

Godfrey Massy's Memoirs of the Famine Years in Bruff

Godfrey Massy (1803-1852), Church of Ireland Vicar of Bruff, was an outspoken and controversial character, indefatigable in the cause of Protestantism and hostile to the practice of Roman Catholicism; a man of strong and deep convictions and a great humanitarian. His memoirs, from which these extracts are taken, were published in 1855, edited and annotated by his brother, Rev. Dawson Massy,⁽¹⁾ and a summary account of his life was published in this journal.⁽²⁾

The account of the years 1845-49 begins with a tirade against the Maynooth Endowment Act, by which the British government annual grant to the RC national seminary was increased from £8,000 to nearly £30,000, with an additional once-off building grant of £30,000, and it is implied that the famine of the following years was God's retribution for this 'national sin'.

The Queen's signature was scarcely dry on the Maynooth Endowment Act, before the Irish journals foreboded famine. An awful and mysterious blight attacked that staple crop of Ireland - the potato. Like the cholera, it left uninjured some fields, and even alternate ridges in the same field, making elsewhere 'the seed rotten under the clods', and loading the air with pestilential vapour. Many a poor farmer, while he traced its mysterious course, mournfully exclaimed, 'There is a curse upon the country, Peel's black gentlemen have brought us the black potatoes!' If the commencing famine created a panic in the drawing-rooms of London, and Paris, and all other fashionable haunts of the Irish aristocracy, we may well imagine how terrific was the condition of the resident gentry, who saw fever already amongst them; the cholera returning; the demon of rebellion flinging his broad shadow over the land; and the great mass of a people always poor, suddenly reduced to starvation. Now drew on a battle of life that required all the heroism of the bravest of the brave soldiers of Christ. The doors of the Protestant clergy were besieged morning, noon, and night, by crowds of famishing Romanists craving relief, and refusing, as usual, to go to their wealthy priests, because their money was not lucky!

On Sept., 23, 1845, every kind of potato was reported as tainted. Those appearing sound, when first washed, melting away in twenty-four hours; and on 31st Oct., 120 Relief Societies were



A silhouette of Godfrey Massy, 10 April, 1836.

organised in Ireland. Government sent over the eminent chymists Lindley and Playfair, to experiment on the potato, but all their remedies failed; and on Nov. 15th they reported that half the crop was lost, and that, allowing one-eighth for seed, only three-eighths were available for the nine months before the new crop could come in! At public meetings in Dublin, petitions were presented to Government for prohibition of exports, but though Cabinet meetings were frequent, and deaths were multiplying fearfully, the year 1845 closed without Government aid, 'as it was not yet absolutely required!'

On the Maynooth Bill being passed, Godfrey observed, 'I am of Archbishop Sharpe's mind, "as nations and families are not immortal, they are judged here". I must collect a Church fund against the evil day at hand'. So he wrote to all his friends for aid, and, although the first cry of distress came from the County of Limerick, he had succour ready; and thus saved from the Workhouse several decayed Protestants, including Adam Bovenizer, now in his 90th year; fed 150 children in Adelaide School; and gave employment to several converts from Romanism, whom he described as trusting in the promise, that 'whosoever

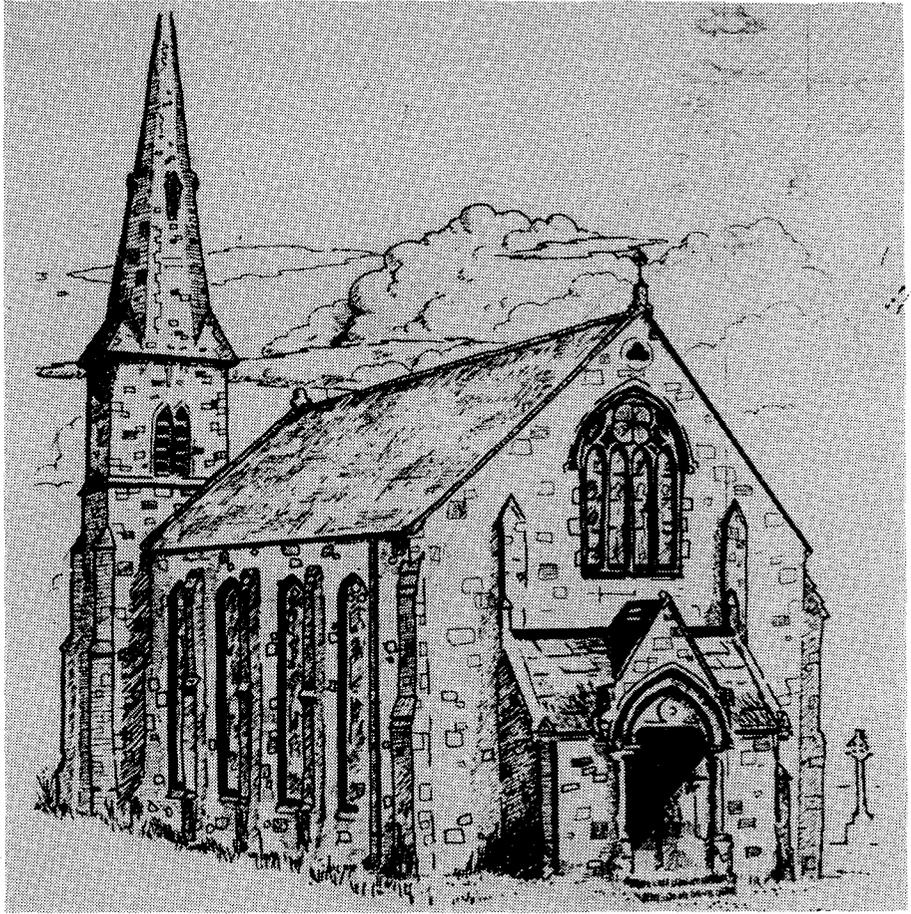
leaves home and relatives for Christ's sake, shall find a home and relatives in His Church' ...

He was instantly chosen Secretary of the Bruff Relief Committee, and said to me: 'Although I have 1,500 letters to write yearly for the Protestant Orphans, and that is only the one-third of my business in their behalf, still I take the labouring-oar of our Committee without fear, because God calls me to it, and His biddings are His enablings'.

His district extended over forty square miles. So awfully rapid was the career of the famine, that on his first inquiry, he discovered 14,783 persons - nearly all Romanists - of whom 7,000 were absolutely 'dying by inches, and almost naked for they had pawned or sold their little rags of clothes, to keep the breath of life in themselves!' Adelaide School had been so often and so bitterly cursed by the priests, that, before this period, few bigotted Romanists passed it without an emotion of horror; 'cutting the sign of the cross', to save themselves from contamination! But now that he opened his office there, and gave a meeting-room to the Committee, it was eagerly sought as a harbour of refuge. Its sheltering enclosures were daily thronged, but alas! how woefully changed was the aspect of an Irish crowd! No longer could it present the dense array of a Monster-meeting, bristling with close-cut heads, and sunburnt Celtic faces, shouting their 'wild Irish cry', and flourishing their shillelaghs. O'Connell's 'seven millions' were melting away, for 'God had called for a famine on the land'. They looked like living mummies - their figures were attenuated - their faces greenish - their eyes glassy and hollow - their hands like birds' claws - their voices sepulchral - while their skeleton bodies exhaled 'the smell of the grave'. Their despairing silence was only broken when thrilling movements in the crowd showed that persons had fainted; but whenever Godfrey appeared, there was a chorus of mournful voices that touched the heart: - 'Oh, your Reverence, the Lord is not pleased with us, and puts us under His scourge! We are only kept breathing, and our eyes are just open. We could bear anything that God sends but the sight of our starving children'.

But for the help of his ally Mary Gammell he could scarcely have managed the multitude. 'Eisth fan go foil mavourneen', (Silence! wait a while my dears), she cried, waving her hands, 'you have his Reverence to help you. Only his heart is warm, and his arm is strong, there would not be a cricket of yez left alive. May the Lord fasten the life in him, and spare him to reign long in Bruff!' As they sat, and looked at the food upon their knees, a faint gleam of something almost like pleasure seemed to play upon their thin lips. Cooked food was chiefly given to them out of Adelaide School - for so reduced were they, that they could not dress any themselves.

Amidst such sights and sounds, appeals



St. Peter and Paul's Church, Bruff. Drawing by Tony Hartnett, from a design by P.A. Quilty.

to the Landlords flowed freely from his pen, and were generously responded to; for by means of a clothing-club he had long interested them in the poor, and gained their full confidence. 'Everybody tells me, my dear friend', wrote Lord Carbery to him, just before he died, 'that you have done wonders, and done them



A peasant. Watercolour by Francis Topham, circa 1845.

well. Did you ever see Lord Rosse's telescope? It shows us the stars in astonishing grandeur and brilliancy - your course is amongst them'.

Sir Robert Peel (24th Jan., 1846) stated the alarming fact that 'the sudden decay of the potato, dug up in an apparently sound state, had set all calculation at defiance'. But the uproar consequent upon his repeal of the Corn-laws, and the reluctance of the poor to enter the workhouses, denounced by O'Connell as 'Poor-law Bastiles', prevented any Government explanation till March 12th. Then he informed the House of his having secretly expended £100,000 in purchasing Indian corn, in America, and that it should be kept in depots, for sale, at first cost. Another sum of £100,000 was granted for Public Works. However, when Sir R. Peel was ejected - chiefly by the Romish members! - he left the Relief measures in terrible confusion; but the Protestant Orphan Society proved a blessing to the county and city of Limerick; for in each of its twenty-two districts, there had already been organised a committee of benevolent gentlemen and ladies, who knew and did their duty for the relief of the hunger-bitten perishing ones. But so enormous was the pressure upon them, that the usual July meetings of the Society were postponed till September.

Massy saw the 'Orphans' Life Boat in danger of destruction by the diversion of the support of the Protestants of Limerick

'whose time and means were then nobly engaged in feeding their famishing Romish neighbours', and launched an appeal in England for the Orphan Society 'as embracing the descendants of English colonists, of whom many had shed their life-blood in conquering or in preserving Ireland for the British Crown'. The appeal raised £635, enabling the committee to raise the allowance of each orphan by £1 per annum, establish a training school for preparing orphan girls for service, and a Model Farm for training grown orphan boys to become stewards and gardeners.

Meanwhile the potato, so luxuriant on July 1st, 1846, was revisited by the mysterious blight on the 12th; and Lord John Russell stated that the crop was more tainted than ever; but he only promised a grant of £50,000 to certain famine districts; reserved the foreign meal in Government-stores; and directed the supply of food to be left to private speculation, for fear of damaging commerce! This political economy quickly raised Indian corn from £9 to £19 per ton, and realised 'Famine-fortunes' in Liverpool, but eventually ruined many of the speculators. Deaths by starvation became frequent, so early as September; and, in many cases, verdicts of 'wilful murder' were recorded against Lord Russell! Then came the Labour Rate Act, as the mainstay of the government, giving loans to the amount of four millions to be expended in public works, and repayable by the ratepayers, in ten-year instalments. But, again, political economy blighted our hopes, for not to disturb the rate of wages, the wretched labourers received twopence a day under the current rate; and, in order to avoid collision with agricultural interests, they were employed on unproductive works! It was soon seen that these feeble labourers were doing nominal work, so that task-work was resorted to. This system yielded one penny per day to some, and one shilling to others; but the exertion proved fatal to creatures so unfit for labour, and the terrible 'road-fever swept them away like flies'. Government at length (March, 1847) gave way, and established new Relief Committees, empowered to give or sell cheap food to the famishing population; but local contributions were always necessary in order to ensure grants.

So Godfrey recommenced his famine-relief labours, (Oct., 1846) and appealed to the landlords, stating that 5,000 starving people were already on the relief list; that £223 had been expended within the month; and that no Government grant could be obtained without payment of new subscriptions, and then only to one-half the amount of the contributions. He implored them to exercise such enlarged benevolence as would provoke the affectionate gratitude of the poor, and continued: - 'it is heart-rending to witness the appalling sufferings of multitudes, - sufferings only



De Lacy Castle, Bruff.

equalled by their patience; for they invariably exclaim, "We could bear anything but the woeful sight of our starving little ones".

Indeed the children were the most distressing objects of all; their legs and arms were as thin as canes. Even the grace of infancy deserted them, and creatures of two years old were seen eating what they got, with the sharp gravity of age. Kilmallock Workhouse, built for 800, contained at the time 1,400 inmates, whose swollen hands and feet, and total loss of appetite, proved that it was almost the death-struggle which forced them from their cabins to its detested shelter. The perpetual use of chloride of lime alone made these abodes

endurable; but the mortality in them was terrible. The relief inspectors not being under the control of the local Committees, and the cumbrous machinery of Government being often brought to a dead lock for days and weeks, by the enormous pressure upon it, most frightful scenes occurred wherever local resources were exhausted. In the adjacent counties of Cork and Kerry, such numbers died of starvation that they were buried without coffins, and famishing dogs tore up their shallow graves, and preyed upon the dead. When the Bruff Committee desired to stop supplies, Godfrey calmly rose, and said, 'We must not let our poor and populous district become another Skibbereen. Send for the food, and I will find the money. My Master never did, and never will, let me be confounded'. All present were so struck by the solemnity of his tone of voice, and the vigour of his faith, that they abandoned their resolve. He thus made himself personally liable for £700, and the chief Protestant merchants of Limerick, already his active supporters, at once honoured his drafts, and poured ample stores into Bruff. With great good feeling the people showed their gratitude by quiet confidence in his management, calling him and treating him henceforth as 'The Father of the poor'. It cost him many a midnight hour's work to collect funds for meeting those merchants' demands, but his accurate statistics and facts secured aid, and thanks for helping the friends of Ireland to rebut the charges of exaggeration, caused by our unbusiness-like appeals.

The Church of Ireland Primate considered this an opportune time, when there was



Interior of a peasant cottage. Engraving, Pictorial Times, 7 February, 1846.

universal praise for Irish clergy, to entreat the Prime Minister for funds for their 2,000 scriptural school, which contained 96,815 children, of whom 35,000 were Roman Catholics, but Lord Russell rejected the application because he "considered their income able to support themselves and their Schools!"

This happened just as our Clergy were petitioning Parliament against the Poor Law enactment, which makes them the only owners of property who cannot charge occupiers - in this case the landlords, - with one-half the poor rate! Thus they are burdened with the whole rate, whilst all others bear but half! Indeed, but for the advocacy of Archdeacon Martin and Archbishop Whately, another poor law enactment would have consigned to prison, as insolvent debtors, most of the Clergy of the famine-districts, by making them liable for the enormous poor-rate, as if the rentcharge were 'separate hereditament', instead of being deducted from the cash payments of landlords. And yet many of these Clergy were actually little better off than the starving poor amongst whom they so kindly laboured. A scant supply of turnips and Indian meal was often their daily fare. Their delicate families were frequently unable to get abroad for want of clothing, and their sons had even to work on the roads, amidst fever-stricken crowds. It was when they were 'an hungered', that Lord Clarendon, the new Viceroy, (May, 1847), announced his determination to confine all the Church patronage of the Crown in Ireland to those who 'had given the most unequivocal support to the National Board of Education.'

Early in May, 1847, the gigantic Public Works, which supported 700,000 labourers, and 11,500 officials, were suddenly suspended, and Government Loans and Poor Rates were substituted. Archbishop Whately compared this step to feeding a famishing dog upon joints of his own tail; and Godfrey thus described the distress in Ireland to Mr. Groves: - 'It is a long time since I had the pleasure of writing to you; but alas! I had little good to communicate, and do not like to be a bearer of ill tidings. Our circumstances just now are these. The poor are greatly dissatisfied with out-door relief, and the rations are inadequate. How are they to get fuel, food, and clothing? Then the labourers greatly preferred work. A reign of terror prevails everywhere, and scarcely a night passes without plunder or murder. While on the other hand, the resident gentry, clergy, and farmers are panic-stricken at the fearful amount of taxation, which threatens in some places to reach forty shillings in every pound! Now as few here have any money saved, this taxation, with past losses, must destroy their means of livelihood in the crisis through which we have yet to pass. Besides disease is fearfully increasing, and some of the most valuable men have



Mid-century engraving of Lord John Russell.

already been removed from the evil to come. Fever is now fatal to the gentry, of whom, when stricken, one in two dies. Such is the gloomy side of the picture; but, blessed be God! the faithful Christian knows that "all things work together for good to them that love God"; and he sees many a bright streak of light breaking through the dark cloud impending over poor Ireland. Popery is the cause of all our woe. May God give the Legislature and the people of England grace to see this truth, and to walk henceforward in the good and right way. Then would Ireland be a fellow-helper with England in spreading the truth from pole to pole!

After describing to Mr. Groves (June, 1847), his sad shock at the death of his brother, Dr. Massy, by famine-fever, he thus concludes: - 'Popery is the cause of all our sorrow. O may God give us national repentance! Though chilled by the present cloud, we are yet enabled to know that our Lord is in the cloud, and above the cloud, and will, in due time, make it burst in blessings upon our heads. Pray for us, that our faith may not fail. May the Lord be glorified by our life or death! A large body of suffering poor have just waited on me to remonstrate against some of the relief measures; but the moment they learned our grief, their feelings were at once turned from their own to our troubles, and they retired with prayers for us. Oh! if they knew the truth, what a noble people they would be! May the Lord hasten His kingdom!'

His labours were increased during the next nine months, by his election as Treasurer and Secretary of the Fever Hospital. Many an hour he spent in the wards, even when no Protestants required his ministry, encouraging both nurses and patients with the promises of the Gospel, and attending to their wants. In offering up prayers for the sick Protestants, he always pleaded for the Romish inmates; and this proof of his spiritual interest in them disarmed their prejudice; caused them to listen rejoicingly to his prayers; and to contrast

them admiringly with the Latin mutterings of the priests.

Bishop Knox offered him (Nov. 17, 1847), the Prebend of Ballycaghane, and he wrote to me: - 'One of my favourite prayers is, "For Thy Name's sake, O Lord! lead me and guide me!" Never did I pray it more fervently than now; for Ballycaghane, although its income is little more than that of Bruff, confers a seat in the Chapter, and there being no glebe-house, the Bishop will permit me to reside in Limerick, whither the education of my children, the care of my little property, and my Protestant Orphan work, attract me. Also it offers to me - naturally indolent as I am - a tempting release from Relief-works, which have engrossed almost twelve hours a day during the last two years. But I shrink from it, for my conscience forbids me to become a non-resident, and a sort of sinecurist. Then for Bruff! Can I be sure that it will fall into active hands? ... I feel disposed to remain here, where so many endearing ties have been formed, rather than go into another post: especially when I think of dear Adelaide School, and of the large number of young persons, many of whom have one parent a Romanist, but all of whom I was enabled to bring up Protestants. They are now entering life, and require double care. The nobility and gentry, without exception, stand by me; and my clerical brethren, for miles around, have been equally disposed to co-operate with me. I cannot contemplate the reverse of this picture without pain. One thing is a relief to my mind. I have taken no step in the matter of removal, and have constantly prayed the Lord to order all to His glory.'

He finally declined the Bishop's offer ... The Limerick Protestant Orphan Society passed through an awful ordeal in 1848. The potato-blight was worse than ever, and the exorbitant poor-rate pauperised the nobility, gentry, and tenantry, often absorbing more than twice the rent, for 703,762 paupers received out-door relief, besides the multitudes that swarmed in the workhouses, and the 201,427 children fed by the British Association. The formidable Incumbered Estates Court also increased the panic, by suddenly engulfing one-third of all Irish property in the vortex of litigation; so, except in Protestant Ulster, everywhere the untilled fields and ruined cabins almost realised Archbishop Whately's fearful foreboding of 'a pauper population in Ireland amounting not to a million and a-half or two millions, but to three, four, or five millions, with farms lying as desolate as the deserts of Arabia, the occupants preferring idleness or alms to work!'

Sir Robert Peel had engaged that his legislation would supply to the nation 'a cheap loaf', and famine mocked his infidel boast. He had plumed himself upon introducing Indian corn into Ireland for the preservation of life; and lo! 'There was death in the pot!' That

strange food, often eaten half raw, perpetuated cholera in our cities and towns during our seven years' famine, especially in 1848...

His Annual Report for 1848 was spirit-stirring: 'We know not how the monthly demands for maintenance are to be met. "We walk by faith, not by sight". We have hitherto experienced the truth of that promise, "as thy day, so shall thy strength be". If we would continue to experience it, there must be faith, faith in proportion to the trial; hope in proportion to the danger; and loving exertion in proportion to the crisis. There must be no slumber; no folding of the hands to sleep; no anxious glances to the exertions of others; but one Christian, prayerful, united, continuous, loving, and laborious effort to keep our harbour of refuge open for future generations of Protestant Orphans'.

This Gospel trumpet-call found an echo in noble hearts at home. The Rev. Joseph Gabbett raised a special fund of £330. Lady Dunraven's collecting-card, several feet long and containing £60, roused all the Collectors to redoubled activity. The Ladies' Bazaar realised £202. William Franklin, Esq. (Manager of the Limerick Provincial Bank), became Treasurer, and ever after enabled the Society, by large advances at his own risk, to receive all eligible Orphans, of whom seventy were admitted in 1848, being bereft of their parents by cholera and famine-fever; whilst so tender and Christian was their nurture, that an eminent lawyer, on inspecting all the Orphans after the annual sermon, observed, 'I have carefully scrutinized the countenances of that fine body of young people, and I do not see a single dark, sullen, and discontented one amongst them; all seem cheerful, happy, and confiding; and this is our fourth famine-year!'

Adelaide School also demanded his energetic support; and he wrote to Mr. Groves: 'It is with extreme reluctance, and only "when driven with my back to the wall", that I trouble you with this letter, in the hope that God may send me aid through you, at the eleventh hour. In addition to several other sources of help, during our three successive years of famine, I have been giving one meal each day to the poor children learning God's Word in Adelaide School. They were thus rescued from demoralisation on the public works: their lives were preserved, and habits of order, cleanliness, and mental cultivation were established at the least possible cost. Still the amount thus expended on 150 children was large, but the Lord supplied us day by day with ample funds for our work. However, to try our faith, a balance of £27 was at last due to our baker. I stated these facts to a few friends, and, as if to keep me wholly dependent upon the Lord of all, I was disappointed by those on whom, next to yourself, I most relied. This troubled me not a little, for I was unwilling to write to you: nor would I do so now, but that

yesterday I was waited upon by a respectable Romanist, who informed me that this debt was transferred to him, and requested to know when I could pay it. I promised the money, and I know my Lord will not fail me. In justice to myself I should tell you, dear friend, that, from the commencement of this visitation, I and my family have been doing all we can to meet the crisis and pass through it, by God's help, without bringing any dishonour on our Master's name. We have lain cold and hard at night, lived most frugally, (our butcher's bill for the last two months is only 18s. 9d.) and we dress most plainly, gratefully accepting from relatives clothes previously worn. My rent-charge is but £45 per annum, with small augmentation and fees; and I have a small private income in Limerick, which has been greatly reduced by the times. The Poor Rate takes 30 per cent.; losses, as much more; and my best house is untenanted... God only knows what the Protestant Clergy in Ireland suffer at this time; many of them are actually starving'.

'I told this', says Mr. Groves to me, 'to some friends who contributed £60, which I urged him, at their desire, to accept for himself. Our request was in vain. Good man! He thought less of himself than of any one else, and said "it was enough to stay the ravages of the cholera among his poor people, and he was happy".'

Till the close of 1848, he was engaged in incessant toil, not merely in daily managing and visiting Fever and Cholera hospitals, soup-kitchens, and cheap food shops, drainage-works, and agricultural seed distribution, but in the more difficult task of reconciling the poor to the Government Relief-measures, which, he showed them, could not possibly remedy 'a national judgment', but might be made to heighten it. Indeed the insignificance of human aid may be learnt from the fact that Ireland, in five years, lost 2,500,000 of her people, by starvation and emigration; although £9,000,000 had been spent in relief. As he then said to Mr. Jebb: 'All the money in England, spent as it is, would do us more harm than good; whilst if popery were but left to itself, and the Protestant clergy properly supported, we should soon, with God's help, see the Gordian knot of the Irish difficulty cut by the "Sword of the Spirit".'

His labours were rewarded, for only one man (and he had not asked for relief), died of starvation, in his wide district of 40 square miles; although, according to the Times (Sept., 1856), 21,770 persons died of starvation in other parts of Ireland! A Romish gentleman proposed a vote of thanks to him as 'the indefatigable Secretary', and it was carried in the Committee by acclamation. A further proof of the general confidence was, the numerous signatures attached to an address which he circulated in his district, thanking the English for their benevolence. Although it was denounced by the priests as a party-trick, a Romish

shopkeeper signed it in their presence, saying, 'Mr. Massy would never send us such a document, for such a purpose'. He was also called upon, in open court, to arbitrate between two respectable Romanists, men quite unknown to him, who, to the amazement of the magistrates, refused the priests' arbitration, and volunteered to submit to his decision. 'There is', said he to Mr. Groves, 'an impression abroad most favourable to the Protestant clergy, and most unfavourable to the Romish priests. The noble conduct of our English brethren has greatly aided our efforts to produce sound principles and good feelings amongst the inhabitants of this unhappy country. I cannot adequately express my thankfulness to the Lord for the extremely kind feelings manifested towards me, and the extraordinary confidence reposed in me by the Romanists here; though I never lose an opportunity of exposing the errors of Romanism, and have a large Scriptural School of 150 children, and a very able Scripture Reader, everywhere received, and constantly working amongst them, through the Irish and English languages. God grant that short-sighted politicians may not still continue their invariable practice of propping up popery in Ireland, now that it is clearly tottering! Show this note and our address to Dr. M'Neile, as he has long been one of my best friends in the work of the Lord. The people suspect, with much reason, that the priests, when they found their cause hopeless, betrayed the very persons whom they had previously instigated to the late insane agitation'...

Eleven new candidates appeared at the first Protestant Orphan Committee Meeting in 1849, and it was interesting to watch the varying expression of their faces, reflecting the anxiety of the elder, and the simple trust of the younger. The Treasurer was heavily in advance, but all were admitted, for the majority of the Committee had been converted to the noble principle of Godfrey Massy, who dispersed the cloud which was gathering on some brows, by announcing his month's collection, previously known only to himself. He began by detailing trifles, and crowned his speech by producing the £75 which his English friend, John Maude, Esq., had sent 'to stop the gap in the Bruff Branch Exchequer of the Protestant Orphans'. His 'Bulletin' described the universal delight which ensued, as 'resembling the joy in Heaven, where love reigns triumphant, on the recovery of a soul which was lost and is found'.

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