

# New Zealand Gabel

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## Current Topics

AT HOME AND ABROAD.

THE contributor of an article on Dean Swift to the *Quarterly Review* for July, gives us a sketch of the condition of Ireland at the time which is of considerable interest, and may be studied with advantage by those worthy people who see in the condition of that country only the marks of a degradation brought about by the natural perversity of the people and their inferiority to the much vaunted Anglo-Saxon race.—Placed before them, moreover, as the view of things to which we allude is by an English writer, and one hardly to be suspected of Irish prejudices, they should find the food for reflection thus furnished them of no little bitterness.—“The condition of Ireland,” says the writer between 1700 and 1750, was in truth, such as no historian, who was not prepared to have his narrative laid aside with disgust and incredulity, would venture to depict. . . . In the time of peace the unhappy island suffered all the most terrible calamities which follow in the train of war. Famine succeeding famine decimated the provincial villages, and depopulated whole regions. Travellers have described how their way has lain through districts strewn like a battle-field with unburied corpses, which lay, some in ditches, some on the road-side, and some on heaps of offal, the prey of dogs and carrion-birds. Even when there was no actual famine, the food of the rustic vulgar was often such as our domestic animals would reject with disgust. Their ordinary fare was butter-milk and potatoes, and when these failed they were at the mercy of fortune. Frequently the pot of the wretched cottier contained nothing but the product of the marsh and the waste ground. The flesh of a horse which had died in harness, the flesh of sylvan vermin, even when corruption had begun to do its revolting work, were devoured voraciously. Burdy tells that these famishing savages would surreptitiously bleed the cattle which they had not the courage to steal, and, boiling the blood with sorrel, convert the sickening mixture into food. Epidemic diseases, and all the loathsome maladies which were the natural inheritance of men whose food was the food of dogs and jackals, whose dwellings were scarcely distinguishable from dunghills, and whose personal habits were filthy even to beastliness, raged with a fury rarely witnessed in western latitudes.”—A writer who writes in this tone as we said can hardly be suspected of Irish prejudices. Gross, nevertheless, as his language is, we consider it useful to quote it as the testimony from not over-friendly lips to the state that the country had been reduced to.—“Not less deplorable,” continues the writer, “was the spectacle presented by the country itself. ‘Whoever took a journey through Ireland,’ says Swift, ‘would be apt to imagine himself travelling in Lapland or Iceland.’ In the south, in the east, in the west, stretched vast tracts of land untilled and unpeopled, mere waste and solitude.”—And let us remark, in passing, it is to this condition certain friends of the country now seek to reduce it once more, or even to a worse one still. “Even where nature had been most bounteous, the traveller might wander for miles without finding a single habitation, without meeting a single human being, without beholding a single trace of human culture. Many of the churches were roofless, the walls still gaping with the breaches which the cannon of Cromwell had made in them. Almost all the old seats of the nobility were in ruins. In the villages and country-towns, every object on which the eye rested told the same lamentable story.” Much of this misery the writer attributes to the inhabitants of the country themselves and their various divisions, and his picture of the middlemen and the gentry especially we believe to be but little, if in anything, overdrawn.—“The middleman,” he says, was as a rule, entirely destitute of education; his tastes were low his habits debauched and recklessly extravagant. Long familiarity with such scenes as we have described had rendered him not merely indifferent to human suffering, but ruthless and brutal. All the tenancies held under him were at rack-rent, and with the extraction of that rent, or what was, in kind, equivalent to that rent, began and ended his relations with his tenants. As many of those tenants were

little better than impecunious serfs, often insolvent and always in arrears, it was only by keeping a wary eye on their movements, and by pouncing with seasonable avidity on anything of which they might become possessed, either by the labour of their hands or by some accident of fortune, that he could turn them to account. Sometimes the produce of the potato-plot became his prey, sometimes their agricultural tools; not unfrequently he would seize everything that belonged to them, and, driving them with their wives and children, often under circumstances of revolting cruelty, out of their cabins, send them to perish of cold and hunger in the open country.’ So much for the middlemen.—The gentry, for the most part the higher race, let us remember, who had replaced the old Catholic proprietors, are thus described: “Nor were the Irish provincial gentry in any way superior to the middlemen. Swift, indeed, regarded them with still greater detestation. As public men they were chiefly remarkable for their savage oppression of the clergy, for the mercilessness with which they exacted their rack-rents from the tenantry, and for the mean ingenuity with which they contrived to make capital out of the miseries of their country. In private life they were dissolute, litigious, and arrogant, and their vices would comprehend some of the worst vices incident to man—inhuman cruelty, tyranny in its most repulsive aspects, brutal appetites forcibly gratified, or gratified under circumstances scarcely less atrocious, and an ostentatious lawlessness which revelled unchecked either by civil authority or by religion.”—The writer, nevertheless, acknowledges that the Government was chiefly accountable for all the evil. “But whatever degree of culpability,” he says, “may attach itself to the inhabitants of Ireland, there can be no question that the English Government were in the main responsible for the existence of this Pandemonium. It requires very little sagacity to see that the miseries of Ireland flowed naturally and inevitably from the paralysis of national industry, from the alienation of the national revenue, from the complete dislocation of the machinery of government, and from the almost total absence, so far at least as the masses were concerned, of the ameliorating influences of culture and religion.” As to what the aspect of the religion was which the Government strove to thrust upon the people while it made their own penal, we may obtain an idea from what follows. The writer is speaking of the Protestant clergy, who, as a class, he says, “were a scandal to Christendom.” “Many of the bishops,” he continues, “would have disgraced the hierarchy of Henry III. Their ignorance, their apathy, their nepotism, their sensuality, passed into proverbs. It was not uncommon for them to abandon even the semblance of their sacred character, and to live the life of jovial country squires, their palaces ringing with revelry, their dioceses mere anarchy. If their sees were not to their taste, they resided elsewhere. The Bishop of Down, for example, settled at Hammersmith, where he lived for twenty years without having once during the whole of that time set foot in his diocese.” There were, indeed, a few noble exceptions the writer explains, but his conclusion is that “of this body it would not be too much to say that no section of the demoralized society of which they formed a part, was more demoralized or so completely despicable.”

THE effect, we are told, of the state of Ireland on Swift was extreme. “It fevered his blood, it broke his rest; it drove him at times half frantic with furious indignation, it sunk him at times in abysses of sullen despondency. He brooded over it in solitude; it is his constant theme in his correspondence; it was his constant topic in conversation. He spoke of it as eating his flesh and exhausting his spirits.” He hoped, nevertheless, that a remedy would be found, and he looked, as we have seen others do in our own day, to the proper quarter to find it—that is, not to England, but to Ireland herself. “And this remedy, he thought, lay not in appealing to the justice and humanity of the English Government, but in appealing to the Irish themselves, to the landed gentry, to the middlemen, to the manufacturers, to the clergy. Throughout, his object was twofold—the internal reformation of the kingdom, and the establishment of the principle, that Ireland ought either to be autonomous or on a footing of exact political equality with the mother country.” His first political pamphlet, written for the purpose of promoting the end