

The Irish Famine

by Oscar B. Johannsen

The Irish potato famine of the 19th Century is being resurrected today in a work, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849*, by Cecil Woodham-Smith, an Englishwoman. This shocking tragedy made its imprint on the United States in many ways for as a result of it hundreds of thousands of Irish fled Ireland to the more hospitable shores of the United States with results on our nation's economics as well as politics.

To Georgists it is particularly important for as a result of this famine, landlordism became so repugnant to the Irish that Henry George's works made a profound impression on the Irish intellectuals, and George himself became an idol of the Irish people.

In the early part of the 19th Century, the Irish peasants were almost entirely dependent upon the potato for food. The British owned most of the land and rented it out to the people under a particularly vicious system of share-cropping in which almost all of their produce went to pay the rent. The peasants largely subsisted on potatoes, as these could be easily and cheaply grown on small bits of land. However, time and again the potato crop failed. When this happened the peasant was in a desperate situation, for he had to pay the rent or lose his land for good. Thus, he starved himself in order to sell all the other produce to pay the rent. In 1845, a blight struck the potato crop which resulted in its total failure. It struck not only Ireland, but England, Holland and France. However, because the Irish were so dependent on potatoes, the loss of the crop was a major disaster.

It is estimated that about 3.5 million pounds worth of potatoes were ruined. Peasants died by the thousands in their miserable huts, or by the roadsides if they were evicted from their tiny plots. And this was going on while practically all the produce raised in Ireland was going to England to pay the rent for the land on which the Irish lived. It is believed that they paid 6 million pounds a year in rents alone when the blight struck. By 1851, 1.5 million out of eight million Irishmen had starved to death and another million had fled to the United States, Canada and other parts of the world.

This dreadful calamity created a hatred for the British which persists to this day. The British government's handling of the crisis was stupid in the extreme. It seems almost incredible — but it did practically nothing to alleviate conditions.

Those in control of the Government believed in the principles of private enterprise and laissez faire to which all Georgists willingly subscribe. However, what they did not know then, and few know today, is that fundamental to laissez faire philosophy, which means a fair field to all with favors to none, is that land be freely available. With land rack-rented by the British, the Irish were at the mercy of speculators. They literally had to sell their very souls to obtain something on which to live, while the British army protected the British landlords.

This is equivalent to people being on a well provisioned ship with a man with a gun standing guard over the entrance to the hold of the ship where the goods are. He permits the people to go down but only to bring up the provisions to give to speculators, who, in turn, then sell the goods to the people. They do all the work and the absentee British landlords and speculators get all the wealth.

Is it any wonder that private enterprise suffered, in the eyes of the Irish as well as many sympathetic English? Possibly George Bernard Shaw's acceptance of socialism stems from his knowledge of how his people suffered under this mistaken application of laissez faire concepts. It is difficult to convince anyone that when land is free, as well as labor, such occurrences are impossible. Shaw read *Progress and Poverty* and owed much of his philosophy to Henry George but did not think George went far enough. He felt the government had to protect the people from the kind of exploitation that occurred in the Irish famine.

Have we learned anything since then? It is doubtful. From the reviews of this book, there seems little understanding that the entire system of land tenure was at fault. Instead, the reviewers seem to feel that it was the result of stupidity and too rigorous an application of the concepts of laissez faire. Paradoxically, therefore, this book instead of helping focus attention on the land may result in helping to implement socialistic concepts.

This points up the fact that to teach Georgism is a difficult task for it is not easy for people to grasp the subtleties of the philosophy. Either they go too far, or not far enough. If they go too far, they become socialists. If they don't go far enough they become the libertarians of today who can't seem to make up their minds as to just where the government should step in and where it should stay out.

The Georgists walk a tight-rope between these two opposing forces. It is exhilarating if he stays on the rope. He can only do this by constantly studying and re-studying his basic concepts for it is so easy to fall.

Georgism is freedom and freedom is so difficult to understand.

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