

VII.

RECENT MANUFACTURE AND USE OF QUERNS IN IRELAND. By SIR ARTHUR MITCHELL, K.C.B., M.D., LL.D., FOREIGN SECRETARY.

A work on the great famine in Ireland appeared in 1896.* It was written by W. P. O'Brien, C.B., who was formerly a Poor-Law Inspector, and played an important part in the time of the famine, and it gives us an account of it from personal observation. I quote the following statements from pages 114 and 115 :—

“One of the many consequences of the change from a potato to a corn diet was, that the means of grinding were found to be exceedingly limited.

“The powerful Admiralty Mills at Deptford, Portsmouth, Plymouth, and Malta, besides two large hired mills, were therefore now constantly employed in grinding the corn brought by the Commissariat, thus leaving the mill power of Ireland to the private importers of grain into that country ; and *hand-mills, on the principle of the old Irish quern, were made for distribution in the most distressed districts, while others, constructed on an improved plan, were procured from France.*”

The revelation here of the easy and quick return, under favouring circumstances, to the use of an implement which appears in almost every European museum of Antiquities, is very instructive, as well as curious and interesting. The old way of grinding corn came back at once, when the new way failed to do all that was required. The resumed use of the quern was not the result of any change in the condition of the people, either in regard to culture or civilisation. They had neither gone up nor down. Those persons, indeed, at whose instance the querns were made and distributed, belonged to the highly cultured class of the community, and they do not appear to have thought of it as a going back to a state of barbarism to grind corn in a way which was and is widely practised by people whom we are accustomed to call barbarous. On the

* The title of the book is, *The Great Famine in Ireland, and a Retrospect of the Fifty Years 1845-95, with a Sketch of the Present Condition and Future Prospects of the Congested Districts*, by W. P. O'Brien, C.B. 8vo. London, 1896.

contrary, they facilitated the re-introduction of the old rude method of grinding corn as both suitable and good, whenever the new method proved insufficient. If the people of these very "distressed districts" had consisted of Oxford graduates, the same thing might have taken place, in order to provide food, and this would have occurred without any disappearance of their scholarship, and without involving any sort of incapacity. It would, indeed, have only meant that they had acted intelligently in the circumstances in which they were placed—converting their corn into meal by grinding it in a hand-mill, when mills driven by water or steam failed to do what was needed. We cannot, in short, make the use of the quern a measure of the user's capacity or culture, nor can we make it a measure of the state of civilisation in which he lives, without a knowledge of many other things regarding him.

Mr O'Brien's book was published in 1896, about fifty years after the famine, and it was in it that I first saw a reference made to this interesting occurrence; but there is also a record of it in a book published within a couple of years of the famine times. The earlier book I refer to was published in London in 1848, and is called *The Irish Crisis*. It was written by the well-known C. E. Trevelyan, afterwards Sir Charles Edward Trevelyan, K.C.B. He tells us that, in consequence of the insufficiency of the means of grinding, hand mills made on the plan of the old Irish querns were distributed among those needing them, and also that hand mills made on a better plan were procured from France for distribution. As to the fact, therefore, that querns were made for distribution in the more distressed districts of Ireland, during the time of the famine, there can be no question.

When I saw the paragraph which I have quoted from Mr O'Brien's book, I communicated with him on the subject, for the purpose of getting a specimen of the querns distributed among the Irish by the Relief Commissioners in 1845 or 1846. He at once agreed to assist me, and seemed quite confident that a specimen would be easily obtained. Applications were accordingly made to Poor Law officials and to the Constabulary, but with no success. Through Mr O'Brien

and other friends in Ireland, I was put into communication with several persons who, it was thought, might prove helpful in the search, and much correspondence followed. I have more than once occupied myself in hunting for a lost object of interest to the antiquary, and have had some success, but I never made a search with more diligence and earnestness than that which I made for a specimen of the querns brought into existence by the Irish famine. The result however was, in the most complete sense, a failure. I neither succeeded in getting a specimen, nor was I able to discover any documents or records containing references to this distribution of recently made querns—showing the place in which they were made, their number, their cost, the part of France from which the French specimens came, and the respects in which these last were considered superior to the copies of the old Irish querns. So much can fifty years do to wipe out the evidence of an interesting occurrence. This should be remembered by archæologists, and should lead to modifications of the strong conclusions which their field of work often invites.