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Henry George and Europe:

Ireland, the First Target of His Efforts to Spread His Doctrines Internationally, Disappointed Him

By MICHAEL SILAGI*

Translated by SUSAN N. FAULKNER

ABSTRACT. *Henry George* made several crusading forays into the *British Empire* at the time of its zenith. But the first, to *Ireland*, proved a disappointment. George saw Ireland as an object lesson in the *land question* and at first it was uppermost in the minds of the 600,000 *tenant farmers*. But the 20,000 *landlords* agreed to an amelioration, and for decades, *republicanism* replaced *land reform* in Irish *social history*. George misread the temper of the times; he saw Ireland's political future better served by becoming a self-governing unit of a *league of British nations*. "Integration" was the trend of the times, the American *social philosopher* insisted. Ireland (with the exception of Ulster) became a *dominion* in 1921 but it withdrew from the *British Commonwealth* in 1949 to become a *sovereign republic*. George was not wholly wrong in emphasizing *economics* over *politics*. In 1955 Ireland, now *Eire*, entered the United Nations where it wielded influence all out of proportion to its resources and economic *development* became its over-riding issue.

I

Introduction

HENRY GEORGE'S NAME is associated with Ireland's struggle for freedom from British imperialistic domination. Only at the end of the first quarter of the next century did the struggle—now waged by guerilla warfare—begin its march toward total victory. In the 19th century the Irish Revolution began as an agrarian rising by the landless against their landlords.

Naturally a rebellion over the land question won the sympathy of the American economist and social philosopher, who brought together into a coherent system classical economics and the ideas of the Enlightenment philosophers, the ideas of Thomas Jefferson and his followers who laid the foundations of the American republic. George seized upon the issue, regarded abroad as a local one, and

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argued in his writings that it was typical of the land question everywhere else in the world where land was subject to absolute private ownership.

George's intervention in Irish affairs, however fruitless, led to his crusades in Great Britain and the empire, missions which were to spread the American land reform movement in several parts of the world. The impact he was to make elsewhere contrasted with the interlude in Ireland, which was, to say the least, disappointing.

The policy of free trade had led to an agrarian crisis and flight from the land in England. It brought to the majority of the British urban population, on the other hand, the advantage of cheaper agricultural products. In Ireland, on the contrary, the disastrous effects of this policy were felt by the entire population. In 1870, more than 90 percent of the Irish made their living—directly or indirectly—from agriculture.¹ Farming was given over almost wholly to tenant farmers, more than 600,000 in number, as against about 20,000 landlords.²

When the Irish farmers lost their British markets, both because of cheap American competition and because of the decreasing purchasing power of the English people, they still had to continue paying the same amount of rent to their landlords.³ This caused an exacerbation of the class antagonism which had been smoldering in Ireland already for centuries, but which had been pacified somewhat only a few years before, in 1870, with Gladstone's Land Act. Gladstone's legislation had improved the situation of the tenant farmers by making their arbitrary expulsion by the landlords more difficult, and by providing that the tenant must be compensated after termination of the tenure relationship for improvements undertaken by him.⁴

Toward the end of the seventies, however, the situation became truly catastrophic. To the effects of the British economic policies now were added the consequences of the weather conditions of the years 1877 to 1879. These were devastating for the farmers so that the situation of the Emerald Isle soon came to resemble the time of the Great Famine of 1845–1847—the “Hungry Forties.”⁵

II

Davitt and the Irish Land League

IN 1879, THE ECONOMIC DISTRESS of the Irish reached its climax. It was then that a period ensued of unparalleled agitation and unrest. This so-called “New Departure” was connected primarily with the name of Michael Davitt, son of a Catholic farmer, who as a small child had been expelled with his father from the latter's tenant farm. At the age of eleven he became a worker in a cotton spinningmill, where he lost his right arm. In 1865, Michael Davitt joined the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood, for which he was imprisoned from 1870

to 1877.⁶ He was the moving force of the most important Irish organization of those days, the Irish Land League, and soon rose to become leader of the entire Irish national movement.

Earlier organizations had fought England as a military occupation force and political oppressor. Davitt effected a break with this tradition. The Land League made use of a battle cry which not only could mobilize momentary hatred, but which promised enduring, far-reaching results, and in any case presented an irresistible attraction for the mass of tenant farmers: "The land for the people!"

Thus, Davitt placed the land question in the center of his political agitation, a question which naturally touched the farmers threatened by eviction notices and expulsions more closely than the fight for national independence.⁷ After some hesitation, the parliamentary leader of the Irish Nationalists, the Protestant landowner Charles Stewart Parnell, joined the Irish Land League; indeed, in 1879 he took over its leadership.

The League solicited support as well in the United States for its objectives, and promoted the founding of an American Land League. In the U.S., it was especially Patrick Ford's New York weekly *Irish World* which fought for the cause of the Irish Land League, and at the end of 1881 the *Irish World* sent Henry George to Ireland as its correspondent.

George took advantage of the opportunity which, he felt, the Irish movement offered him for the dissemination of his ideas. After all, in *Progress and Poverty* George had already cited the economic situation in Ireland as evidence for the correctness of his thesis.⁸ At the end of 1879, he wrote an article for a California periodical about "The Irish Land Question."⁹

When Davitt a short time later traveled through America to win support for the League, he met with George and suggested that the League make an effort toward a wider propagation of *Progress and Poverty* in Great Britain.¹⁰ Since George was afraid, however, that his book would be too voluminous and difficult for the rural members of the Land League, he decided to rework his ideas not only in a simpler and more direct form, but also with special application to the existing circumstances in Ireland. For this purpose he rewrote the previously cited article into a book of about a hundred pages, entitled *The Irish Land Question/What It Involves and How Alone It Can Be Settled*. Of course, the author still had as his main goal the proclamation of general truths. Ireland was merely a concrete example, evidence which served to provide illustrations, but these illustrations could just as well have been taken from anywhere else.¹¹ (The book could, therefore, appear in later editions without the adjective "Irish" in the title, as *The Land Question*, and be distributed in other countries as well.¹²)

The [Irish] Land Question was, as already stated, a simplified presentation of the proposals detailed in *Progress and Poverty* for the solution of the social

question, and a guide to the application of these proposals to the concrete case of Ireland.

But George was somewhat critical, in this work, of the program of the Irish Land League, particularly of Parnell's formulations. On one hand, George objected to transferring the land, as Parnell and his followers were planning to do, to ownership by the tenants, thereby eliminating rent altogether. This would be an action taken on behalf of only one social class, as George saw it.¹³ It would have the effect of merely supplanting the class of the landlords with another, though more numerous, class, namely that of peasant proprietors.¹⁴ George's other objection to the policies of the Land League addressed itself to its nationalistic and anti-British position.

George suggested to the Irish leaders that, on the contrary, the League should unite with the English working class against the landowners.¹⁵ As far as the nationalistic strivings were concerned, he felt that of course the Irish had the same inalienable right to self-determination as any other nation, but that this did not necessarily need to lead to separation from Great Britain: "It must be remembered that the tendencies of the time are not to separation, but to integration,"¹⁶ George stressed. For this reason, he demanded from those he was addressing: "Let them be Land Leaguers first, and Irishmen afterwards."¹⁷

III

"Equal Justice for All"

IT IS NOT SURPRISING, therefore, that the efforts of the American on behalf of Ireland turned out to be unproductive. Basically, he was not ready for any compromise whatsoever, even verbally, regarding that which to him appeared fundamental and decisive. To him, the demand for equal justice for all was primary, and he wanted to subordinate all special interests, including nationalist ideals, to this principle. For two reasons, this fundamental, two-fold divergence did not at first become clear either to him or to his Irish friends.

For one thing, not all Irish leaders shared Parnell's opinion regarding the question of the transfer of land to common property; in fact, the leaders of the Land League could not even agree among themselves on this point. Before Davitt, for example, met with George, he had already thought about nationalization of land.¹⁸ Under the influence of the author of *Progress and Poverty*, he propagated a solution that followed in the footsteps of the theses of this book,¹⁹ but with this stumbling block: Davitt—similar to the "Land Nationalization Society" of A. R. Wallace,—wrote the compensation of the landlords on his banner.

Secondly, George saw in Davitt only the passionate land reformer, for whom, he thought, since his meeting with the American the watchword "The Land for

the People” had become synonymous with the demand for nationalization of landed property.²⁰ But here, too, a serious misunderstanding existed: George and Davitt, it is true, agreed on the demand for land reform. For both, too, land reform was only the means to an end; however, the reformers differed profoundly in their ultimate objective. For George, the solution to the Irish land problem was a step in the direction toward universal justice—for Davitt toward national independence.²¹

Davitt was more radical than Parnell not only on the question of land, but also on that of nationalism. Parnell strove for Ireland’s having home rule within the United Kingdom, while Davitt demanded complete independence from London.²² It was, thus, Davitt’s radicalism which engendered the illusion of agreement with Henry George, an illusion which, however, could not last long. But for the time being, both agreed on a rejection of the Kilmainham treaty.

By this treaty, the detention of Parnell and his co-fighters who had been arrested in October, 1881, ended in May of 1882. In exchange for the freeing of the detainees and a much-needed remission of debts for a hundred thousand Irish tenant farmers, Parnell promised to restrict anti-British agitation.²³ George took a strong stand against this compromise because he saw in the economic concessions by the English a strengthening of the tenure system. This, George felt, would postpone even further the abolition of “landlordism,” and thus of the root cause of the economic and social ills. Davitt, for his part, condemned the agreement because he saw in it a blow to the cause of nationalism.²⁴ Indeed, when he deplored the fact that the nationalization of land desired by him had been rendered more difficult, he did so because—as he saw it—this move would have been a step forward in the march toward national independence.

IV

Davitt’s Break from George

GEORGE BELIEVED DAVITT to be a fellow-combatant and thought that the Irishman, who had read *Progress and Poverty* four times,²⁵ would prove to be an apostle of the land reform movement. This incorrect appraisal by George²⁶ is even perpetuated in some of the literature.²⁷

Davitt, for his part, probably saw their incompatibility more clearly. A possible motive, on the Irishman’s side, for the numerous meetings held between the two men during George’s last years may well have been his expectation that George’s support would be useful to him in his many trips through the United States.²⁸ However, Davitt gave a speech in the United States as early as 1882, in which he denied having been influenced by George;²⁹ and in 1886, while again in America, he wrote George that he could not support him in the latter’s cam-

paign for mayor of New York, because he did not want to involve himself in the American elections, and because he did not, moreover, see George's victory as desirable.³⁰

Precisely to the extent that the land reform goals of George and Davitt resembled each other, they produced no practical results. Davitt's proposals for nationalization met with deaf ears on the part of the tenant farmers, while Henry George's interest in the Emerald Isle dwindled in turn.³¹ During two European trips in 1884 and 1885, he gave 75 speeches in England and Scotland, but only two in Ireland.³²

George hoped Ireland would lead the way in abolishing land monopoly. But his hopes were dashed against the unyielding rocks of history by a rising tide of nationalism as the country's 20,000 landlords agreed to amelioration of the lot of the 600,000 tenants under a scheme voted by the British Parliament.

Through guerilla warfare the Irish won dominion status in 1921. Withdrawing from the British Commonwealth of Nations in 1949, Ireland, as Eire, became a sovereign republic. It has become a leading figure in the United Nations and in world diplomacy. But George was not wholly wrong in emphasizing economics over politics. Successive administrations in the young republic have made economic development their top priority issue. Yet the land question remains an issue, marked by mass unemployment as in other developing democracies.

Notes

1. Norman Dunbar Palmer, *The Irish Land League Crisis* (New Haven, 1940), p. 2.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 41ff.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 64ff.
6. R. C. K. Ensor, *England, 1870-1914* (Oxford, 1936, 1952), p. 111.
7. Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
8. Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*, (1879) (New York, 1979), pp. 123ff.
9. Charles Albro Barker, *Henry George* (New York, 1955), p. 320.
10. "Davitt pledged the Land League to push it (*i.e.*, *Progress and Poverty*) in Great Britain." Henry George, quoted in Henry George Jr., *The Life of Henry George* (New York, 1960), p. 341.
11. George wrote: "In speaking with general reference to the case of Ireland, I have, so far as general principles are concerned, been using it as a stalking-horse." *The Land Question* (New York, 1898), p. 73.
12. In the preface to the 1898 edition we read: "In order better to indicate the general character of this subject . . . the title was subsequently changed to '*The Land Question*,'" *op. cit.*, p. 3.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
14. Palmer says, "The displacement of the landlord, by peasant proprietors meant simply the substitution of one landowning class for another; for a peasant proprietor, as Lord Montagu once remarked, was 'a landlord written small.'" *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

15. *The Land Question*, p. 60.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
18. F. Sheehy-Skeffington, *Michael Davitt* (London, 1967), pp. 70ff.
19. Barker, *Henry George*, p. 367.
20. Cf. F. S. L. Lyons, "Introduction" to Sheehy-Skeffington's *Michael Davitt*, (London, 1967), p. 9.
21. Palmer calls it "a social revolution with political ends." *Op. cit.*, p. 128.
22. "Throughout his life he was a crusader in the national cause." *Ibid.*, p. 129.
23. Ensor, *op. cit.*, pp. 74ff.
24. Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* (London, 1904), p. 363.
25. George, quoted by George Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 380.
26. Palmer is right when he writes, "To expect a pure land movement under such leadership would be fantastic and absurd." *Op. cit.*, p. 129.
27. Thus in Elwood P. Lawrence, *Henry George in the British Isles* (East Lansing, MI, 1957), p. 10.
28. Davitt says the goal of these propaganda tours was "to organize auxiliary movements in other lands," *op. cit.*, p. xiii.
29. George Jr., *op. cit.*, pp. 384ff.
30. Barker, *Henry George*, p. 471.
31. George's resignation concerning Ireland is reflected in the beginning of Chapter 10 of Part III of his *Perplexed Philosopher*. There he complains that his stance got him between two chairs: "In this confusion of thought we who hold that the right of property is an absolute right . . . are looked upon by one side as deniers of the right of property, and by the other . . . as not radical enough," p. 209.
32. Lawrence, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

The Criteria That Identify a "Refereed Journal"

TENURED RESEARCHERS, in choosing a scientific journal in which to report their work, often seek one that will elicit comments from other workers in their field and in the area of their research topic. Junior promotion and tenure seeking researchers have to take account of another consideration: how will administrators and academic committees evaluate their scholarship. One method is to take publications in refereed journals and heft them. This is scandalous; the work should be read carefully and judged on the merits. But it is a not uncommon practice and junior researchers dedicated to science should grit their teeth and face the fact.

To determine what is a "refereed journal," two library scientists, A. Carolyn Miller and Sharon L. Serzan, obtained 242 valid responses from a sample of 349 journal editors in the physical, biological and natural sciences as well as the social sciences and the humanities. (*Journal of Higher Education*, 55 (November/December, 1984), pp. 673-99.)