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LAND NATIONALISATION.*

THE latest cry of the Irish Home Rulers, and of English Democrats, is Nationalisation of the Land. In new countries the process that is carried on is exactly the reverse. As soon as a Government is formed the process of denationalisation begins; and in Australia and Canada and America the fashion is to attract emigrants by the offer of free grants of land. In rude and savage times the land often is the property of the people, and is worthless. Many of our earliest colonists died of starvation, as no one can live on land alone. It has hitherto been assumed that the possession of property in land is the secret of the success which attends agriculture. A man, it is said, will work better for himself than his master. Hence we are pointed to the peasant proprietors of Belgium and France, as careful, as hardworking, as frugal, and thrifty a class of men as any to be found anywhere on the face of the earth; and it is argued that if we had peasant proprietors in Ireland the results would be the same. "Give a man," said Young, "the secure possession of a rock, and he will turn it into a garden." For a long while in England and Scotland it has been held that it is only the large farmer who can farm profitably, and the tendency has been to extinguish small properties and to introduce high farming and steam ploughs, and other machinery, which require no small amount of capital. Bad seasons, and American and Australian competition have made the large farmer rather shy of investing his capital and working hard for the sole benefit of his landlord; and land has been of late somewhat of a drug in the market. The English landlord, like his brother in Ireland, has been taking more than his fair share of the spoil. But land, so long as it is held to be private property, will always command in a wealthy country like England, a high price. Our wealthy tradesmen, our rich manufacturers, our aristocratic classes, will always pay a high price for land, not as an investment, but as the means of affording them a pleasant existence far from the smoke and din of cities. There was a time when land gave its proprietors political power,

and though that time has almost entirely passed away, still the effect has been to make land a commodity greedily to be sought and purchased regardless of expense. To a certain extent the arrangements have worked well. Men who would have starved at home have been planted in the colonies, and have there risen to happiness, and honour and wealth; or, like the late George Moore, have come to London and have risen to be merchant princes. But there is an immense amount of poverty in the land, and it is assumed that poverty would be destroyed if the land of the country were nationalised. Mr. Wallace dedicates his work on the subject to the working men of England, in the hope that it may reveal to them the chief cause of so much poverty in the midst of the ever-increasing wealth which they create; and points out to them the great reform which will enable labour to reap its just reward, which will surely tend to abolish pauperism, and give to all who industriously seek it, a fair share in the increased prosperity of their native land. Seldom, it seems to us, has a gentleman addressed to his inferiors a sentence more mischievous and more full of blunders. As to the working classes of the community, it may be said that they are quite as independent and well off as their masters; that even now they can often become their own landlords, and that poverty must exist so long as the poor are permitted to marry and bring large families into the world, which they are unable to keep, and so long as hundreds of millions of pounds, which ought to enable the working man to lay by something for a rainy day, go into the pockets of the publican and the brewer and distiller. The drink bill of Ireland in its famine year, when it appealed to all the world for help, was, we think, somewhere about sixty millions.

Mr. Wallace tells us that his present work has been published with two main objects. In the first place, it is intended to demonstrate by a sufficient, though condensed, body of evidence, the widespread and crying evils, political and social, material and moral, which are not only the actual but the necessary results of the system of landlordism. That there are evils connected with the present system, and that it requires reform, is admitted on all hands, and it is to be hoped that sooner or later we

may have free trade in land, which, as Mr. Wallace admits, will be a boon to the capitalist—that is, to the self-denying and successful working man. Mr. Wallace easily makes out his case. Instead of taking us to the estates of the Earl of Shaftesbury, where the labourer is well-housed for a shilling a week,—or to such places as Cardiff and Barrow, which have become great centres of trade, owing to the exertions of such noblemen as the Marquis of Bute or the Duke of Devonshire,—or pointing to that Bridgewater canal, the work of one landlord alone, which did so much to develop the wealth of the midland counties,—he begins with landlordism in Ireland, and thus works his way to the conclusion that landlordism is an ill to be abolished off the face of the earth. Then, having shown the evils of great properties, he shows, by extracts familiar to us all, the advantages resulting from peasant proprietors existing in Belgium and France, and elsewhere. So charmed is he with peasant proprietorship, that he answers, as it is not difficult to do, objections to it by facts; and then all at once he shifts his ground, lets the peasant proprietor drop, and, quoting what he calls the remarkable work of Mr. Henry George—a work which shows that all our political economists are wrong, from Adam Smith downwards—leaps to the conclusion that the nationalisation of the land affords the only mode of effecting a complete solution of the land question. Well, perhaps he is right. When the land shall become the property of the nation, that the land question will be completely solved is abundantly clear. But the reader, who has been following Mr. Wallace, as he states as forcibly as he can the evils of the present system—and evils will, more or less, attach to all human arrangements—and the advantages of peasant proprietorship—and that there are advantages connected with such an arrangement no one can deny—even the most inveterate opponent of the system, will be astonished at the change of ground. The real question is not touched, however, till we reach nearly the end of the book. Mr. Wallace, like all special pleaders, imagines, apparently, that by repeating familiar and admitted arguments up to a certain point, the mind is the better prepared to admit arguments which are neither the one nor the other. The real question, of which, however, we hear

* Land Nationalisation: its Necessity and its Aims. Being a Comparison of the System of Landlord and Tenant with that of Occupying Ownership on the Well-being of the People. By Alfred Russell Wallace, Author of the Malay Archipelago. London: Trubner and Co. 5s.

but little, is—first, as to the way in which the land is to be purchased of its present owners (we may buy gold too dear), and, secondly, as to the employment of the people thus planted on the land. In France, as we see, the population is at a standstill. If we are to increase and multiply and replenish the earth, and if pauperism is to disappear, we must have another solution of the question. It is true the desert can be reclaimed and made to blossom as the rose; but, then, people who do that kind of work, expect, as the result, that the improved land shall be their own. Take the case of Chat-moss, in which the well-known Mr. Roscoe, of Liverpool, sunk so much money, and in which Mr. Edward Baines, of Leeds, took so active a part. His son owns that it cannot with truth be said that Mr. Baines improved his fortune by this agricultural experiment. A beautiful estate was, as we hear, eventually formed, but at a cost which somewhat discourages the sanguine expectations frequently entertained as to the reclaiming of the mosslands of Great Britain and Ireland. Hitherto the earth has been conquered and made to bear fruit by private enterprise. If the State were the proprietor, and such things were done, they would be accomplished in the dearest and most unsatisfactory way. The less the State does, if we may argue from the history of the past, the better. Mr. Wallace knows as well as we that there is a great amount of land at this moment lying idle. "Such is the case," he writes, "on the borders of Surrey, Sussex, and Hampshire, and there are enormous tracts in Wales, Ireland, and Scotland which, though claimed as private property, have never been enclosed, but remain in a state of nature." It is amusing to read his suggestions that where those commons are not very extensive they would, of course, be preserved as common pasture land for the surrounding occupiers and cottagers, who might also have the customary rights of cutting furze or gorse, digging sand, gravel, or peat, under proper supervision of some local authority. All the more extensive of these wastes would, however, afford the opportunity for cultivation by labourers and small farmers, who might have choice of sites or areas marked out as open to selection on payment of a low quit rent, which might be higher than the value of the land as unenclosed pasture, but much lower than that of the surrounding enclosed fields. Mr. Wallace's faith is great; but he must pardon our scepticism if we fail to see how land that is worthless in these days, when every one rich or poor aims at becoming a landowner, will become valuable after it has become the property of the State. As an illustration, let us give the following. Not many miles from Godalming, whence Mr. Wallace writes, we were offered the other day a house that had cost at the least a thousand pounds to build, with a

couple of acres of ground, for £500. We went to inspect the place, and declined what seemed a tempting offer. The land was literally worthless. It may be that on such a site a peasant proprietor might manage to drag out a wretched and degraded existence. But then comes the question whether such a one might not be earning a far more satisfactory competency, and leading a far happier life in some city far away. One thing is clear, that it was only the idea of private proprietorship that could give any value to such land. It is true such wealthy noblemen as the Duke of Sutherland do reclaim large tracts of land which now support an extensive population; but a small proprietor—a peasant, for instance—would have, and could have, attempted nothing of the kind.

Mr. Boyd Kinnear shows the difficulties in the way of nationalisation of the land; Mr. Wallace, arguing from the existence of great properties and their attendant evils, concludes with a quotation from Mr. J. Boyd Kinnear's important and instructive volume. "Who does not see how much happier England will be, when, instead of one great mansion surrounded by miles beyond miles of one huge property farmed by the tenants at will—tilled by the mere labourers whose youth and manhood know no relaxation from rough mechanical toil—whose old age sees no home but the chance of charity, or the certainty of the workhouse—there shall be a thousand estates of varying size; when each owner shall work for himself and his children; when the sense of independence shall lighten the burdens of daily toil; when education shall give resources, and the labour of youth shall suffice for the support of age?" Well, no one disputes that. "Working men of England," adds Mr. Wallace, "I have shown you how this improved social condition may be brought about. It is for you to make your voices heard, and insist that it be made the question of the day by your chosen representatives in the Legislature." We regret that we cannot understand Mr. Wallace's argument, nor share in his hopes; and we may remind Mr. Boyd Kinnear that there is many a farmer who deeply regrets that for the last few years he has not been a tenant at will.

This is what Mr. Wallace calls

The Solution of the Question.

1. In the first place, it is clear that landlordism must be replaced by existing ownership. No less radical reform will get rid of the widespread evils of our present system.
2. Arrangements must be made by which the tenure of the holder of land must be secure and permanent, and nothing must be permitted to interfere with the free use of the land, or the certainty of reaping all the fruits of any labour or outlay he may bestow upon it.
3. Arrangements must be made by which every British subject may secure a portion of land for personal occupation at its fair agricultural value.

4. All suitable tracts of unenclosed and waste lands must, under certain limitations, be open to cultivation by occupying owners.
5. The first sale and transfer of every holder's interest in his land may be secured.
6. In order that these conditions be rendered permanent, sub-letting must be absolutely prohibited, and mortgages strictly prohibited.

Still Mr. Wallace leaves us in the dark as to the *modus operandi*. As Hood wrote:—

Utopia is a pleasant place,
But how can I get there.

Another drawback is to be noted. The book is addressed to the working men of England, who assuredly are better off than they can ever be as agricultural labourers. It would be much better to appeal to the middle class and the small tradesmen, who have to pay for the poverty which is to be relieved by the nationalisation of the land. What we want to know is also how the land is to be nationalised. Mr. Wallace seems to argue that the working men of England have only to make up their minds, and instruct their representatives, and the thing is done. His suggestion that an annuity or pension is to be given to the landlord for the loss of his land will not find much favour with the landlords, who know that the ordinary working men believe that Mr. Bradlaugh is kept out of Parliament, not on account of his religious opinions or want of them, but because he has undertaken to put a stop to such pensions as the State already pays.