

The Irish Land Question

Open Letter to Eamonn de Valera

By JOSEPH DANA MILLER

(Reprinted from Single Tax Review)

DEAR SIR:

For the struggle of Ireland for independence, Americans generally, Single Taxers almost universally, feel the greatest sympathy. You have shown a disposition to treat of the question temperately, and have even held out to Great Britain the proposition of a protectorate in the event of Irish independence, similar to that exercised by the United States over Cuba, such protectorate to involve no imperialistic meddling in what are essentially affairs which concern a self-governing people.

It is true that this suggestion has not been well received by those who remember only Elizabeth, Cromwell and Drogheda, but to those whose minds incline them to a practical solution of the question, which at the same time concedes all that is important in the claims for Irish freedom, it will be regarded as a possible way out. The only thing that stands in the way of such a solution is the sentimentalities of history, which do not relate to the actual facts of the present. Such a settlement of the Irish question as you proffer will enlist in its support the general favor

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of the English working classes, now fast becoming the governing element of Great Britain; its opponents will be the unconverted and unconvertible Tories, and those whose Irish nationalism is merely an historic passion—who, if they love not Ireland less, hate England more.

But the great question back of all claims for political independence, back of all forms of government, of all strivings, as in this instance, for such modes of political expression as will secure a realization of the aspirations that are involved in Irish nationalism—is *economic justice*.

Therefore I have sought, but regret to have sought in vain, amid your eloquent pleas for justice to Ireland, for even some slight recognition of the principle of justice for Irishmen. I confess that I am more profoundly interested, as are all followers of the late Henry George, in justice for Irishmen than in the claims for Irish independence, save only as the latter may serve the former.

It has been the fashion of many of the Irish orators in this country to attribute the sufferings of Ireland to economic oppression by England. Whatever warrant this indictment may have had in the past it lacks all justification in the present. The cause that makes of the Irish tenant farmer a slave to some resident or absentee landlord is the same that made a Whitechapel in London, or an East Side in New York. It made Liverpool the "dark spot upon the Mersey;" it is the cause which everywhere impoverishes and embrates men and women and dwarfs and stunts the growth of millions of little ones born too late into the world. This is the cause that divorces men from the soil, that condemns them to lives of unceasing toil, to the payment of unwilling tribute to the privileged owners of the earth, whether in cities or in towns.

This system is not peculiar to Ireland, and the economic oppression of a noble race is not, as I have said, to be laid to England's doors, whatever she may have suffered from her hands in the past, for England lies under the palsying touch of the same "dead hand" which from her own workers exacts unceasing tribute. Indeed England is to be credited with attempts—mostly halting and largely futile,

it is true—to mitigate the severity of Irish conditions. She has hesitated to do for her own people what she has done (with what motives we need not now inquire; it is sufficient that she has done it) for the oppressed tenantry of Ireland. The legislation passed by Parliament relating to landlord and tenant in Ireland comprises no inconsiderable part of the statutes of each Parliamentary session.

It is not an accident in a country where the evils of landlordism are particularly obvious that the most deeply implanted historic tradition, one that has called forth the noblest utterances of her patriots, has made the *Irish land question* seem almost synonymous with what we visualize when we speak of "the Irish question." The right of Irishmen to the land of Ireland is a tradition that has never been lost. It became in a way the faith of many a *soggarth aroon* of the people, and was taught at many a cottier's fireside, and sung in the folk songs of the nation. It animates the pathetic strains of the Neo-Keltic singers of the present. James Finton Lalor gave it a prose setting in which the national yearnings were wedded to the economic principles which he sought to enforce. Bishop Nulty gave to it the sanction of his pastoral office in his Letter to the Diocese of Meath. Michael Davitt voiced it again in his forceful way, and the walls of Kilmainham Jail closed upon him. They closed, too, at the same time upon his friend who had done more to popularize the doctrine of economic justice than any man that ever lived, the great American economist, Henry George, whose disciple Michael Davitt was proud to own himself.

To ignore the land question is to ignore Ireland; it is an act of faithlessness to those men who have been named; it is to forget what Ireland stands for in the Sisterhood of Nations. If the rights of Irishmen to the soil of Ireland be ignored then are all her sacrifices in vain.

We know how disappointing are mere changes in political institutions; how under republics, as under monarchies, the masses remain mere hewers of wood and drawers of water. There is no assurance that under an independent

Irish Parliament the lot in life of a single Irish tenant farmer or city worker would be improved one iota.

You hold out no promise that the system of landed privilege which depresses Irish agriculture and impoverishes her manufactures, will be changed in any of its features. Not a whisper has emanated from you and the earnest patriots who surround you, that the system which divorces Irishmen from the soil they love so well will be changed to secure those inherent rights of man which even the Irish clansman could claim in the common land, of which the Brehon laws appear to have contained more than a passing recognition.

I say not a whisper. But you *do* propose something. In an advertisement of the Irish Republic Bond certificates which appeared in the *New York American* it is noted that the money received will be used;

"To establish Land Tenancy Societies with a view to the occupation of untenanted land.

To establish a Land Mortgage Bank to Finance the Land Tenancy Societies."

Am I wrong in saying that this is nothing? It is worse than nothing. For there is not in it a whisper of hope for the landless man of Ireland. In what you have proposed there is nothing that will make land easier of access. Indeed, the very suggestion will be soothing to the expectation of the land speculator. You are going to facilitate by your Land Mortgage Bank the ability of the Irish tenantry to pay rent. What will be the effect upon land values?

Do you think the friends of Ireland in this country should be solicited to contribute money to swell the incomes of Irish and English landlords, resident and absentee? There will be great rejoicing in landlord circles when under Irish independence the Land Mortgage Bank is running full time; and champagne will flow faster in London cafes. But in nothing will the lot of the Irish tenant farmer be improved.

Your advertisement appears in a newspaper owned by a man who typifies in himself all the abuses of absentee landlordism, and who to make more secure his land-holdings

in Mexico would not hesitate, and indeed has not hesitated, to stir up war with our friendly neighbor to the South of us. In it you promise to "Put the Irish flag on every sea," "Start the looms spinning," and "Lift Ireland up." All this you propose to do, and I do not doubt your sincerity. But if you do all this for Ireland you do it for the owners of Ireland. Those who will chiefly profit will be the men who control the natural resources of the country. Bring "national prosperity" to Ireland, and you will benefit those who in every country are the chief beneficiaries of so-called "national prosperity," while the masses, even in what we call prosperous times, are condemned to ill-requited toil.

I shall be told, as indeed I have been, that to raise the standard of "the land for the people" at this time, would be inexpedient; that when Irish independence is attained, the Irish land question can be dealt with once for all. Of this there is no assurance. As the Lords and the Commons of Great Britain are a Parliament of landlords, so, largely, must be any Irish Parliament of which we can conceive. The same forces and the same influences will be at work. Irishmen will only have undergone a change of masters. The Lord of the Countryside will control the vote of his Irish tenant as the English landlord controls his. The same poverty that makes of rural England many a Tory stronghold will produce no different results in Ireland.

Perhaps it is incumbent upon me to warn you that with the banner of "the Land for the People" borne in the forefront of the fight for Irish independence, those who now are most clamorous for the political freedom of Ireland will desert your standard. Of this you may be certain. For it is not the rights of the Irish peasant, dear to loyal Irish hearts, that many of these professed and professional lovers of Ireland think of when they speak eloquently of the wrongs of your race. If you will examine the list of some of your supporters in this country you will find that they have not been especially active in democratic movements, or that the rights of the people anywhere have given them any great concern. It is useful for their purpose to hitch their political wagon to the star of Irish freedom. If they thought

your programme meant economic freedom for Irishmen their enthusiasm would quickly wane.

Yet what you would lose would be more than made up by the new army that would rally to your standard. Your cause would be lifted up, a banner for all the world!

And what an opportunity is presented to link this struggle for Irish freedom with the movement now spreading over the earth for the economic freedom of all peoples! Surely, your heart must thrill at the thought! That little green isle "set in a silver sea" may become the land beckoning the world to new and grander heights! Civilization is today shaken to its very foundations. The clash of contending armies has rocked the pillars of the house, which trembles in the tempest of passion aroused by the World War. No prophesy can foretell what greater storms may break. The future is black with uncertainty, and in the shadows of impending disaster the governments of the world, stricken with a paralysis of indecision, stand impotent and helpless.

Years ago, at a less serious time for the world and humanity, Henry George, who prophesied as a consequence of social injustice the breakdown of civilization that has come, addressed these most eloquent words to the Irish people. I commend them to your consideration:

"The harp and the shamrock, the golden sunburst on a field of living green! Emblems of a country without nationality! Standard of a people downtrodden and oppressed! The hour has come when they may lead the van of the great world-struggle. Types of harmony and ever springing hope, of light and life! The hour has come when they may stand for something higher than local patriotism; something grander than national independence. The hour has come when they may stand forth to speak the world's hope, to lead the world's advance!"

Single Tax Principles

We hold that all are equally entitled to the use and enjoyment of the free gifts of Nature; therefore, no one should be permitted to hold valuable natural opportunities without giving a fair return to society for such special privileges thus accorded to him.

Land Values Taxation would solve the labor problem; do away with involuntary poverty; raise wages in all occupations to the full earnings of labor; make over-production impossible until all human wants were satisfied; render labor-saving inventions a blessing to all, and cause such an enormous production and equitable distribution of wealth as would give to all honest workers comfort, leisure, and participation in the advantages of an advancing civilization.

Land Values Taxation would take the social value of land for public purposes, and thus equalize natural opportunities. Nothing but work would secure wealth. Labor pays for everything because labor produces everything, but it should not be made to pay private individuals for the use of land. Labor, and labor alone, has a just and natural right to the equal use of the earth. Merely "owning" land produces nothing, and is entitled to nothing. Land Values Taxation will secure to the workers the full reward of their labor, because it will fall on a "privilege" value only, and will not touch labor, nor any of the wealth which labor produces.

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