

LAND NATIONALISATION—ITS NECESSITIES AND ITS AIMS.*



THAT a man like Alfred Russel Wallace, so enthusiastic and successful in the pursuit of natural science in its higher relations, should withdraw his attention from such studies to write a book on the nationalisation of the land is in itself a fact of the utmost significance. Those who imagine that the land tenure of this country is to continue like the earth itself for ever, should ponder, we will not say the conclusions of the work before us, but the fact that such a book, and by such a man, should come to be written at all. Our author is not a man who is unaccustomed to reasoning in the closest possible manner, but not after the manner of the school-men, who build portentuous theories on the narrow basis of a few first principles which have never been tested by experience. On the contrary, it is his habit to compare, analyse, test, and combine facts, revealed in actual life, and from these to draw out the theory which give them unity and intelligibility. This power is so conspicuous in his many charming works on the phenomena of sea and land, as to make him a rival—some would even place him higher—of Darwin himself. But keen as was the pleasure which Mr Wallace found in tracing the methods which nature pursued in the past in order to find an explanation of the present earth and all that it contains, he nevertheless has been for a long time a sympathising observer of the social condition of these islands of ours. One striking peculiarity of the state of this country impressed itself on the mind and heart of Mr Wallace so much that all his power of thinking was set earnestly to work to find its explanation and its remedy—for remedy it needs as much, nay more, than fever or small-pox. The fact referred to is the appalling one that the vast increase of the wealth of this country has not diminished its poverty and wretchedness. Nay, it seems certain that thousands of our people are sunk in a lower hell than they were when millionaires were unknown. The sad truth that misery is the lot of multitudes who help to produce

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the splendid fortunes in which they have no share sufficient to cover their nakedness, or warm their blood, or fill their stomachs, finds its explanation, according to our author, in the absolute ownership in land conferred by law on private individuals. Now, according to him, if wealth is not only to shed a lustre over a select portion of society, but if it is to put reasonable animal comfort, and the decencies and refinements of moral and intellectual life, within the reach of those whose lot it is to toil with their hands, then this private individual and absolute ownership in land must cease and determine. This is no hurried and impulsive conclusion on the part of our author under the pressure of feeling called into play by the dark contrast between the extremes of splendour and squalor, of the baronial hall, and the hut at once a byre and a dwelling-house, so frequently seen in our country. For eighteen years our author has been meditating on this momentous subject—a subject which the hard facts of existence will not suffer to go to sleep until some solution of it is accomplished. Mr Wallace may have argued himself into conclusions which are impracticable, a favourite phrase of the indolent, the faithless, and the timid in all ages, but supported, as they are, with so many deplorable facts, and with so much lucid and unimpassioned reasoning—for passion is suppressed in this book as firmly as if it were a study in quaternions—no wise man will dismiss them without earnest study.

It is not easy to present in small space Mr Wallace's theory of the Nationalisation of the Land. We refer the reader to the book itself, which, like the work of every great writer is intensely interesting in virtue of its facts, its illustrations, and general spirit, apart from the particular theory which it upholds. The chapter, for example on landlordism in Scotland will bring a tear to the eye of many whose ancestors were dealt with, as if they were so much scrub on the land—aye, and of many who have themselves been so used ; perhaps too it will prick some consciences impervious to the arrows of our native—and therefore it is supposed prejudiced writers—our Millers, Macleods, and Mackenzies.

But let us try to give the reader a general idea of Mr Wallace's solution of the Land Problem, and first let us quote what he holds to be the necessary requirements of a right solution.

1. It is clear that landlordism must be replaced by occupying

ownership. No less radical reform will get rid of the widespread evils of our present system.

2. Arrangements must be made by which the tenure of the holders of land must be secure and permanent, and nothing must be permitted to interfere with the free use of the land, or his certainty of reaping all the fruits of any labour or outlay he may bestow upon it.

3. Arrangements must be made by which every British subject may secure a portion of land for personal occupation at its fair agricultural value.

4. All suitable tracts of unenclosed and waste lands must, under certain limitations be open to cultivation by occupying owners.

5. The free sale and transfer of every holder's interest in his land must be secured.

6. In order that these conditions be rendered permanent, sub-letting must be absolutely prohibited, and mortgages strictly limited.

But how is it possible to give effect to these conditions, how can a tenant become an occupying owner without being a landlord under another name, and, therefore, a new source of all the evils which flow from our present system of landlordism?

Mr Wallace answers—The State must become the real owner, or ground landlord. The tenant is to be a perpetual holder of the land, not its absolute owner—the absolute owner being the State. This in effect is the feudal theory which makes the land belong to the king and all proprietors to be but holders of the land from him. It must be borne in mind that Mr Wallace would not transfer to the State all that now belongs to the proprietors of lands. We must make a distinction between the estate and what the landlord in his own person or that of his predecessors, has put *upon* or *into* the estate. Nature is responsible for the one, cultivation in some form or other for the latter. Mr Wallace would have the State take possession of the estate as it is, mere land apart from what labour has added to it. Land has a natural and inherent value depending in part on the condition and position of the soil, in part on such circumstances as population and the necessities which, in the shape of towns, ports, railroads, etc., and an abundant population create. This value the

landlord has, as a whole, no power either of creating or destroying. When the land is nationalised it will become, in this respect, and only in this respect, the absolute property of the State. But a cultivated estate has a value which is due to actual improvement, apart from its natural value. This consists in houses, fences, timber, drains, and roads not made at the public expense. In the new scheme the State is not allowed to take possession of this portion of the value of land. The characteristic which distinguishes this element of the value of land from the inherent value, is that as it was created by human energy, so it may be destroyed by neglect and wantonness. It is therefore of vital importance that all that belongs to the land as distinct from the land itself, all that is involved in tenant right should become the property of the tenant, so that he may if he choose dispose of it, in part or whole, in open market, at a profit if he has added to its value, at a loss if he allows it to deteriorate.

But how is he to get possession of it without injury to the landlord or the State? The answer is, that the State will determine the value of the land which it takes into its own hand apart from what is called the tenant right. For the loss of this the State will compensate the landlord by an annuity of equal annual value, only terminable on certain conditions. The landlord cannot bequeath these annuities to an heir further removed in blood than a second cousin, as such can have no *just expectation* of inheriting the property of a relation so far off. In all cases for a similar reason the annuities will terminate with the third generation.

Now, in the first place, tenants, after the passing of the Act, who wish to become occupying owners, must pay the value of this annuity to the State in the form of rent; and, secondly, they must purchase the tenant right from the landlord, who will be obliged to sell. They may arrange the matter privately; but failing that, a land court will decide the value of the tenant right. When the tenant pays his annual rent to the State, and the value of the tenant right to the landlord, he becomes a holder of the land in perpetuity under the State. This holder may buy as much as he can, or sell what he has. He may divide and subdivide his holding, and sell the various parts separately. This freedom, however, is to be limited by two stringent restrictions.

Sub-letting is to be absolutely forbidden; in other words, no man is to occupy more land than he can occupy personally; for sub-letting would be private landlordism under another name. The next restriction is that heavy mortgages on the land must not be allowed.

Such is a general view of the theory which Mr Wallace has elaborated after years of laborious study. In his book he discusses rival solutions of this vast question, and finds them wanting. Besides, he reviews with great clearness those objections founded on ethical and political grounds which have been raised against the position claimed for the State in relation to the land. Further, our author deals, in the frankest way, with the bearing of this scheme on the future position of our aristocracy, on our towns, our commons, our mines, our taxation, etc. Mr Wallace does not hesitate to follow his argument whither it leads him, and it has led him to the conviction that he has found a means of transferring to the State the ownership of the land without doing injury to any existing landlord or *expectant* heir; that he has hit upon a plan of land tenure which shall combine all the advantages of "safe possession and transmissible ownership;" and that shall guard us from the untold evils of the present system, and that shall render the land an inexhaustible source of national income. If all this be true, may the good time coming put swifter feathers in its wing!

We shall not attempt a criticism of Mr Wallace's theory. Gradually society *may* reach his ideal, but that idea is divided from our present circumstances by a gulf so wide that it might be dangerous to try to jump it at a bound. If ever realised it must be in the way that his own favourite evolution attains its end, here a little and there a little in the way of change, though let us hope with less waste, and more economy in the matter of time. Whatever may be our convictions as to the soundness of Mr Wallace's conclusions, most unprejudiced minds will allow that he has conclusively shewn that our present system of land tenure is productive of results, condemned by philosopher, economist, and Christian. The root of the mischief lies in the assumption made by the landlords that the land is theirs in a manner so absolute that they may turn it into a desert. Our fields are ours—who is Lord over us? This power must in some way be as-

sailed, persistently assailed, until it is razed to the ground, until it shall be impossible that facts, brutal facts, like those described by Mr Wallace in his chapter on landlordism in Scotland, can ever again happen to sully a page of our future history. It is not revolutionary now to argue thus, for the law has taken away from the proprietors of 600,000 tenants of this realm the power to increase their rents at pleasure, or to remove them from their holdings. Had such a law been in force eighty years ago, Sellar's name would not be the reproach it now is, and will be for generations—unhappy victim of a vicious system. Had we such a law now in Scotland, Clyth would have been spared those acts of rapacity which are fitted to awaken in the minds of her peaceful sons thoughts and feelings whose fruit, if unchecked, can be nothing but evil. We can understand and appreciate the views of men who say boldly that, in spite of all the misery which the present system of landlordism has let loose on individuals, it is wrong, absolutely wrong, and unjust, for the law to curtail the rights of the landlord over his land, and so over the human beings who dwell upon it. That is a view which can explain itself, and give reasons for the hope that is in it. But we cannot understand the position of those who hold that it was right to give the tenants of Ireland a Land Law which makes them the most independent tenants in the world, and yet hold at the same time that a similar Act for Scotland is not to be thought of. If by right they mean *expedient*, then they in effect say—You, the sons of Erin, because you stalk landlords, as landlords stalk deer, and with success, shall have a Land Act, but you, sons of the Highlands, because you respect the Decalogue, must be left, without one, to the *summum jus*—*i.e.*, in the vernacular, to the *tender* mercy (often cruel enough) of your Whig and Tory lords!! This is putting a premium on assassination.

The fixed stars and the lairds never change, said the old saw. Astronomy shews that the fixed stars do change, and justice is at work, and will compel the lairds to change in more ways than one. In the meantime those who are interested in the welfare of our Highland peasantry should not waste their energies, as they will not, striving for the realisation of an ideally perfect system like that of Mr Wallace, but should give the legislature no rest until the power to evict our peasantry, and to charge them rent

on the labour of their own weary hands, shall be taken out of the hands of the proprietor, and shall be given to some impartial tribunal appointed by the State. We have nothing to say about our great sheep lords—they are able to look after themselves, they occupy the chief places of the land. Possibly the deer hunting millionaire may do to them as they did to the crofter. “Thy sword has made woman childless, therefore thy mother shall be childless.” We hope not however. We believe that the vulgar display of our Winans will make the modern deer himself vulgar, and send our gentlemen back to the old school of sporting—if they will gratify the instinct, to learn the best rules and traditions of their favourite amusement. Meanwhile what remains of our peasantry must be saved—shorn as they now are of the best land, and of the vast moorland pastures so much more valuable to them than their arable land. Our good lairds who do not need any law to keep them from doing harm, though they too need better laws to help them to do good more abundantly, will not be angry at us—and if they do we cannot help it—for striving to get a law whose arm shall restrain the action of grasping, unsympathetic, indolent, pleasure-loving and needy landlords.

To all who take an interest in the land question we recommend a careful study of Mr Wallace's book. Apart from its special theory, it is intensely interesting, suggestive of thought, and instructive in many ways.

A. C. SUTHERLAND.
