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The Poor Law: Factory Acts: Education

State of the Poor Law

Equally wise and humane were numerous measures for raising the moral and social condition of the people. And first in importance was an improved administration of relief to the poor. Since the reign of Elizabeth, the law had provided for the relief of the destitute poor of England. This wise and simple provision, however, had been so perverted by ignorant administration that, in relieving the poor, the industrial population of the whole country was being rapidly reduced to pauperism, while property was threatened with no distant ruin. The system which was working this mischief assumed to be founded upon benevolence: but no evil genius could have designed a scheme of greater malignity for the corruption of the human race. The fund intended for the relief of want and sickness,—of age and impotence,—was recklessly distributed to all who begged a share. Everyone [406] was taught to look to the parish, and not to his own honest industry, for support. The idle clown, without work, fared as well as the industrious labourer who toiled from morn till night. The shameless slut, with half a dozen children,—the progeny of many fathers,—was provided for as liberally as the destitute widow and her orphans. But worse than this,—independent labourers were tempted and seduced into the degraded ranks of pauperism, by payments freely made in aid of wages. Cottage rents were paid, and allowances given according to the number of a family. Hence thrift, self-denial, and honest independence were discouraged. The manly farm labourer, who scorned to ask for alms, found his own wages artificially lowered, while improvidence was cherished and rewarded by the parish. He could barely live, without incumbrance: but boys and girls were hastening to church,—without a thought of the morrow,—and rearing new broods of paupers, to be maintained by the overseer. Who can wonder that labourers were rapidly sinking into pauperism, without pride or self-respect? But the evil did not even rest here. Paupers were actually driving other labourers out of employment,—that labour being preferred which was partly paid out of rates, to which employers were forced to contribute. As the cost of pauperism, thus encouraged, was increasing, the poorer ratepayers were themselves reduced to poverty. The soil was ill-cultivated by pauper labour, and its rental consumed by parish rates. In a period of fifty years, the poor-rates were quadrupled; and had reached, in 1833, the [407] enormous amount of £8,600,000. In many parishes they were approaching the annual value of the land itself.

The New Poor Law

Such evils as these demanded a bold and thorough remedy; and the recommendations of a masterly commission of inquiry were accepted by the first reformed Parliament in 1834, as the basis of a new poor law. The principle was that of the Act of Elizabeth,—to confine relief to destitution; and its object, to distinguish between want and imposture. This test was to be found in the workhouse. Hitherto pauperism had been generally relieved at home, the parish workhouse being the refuge for the aged, for orphans, and others, whom it suited better than out-door relief. Now out-door relief was to be withdrawn altogether from the able-bodied, whose wants were to be tested by their willingness to enter the workhouse. This experiment had already been successfully tried in a few well-ordered parishes, and was now generally adopted. But instead of continuing ill-regulated parish workhouses, several parishes were united, and union workhouses established, common to them all. The local administration of the poor was placed under elected boards of guardians; and its general superintendence under

a central board of commissioners in London. A change so sudden in all the habits of the labouring classes could not be introduced without discontents and misconception. Some of the provisions of the new law were afterwards partially relaxed: but its main principles were carried into successful operation. Within three years the [408] annual expenditure for the relief of the poor was reduced to the extent of three millions. The plague of pauperism was stayed; and the English peasantry rescued from irretrievable corruption. The full benefits of the new poor law have not yet been realised: but a generation of labourers has already grown up in independence and self-respect; and the education and industrial training of children, in the workhouses, have elevated a helpless class, formerly neglected and demoralised.

While England had been threatened with ruin, from a reckless encouragement of pauperism, the law of Scotland had made no adequate provision for the support of the destitute poor. This error, scarcely more defensible, was corrected in 1845. But worst of all was the case of Ireland, where there was absolutely no legal provision for the destitute. The wants of the peasantry were appalling: two millions and a half were subsisting, for a part of every year, on charity. The poor man shared his meal with his poorer neighbour; and everywhere the vagrant found a home. To approach so vast a mass of destitution, and so peculiar a condition of society, was a hazardous experiment. Could property bear the burden of providing for such multitudes? could the ordinary machinery of poor-law administration safely deal with them? The experiment was tried in 1838,— [409] not without serious misgivings,—and it succeeded. The burden, indeed, was often ruinous to the land; and the workhouse was peculiarly repugnant to the Irish peasantry: but the operation of the new law was facilitated by the fearful famine of 1846; and has since contributed, with other causes, to the advancing prosperity of Ireland. The poor-law legislation of this period was conceived in a spirit of enlightened charity: it saved England from pauperism, and the poor of Scotland and Ireland from destitution.

Lunatics

The same beneficence has marked recent legislation for the care of lunatics. Within the wide range of human suffering, no affliction so much claims pity and protection as insanity. Rich and poor are stricken alike; and both are equally defenceless. Treated with care and tenderness, it is sad enough: aggravated by neglect and cruelty, it is unspeakably awful. To watch over such affliction,—to guard it from wrong and oppression,—to mitigate its sufferings, and, if possible, to heal it,—is the sacred office of the state. But until a period, comparatively recent, this office was grievously neglected. Rich patients were left in charge of keepers, in their own homes, or in private asylums, without control or supervision: the poor were trusted to the rude charge of their own families, or received into the workhouse, with other paupers. Neglect, and too often barbarity, were the natural results. The strong may not be safely trusted with unrestrained power over the weak. The well-paid keeper, the pauper family, the workhouse matron, could all [410] tyrannise over helpless beings, bereft of reason. Sad tales were heard of cruelty committed within walls, to which no watchful guardian was admitted: and idiots were suffered to roam at large, the sport of idle jests, or worse brutality.

A few charitable asylums had been founded, by private or local munificence, for the treatment of the insane;(1) but it was not until the present century that county and borough lunatic asylums began to be established; nor until after the operation of the new poor law, that their erection was rendered compulsory.(2) At the same time, provision was made for the inspection of asylums; and securities were taken against the wrongful detention or mismanagement of lunatics. Private asylums are licensed: every house tenanted by the insane is subjected to visitation; and the care of all lunatics is intrusted to commissioners. The like provision has also been made for the care of lunatics in Scotland and Ireland. Two principles were here carried out,—the guardianship of the state, and the obligation of property to bear the burden of a liberal treatment of the lunatic poor. Both are no less generous than just; and the

resources of medical science, and private charity, have more than kept pace with the watchfulness of the state, in alleviating the sufferings of the insane.

Factory Acts

In other cases, the state has also extended its [411] generous protection to the weak,—even where its duty was not so clear. To protect women and children from excessive, or unsuitable labour, it has ventured to interfere with husband and wife, parent and child, labourer and employer,—with free labour, and wages, production and profits. The first Sir Robert Peel had induced the legislature to interfere for the preservation of the health and morals of factory children.(3) But to the earnest philanthropy of Mr. Sadler and Lord Ashley (now Earl of Shaftesbury) is due their first protection from excessive labour. It was found that children were doomed to immoderate toil in factories, by the cupidity of parents; and young persons and females accustomed to hours of labour, injurious to health and character. The state stretched forth its arm to succour them. The employment of children of tender years in factories was prohibited: the labour of the young, of both sexes under eighteen, and of all women, was subjected to regulation: an inspection of factories was instituted; and provision made for the education of factory children. The like parental care was extended to other departments of labour,—to mines, and bleaching works, and even to the sweeping of chimneys.

Improvement of the Working Classes

The state has further endeavoured to improve the social condition of the working classes, by providing for the establishment of savings' banks, and provident societies,—of schools [412] of design, of baths and washhouses, of parks and places of recreation; by encouraging the construction of more suitable dwellings, by the supervision of common lodging houses,—and by measures of sanitary improvement; the benefits of which, though common to all classes, more immediately affect the health and welfare of the labouring multitudes. In this field, however, the state can do comparatively little: it is from society,—from private benevolence and local activity, that effectual aid must be sought for the regeneration of the poorer classes. And this great social duty has fallen upon a generation already awakened to its urgency.

Popular Education

Among the measures most conducive to the moral and social improvement of the people, has been the promotion of popular education. That our ancestors were not insensible to the value of extended education, is attested by the grammar-schools and free or charity-schools in England, and by the parochial schools of Scotland. The state, however,—inert and indifferent,—permitted endowments for the good of society to be wasted and misapplied. From the latter end of last century much was done, by private zeal and liberality, for the education of the poor: but the state stirred not. It was reserved for Mr. Brougham, in 1816, to awaken Parliament to the ignorance of the poor; and to his vigilance was it due, that many educational endowments were restored to the uses for which they were designed. Again, in 1820, he proposed a scheme [413] for the systematic education of the poor. To the general education of the people, however, there was not only indifference, but repugnance. The elevation of the lower grades of society was dreaded, as dangerous to the state. Such instruction as impressed them with the duty of contentment and obedience might be well: but education which should raise their intelligence and encourage freedom of thought, would promote democracy, if not revolution. It was right that the children of the poor should be taught the church catechism: it was wrong that they should learn to read newspapers. So long as this feeling prevailed, it was vain to hope for any systematic extension of secular education: but the church and other religious bodies were exerting themselves earnestly, in their proper sphere of instruction. In their schools, religious teaching was the primary object: but great advances were also made in

the general education of the poor.

Meanwhile, the increasing prosperity of the country was rapidly developing the independent education of the children of other classes, who needed no encouragement or assistance. As society advanced, it became more alive to the evils of ignorance; and in a reformed Parliament, the political jealousy of popular education was speedily overcome.

In Ireland, as we have seen, a broad scheme of national education was introduced, in 1831, on the principle of 'a combined literary, and a separate religious education.'⁽⁴⁾ In [414] Great Britain, however, there were obstacles to any such system of national education. In the schools of the church, and of dissenters, religious teaching was the basis of education. The patrons of both were jealous of one another, resentful of interference, and unwilling to co-operate in any combined scheme of national education. The church claimed the exclusive right of educating the people: dissenters asserted an equal title to direct the education of the children of their own sects. Both parties were equally opposed to any scheme of secular education, distinct from their own religious teaching. Hence the government was obliged to proceed with the utmost caution. Its connection with education was commenced in 1834, by a small parliamentary grant, in aid of the building of school-houses. The administration of this fund was confided to the Treasury, by whom it was to be distributed, through the National School Society, representing the church, and the British and Foreign School Society, to whose schools children of all religious denominations were admitted. This arrangement was continued until 1839; when Lord Melbourne's government vested the management of the education funds in a Committee of Privy Council. This change was effected, in contemplation of a more comprehensive scheme, by which aid should be given directly to schools connected with the church, and other religious bodies. The church was alarmed, lest her own privileges should be disturbed: many of the conservative party were still adverse, on political grounds, to the extension of education; and [415] the government scheme was nearly overthrown. The annual grant met with strenuous resistance; and was voted in the Commons by a bare majority of two. The Lords, coming to the aid of the church and their own party, hastened to condemn the new scheme, in an address to the Crown. Their lordships, however, received a courteous rebuke from the throne; and the scheme was vigorously carried out. Despite of jealousies and distrust, the operations of the Committee of the Privy Council were speedily extended. Society was awakened to the duty of educating the people: local liberality abounded: the rivalry of the church and dissenters prompted them to increased exertions; and every year, larger demands were made upon the public fund, until, in 1860, the annual grant amounted to nearly £700,000.

However such a system may have fallen short of a complete scheme of national education, embracing the poorest and most neglected classes, it gave an extraordinary impulse to popular education; and bore ample testimony to the earnestness of the state, in promoting the social improvement of the people.

Footnotes.

1. E.g. Bethlehem Hospital, in 1547; St. Peter's Hospital, Bristol, in 1697; Bethel Hospital, Norwich, in 1713; St. Luke's Hospital, in 1751.
2. In 1845; 8 and 9 Vict, c. 126.
3. In 1802 and 1819; Acts 42 Geo. III. c. 73; 59 Geo. III. c. 66, etc.
4. Supra, p. 270.

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