

Limerick as I saw it, 1848

by William S. Balch

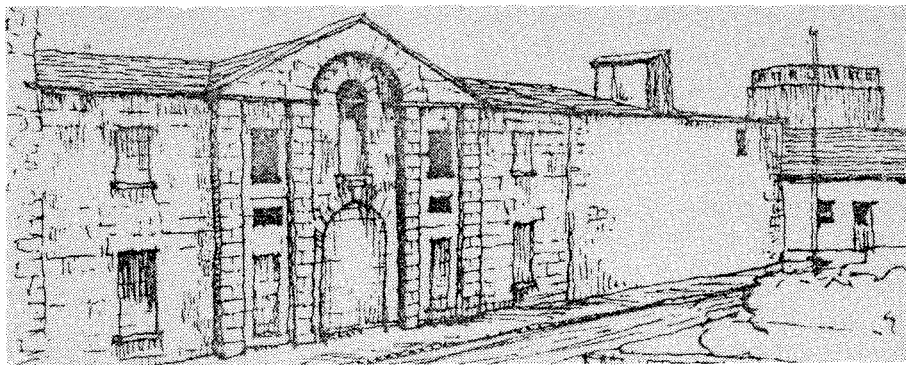
William Stevens Balch (1806-87), a native of Vermont and a Universalist minister, landed in Ireland from America on 17 May, 1848. He toured Cork and Kerry before embarking on a steamer at Tarbert for the journey up the Shannon to Limerick, where he stayed from 21 to 23 May.

For several miles along the shores of the river, before reaching Limerick, the land is level, and the hills recede to a considerable distance.

Close on the banks the ground is low, a portion of it having been recovered from the domain of the water, by artificial dikes, which preserve it from being overflowed by high tides and unusual freshets. These alluvial bottoms are rich, and very productive. Back of these, a broad, undulating plain stretches off in all directions, bounded by distant hills on the east, south, and north-west, leaving the beautiful valley, on the north and west, through which winds the majestic Shannon, the noblest river in the United Kingdom. In the centre of this vale, and directly on a bend in the river where it suddenly spreads into the estuary, called the Lower Shannon, is situated the city of Limerick. Several villages, private seats and villas, with old ruined castles towering up, here and there, from isolated rocks or projecting spurs of a range of hills, add much to the grandeur and beauty of this lovely region.

The city itself, as we approached it last evening, made a far more imposing appearance than I had expected to see in this part of Ireland. The size and beautiful situation of the city, the character of its buildings, the large quantity of vessels lying along its well built stone quays, as well as the business-like stir and bustle, and apparent good taste every where displayed, greatly surprised and pleased me. Nor was I disappointed on entering the town. Everything I saw, confirmed my first favourable impressions. The width and regularity of the streets, some of them more than a mile long, the elegance of the houses, the appearances of the well-filled stores and well-dressed inhabitants, were so unlike anything I had anticipated, that I could hardly realise that we were in the chief city of the west of Ireland. Every thing bore the marks of wealth, prosperity, and refinement, equal, if not superior, to what is common in our country. And what surprised me more, every thing appeared fresh and modern. The houses, churches, stores, and shops, looked as if recently erected, and with a full knowledge of all the improvements in the present system of utilitarian architecture.

My happiness on beholding these proofs of prosperity, taste, and comfort, was inexpressible. I felt relieved from the sadness forced upon me by an intercourse



A drawing by P. O Ceallachain of the old City Jail.

with the misery and degradation I had just passed through; and, like too many, almost forgot that there was any real poverty in the country, and wondered whether the scenes I have faintly described were not dreams, mere figments of a sickly and suspicious philanthropy. All about me seemed to be cheerfulness, activity, pleasure, and contentment, which, I must confess, harmonized much better with my natural feelings, and afforded me great relief.

The wharf was lined with car-men, hack-men, hotel-runners, and ragged, dirty boys, much in the fashion of our cities. As we had no need of either, we hurried from the pier as soon as possible, budget in hand. A crowd of boys followed us, teasing us to grant them the privilege of carrying our sacks, bidding one upon the other, from a shilling to a ha' penny. At length, one poor fellow looked so woebegone, and begged so pitifully, that we agreed with him for a penny. On arriving at the hotel, he demanded, in the fashion of his country, *two-pence*, just four times his offer, and double the amount agreed on. We had resolved to give him three-pence, if he said nothing. But these poor fellows are so unused to anything like voluntary generosity, that they never wait to see the proof of it ...

After securing quarters, we strolled about the town; passed a friary, and a national school-house, both respectable looking buildings, and went to the railway station, a large and elegant building, built in a deep cavity excavated in a hill.

All that part of the town, called Newtown Perry - from the name of the owner of the land on which the *new town* is built - is very fine, neat, regular, airy, and elegant; and our astonishment and admiration increased as we went over it. But the day did not close without proofs of destitution and misery, which awakened

all my sadness, and gave full conviction that we were still in Ireland!

We visited the old part of the city, and all along the main street leading through the "Irish to the English town", saw such sights of poverty and shameless degradation as we never saw before.

All along the street, centre and sides, were grouped masses of human beings, of both sexes and all ages, who exhibited the lowest depths of poverty, intemperance and vice. The gin, beer, junk, and slop-shops were in character with all the rest, in the style of Orange-street, though on a much larger scale. Smutty childhood, wrinkled age, hobbling decrepitude, gaunt distress, bloated drunkenness, shameless vice, barefaced crime - all the odiousness of ignorance, depravity and famine were mingled in a confused mass, the most loathsome and forbidding.

Crossing the bridge into the "English Town", the hue became, if possible, still darker, as the evidences of *moral* depravity thickened on all sides. This added to the picture colourings of disgrace and wretchedness which transcend all attempts at description - most appalling and repulsive exhibitions of vice, in which soldiers from the barracks acted prominent parts. The principal business seemed to be vending old clothes. These, in every conceivable variety, from the laid-off coat of the nobleman, and the dress of his "lady", down to those stripped from the corpse of a beggar, or picked from the gutter, were displayed along the sides of the street.

Crossing another bridge, we passed one of the military stations, when still stronger marks of vice and infamy were to be seen. Under the best regulations, a large share of iniquity clusters about such large establishments. But here it seemed to revel without restraint. From this place flows the blighting influence which leaves

such palpable traces of crime and moral pollution upon both men and women, young in years, but, it is feared, already old in vice and deep in depravity. Who ever searched minutely, the *full* history of large bodies of men, closely packed in barracks or monastery, without finding traces of depravity which have festered into the rottenest crimes; sometimes kept secret for a time, but afterward divulged? The Reformation corrected, in a measure the abuses of one, the prevalence of peace will remove the other.

We were satisfied to return to our inn, at an early hour, having looked upon scenes of beauty and wretchedness, depravity and shame, mingled in such confusion as we had never supposed possible. The events of yesterday I shall not soon forget. They form a chapter - nay a book of many chapters - in the history of my experience, never to be forgotten. The scenes of whole years have been crowded into a single day, and more phases of social life presented, than could be witnessed at home, by travelling from one end of our country to the other. The old and the new, the beautiful and the strange, from the days feudalism first reared these castle walls, to this hour, when wealth, sustained by a royal retinue of lords and armies, tramps with iron hoof upon the necks and virtue of this unfortunate people, are all confusedly huddled together; and I feel my spirit and my flesh completely exhausted. May the good Lord give faith and patience to endure one night of peace and quiet sleep.

May 23 - The only disturbance which troubled us during the night was the doleful cry of the watchmen, who passed our window every hour, drawing out the time of the night and "all's well", in a deep guttural tone, as if they had been released from the grave after a thousand years' confinement, and expected soon to return to it. After the outbreak, a few nights ago, when Messrs. O'Brien, Mitchel, and Meagher were driven from public meeting, and having seen multitudes during the evening, in various parts of the city, engaged in warm discussions upon political questions which now so much agitate this country, and knowing that many apprehended another emute of the citizens, we were easily disturbed; but nothing troubled us but the horrid cries of the night-watch.

We rose at four - the sun having preceded us by half an hour - and took a ramble about the still and quiet streets. Few were astir at that hour. Here and there, a solitary footman passed us, and occasionally a despondent ass, laden with a few vegetables, or boxes stowed into panniers laid across his back, and driven by a young woman with bare feet, dingy, and often ragged dress, and naked head, or covered by a white cambric cap, with a wide flowing ruffle about the face - appearing alike uncared for, and fit companions in misfortune and doom of servitude. Their tramp along the clean and solitary streets at that beautiful hour, seemed lonely and sad, and contrasted

strangely with the cheerfulness and grandeur of that calm and sweet morning.

Soon the baker with his baskets of bread, the servant with her pail for water, the newsman with his bundle of papers, tripped more rapidly along the streets. By-and-by, a groggery was opened, and then a grocery, and, by six o'clock, there were signs of returning life in all the business parts of the town.

We visited the market places, which were first open. The only meat we saw displayed in the stalls was mutton, much of which appeared to be of an excellent quality. Butter, in large quantity, and of the very nicest kind, was all along the street, done up in neat rolls and handsomely stamped. There was also fish of various kinds, piles of boiled shrimps, early vegetables, mainly cabbage and cauliflower, bread, cheese, and articles common in our markets. The prices were not high - generally lower than in New York. Groceries are much dearer, especially tea, coffee, and sugar. Good coffee is from 30 to 40 cents a pound, and most dutiable articles are from three to four times as high as with us. The turf-sellers attracted our notice. Some were standing by asses loaded with the article, others had baskets which they had brought on their backs many miles, and were willing to deliver in any part of the city. These were the most deplorably miserable and dejected of any, except the beggars which met us at every step, and followed us in droves, wherever we went, even into the hall of our hotel, and remained about the door, after being ordered out by our host, to waylay us when we came into the street again.

Many about the market were quite respectable in their appearance. I noticed several persons, well formed, tall, handsome, and genteel in their manners. I was surprised to see several women who could be called really beautiful, even dressed as they were. Every body knows that dress may be so tastefully selected and delicately arranged as to add much to nature's charms, and help set off beauty in its most favourable aspects. But among these rude peasant girls who had come many miles to market, with the commonest products they had themselves reared, there were specimens of female beauty, I had not expected to find in any class in Ireland.

By seven all the shops were open, and the streets were full of bustle and business. Everything in the main streets of the new town wore the appearance of thrift and prosperity. The stores are numerous, large, handsome, and well furnished, betokening an extensive and profitable business. The streets are wide, straight, neat, and airy, and intersected at right angles. Those nearest the river are occupied by large buildings used as stores below, and dwellings above. The land ascends gently from the river, and in the upper part of the town, especially along the Crescent, the dwellings are very large and elegant, the streets being ornamented with shade trees, and the yards filled with

vines, flowers, and shrubbery, much in the character of the best streets in American cities.

We visited this morning, one of the barracks, occupying a large fort on the high ground in the eastern part of the city. We bolted in unasked, and looked at the comfortable quarters of the soldiers. English statesmen are wise in one thing, keeping strong the right arm of their power. The soldiers are well fed, and well paid, and have an easy time of it. None of the common people fare half so well. They are a sort of indigent nobility, furnished with red coats, glazed caps, and good rations at the public charge, and required to exercise barely enough to digest their food. And the ranks of an army are well suited to the hereditary gradations so indispensable in the working of British institutions. There is no motive for a soldier to desert, unless in a foreign land; it would be folly to forsake his beef, and bread, and whiskey, which come to him with perfect regularity, and at no cost, to seek a precarious livelihood on a patch of ground he might hire at an enormous rent, but could never own. His instinct makes him loyal, and natural rights and political and social wrongs do not trouble him. It is food and raiment, and a place to sleep, that concerns him most, and so he becomes mechanically valorous, when occasion requires.

Some three or four thousand of these minions of power, are now stored in the four barracks in this city, and thirty thousand more in different parts of the kingdom. Fresh troops are constantly arriving from England and Scotland. The agitation produced by O'Brien, M.P. Mitchell, and Meagher, the two former of whom are said to have used strongly seditious language in this city, a few evenings ago, is the cause of all this stir in military matters. I am told the officers are in pursuit of these men, and no doubt before this they are in "durance vile". ...

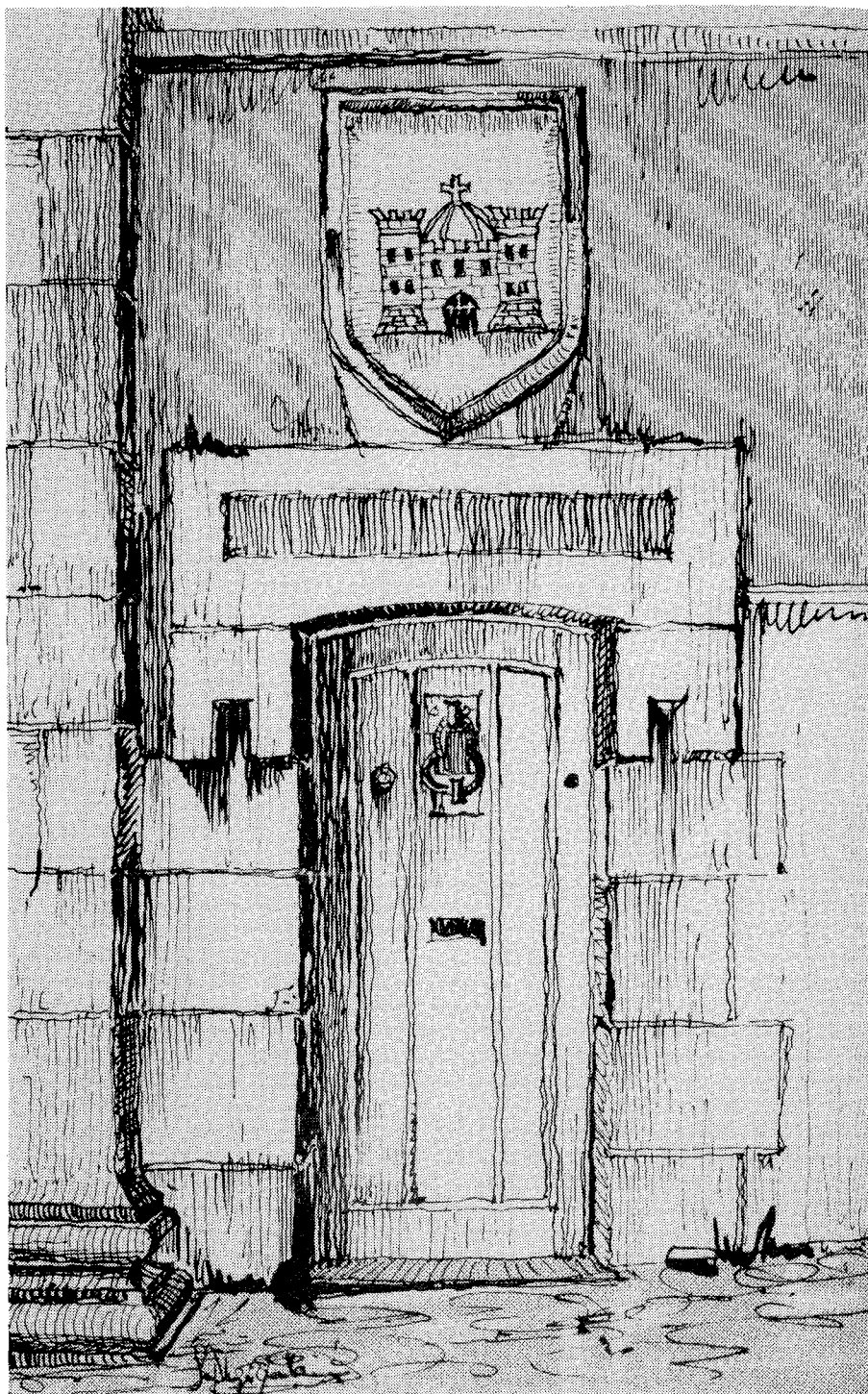
Two or three squads were going through a course of artillery drill. They were tall, noble looking fellows; and as they strutted through the evolutions around their brass pieces, pretending to put in cartridges and ram them down, prime, elevate, take aim, fire off, and swob out, all at the direction of little slim lads, in cloth caps, who swaggered about, flourishing rattan canes, like Broadway dandies, a feeling of pity and disgust was awakened, to think that the best energies of these "noble" young men were to be prostituted to the base purpose of learning how to kill their fellowmen scientifically - by rule and by "law and order", and subject to the command of her Royal Majesty. What bloody madness! Oh Heavens! Is justice lost? Is mercy dumb? Then, "Rule Britannia" and tramp on with thy aristocratic hoofs, still more ruthlessly, and, crush what life is left in this wretched people! Drive on thy cart loads of tax and tithe gatherers, and arm thy constabulary to protect agents of absentees in distraining for rent or evicting tenants from desirable lands, turning them houseless

and penniless upon the world, and then train their military to shoot them down if they dare to make a show of resistance, or a particle of self-respect by way of objection. They have no remedy at law. Physical resistance is their only resource. And such a demonstration they must not make! ...

Is the remedy to be found in the infliction of greater oppressions, or by adding insult to injury? It seems to me as if the principles of humanity, as recommended in the gospels, are never thought of in connexion with the government of Ireland. That it is by a mere display of pride and power, that respect and obedience are looked for - methods which the veriest heathen tyrant would have adopted in the government of a conquered province, which he wished to depopulate, to make room for more loyal subjects.

The ignorance and wickedness of this country does not justify the treatment it receives. One wrong does not justify another; and until England learns to be just and generous towards the masses of her citizens, regarding them in the light of common justice and humanity, instead of bestowing all her care and favours upon her nobility and gentry, no real improvement can be reasonably expected. If her statesmen would act the part of guardians and protectors, and devote her powers to educate the people, by giving them practical knowledge in the arts of civilisation, and then afford them a chance to do for themselves, instead of keeping them the serfs of absentee landlords, to be abused and cheated to the last inch by merciless agents, and trafficking middlemen, and then taxing them to the last farthing to support lordly priests, whose doctrines they disbelieve, and armies of policemen and soldiers to help keep them in the traces, they might look with confidence for improvement, for the peace and happiness of Ireland. As it is, the darkness thickens in her skies, corruption festers at her heart, poverty and crime mark her career, and distraction and ruin are in reserve for her future. Not a ray of hope or comfort gleams from any point of heaven, upon the masses of her sons and daughters. Oppression, starvation, or emigration are inscribed everywhere - on every hill and valley, in every town, village, and hamlet. Peace, justice, and competence are nowhere to be found.

To the courageous, of small means, there are glimmerings of light, wafted in the arrival of each emigrant ship from the distant shores of a foreign land; and they breathe more freely, and their pulses beat quicker, a smile even kindles upon their pale lips, when the thought strikes them that there is a chance for them to forsake their native land, the homes and graves of their ancestors, and seek an asylum among strangers. But to the timorous, without means, there is nothing left but cold, blank despair, rendered more apparent by the glistening of the oppressor's power, which glimmers about the bristling bayonets of these trained bands of death and destruction, sent here



The entrance to the governor's house at the old City Jail.

to overawe the masses, and protect the exclusive privileges of the favoured few!

No country can really prosper, whose inhabitants are so treated that they learn to hate their homes, and to despise the authorities.

From the artillery barracks, we wandered through the public square, and seeing many people gathering about a church near by, we went in. A woman who was serving as sexton, informed us there was to be a wedding, and invited us to walk in. We did so, and took our seats in the front of the gallery, but as it was some time before the parties arrived, we went below, and looked about the building. The pews are furnished with locks, and many of them were fastened to keep out the unbelievers. A tombstone is inserted in

the wall, on the left of the pulpit, at the height of ten or twelve feet from the floor. Its lettering indicates that it is in memory of a Mrs. Russell, wife of one of the richest men in Limerick, we learned afterwards, made so by the distilling of whiskey, the monopoly of grain, and the fattening of hogs! The building itself is neat and respectable, of recent erection and in modern style.

A large number of people were gathered about the door, mere idlers, who came from curiosity, whom the lady sexton refused to admit. But one or two hundred, who were very respectably dressed, came in and seated themselves about the church. Their appearance fully justified my favourable opinion of the personal beauty of the inhabitants, especially the women,

of Limerick. There was scarcely an ordinary looking person amongst them. Many were really handsome. Even among those standing about the doorway, there were many boys and girls, plainly dressed, and some ragged, whose countenances were actually beautiful. They needed only a little soap and water to bring out the lustre of rosy cheeks, and delicate and well-formed features.

Soon carriages began to arrive, with lackeys in livery, and the "parties of the first part", as the lawyer would say, appeared and retired to a small, open room on the left of the entrance. Soon after, the "parties of the second part" were ushered in, and a formal presentation made, when the whole retinue entered the body of the church, and arranged themselves before the altar. The priest, in full canonicals, with book in hand, proceeded to read the marriage service, and, with all due formality, proclaimed the twain to be one, till death them should part. Then the salutations and greetings followed, which over, the happy pair were conducted to their carriage and departed, *but not as they came*. The beggars next claimed our notice, for they flocked about in abundance; but I saw nothing given them, except sour looks and harsh words. We were told this was a wedding in high life, the friends of the parties being among the most distinguished people of the town; and that, therefore, the poor beggars had hoped that a few pennies would have been scattered amongst them. They seemed to bear their disappointment bravely, as if used to it, for where so many are, who can give to all? A man must have a long purse or a hard heart to live long in Ireland.

On our way from the wedding, we passed a Catholic chapel, which was open. We entered. It was a large building, rather dingy, inside and out. Two women and an old man were kneeling on the cold stone floor, not far from the door, with their faces towards the high altar, in the farther end. Their pale, wan faces, wrinkled skin, and tattered garments, told a tale of misery, from which they were seeking relief in the offices of penance they were now undergoing. The women were not old, but they looked the pictures of wretchedness. Each was muttering prayers, and counting a string of old, worn beads, which hung about the neck, with the most apparent fervour and sincerity. They did not seem to notice us as we entered and passed them. After looking at a few pictures and statues about the church, we returned, to go out. The women broke short off, and came to us, holding out their thin hands. One said, "Plase, sir, give me a ha-penny, an' may the Lord bliss ye, and give ye lang life". The other said, "Give me a ha-penny, an' I'll pray that the great God'll bliss ye, yer honors, an' kape yer shouls from purgatory, an' carry ye safe, an' kape ye, an' ye'll give me a ha-penny". They went from one to the other, bartering their prayers for our ha-pennies, and promising to intercede with the blessed Virgin in our behalf. The old man did not rise from his

knees, but reached out his old hat with one hand, while he held the beads in the other. A more perfect figure of patient destitution I never saw ...

Coming down the main street, we were invited into the large, elegant, and well furnished reading-room. Files of English, Irish, Continental, and American papers were arranged about the spacious apartment, and forty or fifty well dressed, and intelligent looking men were busy reading them, or discussing the movements of the government, and the conduct of the agitators. We read and listened, and found most of the papers and the talkers to be truly loyal. I busied myself also - for a time, in copying from a Limerick paper, the number and character of the ejections which had taken place in that neighbourhood, within a short time previous. From one estate seventy-two families, of five hundred and twenty-one persons, had been turned houseless and friendless upon the world; from another, twenty-one families, one hundred and nine persons; from another, thirty-three families, and one hundred and eighty-two; and so on, till I counted up from two papers, over seventeen hundred persons who had been forcibly ejected from their homes, and from all means of subsistence.

I noticed particularly the merciful conduct of one landlord - a clergyman, which was given as a specimen of true philanthropy and Christian benevolence, in contrast with the more barbarous cruelty of other cases described. Wishing to get rid of his tenants, instead of turning them out penniless, to shirk by beggary or plunder, as so many others had been, he gave to each family, for their improvement, half enough to pay their passage to America, in case they actually went. This case was lauded to the skies, and offered as an example for others to imitate.

There are often cases of the grossest cruelty and injustice, in the ejection of tenants, who do not please the landlord, middleman, or the agents, or who stand in the way of the introduction of some English or Scotch tenants, who understand better the arts of agriculture, or are more supple to further the ambitious projects of their noble master! Sometimes a sporting landlord, long an absentee, wants to lay out a hunting park, and therefore drives off fifty or a hundred families, from their homes, turns four or five hundred poor helpless creatures, empty-handed, upon the cold charities of the world, who must beg, steal, or starve, for there is no chance for them to work, and they have no means with which to obtain a lease, nor to get "till Amiriky" ...

I am overwhelmed! Oh England, thou boasted land of freedom and justice, of philosophy and nobleness, of religion and philanthropy, - English laws, the models of Christian jurisprudence - British honour and magnanimity - spirit of Blackstone and Wilberforce - speeches of Peel and Russell - glory of Wellington, himself an Irishman - pride and extravagance of Victoria! What meaneth these roofless huts, these starved

stomachs, cadaverous faces, naked limbs, and scattered corpses! ... Who ever heard of the starvation of slaves, whether crops fail or not? But who has not heard of the famished thousands of Ireland, whose carcasses are strewn over the lands of "noble lords, and right honourable barons", who live in magnificence and luxury in London, and help make laws for the empire, and still weep crocodile tears over the wrongs of American slavery? ...

I also read in one paper a very precise account, which ran thus: "Her majesty, with his royal highness, and the Prince of Wales took an airing in Hyde Park this morning. Her majesty was clad in", - too much fustian for me to copy. In another part of the same paper was a glowing account of a drawing-room at St. James', with a full and particular account of the dresses of the noble ladies in attendance, the wives of several Irish lords among them. The dress of one of these ladies would have purchased food enough to have saved the lives of fifty starving persons, who have been ejected from their rights for the non-payment of rent. But no, that is nothing! What are the lives of *fifty* poor, ignorant Irish Catholics to a diamond pin or a satin dress? ...

After some hours spent in writing, we took a walk across the Wellesley bridge, a magnificent structure, which we inspected closely and with admiration. We have few such specimens of solid, and thorough architecture in the bridges of our country. It consists of five large elliptic arches extending from the solid stone quay across the Shannon. An elegant stone balustrade forms the parapet on either side, and the roadway is level and wide. The end on the city side is formed of a swing for the admission of vessels through the lock into the basin above ...

Wherever we went, we were beset by beggars, who stuck to us like the gallinippers. We could not shake them off. To give to one was to call about us twenty others more destitute and clamorous. The evening is the time when they issue out from their dens, and loiter about the streets, sit at the corners, about the doors of the hotels and places of resort, everywhere, stretching out their withered hands, and turning up their sunken eyes, imploringly, with a "The Lord bliss yer honor, an' ye'll give a poor crayture a ha-penny, till buy soome bread for the childers".

This is the time, too, when a still more abandoned crew - the morally depraved - crawl out of their lurking places, and perambulate the streets, in search of their prey. Hosts of these miserable, unfortunate beings patrol the streets, accosting one at every turn, but in a manner so abashed and hesitating as to prove that all sense of virtue and decency is not yet destroyed. We were glad to make a retreat at an early hour to the quiet rooms of our hotel, and find, in writing, reflection, and sleep, a relief from the miseries we had witnessed.

(Ireland, as I saw it, by William S. Balch, New York, 1850).