

Gleanings of Limerick, 1850

by S. Godolphin Osborne

Sydney Godolphin Osborne was born in Stapleford on 5 February, 1808. He was the third son of Baron Godolphin, and was educated at Rugby and Brasenose College. He served as rector of Durweston/Bryranstown, Dorset, from 1841 to 1845. As well as becoming a writer and crusader, S. Godolphin Osborne acted as an inspector of hospitals at Scutari. He came to Ireland during the famine in 1849 and wrote a series of articles for the *Times*. He returned to Ireland in the following year and went on to write his book *Gleanings of the West of Ireland*, based on his experiences in this country. When he died on 9 May, 1889, the magazine *Punch* paid him this warm poetic tribute:

S.G.O.

(Lord Sydney Godolphin Osborne, Died, May 9, Aged 81.)

Another long-heard voice at last is stilled!

Warm heart, which to all tales of suffering thrilled.

Sound head, which social problems loved to face,

You will be missed from your peculiar place,

Held long ere Bitter Cries found echoes free,

And aid of rhetoric, if not remedy;

When not all men were Socialists, and not

All eyes were open to each bane and blot

Found in the body-politic. E'en then

That sympathetic eye, that potent pen

Were dedicate to service of your kind,

To true benevolence, ardent, yet not blind,

And bettering of the village and the town.

Now, many wandering voices woo renown

As Social Oracles. But Punch looks back

With praise upon his honourable track

Of useful days who thirty years ago

Was known, and loved, by him as S.G.O.

Early in the summer of the year 1849, I was much struck with an account I read in the "Times" newspaper, of the very large mortality from cholera, in the workhouses of the Ballinasloe Union, in the County of Galway, in the west of Ireland; I was also, with many others, much shocked with a discussion, which took place about the same time, in the House of Commons, relative to the effects of the famine, in that part of the sister country.

Circumstances, early in life, turned my attention to the condition of the poorer classes in England, and I had for many years taken an active and somewhat public part, with those who were seeking to ameliorate that condition. I could not but feel, that having devoted myself to this task of seeking the good of my poorer fellow creatures; I had no right to confine

my work, to those of my own immediate country, if I could see any prospect of aiding the same class, in a country so closely connected with my own, and so easily accessible as Ireland. I therefore determined to go myself, and see how far what I had heard to be the case was true; and if true, to judge how far any individual effort could prove of benefit. The result of the tour I then made was kindly published for me in the columns of the "Times" newspaper; and I have reason to believe such publication proved at least of this much benefit; - it brought public opinion to bear on many of those matters of detail, in the treatment of the poor, on which, the effect of that opinion is always most valuable.

I this year again determined to devote my month's annual holiday to a second tour in the west of Ireland; I was this time accompanied by a friend, who wished to

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AND PLASSY MILLS' OFFICE.

Limerick 18

Mr. _____

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Sacks of 1st Quality Flour				
.. Biscuit				
.. 2nd				
.. 3rd				
.. 4th				
.. Oatmeal				
.. Cutlins				
Cwts. of Bran				
.. Pollard				
.. Seeds				
.. Mill Dust				
Sacks of Indian Meal (coarse)				
.. Do. (fine)				
.. Whole Meal (prime)				
.. Egyptian Do. (prime)				
.. Sharps				
.. Barley Meal				

Deposit on Sacks of These to be returned in good order with this Bill, within fourteen days from this date, or the deposit forfeited.

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Bill of sale from the mills of John Norris Russell.



see for himself the state of things of which he had heard so much from myself and others.

Those only who have had to travel in a land, in which they were as strangers, who have had, day after day, to go through lengthened scenes of destitution, death, and misery, in every aggravated form; doing this *alone*; spending each day away from *home*, all its ties, and comforts, many hours, in close contact with the evidence and effects of famine, fever, and oftentimes cholera, besides all the attendant trials, physical and moral, of such a course of investigation; can enter into all I felt of comfort in this time having a companion, and in that companion, one who had no common powers of discrimination, in addition to a kind and generous nature.

I shall now proceed to give my readers some of the gleanings of my late tour; my route [I do not relate any part of my travel which was not made with the purpose I had in view, to inquire into the social condition of the people *in the western districts of Ireland* - was - Limerick, down the Shannon to Kilrush; thence to Kilkee; retracing our steps to Kilrush; by the northern bank of the Shannon.] ...

... In this journey, which, with very little exception, and that only on our return, we performed by private conveyance, I visited eleven Union Houses, and most of their Auxiliaries, and except in one or two instances, I scarce left one department uninspected. It will be seen by reference to a map of Ireland, that, commencing with the capital town of the County of Limerick, we went through the centre of the County of Clare, and a very large proportion of the County of Galway and Mayo; these being, perhaps, the most distressed districts in Ireland.

The only way of performing the journey, so as to see with the greatest convenience, into those matters into which I went to look, we adopted, viz. hiring outside cars, and thus travelling at the hours, and in the directions we thought best.

The population remaining in the west

of Ireland are studied with more ease at this moment, by a traveller seeking to read man in men, women, and children, than perhaps in any country in the world; so large a proportion of the population being actually in the workhouses. I will here give a table of the population, according to the census of 1841, of the Unions we visited, with a return of the average number of persons relieved weekly in the workhouses, in the quarter ending March 30, 1850.

Union	Population in	Relieved on an average each week 1841 in the Quarter ending March 30, 1850, in the Workhouse
Limerick	132,067	6,790
Kilrush	82,353	3,327
Ennis	77,840	3,057
Gort	71,774	2,246
Ballinasloe	99,026	2,284
Galway	88,973	3,712
Clifden	33,465	1,932
Westport	77,952	3,465
Castlebar	61,063	1,674
Ballina, including Belmullet, Dromore West,		
Killala	120,787	3,507
Tuam	74,974	2,627

Population 920,274 in the Workhouses on an average each week 34,621

The above table shews, that in the quarter ending March 30, 1850, nearly one third of the whole population of these Unions were on an average in the Workhouse; but I would have the reader bear in mind, that the population has decreased in these districts, by death, and by emigration, not less than 25 per cent., since 1841; and also it must be borne in mind, that the quarter ending March, is not nearly so bad a quarter as to the pressure on the workhouses, as that which ends in June. We found in these eleven Unions indoor paupers to the amount of 44,000.

When then, the traveller has walked the wards and yards of these Leviathan workhouses, he has had the advantage of seeing, in the, *for him*, most convenient form, by far the largest portion of the peasantry of the several Unions; for, from the Population Census, we must deduct those classes who as yet are not come upon the Poor-rate.

The Irish workhouses are large, and in general well-built; of handsome outward appearance, and contrived with a good deal of care to meet the end for which they were erected; however, such, since the failure of the potato, and the progress of wholesale eviction, has been the increase of pauperism, that the Original Workhouses have been quite incapable of meeting the demand for in-door accommodation. A very large number of places,

called Auxiliary Houses, are now rented by the Guardians; and into these they place different classes of their paupers, under officers appointed for each house.

I am quite satisfied in my own mind, that could any statesman have contemplated the possibility of the present pressure of pauperism, he would have hesitated before he passed a law, which in effect should have to find food, and shelter for the numbers that are now to be fed and sheltered. The population of the whole of Ireland, taken in 1841, was 8,168,632; the estimated workhouse accommodation, March, 1850, was for 273,076 persons; the average number relieved weekly in the Union houses in the quarter ending March, was 227,627.

In the districts to which I am about to call the reader's attention, the estimated amount of accommodation, i.e. that relative proportion of inmates to the space in the houses, which the Poor-law Commissioners had sanctioned, was almost in every instance overstepped; the houses in many instances are most cruelly and disgracefully crowded.

The first Union-house we visited was that at Limerick. Last year, when I went over it, I found it clean and in good order; I now found it every way the reverse. In the parent and auxiliary houses there was no less a number than 8,000 paupers; every department, except the fever hospital, shewed evident symptoms of gross neglect. I have no words with which I can give any real idea of the sad condition of the inmates of two large yards at the parent house, in which were a very large number of young female children; many of them were clothed in the merest dirty rags, and of these they wore a very scanty allowance; they were in the dirt collected on their persons for many weeks; there was not about them the slightest evidence of any the least care being taken of them; as they filed before me, two and two, they were a spectacle to fill any humane heart with indignation: sore feet, sore hands, sore heads; ophthalmia evident in the case of the great proportion of them; some of them were suffering from it in its very worst stage; they were evidently eat up with vermin - very many were mere skeletons: I know well what the appearance of a really famine-stricken child is; there were, it is true, some here who had brought their death-like appearance into the house with them; but the majority were as the type in which the one word *neglect* was printed, in no mistakeable characters - the neglect of their latter state, not the consequence of their former state.

The dirt and general filthiness of the yards, in which these barefooted, ill-clad children had to spend so many hours, made the whole affair more painfully offensive; dogs would have had more attention paid to them. The women, and those I saw of the men, looked, as far as clothes and flesh went, in far better condition.

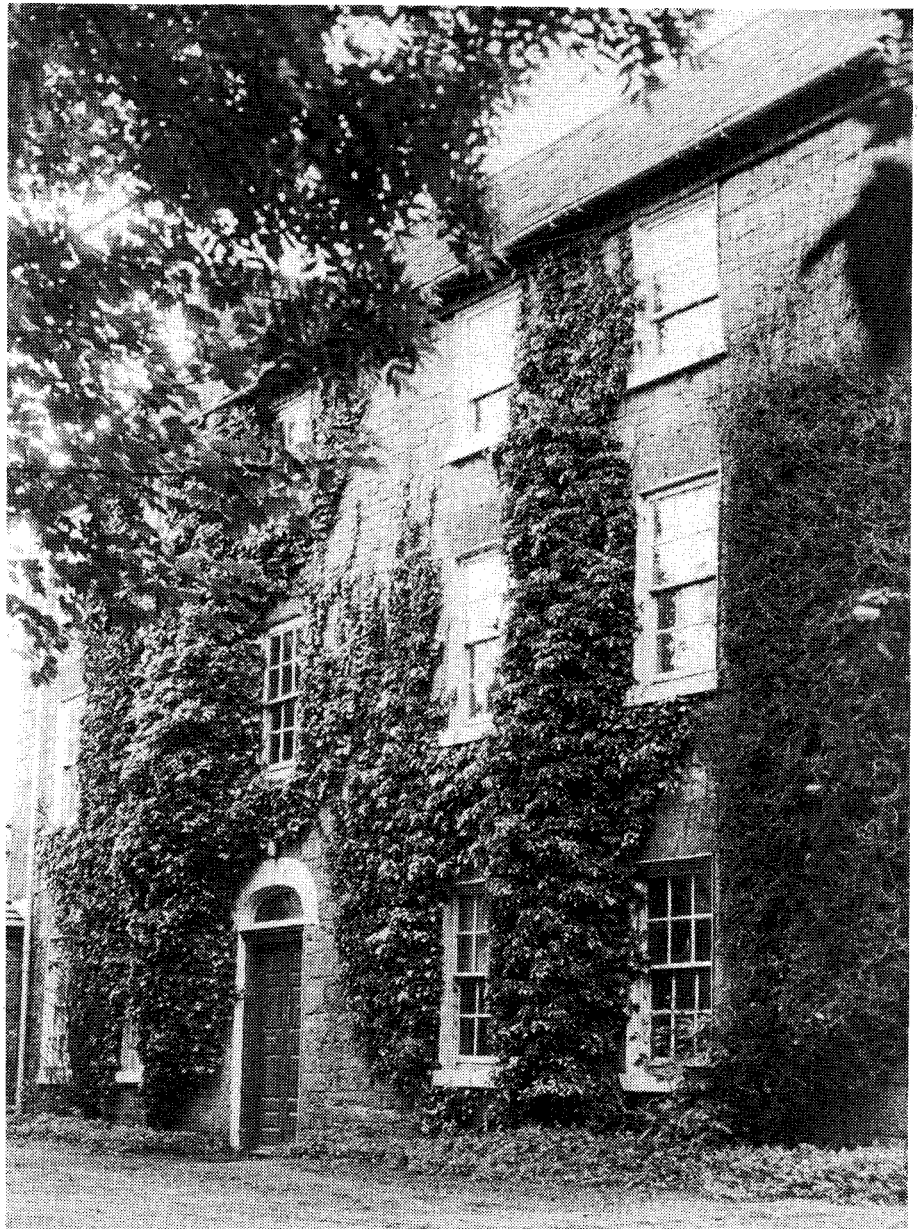
I was kindly allowed to attend the sitting of the Board the following day, when I had the pleasure of hearing a very

eloquent address made by a Guardian to his brethren, founded on a report he read of the condition of their poor; a report, which really almost did that horrid condition justice. I had also the amusement of hearing an eloquent, personal, hard-hitting debate carried on, in connection with the simple question - whether the paupers being without clothes, and the contractor unable at once to supply them, the Board should study the paupers' need, and get calico at once elsewhere - or the contractor's convenience, and wait *his* time? I had the pain of afterwards hearing the contractor's interest won the day.

I went from the Board-room in company with the Medical officer, to visit an auxiliary-house in Clare Street, Limerick, there were about 800 able-bodied women in it - a few days before there had been 822 - for whom the Guardians had provided 267 beds! Let me here observe, that a considerable space in the dormitories was occupied as an infirmary - very many of the cases were of a description which in any decent public asylum would be rigorously separated from communication with the other inmates; these beds had only, as far as I myself observed, one person in each, so that the division of the rest of the beds amongst the inmates must have been very minute indeed. The sick ward, including all cases, had, however, according to the Board's own admission, 115 patients in 88 beds, so that there were left 179 beds to 707 people, all adults!! It was acknowledged that many of the inmates had slept for weeks without beds or covering.

One would have supposed, with such crowding of the majority, and with such a number of sick, that sanitary measures - so far as regards the cleansing of the wards and linen, if not the persons, of the paupers - would have been strenuously enforced. Reader, it is but too true, that for weeks together neither soap or candles had been allowed to this house; for one month, at least, no linen was washed; for many months the matron had not been allowed any brushes, or any of the absolutely necessary articles to cleanse the wards. With regard to the house itself, it has already been the scene of one sad catastrophe; on an alarm of fire, a rush by the inmates was made to the staircase of a dormitory, and a great many lives were lost; such was the evident state of the walls, roof, and floors the day we visited it, that I did not let another day pass without communicating to the highest quarter my apprehension for the safety of the inmates; prompt inquiry was made, and, I believe, instant measures for safety ordered. I have read since, in the public papers, that an architect had informed the Board, *he thought the roof might stand through August, perhaps September.*

The violence of the language of the inmates, their evident moral degradation, was too apparent; but who can wonder if human nature, even of the softest natural character, should become hardened as brass, under a state of things which treats large bodies of women as mere animals,



An Arthur house, off Athlunkard Street.

except in the matter of apparently caring less for their lives than most men do for their dogs.

At another auxiliary-house, called I believe Mount Kennet, I found a very large number of boys; here there was a state of things nearly as bad. Since I was at Limerick these youths broke into open rebellion, and the police force with fixed bayonets had some difficulty in subduing them. At another "auxiliary" the state of things amongst an immense body of children was most disgraceful; for weeks the bed linen had not been changed or washed, in fact, no soap had been allowed; the poor children had from time to time to lie naked in bed whilst their shirts, &c. were washed, when they were fortunate enough to have even this chance of cleanliness; we found some thus naked, and this was the excuse made. The infirmary, or sick ward, was a most piteous sight; to see these poor children suffering from dysentery and other diseases, the direct result of physical depression from want; in this suffering left so dirty, and so evidently neglected, was no small aggravation of the

sense at which I had already arrived of the wanton abuse of their office shewn by the authorities of this union. The rain, as I stood by the side of one poor sufferer, called convalescent, was coming through the roof on the bed in which he was laid.

I had heard the excuse made at the Board in the morning, for the evident want of clothing at the parent house, amongst the children; "that they had none to put on them"; and yet, I found on strict inquiry, that shirts and shifts had been sent to one of the other auxiliaries, in which the children were, whilst I was at the Clare-street house. Can it be, that children were stripped at one establishment, and their clothes sent to hide from the visitor, the nakedness in another? If eloquence could clothe, I could easily believe in the power of this Board, with words to cover the naked; but in the absence of this extraordinary means, I am yet at a loss to know, whence came the shower of little shirts and shifts that afternoon.

As to the state of discipline in which these 8,000 paupers are held, a short time before I was in Limerick, the women and

children broke out of several of the houses, and actually marched bodily into the streets of the town; to the great disgust and terror of the quiet inhabitants.

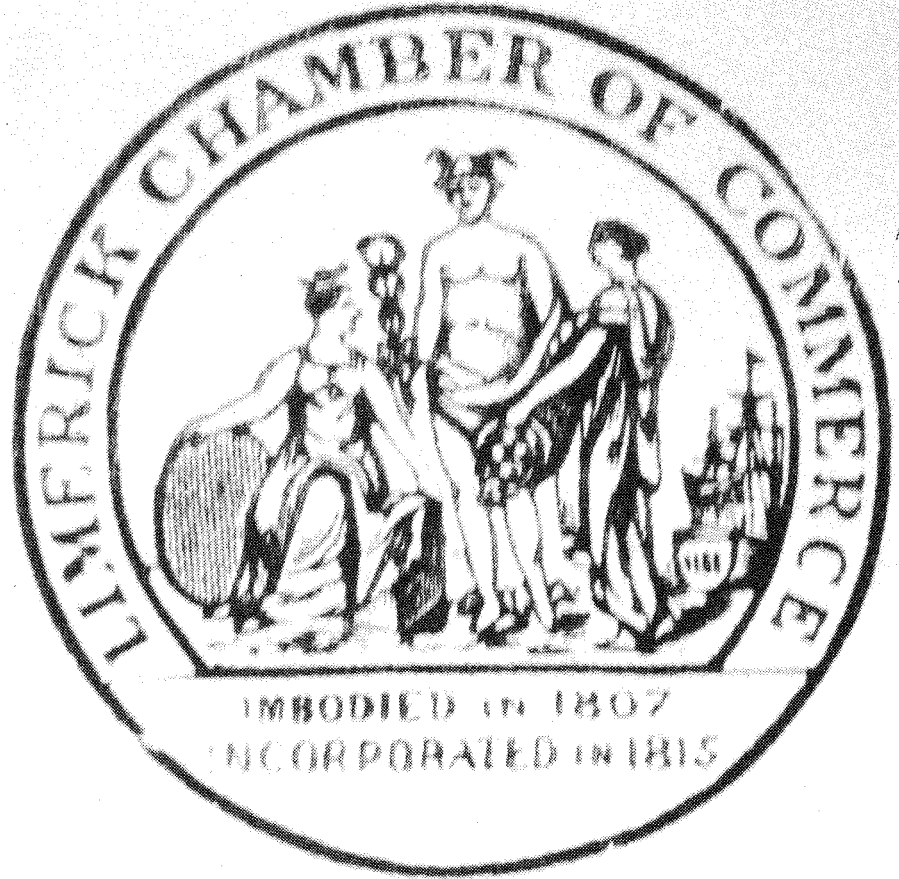
I would wish now to state, that this Limerick Union, is by no means in any real financial difficulty; as a proof of it, at the time the "Rate in Aid" bill was passed, before it had received the royal assent, the Guardians actually struck a rate to carry them over two years, that *they might thus evade the provisions of the Act*. I will not argue on the honesty, or the policy of this measure; but I do argue from it, that a Union which has now a very large amount in the course of collection, notoriously collecting the rate with little difficulty, has no right to plead poverty against an accusation of an amount of neglect of duty, to which any amount of poverty would be no answer. *At the end of last March, they had still £33,435 of the rate struck, yet uncollected.*

I took some pains to ascertain, how such a Union, with a resident nobleman for chairman, could get into such a state of shameless disorganisation. I could get no satisfactory answer; my own impression, from all I heard and saw, is simply this - To feed, clothe, &c. 8,000 paupers, at the expense of a solvent Union, creates so large a demand, for the necessaries required; that a primary object of large firms and others has been to get themselves, or their friends, elected into the Board, with a view of influencing contracts for the supplies.

The open way in which I heard parties accuse each other, by what could scarcely be called insinuation, of gross jobbing, shewed me, the practice was pretty generally admitted to exist. The Board Room has, I fear, been mainly used as a *arena* for able debating on the merits of contractors; such merits being weighed in a balance, the equilibrium of which owed its disturbance, more to the friendship, or hostility, of the parties, who were to decide on the acceptance of the tenders, than on the comparative quality or value, of the samples tendered. I should much like to see the result of an inquiry into the receipts and disbursements of this Union, for the last two years; I only know one power which could be applied, with any hope of success, to such an investigation - the same Committee, or the same accountants, employed on the great Hudson railway inquiry.

To give the reader some idea of the spirit in which the Board business is conducted, I will quote from a published Report of a meeting of the Board, Lord Clare in the chair, held, I believe, the very day after I left Limerick; the concluding sentence of the concluding speech of the day, being in continuation, or rather in conclusion of a spirited debate, in which accusations of jobbery were freely exchanged, it simply was - "it is a d—d infernal lie".

It is indeed time that some public notice should be taken of the manner in which a Board, entrusted with the responsible duty of supervising the relief



Limerick Chamber of Commerce logo.

of 8,000 poor, wholly at their mercy, abuse their position and neglect their duty; to the detriment of the ratepayer, the disgrace of the law, and above all, to the wanton injury of their poor fellow-creatures. Heavy will be the guilt of the Poor-law authorities if they do not quickly interpose, to secure the interest of those who can ill afford to pay rates, and those whose relief at best, is so narrowed, that they can less afford any further restriction to it.

From Limerick I went by steamer down the Shannon to Kilrush; the day was stormy, but not sufficiently so to hide the beauty of this noble river; I fear, from all appearance, that it is but little traversed now by trading vessels.

When I reached the Union house at Kilrush, I had evidence at its very doors, of the awful amount of destitution for which it is the last refuge. It was "the admission day"; within the gates, and on the open ground in front of the doors, were collected in crowds, representatives of every species of extreme suffering. Here was ample evidence of the fact, that the workhouse test is in Ireland, a real test of destitution; for one's first impression was, why had not many of these hundreds applied for food and shelter and clothing, before famine, nakedness, and exposure had so defaced and degraded their humanity?

The debility of age, made worse by long borne misery; the debility of disease, aggravated by long neglect; hunger-worn countenances, telling the tale which at once explained the efficient cause which

had left the frame just a frame, and that all. Infants at the breast of mothers, with the skin and visage of advanced, careworn childhood; children, whose sores and dirt and squalid famished looks, told of the loss of all the elasticity of their age, of their premature acquisition of that stolid care-blunted nature, which years of common suffering alone can give. Lazari, to whom the hated workhouse had come to be as the palace of a Dives, in which they hoped to hide their sores and satisfy their hunger, here waited in crowds longing at the gates: the whole picture was one of utter, almost hopeless misery.

The process of admission or rejection was conducted by one of the vice-Chairmen of the Board, assisted by two other Guardians; the relieving officers calling out the names of the applicants, they were in turn ushered in by the porter and some assisting paupers, some of whom, I observed, had sticks in their hands. The cases were disposed of with such celerity, that I presume the relieving officers had taken no common pains to ascertain the different features of each applicant's case. I was shewn over the parent house and auxiliaries by the Clerk to the Union and the Medical officer; the numbers in the houses were 4,802. One of the first departments we entered was the Infirmary. I do not think my travelling companion will ever forget this his first introduction to the stern reality of famine. (*Gleanings of the West of Ireland* by the Hon. and Rev. E. Godolphin Osborne, London, 1850).