Irish Review (Dublin)

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Source: *The Irish Review (Dublin)*, Vol. 1, No. 9 (Nov., 1911), pp. 417-421

Published by: [Irish Review \(Dublin\)](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30062763>

Accessed: 15/06/2014 06:27

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THE IRISH REVIEW

*A MONTHLY MAGAZINE OF IRISH
LITERATURE, ART & SCIENCE*

NOVEMBER, 1911

Fleshpots and Freedom

BY ARTHUR BURROWES

ACCORDING to the legend we are a logical people and an intensely national people; spiritual rather than material; rebels against "the despotism of fact," loving liberty more than well-being, nursing on this outland of the western world old devotions, and still warming them with the Celtic fire. True, we have now for thirty years or more been mainly busy about very concrete things—the bread rather than the life. Our politics are no longer inspired by the dreams that end in the prison cell or on the scaffold; the extremest extreme of our extremist politicians tells its youth that their supreme duty is to *live*, not to die, for their country, and its elders that they may measure their success by the depth of their dip into the Saxon treasure-chest. Our schoolmasters have turned from literature to what, in the ribald language of the old schools, used to be comprehensively described in one epithet as "stinks"; the Greek of the hedge-schools dies, and "the Department" flourishes; even religious men have challenged the "waste" upon the seven lamps of our houses of worship, and church

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spires have become rocks of scandal. Legend and fact are, as often, in conflict, and logic is tortured to effect a reconciliation between profession and practice, vision and reality, our pursuit of freedom with our desire that the tyrant should become our lavish mortgagee. The reconciling formula here, it must be admitted, is difficult to construct. Not many years ago, it is true, there was one available. Parnell it was who suggested the ox of Exodus—is it Exodus?—for a parallel. “When Israel waxed fat, Israel might kick.” But the ancient Israel was out for a promised land upon which Pharaoh held no mortgages; the modern seems to be busier about the content of the Saxon stall than concerned with the milk and honey that may entail sacrifice to win.

Figure aside, is it too late to ask that in this crisis of its fortunes, Nationalist Ireland should make up its mind as to what it really wants, whether it is Fleshpots or Freedom, and that its leaders should endeavour to make their policies consistent, if not with national ideals, at least within themselves? As it is, the public mind is weltering on a flood of contradictories. “The Irish question is a question of finance,” says one. Agree with him, and in his next breath he will tell you, “but we must have control of the police.” “The Irish question,” says the next, “is not a question of finance, it is a question of freedom.” Agree again, and you learn that though a question of freedom, freedom must be accompanied by a harmless necessary cheque. “Give us control of our own money,” says a third. Again agree, and from the same oracle comes the announcement, that with control of our own money we must get the use of British credit, too. “The Budget was robbery,” adds this oracle. “We must reduce the taxation in the interest of the barley crop.” Ditto you say, and the oracle proceeds. “But we must also restore land purchase on a three and a quarter per cent. basis, provide comfortable family incomes for our gentry, ample reductions for our rentpayers and living farms for the West.” “What about the schools?” you are so indecent as to ask. “O! the schools, too.” Inquire of the miracle worker how all this is to be done with

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Land Stock at eighty when Irish taxation has been reduced, and you will be told that this is the Saxon's business. You whisper "old age pensions," and you are told that Irish "old age pensions" are "an Imperial matter." You mildly suggest that getting deeply into debt with England is not the road to control of our own money; you are informed that you are "a crank"; you suggest that to swell the deficit by going blind for the Insurance Bill is a dubious policy; you are kicked out for a sorehead, a wrecker, or a Mason.

You are left musing as to the expectations of "the man in the street." If he is of a constructive turn of mind, and believes all that he is told by his leaders of various complexions—which, perhaps, is not the most evident failing of the man in the Irish street—he is now preparing himself to cheer an instrument of government which will not merely put an end to British rule in Ireland, but convert Great Britain into a tributary nation. Police, Land Purchase, Old Age Pensions, Insurance, Secondary Education are all to be supplemented out of the British Exchequer, but Great Britain is to have nothing to say to them. Land Purchase is to be resumed at twenty-seven years' purchase, the shackles that have entrammelled Pensions Committees in endowing comfortable farmer septuagenarians and old ladies with holdings in Consols, are to be removed, the teacher is to have a living wage, the worker an out-of-work fund to fall back upon, taxation is to be reduced, the deficit disappear, and Ireland to be as independent as Canada, and freely tax the purchasers of Irish beef and butter. If you hint that British control generally goes with British money, these builders of Castles in Spain begin dubiously to survey your boots to see whether the hoof of the Saxon agent be not there. It is incredible that you should be only a stupid Irishman of an old school who, in the teeth of all the metaphysics of Berlin and Cork, are convinced that things cannot both be and not be at the same time, and that building houses on sand is sane work compared with erecting a fabric of freedom on a foundation of mortgages held by the foreigner.

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Now, the sooner that the Irish people realise that they cannot have it both ways the better. They cannot be both independent and dependent at the same time. The Irish question is a question of freedom and it is a question of finance ; and it is a question of finance because it is a question of freedom. When Mr. Asquith said at Liverpool that the Irish problem had been transformed by the Land Purchase Act, he said what was the absolute truth. The scope of Irish liberty was limited the day Ireland consented to borrow £200,000,000 from its conqueror, and "the march of the nation" during the twentieth century was pretty well defined by its agents at the Land Conference. So of the Old Age Pensions Act ; so of the Insurance Bill ; so of every measure the financial terms of which Ireland is unable to transact for itself. The truth is that Nationalists are in a position similar to old Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*: they have been practising Unionism for a generation without knowing it ; the Promised Land has been left to perorations, and we have been millions marching like one for the Fleshpots.

The answer that will be offered is trite. The Egyptians owe us all this. Agreed. But will the Egyptians pay ? And if the Egyptians do not pay, if they stick by their principle that contribution and control are inseparable, can we compel them ? And if we cannot compel them, shall we still prefer the Fleshpots to Freedom ? That is the issue. It was the issue foreseen by Parnell in 1890 when he declared the land question to be settled. Agrarianism and expensive social reform had done their work for national liberty then ; since then the one cause has been gradually disappearing into the maw of the others. There never was a more logical development, for instance, than Mr. O'Brien's transformation into a Devolutionist on the morrow of the Land Act of 1903. Instinct, if not reason, had determined him truly. When poor Fintan Lalor likened the agrarian problem to the steam engine to which should be coupled the cause of national liberty, his imagination did not picture what might happen at the terminus if the engine over-ran its appointed journey. So much depends on the engine-

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driver when the last station and the final buffers are being reached ! This past of practical Unionism is to be reckoned with now, and there is no disguising the fact that it must hamper the Constitution makers. The game was a merry one, but if Ireland prizes freedom she must pay the reckoning.

The cheerful economist is not disconcerted ; he whispers that magical word "retrenchment." We should not discourage the economist. He will be needed in this country. As the rock in the desert land, so should the courageous economist be to the soul thirsting after national self-reliance, national self-respect, national self-development, the simple national life in Ireland. He will be needed—needed on Cork Hill, as well as behind it, let us remember, and his apparition has as yet cast no shadow on the blithe life there. When he appears he will have his work to do, and he will be stoned like any other prophet. Are not even the R. I. C. a sacred institution to Mr. Timothy Healy, who believes that the best way to prevent emigration and to provide for everybody's younger sons is to make everybody else pay for them ?

And here it will be fairly asked of the writer : "Are you a pessimist and a Unionist ?" I am neither, thanks to heaven and my fathers. What I plead for is a facing of the issues squarely, with full recognition of the facts of the plight into which Ireland has been dragged by an era of reform on the extravagant British scale, but with entire confidence in the ability of a self-governing Ireland to solve yet her own problems for herself, according to her necessities and her means. "According to her necessities and her means"—that is the rub ; not according to British necessities and British means, as the policy of anticipating Home Rule is doing to the detriment of the national cause. We have to choose. A sound measure of national self-government means the end of the policy of sops, and the more we depend upon Great Britain financially, the more dependent we shall be politically. We may grin at that, but we must bear it ; for it is equitable, as well as politically involved in the very root principle of the British Constitution.