IRISH HISTORY AND IRISH CHARACTER

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PREFACE.

THIS sketch is an expansion of a lecture delivered before the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society at their Annual Meeting in June 1861. It would serve a good purpose if it should fall into the hands of any popular writer on Irish history, and induce him to pay more attention than writers on that subject have generally paid to general causes, to cultivate the charities of history, and, in the case of the rulers as well as of the people, to take fair account of misfortunes as well as of crimes.

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THE history of Ireland from the Conquest to the Union is the miserable history of a half-subdued dependency. Its annals are the weary annals of aggression on the one side, and of rebellion on the other; of aggression sometimes more, sometimes less cruel and systematic, of rebellion sometimes more, sometimes less violent and extensive, but of aggression and of rebellion without end. Few are the points, few are the characters of moral interest in such a story. It is a long agony, of which the only interest lies in the prospect of its long-deferred close. Yet a knowledge of these events must be of the highest practical importance to those who may be called upon to deal, as rulers or landlords, with the Irish people.

The destiny of the country has, to some extent, been written on its face by nature. It is a large island, close to a much larger island, which lies between it and the main-land. The course of its history could not fail to be greatly influenced by the history of its more powerful neighbour. It was almost certain, in the primitive age of conquest, to be subdued. Yet, from its magnitude, it was almost certain not to be subdued without a long and painful struggle. Had it been a third part of the size, its independence would have expired without a pang. Moreover, the channel between the two islands, though steam has now bridged

it over, was broad enough to form, in the infancy of navigation, a considerable impediment to the arms of an English conqueror; more especially as the nearest point of contact with England was Wales, a mountainous district, remote from the early seats of English wealth and power, and one which itself long remained unsubdued.

Britain itself is cut in two by the Cheviots and the wilds of the Border; whence its inhabitants were naturally divided into two nations with separate histories. Ireland is in closer contact with the northern division; and in the earliest times it exerted great influence on Scotland, if it was not, as seems most probable, the mother-country of the Gael. In later times Scotland has exerted great influence on Ireland. Ulster has, in fact, become a part, not so much of Keltic and Catholic Ireland, as of Saxon and Presbyterian Scotland.

England being interposed between Ireland and France, the continental country to which Ireland lies most open is Spain. By Spain, in the sixteenth century, the most determined efforts were made to detach Ireland from England. The architecture of the old houses in the town of Galway, and the gay and graceful dresses of the neighbouring peasantry, are by some supposed to recal the time when that town was the port of a Spanish trade; a trade which was so prized as a source of wealth, that for an act of piracy committed on a Spanish vessel, a mayor of Galway, with Roman spirit, hanged his own son over his own gate. The mansions of little merchant princes which once emulated the luxury and the jealousy of Seville, have sunk into Irish squalor and decay: but from the coast of

Galway the fisherman still sees a visionary shore rise out of the Atlantic; a dreamy recollection, perhaps, of Spain, realized again in the New World.

The siren pamphleteers of France may sing as they will of the fitness of Ireland for all kinds of agricultural produce; of her self-sufficing variety of wealth, and of the immense population which she might maintain if she would only listen to disinterested advice, and facilitate the influx of the requisite capital by rebellion and civil war. According to all trustworthy economists, those of France included, Ireland is a grazing country. "The whole island," says M. de Lavergne[a], speaking of Ireland in former times, "then formed but one immense pasture, which is evidently its natural destination, and the best mode of turning it to account." The same writer remarks that the herbaceous vegetation of Ireland is admirable, and that it is not without reason that the trefoil has become the heraldic emblem of the *green isle*. The vast Atlantic clouds, which soften the hues and outlines of the scenery, drop fertility on the grazing lands, and clothe the mountains high up with the brightest verdure. On the other hand, it is difficult, over a great part of the island, to get in a wheat harvest. The true agricultural wealth of the country is displayed in the great cattle-fair of Balinasloe. Its natural way to commercial prosperity seems to be to supply with the produce of its grazing and dairy farms the population of England; a population which is sure, from the quantity of coals and minerals beneath the surface of

[a] *Essai sur l'Économie Rurale de l'Angleterre de l'Écosse et de l'Irlande*, p. 385.