

UNDER IRISH SKIES—By A Kilkenny Farmer

The most important single, present-day factor in Ireland is emigration. It profoundly affects economics, religion, politics, farming, industry, education, in fact, everything. Other countries may be compared to lidded pots simmering on the fire; various pressures are set up therein which if not relieved will cause the lids to fly off. Ireland, however, is like a kettle; when the heat causes expansion the water flows away freely through the spout. The forces that in other countries compel reform and progress in Ireland merely cause emigration. In 100 years the population has dropped from over 8,000,000 to a little under 3,000,000—so free-flowing is the kettle's spout.

Ireland is predominantly an agricultural country. Roughly half the population, or about 1½ million people, are engaged in agriculture, or are the dependents of those thus engaged. Ownership of agricultural land is well diffused among some 200,000 owner occupiers.

We are committed to a policy of industrialisation, which is being pushed behind a high-tariff wall. Further, while professing an abhorrence of Socialism, we countenance the State having a substantial finger in every pie. To pay for this meddling we allow the State to tax everything, to the greatest possible extent, except land. This we tax only to a nominal degree. Industry, commerce and labour are taxed without any principle, except, possibly, that of not taxing them out of existence. The more the farmer produces, the more tax he pays; the less he produces, the less tax he pays. Not being fools, farmers produce nothing, or next to nothing, as was testified to by an independent agricultural expert invited by the present Minister for Agriculture to investigate and report on "The Present State and Methods for Improvements of Irish Land." He, Dr. G. A. Holmes of New Zealand, stated that "the fields were growing just as little as it is physically possible for the land to grow under an Irish sky."

Notwithstanding the immense improvements in the productive arts in the past 100 years, which have resulted in increases of 100—300 per cent in the agricultural output of similarly placed west-European countries, Irish agricultural production has expanded not at all in that same period. The failure of agriculture to expand is the direct result of our present tax policy. Our static agricultural production in turn results in a non-expanding economy, which is unable to give to a fixed or increasing population the constantly improving living standards which our emigrants find overseas.

But no one can say we are complacent over this failure of our agriculture to expand! The State is at present, through the Department of Agriculture, spending about £14,000,000 per annum in the form of subsidies and grants to farmers in an effort to break the deadlock. Few people, apparently, realise that what goes to the farmers in subsidies and grants, plus substantial administrative costs, must come from the general body of taxpayers.

Of late, the decline in population has not been so steep, emigration for the most part taking only the natural increase in population. But no more in Ireland do we have such things as national aspirations. Instead we cherish the vague, unreasoning hope that we will somehow be allowed to drag out our miserable existences on the edge of the teeming mass of Europe, forgetful of the dire prophecy of James Fintan Lalor, Ireland's first and greatest land-reformer, who, speaking in 1847, when our population was nearly thrice its present size said, "It is clear that this island is about to take existence under a new tenure (*i.e.*, the land of Ireland belonging equally to all Irishmen); or else that Nature has issued her decree—

often issued heretofore against nations and races, and ever for the same crime—that one other imbecile and cowardly people shall cease to exist and no longer cumber the earth."

Nothing but the introduction of land-value taxation can remedy matters; such a system, if adopted in full, could revolutionise affairs. Yet we have to realise that there are numerous, powerful, well-entrenched interests that would oppose the introduction of such a system. Among them are the 200,000 farmers. To them the charge of the land-value tax would be more than offset by lower production costs, but inured as they are to a policy of low production, the potential gains from a high farming policy based on lower production costs would at first have little appeal. Reductions in such costs as fertiliser and farm implement prices, at present bearing tariffs, would be obvious enough to them, but these are not in themselves of significant consequence. Less obvious but not less important would be the reductions that are bound to take place all down the line of what the farmer buys. The influence of the sugar-beet growers and wheat growers, who produce for a high-priced home market is a further force opposed to change.

The next most powerful opponents to land value taxation would be the industrialists, 90 per cent of whom depend for their present existence on protection. To them free trade would sound like a death-knell, for they would be slow to realise that the complementary free land would release them from the crushing taxation which impels them to look for protection.

Nor are industrialists the only ones likely to take this view. All our business and professional life is over-shadowed with restrictive conceptions and practices, such as are inseparable from a protective economy. The trading and professional groups into which these sections have broken themselves up, having become strangers to it, would resist the advent of freedom.

It is not easy to think of any section that would welcome land-value taxation and free trade, for each seems at first glance to have something to lose. The problem is how to get people to take a second and closer look, and to see that they have far more to gain from it than to lose. At present the solution is quite beyond me, but an effort must be made to find it, for the rewards offered by the adoption of a land-value policy are dazzling.

Under land-value taxation the portion of Government expenditure that might properly fall on agricultural land would be about £60,000,000 per annum. There are in Ireland over 17,000,000 acres, of which 12,000,000 acres are farm land, the remaining 5,000,000 acres consisting of mountain, bog, and otherwise non-farming land. (It is worth noting, in passing, that although all this land is deemed worthless from an agricultural viewpoint, the State finds the greatest difficulty in acquiring a few thousand acres of it each year from its former owners for afforestation purposes.) This would represent an average rent of £5 per acre on farming land. Even under the present regime of high production costs, this must approximate to the economic rent. As a matter of fact, I occasionally rent very mediocre land outside my own farm for which I have to pay £10 per acre. If all other taxes were removed, we Irish must surely do for our own poor country what, under more favourable conditions than presently exist at home, we have done for other countries. Irish labour and Irish capital would be applied in Ireland instead of, as at present, in the four corners of the globe.

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