

Transcription, September 2020:

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‘The Land for the People.’

Has the time come when an organised effort should be made to agitate for the thorough and radical reform of the Land System in Great Britain and Ireland? And, if so, is there a reasonable hope that the great objects aimed at can be practically accomplished either within the lifetime of the present generation or within that of the generation which is to follow? In other words, ought a great British Land League, of similar calibre and proportions with the historic Corn Law League, to be established immediately for the earnest and zealous promulgation throughout the kingdom of sound and strong views on the Land Question? We have no hesitation in answering this question emphatically in the affirmative. It is quite true—indeed, it is painfully true—that the vast body of the community of all classes are grossly ignorant, not only of the past history of the relations between the people and the land, but also of the nature, operation, and social effects of the existing land system, and even still more of the methods by which it could be, not only improved, but thoroughly revolutionised. There can be no doubt that the more active-minded and intelligent section of the working classes are better informed and further advanced on this subject than any other portion of the community, unless we except Mr. Herbert Spencer, Sir Henry Summer Maine, and about a dozen other philosophical investigators of social history. But the working classes as a body stand greatly in need of enlightenment on the Land Question, although their social position gives them an advantage over most other classes, in so far as they have no interest which would lead them to ignore or misinterpret the facts on which a new solution of this problem depends. As to the farmers and farm labourers, they probably know even less about this question than the squires and parsons to whom they are subject, and some of them are positively as earnest advocates for the maintenance of the existing state of things in regard to the land as if they reaped as much benefit from it as the great landowners and their principal subordinates. There is some little excuse for the backwardness of our urban populations on this matter, and we are glad to see that there have recently been many signs that progress in this respect is being made rapidly amongst them. There is no use of talking yet about the opinions of our legislators in the House of Commons on the matter of the land. Beyond the abolition of entail and primogeniture, and the establishment of the three “F’s”—all of them, that are practicable, at least, no doubt, very considerable and very desirable, though slight, reforms—their vision for the present does not extend, and only a very few of our M.Ps. have shown even this limited amount of mastery over the Land Question. And as for the House of Lords—the hereditary and irresponsible branch of the Legislature—its power and privileges are so obviously based on the maintenance of private property in land, that it would be hopeless to expect them—except, perhaps, some eccentric individuals—to give their support to a radical reform of the existing system.

These remarks have been suggested to us by the perusal of a circular giving a “general outline of a complete, gradual, and practicable method of *nationalising the land*,” which is based on “the article on the same subject in the *Contemporary Review* of November last, by Mr. Alfred Russell Wallace, F.R.G.S.” This programme has been issued by a preliminary committee, for the purpose of obtaining the aid of all social reformers in the formation of a Land Nationalisation Society, and it is, we would therefore suppose, open to alteration and amendment. It is not our intention at present to review or criticise this scheme in detail, but we wish to make a few observations on two or three of the principal points in it, and on the great subject with which it deals. As a literary production the circular is very defective; but that doesn’t matter much. The main proposal it contains is, that the State should *resume* (that is the right word) possession of the land in its inherent state at a fixed date, say ten years after the

passing of the Act, the present landlord being compensated for that part of his property by receiving a Government annuity of the same amount as the *quit-rent*, which would also be payable to his sons and grandsons, and to his brothers and sisters for their lives, in the event of his having no direct descendants. The houses, buildings, private roads, fences, and the increased value given to the land by drainage or other permanent improvements would remain the property of the owner and constitute his *tenant-right*, which he may retain, sell, or transfer in any way he pleases, either as regards the whole or any part of his holding. The last clause of the “Summary of Beneficial Results,” appended to this programme, reads:—

“Under this system the whole of the land will belong to the State without cost; yet no Government supervision or management (with its inevitable wastefulness and favouritism) will be permitted, or will even be possible. For the possession of the *tenant-right* as private property, saleable or transferable with ease, and carrying with it an absolute right to the occupation of the land, subject only to payment of the State *quit-rent*, will render all supervision and any interference with the perfect freedom of the owner unnecessary, and any jobbing or patronage impossible—thus obviating one of the greatest objections to all schemes of nationalisation of the land hitherto proposed.”

As regards unenclosed lands on which little or no human labour has been expended, such as the deer forests of Scotland and the mountain wastes of Wales and Ireland, they would, under this scheme, become at once the property of the State, on payment to their present owners of a Government annuity, representing their annual value for grazing purposes. There is undoubtedly a great deal in this scheme to recommend it to the public-spirited portion of the community, and we heartily commend it to the consideration of our readers.

It is, however, we must say, certainly not such a prospectus as we should have submitted to the public with a view to the establishment of a great British Land League. We should greatly prefer to base our appeal for public support, in order to secure the overthrow of the existing iniquitous land system, on a few simple, axiomatic, and self-evident propositions. For example, we should lay it down that—

1st. Only those things which are the products of human labour are the proper and legitimate subjects of private or personal property.

2nd. Land is not the creation or product of human labour, and therefore is not, any more than the atmosphere we breathe, a proper and legitimate subject of private or personal property.

This is the root of the whole matter; and if the maintainers of the existing system contend that property in the land has been established and ought, therefore, to be continued intact and for an indefinite period, we can only reply that property in human beings was once as sacred as property in land, and yet slavery has ceased over the greater part of the habitable globe. Every reform has to contend against “vested interests,” and the “vested interests” that the land reformer has to contend against are certainly of a very formidable character. All privilege is founded on private possession of the soil. Real virtue, real merit, real ability of any kind gives one man an advantage over another, it is true; but this is the very opposite of objectionable. The recognition and appreciation of true worth is at once the highest duty and the highest pleasure that men can fulfil and can enjoy. There is no fear, as we are sometimes told there is, that the whole of humanity will become so highly cultured and refined that there will be nobody willing to perform, or capable of performing, the coarser necessary work of the world.

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“If all the wrens *were* eagles, what of that?
The wonder of the eagle were the less,
But he not less the eagle.”

Of course, it is to Ireland we owe it that the Land Question has been pushed into the forefront of the arena of practical politics, and that service those of us who are true and earnest Liberals ought not lightly to esteem. There are other influences, however, besides those coming from the sister isle that will force this question prominently under the notice of Englishmen. It has been frequently and very clearly predicted that we should have to grapple seriously with the Land Question before many years elapsed. Professor Clyffe Leslie is not, perhaps, very much of a prophet; but hear what he said a few years ago, and you will be compelled to confess that this is likely to turn out a true prediction:—"The day is not distant," he wrote, "when the supreme question of English as of Irish politics will be whether the national territory is to be the source of power and luxury to a few individuals, or of prosperity and happiness to the nation at large is to determine the answer." A great national Land League, if the necessary Cobdens and Brights would come forward, would soon decide, not only who is to give the answer to this question, but also what the answer is to be. Can there be any doubt in the mind of any reasonable and unprejudiced man regarding the eventual and even near result of a great agitation for the radical reform of the land system? Much remains undoubtedly to be done. In fact, the work is barely commenced. But in this case, it is specially true that the first blow will be more than half the battle. It is ignorance of the Land Question chiefly that has to be dissipated; the rest will be easy enough.

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2020.