



Correspondence of Daniel O'Connell, Volume VI, 1837-1840

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From the Linen and Cotton Weavers of Belfast to House of Commons

Ballymacarrett, Belfast, 20 July 1839

Sir, I am instructed by the Linen and Cotton Weavers of Belfast to solicit you to be so kind as to give them your support in opposing a bill* that James Emerson Tennent has prepared for the regulation of the linen, cotton and hempen manufacture in Ireland. The reason why we solicit your support in the opposing of this measure is from the following circumstances.

In the year of 1837 some of our employers prepared a bill which the weavers thought would be ruinous in the extreme to the trade of Ireland and they thought they would be justified in opposing its provisions in which opposition they were supported (they are proud to state) by the magistrates of the two counties of Down and Antrim and the public at large amongst whom they could name a number of members of parliament. Even Mr. Tennent himself did subscribe one pound sterling to the weavers' funds to carry their opposition into effect. The opposition and agitation continued from the 4th of November 1837 until the 19th and 20th of July 1838.

Upon the 23rd of January that year a general meeting of magistrates to the number of 28 was convened in the Town Hall Police Buildings of Belfast which meeting was also attended by a deputation from the body of manufacturers and weavers when a committee of the three classes were appointed in order that they might correspond with each other in preparing a bill that might give a fair protection till [sic] both masters and workmen. Mr. Molony [Walter Molony, R.M.], on behalf of the magistrates, prepared a bill a copy of which he submitted to the manufacturers, besides one to the weavers for their respective amendments. The weavers agreed to the bill prepared by the magistrates, not so the masters. Instead of agreeing to that bill they got up another new one. It was then suggested by Mr. Molony and Mr. Agnew [John Agnew, Bloomfield, Belfast], Sovereign of Belfast, that both parties should meet face to face in presence of the magistrates and there endeavour by deliberation to come to a mutual understanding. That meeting took place on the 19th February 1838, Mr. Sharman Crawford in the chair, and, after two days' deliberation, a bill was agreed to by all parties, a copy of which bill I furnished Mr. Tennent with immediately, craving his support in endeavouring to have it passed into a law.

That gentleman's answer on the 23rd March to me was that the House of Commons would sanction the introduction of no measure until such time as the commissioners appointed to enquire into the situation of the handloom weavers had given in their report but that, when it would come before the House, he should be prepared to take an active part in supporting the measure. Consequently we are now surprised that, although the report of that commission has not yet been given, that, although Mr. Tennent pledged himself to support the bill of 1838, he should now take advantage of the weavers' ignorance and, at the request of some of our employers, prepare a new bill and endeavour to get it passed into a law without ever consulting them. We will as soon as possible furnish your Honour with a copy of the bill we wish carried into effect. Hoping you will be kind enough to give it your influence [which] will much oblige in name of my fellow workmen. Your devoted servant, Henry Crone, Weavers' Secty.

*On 29 June, Emerson Tennent introduced a bill in the Commons 'to repeal so much of the Laws relating to the Linen, Hempen, Union and Cotton Manufacturers in Ireland, as relates to Manufacturers and Weavers, and to make other Provisions in lieu thereof.' His bill was not given a second reading.