

MR. GEORGE ON IRELAND

A PAMPHLET BY THE AUTHOR OF
"PROGRESS AND POVERTY."*

A CLEAR AND COMPREHENSIVE STATEMENT
OF THE LAND TROUBLES—DANGER NOT
CONFINED TO IRELAND—LAND THE
COMMON PROPERTY OF THE PEOPLE.

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 has 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. Mr. George is neither a "Communist," nor a free-lover, nor even an infidel, so far as can be seen, but he recognizes the social disease that makes itself felt in tramps, railway riots, and the criminal classes of great cities, and is the only man who has not merely put down clearly in black and white what are the causes of the disease, but offered a cure. Only time can be the absolutely sure test of the truth of his theory, yet to all appearance he has hit upon the very root of the ailment and at the same time the medicine to take it away. What makes this pamphlet doubly interesting is the fact that it does not refer only to Ireland and the great questions being debated in Parliament; the Irish land question is only an admirably timely case in point, which illustrates the force of his reasoning in "Progress and Poverty;" the pamphlet goes as much to the heart of every man without a drop of Irish blood in his veins as to the purest of Connaught Celts. Mr. George, in a fine series of logical sequences, lifts the question from the narrow circle of national recrimination to which it is now confined, and shows how the Irish poor are fighting for the very thing that grinds the faces of the English poor, the very thing that keeps up a slow gangrene even in our land of vast unsettled territory, and that may overwhelm us presently, if we do not realize fully our danger and draw the virus from the social sore.

"We have here abolished all hereditary privileges and legal distinctions of class. Monarchy, aristocracy, prelacy, we have swept them all away. We have carried mere political democracy to its ultimate. Every child born in the United States may aspire to be President. Every man, even though he be a tramp or a pauper, has a vote, and one man's vote counts for as much as any other man's vote. Before the law all citizens are absolutely equal. In the name of the people all laws run. They are the source of all power, the fountain of all honor. In their name and by their will all government is carried on; the highest officials are but their servants. Primogeniture and entail we have abolished wherever they existed. We have and have had free trade in land. We started with something infinitely better than any scheme of peasant proprietorship which it is possible to carry into effect in Great Britain. We have had for our public domain the best part of an immense continent. We have had the Pre-emption law and the Homestead law. It has been our boast that here every one who wished it could have a farm. We have had full liberty of speech and of the press. We have not merely common schools, but high schools and universities, open to all who may choose to attend. Yet here the same social difficulties apparent on the other side of the Atlantic are beginning to appear. It is already clear that our democracy is a vain pretense, our make-believe of equality a sham and a fraud. The substance of power is being grasped and wielded by the bandit chiefs of the Stock Exchange, the robber leaders who organize politics into machines. In any matter in which they are interested the little finger of the great corporations is thicker than the loins of the people. Is it sovereign States or is it railroad corporations that are really represented in the elective Senate which we have substituted for a hereditary House of Lords?"

After a chapter on the crimes and injustice to be met with daily in our great cities, he says:

"I do not say that such things are because of civilization or because of Christianity. On the contrary, I point to them as inconsistent with civilization, as incompatible with Christianity. They show that our civilization is one sided and cannot last as at present based; they show that our so-called Christian communities are not Christian at all. I believe a civilization is possible in which all could be civilized—in which such things could be impossible. But it must be a civilization based on justice and acknowledging the equal rights of all to natural opportunities. I believe that there is in true Christianity a power to regenerate the world. But it must be a Christianity that attacks vested wrongs, not that spurious thing that defends them. The religion which allies itself with injustice to preach down the natural aspirations of the masses is worse than atheism.

"There are those who may look on this little book as very radical, in the bad sense they attach to the word. They mistake. This is, in the true sense of the word, a most conservative little book. I do not appeal to prejudice and passion. I appeal to intelligence. I do not incite to strife; I seek to prevent strife. That the civilized world is on the verge of the most tremendous struggle, which, according to the frankness and sagacity with which it is met, will be a struggle of ideas or a struggle of actual physical force, calling upon all the potent agencies of destruction which modern invention has discovered, every sign of the time portends. The voices that proclaim the eve of revolution are in the air. Steam and electricity are not merely transporting goods and carrying messages. They are everywhere changing social and industrial organization; they are everywhere stimulating thought, and arousing new hopes and fears and desires and passions; they are everywhere breaking down the barriers that have separated men and integrating nations into one vast organism, through which the same pulses throb and the same nerves tingle.

"The present situation in Great Britain is full of dangers, of dangers graver and nearer than those who there are making history are likely to see. Who in France, a century ago, foresaw the drama of blood so soon to open? Who in the United States dreamed of what was coming till the cannon-shot rang and the flag fell on Sumter? How confidently we said: 'The American people are too intelligent, too practical, to go to cutting each other's throats!' How confidently we relied upon the strong common sense of the great masses, upon the great business interests, upon the universal desire to make money! 'War does not pay,' we said, 'therefore war is impossible.' A shot rang over Charleston harbor; a bit of bunting dropped, and, riven into two hostile camps, a Nation sprang to its feet to close in the death lock."

The pamphlet opens by a flat denial that the Irish are more unjustly treated than, or differently treated from, the agricultural classes of Great Britain or the European Continent. The Irish is simply the general system of civilization. With us there is no sentiment about letting land, no hesitation to evict tenants. The peasant proprietors of France and Belgium boast of the rents they get. The American system is harder and more grinding than that in Ireland, where sentiment or custom often operates to prevent the landlord from exacting all he could. Germans, Italians, Scandinavians, like the Irish, have large families; but they emigrate. The Irish do not so readily. French and Belgian peasants do not emigrate because they have few children. He denies Mr. Parnell's assertion that Ireland, had she been allowed to have manufactures, would not now be in straits. Land, he maintains, would have been still dearer, rents enormously increased. And on land must depend the whole fabric of the nation, because even manufactures, even homes, must have land to stand on. The proposition that the State should buy out the landlords and sell again on time to the tenants does not meet his approval. It is a half measure; moreover, it concedes the right of the landlord to the land:

"The tendency to concentration which has so steadily operated in Great Britain, and is so plainly showing itself in our new States, must operate in Ireland, and would immediately begin to weld together again the little patches of the newly created peasant proprietors. The tendency of the time is against peasant proprietorships; it is in everything to concentration, not to separation. The tendency which has wiped out the small land-owners, the boasted yeomanry, of England—which, in our new States, is uniting the quarter-sections of pre-emption and homestead settlers into great farms of thousands of acres—is already too strong to be resisted, and is constantly becoming stronger and more penetrating. For it springs from the inventions and improvements and economies which are transforming modern industry—the same influences which are concentrating population in large cities, business into the hands of great houses, and, for the blacksmith making his own nails or the weaver working his own loom, substitutes the factory of the great corporation.

Again, all the propositions leave out of account the agricultural laborers, a poorer class than the tenants, so that the spring of Irish misery would be untouched. Whenever times are hard, it is they who starve first; when times are at their best, they just manage to exist. But as to the right of the landlord to his land, Mr. George argues as follows:

"Let me go to the heart of this question by asking another question: Has or has not the child born in Ireland a right to live? There can be but one answer, for no one would contend that it was right to drown Irish babies, or that any human law could make it right. Well, then, if every human being born in Ireland has a right to live in Ireland, these rights must be equal. If each one has a right to live, then no one can have any better right to live than any other one. There can be no dispute about this. No one will contend that it would be

THE IRISH LAND QUESTION. By HENRY GEORGE, author of "Progress and Poverty." New York: D. APPLETON & Co.

any less a crime to drown the baby of an Irish peasant woman than it would be to drown the baby of the proudest Duchess, or that a law commanding the one would be any more justifiable than a law commanding the other.

"Since, then, all the Irish people have the same equal right to life, it follows that they must all have the same equal right to the land of Ireland. * * * Either the land of Ireland rightfully belongs to the Irish landlords, or it rightfully belongs to the Irish people; there can be no middle ground. If it rightfully belongs to the landlords, then is the whole agitation wrong, and every scheme for interfering in any way with the landlords is condemned. If the land rightfully belongs to the landlords, then is it nobody else's business what they do with it, or what rent they charge for it, or where or how they spend the money they draw from it, and whoever does not want to live upon it on the landlord's terms is at perfect liberty to starve or emigrate. But if, on the contrary, the land of Ireland rightfully belongs to the Irish people, then the only logical demand is, not that the tenants shall be made joint owners with the landlords, not that it be bought from a smaller class and sold to a larger class, but that it be resumed by the whole people. To propose to pay the landlords for it is to deny the right of the people to it. * * * Will any one contend that in all the past generations there has existed on the British Isles or anywhere else any human being, or any number of human beings, who had the right to say that in the year 1881 the great mass of Irishmen should be compelled to pay—in many cases to residents of England, France, or the United States—for the privilege of living in their native country and making a living from their native soil? Even if it be said that might makes right; even if it be contended that in the twelfth, or seventeenth, or eighteenth century lived men who, having the power, had therefore the right, to give away the soil of Ireland, it will not be contended that their right went further than their power, or that their gifts and grants are binding on the men of the present generation. No one can urge such a preposterous doctrine. And, if might makes right, then the moment the people get power to take the land the rights of the present landholders utterly cease, and any proposal to compensate them is a proposal to do a fresh wrong.

"Should it be urged that, no matter on what they originally rest, the lapse of time has given to the legal owners of Irish land a title of which they cannot now be justly deprived without compensation, it is sufficient to ask, with Herbert Spencer, at what rate per annum wrong becomes right? Even the shallow pretense that the acquiescence of society can vest in a few the exclusive right to that element on which and from which nature has ordained that all must live, cannot be urged in the case of Ireland. For the Irish people have never acquiesced in their spoliation, unless the bound and gagged victim may be said to acquiesce in the robbery and maltreatment which he cannot prevent. Though the memory of their ancient rights in the land of their country may have been utterly stamped out among the people of England, and have been utterly forgotten among their kin on this side of the sea, it has long survived among the Irish. If the Irish people have gone hungry and cold and ignorant, if they have been evicted from lands on which their ancestors had lived from time immemorial, if they have been forced to emigrate or to starve, it has not been for want of protest. They have protested all they could; they have struggled all they could. It has been but superior force that has stifled their protests and made their struggles vain. In a blind, dumb way, they are protesting now and struggling now, though even if their hands were free they might not at first know how to untie the knots in the cords that bind them. But acquiesce they never have. * * *

Land is not like other wealth, Mr. George urges, with many apt illustrations. Other wealth passes away; the land is always there.

"The right to possess and to pass on the ownership of things that in their nature decay and soon cease to be is a very different thing from the right to possess and to pass on the ownership of that which does not decay, but from which each successive generation must live."

Mr. George has a most easy and attractive style, which makes of what to many persons is a formidable title merely the superscription of a most fascinating book. He is in thorough earnest, and writes from the sure ground of a mature and unselfish conviction. The honors that "Progress and Poverty" obtained here and abroad cannot fail to be reinforced by this treatise, for it speaks to all Europe, as well as to Great Britain and Ireland.

As to that bellicose island, the gist of Mr. George's argument is this: The Irish land question is not a mere local question; it is a universal question. It involves the great problem of the distribution of wealth which is everywhere forcing itself upon attention. It can only be settled by measures which in their nature can have but local application. Half measures will not do either. If the reformers of Ireland take this broad position, they will make their fight the common fight of all peoples; they will concentrate strength and divide opposition, they will have with them the thinkers and generous spirits throughout the world. Mr. George urges them to proclaim, without limitation or evasion, that of natural right the land is the common property of the whole people, and to propose practical measures which will recognize this right in Great Britain as well as Ireland. To the Land Leagues of the United States he says: "Announce this great principle as of universal application; make it a movement that shall concentrate and give shape to aspirations that are stirring among all nations!"