

## JAMES FINTAN LALOR

### Irish Land Reformer

A collected edition of the writings of James Fintan Lalor was published in Dublin in 1918 with a preface by Arthur Griffith and a biographical introduction by Miss L. Fogarty. It is believed to contain all that is extant from the pen of this great Irish Patriot, mainly letters to the *Nation* and to the *Irish Felon* written during the years 1847 and 1848. The leading feature of these articles is a powerful and impassioned statement of the doctrine that the land of Ireland belongs to the people of Ireland and that they should resume their right to it and that the rent should be paid to the people.

This doctrine bears so strong a resemblance to the views of Henry George that the editor is impelled to contend that some, if not much, of Henry George's inspiration came from Fintan Lalor. She says: "Though the author of *Progress and Poverty* is above the accusation of mere plagiarism from the pages of Fintan Lalor, he never admitted having adopted what John O'Leary terms 'Lalor's peculiar views on the land question.' He may have set the type to print some letter from the *Nation* or *Felon*; or he may have read or forgotten having read, one of the many American re-publications of them." She goes on to say that a germ of Lalor's philosophy must have entered George's mind prior to the publication of *Progress and Poverty* in 1879, and suggests that Michael Davitt gave him a schooling in Irish national economy, apparently when Davitt was pursuing a campaign in America in 1878.

It is, of course, conceivable that Henry George may at some time have seen a reprint of one of Lalor's letters, but there is no evidence of it. Miss Fogarty does not appear to be aware that in 1871 George wrote and published in California a pamphlet entitled *Our Land and Land Policy* which in most of its essentials contains the doctrine which was afterwards expanded and developed in *Progress and Poverty*. Moreover, Miss Fogarty herself says that it was not until December, 1877 that Michael Davitt began to make practical use of the dogma expounded by Lalor in '48.

In view of what is known of George's life it is unlikely that he had ever read anything written by Lalor before he came to his own conclusions on the land question. What Lalor had to give him was in any case no more than he could have got from many other writers who in all ages have maintained the doctrine that "the land belongs to the people." George's great contribution was to link up the moral doctrine with economic principles, and to expound a comprehensive philosophy explaining precisely how the existing system of land holding impoverished the people and how it could within the existing frame-work of society be altered so as to establish for each his right to the use of the land and for all their right to its value.

The question whether Fintan Lalor influenced Henry George may be regarded as finally settled by what George himself says in *The Science of Political Economy*, where in dealing with various writers who had preceded him he refers to Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics*, of which he says: "This was the only work of the kind I knew of when writing *Progress and Poverty*."

To say this is not to detract from the greatness of Fintan Lalor. Would that other Irish patriots had seen or even yet could see what Fintan Lalor saw! But even his great successor, Arthur Griffith, in the preface to this book says that "the land theory of Lalor resolves itself into the abolition of dual ownership and the crea-

the fatal weakness of all attempts to deal with the Irish land question lies. Lalor himself at first looked at the question from the point of view of "tenant right" as so many still do in Ireland, but the force of his thought rapidly drove him to more radical conclusions. He saw that nothing less than the permanent assertion of the rights of the whole people to the land was necessary. "For no generation of living men can bind a generation that is yet unborn or can sell or squander the rights of man; and each generation of men has but a life interest in the world." He adds that a permanent settlement must be "such as would give the majority and mass of the people a permanent interest in its maintenance. But that object could not be accomplished by granting away the whole of the land to one man, or to *eight thousand men*, in absolute irresponsible ownership forever, without condition of payment, or any other condition whatever." This, it may be interposed, is exactly what peasant proprietorship does. He concludes: "Putting together and proceeding on the principles now stated, it will appear that if these principles be sound no man can legitimately claim possession or occupation of any portion of land or any right of property therein, except by grant from the people, at the will of the people, as tenant to the people, and on terms or conditions made or sanctioned by the people; and that every right except the right so created and vested by grant from the people, is nothing more or better than the right of the robber who holds forcible possession of what does not lawfully belong to him."

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