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On the Necessity of a State Provision for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb of Ireland.

By Charlotte M. B. Stoker. (Heard Wednesday, 13th May, 1863.)

THE condition of the uneducated mute is worse than that of the heathen; the most barbarous and savage nations have some notion (however faint) of a Supreme Being, but a deaf mute has no idea of a God. The mind is a perfect blank; he recognises no will but his own natural impulses; he is alone in the midst of his fellow-men; an outcast from society and its pleasures; a man in outward appearance, in reality reduced to the level of the brute creation.

That the capacity for receiving education exists in most cases cannot for a moment be questioned, from the numerous instances in the present day of highly educated and even accomplished mutes. Seven years is the period thought necessary by experienced teachers to complete the education of a deaf and dumb person; and mutes are found to be most easily instructed between the ages of eight and eighteen; but within the last year an experiment has been made at Claremont of establishing an infant school, which is found to answer well.

The average of those born deaf and dumb to the entire population of Ireland is about 1 to 1,380, which is very nearly the average all over Europe. According to the census of 1851, there were in Ireland 180 deaf and dumb; of these 3,000 were of an age and capacity to receive instruction, the remaining 2,180 were either too old or too young to be educated, or were idiots as well as mutes.

To meet the educational wants of this mass of human misery and ignorance we have a few private institutions, supported wholly by individual charity, in which about 400 are educated, leaving the remaining 2,600 to utter ignorance.

True, in the amended Irish Poor Law Act, in the year 1843, 6 and 7 Vic., cap. 92, Poor Law Guardians are empowered to pay out of the poor rates for the education and maintenance of deaf and dumb children under eighteen years old, at any institution where such instruction is given. But it is to be observed, that among the poor, who are so utterly destitute as to become inmates of the workhouse, there are comparatively few deaf and dumb; only 82 are at present provided for under this Act, viz. :—80 in Cabra, 1 in Belfast, and 1 in Strabane.

It is among the mass of the people such as those for whom national education is provided, who, although not belonging to the class of paupers, are nevertheless unable to pay the sum necessary (or indeed, in most instances, any sum at all), that a state provision for the education of the deaf and dumb is required.

It is a startling fact, that while state provision is made in France, in Prussia, in America, and other countries, nothing of the sort has been done in Great Britain.

The neglect of this measure is the more astonishing, when England is known to provide so freely for the education of the poor of every other class, without distinction of creed. Why should the deaf and dumb be the exception? Why should not a privilege be granted to those speechless poor which is so liberally bestowed on all others?

In New York, where the population is more than three times as great as in Dublin, and the number of mutes less—as in 1856 they had only 125, while in Dublin there were 163—there is not only a State institution for deaf and dumb, but a church in which the sign language is used, and they were then about establishing a reading room and library for the benefit of this class. Seeing that America and other countries have provided so amply and liberally for the education of their deaf and dumb, should we be so far behind in such a cause?

There are in Ireland (supported by private charity) four institutions for the education of the deaf and dumb. One at Claremont, county of Dublin—the first established of these institutions—has been in existence forty-seven years, and was founded in 1816 by the exertions of Dr. Orpen, a true philanthropist, who devoted his life to this cause; it has not only proved a successful experiment, but led the way to the formation of the other institutions now existing in Ireland. It contains 70 children,—one in Belfast contains 80, and one at Strabane (county Tyrone), 15. In these, 165 Protestant boys and girls are clothed, fed, educated, and (when of suitable ages) apprenticed to trades. At Cabra, near Dublin, 235 Roman Catholic boys and girls receive the same advantages.

There was, until lately, a small industrial school for adult female mutes in Moneymore, which owed its origin and support entirely to one lady (Miss Wright), who for about 20 years carried it on with the help of a teacher. It was partly supported by the sale of wood carving, the work of the inmates, who usually numbered about 15. From pecuniary difficulties this good work has been stopped, for the present at least, and the public aid has been solicited to pay off the debts incurred.

These constitute the whole means at the command of the Irish people for the education of above 3,000 persons, cut off from the ordinary means of instruction and communication.

I trust the time is near at hand when we will have national institutions, where the sympathy and encouragement extended to so many other classes of society may flow as freely for those so much more in need of it from their peculiar privation.

This subject is one of such national importance as would seem to call for the interference of the representatives of the people, who, by a zealous and united appeal to the Legislature, could scarcely fail to obtain a grant to meet so imperative a necessity as a NATIONAL INSTITUTION for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb.

While ample provision is made for lunatic asylums and reformatories; while criminals are taught and provided for at a vast expense, and in the most careful and efficient manner; surely, if brought properly under their notice, the Government of this country could not refuse so

reasonable a demand as the maintenance of an institution for instructing in morality and religion, as well as for fitting for some useful occupation, those who would otherwise remain burdens on themselves and on society. Let us hope that the time is not far distant, when, for the instruction of Ireland's 3,000 mutes, proper means will be adopted to bridge the gulf that divides them from their fellowmen.

DISCUSSION.

Dr. W. E. WILDE, (Census Commissioner), said that the subject was one of such importance that it had engaged the attention of himself and his colleagues in the Census' Commission of 1851, when they brought the subject of educating deaf mutes prominently under the notice of the executive, and urged upon the then Lord Lieutenant that a state provision should be made for the purpose.

Their report contained the following passage :—"We respectfully suggest for your Excellency's consideration the expediency of engrafting upon the system of national education some institution for the instruction of this class of this community, or of granting aid to those schools already in existence." The actual number of the deaf and dumb in Ireland at present was 4,990. The result of statistics and investigations showed that this permanent malady might be classed as hereditary. Although not always transmitted direct from parent to child—a generation, or two, or three might elapse—but still they found the disease breaking out, if not in the direct descent, in some of the collateral branches.

The statistics of the deaf and dumb showed the following results :—Average in Europe, 1 in 1,526 ' in Ireland, 1 in 1,700. The number of the afflicted in Ireland susceptible of instruction—that is, being within the ages of 8 and 15—was between 600 and 700. The importance of the subject brought under the notice of the Society should be admitted by all; and he sincerely hoped that the great object in view would be carried out by the government either engrafting institutions for the education of deaf mutes on the national system, or affording state aid to the institutions already in operation, and which had done so much, although necessarily on a limited scale, for the amelioration of the sad condition of this class of their fellow beings. The act of parliament referred to, had been in existence for a number of years, under which it was usual for boards of guardians to transmit blind persons to asylums, but it was much to be regretted that they had not done so with the deaf and dumb. It was quite true that according to the Census returns the number of deaf mutes amounted to over 3,000, but there were two important facts to be borne in mind—first, that not more than 600 or 700 of that number were suitable for instruction, being within the ages of 8 and 15; and, secondly, it should be remembered that the country was now in an abnormal state, the effects of the famine years and of the exodus of the population not having passed away, for when such large numbers of the people emigrated, the diseased, the blind, and the deaf and dumb were left behind.

Mr. HAUGHTON, J.P., said the truth was that, generally speaking, the boards of guardians had not been applied to. He had no doubt, if application were made to them, they would be willing to use the powers conferred on them by act of Parliament, in all cases where it was expedient to do so. During the entire time he had been a member of one of the metropolitan boards he had never known an instance of such application being made.

Mr. O'SHAUGHNESSY concurred in the opinion as to the necessity of State provision being made for the training of deaf mutes. The objection made by some as to deaf mutes being helpless, was met by the fact that in the census for 1851 it appeared that a large proportion (1,683) of the total (4,747) in Ireland were engaged in remunerative employment. The Christian Brothers, under whose superintendence the Cabra Institution was, were now making arrangements for increasing the industrial training of the pupils, and these efforts should be assisted, especially by increasing the stipends allowed for the pupils by Poor Law Guardians. In the Cabra Male Institution there were altogether 138 or 139 inmates, of whom 86 were supported out of the poor rates, 9 were maintained by friends, leaving over 40 supported wholly by voluntary charity. If to the number supported at Cabra were added those maintained and educated in other establishments for the training of deaf mutes throughout Ireland, there would be a total of only between 350 and 400 provided for, so that the great bulk of the deaf mutes in the country, 3,000 in number, were wholly unprovided for. It should be remembered how slow the process of instruction was. It took six years to instruct any of these subjects. At present £10 a year was about the sum yearly allowed, whilst the expense was considerably greater for each. It would be real economy to expend money on the industrial training of this class. There was no doubt that the deaf and dumb might be made self-supporting, and the matter was well worth the attention of the members, of poor law boards. When one of the deaf and dumb went back to the workhouse, no matter how high his intellectual training in the institution, he was still helpless; but give him a trade, and he became an earner, and, instead of being a burden, would be a help to the community. The condition of the class entitled them to no less considerate treatment than the criminal or vagrant boy. There was fully as much necessity for some State provision for the training and instruction of the deaf mute. If the legislature deemed it expedient to educate the vagrant lad in an industrial school, and to train the juvenile criminal in a reformatory, he could not conceive why they should not act in a similar manner with the afflicted and helpless deaf mute. It should be the law that on the certificate of two justices and a medical man any poor deaf mute should (with the consent of his parents, if living) be sent to some approved and duly certified institution, (such as Cabra or Claremont may then be), and their support aided out of the public funds. This would be the true way to aid and extend the usefulness of the excellent institutions now in existence, and whilst it would be a mercy to the object, it would be the truest economy towards the public.

Mr. C. MOLLOY observed that, of the entire number of deaf mutes in the country, only a certain proportion were of such a class of society as would admit of their being instructed in public institutions. Boards of guardians could only provide for them when they were destitute orphans, or else the children of persons entitled to workhouse relief.

Dr. STEWART mentioned, as an instance of the degree of intelligence and efficiency to which deaf mutes might be brought by proper instruction, that in an institution with which he was connected the most valuable servants were two persons who were deaf and dumb. He was inclined to think that for a much smaller sum than £18 a head a training institution, thoroughly efficient and practical, might be obtained, provided, of course, that there were a certain number of inmates, say 100 in each.

The Chairman (Sir THOMAS LAECOM) said the discussion had cleared away many difficulties, which had at first appeared. The great number, which appeared to be startling, was shown by Dr. Wilde to be not all capable of instruction. The remarks of Dr. Stewart proved the advantages resulting from the judicious training of the class in question; and the help which the State gave to their support through means of the Poor Law was explained by Mr. O'Shaughnessy. Little remained but to make this operative, by bringing the matter prominently under public notice, and this the excellent paper read would, he was sure, be effective in doing. The best mode of removing the evil at present admitted to exist was to enlist public sympathy on the subject.