

## THE LAND QUESTION IN CHINA

Frank Robertson, special correspondent of the *Scotsman*, November 23, in an air-mail from Hong Kong, sent a long and informing despatch which he entitled:—

### SZECHWAN LAND REFORM

#### STEP "TOO LATE" IN NATIONALIST CHINA

##### EXAMPLE FOR S.E. ASIA

Too late is true, as the swiftly developing situation has since proved. But here is the lesson as this observer tells it, and we print it with the acknowledgments both to the *Scotsman* and its contributor.

"Hong-Kong (by Air Mail).—In its last hours the defeated Nationalist régime in China is now turning to land reform, the platform which 20 years ago first began winning popular support for the Chinese Communists.

"It is too late, of course. Yet too late as it is for Nationalist China, the early success of a reform programme, begun recently in remote Szechwan province, may point to a more effective and infinitely cheaper method of preventing the discontented millions of South-East Asia from turning to Communism than any other scheme yet devised or tried.

"The Szechwan experiment consisted of the compulsory reduction of tenant farmers' rents by 25 per cent.

"Two things were remarkable about this simple order issued by the Provincial Government. After 25 years of talk and promises, this was the first time anything concrete had been done in Nationalist China for the bitterly oppressed peasant. And the Government, having issued the order, proceeded to enforce it without prejudice. To sophisticated Chinese, cynical of the claims and announced intentions of the Government, this must have come as a great surprise.

"Szechwan, a vast, mountain-hemmed province in China's South-West, is the country's richest rice-producing area. And, as in other productive regions of China, pressure of population and exploitation of labour have made the Szechwan peasant among the nation's poorest.

#### MOST OF RICE CROP AS RENT

"Until reform, the average tenant farmer paid 70 per cent. of his rice crop to the landlord for the rent of his acre or so of paddy. In some areas the rent exceeded 90 per cent.

"Such rents did not leave the farmer with nearly enough rice for his family's needs. He grew a secondary crop of wheat and vegetables, and raised some chickens and perhaps a pig or two. Most of this was sold so that he could buy enough rice for himself and his family.

"The rent reduction programme in Szechwan was instigated largely by the Sino-American Joint Commission for Rural Reconstruction, an agency established about a year ago to work in rural areas of China with funds supplied by the American Economic Co-operation Administration. In addition to Szechwan, it is supporting similar rent reduction projects in Kwangsi province and Formosa.

"In the early stages of the programme in Szechwan 1,700,000 families will benefit. The cost to the United States for its part in the plan—an important part—will work out at something less than ten U.S. cents per family.

"For this small outlay the United States is winning some support, however belated, from the man who made possible the Communists' dominant position in China

to-day—the Chinese peasant. This is something that the millions of dollars spent by E.C.A. and other agencies did not accomplish before, because this is the first time the appeal has been made directly to the peasant in terms he can understand.

#### STABLE ECONOMY AS BASIS

"American and British observers who have watched the experiment believe that the Szechwan reform programme offers a workable blue-print for President Truman's 'Point Four' Programme for development of backward areas in the rest of Asia. They agree that technical assistance is necessary, but they argue that it will be wasted—as it has been wasted in China—if a stable economic basis is not first established. They believe this can be accomplished by making land reform a necessary condition before the United States commits itself to give aid to any of the countries of South-East Asia.

"Although the programme in Szechwan is in its initial stages—and almost certainly will be interrupted before very long by Communist occupation of the province—the peasants there already have begun to react against the oppression they always have accepted as a matter of course.

"One of the province's biggest landowners, a war lord with a private army, discovered this for himself. He normally sent a detachment of soldiers out with his rent collectors to see that the full measure of rice was paid him.

"In one area the peasants, determined they would pay only the reduced rent, armed themselves in advance when they heard that the powerful war lord's soldiers were demanding that rent be paid on the old scale. They won their point, and because the reform programme was being backed solidly by the Government, there was little the war lord could do—except perhaps to bemoan the passing of the good old days.

"If something of this same spirit can be engendered among the similarly oppressed peasants of South-East Asia, thoughtful students of Far Eastern affairs feel convinced that the Communists will have a far tougher time in a conquest of the countries of that area of the world than now appears likely."

## FORTHCOMING WEEK-END CONFERENCE

Under the auspices of the Henry George School of Social Science a weekend Conference will be held during the weekend May 5—7, 1950, at the Beatrice Webb House, Dorking, Surrey. The charge per head from Friday tea to Sunday tea (inclusive) is approximately 33s. The house is situated in a lovely part of Surrey, being on the western slopes of Leith Hill, surrounded by 130 acres of garden and woodlands. We hope to publish details of the programme in our next issue. In the meantime, as accommodation is limited to 56 persons, those intending to come should send in their names to the Secretary, Mrs. Joan O'Leary, Henry George School Week-end Conference, 4 Great Smith Street, S.W.1, accompanied by a deposit of 5s. For those wishing to attend for only part of the week-end special arrangements can be made. Of special interest is the fact that staying also at Beatrice Webb House at the same time will be a Conference organised by the United Nations Association, and there will be much opportunity for exchange of opinion.