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A Modest Proposal
and Other Writings

A Short View of the State
of Ireland
(1728)

A Short View of the State of Ireland

I AM ASSURED THAT IT hath for some time been practised as a method of making men's court, when they are asked about the rate of lands, the abilities of tenants, the state of trade and manufacture in this kingdom and how their rents are paid, to answer that in their neighbourhood all things are in a flourishing condition, the rent and purchase of land every day increasing. And if a gentleman happen to be a little more sincere in his representations, besides being looked on as not well affected, he is sure to have a dozen contradictors at his elbow. I think it is no manner of secret why these questions are so cordially asked or so obligingly answered.

But since, with regard to the affairs of this kingdom, I have been using all endeavours to subdue my indignation (to which, indeed, I am not provoked by any personal interest, being not the owner of one spot of ground in the whole island), I shall only enumerate by rules generally known and never contradicted what are the true causes of any country's flourishing and growing rich, and then examine what effects arise from those causes in the kingdom of Ireland.

The first cause of a kingdom's thriving is the fruitfulness of the soil to produce the necessaries and conveniencies of life – not only sufficient for the inhabitants, but for exportation into other countries.

The second is the industry of the people in working up all their native commodities to the last degree of manufacture.

The third is the conveniency of safe ports and havens to carry out their own goods as much

manufactured – and bring in those of others as little manufactured – as the nature of mutual commerce will allow.

The fourth is that the natives should, as much as possible, export and import their goods in vessels of their own timber, made in their own country.

The fifth is the privilege of a free trade in all foreign countries which will permit them, except to those who are in war with their own prince or state.

The sixth is by being governed only by laws made with their own consent, for otherwise they are not a free people. And, therefore, all appeals for justice or applications for favour or preferment to another country are so many grievous impoverishments.

The seventh is by improvement of land, encouragement of agriculture and thereby increasing the number of their people – without which

any country, however blessed by nature, must continue poor.

The eighth is the residence of the prince or chief administrator of the civil power.

The ninth is the concourse of foreigners for education, curiosity or pleasure – or as to a general mart of trade.

The tenth is by disposing all offices of honour, profit or trust only to the natives – or at least with very few exceptions, where strangers have long inhabited the country and are supposed to understand and regard the interest of it as their own.

The eleventh is when the rents of lands and profits of employments are spent in the country which produced them, and not in another – the former of which will certainly happen where the love of our native country prevails.

The twelfth is by the public revenues being all spent and employed at home, except on the occasions of a foreign war.

The thirteenth is where the people are not obliged (unless they find it for their own interest or conveniency) to receive any monies except of their own coinage by a public mint, after the manner of all civilized nations.

The fourteenth is a disposition of the people of a country to wear their own manufactures and import as few incitements to luxury – either in clothes, furniture, food or drink – as they possibly can live conveniently without.

There are many other causes of a nation's thriving which I cannot at present recollect, but without advantage from at least some of these, after turning my thoughts a long time, I am not able to discover from whence our wealth proceeds, and therefore would gladly be better informed. In the mean time, I will here examine what share falls to Ireland of these causes, or of the effects and consequences.

It is not my intention to complain, but barely to relate facts – and the matter is not of small importance. For it is allowed that a man who lives in a solitary house, far from help, is not wise in endeavouring to acquire in the neighbourhood the reputation of being rich, because those who come for gold will go off with pewter and brass rather than return empty. And in the common practice of the world, those who possess most wealth make the least parade – which they leave to others, who have nothing else to bear them out, in showing their faces on the Exchange.

As to the first cause of a nation's riches being the fertility of the soil, as well as temperature of climate, we have no reason to complain, for although the quantity of unprofitable land in this kingdom (reckoning bog and rock and barren mountain) be double in proportion to what it is in England, yet the native productions

which both kingdoms deal in are very near on equality in point of goodness – and might, with the same encouragement, be as well manufactured. I except mines and minerals – in some of which, however, we are only defective in point of skill and industry.

In the second, which is the industry of the people, our misfortune is not altogether owing to our own fault, but to a million of discouragements.

The conveniency of ports and havens, which nature hath bestowed so liberally on this kingdom, is of no more use to us than a beautiful prospect to a man shut up in a dungeon.

As to shipping of its own, Ireland is so utterly unprovided that, of all the excellent timber cut down within these fifty or sixty years, it can hardly be said that the nation hath received the benefit of one valuable house to dwell in or one ship to trade with.

Ireland is the only kingdom I ever heard or read of, either in ancient or modern story, which was denied the liberty of exporting their native commodities and manufactures wherever they pleased, except to countries at war with their own prince or state. Yet this privilege, by the superiority of mere power, is refused us in the most momentous parts of commerce* (besides an Act of Navigation* to which we never consented, pinned down upon us and rigorously executed, and a thousand other unexampled circumstances as grievous as they are invidious to mention). To go on to the rest.

It is too well known that we are forced to obey some laws we never consented to – which is a condition I must not call by its true uncontroverted name, for fear of Lord Chief Justice Whitshed’s ghost,* with his “LIBERTAS & NATALE SOLUM”* written as a motto on his coach as it stood at the door of the court while he was

perjuring himself to betray both. Thus we are in the condition of patients who have physic sent them by doctors at a distance, strangers to their constitution and the nature of their disease. And thus we are forced to pay five hundred per cent to decide our properties – in all which we have likewise the honour to be distinguished from the whole race of mankind.

As to improvement of land, those few who attempt that or planting, through covetousness or want of skill generally leave things worse than they were, neither succeeding in trees nor hedges – and, by running into the fancy of grazing after the manner of the Scythians,* are every day depopulating the country.

We are so far from having a king to reside among us that even the viceroy is generally absent four fifths of his time in the government.

No strangers from other countries make this a part of their travels – where they can

expect to see nothing but scenes of misery and desolation.

Those who have the misfortune to be born here have the least title to any considerable employment – to which they are seldom preferred but upon a political consideration.

One third part of the rents of Ireland is spent in England – which, with the profit of employments, pensions, appeals, journeys of pleasure or health, education at the inns of court and both universities, remittances at pleasure, the pay of all superior officers in the army and other incidents, will amount to a full half of the income of the whole kingdom – all clear profit to England.

We are denied the liberty of coining gold, silver or even copper. In the Isle of Man they coin their own silver; every petty prince, vassal to the emperor, can coin what money he pleaseth. And in this, as in most of the articles

already mentioned, we are an exception to all other states or monarchies that were ever known in the world.

As to the last (or fourteenth) article, we take special care to act diametrically contrary to it in the whole course of our lives. Both sexes, but especially the women, despise and abhor to wear any of their own manufactures, even those which are better made than in other countries – particularly a sort of silk plaid through which the workmen are forced to run a sort of gold thread, that it may pass for Indian. Even ale and potatoes are imported from England, as well as corn. And our foreign trade is little more than importation of French wine, for which I am told we pay ready money.

Now, if all this be true (upon which I could easily enlarge), I would be glad to know by what secret method it is that we grow a rich and flourishing people without liberty, trade,

manufactures, inhabitants, money or the privilege of coining – without industry, labour or improvement of lands – and with more than half the rent and profits of the whole kingdom annually exported, for which we receive not a single farthing. And to make up all this, nothing worth mentioning except the linen of the North – a trade casual, corrupted and at mercy – and some butter from Cork. If we do flourish, it must be against every law of nature and reason, like the thorn at Glassenbury,* that blossoms in the midst of winter.

Let the worthy commissioners who come from England ride round the kingdom and observe the face of nature or the faces of the natives; the improvement of the land; the thriving numerous plantations; the noble woods; the abundance and vicinity of country seats; the commodious farmers' houses and barns; the towns and villages, where everybody is busy

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