

# THE IRISH PEASANT

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**THE IRISH PEASANT.**

# THE IRISH PEASANT

A Sociological Study

*EDITED FROM ORIGINAL PAPERS*

BY

A GUARDIAN OF THE POOR



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## PREFACE.

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IN the following pages are to be found the personal experiences of one who led the life herein described. There are few persons in whom the spirit of inquiry is so strong as to suffer much hardship in order to get to the bottom of a commonplace subject. This, it may be truthfully stated, has been done. Perhaps it may furthermore be found that the subject is not so commonplace as it seems at first sight. Much that is unknown, or little known by the world at large, is to be found in these pages, so that in one sense, at least, they will not be commonplace. And in another sense they will be found somewhat uncommon, in that they contain the results of the observations of a man of unbiased views. He was a real person, anxious only to

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discover the truth as to a matter in which he felt a deep interest. Indeed, its truthfulness and freedom from prejudice must form the editor's best excuse for the publication of this autobiography.

The book also contains some useful information about matters of present public interest. For such there is a great need just now; party spirit runs high, and few writers or speakers can be looked on as being unprejudiced. Whatever the shortcomings of this part of the book may be, it is at least written in an impartial spirit. It may be added that the facts and figures are from the best sources, and are capable of proof.

THE EDITOR.

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## APPENDIX.

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(A, Page 7.)

WHAT has been stated here may seem absurd to some persons, nevertheless it describes a state of things which really exists. The editor knew of another case where a young man inheriting property was gravely told that he could not possibly be looked upon as a "gentleman" unless he had at least "four thousand a-year." In this case, as in that in the first chapter, the object of the remark was a man of ancient family, blameless character, and independent means. This state of things, no doubt, does not exist in every part of Ireland : in some few places there are very "small," and very poor gentry, but in most rural districts the "gentry" consist of agents who are supposed to stand in their employer's shoes, *pro tem*, landowners, who, though nearly always "hard up," yet have large houses and extensive properties, and parvenus, of one sort or another, generally connected with "whisky" or "grazing," these latter being usually rich men.

A state of society such as this may be found in counties where the bulk of the people are very poor. A resident gentry, in the common sense of the term, is greatly needed in Ireland.

M'Whirter here expresses the sentiments of most Irish Conservatives, especially those in Ulster. Conservatism in Ireland is quite different from Conservatism anywhere else. Owing to a curious complication of matters in the past which need not here be gone into, a class of people in Ireland are Conservative on one or two points, and not so on anything else. It was at one time the policy of the Tories to (very inconsistently) back up Irish Protestants who were Radicals to the backbone. Hence their support was gained, and has been kept down to the present, though whether the Conservative party may be able to keep it

in the future is very doubtful. Political Protestantism is the test, almost the only one, of a "sound Conservative" in Ireland. Conservatism has been much less of a class question than in England, many, if not most, of the great Irish landowners having always been Liberals.<sup>1</sup> In a great number of cases within the editor's personal knowledge, Irish Conservatives, especially those of the middle-class, have become Liberals on going to live in England.

Their Puritan origin, and the fact of so many, if not most, Irish Protestants being Nonconformists, may account to some extent for this fact.

(B, Page 11, Bogs.)

As most English readers may not be familiar with Irish bogs, a short account of them may be of interest.

Irish bogs are of different kinds, varying from a "wet spot" between two little hills to a vast plain of peat and heather. The common bogs or moist places are much like those to be found in Devonshire and elsewhere in England, and require little or no description save that Irish bogs of this kind usually contain more peat than those in England.

The great bogs of Ireland correspond in some respects to the "fen districts" of England, but in other ways are very different. The bogs resemble the fens in that they are perfectly level, contain peat, and often adjoin marshes. There is also in both cases a distinction between "bog" and "marsh," as there is a difference between "marsh land and fen land." Here the likenesses end, and the unlikenesses begin. In the first place, a bog is unlike a fen in that it contains much more peat suitable for fuel. Peat stacks may no doubt be found in the fen districts, but they are not on the whole common, and the peats are difficult to get. Peat fuel abounds in the Irish bogs, and is to be

<sup>1</sup> If the lists of landowners are studied, it will be found that the Lansdowne, Kenmare, Devonshire, Clanricarde, Leinster, Fitzwilliam, and many other great families have been Liberals.

had everywhere, the reason for this being, that the peat in the Irish bog is less mixed with other matters than that of the fens. However, if there is a gain in fuel, there is a very great loss in other respects, because fen is capable of reclamation, being mixed with other substances, and Irish bog is, on the whole, incapable of reclamation. Small patches of bog have been reclaimed by bringing clay from a distance and mixing it with the peat. This has been done with some of the small Ulster bogs lying between little hills, but the process seemed a troublesome one, and the reclaimed bog was only suitable for roots or meadow. These are the only instances of reclaimed bog which the editor has seen. The great bogs seem to be quite incapable of being reclaimed on any wide scale for the reason before stated.

An Irish bog is much drier than an English fen, and for this reason a dry spot in or near a bog is much healthier than an "isle" in the fens. No mist or miasma rises from a bog where "marsh" is absent; hence people living on the borders of large bogs are often very healthy and free from ague, which is more than can be said for the inhabitants of many of the fens. Another result of this peculiar dryness of the bogs is, that heather grows to a great height on many of them, and grouse thrive apace where they are preserved. In fact many of the large Irish bogs may be described as moors flattened out, being often quite as dry as the latter, and sometimes easier to walk over. The great "banks," as they are called, of dry peat are very remarkable; these are often many feet, or as it is called "spits," in depth, a "spit" being the length of a peat or "sod of turf."

Few or no Irish counties are without more or less of bogs, but in the eastern and north-eastern counties, they are very small and far between; besides this, most of them have been "cut away." "Cut-away bog," or "spent moss," as it is called in parts of Ulster, means bog from which all the peat has been cut. It forms a very ugly object, full of holes of black, slimy water, and beds of gravel or stone which underlie the peat. In eas-

tern Ireland coal is cheaper than in the south of England, the collieries of Lancashire and Cumberland not being far off, and sea carriage being cheaper than that by rail. It is well for the people of these parts of Ireland that coal is reasonable in price, as there are few woods or bogs whence fuel could be obtained. The peat bogs of Ireland are chiefly in the central parts of the country, hence those districts lying between them and the east coast are worst off for fuel, coal being dear, and "turf" scarce or altogether absent. These great central bogs of Ireland contain a practically exhaustless supply of peat fuel. Much of this is brought to Dublin by barges, and great stacks of peat or "turf" are to be seen on the canal banks near the bridges. Two canals lead from Dublin to the Shannon, the chief traffic on these being turf or produce from the rural districts, and coal and timber from Dublin. It is a curious fact that coal, chiefly for public institutions, such as barracks and workhouses in the central parts of Ireland, is brought by canal from Dublin. It is said that it is more economical than peat, though the latter abounds in these localities. Some people in the country also think it "vulgar" to burn "turf;" besides this, modern grates are not suited for burning it. But "turf" is the fuel of the peasantry, wherever they can get it. They cut it themselves usually, so that it costs merely the small payments made to the landowner for the "turf bank." These bog rents are often very nominal, besides this, most farms in boggy counties have what is called "turbarry," or right of cutting turf attached. Peat is burned on an open fireplace of the old fashion, the sods or peats being built in little heaps. In Dublin, "turf" is quite too costly for burning alone, it is only used to help to burn bad coal used by the poor, or for lighting fires. "Turf-cutting" affords employment to many persons in the central parts of Ireland, and there are villages chiefly inhabited by "turf-cutters." Some years ago, experiments were made with machinery to make a hard, durable peat fuel; this was brought to Dublin in small circular discs, but, for some reason or other, the manu-

facture was given up. Lately, a company has been formed for the purpose of making "peat fuel," with what success remains yet to be seen.

These bogs take up a great space. The largest, called "the bog of Allan," extends over several counties, not in one unbroken tract, but winding in and out. In some places, it is so broad that it bounds the horizon, a sea of peat and heather lying in front of the spectator.

Peat has a power of preserving things covered therewith for a great length of time. Many objects of interest have been discovered in the Irish bogs in a wonderfully good state of preservation, notably the remains of the Irish elk, a gigantic animal for centuries extinct.

In the Dublin museums, many objects of interest may be seen which have been discovered in Irish peat bogs.

In most parts of Ireland, peat bogs are called "bogs," and peats are called "sods of turf," nor, if other names were used, would the people understand what was meant. In parts of Ulster, bogs are called "mosses," and peats are called "péats."

(C, Page 16, Protection.)

Protectionist ideas seem to the editor to be gaining ground greatly in Ireland. There are many reasons for this feeling. Manufacture of cloth has been lately started on a more extensive scale, and people find that they are unable to keep pace with English manufacturers, having better machinery and more capital. Besides this, French and American notions are very popular in Ireland, and France and the United States are well known to be protectionist countries. It is not considered prudent to say much about protection at present, but there is little doubt that sooner or later a demand for it will arise. This demand will come chiefly from the working-class, many of whom are thrown out of employment by the cheapness of English goods. The Dublin working-class bitterly complain of the want of patriotism of their fellow-townsmen and women,

who buy English-made dress materials and shoes, simply because they are cheaper than those made at home. Dublin was at one time a great centre of the Irish boot and shoe trade, these being made of excellent quality. This industry has been almost destroyed by the introduction of cheap English machine-made boots and shoes. Irish makers cannot possibly compete with these, and the Irish public, screaming patriots included, buy the English-made article simply because it is cheaper than that made at home. It is the same with dress of other kinds. Poplin and tabinet are beautiful materials, at one time largely manufactured in Dublin, but Irish ladies are not sufficiently patriotic to wear them. And stuffs of English or foreign manufacture are now worn at the drawing-rooms and vice-regal balls instead of home-made fabrics.

Among the general public there is the same want, or alleged want, of patriotism, in buying cheap English shoddies and stuffs, partly because they are cheaper, and yet more, because they are considered more fashionable and smarter than the old-fashioned woollens and friezes. It is, no doubt, a great proof of the "union of hearts" between certain people in Ireland and others in England, that the former should enrich the latter at the cost of the semi-famished Irish working-class.

(D, Page 23, Antiquities.)

The eastern part of Ireland, north of Dublin, is particularly rich in the remains of abbeys and castles. Some of these are of great size and beauty. King John's Castle at Trim, Bective Abbey, Carlingford Abbey, the ruins of the Archiepiscopal palace at Swords, near Dublin, and many other historic remains are in Leinster. A little to the north in Lecale in Ulster, are ruins of numerous castles along the coast. There are few parts of the British Isles where so many Norman castles can be found close to each other. Most Irish ruins, ecclesiastical or civil, are greatly neglected, especially along the Ulster coast, where no one seems to care for them. The editor has known of

quantities of stones being taken from ruins of great interest to build cow-houses. Ruins in many instances are crumbling to the dust for want of a little care on the part of the lord of the soil.

(E, Page 26.)

In old surveys large parts of the county Down may be seen, which had not in the middle of the seventeenth century been as yet mapped out into town lands. The divided or mapped-out country went a certain distance and then ceased: all beyond was apparently uninhabited "bush" or "prairie." These districts are now well peopled, and are thickly studded with farmsteads and fields.

(F, Page 34, Names of Places.)

The English translation of a few of the chief Irish prefixes may be of interest. *Bally* is an Anglicised corruption of the Celtic *Bala*, a place. The Irish peasantry never pronounce the final *y* in this word. *Balla* in Ballachulish in Scotland is the same word. *Kil* means a church, or more strictly a cell, the ancient Irish churches having been very small. *Drum* means a long hill; *Dun*, a small mound or earthwork; *Lis*, a fort, usually of stakes; *Rath*, also a fort; *More* = great; *Beg* = small; *Bawn* = white; *Dubh*, pronounced *duw* or *daff* = black; *Lin* = a pool; Dublin originally pronounced *Duvelin* = dark pool; *Inver* = a river; *Ben* = a peak; *Slieve* = a mountain. Most of these words may also be found in the Scotch Highlands.

(G, Page 60, Horses and Ponies.)

There is now much talk and correspondence about improving the horses and ponies in the far west of Ireland. Yorkshire hackney stallions have been already imported by the State, and several of these were lately "on view" in Dublin. Opinions on the matter have differed very widely. Some people have stated that these are the wrong sort of horses for the little western ponies and mares, and that Clydesdale sires would have

been better. Others, with whom the editor is disposed to agree, are opposed to Clydesdale or any other form of "cart blood." The size of the progeny of Clydesdales and the little Irish mares is urged strongly as an argument in their favour, but this size is little use for ordinary harness purposes, if accompanied with sluggishness. Though English buyers may at first be taken in by the size and appearance of this cross, they will soon find out its bad qualities, and in the end the character of the Irish horse will suffer. There seems little doubt that the Yorkshire hackney stallions are much more likely to breed good harness horses of small size and low price than any sort of cart horse would be likely to do. The chief objection to the lately imported animals is, first, that their quality is not good enough, and next, that their number is not nearly large enough. They are certainly a better kind to breed with than either cart horses or weedy thoroughbreds. But in the editor's opinion it would be much better to keep these western ponies pure, and if stallions were imported, that they should be of the Highland pony family. It is a great pity that this Irish pony has been so much neglected of late years, and that males of the true Connemara breed are scarce. In this pure state these ponies are both more easily kept by the poor people on the west coast, and bring better prices in the open market, than cross-bred animals.

In the county of Antrim the native ponies have been greatly spoiled by the introduction of Suffolk blood. The result of the cross is a chestnut or black cobby animal, in no respect, save size, so good as the original pony.

(H, Page 73.)

Magistrates here mean unpaid or county magistrates. As nearly everyone knows, there are a great number of stipendiary resident magistrates in Ireland; these men have nothing to do with fiscal or poor law business. Loud complaints have been made through the Irish parliamentary representatives as to this latter class of magistrate. Their inferiority and excessive num-



ber seem to be the chief grounds of objection. As to the first charge, there seems no reason why paid magistrates should not be barristers of certain standing as in England. As to the second objection, though it would be impossible to do without paid magistrates in some places, yet the present number might be reduced, and in quiet counties such officials might be dispensed with. To a certain extent this has been already done, as in some instances there is but one stipendiary for an entire county.

(I, Page 89, Protestant Rebels.)

At the close of the last century most Ulster Protestants were in a state of open rebellion. Some hotly contested battles took place between the insurgents and the King's troops, in which the former were defeated with some difficulty. At this time the Protestants were to some extent divided in opinion, a considerable minority being loyal to England. Should all join together in rebellion at any time the results might be serious, and this is a danger which must always be reckoned with.

(J, Page 95, Land Courts.)

As is well known, Irish rents are now fixed by a court of land commissioners for a term of fifteen years. This system of fixing rents has not, on the whole, given much satisfaction, especially to the smaller landholders. To understand some of the reasons for this want of confidence, a short account of Irish land valuation becomes needful.

The whole of Ireland was valued many years ago by a number of official valuers. This valuation was called "Griffith's valuation," and was commonly supposed to be one-fourth under the actual letting value of land at the time before the present agricultural depression began. Even at this time "Griffith" was not considered to represent the true value of the land. The valuation had been made at a time when wheat was dear and labour cheap, and when cattle and sheep commanded much smaller prices than at present. The impression a few years ago

was that the strong corn-growing<sup>e</sup> land, especially that in the eastern parts of Ireland, was too highly valued, and on the other hand, that pasture and light turnip-growing land was quite too cheaply valued. From the alteration in the respective values of corn and stock, it was quite to be expected that land should also alter as to its valuation. Another proof of these changed values was to be found in the prices bid for interests in farms. In many cases "Griffith" was no guide whatever. Some land let at or near this valuation was thought to be too dear, other land let much above Griffith was considered cheap. Matters stood thus when the present land courts were established. One of the first grounds of discontent with these courts was, that their powers were at once too limited and too full. They were said to be too limited because leaseholds and grazing-farms did not come within the scope of their operation. And, on the other hand, landlords complained because rents were fixed on farms which were practically grazing land. They also complained of rents being fixed on land which had been let for short terms, where the tenant had made no improvements, and was expected to give up the land after the expiration of the few years for which it had been let. Both landlords and tenants were also dissatisfied with the constitution of the land courts, some members of which were not considered to be competent authorities on the subject of land valuation. In one instance, a tailor and draper in a country town was appointed a land commissioner. He may have been fully qualified to value land, but the fact of his business being well-known was not one to give him weight with the agricultural interest.

In making their decisions, the courts were considered by the tenantry to have been too much guided by "Griffith," and to have valued some land too highly. This land, near the coast, was both valued highly and let at dear rents, and in former times was no doubt quite worth these rents for wheat-growing. But the drop in the rents was not thought to anything like correspond to the fall in the price of grain. This kind of land

being ill-suited for grazing and the tenant having usually made all improvements, he found himself in a difficult position. He could not turn grazier, and if he threw up his farm he lost his property. On the other hand, many tenants who had good grazing land had their rent considerably lowered, often in cases where the reduction was not needed by the occupier.

At the subcommission courts held in the country districts, these land cases are fiercely fought out, lawyers being engaged by both landlord and tenant. Whatever abatement the tenant may get, he certainly pays for it in law costs. Nor does the matter end here, for appeals from the decisions of the sub-commissioners to the higher courts in Dublin are common, and this means yet greater expense.

Fixing rents in the "congested" districts in the south and west of Ireland is merely a ghastly kind of joke. These places are unfit for human habitation, and the people would be sunk in misery even did they pay no rent. As it is, their rents are trifling, often not more than two or three pounds annually, and this frequently in arrear for a length of time.

Public sentiment in Ireland may be said to be generally in favour of absolute ownership of the land by the occupier. Well considered schemes of land purchase, where the provisions of the enactments are simple and easily understood, will always be popular. The only remedy for the "congested" districts is to be found either in moving the people on to the uninhabited pastoral tracts or in some scheme of State-aided emigration.

(K, Page 118.)

This may be a proper place to mention people who, though not labourers or peasants, yet on the whole belong to, or are drawn from, those classes.

Workers in factories are chiefly women belonging to the poorer class of peasantry and labourers. These millworkers may be divided into two classes: first, those who live at home and work in country mills; next, those who have left home and are

employed in factories in towns or villages. Women working in north of Ireland factories are miserably ill-paid, but when they live with their relatives in the rural districts, their shilling or so a day is often of service. Living in the country parts is cheap, and girls belonging to a large family often find that working in a mill to a certain extent "pays." In towns and villages, the case is quite different; here there is rent to pay for the poor habitation of the worker, she is separated from her family, and either "boards" with someone, or clubs together with one or two "hands" like herself. How far six shillings a-week will go towards the support of full-grown, hard-worked girls in towns and villages where living is as, or nearly as, dear as in England, may be easily imagined. Some years ago, a correspondent of an Irish newspaper<sup>1</sup> investigated the condition of some of the Belfast millworkers, and described their mode of life. His description was that of a people whose condition could with difficulty be more miserable. The impression left on the editor's mind after reading the account was that the millworkers would be infinitely better lodged and more wholesomely fed in the workhouse. Working-men are, as a rule, quite able to protect their own interests, but the case is different with working-women. Women living as these north of Ireland millworkers, or, indeed, as women elsewhere in the British Isles, are injurious to society if nothing else; as the progeny of such ill-nourished creatures must in time become a serious burden to the community. How far it would be possible for the State to enforce a system of better housing and payment for those who are unable to help themselves would not be easy to say. It might be replied that the state of trade did not permit of better wages. There might also be much talk about the laws of Political Economy. As to these objections, the state of vulgar luxury in which some of the proprietors, directors, and managers of these factories live, might lead many to suppose that their profits would allow of better wages being paid to the wretched beings

<sup>1</sup> Either *Freeman's Journal* or *Belfast Morning News*.

in their employment. As to the laws of Political Economy, the State has found it needful to interfere with these already, in order to protect the weak and helpless, and may find it necessary to do so again.

(L, Page 118.)

The Irish fisherman has not been noticed in these pages. As he is in some cases a kind of peasant, and in others a sort of labourer, a short account of him may not be without interest.

There are on the Irish coast fishermen who go to sea in large boats, usually cutters, luggers, or a kind of sloop called a "hooker." There are also men who fish from open boats, and, as a consequence, do not go far out to sea. Some men belonging to both of these classes hold land in small quantities, and are farmers in springtime and later autumn. When their patches of grain and potatoes have been "put in," the owners go to sea in their own boats, if they have got any, and if not, they hire themselves out to "smack-owners." Many Irish fishermen hire themselves to Scotch smack-owners for the herring season. The editor has known of fishermen on the eastern and north-eastern coast leaving home when their fields or gardens have been planted and going to Scotland to be employed in the fishing season.

Though there are many smacks on the Irish coast, particularly on the eastern shore, they are not numerous enough to employ all the fishermen. The result is that the latter are obliged either to hire themselves on "foreign" smacks or to fish from open boats. These open boats are generally very roughly constructed, being usually built in or near the fishing villages by local builders. The cost is low, being often not more than a third of that charged by a regular boatbuilder at a seaport town. The editor has known of good eighteen and twenty feet boats being built for six or seven pounds. These appear very rudely constructed, but they are strong, and will "live" in very bad weather.

On the western and north-western coasts the canvas "curragh" or "corach" already described is used. Want of timber, and the great poverty of the people in those parts of Ireland, may account for such boats being still employed.

The want of large fishing smacks is a very serious one. Great loss of life is often caused by fishing from open boats, these being sometimes struck by squalls.

In the present spring two boats and several men were lost on the east coast, the casualty being altogether due to open boats.

Several reasons are put forward for the want of large-decked boats. One is the want of proper harbours in which such craft could take refuge. Now, unlike many parts of the English coast, there are numerous places along the shores of Ireland where harbours could be made at little cost, and where natural harbours could be improved. This, no doubt, has been done to some extent, but much remains to be done. There are many places where only open boats, which can be drawn up on the shore, are kept, simply because a harbour has not been improved or deepened, or a pier already made not kept up. The accident just named took place a few miles from a little port, whose pier was partly washed away a few years ago. The harbour is now useless, and fishing is carried on from open boats. As mountains, nearly three thousand feet in height, rise abruptly from the coast, the squalls, with certain winds, are very dangerous, and casualties have been very common. Yet nothing has been done for years past to repair the little pier. Different persons, public and private, are blamed for this neglect, and it is a difficult matter to find out where the fault lies. The fact remains, that last autumn the pier was in its ruinous state daily becoming worse, and that nothing had been done towards repairing it. Without proper piers and harbours it is not to be expected that anyone will embark capital in building fishing smacks, and loss of life and of money is the result.

No doubt, on the other hand it may be said, that where there

are good harbours, "foreigners," i.e., Cornish, Manx, and Scotch fishermen got most of the fish, and that Irish fishermen are behind-hand. There is, no doubt, some truth in this, but the fault would seem to lie with persons other than the fishermen, as the latter are so numerous and willing to work that they hire themselves in Scotch boats. There seems a great indisposition on the part of persons with capital in Ireland to embark it in any sort of maritime enterprise, such as smack-owning would be. Although there is plenty of capital in and around Dublin, and in parts of Ulster, and many good harbours are to be found in those parts of Ireland, yet smack-owners are few. This want of enterprise is a serious drawback to Ireland, as it means a very heavy annual loss to the country. And whatever may be said in favour of State assistance to buy boats along the far western shores of Ireland, where aid of some kind is sorely needed, there is certainly no necessity for such in the east or north of Ireland.

As a rule the fishermen are very poor: they are a poor class everywhere, but particularly so in Ireland. The only exceptions to the rule are in those instances where the fishermen are small farmers as well. In many cases within the editor's knowledge, where men have had a few acres of good land, and were in the habit of hiring in smacks during the herring season, they have been in comfortable circumstances. There may be seen in some places snug cottages belonging to such men, these being often surrounded by flower gardens. The explanation given for the very unusual sight of flowers in rural Ireland is, that "The women manage the farms whilst the men are away at the fishing, and that women always like flowers about a place." Fishermen of this stamp are unfortunately few in number, being limited very much, so far as the editor is aware, to one district. It is much to be desired that the number of such men could be increased. This can only be done by the public authorities improving the harbours, and by private persons showing a greater spirit of enterprise.

(M, Page 147.)

The editor cannot hold himself responsible for the exact truthfulness of everything stated in the preceding pages. Everything is accurate so far as he knows, and where the facts have not been within his personal knowledge, they have been verified as far as possible by reference to the best possible sources of information. What have been herein stated as facts are to be taken as generally true, but, as exceptions may be found to every rule, not universally true.



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