressed him a few days later; and the members of the Temperance Institute gave him a soiree, at which the Rev. Theobald Mathew assisted.

The Macedonian, another ship of war, arrived later on, conveying about 550 tons of provisions, a portion of which was landed in Scotland. Both ships were manned by volunteers.

On the appearance of the potato blight scientific men earnestly applied themselves to discover its cause, in the hope that a remedy might be found for it. Various theories were the result. There was the Insect Theory; the Weather Theory; the Parasitical Theory; the Electrical Theory; the Fungus Theory; the Fog Theory. But whilst philosophers were maintaining their different views; whilst Sir James Murray charged electricity with being the agent of destruction, and Mr Cooper cast the blame upon the fogs; whilst Professors Lindley, Playfair and Kane were busy with their tests and retorts and alembics; and whilst others again — microscope in hand — were in active pursuit of the Aphis vastator, or Thrips minutissima, a not inconsiderable class of persons, departing widely from all such speculations, discovered, beyond all doubt, that Popery was the true cause of the potato blight.

'As this predicted system' (popery), said a pamphleteer, 'is an idolatrous one, any treaty with it must be opposed to God's will, and call down his wrath upon those nations who have commerce with it: more particularly upon nations wherein its hideous deformities are most signally manifested. Now, how have we seen in the first part of this work, that He has repeatedly punished? By famine and pestilence! Oh, beloved countrymen of every diversity of creed, in the heart-rending scenes around us do we witness punishment for national idolatry, systematic assassinations, performed occasionally with a refinement of cruelty worthy of incarnate devils.'⁴

'This much is certain', wrote a public journalist, 'that our country is scourged with famine.' Three causes were then given for the scourge; the second of which was 'idolatry in the professing people of God, especially when sanctioned by the rulers of the country'. After quoting examples from the Old

The good — and bad — donors

Testament of the manner in which God punished idolatry, he proceeded: 'It [idolatry] is just as true of the millions of Ireland as it was of the millions of Judah: "They worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made." And to complete the resemblance to apostate Israel, and fill the measure of our national guilt, the prevalent idolatry is countenanced and supported by our government. The Protestant members of the Houses of Lords and Commons have sworn before God and the country that Popery is idolatrous; our Queen, at her coronation, solemnly made a similar declaration, yet, all have concurred in passing a Bill to endow a college for training priests to defend, and practise, and perpetuate, this corrupt and damnable worship in this realm. The ink wherewith the signification of royal assent was given to that iniquitous measure was hardly dry when the fatal rot commenced its work of destruction; and as the stroke was unheeded, and there was no repentant effort to retrace the daring step of the first iniquity, but rather a disposition to multiply transgression, we are now visited with a second and severer stroke of judgment.'⁵

The Rev. Hugh McNeill preached a 'Famine' sermon in St Jude's, Liverpool, and published it under the title of 'The Famine, a rod'; a rod that was meant to scourge England for tolerating Popery, of which he said: 'That it is a sin against God's holy law to encourage the fables, deceits, false doctrines, and idolatrous worship of Romanism, no enlightened Christian — no consistent member of the Church of England can deny.'⁶ 'She [England] is fondly anticipating, as the result of generous concession, that she shall witness Roman Cooperation in general Liberty! Alas, for the Romans! With equal reason might she expect the Ethiopian to change his skin, or the leopard his spots. With the rich and responsible inheritance of an open Bible before her, and with free access to the illustrations of authentic history, this absurdity is England's sin, England's very great sin. There can be little doubt, that except repentance and amendment avert the stroke, this will prove England's plague, England's great plague, England's very great plague.'⁷

Let us hear another and a very different stamp of man. 'I don't know whether I have mentioned before', wrote Charles Dickens, 'that in the valley of the Simplon, hard by here, where (at the Bridge of St Maurice over the Rhone), this Protestant canton ends and a Catholic canton begins, you might separate two perfectly distinct and different conditions of humanity, by drawing a line with your stick in the dust on the ground. On the Protestant side, neatness; cheerfulness; industry; education; continual aspiration, at least, after better things. On the Catholic side, dirt; disease;

ignorance; squalor; and misery. I have so constantly observed the like of this, since I first came abroad, that I have a sad misgiving, that the religion of Ireland lies as deep at the root of all her sorrows even as English misgovernment and Tory villainy.⁷⁸

Charles Dickens is looked upon not only as the strenuous denouncer of vice but as the happy exponent of the higher and purer feelings of human nature also. For three-fourths of his life he wrote like a man who felt he had a mission to preach toleration, philanthropy, universal benevolence. He had travelled much. He had been over Belgium and France; he was through the Rhenish Provinces; in all which places the people are Catholics; they have received the highest praise from travellers and writers for their industry; their thrift; their cleanliness; Charles Dickens saw all this, but it never occurred to him to credit their religion with it. When the contrary occurs, and when fault is to be found, Popery, like a hack-block kept for such purposes, is made responsible and receives a blow.

He had, indeed, a sad misgiving that the religion of Ireland lay deep at the root of her sorrows. Surely this is enough to try one's patience. We have passed through and outlived the terrible codes of Elizabeth and James and Anne and the first two Georges, under which gallows-trees were erected on the hillside for our conversion or extinction; we have even survived the iron heels and ruthless sabres of Cromwell's sanctimonious troopers; and we can go back upon the history of those times calmly enough now. But this 'sad misgiving' of Mr Dickens; this patronising condescension; this contemptuous pity, is more than provoking.

It is probable he had not the time or inclination to read deeply into Irish history but he must have had a general knowledge of it more than sufficient to inform him that there were causes in superabundance to account for the poverty and degradation of our people, without going to their religion for them. Instead of doing so, he should have confessed with shame and humiliation that his own countrymen, for a long series of years, did everything in their power to destroy the image of God in the native Irish, by driving them like beasts of chase into the mountains, and bogs and fastnesses and over the Shannon. Our people suffered these things and much more for conscience sake; inflicted, as they were, by Mr Dickens' countrymen, in the name of religion; in the name of conscience; in advancing, as they pretended, the sacred cause of the right of private judgment. He makes Popery responsible for the results.

Those who held that Popery was the real cause of the potato-rot were influential, if not by their numbers, at least by their wealth; so they set about removing the fatal evil energetically.

Large sums of money were collected, and a very active agency was established throughout the West of Ireland for this purpose; with, it would seem, very considerable success. But whilst those engaged in the work maintained that the conversions were the result of instruction and enlightened investigation, others believed that most of the converts were like the poor woman mentioned by the late Dr Whately, in a conversation with Mr Senior.

In 1852, Mr Nassau Wm. Senior was on a visit with the Archbishop, at his country house, near Stillorgan, five miles from Dublin. Mr Senior asked him to what cause the conversions made during the Famine were attributable. The Archbishop replied that the causes must be numerous. Some, he said, believed or professed to believe that the conversions were purchased; this of course was the Catholic view. He then related the following anecdote on the subject:

'An old woman went to one of my clergy, and said, "I'm come to surrender to your Reverence — and I want the leg of mutton and the blanket". "What mutton and blanket?" said the clergyman. "I have scarcely enough of either for myself and my family, and certainly none to give. Who could have put such nonsense into your head?" "Why, Sir", she said, "Father Sullivan told us that the converts got each a leg of mutton and a blanket; and as I am famished and starving with cold, I thought that God would forgive me for getting them".'

Dr Whately was president of the 'Society for Protecting the Rights of Conscience', and he indignantly denied that any reward or indemnity had been held out, directly or indirectly, by that Society to persons to induce them to profess themselves converts; and he added: 'not only has no case been substantiated — no case has been brought forward'. This may be true of that particular society, but to deny that neither money nor food were given, to induce persons to attend the Scripture classes and proselytising schools, is to deny the very best proven facts.

In the Tralee Chronicle of 19 November 1852, Archdeacon O'Sullivan of Kenmare published an abstract of a report of one of those Missionary Societies which fell into his hands. The expenditure of a single Committee was £3,557 1s. 9d. The salaries of clerical and lay agents are set down at £382 Os. 11d. What became of the remainder of the money?

But here is testimony that Dr Whately himself would scarcely impugn: Dr Forbes, in his Memorandums made in Ireland in 1852, visited Connaught and examined many of the proselytising schools. He spoke without any doubt at all of the children who attended those schools receiving food and clothing. It did not seem to be denied on any side. Here is an extract: "I visited two

The Great Irish Famine

of the Protestant Mission Schools at Clifden, one in the town and the other leading to the mouth of the bay. In the former, at the time of my visit, there were about 120 boys and 100 girls on the books, the average attendance being about 80. Out of the 80 girls there were no less than 56 orphans, all of whom are fed and clothed out of the school funds, and a large proportion provided with lodgings also. Only two of these girls were children of Protestant parents; and in the boy's school there was only one born of parents originally Protestant At the probationary girl's school there were 76 on the books, at the time of my visit, their ages varying from eight to eighteen years. They are all Catholics, or children of Catholic parents; and out of the number no fewer than 40 were orphans. All the children at this school receive daily rations of Indian meal; 45 of them one pound, and the remainder half that quantity. Whether this is exclusive of the stirabout breakfast I saw preparing for them in the school, I forgot to ask. All the children of these schools read the Scriptures and go to the Protestant Church. Catholic and Protestant alike.¹⁰

But I turn with pleasure from this uninviting and uncongenial subject to one more elevating — to the all but unlimited private charity which was called forth by the Irish Famine. I have already endeavoured to give some idea of it but of course an imperfect one. The feelings evoked and the almost unasked alms bestowed with a noble Christian generosity, during that awful time, can be fully known only to Almighty God, the Great Rewarder. The Merciful Rewarder has recorded them and that is enough, at least for the givers.

However, there were some amongst them who should not be passed over in silence. Baring Brothers & Co.; Rothschild & Co.; Smith, Payne & Smith; Overend, Gurney & Co.; Truman, Hanbury & Co.; The Duke of Devonshire; Jones, Lloyd & Co.; an English friend (in two donations); and an Irish landlord (for Skibbereen) subscribed £1,000 each.

Irish landlords did not contribute very munificently to the Famine-fund; but here is £1,000 from one, and for a special locality. Who was the retiring but generous donor? The following extract of a letter will answer the question; and throw light upon another remarkable offering sent every month to Skibbereen for more than a year.

'The first case of death clearly established as arising from starvation', wrote Mr McCarthy Downing, 'occurred at South Reen, five miles from the town of Skibbereen. The case having been reported to me, as a member of the Relief Committee, I procured the attendance of Dr Dore, and proceeded to the house

The good — and bad — donors

where the body lay; the scene which presented itself will never be forgotten by me.

'The body was resting on a basket which had been turned up, the head on an old chair, the legs on the ground. All was wretchedness around. The wife, emaciated, was unable to move; and four children, more like spectres than living beings, were lying near the fire-place, in which apparently there had not been fire for some time. The doctor opened the stomach and, repugnant as it was to my feelings, I, at his solicitation, viewed its contents, which consisted solely of a few pieces of raw cabbage undigested.

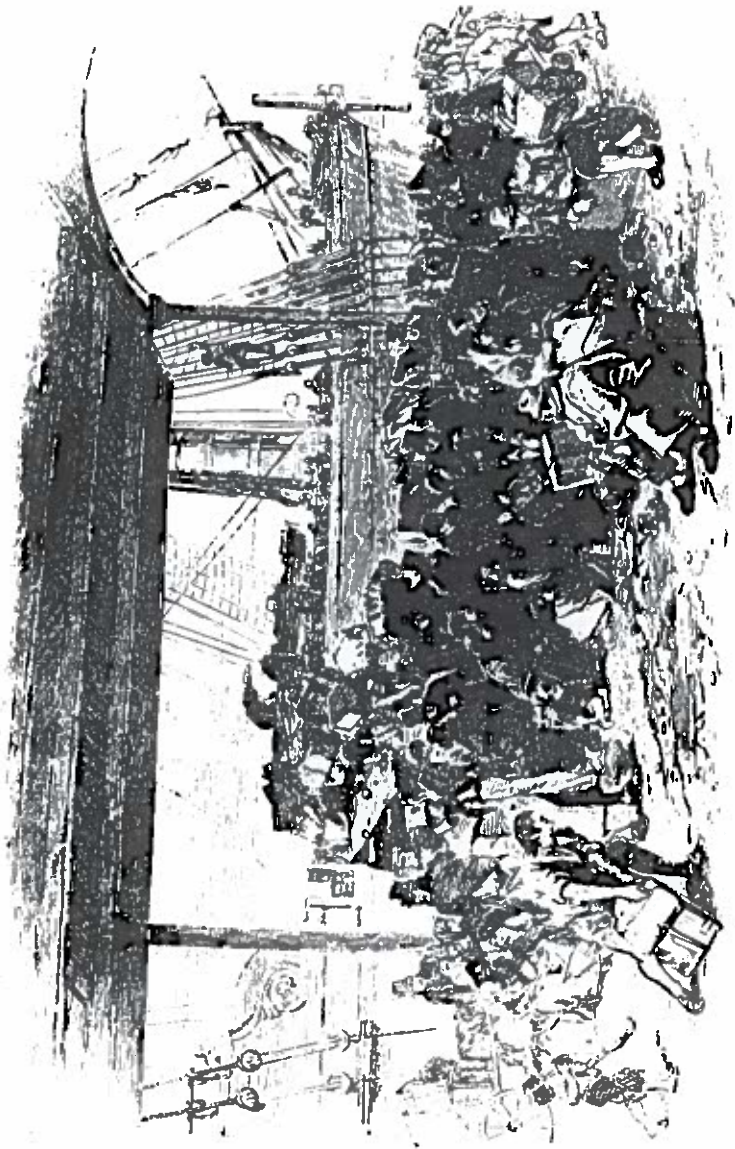
'Having visited several other houses on the same townland and finding the condition of the inmates therein little better than that of the wretched family whom I had just left, I summoned the Committee and had a quantity of provisions sent there for distribution by one of the relieving officers; and then published in the Cork and Dublin papers a statement of what I had witnessed.

'Many subscriptions were sent to the Committee in consequence, and I received from an anonymous correspondent a monthly sum varying from £6. to £8. for a period of more than twelve months.

'One subscription of £1,000 came from another anonymous donor and for years the Committee knew not who those generous and really charitable parties were; but I had always a suspicion that the giver of the £1,000 was Lord Dufferin. The grounds for my supposition were that, during the height of the sufferings of the people, I heard that two noblemen had been in the neighbourhood, visiting some of the localities. One was Lord Dufferin, then a very young man, who alluded subsequently in feeling terms to the wretchedness and suffering which he had witnessed; the other, I heard, was Lord John Manners.

'In some years after, I met at the house of Mr Joshua Clarke, QC, in Dublin, Mr Dowse, then a rising barrister, now a Baron of the Court of Exchequer, who addressed me, saying, "We are old acquaintances"; to which I replied that I thought he was mistaken, as I had never the pleasure of meeting him before. He said: "That is quite true, but do you remember having received monthly remittances during the severe pressure of the Famine in Skibbereen?" I answered in the affirmative; and thereupon he said, "I was your correspondent, I remitted the moneys to you, they were the offers of a number of the students of Trinity College".

'I need scarcely say that the incident created in me a feeling



Irish emigrants embarking at Liverpool for the fearful Atlantic crossing.

The good — and bad — donors

of esteem and regard for Mr Dowse, which has continued to the present moment.

'During the passing of the Land Bill through the House of Commons, in the year 1870, I proposed several amendments, in consequence of which I received a letter from Lord Dufferin, asking for an interview, which subsequently took place at his house and lasted more than three hours. When about to leave, I said that I had a question to put to his Lordship which I hoped he would not refuse to answer; and having received his assent, I said: "Lord Dufferin, are you the anonymous donor of a subscription of £1,000 to the Relief Committee at Skibbereen twenty-three years ago?" And with a smile, he simply replied "I am".

'I left with feelings of high admiration for the man.'¹¹

To conclude. Every reader will, doubtless, form his own views upon the facts given in this volume; upon the conduct of the people; the action of the landlords; the measures of the Government; those views may be widely different; but of the bright and copious fountains of living charity which gushed forth over the Christian world during the Great Irish Famine history has but one record to make — posterity can hold but one opinion.