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Economic Evolution

By R.B.Cunninghame Graham

(The economic evolution here charmingly sketched does not merely describe general tendencies of which, *mutatis mutandis*, we have all seen examples, but is a specific account of what took place in the village of Lurgan, now a town. Mr Cunninghame Graham and others of us knew natives of the place, forty years ago, and from them we heard of what was and is, Graham visiting it at a time when the advanced politicians of Scotland and Ireland had more in common than they seem to have now. The sketch will be reprinted as a pamphlet.)

I knew a little village in the North of Ireland – call it what you please. A pretty, semi-ruinous, semi-thriving place. Men did not labour over much there. All went easy (*aisy* the people called it); no man troubling much about the sun or moon; still less bothering himself about the fixed stars or planets, or aught outside the village. All about the place there was an air of half-content, tempered by half-starvation. No man ran; few even hurried. Every hedge was shiny with half broken-down, cut, flat, free seats. All the population lounged against these; for they served to prop men up as they discussed for hours on nothing. Cows marched up and down the lanes; sometimes children led them by a string, or, seated on the ground, made believe to watch them as they ate, much in the same way, I suppose, that shepherds watched their flocks on a memorable occasion near Bethlehem, or as the people do in Spain and the East today. Goats wandered freely in and out of the houses. Children raggeder, and happier, and cunninger than any others on the earth, absolutely swarmed. Herod (had he lived in those parts) could have made an awful *battue* of them, and they would not have been missed. Children, black-haired, grey-eyed, wild-looking, sat at doors, played with pigs, climbed on the tops of the cabins, generally permeated space.

Trees there were few. The people said the landlords cut them down. The landlords said the people never left a tree alone. However, let that pass. Creeds there were, of course – Catholic and Protestant. Both sides claimed to have the majority of the sheep. They hated one another; or they said so, which is not the same thing, by the way. Really, they furnished mutually much subject of entertainment and

conversation. In this village no one really hated very much, or very long. All took life quietly.

On the great late folk fished lazily, and took nothing save only store of midge-bites. The roads were like pre-Adamite trucks for cattle: nothing but the cow of the country could cope with them; and even that sometimes sustained defeat. Still these folks, given enough potatoes, were not miserable, far from it. Wages were low - some 8s 6d a week - but still they were not driven like slaves, as is the artisan of England and of Scotland.

In the morning early, out into the fields to wile away the time and lounge against the miniature round-towers that serve for gate-posts.

Those who did not go remained at home, and, squatting by the fire at ease, looked after their domestic industries and through the jambwall hole kept a watchful eye on foreign competition, or the passing girls and women, and criticised them freely. Still there was peace and plenty of a relative degree. No factories, no industries at all, plenty of water power running to waste, as the Scotch agent said, and called God to witness that if there were only a little capital in the town, it would become a paradise. What is a paradise? Surely it is a land in which there is sufficiency for all, in which a man works as little as he can - that is to say, unless he prefers to be a slave - which no one did, or he would have been looked on as a madman, in the village of which I write. These men reaped their corn with sickles, as their forefathers did, in lazy fashion. Agriculture was all it never should have been. Sometimes a woman and an ass wrought in one plough - the husband at the stilts.

Men were strong, lazy, and comfortable; women, ragged, as lazy, and, when children did not come too fast, not badly off. The owner of the soil never came near the place. Patriot lawyers talked of liberty, and oppressed all they got within their toils; but still the place was relatively happy. Those who did not choose to work (and they were not a few) passed through their lives without doing a hand's turn, and were generally respected. Anyone who tried to hurry work was soon dubbed tyrant. Thus they lived their lives in their own way.

If they were proud of anything it was because their village was the birthplace of a famous greyhound. In my lord's desmesne his monument is erected - the glory of the place Master Magrath - after the Pope, King William, Hug Roe, O'Neill, or Mr. Parnell, he seemed the greatest living thing that ever breathed. Himself it was that brought prosperity amongst us. Quality would come for miles to see him, and leave their money in the place. A simple little thing to see him; ye had never thought he had been so wonderful. The old Lord (a hard old naygur!) thought the world of him. 'Twas here he used to live, but did his business (winning the Waterloo Cup) over there in England. England seemed as vague a term as China to them, and as distant. Master Magrath, the Mass, the Preaching, the price of cattle at the fairs, whether little Tim O'Neil could bate big Pat Finucane - these were the subjects of their daily

talk. A peaceful, idle, sympathetic, fightingly-inclined generation of most prolific Anglo-Celts or Celto-Angles.

Agiotage, Prostitution, Respectability, Morality, and Immorality, and all the other curses of civilised life, had no place amongst them.

Not that they were Arcadians; far enough removed from that. Apt at a bargain, ready to deceive in little matters. In great ones, on the whole, reliable enough. Had there been but only more to eat, less rent to pay, one faith instead of two or three, no public house, and if the rain had cleared off now and then, the place had been about as happy as it is possible for a place to be in this vale of tears. Little enough they recked of what went on in Parliament, on the stock exchange, or in the busy haunts of men.

Once in a way a Home Rule speaker spoke in the village. The folk turned out to cheer with all their might. In a week or two an Orangeman came round, and the cheers, if possible, were louder. In fact, they looked upon the rival Cheap Jacks as travelling entertainment sent by Providence to amuse them.

Except on Pitcairn's Island, Tristan d'Acunha, or in some group of islets in the South Seas before the advent of the missionaries, I doubt if folks anywhere fared better on the whole.

But still a change was near.

One fine day a traveller from Belfast – a loyal Orangeman of course – came to the village. Instantly it struck him – What a place to build a mill in! here is water power, here is a strong and vigorous, but poor population. Of course, the priest, the minister, the Scotch agent, the attorney, and the others of the few who formed the *elite* of the village, and read the newspapers and believed all that was in them, just because it was in print, were mightily uplifted.

We want capital. The want of capital is, and always has been, the drawback of the land. Had we capital we should all be rich, there would be plenty; pauperism would vanish, and all become as flourishing as over there in England, where, as all men know, the streets are paved with gold.

Alas! They never thought that on the golden pavements rain down floods of tears that keep them always wet, hiding the gold from sight. They never knew of the villainy and rascality of the world, of the way in which men work, and work, and slave, and slave, and still are poor. They never dreamt, in fact, what the world was, and how it crushes and devours those who leave little villages like this, and launch the vessel of their lives upon its waves. They could not see the perished and half-starved children; did not know the smug sufficiency of the cruel Christian man of commerce; had never heard the harlot's ginny laugh at the corner of the street. All this existed not for them at all. Therefore the proposition seemed to them a revelation straight from heaven. Yes, build a mill, and all will turn to gold. The landlord will get his rents, the minister his dues, the priest his tithes, the working-man, instead of being fed on

butter-milk and filthy murphies, drink tea (they call it *tay*), and feed on bacon and St. Louis beef (in a neat tin), white bread, and speedily become a gentleman. Wages will rise, of course; our wives and children, instead of running barefoot or sitting idle at the doors, will wear both shoes and stockings, and attend Mass or the preachment 'dacent.'

The syndicate of rogues, with due admixture of fools, and dupes, was got together; the mill was built. The village suffered a great and grievous change. All day long a whirr and whiz of wheels was heard. At daybreak a long string of girls and men tramped along the dreary streets and worked all day. Wealth certainly began to flow; but where? Into the pockets of the shareholders. The people, instead of sturdy, lazy rogues, became blear-eyed, consumptive, bandy-legged. The girls, who formerly were patterns of morality, now hardly reached eighteen without an 'accident' or two. Close mewing up of boys and girls in hot rooms brought its inevitable result. Wages did not rise, but, on the contrary, rather inclined to fall; the people flocked from the country districts to get employment at the far-famed mill.

The economists, of course, were all delighted; would have thrown their hats into the air had their idea of thrift not forbidden them to damage finished products. Now capital had come; yet somehow it seemed to prove a curse. The goods made in the mill were quoted far and wide, known for their inferior quality throughout the world. The benefits to the shareholders were immense.

Yet still content and peace were gone. The air of the place seemed changed. No longer did the population lounge about. It had no time. No longer did the cows parade the streets, or goats climb cabin-roofs to eat the house-leek. The people did not saunter through their lives as in the times when there was lack of capital, and therefore of advancement, as they thought. They had the capital; but the advancement was still lacking. Capital had come – the capital which is the dream of every patriotic Irishman. It banished peace, idleness, beauty, and content – made slaves of the people, giving the fetid atmosphere of the mill for the fresh breath of the fields and lanes. Of course there was a gain. Savages who did not need them purchased, at the bayonet's point, the goods the people made; perhaps it was a gain to them. The people did not gain, though, but became raggeder than ever. Perhaps the thought that savages wore, on their arms or round their necks, the stockings they had made, consoled them for the loss of their former peaceful lives. Perhaps, too, having little ear for music, they rather liked the change from being roused at seven by the lowing of the kine to being routed out at six by the dulcet strain of the 'steam hooter', calling them to work in the dark winter mornings – calling them to toil on pain of loss of work and constant starvation – seeming, indeed, to my ears to say: 'Work brother!' Up and to work; it is more blessed far to work than sleep. Up! Leave your beds; rise up; get to your daily task of making wealth for others, or else starve; for Capital has come!

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