

## National Self-Determination A Natural and National Right

A Lecture delivered at Wellington before the Cumann na n-Gaedhal by P. J. O'REGAN.)

Of late years a great deal has been heard of the principle of national self-determination, and the fact that the term was exploited for propagandist purposes during the late war, and that too by men of the most reactionary principles, serves to show conclusively that there is deeply embedded in the public mind a conviction that the right of nations to govern themselves is one of those inherent and primary principles of which the existence is beyond dispute. The methods of the war propagandist—odious as they are in many respects—may at least assure us that he knows only too well of those abiding principles to which the human mind readily gives assent. During the South African war of 1899-1903, the popular dislike to slavery was exploited by the Northcliffes, the Chamberlains, and the Milners, in precisely the same manner. The Dutch farmers were accused of enslaving the native population, and so the public mind, through its hatred of slavery, was induced to give its approbation to a cruel, unnecessary, and humiliating war. Thus we may deduce from the methods of the war propagandist—his denunciation of slavery and his affected zeal for national self-determination—evidence that he knows only too well how to pervert to his own ends principles sacred in themselves which are deeply embedded in the hearts of men.

### The Case of Ireland.

In submitting that Ireland has the right to govern herself untrammelled by external control, I am not contending that she possesses any right which does not belong equally to other peoples, and the purpose of this paper is to show that the case of Ireland merely illustrates the universal rule that the people of every country have by decree of Providence the right to be a nation, and manifestly one of the marks of nationhood is the right of a people to govern themselves. No doubt when we come to details we are confronted with practical difficulties. It is not always easy nowadays to define what is a nation, and societies described by the term sometimes comprise contending political and racial elements. To concede so much, however, is in no way to invalidate the proposition that government to be effective, wise, and popular must be local. Absentee government means autocratic, and therefore incompetent government, and such a government will always provoke disaffection. Imperfections are inseparable from all human institutions, and government of course is not exempt, but a Government that is effectively controlled by the people will always be the least liable to abuse, indeed it is a truism that really democratic government is impossible unless under the effective control of the people from whom it derives its power. The cardinal defect in all systems of federation consists in the fact that every one of them implies more or less of absentee government. We hear much nowadays of projects of federation, and there are people who advocate what is called Imperial Federation with its inevitable concomitant, colonial representation in the Imperial Parliament. Do the advocates of such an unhistoric, and I will add unhuman, proposal ever ask themselves what measure of control the colonial constituencies would have over the "representatives" it would send to a Parliament 12,000 miles away? Obviously the constituencies would have no control over their so-called representatives. Lack of control would inevitably breed disaffection, and we may therefore rest assured that should such a crazy scheme ever be realised, it must soon fall to pieces. This reminds me that New Zealand sent two delegates to the Federal Conference which assembled at Melbourne in 1890. Both of our representatives, Captain (afterwards Sir William) Russell and Sir John Hall, expressed strong opposition to the proposal that New Zealand should be included in the Commonwealth of Australia. Incidentally Sir John said:—

"Nature has made 1200 impediments to the inclusion in any such Federation in the 1200 miles of stormy ocean which lie between us and our brethren in Australia. That does not prevent the existence of a community of interests between us. There is a community of interests, and if circumstances allow us at a future date to join in the

Federation we shall be only too glad to do so. But what is the meaning of having 1200 miles of ocean between us? Democratic government must be a government not only for the people and by the people, but if it is to be efficient and give content, it must be in sight and within hearing of the people."

Sir John Hall belonged to the school of politics generally designated Conservative, but here he expressed an immutable truth, a principle which must never be lost sight of in considering the age-long conflict between the opposing principles of Imperialism and Nationality.

### Appeal to History.

History is to the race what memory is to the individual, and I subscribe unreservedly to the argument so admirably formulated by Edmund Burke that in all things we should act as if standing in the presence of canonised forefathers. In other words, I believe that if the principle for which I am contending is a true one, it must be capable of verification by an appeal to history. Said that distinguished and scholarly Englishman, the late Dr. Goldwin Smith\* :—

"There are two grand facts with which the philosophy of history deals—the division of nations and the succession of ages. Are these without a meaning? If so the two greatest facts in the world are alone meaningless."

"It is clear that the division of nations has entered deeply into the counsels of creation. It is secured not only by barriers of sea, mountains, rivers, intervening deserts—barriers which conquest, the steam-vessel, and the rail-road might surmount—but also by race, by language, by climate, and other physical influences, so potent that each in its turn has been magnified into the key of all history. The division is perhaps as great and as deeply-rooted as it could be without destroying the unity of mankind. Nor is it hard to see a reason for it. If all mankind were one state, with one set of customs, one literature, one code of laws, and this state became corrupted, what remedy, what redemption would there be? None, but a convulsion which would rend the frame of society to pieces and deeply injure the moral life which society is designed to guard. Not only so, but the very idea of political improvement might be lost, and all the world might become more dead than China. Nations redeem each other. They preserve for each other principles, truths, hopes, aspirations, which, committed to the keeping of one nation only, might as frailty and error are conditions of man's being, become extinct forever. They not only raise each other again when fallen, they save each other from falling. They support each other's steps by sympathy and example, they moderate each other's excesses and extravagances, and keep them short of the fatal point by the mutual action of opinion, when the action of opinion is not shut out by despotic folly. They do for each other nationally very much what men of different characters do for each other morally in the intercourse of life; and that they might do this it was necessary that they should be as they are, and as the arrangements of the world secure their being at once like and unlike, like enough for sympathy, unlike enough for mutual correction, conquest, therefore, may learn that it has in the long run to contend not only against morality but against nature. . . . Nationality is not a virtue, but it is an ordinance of nature and a natural bond, it does much good; in itself it prevents none, and the experience of history condemns every attempt to crush it when it has once been really formed."

Such is the case for Nationality as presented by Dr. Goldwin Smith when he was Professor of History at the great University of Oxford more than sixty years ago. It would be difficult to find a more scholarly and eloquent justification for the aspiration of Ireland, and it explains to us Dr. Goldwin Smith's lifelong antagonism to Imperialism, an antagonism which towards the end of his long life found eloquent expression in his opposition to the war against the Dutch Republics in South Africa.

It were idle for me to digress in order to illustrate at length from history the principle of Nationality. Suffice it to say that the first illustration of the exercise of the right of self-determination is afforded by no less an auth-

\*On the Study of History, being lectures delivered in Oxford, 1859-61.

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