

7 FIN DE SIECLE

Those who make private property of the gift of God (land) pretend in vain to be innocent, for in thus retaining the subsistence of the poor they are the murderers of those who die every day for want of it.

St Gregory the Great
Quoted in *Single Tax*, January 1896

Although the late 1880s were marked by a gradual decline in the rural land agitation, the same period also witnessed a great upsurge of interest in the land problem as a matter of urban concern. Two processes were operating simultaneously; on the one hand, moderate political thinkers were becoming interested in land reform, without necessarily receiving much prompting from the extremists; on the other hand some of the extreme land reformers were coming to realise that they could rephrase their arguments in a way which would be attractive to the moderates.

Both the peasant rebels and the intellectual land reformers paid increasing attention to "mainstream" Liberal opinion. Thus, in 1888, the Skye Land League recommended that its branches should affiliate to the Scottish Liberal Association. A year later, the Scottish Liberals recorded — with no apparent signs of distress — that forty-eight of the sixty members of the Liberal committee in Caithness-shire were also members of the local Land Law Reform Association.¹ A proportion of the militants fought a rearguard action against close association with the main body of Liberalism; but after failing to capture the Highland Land League in 1893 they lapsed into insignificance.²

The followers of Henry George soon perceived an easy way of presenting their case to a much wider body of people. They came to realise that the reforms which they desired could be brought about by the simple, and by no means terrifying, expedient of an annual tax on the site value of land. With State expenditure below £100 millions a year — as it remained throughout practically all of the nineteenth century — a 100 per cent tax on the annual value of land would not merely produce all the revenue which was required, but would leave a very handsome

surplus as well, which could be devoted to measures of social improvement. Thus all other taxes could vanish, and a "single tax" on land values would suffice in their place.³ The more enthusiastic followers of George came, in the late 1880s, to describe themselves as "Single Taxers". By this term they sought to emphasise that they did not wish to add to the number of taxes, but to employ one tax in place of many. A sharp and complete distinction was made between site values, which they proposed eventually to collect *in toto*, and improvement values, which they would leave quite untouched. If the "Single Tax" was introduced gradually, any errors of assessment which were made in the initial stages of the operation could be adjusted without serious damage or injustice.

Although this term "single taxing" was a very convenient slogan for expressing the aims of the extreme land reformers, it also had the practical disadvantage that it might appear crankish to moderate people who suspected all panaceas. The reformers discovered that they could appeal to men of that kind by simply urging the "taxation of land values". In the early 1880s, the terms "single tax" and "land value tax" had not been used widely, if at all;⁴ from 1888 onwards, they appear constantly. This is a striking example of the way in which, without any alteration in the actual proposals made, a movement may suddenly broaden its appeal by devising suitable slogans.

Liberals for their part soon came to realise that the taxation of land values was an attractive banner beneath which to march. They began to feel their way in that direction, rather cautiously at first, and commencing in Scotland. A Conference of the Scottish Liberal Association held in Edinburgh in February 1887, gave its unanimous support to "a reform of the existing land laws" — which, as A. L. Brown, MP for Hawick, explained, meant that "they wanted to deal with those exorbitant ground rents and to put a stop to the way that property in stone and lime was being confiscated in towns under our present leasehold system" — and also that "our laws should secure for every man what he honestly made — and prevent any man from taking what another made."⁵

During the late 1880s and early 1890s, a general system of representative local government was set up throughout the United Kingdom, and public interest in local affairs was greater than it had been for many years, or has ever been since. People were disposed to expect a great deal from the operation of local

government. The whole edifice was also so new that quite drastic improvements could be proposed without rousing opposition from people who were normally inclined to resist change of any kind. The land taxers sought to apply their own policies to the special needs of local government. They were not slow to see that rates for local government purposes were already assessed on the value of real property, and that it was only necessary to urge that rates should be assessed on the site value alone and not on the total value of the hereditament. Thus another exceedingly useful slogan emerged: "Site Value Rating", which simply meant land value taxation applied to the special needs of local government.

This idea caught on in many places. A new London evening newspaper, *The Star*, was an instant success when it appeared in January 1888, and soon had a larger circulation than any other evening newspaper in the country. *The Star* gave very early support to the doctrine of a "single tax" for national purposes.⁶ At the beginning of 1889, the first elections for the new London County Council were held, and *The Star* declared that: "Taxation of Ground Rents or Values is one of the most popular cries in the election of County Councillors. . . ." Allowance must be made for *The Star's* own enthusiasm; but there can be no doubt that site value rating had already become a major question in London. The LCC elections of 1889 were highly encouraging. Definite parties had not yet "emerged" in LCC politics; but those candidates whom *The Star* and other radicals favoured were able to secure a substantial majority, even though London was strongly Conservative for parliamentary purposes.

Predictably, Glasgow was another place where progress was recorded. In February 1890, the Glasgow municipal council set up a Committee to examine the question of site value rating. The report was favourable to the proposal, but it was remitted for reconsideration. Another report to the same effect followed; in June 1891 this was rejected only by the casting vote of the Lord Provost. As we shall later see, the Glasgow City Council eventually became an enthusiastic convert. Glasgow in fact became very much the centre of the land taxing movement, and remained so well into the twentieth century. Henry George made another visit to Britain in 1890, and a new organisation, the Scottish League for the Taxation of Land Values, was set up to promote his ideas. In June 1894 the first issue of a monthly organ, *The Single Tax*, appeared in Glasgow.⁸

The idea of urban land reform in general, and the rating or taxation of land values in particular, became a matter of general interest to Liberals all over the country. In December 1889, the National Liberal Federation Council, meeting at Manchester, carried a resolution embodying no fewer than five distinct kinds of land reform: the time-honoured policy of "freeing the land" from obsolete legal encumbrances; the application of "tenant-right" to compensation for improvements; leasehold enfranchisement; compulsory powers for local authorities to acquire land for allotments and smallholdings; and — most radical of all — the doctrine of land value taxation, set out in terms which Henry George himself could scarcely have criticised.⁹

Two years later, in 1891, the NLF set itself the task of expounding a compendious programme for the forthcoming General Election — the famous "Newcastle Programme". The ideas of land reform which had been promulgated at Manchester were repeated,¹⁰ among a very wide range of reforms in other fields. On the same evening, Gladstone delivered a speech which formally commended a large part of the "Newcastle Programme" — so much, indeed, that *The Times* scolded him for being "mere showman of the wares turned out by the caucus". Not all of the land proposals were mentioned by Gladstone, and the taxation of land values is a very significant omission; but the public tended, not unreasonably, to consider that he had given at least a *nihil obstat* to the whole Programme. In fact he had done nothing of the kind. A year or so earlier, he had said some very scathing things about Henry George;¹¹ but by this time most of the Liberal enthusiasts were keen land reformers who sought to claim Gladstone as one of themselves, while the Conservatives were only too anxious to show that he was tarred with the brush of George's "revolutionary" doctrines. While such proposals were being ventilated in the Liberals' own organisations, the Opposition parliamentarians also sought to raise them in one form or other in the House of Commons. R. B. Haldane, who was by no means a single taxer, brought forward a Bill in the spring of 1890, and another two years later, which were designed to give local authorities power to collect a measure of land value increments. The particular concern which Londoners had shown for the taxation of ground rents in 1889 prompted other Liberals to propose Bills designed for the capital alone. Predictably, none of these Liberal proposals proceeded to enactment — indeed, not all Liberals

were happy about them — but they were evident signs of public interest.¹²

The Conservative Parliament of 1886 nearly ran its full legal course and the next election took place in 1892. A glance through the election addresses of the Liberal candidates who stood at the General Election of 1892 shows that a considerable number of them (although by no means all) were taking their cue from the "Newcastle programme", and were treating this as a more or less authoritative statement of Liberal policy — as one candidate called it, "the Newcastle programme of the Liberal Party".¹³ Liberal candidates everywhere, but especially in London, made frequent reference to the taxation of ground rents and mining royalties, and at least one of them called for "the nationalisation of the land".¹⁴ Keir Hardie, who was returned at the election for West Ham South as the first independent "Labour" MP (or "Labour, Radical and Home Rule", as he described himself), laid his main emphasis on land reform. An interesting example of the changing use of words is provided by Hardie's declaration that he favoured "nationalising the land by taxing land values" — a statement which both land nationalisers and land value taxers would have considered to be a contradiction in terms a few years later.

The General Election of 1892 gave no very clear verdict. The Liberals, with 273 seats, almost exactly balanced the Conservatives with 269, and a working majority could be obtained only by linking the eighty-one highly fissile Irish Nationalists to the Liberals; while the forty-six Liberal Unionists were by this time more or less completely bound to the Conservatives. In August 1892, Gladstone, well advanced in his eighty-third year, formed his fourth and last administration.

None of the radical land reformers was in a commanding position through his own personality, although H. H. Fowler (who had seconded the land resolution at Newcastle) was sufficiently important to be given a seat in the Cabinet. Yet the land reformers had made immense strides since the Liberals were last in office, and theirs was one of the principal questions which Liberals wished to tackle, once the Home Rule issue had been resolved.

The parliamentary situation was exceedingly unsatisfactory for all parties throughout the lifetime of the 1892 Parliament. The Liberals not only lacked an overall majority, but it was common knowledge that they were deeply divided on both personal and

political questions. The Irish Party was even more profoundly split. The Liberal Unionists suffered from the traditional affliction of the mule: they were without pride of ancestry or hope of posterity. The Conservatives had an enormous majority in the Lords, which made it possible for them to harass the Government out of existence, or force it to go to the country, at almost any moment; yet it was not in the Opposition's interest to bring down the administration in circumstances where an appeal to the people would be likely to go in the Liberals' favour. To avoid this risk, they were bound to accept legislation which they disliked and could have blocked had they chosen. Tentative bargains were made from time to time between the Front Benches, which enabled Liberal measures to pass, although often in a form which gave no satisfaction to either side of the House.¹⁵

Early in 1894, Gladstone resigned the premiership, and was succeeded by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Rosebery; while Gladstone's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir William Harcourt, remained in office. Harcourt was under considerable pressure from radicals in the House of Commons to introduce measures bearing on land reform. Early in 1894, for example, the Chancellor received a Memorial from many Radical MPs, urging him to equalise the death duties payable on realty and personalty; for, up to that time, landed property had been assessed at a lower rate than personal possessions. Sir William complied with the request in his Budget that year. The Prime Minister disliked both the proposal and its author, but the Chancellor was able to pilot the necessary measure through Parliament without too much difficulty.

The campaign for land reform did not abate. Not long after the Budget, ninety-four MPs signed another Memorial to the Chancellor, this time urging that municipalities should be authorised to collect their rates on the basis of site values.¹⁶ Lord Rosebery himself apparently gave support to the idea — declaring that the principle was “becoming universally established”. He also counselled patience — adding that: “While you make converts like that you need not be afraid if for a session or even two these large principles do not have immediate effect.”¹⁷ Long before the two sessions had passed, Rosebery's government was out of office, and its successor had no intention of setting the proposals into legislation.

In the middle of 1895, the Liberals resigned, and Salisbury

formed another Conservative administration. On this occasion, however, the Liberal Unionist leaders were actually incorporated in the administration; yet they were still sometimes disposed to exert independent pressure upon the Conservatives.

The change of government made a General Election necessary. With Gladstone no longer the leader, and Rosebery and Harcourt more or less publicly at loggerheads, the local organs of the Liberal Party had a large measure of autonomy, and causes like land taxing, which were popular among the rank-and-file, featured prominently among the various programmes advanced by the candidates. The Scottish enthusiasts were able — apparently without challenge — to make the astonishing claim that: “Every Liberal candidate in Scotland was pledged to the taxation of land values. Many of them made it the fighting question. In Glasgow seven Liberals, four Labour men and even one Unionist declared for this great reform.”¹⁸ The overall results of the election were bad for Liberals of all kinds, and inevitably some of the prominent land reformers were among the casualties. Yet other aspects of that disastrous election were more encouraging for the land taxers. Sir William Harcourt gave public support to the taxation of ground values and mining royalties. Among the few Liberal gains were two recorded by active land-taxers in the south-west of Scotland: Robinson Souttar in Dumfriesshire, and J. G. Holbourn, a self-educated tinsplate worker, in N.W. Lanarkshire.

The new Government was now safely established. In general, it had little interest in urban land reform, but much more interest in rural land policies. The urban reformers were in no position to compel action; their main aim was to cultivate public opinion so that the next Liberal administration would comply with their wishes.

The process of persuasion was conducted at various levels. Land taxing was vigorously preached among working-class organisations. Sidney and Beatrice Webb give a vivid picture of how the ideas of Henry George “completely revolutionised” the attitude of the urban workers in the middle 1890s: “Instead of the Chartist cry of ‘Back to the Land’, . . . the town artisan is thinking of his claim to the unearned increment of urban land values, which he now watches falling into the coffers of the great landlords.”¹⁹ The same spirit was evinced at the Cardiff meeting of the Trade Union Congress, which in 1895 urged that: “The taxation of land values and ground rents should be made a test

question at the next General Election."²⁰

No less striking was the ascendancy which the advocates of land value taxation were acquiring over other groups of land reformers. At a joint conference held by a number of organisations in London in May 1895 — with individuals like Dr G. B. Clark present, and bodies like the Land Nationalisation Society represented — unhesitating assent was given to a resolution in favour of land value taxation.²¹

Socialist organisations were also susceptible to the same influence. The Independent Labour Party (ILP) was founded in 1893, for socialistic objectives; but when it sought to translate these into an actual programme, the land policy of the ILP appeared in the form of a proposal that "Land values, rural and urban (should) be treated as public property"²² — in other words, the taxation of land values, not the "socialisation" or "nationalisation" of land. So also are the doctrines of George and Wallace frequently found jumbled together in other "socialist" publications of the period, in a manner which shows that neither was fully understood²³ — but which is eloquent witness of the deep and lasting impression which land reform doctrines had exerted on the minds of the working people.

The one direction in which the land reformers had an "outside chance" of persuading the Government to inaugurate urban legislation was in connection with site value rating. Those municipal authorities where the radicals were dominant began to exert pressure, not for a uniform national system of site value rating, but for particular towns to receive authority to conduct the experiment. The campaign began even before the Liberals had left office, and it continued with growing force during the supervening period. In 1894, the London County Council appointed a committee to communicate with the Government in order to promote site value rating in the capital. Then the Glasgow Police Commissioners sought authority "to appropriate, by rating, the future unearned increment of the city to municipal purposes".²⁴ In 1895, it was the Dundee Council which took the initiative in summoning a convention of delegates from town and parish councils in Scotland. This convention met at the end of the year, and also decided in favour of site value rating.²⁵ In 1896, the dominant issue of the Glasgow City Council election was site value rating; forty-nine of the seventy-seven members of the Council which was returned were supporters. By the autumn of 1897, it

was reported that: "Close upon 140 assessing bodies in England and sixty-three in Scotland have recently pronounced in favour of having powers from Parliament to tax land values for local purposes."²⁶

In the years which followed, the movement continued to grow. By the early part of 1906, a petition urging that local authorities should be empowered to levy rates upon site values was sent to the Chancellor of the Exchequer with the support of no fewer than 518 local authorities.²⁷

Evidence accumulated from other quarters that the idea of site value taxing, at least for local purposes, was winning support. In the middle of 1901, the Royal Commission on Local Taxation produced its final Report. This covered a wide field of local finance, but the question of urban rating attracted considerable interest. The Commission was severely split; but a substantial minority proposed that a system intermediate between the existing one and full-scale site value rating should be adopted.

This "Minority Report" — as it became known — was exceedingly mild in its proposals. The Commissioners who signed it went so far as to declare that: ". . . if proper regard be had to equitable considerations, the amount capable of being raised by a special site value rate will not be large; and that the proceeds of it, whatever the amount may be, should go in relief of local, not Imperial, taxation." Yet the Minority Report represented some sort of move in the direction which the land taxers desired; and they took particular heart from the fact that one of the signatories was the Chairman of the Commission, Lord Balfour of Burleigh, Secretary of State for Scotland in the Conservative Cabinet. The various opinions expressed by the Commissioners on this and other questions of local finance were sufficiently tentative and disparate to leave the whole question very much open to argument. None of the advocates of any point of view could reasonably claim a consensus of informed opinion in their favour.

The proposal of site value rating was taken up with increasing zest in the House of Commons. In 1902, a bill in favour was moved by C. P. Trevelyan from the Liberal benches, and was defeated by 71 votes on the second reading. A similar bill in the following year, this time moved by Dr T. Macnamara, secured a more encouraging reception; thirteen Government supporters voted with the Liberals and the Irish in favour, and the second

reading was rejected by a majority of only thirteen.²⁸ In 1904, yet another bill actually passed its second reading in an overwhelmingly Conservative House of Commons — securing the support of no fewer than thirty-three Ministerialists.²⁹ In 1905, a further Trevelyan bill was carried out with a majority of ninety.³⁰ On these last two occasions, the Government Whips did not tell: but this fact itself is eloquent of the way in which land value rating was winning support, even in Conservative circles. A parallel Bill dealing with Scottish land values also secured a second reading; this will call for further discussion later. These Bills were not allowed to proceed to their later Parliamentary stages, but it appears that MPs who did not like the taxation of land values had become so demoralised that they were unwilling to stand up and be counted. By the early twentieth century, site value rating was scarcely an issue of controversy among Liberals, for practically all the leading figures of the Party had made public statements in favour. So had a considerable number of Liberal Unionists, even including the new Duke of Devonshire, better known under his earlier title of Marquis of Hartington.³¹ It had already become quite “respectable” among Conservatives — so much so that local Councils in overwhelmingly Conservative areas like Liverpool and Croydon declared for Trevelyan’s Bills.³²

Politically and socially, the land reform movement in urban areas operated from below upwards: it was a movement of people at the “grassroots” who sought to influence politicians to legislate. Originally, the same had been true of the rural land reform movement. We have seen much of the spontaneous — often violent — action which peasants adopted in many parts of the British Isles during the 1880s. Pressure from below certainly did not cease in the 1890s; but in the last decade of the century the initiative came mainly from above, and was often met with indifference by the people whom it was intended to benefit, or whom (on a more cynical view) the Government sought to mollify in order to avoid trouble in the future.

There are two rather important exceptions — instances where pressure for rural land reform in the 1890s really did come from below. The brief Liberal administration of 1892-5 had the ill-fortune to take office during a period of agricultural depression. In 1892, there was “a harvest much under the average, except in a few favoured districts, coupled with a serious fall in the

value of corn, live stock and other leading agricultural products".³³ This revived interest among the tenant-farmers in the "Irish Fs", and made them also press for the abolition of distress for rent. The Government was well conscious of the existence of radical pressure-groups among its supporters, and feared in particular that a land-reforming backbencher, Francis Channing, would introduce a bill which would propose satisfaction for the farmers' demands; a bill certain to evoke strong feelings on both sides, and one which it might be equally inconvenient politically either to support or to oppose. As is very common in such circumstances, a Royal Commission was set up. The Government had considerable difficulty in finding a suitable chairman,³⁴ but eventually chose the Conservative Henry Chaplin — probably hoping that any legislation based on the Report of such a Commission would prove more or less non-contentious. Unfortunately Chaplin used all available methods to spin out the proceedings, presumably in the hope that the Government would fall before the Report was issued, and the initiative for legislation would devolve on the Conservatives. By the beginning of 1895 the Commission was still sitting, while two more bad years for cereals had "resulted in a real calamity. Rents — already reduced by 50 to 80 per cent — can in some districts hardly be collected at all; and in many parts of the East and South of England, farmers, owing to their necessities, have discharged large numbers of labourers during the winter months".³⁵

In February 1895, some of the Liberal backbenchers, including Channing, jumped the gun of the Royal Commission, and introduced a Land Tenure Bill which sought to increase the tenants' rights to improvements, give added security of tenure and abolish the landlords' right to distraint. The Government supported the Bill, which passed its first two Readings. Before its passage could be completed, however, the Government resigned.

The second exception was a matter of even wider interest. One of the most important measures of the Liberal interlude was H. H. Fowler's Parish Council Bill, which passed through its stages in 1893-4. It brought in a number of major innovations, including the establishment of parish and district councils; and a somewhat similar measure was passed for Scotland. Certain features of the Bill had considerable bearing on land policies. On these the Government encountered difficulties, and was forced to make considerable concessions to "buy off" opposition — notably in

several of the clauses relating to allotments;³⁶ while the Conservatives managed to carry an amendment which limited the expenditure of the parish councils to the value of a threepenny rate. This looks, at first sight, like a mere point of administrative detail, but it was really very significant. The effect of the amendment was that parish councils operated on such a small budget that they became of trivial importance in local government. At the parish level, there was a real possibility that farm labourers might actively participate in local government; while considerations of time, distance and expense made it impossible for most of them to attend meetings of rural district or county authorities. The parish councils received, in name, very considerable powers to acquire land for allotments; but on a threepenny rate this power was nugatory. Thus the possibility of using parish councils as a means of securing either public ownership of land on a large scale, or the development of peasant-proprietorship, was vitiated from the start. There is no reason to doubt that the Conservatives had been sincerely converted to the idea of establishing a peasant proprietary; but they did not wish it to be brought about through the agency of local authorities which were largely controlled by farm labourers.

The Conservatives were in office from 1895 until almost the end of 1905. Their rural land legislation falls very sharply into two divisions; a few measures, which were in no sense epoch-making, which were designed for Britain; and some vastly more important legislation by which they sought to extinguish the Irish rural land problem as a live political issue.

The most important British legislation was the Agricultural Rating Act (England and Wales) of 1896. This Act had a rather extraordinary history. The Royal Commission under Henry Chaplin succeeded in spinning out its proceedings while the Liberal Government lasted and acted with peremptory haste as soon as the Conservatives returned, producing an Interim Report early in 1896. This proposed a reduction of rates on agricultural land. Contrary to the usual practice of Royal Commissions, no enquiry had been held on the subject of the Report, and no evidence had been taken from witnesses as to the likely benefits or disadvantages to various interests. Virtually, the procedure of a Royal Commission was used to introduce a new piece of Government policy.

The Government also acted with considerable alacrity, and legislation was passed in the same year to implement the pro-

posals. Agricultural land was to pay only half the normal rates over a period originally set at six years, but which was later protracted beyond the lifetime of the Government. Opponents of the Government, who contended that the ultimate beneficiary would be the landlord and not the tenant-farmer, were able to point to a remarkable admission made by Thomas Usborne, Conservative MP for Chelmsford: "No one has denied, and he hoped no one wished to deny, that the Rating Act was in relief of the landlord and not of the tenant."³⁷

The other significant piece of rural land legislation was the Agricultural Holdings Act of 1900. This simplified and cheapened the procedure for settling compensation to the tenant in respect of improvements, and it also met a long-standing subject of complaint by greatly reducing the power of a landlord to dis-train for rent on his tenant's property.

To these two measures, we might perhaps add a third, although it only affected a small body of people, and them only to a marginal extent. This was the Tithe Rentcharge Act of 1899, which gave the owners of tithe rentcharges the same rating relief as the 1896 Act had given to most agricultural properties. By this Act, between 10,000 and 11,000 clergymen secured a relief which on average was not more than £5 a year.³⁸ The Act served as something of an irritant to nonconformist and anti-clerical opinion; it is difficult to see how anyone (including the clergymen and the Government) could have benefited enough to make the whole rather unpopular transaction worthwhile.

Not the least remarkable feature of this period of Conservative ascendancy was the absence of further legislation designed to encourage the development of smallholdings in Great Britain. The existing Acts had produced very limited results; between December 1894 and March 1902, fewer than 222 acres were acquired for the purpose. In the last couple of decades of the nineteenth century, the number of farm workers was dropping at the rate of about 1.5 per cent per year. Yet the greater the decline, the less eager the remaining farm workers became to acquire smallholdings. The dissatisfied farm worker was evidently unwilling to deepen his personal commitment to an occupation in whose future he had little faith.

Although the closing years of the nineteenth century and the first few years of the twentieth were not marked by much important

British land legislation, the Irish legislation of the same period was far more spectacular. The Liberals' Irish policy at the beginning of the 1890s had centred upon Home Rule; and presumably the settlement of the Irish land question would thereafter have devolved on the Irish Parliament which would be set up. When Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill was thrown out by the Lords in 1893, and the Ministers decided not to resign or dissolve Parliament, they were bound to inaugurate some kind of Irish land legislation. A Government bill was introduced early in 1895, by John Morley, Chief Secretary for Ireland. The most important innovation proposed was that the statutory tenancy period should be reduced from fifteen years to ten, but there were also several other modifications to the existing law. The Morley Bill passed its first two readings, but the Government resigned long before its passage was complete.

When the Unionists resumed office in the middle of the same year, the climate was favourable to a settlement. There were three main "interests" involved: the Irish landlords, the Irish peasants and the British people. As we have seen, the Irish landlords had long decided that Ireland would yield few of the spiritual delights of land ownership. The main attraction was the rent, and they had good reason to fear that this rent might one day cease to be paid. If, therefore, they could contrive to sell the land on terms which they considered reasonable, they would probably do so with considerable alacrity. The main concern of most of the peasants — now that the "Three Fs" were firmly established — was to pay as little rent as possible; and if they could also become freeholders, this, no doubt, was all to the good. The peasants living in the Congested Districts had the further interest that they wished to acquire land which would be adequate for their needs. The British people were sick of the turbulence of Ireland and the heavy expenditure involved in maintaining law and order. They were willing to assist practically any settlement which was acceptable to the Irish peasants and landlords, and did not involve more State expenditure than was necessary.

In 1895, there were other considerations which rendered it quite urgent that action should be taken. The funds which had been made available under the land purchase Acts had been taken up with alacrity; but it was by no means clear that sums which might be offered on similar terms in future would be grasped

with equal avidity. The rents which had been fixed shortly after the 1881 Act would soon come up for revision, and it was obvious from current prices that the courts would make substantial further reductions. Peasants might very well decide that it was cheaper for them to pay the revised rents than to enter any new land purchase agreements which might be offered. Thus the Government was bound to consider what sums of money should be made available, and on what terms. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the Liberal Unionists were just as willing to set pressure upon the Conservatives to implement "constructive Unionism" as they had been in the 1886 Parliament.³⁹ Chamberlain exploited Liberal Unionist doubts to the utmost possible extent in his negotiations with the Conservatives in order to secure concessions to the ideas of his own Party; yet not all was bluff by a long way, and many Liberal Unionists in Britain as well as Ireland might well return to their original Party if the Government was not sufficiently radical in dealing with Irish land matters.

The Irish Secretary in the new Government was Gerald Balfour, brother of Arthur. In his view, the judicial rents would be revised downwards by about 20 per cent.⁴⁰ He contended that substantial modifications of current and future land purchase bargains were necessary. This opinion was not endorsed by the Treasury; but the Irish Office view prevailed, and a Bill was soon introduced by Gerald Balfour to give effect to his own Department's view, and also to reintroduce some of Morley's proposals.

The new bill did not propose a reduction of the fifteen-year period for judicial rents, but instead authorised applications to be made by either tenants or landlords at five-year intervals if price variations justified them. The main concern, however, was to devise a workable scheme of land purchase. The Government proposed to reduce the debts on existing and future agreements at the end of each of three decennial periods, and for the tenant to pay his 4 per cent towards the interest and repayment of the sum outstanding at the beginning of the decennium, and not on the total original loan. The interest would therefore be reducing, and the loan period would be extended to about seventy years. The sums paid by the purchasing tenant would remain rather less than the fixed rents on comparable properties, even though there were periodic downward revisions of rents. The Irish MPs were given to understand that the fate of the bill depended upon them;

if they allowed it through it would pass into law; if they obstructed it would be dropped, and other kinds of legislation would receive priority. In fact the Irish did not obstruct, and after some modifications which did not radically affect its character, the bill was accepted.

The 1896 Act, like the Act of 1891, was of only limited effect and, in particular, little was done to tackle the question of the Congested Districts. The most important step taken in that direction under the two Acts together was the purchase of Clare Island, and the settlement of ninety-five families.⁴¹

In the closing years of the century, there were new stirrings in peasant Ireland. 1897 was a bad year for agriculture, especially in the west, and at the beginning of 1898 a body nostalgically called the United Irish League was founded under the leadership of William O'Brien in the Congested Districts of Co. Mayo, as a sort of renascent Land League. The United Irish League soon extended its organisation throughout similar Congested Districts in Counties Galway, Leitrim and Sligo. By the time the new body was on its feet, however, prosperity had begun to return. This in no way impeded the progress of the UIL, but radically altered its character. It ceased to be concerned with the land problem as such, but became instead the "organisation of the Nationalist Party for political purposes".⁴² By the end of the century, agrarian crime was not much over a quarter of what it had been in 1887, yet the problem of chronic Irish discontent had not been solved. "Constructive Unionism" had to do better than that if the Home Rule threat was to be averted.

In 1900, Gerald Balfour was succeeded as Irish Secretary by George Wyndham — a man who lived his rather short life to the full, and whose contribution to a settlement of the Irish land problem was probably greater than that of any other incumbent of his office; yet whose career was eventually wrecked by the intrigues of lesser men in his own Party. The situation at the inception of Wyndham's period of office was summed up in a document which he circulated to the Cabinet: "In spite of . . . some forty Acts of Parliament, the land question is not progressing towards a solution. The landlords dread ruin by consecutive revision of judicial rents, but are powerless to improve their property and reluctant to sell it under the existing Acts. The tenants outside Ulster are not over eager to purchase so long as they look to reductions of rent at the hands of an army of Sub-

Inspectors. . . . The Nationalist agitators advocate the reduction of fair rents to the level of purchase instalments by 'running out' farms and more lawless proceedings in order to compel the breaking up of large farms let to 'graziers'. The landlords counter these attacks on their property by multiplying appeals and keeping as much land as they can out of the Act of 1881 either by holding it themselves or letting it for eleven months to graziers. Fair rent litigation, which has already cost the taxpayer over £2 millions, not to speak of the cost to the parties concerned, must increase in acerbity with each revision and subsequent crop of appeals . . ."⁴³

A year later, Wyndham developed his analysis further. Irish Land Acts which dealt with landlord-tenant relations, he argued, had invariably failed; while Acts which "abolish(ed) those relations by enabling the tenant to become an owner" had invariably succeeded. Under those Acts, "over 70,000 tenants have purchased and the State has not lost a penny".⁴⁴

In 1902, Wyndham brought forward a new Land Purchase Bill, which had an unsatisfactory Parliamentary history, and was finally withdrawn. There followed a period of considerable violence in Ireland, in which about half the country was "proclaimed" and subjected to coercion, while eleven MPs were imprisoned.

Not long after these unpropitious events, Wyndham had to make a decision on the appointment of an Under-Secretary for Ireland — that is, the most senior permanent official in the Irish Government. The best-qualified candidate seemed to be Sir Antony MacDonnell, who was at that time serving on the India Council. MacDonnell explained his own position to Wyndham with complete frankness: "I am an Irishman, a Roman Catholic and a Liberal in politics; I have strong Irish sympathies; I do not see eye to eye with you in all matters of Irish administration . . ."⁴⁵ So far as the land was concerned, MacDonnell favoured "the solution of the land question on the basis of voluntary sale. Where sale does not operate the fixation of rents on some self-acting principle whereby local inquiries would be obviated". On these terms the appointment was made — as "the colleague rather than the subordinate of the Chief Secretary"⁴⁶ — and the two men co-operated very closely. This co-operation was to have a profound effect on the eventual solution of the Irish land problem.

Just before MacDonnell's appointment, a letter had appeared in the Irish newspapers over the signature of a certain Captain Shawe-Taylor, the younger son of a Galway squire and a man

completely unknown in politics. Shawe-Taylor invited certain named landlords and certain named Nationalist politicians to a conference in Dublin. There were some important omissions, and Shawe-Taylor spoke for nobody but himself. Wyndham was at first unimpressed,⁴⁷ but eventually the Conference was held under the Chairmanship of the Earl of Dunraven, an Irish landlord of moderate views. A remarkable measure of agreement was reached, and a substantial body of proposals emerged, which recommended ways in which land purchase might be encouraged and the special problems of the Congested Districts and evicted tenants might be solved. These proposals were published at the beginning of 1903. They gained a very mixed reception indeed among the Irish leaders, but were soon followed by the Report of the official Inquiry into the functioning of the Land Purchase Acts. This confirmed Wyndham's view that the State had lost nothing by the transactions, and also showed that there had been considerable improvements in cultivation in those areas where tenants were acquiring their own land.

Thus there were some clear indications of an acceptable line of settlement, and Wyndham brought forward a new Government Bill on the subject, which was largely the work of Mac-Donnell. The Bill introduced certain important innovations in order to facilitate sales. When a landlord was willing to sell and at least three-quarters of the tenants were willing to buy, advances could be made by the State in cash, without inquiry as to the commercial wisdom of the transaction. Repayment by the tenant would be over a period of 68.5 years, through a 3.25 per cent annuity. A bonus grant of 12 per cent would be made available to bridge the gap between the figure at which the landlords would be likely to sell and the figure at which the tenants would be likely to buy. On Wyndham's calculation that the total value of the sales would be £100 millions, the landlords' bonus would be £12 millions. Treasury opposition was bought off by a bargain whereby the Irish Office agreed to reduce its ordinary annual expenditure by £250,000 — mainly on the police estimates.⁴⁸

Just before Wyndham's proposals were submitted to Parliament, an event occurred which may have had some effect in forestalling any disposition by Conservative backbenchers or peers to tamper with the Bill. A by-election occurred in the marginal Ulster seat of North Fermanagh.⁴⁹ An Independent Unionist, Edward

Mitchell, was set forward against the official Unionist candidate. Mitchell was a tenant farmer, and concentrated on the land issue. He was prone to speak of "landlord wolves". The Nationalists did not stand, and Mitchell was elected. Evidently he had not only captured the Catholic vote practically entire, but had taken many Protestant votes as well. Here was another warning that the Unionists were not entitled to presume too much on the support of Northern Protestants.

When Wyndham's proposals came before Parliament, they were welcomed by the Irish and most of the Government supporters. The official Liberal opposition gave the measure rather lukewarm support,⁵⁰ and on the critical divisions only small minorities resisted the Bill. These included no Irish MPs from either South or North, but comprised a rather startling political amalgam — some deep-blue Conservatives who took their stand on traditional landlord principles, and some very radical Liberals who argued that it was a "gift" to landlords, or even a concession to "blackmail". Among the strongest critics of Wyndham's proposals were the land value taxers and the land nationalists. Wallace, for example, considered that the whole idea was "unsound in principle, and entirely useless except as a temporary expedient, since it would leave the whole land of Ireland in the possession of a privileged class, and would thus disinherit all the rest of the population from their native soil".⁵¹

"Entirely useless" is a gross exaggeration; but there is force in the argument that the position of landless men may actually have become worse in the long run; for while they might have been able to assert their claims effectively against a small class of alien landlords under the old system, it was far more difficult for them to obtain satisfaction in any dispute where the interests of hundreds of thousands of peasant-proprietors were ranged against them. Perhaps the most powerful argument of all in favour of the Wyndham settlement in the minds of British politicians and the British public was the somewhat cynical view suggested by William O'Brien. In his opinion, the landlords' bonus "was a very modest quit-rent indeed for the £3,000,000 (the Exchequer) had heretofore to disgorge every year that came for the swollen police and judicial establishments whose real effect was to subsidise landlord oppression and to keep the wound of Irish disaffection for ever bleeding".⁵² Events would later show that the quit-rent was greater than Wyndham or O'Brien anticipated, and that the

wounds were not staunched.

Thus did the Bill pass safely through Parliament. The most significant feature was that it was based on an agreement derived from Irish initiative and concluded between Irishmen, which had been accepted with very little trouble by the United Kingdom legislature. Unionists and Nationalists could draw their disparate political morals from that situation.

The Government certainly had no intention of making peasant-proprietorship universal among the rural classes. Discussing the landless labourers, Wyndham himself wrote in September 1903 that: "Any concession to the sentiment of 'ownership' should be avoided. Care should be taken not to turn labourers into small owners of uneconomic holdings." The furthest he would go in the direction of land ownership for the labourers was to "extend the English Allotments Acts with modifications if any are necessary".⁵³

The Wyndham Act was, for good or ill, one of the most important measures of all in the history of the Irish land problem. That problem, of course, was not completely settled; but the country had been set in a direction which has been followed to this day, through all the political upheavals.⁵⁴

The rural land question was by no means a dead issue, either in Ireland or in Great Britain; but urban land reform was the main focus of attention. For all practical purposes, the urban land reformers were united in the view that the most urgent measure was the taxation of land values, whether for local or national purposes. The same doctrine was also preached for rural areas, but with much less effect. It is exceedingly difficult to assess just how high a priority the idea of land value taxation held in people's minds by comparison with other reforms which they also sought; but it is doubtful whether there was any other reform in the whole field of politics and economics which was positively desired by so many people. There was every reason for thinking that any government, whether Liberal or Conservative, would be driven to legislate on the subject in the near future.

Notes-7

- 1 SLA Minutes, 1886-1892, pp. 147, 220.
- 2 See discussion in James Hunter, "Politics of Highland land reform 1873-1895", *Scottish Historical Review*, 53 (1974), at pp. 63-4.
- 3 See argument of William Saunders, MP, 24 March 1894. Ellis, fo. 1925.
- 4 See discussion in Elwood P. Lawrence, *Henry George in the British Isles* (see bibliog.), p. 52.
- 5 Press report of SLA Conference, Edinburgh, 8 February 1887. SLA Press Cutting Book, p. 95.
- 6 *The Star*, 30 January 1888.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 8 January 1889.
- 8 Later known as *Land Values*; still published, now as a bi-monthly in London, under the name *Land and Liberty*. For the early history of the movement, see *Land Values*, June 1915, pp. 3-6.
- 9 *The Times*, 5 December 1889. Resolution moved by C. A. Fyffe (Liberal candidate for Oxford 1885) and seconded by F. A. Channing MP.
- 10 *The Times*, 3 October 1891.
- 11 Parliamentary Debates 3S 350, col. 1878.
- 12 Michael Barker, *Gladstone and Radicalism* (see bibliog.), pp. 141-44, 186-88.
- 13 G. Howell, Bethnal Green NE. All election addresses to which reference is made are in the collection of the National Liberal Club.
- 14 J. A. Murdoch Macdonald, Bow and Bromley.
- 15 For examples of these bargains, see A. J. Balfour to Salisbury, 29 December 1893 and 12 January 1894. S. E.
- 16 *Single Tax*, June 1894.
- 17 William Saunders to T. E. Ellis, 24 March 1894. Ellis, fo. 1925.
- 18 *Single Tax*, August 1895.
- 19 Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *History of Trade Unionism* (see bibliog.), p. 376.
- 20 *Single Tax*, October 1895.
- 21 *Single Tax*, June 1895.
- 22 Tom Mann, *The Programme of the ILP and the Unemployed* (see bibliog.), p. 8.
- 23 As, for example, Robert Blatchford, *Land Nationalisation* (see bibliog.), which solemnly recommends books by both authors with a comment that they "afford a clear and comprehensive view of the land question".
- 24 *Single Tax*, July 1894.

- 25 *Single Tax*, January 1896.
- 26 *Single Tax*, October 1897.
- 27 *Land Values*, March 1906; *Liberal Magazine*, 1906, pp. 64-5.
- 28 See analysis of the division, *Liberal Magazine*, 1903, p. 146.
- 29 Ministerialists supporting the Bill are listed in *Liberal Magazine*, 1904, pp. 161-62. The vote was 158:225.
- 30 *Liberal Magazine* 1905, pp. 237-38.
- 31 *Single Tax*, April 1898.
- 32 So also did Dublin. *Land Values*, April, July 1904.
- 33 Memorandum to Cabinet, 14 December 1892. CAB 37/32/45.
- 34 A. J. Balfour to Matthew Ridley, 14 July 1893 (copy). S. E.
- 35 G. Shaw-Lefevre's memorandum, 16 January 1895. CAB 37/38 No. 5.
- 36 A. J. Balfour to Salisbury, 29 December 1893. S. E.
- 37 8 February 1897.
- 38 For a defence of the Act, see letter of Jesse Collings in *Rural World*, 12 July 1899. JC 6/5/6 fo. 3.
- 39 See, for example, A. J. Balfour to Salisbury, 6 June 1895. S. E.
- 40 Gerald Balfour's memorandum to Cabinet, 10 March 1896. CAB 37/41/16.
- 41 See Morley-William O'Brien correspondence 22-23 August 1893. O'Brien 11,439 (2); 11,440 (1); Birrell to Cabinet 23 October 1908. CAB 37/95/130. The Land Commission was not able even to make full use of the powers it legally possessed until a Court decision in 1905 clarified the situation. Bryce to Campbell-Bannerman, 18, 31 December 1905. C-B 41,211, fos. 329, 330, 336.
- 42 Earl Cadogan's memorandum, 26 July 1901. CAB 37/57/72.
- 43 Cabinet memorandum (unsigned, n.d., but *circa* 1901), "The Irish Land Question and the need for Legislation". CAB 37/59/147.
- 44 Wyndham memorandum, "A policy for Ireland", 14 November 1902. AJB 49,804, fos. 78-95. On Ulster difficulties see Wyndham to Balfour, 14 February 1902, *ibid.*, fos. 1-2.
- 45 MacDonnell to Wyndham, 22 September 1902 (copy). AJB 49,804, fos. 61-2; see also Wyndham to Balfour, 13 September 1902. *Ibid.*, fo. 36.
- 46 Denis Gwyn, *Life of John Redmond* (see bibliog.), p. 101.
- 47 Wyndham to A. J. Balfour, 19 September 1902. AJB 49,804, fos. 55-8.
- 48 MacDonnell report to Cabinet, 17 June 1907. CAB 37/89/70.
- 49 See account in P. Buckland, *Irish Unionism 2: Ulster Unionism . . .* (see bibliog.), pp. 24-5.
- 50 See Campbell Bannerman's statement on 4 May 1903. *Liberal Magazine*, 1903, p. 306.

- 51 A. R. Wallace, *My Life* (see bibliog.), p. 321. Henry George jr makes the same criticism of National League policy after 1882, see *Life of Henry George (third period)* (see bibliog.), p. 376. Michael Davitt seems to have seen it earlier; *ibid.*, p. 346. See also criticism in *Single Tax*, March 1903.
- 52 O'Brien, *op. cit.*, p. xxii.
- 53 Memorandum, "A general sketch of Irish policy", 28 September 1903. AJB 49,804, fos. 186-94.
- 54 For Birrell's recognition of this fact, see his statement of November 1907. *Liberal Magazine* 1907, p. 660.