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[p. 1]

‘Dr. Alfred R. Wallace on “Poverty and Population.”’

Sir,—Your distinguished Correspondent, Dr. Alfred Wallace, says in *The Echo* of Saturday, that there is no proof that, if the 45,000 inhabitants of Hampstead, where the birth-rate is 22 per 1,000 inhabitants per annum, were to have a birth-rate of 40 per 1,000, like some of the inhabitants of Whitechapel, the people of Hampstead would become poor also; and adds, that some savages have a low birth-rate, and yet are poor, and that the clergy of the English Church have very large families, and yet do not sink into poverty.

Well, in the first place we find in France that the well-to-do classes have a very low birth-rate indeed. For instance, I took in 1877, when Vice-President of the First Section of the International Congress of Hygien, at Paris, 100 names of elderly married celebrities of the Faculty of Medicine of that city, and made inquiries as to the size of their families. These 100 gentlemen, I found, had only had 174 children in all—i.e., not two each. And there was no miracle in this, for they had voluntarily limited their families, as, indeed, is done by all the respectable classes, both peasantry and townspeople, in that country, which accounts for the average number of children in France being three to a family, whilst here it is more than four. If we had a birth-rate as low as France, we should all be in comfort.

In Whitechapel, again, I interrogated 100 women, who were, or had been, married, and were over 50 years of age, and found that these 100 had had no less than 720 children, or more than seven each; but that, when I inquired, these 720 had been reduced by death to 340. I have no doubt that the birth-rate among women as poor as they in Whitechapel was over 40 per 1,000 annually, and the death-rate about 30 per 1,000, instead of 12 per 1,000, as in Hampstead. Dr. Wallace talks of “simple social laws”; but what can be simpler than to see that such poor people, with an average of seven children, and low wages, are not able to lay much by, or to make capital and grow rich, like the prudent French peasantry, or the late-marrying inhabitants of Hampstead. Dr. Wallace is, it seems, in favour of low birth-rates, but would not tell the people so, but allow circumstances to gradually teach them.

Concerning those savages who have a slow birth-rate, that evidently must arise from the customs of destruction of female children so common among such people. And, as to the clergy not becoming very poor by these proverbial high birth-rates, allow me to cite Mr. J. S. Mill’s sentence again: “Little improvement can be expected in morality until the production of large families is regarded in the same light as drunkenness or any other physical excess. But whilst the autocracy and clergy are foremost in setting an example of this species of incontinence, what can we expect from the poor?”

The aristocracy and clergy both do suffer from their improvidence in this matter, but the Civil Service, as Mr. John Bright once said, is an out-door relief for the children of the former. As to the poverty of curates with large families, surely Dr. Wallace must have heard plenty of dismal tales about that class. There is, indeed, no class in any European country that does not suffer where families are large. It is only in new countries that large families are compatible with comfort and cheap food supplies. Here, where we have only 28 million sheep to 35 million mouths, we cannot add other mouths in the same profuse way as can be done in Australasia, with 75 millions of sheep to 3 millions of mouths, without suffering for it.

As to Land Nationalisation, I have read a great deal about it, and I admit that property in land differs essentially from property in goods, because no one made the land; and, moreover, I am not sorry to hear all this talk about land nationalisation, because I think it will frighten the Tories into granting

the abolition of primogeniture and entail, and will enable Mr. Gladstone to pass a Bill, perhaps next Session, which may make land easily bought and sold. I might here, perhaps, express a humble hope that Dr. Wallace and other nationalists will not oppose such a Bill, but rather assist it; and, after that amount of justice has been attained, they can then, with renewed energy, insist on what is perhaps more theoretically correct, i.e., that the State should be the sole landlord. That is surely, however, not a Bill to ask for next Session.

—I am, Sir, yours obediently, 65, Regent-street, Oct. 28. C. R. Drysdale, M.D.

*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2023.