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[p. 5f]

### ‘The Nationalisation of Land.’

The name of Mr. Alfred R. Wallace is well and honourably known in connection with various departments of natural history, such as the geographical distribution of animals and the phenomena and causes of insular faunas and floras. He has also made some substantial contributions to the theory of natural selection, while few, if any, of our modern writers have given us a more vivid idea of the phases of tropical climates. In venturing on the subject of the nationalisation of land he enters a different arena, all the more that he is a stout defender of what he terms “occupying ownership,” believing that this system, as compared with that of landlord and tenant, would have the happiest influence on the well-being of the people, and, in fact, furnish us with a complete solution of the land question. The main points of this volume of nearly 250 pages may be thus briefly expressed. Arrangements ought to be made by which the tenure of the holder of land might become secure and permanent, and nothing ought to be permitted to interfere with his free use of the land, or his certainty of reaping all the fruits of any labour or outlay bestowed upon it. Following upon this, there ought to be legislation by which every British subject might secure a portion of land for personal occupation at its fair agricultural value, while all suitable tracts of unenclosed and waste lands ought, under certain limitations, to be open to cultivation by occupying owners. In like manner, the freest sale and transfer of every holder’s interest in his land ought to be secured; and in order that these conditions should be rendered permanent, sub-letting should be absolutely prohibited and mortgages strictly limited. These, according Mr. Wallace, are the necessary requirements of the solution of the land is problem. Occupancy and virtual ownership ought to go together, although the State ought to be the real owner or ground landlord, every individual landowner holding his land from the State, subject to whatever general laws and regulations might be made for all land so held. Mr. Wallace has certainly brought together a large body of evidence to prove the political and social evils of what he terms “landlordism;” while the facts on the other hand, which he has marshalled in order to show the benefits of a properly-guarded system of occupying ownership, go a long way to furnish something like the remedy. He is also very successful, as it appears to us, in explaining how the change he proposes may be effected with no real injury to existing landowners, and how his scheme would work without producing any of those injurious results frequently thought to be inseparable from a system of land nationalisation. It may be remembered that in one of his speeches during the Midlothian campaign—that, namely, at West Calder—Mr. Gladstone gave expression to some sentiments not unlike those which the author of this volume regards as of “vast and momentous importance.” The argument of the right honourable gentleman was in substance this, that if it was known to be for the welfare of the community at large, the legislature was perfectly entitled to buy out the landed proprietors. “Those persons,” he said, “who possess large portions of the earth’s space are not altogether in the same position as the possessors of mere personalty. Personalty does not impose limitations on the action and the industry of man and the well-being of the community as possession of land does, and, therefore, I freely own that compulsory expropriation is admissible, and even sound in principle.” Referring to the wholesale evictions in the Highlands of Scotland, Mr. Wallace puts it beyond all doubt that unrestricted private property in land gives to a certain class of landowners despotic power over the freedom, property, happiness, and sometimes even lives, of their fellow-citizens who are not landowners, while, by possession of the land,

which is absolutely essential to all productive labour, it permits the landowner to absorb all the surplus profits of both labour and capital, keeping down the wages of unskilled labour, and enabling large capitalists to thrive, while small capitalists can hardly live. The whole book is worthy of a careful perusal, particularly at the present moment, in connection with Ireland, for it is certainly astonishing as an idea of statesmanship and political economy, to see the land of a nation on which people must live, if they live at all, placed in the hands of a comparatively few monopolists, to the serious injury of the landless classes, and especially the lower stratum of society.

<sup>1</sup> *Land Nationalisation*. By Alfred Russel Wallace. London: Trubner and Co.

*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2017.