James Ewing Ritchie

Bessbrook and its Linen Mills

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J. Ewing Ritchie
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BESSBROOK AND ITS LINEN MILLS

That the times in which we live are out of joint is a truism too obvious to require comment. As much now as in old days the cry is, "Who will show us any good?" We hear much of modern progress; but there are many who, like Mr. Froude, intimate that what we call progress is in reality merely change, and that change is not necessarily always for the better. When such men as Mr. Ruskin leave the domain of the beautiful fiercely to arraign what in our wisdom, or want of it, we term Political Economy and its pitiless laws, we may be sure that all the social problems of the age have not been satisfactorily solved. If it be true that our rich men are becoming richer every day, it is equally true that our poor are becoming poorer. Might has taken from the peasant his strip of land, and has driven him into the towns, where he dies of bad air, bad water, bad food, bad lodging, bad pay; where his sons learn crime, and his daughters how much better rewarded is vice than virtue. Underneath the whited sepulchres of our boasted civilisation there lie rottenness and dead men's bones. Of talk we have somewhat more than enough, as must necessarily be the case now that woman claims to appear on the platform on an equality with man. Associations of all kinds exist partly for the bettering and partly for the bewildering of the public. Money is freely subscribed for them; for Dives has a dim idea that he owes much to Lazarus, and would at all times rather discharge the debt by letting a few crumbs fall from the table, than by personally clothing his naked form and binding up his loathsome sores. It is not clear that we have improved on that very much. It is clear that for lack of it we have a great deal – especially in our crowded manufacturing districts – of social anarchy – of progress the wrong way – of licence which means licentiousness, of teaching and talking downward rather than upward. The need of silent divine action, as Thomas Carlyle writes, is very great at this time.

In Ireland, in one spot in particular, this silent divine action has now been in progress some twenty years, and the result is worth noting. I write of Mr. Richardson's Flax-spinning Mills at Bessbrook, a model town near Newry, and not far from the headquarters of Ireland's principal source of wealth, the linen trade.

A few words as to this trade may not be out of place here. The art of weaving is of great antiquity. In Ireland for many years attention has been paid to this branch of industry. Its linen manufacture has existed from the earliest period. In the reign of Charles I. the Earl of Strafford caused flax seed to be brought from Holland, and induced manufacturers from France and Holland to settle in the country. After the Restoration the trade was firmly established. From 1711 to 1832 it was placed under Government patronage. In former times the weaver was superior in social status to most other workpeople, and he enjoyed special privileges. He was exempt, for instance, from serving on juries, and, except under peculiar circumstances, could not be forced to join the army. Many of the old Irish squires as well as the sons of landed chiefs were taught to weave, and even as late as the last century there were numbers of such weavers in Ulster. Indeed in that district everything was done that could be done to develop this important industry. During the long period of Lord Moira's residence at Montalto, he gave all possible encouragement to his tenants in stimulating the growth of flax. He had a dinner prepared every Thursday for the cloth buyers who attended Ballynahinch Market, and on these occasions we are told that his lordship sat at the head of the table and listened to the trade gossip about yard-wides and seven-eights, with all the zest of one who had become personally interested in the rise or fall of goods. In a similar spirit the Earl of Hillsborough, at that time a leading statesman, readily exercised his senatorial influence as well as his baronial power. Lord Hertford was also very friendly in every way where his aid could be of advantage. In 1765, when he held the office of Irish Viceroy,

he obtained from the Linen Board many concessions in favour of the Northern merchants, and his influence at Court was successfully used to obtain royal patronage for the Lisburn Damask works. A large lot of goods was specially got up for the royal table, the fame of this damask rapidly rose after the accomplishment of the royal order, and not only the leading peers of Great Britain, but several of the Continental potentates, sent to Lisburn for their goods. In many ways public-spirited men sought to improve their machinery in order that they might be able to produce a better class of goods. About the time when James Quinn was stirring up the latent taste for the fanciful in damask-weaving and giving the people of Lurgan new ideas as to what could be accomplished in working patterns with the shuttle, James Bradshaw, the son of an independent landowner, who resided near Newtownards, was paying great attention to the diaper trade, then carried on in that town with considerable spirit, though at that time the Irish looms were beaten by those of Holland and the Continent. Mr. Bradshaw was determined to find out the secret of that superiority. As an amateur weaver, he had taken much interest in the improvement of weaving machinery, and seen its defects. One morning in 1728 he left his home in Ulster, and for two years afterwards no one of his family or friends knew anything of his whereabouts. Immediately after leaving home, he assumed the style of dress usually worn by weavers, and set out for Holland, but at the end of several weeks' travel by sea and land, he found himself, instead, in Hamburg, where he engaged with a diaper manufacturer, and at once commenced work. While so employed he paid the most diligent attention to all he saw, both as to the style of weaving, the fittings of looms, and the peculiar description of yarns chosen for certain classes of goods. All the time young Bradshaw remained in Hamburg he was obliged to keep up the garb and character of an ordinary workman, as such was the jealousy of the trade there, that had it been known that he had merely come among them for the purpose of finding out the secret of the manufacture, his life might have fallen a sacrifice. At length, having mastered the details and gained ample experience of the practical department of diaper-making, he thought of returning home, which he did, by the aid of friends. In 1730, he arrived safely at Newtownards, a town which has since become famous as the Paisley of Ulster. Soon after his return, Mr. Bradshaw had looms constructed on the improved principle. He personally inspected the mode of fitting them up, and had all the gearing made on the plan so popular in Hamburg. The effect of all this was, we are told, to introduce a superior system of production, and to give life to the diaper trade, not only in Newtownards, but throughout other parts of Downshire.

Thus the linen trade flourished and became more important every year; of this importance Belfast may be considered as the outward and visible sign; every one knows that, in consequence of its being the seat of the linen trade, it has become the most prosperous town in Ireland. Its mills, factories, and docks, combine the commercial and mercantile features both of Liverpool and Manchester. Its situation is most picturesque – its streets are broad and uniform. Some of the linen-warehouses are palaces, and nowhere in the world are there finer buildings, more attractive shops, and greater symptoms of prosperity and wealth. It is not merely the seat of shipping, of commerce, of manufacture, but its intellectual claims are of no common character. It calls itself the Irish Athens, and its colleges, and libraries, and newspapers, and general intelligence, bear out in some degree that claim. The linen trade of Ulster now represents a capital of several millions, and employs men, women, and children.

What has developed it to its enormous extent has been the application of steam. No longer the weaver sits in his isolated cottage. He is a hand in a mill, and weaving is a complex affair, requiring, to make it pay, gigantic operations and many hands. The factory system has many disadvantages, which tend to the mental, moral, and physical deterioration of the hands engaged in it. I write of one of the most successful efforts that has yet been made to free the factory of them, and to carry it on in a way advantageous, not only to the employer, but the employed. For these purposes it is necessary that the factory be an isolated one; that it should be a community by itself, an *imperium in imperio*, governed by its own laws, with its own special educational, religious, and philanthropic establishments; and

that, above all things, it should be conducted on the principle, or rather practice, of total abstinence from all intoxicating drinks. I heard the Rev. Kegan Paul say at a temperance meeting, held in Exeter Hall this year, that in some parts of Dorsetshire, the county in which he resided, there were parishes with no public-houses in them, that in these parishes there were no paupers, that no cases came from them to the Petty-Sessions, and that the answer given by policeman, when asked by the magistrates whether he had ever taken a teetotaller into custody, was "No." From many other districts in England, Scotland, and Ireland, a similar testimony reaches us. From all the judges of the land, from all our clergy, from all our prisons and penitentiaries – affirmation, mournful in its monotony, reminds us that drink is the bane of the working-man. This is confessed by all, whether they be temperance reformers or not. In many cases it is found that the higher the wages earned by the operative, the more drunken and dissipated are his habits. No fact has been more conclusively established. Where you shut up the public-house, the gin-palace and the beer-shop, you have less pauperism and crime, more honest, decent, sober living, than you have where these places are open. If this be true in England, where the people are more phlegmatic and less wild on politics and religion, it is trebly true of Ireland, where the people are supposed to be at all times too passionate and ready to take offence; where ages of political and religious partisanship have given to those passions an unnatural ferocity; and where the drop o' drink seems to be especially potent in its working. I have travelled in most parts of England, Scotland, and Europe, but I never felt in the slightest peril from the character of my travelling companions. I have been very little in Ireland, but the most disagreeable journeys I ever made were on Irish railways. In each case the disagreeableness arose entirely from the extent to which my fellow-passengers had indulged in the national drink. Perhaps we get it adulterated in England. If so, we have reason to be thankful. Its effects on the Irish are, for the time, truly demoniacal. I have never seen people so maddened with drink as those of the sister isle. The temperate character of Bessbrook strikes you at once. There the difficult problem of carrying out a factory with the minimum of inevitable evil seems to have been satisfactorily solved.

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