

**THE POOR-LAW BILL FOR IRELAND EXAMINED,
ITS PROVISIONS AND THE REPORT OF MR.
NICHOLLS CONTRASTED WITH THE FACTS
PROVED BY THE POOR INQUIRY
COMMISSION, IN A LETTER TO LORD
VISCOUNT MORPETH, M. P., HIS MAJESTY'S
PRINCIPAL SECRETARY OF STATE FOR IRELAND**

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The poor-law bill for Ireland examined, its provisions and the report of Mr. Nicholls contrasted with the facts proved by the poor inquiry commission, in a letter to Lord Viscount Morpeth, M. P., his Majesty's principal secretary of state for Ireland by George Nicholls & Isaac Butt

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GEORGE NICHOLLS & ISAAC BUTT

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IN

A L E T T E R

TO

LORD VISCOUNT MORPETH, M. P.

HIS MAJESTY'S PRINCIPAL SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR IRELAND.

BY

ISAAC BUTT, LL.B. M.R.I.A.

PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL ECONOMY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN.

"If a brother or sister be naked and destitute of daily food, and one of
you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwith-
standing ye give them not those things which are needful to the body;
what doth it profit?"

LONDON:
B. FELLOWES, LUDGATE STREET;
AND W. CURRY, JUN. AND CO. DUBLIN.

1837.

1171.



LONDON:
R. CLAY, PRINTER, BREAD-STREET-HILL.

A LETTER,

&c. &c.

MY LORD,

You have introduced into Parliament a measure professing to be for "the more effectual Relief of the Destitute Poor in Ireland." This is a measure in which every one who has a regard to the welfare of that country must feel deeply interested. I have no better excuse than this interest to offer for the liberty I take in addressing your Lordship on the subject of the provisions of your proposed bill.

It may, perhaps, add freedom to the observations which I may feel it my duty to offer to your notice, if I state in the outset that I cannot regard this bill as in any sense owing its origin to your Lordship. The merit or demerit of the measure belongs to Mr. Nicholls, except as far as your Lordship may be involved in having permitted yourself to be the medium of its introduction; but it is evident that the bill is drawn up without any deviation, on the

plan suggested by Mr. Nicholls, in the report presented by him to Lord John Russell. That report is literally and completely the draught of the bill; and the transcript is not only a faithful, but a servile copy of the original. It is not merely that the views and principles of that report are carried out in the enactment which is based upon it, but even in minute details its suggestions are implicitly obeyed.

The measure, my Lord, is Mr. Nicholls's; for, of course, I must not suppose that this gentleman was sent out to frame from personal inspection a report in accordance with any model previously settled on and deposited in the Cabinet. I must believe that all his commission appears in the letter of Lord John Russell, prefixed to his printed report. To suppose the report not to be altogether his own, would be an insult to that gentleman and his employers. If the report be his own, unquestionably so is the bill which is its copy.

A knowledge of the manner of the preparation of the bill may be useful, as a key to understanding, or at least explaining the character of its provisions. Any one acquainted with Ireland must feel, upon perusing this bill, that it has not grown naturally out of a knowledge of the wants and circumstances of the country, but has been framed to meet a particular exigency in legislation. The truth is, that it has been brought in to meet the desire on the part of the public, that some remedial measure should be applied to the destitution which is known to exist in Ireland. The necessity of meeting this desire

determined the Cabinet to prepare *some* Poor-law. On this determination, Mr. Nicholls was sent over to report whether it would be possible to establish the workhouse system in Ireland; and he has reported, as he might have done without going to Ireland at all, that it is possible; and he has accordingly prepared a plan for dotting the country with workhouses, and for regulating and managing them. But he has not touched—indeed he could not touch—upon the vital question, whether the establishment of workhouses would be a remedy for the state of things, which leaves a large proportion of our fellow-beings without sufficient food; and makes the condition of the poor of Ireland a disgrace, not only to the British empire, but to humanity. Through the entire bill you may trace the effects of the spirit that indited it. It is a piece of forced legislation; and in every clause you can discern that it is enacted, more from the impression that so much of an article called legislation must be produced, than from any *a priori* conviction that a particular provision is in itself expedient.

I need not point out to your Lordship the dangerous consequences of such a mode of legislation; but I may remind you, that such legislation is just what we might have expected from the course that, in this instance, was pursued. Mr. Nicholls was directed to frame a system of poor-laws for Ireland; his commission extended in fact no further than to adapt the English administration of poor-laws to Ireland. He has executed his commission, and the result has

been, that he has produced a plan utterly and miserably inefficient as a measure of relief, and just as foreign to the real character and causes of destitution in Ireland, as it is possible for any measure to be. And this just because the plan was not the result of a patient and calm investigation of the nature and causes of the existing distress, but was produced to meet a demand on the part of the house and the ministry for a plan.

It is very true that Mr. Nicholls was desired to take with him the report of the Poor-inquiry Commission; a report which was certainly the result of a long, and minute, and careful inquiry into the distresses of Ireland; a report, not gathered in a hasty travelling tour of six weeks, but by laborious and multiplied investigations. But, strange to say, this report Mr. Nicholls has entirely disregarded. It is not merely that he has directly opposed the recommendations, and set at defiance the opinions of the Commissioners, but he has most singularly thrown overboard the evidence they have adduced as to facts. He either has paid no attention at all to the facts which the Commissioners have proved as to the character of the distress in Ireland, or he has drawn from these facts a conclusion as to the remedy, such as no other man could, by any ordinary process of reasoning, have arrived at.

Now, my Lord, it is quite one thing to reject an opinion, and quite another to disregard the statement of a fact. Mr. Nicholls may, or may not have been correct in disregarding the inferences which the

Commissioners themselves drew from the mass of evidence they collected, but certainly he must have reasons which do not appear on the face of his report—reasons, too, of which the most remote hint has not been given—to warrant him in throwing aside altogether the testimony borne by them to the actual state of the country, and framing a plan without the slightest reference to the information they had collected as to the nature, the extent, and the probable causes of destitution.

Nor does it appear, in rejecting the data furnished to him by the labours of the Commissioners, what information he has substituted as the ground-work of his plan. It is quite idle to suppose, that in a hurried circuit through some of the towns of Ireland, he could personally obtain the knowledge of the country which would enable him to supersede the information furnished by the Commission. Indeed, upon the most essential point—the extent of distress—he has no more accurate notion than what he derives from a vague analogy between Ireland and some counties in England, which he terms “among the most highly pauperized;” from which he infers, that “workhouse accommodation may occasionally be required for 80,000 persons,” being one per cent. on the population; and this vague analogy—an analogy which every inhabitant of Ireland knows to be completely deceptive—is all that he puts in place of the proofs offered by the Commissioners, that “there are out of work, and in distress, during thirty weeks in the year, not less than 585,000 persons,