

1 THE ISSUE

*When wilt Thou save the people?
O God of mercy, when?
Not kings and lords, but nations!
Not thrones and crowns but men!*

Ebenezer Elliott
(1781-1849)

Because man is a land animal, and the quantity of land available for his use is limited in quantity, disputes of one kind or another over rights to land are as old as history, and probably a great deal older. In that sense, the "land problem" is universal and perennial, and most unlikely to disappear completely so long as man himself survives. At certain times, however, the "land problem" has acquired a degree of urgency, and people who had once been prepared tacitly to accept the *status quo* have begun to demand drastic changes. These occasions have usually occurred at times when the capacity of land to meet human needs has suddenly declined.

Such an occasion arose in the United Kingdom in the late 1870s. Its origin must be sought in a natural calamity, which we shall later need to discuss.

This crisis, however, did not simply lead to a brief period of agrarian distress and turbulence which gradually died away as conditions improved. It set people asking a great many searching and fundamental questions about land. As time went on, these questions were asked not merely in rural areas, but in urban areas as well; and right down to 1914 more and more people in all parts of the United Kingdom began to ask them. The clamour was taken up again at intervals after the end of the 1914-18 War. It continued to exert a substantial and demonstrable effect on politics long after the Second World War, and is far from silent to this day.

As a general rule, the "land problem" in its various manifestations has been treated essentially as an accessory to other stories: the story of Irish Home Rule; the story of the constitutional crisis of 1909-11; the story of British Socialism, and so on. This work

is concerned to study the "land problem" in its own right. We shall consider to what extent, and in what ways, the various eruptions of the issue into the newspaper headlines were related to each other, and how a concern with land has influenced the general course of history. It will be seen that this thread, the "land problem", was no mere accessory or decoration, but the thread which tied together a very large part of our economic and political history.

Conditions in the period which immediately preceded the agricultural catastrophe of the late 1870s were exceedingly good, by the standards to which men had previously been accustomed. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on agriculture, published in 1875, concluded a complacent survey with the observation that: "It is gratifying and cheering to reflect that never was this great branch of national industry in a healthier condition, and never was there such solid ground for anticipating for it a steady and rapid advance."¹

The vast majority of people in all social classes, in town and country alike, could look back on a quarter of a century of steadily advancing prosperity. Of course there was still squalor; still the gloomy prospect of the workhouse for great numbers of British working people; still a scanty and precarious existence for innumerable Irish peasants; still long hours of wretched, monotonous toil for millions of industrial workers, and much worse conditions still for the agricultural labourers.

Yet the present was better than the past, and men had every reason for thinking that the future would be a great deal better still — if not for themselves, then for their children. People believed, and not without reason, in the great ideas of the age: in Free Trade; in Progress; in the Christian religion; in Britain as the preceptress of the world. We talk today of "Victorian smugness", but it is well to remember that men of the middle 1870s had quite a lot of justification for being smug. Although they certainly did not live in the best of all possible worlds, they could easily believe that they were marching along the road which led to that happy destination.

Land, in the eyes of most people, was a species of property essentially like other property; and all property rights were quite literally sacred, for a violation of property rights was an infringement of the Commandment not to steal. To put it less dramati-

cally, as one Welsh Liberal landlord wrote to another in 1881: "I look on a landlord with a farm to let as very much in the position of a farmer with a score of bullocks to sell at a fair. He has a perfect right to say whether he will dispose of his property and on what terms."²

Yet the possession of land had special attractions over and above the attractions of other kinds of property. The 15th Earl of Derby was a great landowner; he was also a politician who oscillated between the Liberal and Conservative parties. Writing in 1881, he declared: "The objects which men aim at when they become possessed of land in the British Isles may, I think, be enumerated as follows: (1) political influence; (2) social importance, founded on territorial possession, the most visible and unmistakable form of wealth; (3) power exercised over tenantry; the pleasure of managing, directing and improving the estate itself; (4) residential enjoyment, including what is called sport; (5) the money return — the rent."³

No doubt other landowners would have set rent in a higher place on the list; but the importance of land ownership for purposes other than financial profit must have meant that the rent collected was frequently far less than could have been drawn if the estate were regulated as a purely economic undertaking. Land had a much greater emotional significance to its owner than did most forms of property. The attractions of land ownership were never greater than in the early and middle 1870s, when agriculture seemed set in a permanent condition of prosperity.

There had been substantial reforms in some features of land ownership and land transfer during the previous twenty or thirty years. Many archaic legal restrictions on land transfer had been removed by the Encumbered Estates Act of 1848. The Agricultural Holdings Act of 1875, proposed by a Conservative duke, gave some sort of acknowledgement to the idea that a tenant who introduced improvements on to land has a title to the value of those improvements when his tenancy ceased. The effects of that Act were a good deal less impressive than many people had hoped; but at least a step in the right direction had been taken. Again, the practice of "enclosure", through which the grazing commons and the great open fields were brought into private hands, had long been an issue of passionate controversy, and had been the subject of many Acts of Parliament; but it was the Commons Act of 1876 which virtually ended the enclosures.

Throughout this long period of comparative prosperity, many famous reformers pressed for further land legislation. John Bright called for "free land" in the early 1850s.⁴ The same cry was taken up by Cobden, in the last speech which he made, at Rochdale in 1864: "If I were five and twenty or thirty instead of, unhappily, twice that number of years, I would take Adam Smith in hand . . . and I would have a League for free trade in Land just as we had a League for free trade in Corn . . . If you can apply free trade to land and labour too . . . then, I say, the men who do that will have done for England probably more than we have been able to do by making free trade in corn."⁵

The demand for "free land" was raised again, and raised repeatedly, by Joseph Chamberlain in the 1870s. Yet it would be wrong to read too much into the slogan. Chamberlain was immensely self-conscious about his radicalism, and it is doubtful whether many politicians would have gone much further than he did, when he explained his own interpretation of the term in 1873: "I am in favour of freeing the land from all the trammels which press upon its utmost production. I am in favour of promoting by every means its ready sale and transfer. I am in favour of four great reforms. In the first place I would abolish the absurd custom of primogeniture . . . I am in favour of the repeal of those laws of entail by which more than half of the land in this country is tied up . . . for the supposed benefit of less than 150 families. I am in favour in the next place of such a revision of the laws which affect the appropriation of commons as shall secure those that remain for the people, and should provide for their tenancy in small plots direct from the State, on fair and reasonable conditions. And I am in favour, lastly, of a full tenant right, for every farmer, in spite of any conditions in his lease, which shall give him property in the unexhausted improvements he may make . . ."⁶

A few people, however, were prepared to go a good deal further. The Land and Labour League, founded in 1869, campaigned for "nationalisation of land" and "home colonisation". The Land Tenure Reform Association, which was formed in the same year, included such eminent men as John Stuart Mill, Henry Fawcett, Sir Charles Dilke and Thorold Rogers. This body was influential among educated opinion, and Mill at least seems to have accepted some very radical ideas indeed. The Labour Representation League, under whose auspices the first two working men

were elected to Parliament in 1874, declared the need for "changes in the tenure and transfer of land".⁷

Thus the political climate of the middle 1870s was favourable to modest reforms in land questions, as in most other matters. The idea of "progress" — in the sense both of technological improvements and the removal of social and legal anachronisms — was very much in the air. Not many people, however, were in a mood to demand any fundamental alteration in the system of land ownership, or to ask any really searching questions about the title through which men owned land.

Then came the crash. A run of wet summers culminated in the fearful year 1879, when grain rotted in the English fields in November, and Ireland was brought to the very verge of famine by failure of the potato crop. About the same time, sheep and cattle were visited by epidemic disease. Thus there was an enormous demand for food for the urban population, which home production could not possibly satisfy. By a remarkable coincidence, the prairie lands of the New World had just been opened up to cultivation, and techniques had recently been devised which made it possible to bring food from the Americas to the British market in great quantities. Agricultural producers found themselves with woefully small crops, but without power to command the high prices of scarcity. This influx of food from abroad did not cease when the weather improved, for land was cheap in the New World, and production costs much lower than in Britain. A few years later, in the 1880s, the stockbreeder suffered a similar threat from abroad, with the development of refrigeration methods which made it possible to bring dairy produce and frozen meat to Britain from anywhere in the world.

Thus did the late 1870s mark the end of an era. Men who suddenly found that everything was going wrong became anxious to secure fundamental changes. The worse their conditions had been before the downswing commenced, the more willing were they to take vigorous and even violent action. As living standards in Ireland were far lower than those in most parts of the British Isles, it is no accident that the onset of the sudden and unexpected depression was followed almost immediately by turmoil in Ireland. Irish peasants in the late 1870s were in no mood to await the long-term consequences of reforms like those which Chamberlain and other daring radicals had been advocating. They needed an immediate answer to an immediate threat of famine.

A decade on from that depression, nobody with a mind at all could say that his views had been wholly unchanged by the events and theories which had been thrown up in the late 1870s and early 1880s. What had seemed daring — almost revolutionary — in 1878, soon became commonplace among Conservatives. Ideas about “freeing the land” with which Chamberlain had excited his radical audiences in the 1870s would hardly have caused an eyebrow to be raised in the stuffiest London club by the time of the Queen’s Golden Jubilee, in 1887. In Great Britain, where mineral extraction and industry were becoming increasingly important, people came to see the “land problem” not merely as an aspect of agricultural economics, but as a matter of immediate and direct importance to the townsman as well. More and more people, in more and more places, began to decide that some kind or other of land reform was essential for the treatment of their own particular economic and social problems.

Notes-1

- 1 Quoted in George Winder, *British Farming and Food* (see bibliog.), p. 8.
- 2 A. C. Humphreys-Owen to Stuart Rendel, 16 October 1881. Rendel 19,459C, fo. 109.
- 3 Lord Derby, “Ireland and the Land Act”, *Nineteenth Century*, October 1881, p. 474.
- 4 See Joseph Chamberlain’s speech, 19 February 1872. JC 4/1 p. 33.
- 5 John Bright, jr, and J. E. Thorold Rogers (ed.), *Speeches by Richard Cobden* (see bibliog.), p. 493.
- 6 Newspaper cutting 1 January 1874. JC 4/1 pp. 103-4.
- 7 Examples from J. MacAskill, *The treatment of “land” in English social and political theory 1840-1885* (see bibliog.).