

# ESSAY ON THE STATE OF IRELAND IN 1720

It is a favourite cant, under which many conceal their idleness, and many their corruption, to cry that there is, in the genius of the people of this country, and particularly among the lower ranks, a spirit of pride, laziness, and dishonesty, which stifles all tendency to improvement, and will for ever keep us a subordinate nation of hewers of wood, and of drawers of water. It may be worth while a little to consider this opinion, because, if it be well founded, to know it so, may save me, and other well wishers to Ireland, the hopeless labour of endeavouring to excite a nation of idle thieves to honesty and industry; and if it be not, it is an error, the removal of which will not only wipe away an old stigma, but, in a great degree, facilitate the way to future improvement. If we can find any cause, different from an inherent depravity in the people, and abundantly sufficient to account for the backwardness of this country, compared with England, I hope no man will volunteer national disgrace so far as to prefer that hypothesis which, by degrading his country, degrades himself.

Idleness is a ready accusation in the mouth of him whose corruption denies to the poor the means of labour: "Ye are idle," said Pharoah to the Israelites, when he demanded bricks of them, and withheld the straw.

In enquiring into the subject of this essay, I shall take a short view of the state of this country at the time of her greatest abasement; I mean about the time when she was supposed to be fettered for ever by the famous act of the 6<sup>th</sup> of George I, and I shall draw my facts from the most indisputable authority, that of Swift. Yet, surely, misrule and ignorance and oppression, in the Government, are means sufficient to plunge and to keep any

nation in ignorance and poverty, without blaspheming Providence by imputing innate and immovable depravity to millions of God's creatures. It is, at least, a hypothesis more honourable to human nature; let us try if it be not more consonant to the reality of things. Let us see the state of Ireland in different periods, and let us refer those periods to the maxims and practice of her then Government.

To begin with the first grand criterion of the prosperity of a nation. In 1724, the population of Ireland was 1,500,000, and in 1672, 1,100,000, so that in fifty two-years it was increased but one-third, after a civil war. The rental of the whole kingdom was computed at £2,000,000 annually, of which, by absentees, about £700,000, went to England. The revenue was £400,000 per annum; the current cash was £500,000, which, in 1727, was reduced to less than £200,000; and the balance of trade with England, the only nation to which we could trade, was in our disfavour about £1,000,000 annually. Such were the resources of Ireland in 1724.

Commerce we had none, or what was worse than none, an exportation of raw minerals for half their value; an importation of the same materials wrought up at an immense profit to the English manufacturer; the indispensable necessaries of life bartered for luxuries for our men, and fopperies for our women; not only the wine, and coffee, and silk, and cotton, but the very corn we consumed was imported from England.

Our benches were filled with English lawyers; our Bishopries with English divines; our custom-house with English commissioners; all offices of stated filled, three deep, with Englishmen in possession. Englishmen in reversion, and Englishmen in expectancy. The majority of these not only aliens, but absentees, and not only absentees, but busily and actively employed against that country on whose vitals, and in whose

blood they were rioting in ease and luxury. Every proposal, for the advantage of Ireland, was held a direct attack on the interests of England. Swift's pamphlet, on the expediency of wearing our own manufactures, exposed the printer to a prosecution, in which the jury was sent back by the Chief Justice nine times, till they were brow-beaten, and bullied, and wearied into a special verdict, leaving the printer to the mercy of the judge.

The famous project of Wood is known to every one; it is unnecessary to go into the objections against it; but it is curious to see the mode in which that ruinous plan was endeavoured to be forced down our throats. Immediately on its promulgation, the two Houses of Parliament, the Privy Council, the merchants, the traders, the manufacturers, the grand juries of the whole kingdom, by votes, resolutions, and addresses testified their dread and abhorrence of the plan. What was the conduct of the English Minister? He calls a committee of the *English* council together; he examines Mr. Wood on one side, and two or three prepared, obscure, and interested witnesses on the other, he non-suits the whole Irish nation; thus committed with Mr Wm. Wood, he puts forth a proclamation, commanding all persons to receive his half-pence in payment, and calls the votes of the House of Lords and Commons, and the resolutions of the Privy Council of Ireland, a clamour. But Swift had by this time raised a spirit, not to be laid by the anathema of the British minister; the project was riven as far as the verge of civil war; there it was stopped, and this was the first signal triumph of the virtue of the people in Ireland.

In one of his inimitable letters on the subject of Wood's half-pence, Swift, with a daring and a generous indignation, worthy of a better age and country, had touched on the imaginary dependence of Ireland on England. The bare mention of a doubt on the subject, had an instantaneous effect on the nerves of the

English Government here. A proclamation was issued, offering £300 for the author; the printer was thrown into jail, the Grand Jury were tampered with to present the letter, and, on their refusing to do so, were dissolved in a rage by the Chief Justice, a step without a precedent, save one, which happened in the times of James II and was followed by an immediate censure of the House of Commons of England. Yet all that Swift had said, was that,

“...under God, he could be content to depend only on the King, his Sovereign, and the laws of his own country; that the Parliament of England had sometimes enacted laws, binding Ireland, but that obedience to them was but the result of necessity, inasmuch as eleven men well armed, well certainly subdue one man in his shirt, be his cause ever so righteous, and that, by the laws of God, of nature, and of nations, Irishmen were, and ought to be, as free as their brethren in England.”

We, who live at this day, see nothing like sedition, privy conspiracy, or rebellion. In all this; and we may bless God for it; but in 1724, the case was very different. The printer was prosecuted and died in jail; Swift escaped, because it was impossible to bring it home to him, and so little were the minds of men prepared for such opinions, that, in a paper addressed to the Grand Jury, who were to sit on the bills of indictment, Swift is obliged to take shelter under past services, and admit that the words which were taken up by Government, as offensive, were the result of inadvertency and unwariness.

The famous act of the 6<sup>th</sup> of George I, Swift, with all his intrepidity, does no more than obscurely hint at; a crying testimony to the miserable depression of spirit in this country, when the last rivet, driven into her fetters, and clenched, as England hoped, forever, could not excite more than an indistinct and half-suppressed murmur.

From this brief sketch, it appears, that no prospect could be more hopeless than the star of liberty should again arise in Ireland. If, notwithstanding the impenetrable cloud in which she seemed buried for ever, she has yet broke forth with renovated splendour, and again kindled the spirit of the people, surely it is a grand *fact*, overbearing, at once, the efforts of thousands of corrupt cavaliers, who cry out that this is not a nation capable of political virtue or steady exertion.