

Report to the children's apprenticeship board

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Transcript:

Report to the children's apprenticeship board

Poor Law Commission Office
Dublin

27th November 1850

The Commissioners for administering the Laws for Relief of the Poor in Ireland desire to submit to His Excellency the Lord Lieutenant the following observations on the Colonial Despatch numbered O: 6479/328 which has been referred by His Excellency to the Commissioners for their consideration.

This despatch dated South Australia 8th March 1850 encloses a report from the Children's Apprenticeship Board at Adelaide containing information regarding the conduct of some of the orphan girls sent to that Colony from Work Houses in Ireland, and to this information Earl Grey refers in a letter to Sir George Grey of 10th October last "as conveying additional proof of the importance of providing more adequately for the training and instruction of the children in the Irish Workhouses, since it appears from this despatch that the absence of effectual provision of this kind has deprived the Irish unions of the great advantage of relieving themselves of these orphans, of whom a very considerable number would no doubt have been received by the Australian Colonies with great willingness, had they been fitted by a proper education to become useful to the settlers".

The Commissioners have read this despatch with much attention, and have referred to a despatch from Adelaide dated 29th Nov. 1848, announcing the arrival of the first ship sent to this colony ("The Roman Emperor") with 224 orphan girls from the Irish Workhouses, who it is there stated, were all engaged by the Colonists within 14 days from their arrival in the Colony, "the first twenty who entered service" (to use the words of the Lieutenant Governor,) "having conducted themselves so creditably as to create a feeling as much in favour of the Emigrants as it had before been adverse".

The "Roman Emperor" was in due course followed by the "Inconstant", with 186 orphans, and afterwards by the "Elgin" with 196, making in all 606 orphan girls sent from the Irish Workhouses to Adelaide.

The Commissioners regret to find from the present despatch that the emigration of these girls to Adelaide, which commenced so auspiciously and with so much apparent satisfaction to the Colonists has now resulted in disappointment, and what is more important in every point of view, in a course of degradation and probable ruin to some of the girls themselves who have been sent to this Colony. The

Commissioners are not prepared however an immature considerations of the contents of the present despatch to ascribe these results to the previous defective training of the girls while inmates of the Workhouses in Ireland.

It must have been manifest, when this branch of emigration was first proposed, that the materials upon which the selection was to be made were not altogether of a hopeful character, consisting as they did exclusively of the children of the most indigent peasantry in the world, brought up from their earliest years in habits inseparable from extreme indigence, and afterwards maintained in large numbers in the Workhouses in a state of absolute dependence on the public. It could not be expected that a selection made from this class, subject to two important limitations - namely, that the girls should be orphans, and between the ages of 14 and 18, - should supply emigrants prepared by previous training for the peculiar moves of domestic service prevailing in a new Colony. This emigration commenced in the early part of the year 1848, before the passing of the act which authorises the taking of twenty-five-acre farms for the instruction of Workhouse children in an improved system of agriculture. It ought not therefore to have been supposed at that time that acquaintance with the duties-of-farm service and the manipulation of farm produce had been imparted to young persons brought up in Workhouse schools, even the art of cooking as practised in the most simple form in a family is not practised for the purpose of supplying their meals to the inmates of Irish Workhouses, and in truth, the only knowledge of household work which could have been acquired by girls in those establishments consisted of washing and laundering the workhouse linen, and scouring and dry-scrubbing the floors of the dormitories.

What, however, was reasonably to be expected in the conduct of such an experiment was this, that by a carefully managed selection a large number of orphan girls might be supplied in whom any vicious or uncleanly habits acquired in their early years had been suppressed by a course of moral discipline in the Workhouse Schools: that they should be of good health and average physical growth and strength, and prepared to learn with willingness and obedience the duties required from household servants by the settlers in a Colony. It is notorious that when a girl from the age of 14 to 18 is for the first time taken into service in a family in the Mother Country, she has to acquire from teaching a knowledge of her household duties and it was to be hoped that in the state of the demand for female domestics represented as existing in the Australian Colonies, the Irish orphan girls, being naturally quick and apt to learn, would, with patience and forbearance on the part of their employers, acquire a knowledge of their duties and that if left to feel dependent on their own obedience and good behaviour, they would hold steadily to their engagements with their employers and so justify the prophecy which suggested this class of emigrants as likely to supply the wants of the settled in the Australian Colonies.

And of the twenty ships sent out to the Australian Colonies with this class of emigrants during the years 1848 and 1849, 11 proceeded to Sydney with 2253 emigrants with 6 to Port Philip with 1255 emigrants and 3 to Adelaide with 606 = 4114.

The information which has hitherto reached the Commissioners regarding the emigrants to Sydney and Port Philip has not been of an unfavourable nature as

regards the girls themselves, but rather tends to the conclusion that the demand for this class of emigrant has for the present been fully met by the supply.

At Adelaide, a course of proceeding appears to have been adopted by the Apprenticeship Board in that Colony which the Commissioners submit to His Excellency the Lord Lieutenant was not unlikely to produce the results which are described in the despatch. It appears that on the arrival of the first Ship,

"The Roman Emperor", the girls ...
[missing page].

"... the girls 5 in which the girls and mistresses could not agree, and several others may possibly happen before the 218 become permanently settled".

No one can read the above resolution without acknowledging the benevolent and almost parental feeling which without doubt suggested to the members of the Apprenticeship Board the adoption of this arrangement but the Commissioners submit to His Excellency, that an establishment of this nature, if opened at all for the protection of the Irish orphans, should have been conducted upon the most rigid principles of Workhouse management, otherwise its existence would necessarily disturb the relations subsisting between the girls and their new employers, and the least well disposed among the former, would immediately look to this as an asylum open to them at all times and under any circumstances, and thus lose all feeling of dependence on their own good behaviour as the means of securing to them a home and protectors in a strange country.

The descriptions given of this asylum by the persons officially connected with its management, shows it to have been most insidiously and improperly conducted and different in all respects from such an institution as might with safety have been opened for the casual reception of these young women in the event of their becoming destitute.

It appears to have been under the care of a matron who undertook the duty without remuneration, and who seems to have professed no moral control over the numerous inmates occasionally lodged in the asylum. The inmates appear to have been subjected to no discipline, to have had the opportunity of leaving the premises and returning at their discretion, to have been equally without employment and without restraint. The most disgusting habits are said to have prevailed among them, and attempts made to enforce obedience are described as having resulted in altercation, personal violence and bad language on both sides. The use of the words "Irish brutes", or "dirty brutes", by the matron of the depot, the matron of the native school and the secretary superintending these institutions was alone sufficient to deprive those officers, of all moral control over the young women under their charge.

It is not to be regarded with surprise that the worse disposed among the emigrants should choose to resort to the security of their companions in an asylum of this nature rather than submit to the drudgery and loneliness of a servants life in the family of a settler: that they should refuse eligible situations, feigning [feigning] inability to work, that having gone into service they should behave themselves insolently and disobediently, and show an unwillingness to learn and perform their

duty and that on remonstrance from their employers they should throw up their service and repair to the asylum with their wages already earned in their profession. The present despatch contains much evidence in proof of this nefarious tendency of the depot, in the statements of settlers who were examined by the Apprenticeship Board as to the character and conduct of particular emigrants and the Apprenticeship Board observe in their report that "numberless instances of the same kind might be added" to those accounted.

It is necessary, however, to do more than give the opinion of the Secretary himself regarding the effects produced by the depot system, which opinion he states as the result of his experience derived from "a sixteen month superintendence of this depot for orphans and unprotected females".

It is open, he says, to "all Irish orphans who may have left their situations, and who may not have been able to meet with others in which to engage. This privilege has not been given to the English, and for this class it does not appear to have been required. Several reasons may be advanced why the Irish should be placed on the same footing as the English".

"1st the settlers who have engaged Irish orphans have made many complaints of the inconvenience suffered from the girls leaving their situations without the least provocation, some fancied they were too far from town, some who were in town thought they would like the country better, others wished to be nearer those from the same union in Ireland, others would not milk, others again would not wash.

2ndly it tends to retard the advancement of these orphans in domestic life many who have been spoken to and gently corrected for dirty or vulgar habits, have shown great independence and left without giving a moments notice, because the depot was open for their reception.

3rdly girls taken into the country would be obliged to remain there if no depot existed, but the present system enables them to gratify any wish they may have to see the town and once in, they are apt to meet with bad companions and become tempted to go astray".

According to the evidence of the same gentleman the step at length resorted to in the cases of girls who had become unmanageable was to expel them from the depot and in reference to the charge conveyed in the words "capriciously expelled", he makes the following statement: "I have experienced much provocation from the behaviour of Irish orphans - their utter disregard for truth has rendered abortive all attempts at discipline, and the three girls, Ryan, McCarthy and Collins, whose statements have been made before the Board, were very unruly, and their examples had a bad effect upon others. They refused to hire and after having three offers each I was obliged to order them out of the depot. I dismissed no girl until she had refused two or three acceptable offers, and have just dismissed them we should have had an average of about one hundred constantly living upon government".

In another part of the Secretary's evidence, he states in allusion to the three girls thus expelled from the depot, one case only has been taken in from Light Square and she

was sent 60 miles into the country at her own request. She came crying to be delivered from the temptation and life of such characters."

The place called "Light Square" appears from other parts of the despatch to be a place of abode or resort for prostitutes. The name of the girl received back into the depot from this locality is not stated, but the Commissioners must here advert to the evidence given by Mrs Turner regarding Catherine McCarthy, one of the three girls expelled from the depot as showing a girl comparatively well disposed, whom after three months service she thought "honest, in whom she never discovered any dishonesty", was demoralised altogether by the agency of this institution, "if ever we spoke to her", says Mrs Turner, "to make her attentive and clean, she would instantly turn round and say if she did not suit she could go to the depot. During the last month she was with us, she would leave the house as soon as the dinner was put upon the table, and go to the street to gossip with her shipmates for an hour or so and then return, she was told this could not be allowed, for it occurred every day, but she said she would gossip with her shipmates in spite of Mrs Turner or any other Mistress in Adelaide, and if Mrs Turner was not satisfied she could leave and go to the depot".

Mrs Turner further states "she had 16/6 when she left our house I remarked to a friend of mine in town that we should have had much more civility from this girl provided the depot had not been open to her at pleasure and I expressed my surprise that a girl who had been three months in the country had it in her power to enter a government depot at will - had she expected to pay for her lodgings she would have shown a much greater willingness to oblige and accommodate".

The Commissioners do not doubt that the forbearance shown by Mrs Turner in the case of Catherine Ryan was extended to the Irish orphans at Adelaide generally by the Colonists who employed them, and they still indulge a hope that a large proportion of the 606 girls sent to this Colony may be found to have escaped the demoralising influences of the depot system, but it is impossible to avoid reflecting that the existence of this ill-conducted asylum, was calculated to impair the moral principles and industrial energies of the best disposed among them and the Commissioners cannot but feel a most painful degree of anxiety in reference to that part of the report of the Apprenticeship Board of the 4th March 1850 in which the Secretary states that the "Moral character of the emigrants will be reported upon in the next general return by the Magistrates of the Colony".

In the same report the following resolutions of the Apprenticeship Board is recorded - : "The Board desires to record its opinion that emigration from the Workhouses of England and Ireland at the expense of the Colonial Land Fund is a misapplication of that fund, inasmuch as the labour so imported is costly and inefficient, as well as inferior in point of moral character".

The Secretary makes the following remark on the abode:- "That portion of the resolution setting fourth costliness and inefficiency refers to expenses of the depot, which in the Month of October last were £76.2.10, and the inefficiency, to the inferior class of servants that the workhouse girls prove to be".

In reference to this report of the Apprenticeship Board the Commissioners think it must be admitted that the preceding observations and extracts are sufficient to show

that the experiment of sending Irish orphan girls to the Australian Colonies has not received a fair trial in that part of those Colonies of which Adelaide is the metropolis, and that while the costliness complained of in the conduct of this experiment was ascribable altogether to the proceedings of the Apprenticeship Board itself, to the same cause also in a very great degree must be attributed the inefficiency of the labour imported.

In conclusion the Commissioners desire to assume His Excellency the Lord Lieutenant that looking as they do to the possibility of a further demand arising for the emigration of female orphans from the Irish Workhouses to Australia, or to other British Colonies, no exertion shall be wanting on the part of the Commissioners to provide for the training of such females while inmates of the Workhouses so as to suit them as far as may be practicable for the domestic duties of servant in the families of colonists. The only practicable means at the disposal of the Guardians of unions for giving this description of training to girls in Workhouses arises in connection with the provisions of Vict. c.25 outhousing land to the extent of twenty five acres to be taken for the purpose of instructing in an improved system of agriculture, children under sixteen years of age. Although this enactment is regarded as peculiarly applicable to boys, it is intended to adapt the arrangement as far as possible to the instruction of a limited number of girls in the ordinary duties of female farm servants. At the same time that the boys are exercised in the agricultural processes of the farm.

This statute was passed on the 30th June 1848 and there is now a considerable number of unions in which twenty-five acre farms have been taken by the Guardians, and although under the late depressing circumstances of the Country, little progress has yet been made in agricultural teaching in those unions which stand peculiarly in need of relief from emigration, the Commissioners trust that under the more favourable aspect of the present season the agricultural schools will be made the means of supplying industrial training to a considerable extent to the children of both sexes.

I have the honour to be

Sir,

Your Obedient Servant

