

It has taken nearly half a century for me to see the light — I believe it takes some people even longer — but at last the dead wood of inaction, and the tangled undergrowth of confused thinking, have been cut away for ever. The path is now clear, and I hope I shall be granted many more years in which to play my humble part in this noble enterprise. Nor shall I be dismayed by

the odds. The final verse of the well-known hymn by Arthur Hugh Clough shall be my constant inspiration :
 "If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars ;
 It may be, in yon smoke concealed,
 Your comrades chase, e'en now the fliers
 And, but for you, possess the field."
 That is sound enough logic for me.

BOOK REVIEW

The Needless Tragedy Of Ireland

By R. SMITH

THE GREAT HUNGER by Mrs. Cecil Woodham-Smith
 (Hamish Hamilton, 30s.)

IN AUGUST, 1846, the potato fields of Ireland turned black almost overnight — attacked by an unknown fungus. Three days later there was "one wide waste of putrefying vegetation." The famine that followed was the most terrible in Irish history; it was estimated that out of a population of eight or nine million, one and a half million people perished of starvation and disease. The harrowing story of the famine years from 1845 to 1849 and the story of the failure of the British Government to effectively relieve the situation are vividly told by Mrs. Cecil Woodham-Smith in *The Great Hunger*.

Many years before this period, the population of Ireland had begun to increase at a rate unknown in Europe. Paid employment hardly existed, and the population gained their existence from the cultivation of their small holdings which produced barely enough to pay the rent. The Irish people did not regard wheat, oats and barley as food — they were grown to pay the rent which was of necessity the first priority. Land was precious; holdings were divided until six or seven persons were depending on a mere fragment. In normal times it was estimated that this system led to hunger for two and a half million people for most of the year, although according to Irish revolutionary John Mitchell, "during all the famine years Ireland was actually producing sufficient food, wool and flax, to feed and clothe not nine but eighteen millions of people."

In drawing up plans to relieve the victims of the famine, the British Government determined against direct interference and decided that food was to be brought in by private trade. In order to provide the Irish people for the first time with paid employment, so that they might be able to buy the imported food (maize), public works were to be started on a large scale all over the country.

The scheme was a failure. Expected imports of maize did not arrive, owing to bad harvests elsewhere, and what little was imported was sold at scarcity prices. The staff of the Dublin Board of Works was totally inadequate to deal with the deluge of proposals for public works schemes which came in from all over the country, while those that

were started could employ but a small proportion of the destitute. Also, the fact that liability for payment for these schemes fell upon the ratepayers, who were in no position to pay, contributed to the eventual collapse of the scheme.

In October, 1846, starvation began in earnest. Many children died, and the hungry masses became uncontrollable. At this point, a winter of abnormal severity set in. The public works schemes fell into hopeless confusion, for, since the test for employment was destitution, starving women, children and old people had been taken on, but these were so weakened by hunger that many could not hold a spade. All over Ireland people were dying, many in the streets. Although the Government decided to stop the public works schemes and to treat the victims of the famine as paupers, many local authorities refused to close their public works.

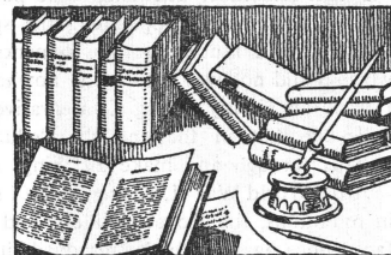
Owing to bad conditions elsewhere in Europe, the price of seed had risen, and everywhere labourers' patches lay uncultivated. The Government decided against distributing seed as "this would have interfered with private enterprise."

Conditions had never been so fatally favourable to the rapid spread of disease, and during the winter of 1846-47 fever on a gigantic scale began to ravage the country. Terrified and desperate, the people began to fly from the country, making their way to America and to Britain. Fever went with them.

Although Irish emigrants were allowed to settle in Canada, they were not welcomed in the United States, being regarded as "unprofitable," although many managed to cross the border; but thousands died on the voyage and thousands more soon after arrival.

In Ireland throughout the spring and summer of 1847 the state of the people became desperate. Rates could not be collected in distressed districts, and large scale evictions began. After the assassination of a number of landlords it was thought that a conspiracy was afoot to drive them from the country, but the murders were in fact individual acts of vengeance by tenants who had been evicted.

Although there was a good potato harvest in 1847, an



insufficient quantity had been sown, and in 1848 the people sold everything they possessed in order to secure seed potatoes. It was a last desperate venture, but the potato failed again as it did in 1846.

A sorry tale indeed, and one which Mrs. Woodham-Smith has reported with great understanding and sympathy. The fundamental cause of this Irish disaster is made devastatingly clear — it was the system of land tenure which had made the peasants all but slaves.

In *Progress and Poverty*, Henry George stated that although Ireland furnished the great stock example of over-population (constantly referred to as a demonstration of the Malthusian theory), Ireland had never yet had a population that the natural powers of the country, in the then existing state of the productive arts, could not have maintained in ample comfort.

It was not the infertility of the soil that compelled the Irish to live in that miserable way but the system whereby the land was regarded as "owned" by a few landlords who claimed absolute possession, regardless of the needs and rights of those who worked upon it.

Cultivation was for the most part carried on by tenants at will, and they did not dare to make improvements, for these would have been the signal for an increase of rent. Thus labour was applied in the most inefficient and wasteful manner. (The origin of the "lazy" Irishman?)

Henry George also pointed out that no matter how sparse its population, no matter what its natural resources, pauperism and starvation would have been the necessary consequences of a system of land tenure in any country where the producers of wealth were compelled to work under conditions which deprived them of hope, of self-respect, of energy, of thrift; where absentee landlords drained away without return at least a fourth of the net produce of the soil; and where, besides itself, a starving industry had to support resident landlords, with their horses and hounds, agents, jobbers, middlemen, and bailiffs, and an army of policemen and soldiers.

The story of Ireland yesterday is the story of many other countries today. And the problem of hunger will not be solved by welfare stateism no matter how highly organised. Nor will it be solved by political or economic aid. For this kind of charity goes down a bottomless pit. Only in a thorough-going land reform will a lasting solution be found.

BOOKS RECEIVED

Fieldhouse's Income Tax Simplified by H. E. D. Ayling, A.A.C.C.A. New Edition (Arthur Fieldhouse Ltd., 4s. 6d.).

Housing (Britain in the Sixties) by Stanley Alderson, (Penguin Special, 3s. 6d.)

Marx on Economics. Edited by Robert Freedman. (Pelican, 4s. 6d.)

Backbench Opinion in the House of Commons by S. E. Finer, H. B. Berrington, D. J. Bartholomew. (Pergamon Press, 60s.)

Planning

Permission

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He looked at me without surprise or pleasure
But with a bored, habitual compassion.
"They sent me here," I said. "I want to build."
"Naturally," he said. "We'll see what we can do."
Along the hopeless counter twenty others
Were seeing what they could do.

"You'll need these forms."

*Application for permission for an erection
For occupation as residential accommodation
And/or private domestic habitation.*

"In triplicate of course. Return when filled
To the assistant sub-divisional officer."
I took the papers. Tears of gratitude
Misted my sight; but he was gone already
Into the wastes beneath his sandy hair.

A year later I took the papers back.
Alone in his little room
The assistant sub-divisional officer sent for me.
He looked at me without surprise or pleasure
But with compassionate unrecognition.
"Permission for an erection. Quite so. We'll write."
"Oh thank you, sir," I started. "Do you think . . . ?"
But under the sandy hair the eyes were blank.
After eleven months the answer came.
"Rejection of permission for an erection.
Any appeal to be directed within three years
To the sub-divisional officer for attention."

Two years and more went by before I gained
The sub-divisional officer's section. With relief
I saw that he at least had had his due reward.
Between the flat ears under the greying hair
No sign of recognition stirred.

"Ah yes.
Objection to rejection of application for erection."
With the old bored compassion in his voice,
"We'll do," he promised, "what we can to help."
"Oh sir," I sobbed. He interrupted me.
"I'll pass on your objection to the divisional officer
It may take time."

Re-charged with hope I went.

I died; and here I falter by the gate
Drained of desire and too ashamed to face
The sorrowing figure on the throne of grace.

JAMES REEVES.