

## THE TRUTH ABOUT THE IRISH FAMINE

Dr James Knight, vice-president of the Royal Philosophical Society, should get *Progress and Poverty*. For him, at any rate, the chapters on the Malthusian theory are not out of date. He was speaking about Ireland (*Glasgow Herald*, 6th November) and of the time when its peak population was 8,200,000; but, he said, excessive rainfall caused such a complete failure of the potato crops that 200,000 to 300,000 people died of starvation. The British Government provided work for over 700,000 at one period and at another food for as many as 3,000,000; but the economic pressure was so great that emigration was the only outlet."

Died of starvation! What kind of a philosophic society is it that allows such remarks to pass unchallenged and the facts to be ignored? Ireland was one of the stock arguments for the Malthusian view that population outran subsistence, till Henry George wrote these words:

"At the period of her greatest population (1840-45) Ireland contained something over eight millions of people. But a very large proportion of them managed merely to exist—lodging in miserable cabins, clothed with miserable rags, and with but potatoes for their staple food. When the potato blight came, they died by thousands. But was it the inability of the soil to support so large a population that compelled so many to live in this miserable way, and exposed them to starvation on the failure of a single root crop? On the contrary, it was the same remorseless rapacity that robbed the Indian ryot of the fruits of his toil and left him to starve where nature offered plenty. A merciless banditti of tax-gatherers did not march through the land plundering and torturing, but the labourer was just as effectually stripped by as merciless a horde of landlords, among whom the soil had been divided as their absolute possession, regardless of any rights of those who lived upon it.

"Cultivation was for the most part carried on by tenants at will, who, even if the rack-rents which they were forced to pay had permitted them, did not dare to make improvements which would have been but the signal for an increase of rent. Labour was thus applied in the most inefficient and wasteful manner, and labour was dissipated in aimless idleness that, with any security for its fruits, would have been applied unremittingly. But even under these conditions, it is a matter of fact that Ireland did more than support eight millions. For when her population was at its highest, Ireland was a food-exporting country. Even during the famine, grain and meat and butter and cheese were carted for exportation along roads lined with the starving and past trenches into which the dead were piled. For these exports of food, or at least for a great part of them,

there was no return. So far as the people of Ireland were concerned, the food thus exported might as well have been burned up or thrown into the sea, or never produced. It went not as an exchange, but as a tribute—to pay the rent of absentee landlords; a levy wrung from producers by those who in no wise contributed to production."

Who is right? Dr Knight or Henry George? if it will excuse Dr Knight to say that he was only speaking on the narrow ground of the "Climatic Factor in History," there is no reason why he should not be seized of the importance of the economic factor.

### FINTAN LALOR'S TESTIMONY

In a recent issue we reviewed Fogarty's book on James Fintan Lalor, the famous Irish reformer. This is what he says about the potato blight and the famine, speaking of the Irish cultivator:

"Last year this man did according to custom. He planted potatoes for his own support, he sowed corn for his landlord's rent. The potato perished: the landlord took the crop. The tenant-cultivator paid his rents—was forced to pay them—sold his grain crop to pay them, and had to pray to man as well as to God for his daily bread . . . I say and assert that the land-owners took entire possession of last year's harvest (written 1847)—of the whole effective sum and substance of that harvest. The food for this year's subsistence, the seed for next year's crop—the landlord took it all. He stood to his right, and got his rent—and hunger was in five hundred thousand houses, pinching dearth in all, deadly famine in many. Famine, more or less, was in five hundred thousand families; famine, with all its diseases and decay; famine, with all its fears and horrors; famine, with all its deadly pains, and more dreadful debility. All pined and wasted, sickened and drooped; numbers died—the strong man, the fair maiden, the little infant—the landlord got his rent."