

THE LAND QUESTION AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

The Introduction to Miss Rose Strunsky's well-known book on ABRAHAM LINCOLN contains these interesting passages on the causes of the American Civil War:—

"We are usually told that the nation went to war over the question of slavery. True, on the surface. But, when one begins to analyze that slavery, to which one-half of the nation objected so strongly, and for which the other half went to the length of declaring war, one finds, beneath the phrases of the time, that not slavery but property in land was the real cause of the Civil War. It was not the three million Negroes in chains, not the torture of the Uncle Toms at the whipping-posts, or the thought of the Elizas running over the broken ice with the blood-hounds behind them, that set the non-slave-holding whites so resolutely against the institution; but the fact that slavery meant large plantations and that they drove the small homesteader from the land. Even then the large landlord of the South might have travelled along peaceably towards the south-west, and the small homesteader towards the north-west, had not the sudden rise of railways brought the frontier close to civilization, and thrust upon the people the problem as to whether the large or small property-owner was to be the first to rush into those newly-opened Eldorados and claim them for his own.

"Slavery, from the point of view of the slave, had very little to do with the American Civil War. The freed Negro was not welcomed to the North as a competitor with free labour nor as a fellow property-owner with his white neighbour. Slavery was objected to by the small homesteader only because he objected to the large landlord. True, the unskilled workers opposed slavery, on the ground that it degraded their labour and prevented their employment. But the unskilled worker was in a fair way in the 'fifties and 'sixties to becoming a small homesteader himself. He was not a labourer 'fixed in that condition of life,' to quote Lincoln. The skilled who worked in the cities and were 'fixed in that condition' were in no way touched by the problem and remained, if anything, hostile to an agitation of abolition. 'We too are slaves,' they said, 'and we have not time to see to the liberation of others.' Besides the alignment of forces between the large landlord and the small landlord, there was an antagonism between the merchants of the east who desired a high tariff and the planters of the south who were free traders. But the more serious division lay in the west, and was fought over the control of the new territories that were about to be opened.

"It was property then, and not liberty, which animated the American people in their struggle against the southern slave power. Yet it is typical of American democracy that the words liberty and property should have been interchangeable. The fact has a distinct potent significance in American history. With the riches of Nature lying open and unexploited, the liberty to go out and acquire property was the main factor in American democracy, so that all through the country's history we see these successive risings of the many to power. Abstract French ideas of the rights of man were not lacking to sustain the people in what they called 'the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,' but these ideas translated meant for the American only the right of an equal economic opportunity to the bounties of Nature."

Miss Strunsky then proceeds to show that the economic development of America from the time of its discovery by Europeans is to be interpreted in the same way:—

"From the very beginning the approach of the Old World towards the New was only for exploitation and profit. Private monopolies were formed to hold her, which were followed by the monopolies of governments; but the onrush of numbers into the New World kept hammering down the most impregnable of special privileges. In the

first years of exploration and colonization monopoly of the land was easy, but labour was difficult to find. The wild backlands gave ready room for the labourer to escape, and slavery was resorted to as a means of tying him down to the soil. In those days slavery took no account of race or colour. Native Indians, Negroes, indentured servants, company immigrants; all who could be impressed to work had to work. But the natives revenged themselves by massacres, the indentured servants and company immigrants escaped into the woods to acquire property of their own, and it was only the bewildered Negro who could be brought into this strange land and be kept in bondage for ever by the brand of colour.

"The discovery of the black race in the same era which produced the discovery of the New World, helped to free the white man and the Indian from a serfdom which existed all over Europe at this time. If one could forget that slavery in America was based on colour, the history of American slavery would become simple and readily understood. It was not at all an institution peculiar or indigenous to America, but was part of the problem of large landlordism which existed in Europe even long after the Napoleonic period."

We commend to our readers these passages from Miss Strunsky's Introduction to her work on ABRAHAM LINCOLN (1914, 10s. 6d. net), which has already a recognized place in the biographies of one of the greatest men that the English-speaking race has ever produced. The quotations have been made by kind permission of the publishers, Messrs. Methuen & Co., Ltd.

The absurdity of any man or number of men being allowed to claim ownership of the natural resources—tin, iron, copper, lead, coal, slate, the forests, fields, streams, rivers, lakes, rain, sunshine, snow—on the very face of it ought to be apparent to any thinking mind. Parliament makes laws, all framed to support this iniquitous system. All the great schemes of railways, canals and other improvements are either held in check or made costly by the exorbitant demands of the landowners. The difficulties of George Stephenson in inventing the Rocket were small in comparison to getting the right of road for his first railway train.—*Mr. D. Wilson of Bashall Eaves at a Labour Party meeting, Clitheroe, 31st January.*

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