

IRISH FREEDOM

IN 1879, the land question in Ireland was a burning issue. The Irish peasants, ground down by poverty and oppressed by their landlords, most of whom were absentee owners, were being subjected to widespread eviction. The Irish National Land League had been formed "to bring about a reduction of rack rents." During that same year Henry George had written an article on the situation in the *Sacramento Bee*. Rack rent, he explained, was "simply a rent fixed by competition at short intervals. . . . In our agricultural districts, land is rented from season to season to the highest bidder. This is what in Ireland is called rack rent."¹

Charles Stewart Parnell was then president of the Irish Land League. But Michael Davitt, who was one of the honorary secretaries, seemed to be the soul of the organization. He proclaimed the principle of "the land for the people." In 1880, he was released from Portland Prison after having served seven years for his adherence to the cause of Irish independence.

Visiting New York that summer, he met Henry George and read *Progress and Poverty*. The experience led him to pledge the Land League to push the book in Great Britain.

George was deeply stirred by firsthand information on the Irish situation. He undertook to write an article on the subject for *Appleton's Journal*, but the work grew under his pen until it became a small book of seventeen chapters. He called it *The Irish Land Question: What It Involves and How Alone It Can Be Settled*.

The book argued that in order to relieve Ireland of the abomination of rack-renting and to give the Irish people the benefits of their labor, it was necessary to spare industry and thrift from taxation and to take the rental value of the land alone for the community needs. Under such a system the laborer

would get what he created; no one would have an advantage as a mere landholder. Even though the landowner might be an Englishman living in England, the value of the land of Ireland would accrue to the Irish people as a whole.

D. Appleton and Co., George's publisher, brought out the little book early in March. "First edition exhausted the first day and not enough to fill orders that have already come in," George wrote Taylor. Shortly afterwards editions were published in London, Manchester and Glasgow. *The Irish Land Question* enjoyed splendid reviews. One in the *New York Times*—a column and a half of small type—began, "One rises from a reading of this weighty pamphlet with a conviction of the justice of the theory advocated and with admiration for the clearness with which it is stated by Mr. Henry George. He had the advantage of having got rid in *Progress and Poverty*—a masterly book on the reasons for the spread of pauperism in the modern social fabric—of most of the prejudices which beset writers on similar topics."²

In the meantime George's family had joined him in New York. They were boarding at Fort Washington, at the northern end of Manhattan Island. Living there afforded a quiet place for work and yet gave easy access to the center of the city. His financial burden was lightening; a demand had sprung up for his lectures and for magazine and encyclopedia articles. He earned \$130 when he spoke in Chickering Hall at a meeting in charge of the Reverend R. Heber Newton, his classmate of the Philadelphia day school and Sunday school period who was now rector of All Souls Episcopal Church in New York. A Brooklyn lecture, arranged by Andrew McLean of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, netted \$200. On this occasion the corporation lawyer, Thomas G. Shearman, friend and attorney of Henry Ward Beecher, was present. It was the beginning of a fruitful and inspirational friendship which gradually developed into Shearman's ardent promotion of George's theories.

Through the introduction of Poultney Bigelow,³ George became a member of the New York Free Trade Club. Bigelow was a convert to *Progress and Poverty* and had translated from the French, for the American economist, excerpts from the writings of the Physiocrats. Soon after joining the club, of which Theodore Roosevelt was at that time a member, George attended one of their dinners. The experience disillusioned him; the tone of the affair was, he felt, timid and reactionary.

"As you said," he wrote to Bigelow, "only worse! worsell worsell!! I told them four minutes of horse sense, however."⁴

In the early summer he began lecturing for the Irish Land League through New England and Canada. "Best ever have done," was the entry in his diary appraising a speech in Montreal. But the lecture tour was cut short so that he could make a business trip to California for a friend. While in San Francisco he spoke in the same Metropolitan Temple where, three years previously, when he was a "gas measurer," he had delivered an address in an all but empty hall.⁵ On this occasion the auditorium was packed by an enthusiastic audience. For an hour and a half he lectured without notes on "The Next Great Struggle." From Scandinavia to Italy, he observed, Europe was in the ferment of social change. What is it? he asked, answering, "It is a quickening of the seeds cast here, a renewal of the light focussed here and of the spirit proclaimed in that Immortal Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal. . . . But Europe is striving not alone for what we have attained. It is seeking for social and not merely political reform. . . . The same feeling of unrest exists in this country. All was not accomplished when our forefathers instituted the Republic and the ballot. . . . Giant forces are arising which must make their way."⁶

The visit to his scenes of early struggle was indeed a happy one, made more so by the fact that he was able to pay off nearly all the debts he had contracted while working on his book. California had become even more receptive to his message and aware of his influence. He had learned that spring, for instance, that when the legislature named a new United States senator, two votes had been cast for him. In nominating George, Warren S. Chase of Santa Barbara and Ventura had said, "I shall name neither a lawyer nor a soldier, but a political economist who has distinguished himself and acquired a national reputation; who is throughout the world recognized as the peer of such intellects as Ricardo, John Stuart Mill and Malthus."⁷

Good news awaited him back in New York. *Truth*, a one-cent daily with a circulation of between 75,000 and 100,000, was arranging to reprint *Progress and Poverty* in installments. George received no compensation; he was grateful enough for another outlet for his message.

The editor of *Truth* was Louis Freeland Post. A printer by trade and a member of the bar, he preferred to devote his ener-

gies to the discussion of public questions. He had complained one night of "the deadly dearth of subjects for editorial comments." William McCabe, one of the printers on the paper, asked if he had heard of *Progress and Poverty*. Post replied that he had, but there was "nothing in it." McCabe retorted, "Maybe so; but just the same, there are enough editorial subjects in that book to last you a lifetime."⁸

A few days later Post found a copy of *The Irish Land Question* on his desk. He read the book and was convinced by the author's reasoning of the evils of land monopoly. He acknowledged this in an editorial, explaining, however, what he believed to be the fallacies of the proposed plan for abolishing the land monopoly. After seeing his remarks in print, the "cock-sureness"⁹ of his rebuttal worried him; he felt compelled to send a copy to George for criticism. George merely sent back a copy of *Progress and Poverty* with a friendly note requesting that Post "read the book carefully from beginning to end, for it was 'a linked argument.'"¹⁰

Post read the book—in one day! He was completely convinced that George was right. Thereupon he decided to reprint it in *Truth*.

Louis F. Post was ten years younger than Henry George. Short, stocky, with a mop of thick brown hair, his dark eyes sparkling behind thick spectacles, he exuded strength and goodness. A man of great courage, he was extremely tolerant of men and their ideas. He had the rare gift of trying to find the other fellow right, not wrong; the priceless gift of making you like yourself. His sense of humor and convincing, simple delivery made him a delightful raconteur and speaker. He became one of George's staunchest followers and most beloved friends.

Another friendship which started at this time was with Francis George Shaw, a man of great culture and beauty of spirit. Shaw, a member of a wealthy Boston family, professed he had lost hope of solving social problems until he read *Progress and Poverty*. It so excited him that he ordered one thousand copies to be sent to libraries throughout the United States.¹¹

At the same time word came from England that Alfred Russell Wallace had also been endorsing *Progress and Poverty*, calling it "undoubtedly the most remarkable and important work of the century."¹² George could write happily of his recognition on two continents, "So the seed has begun to sprout."

Meanwhile in Parliament the Liberal government, headed

by Gladstone, was grappling with the chaotic conditions in Ireland. Under the direction of Westminister, Lord Cowper, the Viceroy, and William E. Forster, the Chief Secretary, were both working for justice for tenants but they were also trying to repress tenant violence against landlords who were practicing eviction. *Habeas corpus* was suspended and hundreds known or "suspected" to be connected with the tenant agitation were thrown into jail without trial. The Irish Land League had been banned; Michael Davitt had been sent back to Portland Prison and Parnell was living under threat of momentary arrest.

The Irish land question naturally had aroused intense interest and feverish partisanship in the United States. In New York, Patrick Ford, editor of *The Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*, challenged the exploitation of the Irish tenant in these strong words which had appealed to George: "The strength of the land agitation in Ireland will be in exact proportion to how much or how little it accepts of the incontrovertible truth that the land of Ireland was not made for the landlord class, or any other class, but for *all Irishmen*." ¹³

Ford approached George with the proposition that he go to Ireland and England to report the political situation for *The Irish World*. It seemed an excellent chance—the one "I have long waited for," as George wrote Taylor. And so he accepted readily. He was to be paid sixty dollars a week plus transportation expenses for himself and his family.

On October 15, 1881, leaving his elder son, Henry, to work as a cub reporter on the *Brooklyn Eagle* and his son Richard to study at the Art Students' League, George and his wife, with their two little girls, set out for England on the steamship *Spain*.