

Transcription, January 2015:

*The Times* (London) No. 30365 (30 Nov. 1881): 6b (M. P.).

[p. 6b]

‘To the Editor of the Times.’

Sir,—I am not quite sure whether Mr. Wallace’s letter on the land question which appeared in your impression of Saturday last is a piece of elaborate satire or written in good faith. If the former, I fear that it may be too recondite for a fair trader to understand; if the latter, it requires an answer.

Mr. Wallace discusses the question whether “the system of cultivation which produces the greatest return with the smallest expenditure of labour is best for this country under its present system of land tenure and without any regard to collateral result on the wellbeing of the people,” and he decides that it is not. He puts the case of the land being at least as well cultivated as it is at present with half the number of labourers, and of other industries being equally affected by labour-saving machinery, and he asks, What is to happen under so alarming a state of things? Are the surplus labourers to be supported or exported?

I should like to remind Mr. Wallace, first, that he is putting an impossible case; and, secondly, that the process which he assumes is likely to take place instantaneously has been regularly but slowly going on for the last half-century. Fifty years ago wheat thrashing was mostly done by hand, barley thrashing entirely so. At present there is hardly a labourer to be found who knows the use of the flail, and the instrument itself has almost disappeared. Thirty years ago there was hardly a grass or corn cutter in existence, and wheat was usually cut with the sickle, leaving the haulm for a second cutting with a scythe. Twenty years ago there were very few steam thrashers, and those of a most imperfect description. But in spite of all these labour-saving machines, agricultural labourers’ wages are from 20 to 50 per cent. higher than they were 40 years ago, and there are no labourers out of employ. In the cotton, woollen, linen, earthenware, and machine manufactures there is a rise of wages of from 20 to 60 per cent. within the last 40 years; in the building trade a rise of 50 per cent; in the commercial marine a rise of 50 to 70 per cent.

It is true that rents have risen, and that the value of land is, or lately was, higher; but it is very doubtful whether those rents have risen out of proportion to the increased cost of living.

There is no doubt that rapid displacements of employment cause local distress; but to discourage labour-saving appliances for fear of their ill effects upon the labourer is to carry out the joking proposal of M. Bastiat that all men should work with their left hand alone. It is the commonest of economical commonplaces to assert that labour is a means, not an end; but if this principle were more constantly kept in sight we should not have to waste time in controverting such propositions as those to which I have been endeavouring to reply.

I am, Sir, yours, &c.,

M. P.

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*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2015.