

Transcription, April 2021:

The Radical 2(3) (21 January 1882): 5b-5d. (anon.).

[p. 5]

‘The Land Nationalization Society.’

The Conference of this Society held at Westminster Palace Hotel, last Monday, was well attended, and the proceedings were watched with interest by many leading Radical thinkers. This latest off-spring of Radical reforming tendencies essays so large a labour that it may well alarm timid spirits, and excite the ever-ready jeers of unbelieving would-be cynics. It is obvious that the air is full of ominous whisperings on the subject of Land Reform, and many reformers in search of a mission in life look wistfully that way, but doubt how to make the first overtures.

As all readers of *The Radical* know Mr. Alfred Russell Wallace has elaborated the scheme which was formally inaugurated last Monday, and naturally he presided at the inception of the society. It needs not that I should here explain or expound the details of Mr. Wallace’s plan, as they have already been fully given; but it is very desirable that all persons should be aware of Mr. Wallace’s peculiar qualifications for the work upon which he has entered. He is firstly, a man of science, accustomed carefully to weigh evidence, and take note of all points of view; secondly, a traveller, conversant with widely diverging stages of life and habit, and not likely to be pressed into shape by the narrowing influences of any corner coterie, or little band of elect politicians up this street or down the other. His scheme in the eyes of conventional criticism, is the dream of a gentle enthusiast, quite unpractical, and incapable of producing any workable result. The *Daily Chronicle* has not failed to let Mr. Wallace and his co-workers know how feeble, futile, and fatuous is the whole programme, and that men must not worry about Millenniums when the rent has to be paid. It has become very stale work to remind this wicked and perverse generation that enthusiasm is not the mark of imbecility, and that nearly all great movements owe their first start to that much maligned quality.

The Conference on Monday was attended by some of the élite of Radicalism. Mr. Wallace has all along been ably seconded by Mr. A. C. Swinton, also a naturalist of no mean repute, and who no doubt in a large measure secured the success of Monday’s meeting. Among the speakers were Miss Helen Taylor, Mr. W. Wren, and Dr. Clarke, and among the auditors were Mr. Frederic Harrison, Rev. Samuel Barnett, Rev. J. Newenham Hoare, Mr. Gerald Massey, Mr. Morrison Davidson, and many more well-known Radicals.

Among the incidents of the meeting was the recital of an imposing piece of very blank verse, supposed by many to be a too free translation of Hesiod’s “Works and Days,” and very much *apropos des bottes*. Next in interest to this was the discussion on the second resolution raised by Mr. Webster, who, having determined upon a whole loaf, was very scornful on any proceedings towards obtaining only half a one. The Conference lasted three hours, and finally adjourned till two p.m. on Wednesday, 31st instant. —J. H.

* * *

In opening the proceedings, the Chairman read two letters from Professor F. W. Newman and Mr. Henry George in favour of the proposed reform, the former declaring that the present Land Laws could not endure, and that peaceful reform or revolution was inevitable, as there was no parallel to it except as a legacy from slavery in the West Indies. The suggested reform would have to be carried out, and the sooner the better. The Cobden and Bright school deluded people by calling the present land system feudal—it was the deprivation of feudalism and was far more unjust, and was the cause of pauperism, of which the Poor Laws were the buttress. The letter from Mr. Henry George, the American political economist, was one of hearty sympathy with the greatest and noblest work

Englishmen had to do, and an expression of opinion that the Society was lighting a fire which must spread, as its opponents would do more in its cause even than its friends.

The Chairman said they had met for the purpose of inaugurating the formation of a Land Nationalisation Society, whose immediate object would be to educate public opinion, and to secure the nationalisation of the land as the only effectual cure for the evils of the present system. Landlords held in their hands practically the happiness and even the lives of the people. As a consequence the rural districts were depopulated, and the towns were becoming more crowded at the will of the landlords. Herbert Spencer thirty years ago had laid down the main principles of Nationalisation, and John Stuart Mill had held the same views, though deterred from urging them by his dread of the evils of State management. As against the cry of confiscation which was sure to be raised, he would point out that private property in land was in principle unjust, and that in its results it was evil, and that further it was not proposed to deprive any existing landowner or any heir now alive of any part of the income now derived from the land, but they refused to recognise any right in unborn individuals or unborn generations to continue to be supported in idleness out of the proceeds of rent, and as a burden to their fellow citizens. In further justification of the proposed scheme must be cited the well-known maxims of equity, that “no man could have a vested interest in the misfortunes of his country,” and that “public safety was the highest law.” In view of the long-continued wrong to the people, a much greater interference with vested interests than any that they proposed would be fully justified. Finally, their position was this, that they refused to sanction the payment of one penny of public money in order that the nation might ultimately resume possession of the national soil; but, in order to rob no one, nor to confiscate the rights of existing landlords, they agreed to continue to them through life and to living heirs the full revenue they had hitherto received from the land, which had always been held as a trust and not as individual property. No one, therefore, ever had, or could have, a claim to its ownership absolutely and for ever. (Cheers.)

Mr. Wm. Volckman moved, “That private property in land is the monopoly by a few of an element essential to human existence; that it had its origin, to a large extent, in force or fraud, and is a danger to the stability of the community.” He suggested accepting every instalment of reform that tended in the direction they desired to go.

Mr. Flaws seconded the resolution, citing the proceedings of the Duke of Bedford in his own county and his obstruction in London as an argument for the necessity of the movement now to be launched.

The resolution was carried unanimously.

Mr. W. Saunders moved: “That private property in land in this country, by reason of the divided and often conflicting interests it creates in the soil, leads to bad cultivation, greatly diminishes production and checks permanent improvement; while, by depriving the labourer of any rights in the soil, it is one of the chief causes of pauperism, demoralization, and crime.” He urged that it was time the land question was discussed, and that the Chairman had suggested very tender terms to existing landlords, seeing that rents were falling. Advantage ought to be taken of that to put land legislation on a satisfactory footing. He suggested that landlords should be taxed on their land at the value they themselves put upon it. Land did not pay a farthing to the taxation of the country, though the industry on the land was too heavily taxed, and he thought all ground rents should be forthwith taxed—(hear, hear)—as a beginning.

Mr. Wren, late M.P. for Wallingford, seconded the resolution, which was also carried.

Miss Helen Taylor moved: “That private property in land, by favouring monopoly and building speculation, has produced, and still produces, crowded and unhealthy dwellings, in which the mass of our people are forced to live and pay exorbitant rents.”

This, being seconded by Mr. Burrows, was carried.

The following resolutions were also agreed to:—"That private property in land secures to a class what rightly should belong to a community and be appropriated to the relief of State burdens—namely, the inherent value or economic rent of land which is caused by population, wealth, and civilisation, and cannot be either increased or diminished by the action of any individual landlord or tenant;" and "That this meeting is of opinion that 'free trade in land' would have no tendency to remove the vast evils resulting from land monopoly; and that by facilitating the extension of private ownership in the land by the monied classes, it would most probably aggravate rather than diminish those evils."

The Conference then adjourned to the 31st inst.

'Press Sneers.'

The *Scotsman's* London says Mr. Russell Wallace did his best to elevate the tone of the discussion; but even his propositions were sufficiently startling, and it was only a reduction of his principles to a greater degree of absurdity than that reached by himself when an excited chiropodist wildly declared that to effect their purpose they must abolish not only private property in land but the House of Lords and the Queen herself. At one time the meeting came to a deadlock through the adoption of an amendment which left one of the resolutions standing devoid of reason and sense. For some time the head-strong advocates of this nonsensical amendment insisted on having their own way, and it was only after a good deal of noisy talk, in the course of which the irreconcilables at the back of the room became very heated, that the meeting, having first voted one way and thereby put themselves in the wrong, reversed its decision to put itself right.

What struck the observer most on entering the room, says the *Manchester Courier's* Correspondent, was the presence of a number of ladies, who were evidently not the least interested portion of the meeting. The opening speech of the chairman, Mr. A. R. Wallace, was temperate in its tone, but this could not be said of some that followed. The most remarkable feature of the meeting was the favour with which every approach to communism in the speeches was greeted. That property in land was robbery seemed to be accepted by all as an axiom not to be questioned.

The Conference, admits the correspondent of the *Leeds Mercury*, is a sign of the extent to which the Land Question is stirring the mind of the country. It is no exaggeration to say that four or five years ago it would have been impossible to have got a dozen men to meet and discuss so visionary a scheme as that of Mr. A. R. Wallace. Mr. John Mill's project for appropriating unearned increment died of inanition, and yet it was far more practical in its character than Wallace's idea of abolishing private property in land. Everybody at the Conference was of one mind. Indeed, the plan of the Conference, if it erred at all, erred, in the opinion of these speculative reformers, on the side of moderation. Political economy, as hitherto understood, was denounced not merely as the dismal, but as the delusive, science. Most of the doctrines propounded are never likely to advance beyond the stage of academic discussion; but the fact that they are held, and will be sedulously propagated by a band of enthusiasts, shows how deeply the Land Question is taking hold of the public mind.

The Conference in the opinion of the *Glasgow Herald* Correspondent was not an affair of great importance. The audience was composed mainly of extreme politicians, and consequently the resolutions were more extreme than expedient. On the principle that if you shoot at the sky you may kill a lark, the views of these reformers may have some reasonable outcome, but it is more probable that they will disgust the people who have any real influence in such matters, and so postpone a less Radical, but equally useful, measure of Land Reform.

Probably, says the representative of *The Dundee Advertiser*, the Conference will not greatly disturb the landowners, but nevertheless it was a sign of the times. A few years ago it would have been impossible to procure the somewhat Communistic and visionary scheme a hearing. To-day, however, it was sanctioned by a meeting of some 200 ladies and gentlemen—all of them enthusiasts

in the cause, and evidently interested in the Land Question. No one at the meeting complained that the scheme went too far. Some thought that it was not sharp and stringent enough. A distinctly revolutionary tone pervaded the speeches. One gentleman proposed that the Queen and the House of Lords should be forthwith swept away. Another gentleman declined to admit that private property in land could, under any circumstances, be of any good, and Mr. Walter Wren, varying the aphorism of the French Socialist that property was robbery, said there was no such thing as property. The owners of houses in towns were treated with scarcely less respect than the owners of estates in the country, and if the land ever be nationalized the urban property owner will have nearly as bad a time of it as his rural neighbour. The scheme has the inherent vice of being impracticable, but nevertheless it will be a captivating doctrine to household voters that rent should be appropriated for the relief of taxation. The birth of revolutionary projects of this character for dealing with the land problem, shows how deeply it has taken hold of the public mind. The Land Nationalisation Scheme will probably never advance beyond the stage of discussion, but it will help to force on that Radical mode of dealing with the Land Question which is inevitable at no distant date.

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2021.