

A Letter from
Sir Matthew Barrington,
 — 1846 —

A letter from Sir Matthew Barrington, of Glenstal Castle, Co. Limerick, to Lord Cottenham, the Chancellor of England and Ireland, commented on the famine and the consequent crisis in Ireland, in December, 1846. Sir Matthew, who held the important post of Crown Solicitor for Munster at the time, discusses in detail the problems of rural Ireland and offers some remedies. He foresees a possible insurrection, unless the government takes some steps to make life easier for the Irish tenant farmer. His own observations of life in and around Limerick, between 1815 and 1846, have convinced him that changes had to come, and the sooner the better. His proposals seem to have fallen on deaf ears.

50, Stephen's Green, Dublin.

December 17, 1846.

I fear that you will think me very presumptuous in thus taking the liberty of addressing you on the state of this country, but possessing as I do a considerable landed property in the county of Limerick, having had the experience of 30 years as a public officer employed in the most disturbed districts of the country, and having long and attentively considered the subject, I may perhaps be excused if I venture to assert that I have acquired some knowledge, which may be useful in the present emergency, and this must form my apology for troubling you with this letter.

It is admitted on all hands, that the mode now adopted of relieving the distress of the country (necessary as is that relief at the present moment), cannot be continued without leading to a confiscation of the property of the country, and ultimately to an actual revolution. I



Lord John Russell.

say so advisedly, for the confiscation, instead of proving a simple forfeiture of the land to the Government in payment of their advances, will be found to lead to resistance by the occupiers having for its object to obtain possession of the land as their own property.

The two evils which require to be remedied are, the want of employment for an excessive population at present, and the likelihood of the recurrence of such want in future.

That the general population of the country (with the exception of the few landlords) take little or no interest in the cultivation of the land or the consequences of the present distress, is fully proved by the course pursued by the farmers at present. It will be found that they and their sons very generally abandon their own farms and neglect their tillage to seek employment as stewards and overseers on the Public Works; and this arises from the circumstance of so few of them having the slightest interest in the land, and of their not being, as in other countries, a body of small proprietors scattered amongst the larger ones, so as to form a protective influence; in fact, a sort of local police, for the preservation of property and prevention of pauperism and taxation.

To meet the first evil, it will be necessary to afford profitable employment for the present emergency.

The second evil, that of a probable recurrence of a state of things similar to the present, must be met by the creating of a small proprietary in the country, whose interest it will be to improve their properties and give employment to the people.

To afford profitable employment for the present, no measure can be adopted better than the drainage and consequent improvement of the land, but as a preliminary step to doing so, the rivers and mountain streams must be cleared, and obstructions removed, otherwise an attempt to drain the land would be as ineffectual as attempting to drain the houses in a city without having good main sewers under the streets.

This may be easily effected by the Board of Works, under provisions similar to those by which they constructed the great mountain roads through the country; such provisions, of course, to include the future prevention of such obstructions.

The clearing of the rivers being thus provided for, the next step should be, to lend money to such proprietors as might require it for the drainage of their lands, taking proper care that it was not expended in relieving themselves from their embarrassments, or otherwise spent without giving the employment intended; this might be done by withholding the loan until after a certain portion of the drainage was certified to be completed. This species of work would save the money now wasted in salaries to inspectors, overseers, &c., and be much better and more economically performed than what is now doing.

The means above recommended will occupy a large portion of the unemployed population, and the surplus may, some of them, be supplied with work on the necessary repairs and keeping up of the public roads, others disposed of by emigration, and the rest assigned to the cultivation of the waste lands under careful regulations.

Now as to the remedy for the prospective evil, I mean the creation of a small proprietary in fee simple; as this subject would lead me into lengthened details, I beg to enclose a letter which had been originally submitted to Lord Morpeth, and which, entering fully into its examination, I had the honour of submitting to Sir Robert Peel in 1844. In acknowledging the receipt of that letter, Sir Robert was pleased to write thus:-

I have read with the attention to which it is so fully entitled, the printed letter you have addressed to me. I will, for the present, content myself with the expression of my acknowledgments for it, because I feel that the consideration of the practical measure which it recommends could not be undertaken with advantage until after the Commissioners of Inquiry into the relation of landlord and tenant in Ireland, and into the general subject of the occupancy of land in that country, shall have made their Report, which I believe may be expected at no remote period.

The Land Committee have since made a Report, which has been printed by order of Parliament, from which the following is an extract:-

It now rarely happens that land in Ireland is brought into the market for sale in lots of a moderate or small size. Estates are so generally encumbered by family settlements, or otherwise that the expense, delay, and difficulty which would attend the dividing them so as to sell in separate or detached portions, deter a proprietor from taking this course, although a larger sum might be raised by it than in the whole.

We believe that there is a large number of persons in Ireland, possessing a small amount of capital, which they would gladly employ in the purchase and cultivation of land, and a still larger number now resident in different parts of the country, and holding land for uncertain or limited terms at a rent, who would most cheerfully embrace the opportunity of becoming proprietors.

The gradual introduction of such a class of men would be a great improvement in the social condition of Ireland. A much larger proportion of the population than at present would become personally interested in the preservation of peace and good order, and the prospect of gaining admission into this class of small land-owners would often stimulate the renting farmer to increased and persevering industry.

I lately submitted a copy of my printed letter to Lord John Russell, and in the month of September, I had a reply from his Lordship, in which he says:-

I wish to express to you, that I was very much gratified by the perusal of your letter to Sir Robert Peel, I am afraid that the loss of the potato crop will have much changed the prospect of forming a company for the purposes you point out. But if such a company could be formed, a question might fairly arise, whether a private company or a public Board, like the Woods and Forests or the Board of Public Works, would be best fitted to hold powers so extensive, and conduct an enterprize which might have social success, and at the same time be subject to commercial failure.

I wish you would have the goodness to communicate with the Lord Lieutenant on this important subject.

While awaiting the Lord Lieutenant's return to town, I address this letter to you.

Several noblemen and gentlemen of high consideration and character in both countries (or, connected with Ireland), amongst whom may be mentioned - The Duke of Leinster, the Earls of Devon, Courtown, and Dunraven, Lord Monteagle, Mr. Samuel Gurney, and Mr. Carr, Governor of the Bank of Ireland, &c., are ready to act upon the suggestions contained in my letter, and form a society for the purpose of purchasing land in Ireland, and selling it again in small portions, provided they receive the aid of the Government by its countenance, support, and co-operation, it being clearly understood, however, that the scheme must be carried out by a private society, and that though such society should be subject to Government control, any direct

interference on the part of Government in the purchase of land would at once raise its price so as totally to defeat the plan at the outset.

The following extract of a letter from Lord Courtown, will show how my suggestions have been received by one of the best resident landlords in Ireland:-

My dear Sir Matthew, - Having read, some time ago, with the greatest interest, your letter to Sir Robert Peel, which Captain Owen lent me, I had intended writing to say how much I approved of the subject of it, and of the measure you propose for the bettering our unfortunate country, but my time has been so much engaged with Relief Committees and writing begging letters that I have neglected writing.

"I am so convinced that your views are just as to the cause of the agrarian outrages (as they are called) that so frequently happen in this country, and that the remedy you propose is the one most likely to cure the disease, that I beg you will name me, as one of the company you propose to form. I believe one great reason why this country has been freer than most others from outrages is from the number of respectable farmers that either have the fee of small properties which they have purchased, or hold farms for leases for ever. I am acquainted with several in this immediate neighbourhood of that description, who, I am happy to say, do not pretend to be gentlemen, but who stick closely to their business as farmers. I have heard from my steward, who is a Cumberland man, that in that country there are numbers of the farming class who have small properties of their own, and who work on their farms and go jogging on their horses to fairs and markets, just the same as if they were only tenant farmers. It would never do if they became squireens, which they would not do, if they were possessed of the quantity of land you propose they should be enabled to purchase. Great care should be taken that they did not either subdivide their properties among small tenants or have the power of selling small portions.

"Do you intend speaking to the present Irish Government on the subject? If you do, I should be obliged to you to communicate to me what success you meet with.

In the plan proposed, you will observe that due precautions are taken to prevent the subdivision of the land, and consequent increase of population upon the principal of the English Act of the 31 Elizabeth, c. 7, which was in force in England to the year 1775.

Allow me, in conclusion, to state my conviction that if the measure I have suggested, or some similar one be not shortly adopted, there will be a general insurrection of the whole population of this country against the landed proprietors, which must lead to a fearful and sanguinary struggle, and moreover, that any measure merely providing employment without affecting tenure, is only a temporary palliation of the evil almost certain to tend to its ultimate increase.

With this letter, and that addressed to Sir Robert Peel, before you, you will be able to judge whether my plan does not call for the immediate consideration of Government. Should you wish further inquiry, I shall be happy to reply to any queries you may be disposed to put, but confess, that having contemplated such a scheme for years, the present moment seems to me precisely that which calls for the aid the projected society is calculated to afford. And with so strong an opinion, I would earnestly press it upon you, to consider my suggestions before Parliament meets, so as to be ready, if Her Majesty's Government are disposed to enter into my views, to co-operate in a systematic plan that can be brought practically to bear upon the country with as little delay as possible.

(British Parliamentary Papers: Famine [Ireland], Vol. 6, 1847, pp. 406-409).

