

# OBSERVATIONS

ON THE ECONOMIC

## EFFECTS OF ABSENTEEISM

UPON

### IRELAND;

A PAPER READ BEFORE

THE DUBLIN STATISTICAL SOCIETY,

ON THE 18<sup>TH</sup> OF MARCH, 1850.

BY A. J. MALEY, ESQ.

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DUBLIN:

HODGES AND SMITH, GRAFTON-STREET,  
BOOKSELLERS TO THE UNIVERSITY.

1850.

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*Observations upon the Economic Effects of Absenteeism on Ireland.*  
By A. J. Maley, Esq.

THERE are few questions generated by the peculiar condition of Ireland more interesting to its people, than that upon which I am about to offer a few observations; for if the opinion which I, in common with many others, hold, that the nonresidence in Ireland of those who, as landlords or creditors, receive the amount of rents payable out of lands in it, is injurious to this country, be not well founded, there is a prevalence of error amongst us that cannot but operate injuriously upon the Irish community, by creating false notions as to what many of us regard as one of the principal causes of our poverty, and one of the greatest impediments to the improvement of our condition; and if, on the other hand, the doctrine we hold be sound, it is not less important that the error of those who entertain a contrary opinion should be corrected. For although it may not be practicable to remedy the evils resulting from absenteeism, by compelling Irish proprietors to live in Ireland, the pernicious influence of their absence upon the prosperity of the country, in an economic, as well as in a social, point of view, ought to be mitigated by those who have it in their power to do so; because it is an evil which we are obliged to suffer to a great extent for the benefit of our British fellow-subjects, and as the result of our political relations with them, and therefore we ought to be compensated for its endurance by the enjoyment of some countervailing good.

The reasoning by which I have arrived at the opinion I have formed, respecting the pernicious influence of absenteeism upon the commercial and trading interests of Ireland, appears to me to be so conclusive, that I would entertain no doubt whatsoever as to the soundness of my own judgment, (indeed I should scarcely think the question I have stated deserving of argument) if I were not aware that many who have as anxiously investigated the subject as I have, and brought to its consideration advantages which I do not possess, have arrived at a contrary conclusion; and as I have no regard for any opinion I entertain, except that which a belief in its truth inspires, I state the grounds of that which I have formed on the present question, rather in the hope of having the fallacies of my reasoning detected, (if it be fallacious,) than in the expectation of changing the opinions of those whose judgment upon this interesting question is not coincident with mine.

In order to prove the truth of my opinion, I will suppose a farmer to hold, rent free, a given quantity of land in Ireland, which he dedicates to the cultivation of agricultural produce, and that, by

expending upon it a sum of £500 in a given year, he raises agricultural produce, for which he obtains, in a market out of Ireland, £1000 over and above the charges incident to its conveyance from his farm to the place of sale, so that the difference between the amount of his outlay for the purposes of cultivation, and his return, is £500, and the wealth of the community of which he is a member is augmented that extent. Now, for the £1000 which is the amount of the proceeds of his sale, he may bring back to Ireland gold or silver coin, British or foreign produce, or British or foreign manufacture. But let the value he brings to Ireland, in return for what he carried out of it, assume what shape it may, the wealth of the country is increased by the amount of the farmer's profits. The value, however, which he brings into Ireland will be useless to him, unless he parts with a portion of it at least, in order to procure for himself and the members of his family those articles of consumption which they require. I will, however, suppose that in exchange for the £1000 worth of produce which he brings to market, he obtains £500 in gold coin, and £500 worth of British manufacture. Now, as he ought not to spend his capital, he ought not to part with the gold except to reinvest it in the cultivation of his farm, but he may, with perfect propriety, give the British manufacture directly, or money obtained for it through the medium of commercial traffic, in exchange for the labour of his domestic servants, in payment of his tradesmen and merchants' bills, and, perhaps, some of it to relieve the wants of the indigent, or to remunerate the artists or literary men who gratify his taste or enlighten his mind. Now I assume that all of those persons, amongst whom he so distributes his profits, are members of the Irish community, and that they retain for themselves a portion of the value which the farmer gives them for whatever equivalent he receives from any of them; the grocer, for example, has his profit on the tea and sugar he supplies to the farmer and his family, and to the tailor, and such other tradesmen as receive from the farmer portions of the £500 profit, and spend it, or a part of it, with the grocer. Part of the profits thus resulting to the grocer he dedicates to the maintenance of his family, and a portion of it (if he be a prudent man) goes to augment his capital; and if his dealings be extensive, and he be prudent, he acquires in time a provision for himself and his family beyond the current profits of his trade; and if all the other tradesmen who obtain a portion of the farmer's profit act in the same way, their conduct is productive of a similar result; and the property thus acquired by them forms, in their hands, or in the hands of their children, or other persons on whom they may bestow it, capital which they may invest and augment, and thereby increase the wealth and comfort of the community to which they are members; and thus the Irish community is benefited not merely to the extent of the profit which the farmer acquires, but ultimately to an extent which it is not difficult to conceive, but very difficult to trace through the labyrinths of traffic.

I will now suppose that the farmer, instead of holding rent free

the land which produces the £1000 worth of produce, pays for it a rent of £200 a-year; he must, therefore, give to his landlord £200 in money, produced by the sale of two-fifths of the profits which he has realized over and above his £500 capital, or he must give him two-fifths of the goods which he brings from England as the representative of that profit. But if the landlord be resident in Ireland, he must apply his £200 just as the farmer would have done, if the latter did not pay any rent for his farm; and the result is the same so far as the Irish community is concerned. I will now, however, suppose that, instead of paying the £200 rent to a landlord who is resident in Ireland, the farmer is obliged to pay it to a landlord resident in England; so that, instead of bringing to Ireland the £1000 which I have assumed to be the price he receives for his agricultural produce in cash or goods, if his sale be effected in England, he must leave £200 of it there, either in money or in goods, equivalent in value to that sum; and then the landlord to whom he thus gives the £200 exchanges it with English servants, artisans, tradesmen, and others, instead of doing so with members of those classes resident in Ireland, and thus gives to the members of the English, or perhaps some foreign community, to the extent of his dealing with them, that employment and consequent profit which he would, if he were resident in Ireland, give to the members of the Irish community. The extent to which this loss to the people of Ireland amounts cannot of course be computed, unless we could ascertain the amount of the remittances made in value or money for the purpose of satisfying the demands of landlords or other persons entitled to receive the amount of rent-charges, or interest upon incumbrances payable out of lands in Ireland, but who are not resident in it. I have never been able to form a satisfactory estimate of the aggregate amount of these payments; but from the observations and enquiries which I have made in the course of my professional pursuits, (and I have been rather inquisitive upon the subject) I am strongly inclined to believe that the amount of value sent out of Ireland, to satisfy the demands of those who are entitled to receive rents, rent-charges, and interest on incumbrances payable out of lands in Ireland, greatly exceeded, for some years prior to 1847, £4,000,000 a-year.\* But supposing my reasoning to be correct, and that the annual amount of such remittances be only one-half the sum I have stated, is it surprising that, without any profit than that which we derive from agricultural produce, and a single article of manufacture, Ireland should continue in an impoverished condition?

But let it not be supposed that I regard the full amount of the value of Irish produce sent out of Ireland, to meet the demands of landlords and creditors, as the measure of our loss. Far from it; for

\* Mr. Pitt admitted that, previously to the Union, the sums remitted to non-resident landlords amounted to at least £1,000,000 annually.

if the persons entitled to receive it were resident in Ireland, a large portion of it should be exported, in order to procure for their use the articles of foreign produce or manufacture which they consume. But although such is not the measure of our loss, our actual loss is quite sufficient to inflict a severe injury on a community the sources of whose wealth are so limited as ours; I mean, of course, those sources which are made available. And although some seem to regard this loss as too trifling to influence our prosperity in an economic point of view, the exercise of a little skill in political arithmetic would convince any man, that the loss is such as to influence to a very serious extent our commercial prosperity.

I am aware that many persons conceive that they answer the arguments which I have used to sustain my opinion, by asking whether the owner of rents payable out of lands in the county of Galway, but who is resident in Dublin, is not as much an absentee as if he were resident in London. But this, I conceive, is no answer to the argument; for it rather admits than denies the truth of the opinion which it is brought forward to impugn, and merely raises an antagonist interest between Galway and Dublin, in place of one between Ireland as the place of production, and England or any other country which may happen to be the place of consumption, by being the residence of the absentee. But although I admit that the inhabitants of the county of Galway would be benefited by the Galway landlord remaining in his own county, I conceive that the Irish community at large is benefited by the Galway landlord making choice of Dublin rather than London or Paris, as his place of residence; and the question which I am discussing is not whether each county in Ireland is injured by the nonresidence in it, of its landlords or other persons entitled to receive a portion of the rents payable by the occupying tenants of the lands within it, but whether the Irish community is injured by the absence from it of persons who derive their means of support, in the whole or in part, from the produce of Irish lands. I am aware that the people of England sustain a similar loss by the residence upon the continent of Europe of a large class of proprietors of English property; but the people of England derive but little wealth, comparatively speaking, from her agricultural produce, and they are compensated to a certain extent at least by the residence in England of Irish proprietors; and, moreover, the vast amount of wealth produced in England by means of her manufactures, and acquired by her merchants through the medium of foreign commerce, mitigates to a great extent the evils which result to her from absenteeism. But as Ireland has not these counterpoises, she feels to the fullest possible extent, and in every possible form, the evil effects of a non-resident proprietary; and if the owners of English factories, iron works, and mines, were resident out of England, to the same extent that Irish landlords and owners of Irish incumbrances are

resident out of Ireland, the condition of the former country would be very different from what it is.

I have recently heard it said, by a gentleman, a member of our society, for whose opinions I entertain a very high respect, that the only effect which the restoration to Ireland of her absent proprietors would have, in an economic point of view, would be that Dublin or any other city in Ireland which might happen to be made the residence of these proprietors, would be made a little larger than it is, and that the people of Ireland who cannot obtain employment here will seek it elsewhere. These, however, appear to me to be very erroneous notions; for I am strongly inclined to believe that if the now absent Irish proprietors came to reside amongst us, there is not any one, two, or three counties, cities, or towns in Ireland that would enjoy a monopoly of advantage. It is a well known fact that when the English proprietors were driven home from the continent of Europe, by the political convulsions which occurred there in the year 1848, they were scattered all over England and Wales; and many found it almost impossible to procure upon reasonable terms houses or lodgings in the towns in England where they were desirous of fixing their residence, and in which houses could have been previously procured at very low rents; I allude particularly to Bath, Clifton, Cheltenham, Brighton, Ramsgate, and Dover; and certainly it would be rather difficult to persuade the persons who let their houses to the returned members of the British community, or the tradespeople who supplied them with food and clothing after their return, and during their residence in England, that the return of those persons to England did not confer any benefit upon them, or that they would sustain no loss if their tenants or customers were to go back again to the continent. Nor do I think that the tradesmen would very readily adopt the opinions of a political economist, who should endeavour to persuade them that all they had to do, in order to repair their loss, was to follow their customers to the continent, as they would there, according to the laws of political economy, be sure to find that profit which the absence from England of their fellow-countrymen denied them at home. And I may here observe, that the legislative enactments of the imperial parliament which are commonly called the law of settlement, deny to the native of Ireland, who depends upon his labour for his daily bread, a residence in the same land with the Irish landlord who goes there to spend the profits of the Irish soil, except so long as he can procure food in exchange for his labour. But the moment the English employer ceases to require the Irishman's labour, the English community, that enjoyed the benefit of that labour so long as it was profitable, insists on the labourer leaving England, but has no law whatsoever to extrude the man who has money to spend. Indeed it appears to me to be rather a whimsical mode of reconciling a community to the loss of a considerable portion of its wealth, to suggest a remedy,

which makes a separation from that community a condition precedent to the enjoyment of prosperity by a large portion of its members; nor is it easy to see how far short of a total dissolution of the community itself, the operation of this principle is to stop.

I am, however, aware that there are many persons who endeavour to get rid of the question which is the subject of these observations, by alleging that Great Britain and Ireland form but one community, and, therefore, that the question I am discussing is an immaterial one, or does not, strictly speaking, arise any more between the people of Ireland and Great Britain, than it does between the people of Yorkshire and Middlesex. But this appears to me to be a mere subterfuge, for it is a matter of indifference to the Irish community whether the absentees be resident in England or in any other foreign country; because the evil resulting to her is the same, whether a large portion of the profits arising from the application of Irish capital, labour, and skill to the cultivation of the Irish soil, be spent in England, France, or any other country. Let the absentee live where he may, she loses, to the extent of his dealing with her produce, the benefit of the process whereby that which is realized as profit to-day becomes capital to-morrow; by which, in fact, industry is stimulated, and toil rewarded. It is difficult for a merely agricultural country to become wealthy under any circumstances, but it is almost impossible for it to be otherwise than poor, if it receives no return whatsoever for a considerable portion of its produce; and to this cause I will continue to attribute a vast deal of its poverty and consequent misery, until I shall have better reasons for holding a contrary opinion than any I have as yet heard.