

MEXICO AND THE LAND QUESTION

By Bessie Beach Truehart

I BELIEVE THE readers of *Land & Liberty* are more or less familiar with the land question in Spain. That in Mexico is very similar. Mexico derived its land laws and land customs from its mother country, Spain. The long succession of varying political regimes, however, made the land laws more unstable and erratic than those of Spain.

Rulership in Mexico has been neither by inheritance nor election, but by possession. The presidential chair, virtual dictatorship of the country, belonged to the man who could seize and hold it. Naturally, he was always a military general, and his supremacy lasted as long as he could retain the loyalty of his army. He ruled by the sword, and he rewarded his knights of the sword with land grants, the magnitude of which it would be difficult for an Old World citizen, accustomed to the narrower geographical bounds of European countries, to envisage. A *rancho* the size of Ireland was no more than a moderate demesne for one of these favoured henchmen. Thousands of cowboys were employed on these great *haciendas*. At round-up times, when cattle were herded together for branding, they presented the appearance of a veritable sea of milling horns and hoofs covering miles upon miles of terrain. One general, for instance, received a grant embracing nearly the whole state of Chihuahua, a political sub-division encompassing over 90,000 square miles, or nearly three times the area of Scotland.

The peasants, or *peons*, who worked these extensive estates, were virtually serfs, economically attached to the land and unable to leave it, even had a better condition offered elsewhere, since they were held there by the law of debt. They had no means of securing any commodities whatever save by purchase from their employer. The law forbade their leaving his *hacienda* until they had worked out their indebtedness, and he saw to it that they were never out of debt. They were as literally at the mercy and caprice of their employer as is a slave in relation to his master.

All that served to check the power of these mighty land barons were the perennial revolutions, resulting in changes of dictators, with consequent shifting in ownership of the vast estates, since one political regime considered itself under no obligation to recognize the grants of its predecessor. But to the enslaved *peons*, it was merely a change of masters, not a change of conditions.

The most stable, if one of the cruellest regimes, was that of Porfirio Diaz, who dominated the country from 1877 to 1910. This president was called "The Man of Iron." He ruthlessly crushed his enemies, enriching his supporters, and establishing upon a secure basis the great *latifundias*, or landed estates. Eventually, however, he succumbed, also, to the inevitable revolution. He was followed by a succession of more liberal presidents, all representing the Revolutionary Party which had overthrown Diaz.

In 1910, 85 per cent of Mexico's adult population could neither read nor write, the system of land tenure had reduced them to virtual slavery, and they faced a future without hope or aspiration. When the revolution opened the way for a measure of freedom, this disinherited generation rallied to the cry of "La Tierra y la Libertad!" Yes, the battle cry of Mexico became the same as the name of your magazine. The new regime pledged itself to a policy of "Tierra libre para los Mexicanos," free land for the people of Mexico.

It has not been easy sailing, nor has it been a road

of consistent progress. There have been recessions and almost overwhelming losses, but it is to the credit of the morale of this long down-trodden people that they have pressed courageously onward, until now at last they are in a position to make their own laws, elect their own candidates to office, apportion the various resources of their country as their own wisdom dictates.

The pity is that there have been so few teachers to direct their groping thought, so few teachers with real understanding. Professor R. B. Brinsmade, of San Luis Potosi, who served at one time in an advisory capacity to the Mexican government, was a Georgeist of singularly clear vision, and inspired the organization of "La Union de Veterans de la Revolucion," composed of an enlightened group of Mexican intellectuals including editors, lawyers, authors, doctors, engineers and army officials. This organization demanded that economic rent be socialized and taxes abolished. But Professor Brinsmade died over a year ago, and present Mexican leaders tend more to Communistic aims.

There is now free land, as they understand free land, for the *peon*, who never before owned so much as the shadow under his *sombrero* (wide hat). Any Mexican over eighteen years of age may claim 4 *hectareas* (10 acres) of farm land, besides a still larger share in the village commons, or grazing land. There is a government loan bank which finances the beginning of individual proprietorship for these *peons* in the land on which they formerly laboured as slaves. There are schools for their children. There are cultural and musical clubs, and athletic organizations. Mexico is thoroughly labour unionized, with rights of collective bargaining and other liberal labour laws. The sexes enjoy equal suffrage.

As compared with his status a generation ago, the average Mexican has made amazing strides toward a high place in the sun. Mexico is rich in natural resources; potentially a great country physically. With education and wider economic opportunities opening to her sons and daughters, she will assuredly progress far.

But not the progress she might make, if her land laws were founded on a really scientific basis. The big ranches have been broken up into little ones. But the state does not retain ownership of the land, as she might well have done, leasing it to users at its rental value; nor is there any legal provision to collect this value from the new owners in the form of a tax. The present generation profits, because land tenure is spread over a wider base; more families can own homes and produce their living by the land. But this very widening of the base will serve to establish private ownership in land on a firmer foundation. When all the now "free" land of Mexico has been taken up, who will provide the next, or the next, generation with land?

The United States of America was a land of unlimited opportunity—as long as our free land lasted. But now that it is gone, we have a dispossessed and disheartened generation. Yet so comparatively wide is the base of land ownership in America that it is hard for our people to understand that this land monopoly is at the bottom of our depressions and increasing poverty. It is easy to point to one man, or one class, and say, "There lies the cause of your sufferings. Down with the robber!" But when these "robbers," these beneficiaries of our landed system, chance to be our relatives or neighbours, men and women struggling, as we are, for a living, it is impossible to view them as identical

with the plutocratic monopolists we are told to condemn.

Mexicans could readily understand that the laws which gave virtually all their lands into the hands of a few men were unjust. But can they understand, at a later date, when the shoe begins to pinch, that the principle is equally wrong, even though the land be monopolized by many instead of few, so long as there are some born into a land who yet have no land they may call theirs?

We are all familiar with the platitude, "If all the money in the world were confiscated and divided equally among all the people, it would be only a short time until it gravitated back into the hands of a few, and the rest would be poor again." That argument may as well apply to a division of land such as that in which Mexico has engaged.

THE PEASANTS IN POLAND

A SPECIAL article in *The Times* (22nd March) from a "correspondent lately in Poland" alleges that "pressure of population is at the root of most of Poland's social and economic problems at the present time." In support of this it is said that the population has increased from 27,000,000 to 34,000,000 since 1921. The agricultural population averages 79 per square kilometre of agricultural land.

It appears, however, that the distribution of land is extremely unequal. While there are many people without land there are also great estates.

"The growth of a landless proletariat in the country districts has led to an ever more insistent demand for a drastic measure of land reform through the gradual expropriation of the large landholders. This demand is warmly sponsored by M. Poniatowski, Minister for Agriculture in the present Government. M. Poniatowski is regarded as the most progressive member of the Polish Administration. He started his political career by organizing a strike of the peasants on his father's farm; and it is reported that on a recent tour of the countryside he pointed to the farm buildings of a large estate and remarked to the members of his entourage. 'Those are the castles we have got to storm.' His radicalism makes him the arch-enemy of the Right Press."

Another difficulty arises from the fact that the three-field system still prevails over a large area of Poland. The holding of one peasant may be divided into as many as 50 strips. This primitive method of endeavouring to preserve equality of land-holding prevents initiative, wastes labour and discourages improved methods of cultivation.

"In England the process of consolidation—the Polish expression is *commassation*—was carried through at the instance of the large landowners, by the simple, if somewhat brutal, expedient of compelling the smallholders to enclose their land and of buying them out if they proved unable to do so. In Poland, where the aim is the promotion of smallholdings rather than their extinction, the problem cannot be solved in this drastic way. Land must be measured, its relative fertility must be estimated, and new villages must be planned in which the individual peasants have holdings corresponding to the size and value of the scattered strips formerly held by them. The process is both long and costly, and often the actual hostility of the peasants has to be overcome before *commassation* can begin. But once successfully carried through, its results are greatly valued by the peasants, who have a heightened feeling of self-respect when their property has been formed into

Another disturbing feature of the Mexican situation is that, instead of drawing its necessary revenue from the natural source for such revenue, land values, industry is being heavily penalized to support expanding governmental plans. Capital is afraid of Mexican investments, and business is shaky.

Mexico is in an evolutionary, as well as a revolutionary, stage, and, with the rapid spread of literacy and education, we may hope for happy results. Mexico is a ripe harvest—but the Georgian labourers are pitifully few.

Mrs Truehart, the writer of this article, is resident in Del Rio, Texas, just across the river dividing that State from Mexico. She visited Mexico City last summer and has made the land question in Mexico a special study. She writes: "I have discussed the enclosed article with our local Mexican consul and vice-consul, a Mexican editor, and others well informed, and believe you will find it at least authentic."

a single unit and they have removed their homes from the village street to the new holding."

The existence of servitudes—rights of pasturage and of gathering firewood in the forests of the large landowners—has also led to friction between the large and the small landowners. Steps are being taken to commute these rights, but the writer does not explain on what basis.

An illustration of the enormous size of some of the great estates is given in a note in the *Daily Telegraph* (5th March) relating to Prince Henry of Pless who died in Paris recently.

"His vast estates were divided after the war, Pless becoming part of Poland while Fuerstenstein and Waldenburg remained in Germany. For the last years of his life he was involved in constant difficulties with the Polish authorities over taxes.

"Last year the Polish Parliament passed an Act to enable overdue tax claims against the estate to be collected in kind.

"I hear that the State-owned Rolny Bank has already seized over 50,000 acres of arable and forest land on the estate. The inheritance taxes are likely to exceed £1,000,000."

SPAIN

Under the auspices of the International Agrarian Institute in Moscow there has recently been issued in German a book by B. Minlos on the Spanish peasants' struggle for land and freedom. (*Spaniens Bauern im Kampf um Boden und Freiheit*. Verlagsgenossenschaft Ausländischer Arbeiter in der U.S.S.R., Moscow, 1937. Price in Russia, 90 kopeks.) The general statistics of the distribution of landownership accord with those given in our March issue. It is pointed out that the total area of Spain is 50 million hectares of which 45 million are suitable for agriculture, but only about 20 million are cultivated. The large landowners hold about 30 million hectares, and it is mostly their land which is left idle. Hence of the large landholdings something approaching two-thirds is not cultivated. Much valuable information is given about the system of landholding and the condition of the landworkers, as well as of their struggle for economic freedom.

The value of this paper does not end with YOUR reading it. Your business associate, your neighbour or your fellow worker may not have seen it. . . .