

8.—LAND NATIONALIZATION.¹

There are two chapters in Mr. Wallace's book which we cordially recommend to the notice of our readers. They are the chapters in which, chiefly in the words of eye-witnesses of unimpeachable integrity, the author recounts the oft-told tale of wholesale evictions and clearances in Ireland and Scotland.

¹ *Land Nationalization.* By Alfred Russel Wallace. London: Kegan Paul and Co.

This is a sad story which, if we would form sound views on burning questions of the day, it is hardly possible to keep too constantly in mind. No academic speculations or agricultural theories about the advantages or disadvantages of a peasant proprietary, or as to the superior recommendations or comparative profits of large or small farming, can affect the unchangeable principles of right and justice, or can palliate the exercise of cruelty and oppression of the poor; and it is Mr. Wallace's merit that he has collected a body of testimony which brings out with peculiar force the injustice and the cruelty which has too often, though by no means always, disgraced the system against which he so earnestly protests. The worst evils of that system are, it may be hoped, as far as Ireland is concerned, definitively a matter of past history; but history is not blotted out in a day, and those who are weary of hearing ever "the same old song" may gather patience from reflecting on the more awful monotony of suffering endured by the subjects of the tedious refrain. The memory of past injustice, rankling in the hearts of the heirs of its victims, is a factor in the political problem with which England will yet have to reckon; nor is it to be supposed that these memories will fade away so long as survivals of the old Protestant ascendancy, as unnecessary as they are unmistakeable, are allowed to maintain their unhallowed existence. It is not necessary to do more than refer to the anomaly of a magistracy four-fifths Protestant in a country four-fifths Catholic (Protestants being therefore over-represented in the ratio of sixteen to one); or to the absurdly disproportionate endowment, in the same Catholic country, of non-Catholic higher education.

We cannot, however, entirely agree with the terms of Mr. Wallace's argument against unlimited landlord rights. The grievance of which he complains is a grievance, not because it is an interference with that very undefinable abstraction called "personal liberty," but because it too often involves the uncompensated appropriation by one man of the fruits of others' industry, and still more because it is palpably contrary to the best interests of the community. *Salus populi suprema lex.* And with this law—supreme in legislation though not, formally speaking, in morality—the existence of absolute and unrestricted private dominion in regard of land is in flagrant contradiction. We in England may afford to put up with the fact that a few hundred landowners could, at comparatively short notice, drive

most of us into the cities or into the sea—because, as Mr. Mallock has pointed out, we have excellent grounds for believing that they will not attempt anything of the sort. Should they begin, however, to exercise their power, it would not be long before we should recognize that there was here a case for Government interference.

Our commendation of Mr. Wallace's book, however, stops short with the chapters to which reference has been made. There is indeed in the remainder of the volume much that will repay perusal and that invites attention; but with the author's main proposal we find ourselves at issue. Whatever sympathy we might under other circumstances be disposed to feel towards Mr. Wallace's suggestion of a national purchase of the entire freehold of the country, in connection with a system of perpetual leases to occupying cultivators, is overborne by our conviction of its impracticability as applied to England. We do not think that Mr. Wallace has met Mr. Fawcett's palmary argument—that it must under all circumstances be economically disastrous to borrow at $3\frac{1}{4}$ per cent. a vast sum of money which, if invested in the equitable purchase of land, would not produce an income of more than $2\frac{3}{4}$ per cent. Moreover, the author's principle that every English-born citizen has an inchoate right to a free choice of a plot of English soil on which (after paying its due price) he may settle, and that it is the business of Government to secure to him the realization of this right, appears to us to be not only without ethical foundation, but also economically chimerical and self-contradictory in its logical consequences. And no greater dis-service perhaps can at present be done to the discontented classes than to hold up before their ambition delusive and irrational ideals.

We must not, however, dismiss Mr. Wallace without reminding the reader that though the author of *Land Nationalization* is a friend of Mr. Henry George, from whom he quotes extensively, his suggestion that the nation should compulsorily buy up the freehold of the soil of England stands poles asunder from Mr. George's proposal for a universal confiscation of rent. The two schemes of "Nationalization" can be classed together only in the same way as robbery and purchase may both be included under the head of "transfer of property," or as a political murder and the carting away of a heap of rubbish might both be described by the term "removal."