

## THE **LAND** QUESTION

By John Bright, M.P.

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Although I have often stood before you on this platform, yet I can assure you that on no former occasion have I felt it necessary so much to ask your forbearance and your silent attention as on this occasion. I had no hope a week ago that I should be able to attend here to-night, and to address this large audience, but being here in the performance of my duty as one of your representatives, I shall endeavour to lay before you the thoughts which are uppermost in my mind, and which bear upon the questions in which we are all deeply interested.

There are two subjects which have been treated upon by my hon. Colleague, about which I would say a few words before I come to that which I had intended to speak about. The first is the question which now keeps Europe in suspense, which may end in a war, or may end in some diplomatic accommodation of a long-standing quarrel. I will not go into the history of the Danish and German dispute. I have received since I came here a long and most able letter from a German Professor resident in this country on behalf of the German view of that question—probably he is now within the sound of my voice. I can only tell him, in telling you, that I agree entirely, and from my heart, with every word that my hon. Colleague spoke upon that question; and I will say further, that if there be a Government possible in our day that will plunge this country into war under the pretence of maintaining the balance of power in Europe and sustaining any kingdom there, be it little or great, I say that Government not only is not worthy of the confidence of the people of England, but deserves our execration and abhorrence.

There is one other question to which my hon. Colleagues has devoted a considerable portion of his speech. He said, and I believe it, that a year ago he felt it a painful thing to stand here and to avow opinions contrary to those of many of his friends, and contrary to those which I had avowed before. I told you then how painful a thing it was for me to stand up and to controvert on this platform any of the statements which he had made. I came here to-night intending to say no single word as to the

question between North and South in the United States. My opinion is that the unanimous judgment of the people of England, so far as that is ever shown upon any public question, is in favour of the course which her Majesty's Government have publicly declared it to be their intention to pursue. I believe that my hon. Friend is mistaken in the view he takes of the meaning of the result of what he calls a recognition of the South. I have seen it stated by authority, North as well as South, and by authority which I may term English, and by authority from France, that in the present condition of that quarrel, recognition, by all the usages of nations, must necessarily lead to something more. And, therefore, although there were no question of slavery, even though it were simply a political revolt, and though there were no special moral question connected with it, I believe, looking to the past usage of this country with regard to the rebellion of the Greeks against Turkey, and with regard to the revolt of the colonies of South America against Spain, that it can be demonstrated that these cases afford no support whatever to the argument that we are permitted now to recognize the South, and that if such recognition did take place now, it could only exasperate still more the terrible strife which exists on the North American Continent, and would spread that strife even to Europe itself.

I am myself of opinion, as I have been from the first, that the people of America—so numerous, so powerful, so instructed, so capable in every way—will settle the difficulties of that continent without asking the old countries of Europe to take any share in them. I believe that in the providence of the Supreme, the slaveholder—untaught, unteachable by fact or argument, or Christian precept—has been permitted to commit—I will not call it the crime—but the act of suicide. Whether President Lincoln be in favour of abolition; whether the Northerners are unanimous against slavery; whatever may be said or thought with regard to the transactions on that continent, he must be deaf and blind—and worse than deaf and blind—who does not perceive that, through the instrumentality of this strife, that most odious and most indescribable offence against man and against heaven—the slavery of man, the bondage of four millions of our fellow-creatures—is coming to a certain and rapid end.

Sir, I will say of this question that I look forward to the time when I shall stand on this platform with my honourable Colleague, and when he will join with me—for he is honest enough and frank enough to do that—when he will join with me in rejoicing that there does not breathe a slave on the North American Continent, and that the

Union has been completely restored. And not only so, but he will rejoice that England did not in the remotest manner, by a word or a breath, or the raising of a finger, or the setting of a type, do one single thing to promote the atrocious object of the leaders of this accursed insurrection.

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I will ask you whether, during past years, you have read any letters in the Times newspaper signed by the initials "S. G. O." These letters are written by a gentleman of rare intelligence and of great benevolence. His descriptions I believe may be entirely relied upon. If any of you have read some letters written three or four months ago from parts of Buckinghamshire, and published in the Star newspaper, with regard to the condition of that population,—you will know what it is that I mean,—but if you are unwilling to take their evidence, let us take the evidence of a witness that nobody here will call in question, and that is the evidence of the Saturday Review. On the 26th of September last there was an article in that journal on "Agricultural Labourers," in which it said—and I beg you to listen to it, for, in point of fact, it is the great part of my speech. The extract from the article reads thus:

"When the dull season of the year comes round [it is between October and the meeting of Parliament] all sorts of odd persons and things have their share of public attention, and even agricultural labourers are pitied and discussed. At other times they live on with no one much to care for them—the farmer looking on them as his natural enemies, the parson's kindly soul getting weary of his long combat with their helpless stolid ignorance, and the squire not knowing what he can do for them further than build two or three Elizabethan cottages, covered with honeysuckle, close to his gates."

And then the writer of the article proceeds to say that when foreigners come here and read of the condition of agricultural labourers they must be much shocked, for he adds:

"We are moved to a languid shame and sadness by thinking how true the picture is, and what wretched, uncared-for untaught brutes the people are who raise the crops on which we live."

And then:

“There is a wailing over the dirt and vice and misery that must prevail in houses where seven or eight persons, of both sexes and all ages, are penned up together for the night in the one rickety, foul, vermin-haunted bedroom. The picture of agricultural life unrolls itself before us as it is painted by those who know it best. We see the dull clouded mind, the bovine gaze, the brutality and recklessness, the simple audacity of vice, the confused hatred of his betters, which mark the English peasant, unless some happy fortune has saved him from the general lot, and persuaded him that life ‘has something besides beer that the poor man may have and may relish.’”

He then goes on to declare that “the old feudalism”—feudalism is precisely the thing I mentioned—

“The old feudalism of England—the state of things when there yet were serfs, and when the lords of the soil were almost a different order of beings—still colours the relations of the rich and the poor.”

And perhaps you would like to know what he says an agricultural labourer should be. The writer states:

“It is looked on as the duty and place the poor man to stay in his native village for ever; to work hard for ten or twelve shillings a week, and bring up a large family respectably on the money; to touch his hat to the gentry, to go to church regularly, and to make out as much as he can of the service; to hate the public-house, and feel no longing for company and a bright fire or gossip, and be guided towards heaven by the curate and the young ladies. This is the poor man which modern feudalism actually produces, and who may be seen by anyone who stands opposite the door of the village beershop on a Saturday evening.”

Now this is the testimony of the Saturday Review, and what do you think the writer of the article from which I have just quoted proposes?—he proposes that instead of a man receiving parochial relief from the parish, he shall be allowed to receive it from that larger area—namely, from the Union; and that a law which he says is hardly ever put in practice should be repealed, by which a working-man breaking a contract to work is treated as a felon. I do not believe those remedies would be

sufficient for the terrible malady which he has described in such powerful language. May I ask you this question? Is it the unchangeable law of Heaven that the agricultural population of this country shall continue in that condition? Writers tell you, that your agriculture is far better than any other agriculture, that you produce a larger quantity of wheat or any other produce over a given surface. We know that there is the greatest market in the world close at their doors, and the means of conveyance to every part of the kingdom. Then I want to know why it is that the labouring population upon the farms of this country are in the condition I have just described. Is it so in the most civilized parts of Europe; is it so in the United States of America? No. I could give you, if it were not that reading evidence from books is not suited to a speech, and to a great meeting like this—I could read you evidence from every kind of man—from the highest in rank—from the most cultivated in mind—from the most extensively known in public affairs—I could prove to you, beyond all doubt, that in all these countries in Europe where the **land** is divided and the people have a chance of having some of it—those, in fact, who are industrious and frugal—that the condition of the agricultural and peasant population is infinitely superior to anything that is to be seen in Great Britain and Ireland.

Well, then, you may ask me very reasonably,—what is the difference between the laws of these countries and the laws of ours, and what changes do you propose? I will tell you in as few words as I can. In the greatest portion of the Continent of Europe—in France, in Germany, in Belgium, in Holland and in Norway, and in point of fact it is likely to become general throughout Europe, the law follows what is believed to be the natural law of affection and justice between parent and children. The large portion of the property of the parent must be by will (or if not by will the law will so order it) divided amongst the children; not **land** alone, but all the property of the parent, according to the number of his children. And you are to be frightened by this law of bequests as if it were something very dreadful. It only follows the rule which the majority of your merchants, your manufacturers, and of all the people in the world have followed in these later days, of treating their children with equal affection and with equal justice. On going to the United States, you find a very different state of the law. There a man may leave his property as he likes amongst his children because the United States' law believes that natural affection and justice are of themselves a sufficient law in the majority of cases, and therefore that it is not necessary to enforce these moral duties by any statute. But if a man dies without leaving a will, the law of the United States takes his property, and looking upon his

children with equal affection and equal justice, makes that distribution which it believes the just and living parent would have made.

But if you come to this country what do you find? You find this, that with regard to all kinds of property, except what is called real property (meaning the **land** of the country and the houses upon it), the law does exactly the same thing. It divides it equally amongst the children, because it knows that this is what the parent should have done, and would have done, if he had been a just parent. But when it comes to the question of the **land**, our law is contrary to the European law which makes a statute according to natural justice, contrary to the United States' law, which, when there is no will, makes a distribution also in accordance with natural justice. Thus our law steps in and does that which natural justice would forbid. Now I should like to know if any body is prepared to deny this. Personalty, that is, property which is not **land**, is divided equally; the property which is **land** is not divided equally, but is given to the eldest son in one lump. Now, tell me whether the principle which the law of Europe for the most part wishes to enforce, that which the law of America enforces when there is no will, that which we enforce when **land** is not in question—whether that is not a more just law, does not approve itself more to the hearts of men, and before the eye of Heaven, than a law by which we send beggars into the world,—it may be half a dozen children,—that we may make one rich in the possession of unnecessary abundance?

What are the reasons—these things are not done without reasons—ask anybody what are the reasons, and you are told, perhaps, that they are high political reasons. These high political reasons are often very curious. In some countries—in Turkey, for example—it has been the custom for a long time, and is hardly abandoned yet, that the wielder of the sceptre should destroy his younger brothers, lest they should become competitors with him for the throne. What would you think if the law of this country doomed all the younger children to a want of freedom and to a total want of education,—if it conferred all the freedom and all the education on the eldest sons, and left the others to go to the streets? It would be as reasonable to cut off all the younger boys and girls from all education and all freedom, as it is to cut them off from their share of their father's property. But you will find to-morrow morning, in all probability, that the editor in this town,—who does not generally, as I have noticed, serve you up very strong meat,—will say, if he comments on this part of my speech, what use would it be to make a law that the property shall be divided in

cases where there is no will, when men die so seldom without making a will, and will argue that the difference will be very small. I will tell you what difference it would make. It would take the tremendous sanction of the law from the side of evil, and put it on the side of good.

There is a case—it is the only one which occurs to me—bearing upon this point. About the time when the American colonies were severed from this country, the laws of primogeniture and entail were enforced in the State of Virginia in the most rigid manner. Mr. Jefferson, who was afterwards President of the Republic, considered it one of the greatest acts of his life that he prevailed upon the Legislature of Virginia to abolish these laws. You will find this statement in his Life: “The class which thus provided for the perpetuation of its wealth also monopolized the civil honours of the colony.” You will be able to judge whether that is not very much the case in this country. Amongst the reasons which he gave for abolishing the law of entails was that he wished “to make an opening for the aristocracy of virtue and talent, which Nature has wisely provided for the direction of the interests of society, and scattered with equal hand throughout all its conditions.” And when he came to the abolition of the law and custom of primogeniture, that is, by the enactment of a law that property should be equally divided whenever the parents did not leave a will, it is said by his biographer that these laws—

“Have not merely altered the distribution of that part of the **landed** property which is transmitted to surviving relatives by the silent operation of law, but they have also operated on public opinion so as to influence the testamentary disposition of it by the proprietors, without which last effect the purpose of the Legislature might have been readily defeated. The cases are now very rare in which a parent makes, by his will, a much more unequal distribution of his property among his children than the law itself would make. It is thus that laws, themselves the creatures of public opinion, often powerfully re-act on it.”

And he goes on to show that the effect of the distribution was to lessen the chances of a man being so enormously rich, and to give an opportunity to a large number to become moderately so. He said further, that if there were fewer coaches and six in the State of Virginia, there were twenty times as many carriages and pairs.

I have thus briefly touched upon the question of primogeniture. The question of

entails is much of the same kind, and with regard to its effect upon the public I shall only say a sentence or two. The object of entailing **land** is to keep great estates together, and to keep them in one family. Upon this system **land** in this country is some times tied up for fifty, or eighty, or a hundred years, no person having power to sell it, however advantageous it might be to the proprietors that the **land** should be sold. And then, if you come to the question of the difficulties of transfer, I might ask gentlemen near me connected with the law—and they will tell you that it always takes months, and it sometimes takes years, to prove a title; and the cost of this in money comes to no inconsiderable portion of the purchase money of the property.

Now, may I ask you what is the political reason for which this state of things is maintained? It is for the very reason for which this system was established eight hundred years ago—that three may be in this country a handful or persons, three or four times as many as there are here—twice as many, perhaps—who are the owners of nearly all the **land**, in whose hand is concentrated nearly all the power, by whom the Government of the country is mainly conducted, and amongst whom the patronage of the Government is mainly distributed. In every country in the world, as far as I know, the possessors of **land** are the possessors of power. In France, at this moment, we all know perfectly well that, notwithstanding there may be a revolution now and then in the streets of Paris, if you come to the question of voting, the majority of the voting population at this moment are found in the number of the proprietors of the **land**. Ten or twelve years ago it was their suffrages which conferred the supreme power on the present Emperor of the French. If you go across the Atlantic, and study the political system of the United States, where almost all the farmers are owners of their farms, you will find that they are the holders of political power. The city of New York may denounce the policy of the Government at Washington; but it is the **land**-owning farmers—the cultivators of the great States in the interior of the country—who are the real holders of political power, and by whose will alone the President of the United States is able to carry on the great matters which belong to his exalted station. It is the same in the Southern States, for the great planting population—the owners of immense plantations—are the life and soul of Southern politics. And if you come to our own country—to your own county, Warwickshire, or any county you choose to walk into—you will find that two or three great **land**owners can sit down together and determine who shall or shall not go to Parliament, as the pretended representative of the population in that county.



I believe that with these vast properties, which are of no real advantage to those who hold them—for 100,000l. a year, or 200,000l. a year, can give no man greater real happiness than 10,000l. or 5,000l. a year,—I say these great properties, with great political power, form what we call our great territorial system—a system which prevails to an extent in this country which is probably unknown in any other, but which leaves the cultivator of the soil ignorant, and hopeless, and dependent, and degraded. There is, as you know, a great tendency to increase the size of farms throughout the country, a practice which makes it still more difficult for the labourer ever to become a tenant, or to rise from the condition in which he is. You see a ladder—the social ladder—upon which you wish to see the poor, and depressed, and unfortunate nine-or-ten-shillings-a-week-labourer ascend gradually. You would rejoice to see him get up a few steps and become a farmer, although but in a small way; or the owner of a small piece of **land**. But you find that for six or eight, or ten feet up the ladder, the steps are broken out; and, in his low position, he has not a chance of beginning the ascent. Let there be steps in the shape of small farms and small estates, and **land** freely bought and sold, and then he will have something to hope for, something to save even his small earnings for, that he may be enabled to purchase or to occupy one of these small farms and get away from the humble and melancholy position in which he is now, to one which I wish, from my soul, every labourer in this country could find himself placed in.

Now, Sir . . . for fear that the Main in the Mask should misrepresent me to-morrow, let me tell you that I am not against great estates, or great farms, or great factories, but I have a very great liking for small estates, small farms, and small factories. In this country, where there is such a rapid creation of wealth, there is always a great power urging to the accumulation of **land**. I know the case of a nobleman now, in a southern county, from report, who is stated to have an income of 120,000l. a year; and being a wise man, as regards his expenditure compared with his income, he only spends—though it is mystery to me how he spends it—he only spends 40,000l. a year, and he has 80,000l. a year left. What does he do with this? He buys up every farm, every estate, big or little, all over the district, and the consequence is that his immense estate is constantly becoming larger. I do not blame him for that. I applaud him so far, that he is a man who does not waste his property, and I have heard that among those with whom he lives he is a man of excellent character. There are persons who come from Manchester, from Leeds, and there are some in Birmingham who are able to purchase large estates. There is a tendency to this in this country,

where we have so much manufacturing and commercial industry, and wealth to buy estates with. In addition to this, their possession gives great social position and great political influence. I am not complaining of this. It is a natural, and advantageous, and healthy thing; for it is desirable that farmers should have the stimulus of ambition to have a larger farm, and that the men who have an estate should have an ambition—if they can entertain it honestly—to have a larger estate. The stimulus by which men strive at something honourable is useful to the country; but at the same time, to add to this the force of a most intricate and complicated system of law, to give to this force greater force, is, in my opinion, contrary to all the true interests of England; and I believe if it goes on for another half-century, as it has for the last half-century, it will cause great discontent and great embarrassment within this now peaceful kingdom.

What I propose in this . . . First of all, that the law shall declare that when any person owning property dies without making a distribution of it by will, the law shall distribute it upon the same principle that it now adopts when it divides—I am now speaking of **landed** property—any other kind of property. For example: Suppose a man has got money in the bank—I wish everybody had—suppose he has machinery in his mill, merchandise in his warehouse, ships upon the ocean, or that he has shares, or the parchments for them in his safe—if he dies, the Government by the law, or rather the law itself, makes a distribution of all that property amongst all his children, in accordance with the great universal law of natural parental affection and justice. Then, I say, let that principle be extended to all the property which a man may die possessed of; and, so far as that goes, I want no further change. Then, with regard to the question of entails, I would say this: the Spectator proposes that a man, by entailing his property—so far as I can understand—shall only prevent himself and his next heir from disposing of it—that there shall be, in point of fact, only two persons in the entail. Now, what I propose is, that a man may leave his property to as many persons as he likes, to A, B, C, D, and E and F, and so on all through the alphabet, if they are all alive at the time he makes his will, and he can put all their names into it. But at present he can leave it to these people, and to a child then unborn, and who shall not be born, it may be, till twenty years after he has made his will. I would cut that off. I contend that it should be left to persons who are in existence, and whose names are in the will, and you will find that as A, B, and C died it would finally come into the hands of a man who would have the absolute disposal of, and who could keep, or sell, or give, or waste it as he pleased.

And I believe it will be much better for the public when that freedom of transfer is given to the possessors of **land** which is given to the possessors of every other kind of property. If I were to sit down for ten minutes and a lawyer were to take my place, he could tell you what a trouble our law is; and—although I am sorry that some of them think that they make a good thing out of it—what a curse it is to a man who buys **landed** property or who sells it. Everything which I am proposing is carried out, I believe, through most of the States in the American Union, and to a greater extent on the Continent of Europe, and is being adopted in the Australian colonies. It is the most curious thing in the world, that whenever an Englishman leaves these shores—whether it is the effect of the salt air, or of seasickness, or the result of that prolonged meditation which a voyage of some weeks' duration invites, I do not know—but whenever an Englishman leaves these shores, the effect is to peel off, not the rags of his body, but the verminous rags from his intellect and soul. He leaves behind him in England all the stupidity which some of us cherish, and he **lands** in Australia with his vision so clear that he can see things in a commonsense manner.

I want to ask you as reasonable men, as men of business—there is not a man who cannot understand this question moderately well—is this spoliation? Is this agrarian outrage? Is this stimulating the workingman and the agricultural labourer to—what shall I say?—to, it may be, incendiarism or to something worse? It is nothing of the kind; it is but laying before them those just principles of law and practice which are admitted to be just in every other country in the world than this, and which we admit to be just with regard to everything else, except the single article of **land**.

We are charged with all sorts of dreadful things by that gentleman in the Mask. On the 27th of November he wrote this of Mr. Cobden. He said:

“He [Mr. Cobden] stoops down and picks up a weapon which has never yet been used but for anarchy and revolution. Is it not, in fact, to tell the labourer and the workman to look over the fence of the neighbouring proprietor, and learn to think that they have a natural right to a slice of the soil?”

Surely, if they are industrious and frugal, and can save the means to purchase, and there be anybody who would wish to sell, and the law steps in and makes it difficult to sell and to buy, then, I say, that labourer has a right to look over the hedge, and to

feel that the law deals a grievous injustice to him.

And it is this gentleman in the Mask that frightens the **landed** proprietors. I met the other day with a gentleman connected with one of the largest properties in the kingdom. He said to me,—and he is a very liberal and thoughtful man,—he said to me: “You have no idea of the terror which your speeches create amongst **landed** gentlemen.” Now, I never frighten any of my neighbours. I do not know why I should be so alarming to those gentlemen who live in their great houses and castles. But the fact is the **landed** gentlemen are not a wise class. There are brilliant exceptions. There are men amongst them, many of whom cannot be surpassed by any of their own class, or of any other class in the world. But as a class, and, perhaps, one might say it of nearly every class—I believe it is true of that to which I belong in Lancashire—they are not a wise class. They know something of agriculture—county Members have to get it up for agricultural dinners—and they know something of horses—and they know all that can be known on the subject of game. But on the principles of law and of government, speaking of them as a whole, and judging of them by their past course, they are dark as night itself. Would you believe it—young men here do not recollect it—that the **landed** proprietors could never find out, till Mr. Cobden and a few others told them that the Corn-law was a great injury to them? They did not know that it actually lowered the value of their **land**, and diminished the security of their rents, and that it loaded them with an inconceivable amount of public odium; whilst, at the same time, it beggared hundreds and thousands of the people, and it menaced this nation with rebellion.

Mr. Cobden and I, and others who acted with us, but we chiefly, because perhaps we were the most prominent, were slandered then by the gentleman in the Mask, just as we have been now. The Times was as foul-mouthed upon us twenty years ago as it is at this moment. It said that we went about the country setting class against class. It said that our views led to the confiscation of **landed** property. It said everything that was spiteful and untrue, as it says now. And yet, is there any man in this country who will not admit that property is more secure in consequence of the abolition of that law, which **landowners** believed to be the anchor of their safety, and that animosities between class and have been allayed? And who shall tell how much it is owing to this reform that our Queen at this moment wields an unchallenged sceptre over a tranquil realm? A **landowner** in the House of Commons, an old Member of the House, a representative of a south-western county, a man of excellent character, for

whom I have always had the greatest respect, even when he was most in the wrong,—he told me not long ago, speaking about the Corn-law, that they did not then know the good we were doing to his class. I smiled and said to him: “If you would only have faith, I could tell one or two other things that would do you just as much good if you would let us try them.” But he had no faith.

Now, I will just say to the **landowners** that I was never more their friend than when discussing this question which I am occupied with to-night, without the least animosity to them, and with a belief as firm as I ever had on the question of the Corn-law, that their interests are bound up with the interests of the people in the right solution of this question. I would ask, then, to what are they tending under the operation of these laws? They are becoming every year smaller and smaller in number. The large owners are rapidly eating up the smaller ones. The census returns show that the number of **landed** proprietors is but a handful in the nation, and every day becoming fewer and fewer. Their labourers remain at the 9s. or 10s. a week. Somebody will write to the paper to-morrow and say they get 12s.; but bear in mind that they do not always receive wages on wet days, and I believe the average money-income of the agricultural labourer throughout the United Kingdom will not exceed—and many persons will say it will not reach—10s. a week. Now, the smaller in number these **landed** proprietors become, the more, it may be, these labourers will become discontented. There may arise some political accident, and political accidents are almost as unlooked-for as other accidents. You do not hear the tread of the earthquake which topples down your firmest architecture, and you do not see—the country gentlemen do not see—the tread of that danger, it may be that catastrophe, which inevitably follows upon prolonged unjust legislation. There may come a time, and I dare prophesy that it will come if there be an obstinate retention of our present system, when there will be a movement in this country to establish here, not what I believe to be the just and moderate and sufficient plan which I recommend, but a plan which shall be in accordance with that which is established by the Code Napoleon in France, and which is spreading rapidly over the whole of the Continent of Europe. And I would ask them again how do they purpose to keep their population if this system is to be maintained?

And now, addressing you working-men who are here, I beg your attention to two or three observations on this point. America, though three thousand miles off, is not so far off but that people may go there in about twelve days, and may go there for a

sum varying from 2l. to 5l. You know that in this very year—I mean the year which is just passed—150,000 or 160,000 persons have sailed from this country to New York. Every man who settles there is not blinded by the mystifications and the falsities uttered by the New York correspondent of the Times. He is there, and can see what the working-man earns, and how he is treated, and what he is, and he writes over to his friends in this country—as has been the case for years in Ireland—and the result is that Ireland is being drained, not of its surplus population, but of the population absolutely necessary to the proper cultivation of the soil.

Let me tell you a fact, and if you do no treasure, it up in your minds, I hope some of those gentlemen, the **landowners**, who think I am very hostile to them, will just consider it, if they have time, as they eat their breakfast and read the paper to-morrow, or the next day. In America there are 140,000,000 of acres of **land**, surveyed, mapped out, set apart for those who are ready to settle upon them. In the year 1861 (that was the first year before the war attained its present proportions), there were not less than 40,000 new farms, averaging eighty acres each, occupied in the Western States. But the Government of the United States, not content with that measure of progress, framed an Act which came into operation on the 1st of January, 1863, called the Homestead Act. I have a copy of the Act here, and the circular which was issued from the Department of State, giving directions as to how this Act should be worked throughout the Union. What is the Homestead Act? It is this. It says that any man of twenty-one years of age, or younger, if he has been for a fortnight or a little more in the service of the United States, whether in the army or navy—any man of twenty-one years of age may come into these territories, may choose what is called a section, which is 160 acres of **land**, being one-fourth of a square mile, and on payment of a fee of ten dollars, which is equal to two pounds English, may apply to have this **land** conveyed to him for no other payment for a term of five years. It cannot be alienated, he is not allowed to sell it, it remains in his possession. At the end of five years, he having done to it what the Government requires—that is, settled upon it and begun cultivation and so forth, the law gives him what is called a patent, but what we should call a Parliamentary title, and the **land** is his own absolute freehold for ever. Now it would not take more than 15l. for a man to go from Birmingham to the territory where this **land** is to be disposed of. If he had not got any money by which he could take up 160 acres, he might engage himself to a neighbouring farmer, and would get, I believe, now, about 20s. a week wages, besides his board and lodgings, and if he worked as a labourer for two or three years

he would be able to save a sum sufficient for him to commence the cultivation of a portion of his farm, and would be settled down there as a farmer and freeholder on his own estate.

Do not let me leave you with the idea that there is no rough and rugged career in this. There is much that is rough and much that is rugged, but there is a good deal of that sort in this country now. And when a man looks upon those children and create even in the poorest house, sometimes, a gleam of joy,—when he thinks what those boys and girls must be in this country,—that they can never rise one step higher than that which he occupies now as an agricultural labourer, and when he looks abroad and he sees them, not labourers in the sense in which we speak here, not tenants even, but freeholders, and **landowners**, and farmers of their own property—then, I say, that the temptation held out to men here to emigrate, if men knew all the facts, would be irresistible to hundreds of thousands who have now no thought of moving to another country. But the agricultural labourer is not as he once was, in one respect. There are some feeble efforts made to give him some little instruction. There are newspapers published at a price which at one time was deemed impossible, and these find their way into agricultural villages. And the labourers will gradually begin to open their eyes, and to see that a change of their position is not so impossible as once they thought it was. What is it the United States offer more? They offer social equality—they offer political equality—they offer to every child of every man in whose face I am now looking, education—from the learning of his alphabet to, if he has the capacity to travel so far, the highest knowledge of classics and mathematics which are offered to the best students in the colleges of this country. And all this without the payment of one single farthing, except that general payment in which all the people participate in the school-rate of the various States of the Union.

I ask you if I am wrong in saying to the rich and the great that I believe, if they knew their own interests, that it would be worth their while to try to make this country a more desirable country for the labourer to live in. If they disregard this great question, we, who are of the middle, and not absolutely powerless, class, shall have to decide between the claims of territorial magnates and the just rights of millions of our countrymen. Some men I meet with—and now and then I wonder where they were born, and why they came into the world—regard these territorial magnates as idols before whom we are all to bow down in humble submission. Travellers tell us

there is a tribe in Africa so entirely given up to superstition that they fill their huts and hovels with so many idols that they do not even leave room for their families. It may be so in this country. We build up a system which is injurious to our political freedom, and is destructive of the intelligence, and the comfort, and the morality, and the best interests of our producing and working classes. Now, am I the enemy of any class when I come forward to state facts like these, and to explain principles such as these? Shall we go on groping continually in the dark, and make no effort to strengthen our position? Do not suppose because I stand here oftener to find fault with the laws of my country than to praise them that I am less English or less patriotic, or that I have less sympathy for my country or my countrymen than other men have. I want our country to be populous, to be powerful, and to be happy. But this can only be done—it never has been done in any country—but by just laws justly administered. I plead only for what I believe to be just. I wish to do wrong to no man. For twenty-five years I have stood before audiences—great meetings of my countrymen—pleading only for justice. During that time, as you know, I have endured measureless insult, and have passed through hurricanes of abuse. I need not tell you that my clients have not been generally the rich and the great, but rather the poor and the lowly. They cannot give me place and dignities and wealth; but honourable service in their cause yields me that which is of far higher and more lasting value—the consciousness that I have laboured to expound and uphold laws which, though they were not given amid the thunders of Sinai, are not less the commandments of God, and not less intended to promote and secure the happiness of men.

[The Settled **Land** Act, passed 1882, has since carried out Mr. Bright's views, to a certain extent, by greatly facilitating the sale of settled estates.]

[Back to Table of Contents]

XV

## THE **LAND** QUESTION—II

Birmingham, January 22, 1876.

Now let me ask your attention to this for two or three minutes. Lord Derby is a man very superior to many of his order and of his party. He has always been industrious; he is well informed; he is not troubled with many prejudices; I am not sure whether he has strong convictions—I know that on many things he has held Liberal opinions,



but I confess I am astonished that he should have dared to make statements with regard to the **land** such as he has made, with the knowledge that he ought to have, even to those uninquiring gentlemen who are called the 3,000 Conservative working-men of the city of Edinburgh, and that he should have made these statements in that city and in that country where the monopoly of **land** is the closest, probably, of any part of the United Kingdom. From this very return which he has obtained, it turns out that 5,000,000 of acres out of less than 19,000,000 in Scotland—that 5,000,000 acres, or considerably more than one-fourth of the whole of Scotland, are in the possession of twenty-one persons; that 8,000,000 acres, which is not far short of one-half of all Scotland, are in the possession of forty-nine persons; that 14,560,000 acres, or more than three-fourths of all Scotland, are in the possession of 583 persons. And if you were to take all the square miles of all the estates, of all the farms, of all the acres of the surface of Scotland, seventeen out of nineteen are in the possession of 2,583 persons; and of the other—his return shows that there are 132,000 proprietors, but the whole of the rest of them—the whole of the rest of the population do not possess more than the largest proprietor in Scotland, and do not possess more than one-fourth of an acre each. In point of fact, one proprietor in Scotland holds nearly as much **land** as 3,000,000 of its population.

Now I want to ask you how this comes about? I have given you Scotland; I will give you a fact with regard to Ireland. About a fortnight ago there was a letter in the Times from Mr. Fitzgerald, well known as the Knight of Kerry, a very respectable gentleman, whom I have had the pleasure of meeting many years ago. Mr. Fitzgerald wrote a letter to the Times in defence of the proprietors of **land** in Ireland, who are being attacked, as you know, constantly on the subject of tenure and the subject of rent; and he says that in Ireland there are 6,000<sup>1</sup> proprietors and 600,000 occupiers. Well, if there be only 2,583 persons in Scotland to seventeen-nineteenths of the soil, and if there be only 6,000 proprietors in Ireland, which is almost all the extent of Scotland, it would appear that the statement which Lord Derby says that Mr. Mill and I had endorsed cannot be very far from the truth. But if we take England—England and Wales—the acreage is about equal to Scotland and Ireland united, and if in England and Wales **land** be no more divided than it is in Scotland—I am not going to say it is not, because I believe it is, owing to the greater population and the greater wealth—but if the **land** in England and Wales were no more divided than it is in Scotland, then seventeen-nineteenths of the whole of the surface of England and Wales would be in possession of 5,166 persons, And take the whole proprietorship of

Ireland as given by Mr. Fitzgerald, and take seventeen-nineteenths of Scotland the same proportion of England, and it would leave us with 13,749 proprietors of the soil in the United Kingdom. When we are talking of proprietors of the soil we are not speaking of the man who owns a few yards or a few roods or a quarter of an acre of **land**, upon which his house stands, but we are speaking of those who are occupying and cultivating the **land**, or who are letting it to others to occupy and cultivate; and we are speaking of the political power which has been for generations the greatest in this country, which is enormous now, and which, whenever it chooses to act in Parliament, in spite of the household suffrage in your boroughs, bears down all your opinions and carries any measure which it thinks necessary for its own interest.

Now, I must ask you a question, which it would be well if Lord Derby would endeavour to answer. My question is—is there not something strange in this partition of the soil I have described to you? Remember that property in the soil is the most universal of any property in the country. You cannot stand anywhere but that you are upon it. It is the most solid of any property in the country; the most certain as a possession and an investment; it is more desired by all classes of people than any other kind of property in the country; and it is the foundation of all other property, yet the people—and I use the term advisedly—are shut out, and a handful of men are the possessors, as I have shown you, of at least seventeen-nineteenths of it. Do not suppose that I am blaming any of these men; not in the least. They have had nothing to do with making any law, or, purposely, of any custom which has led to this state of things. They are, in their circumstances, living as honourably, and acting, probably, as well as possessors of property in any other station of life. But I maintain that there is a cause, and that cause is to be found in the state of our law and in customs which have arisen from and are supported by the law.

May I ask your attention to one argument that has always appeared to me to have great force? Suppose there were no law of Parliament to interfere with the possession of **land**. You can see at once that there are natural causes which promote accumulation and natural causes which promote dispersion. Of the natural causes which promote accumulation, you would say, for example, the desire to possess **land**, which appears to be universal, the certain security which it gives to property and to investment, the social position which the possession of **land** gives, more or less, in almost every country, and the charm which there is in country life.

Dr. Johnson, I think, recommended everybody in delicate health to take a walk of two miles every morning before breakfast, and he added a very good piece of advice, if it could only be followed—that he should take a walk on his own **land**. If there are these forces of accumulation, there are also forces of dispersion, and the greatest and the chief of these is death. The death of the possessors, as a matter of course, in almost every kind of property—and in this, if it were not for the law—would tend necessarily in some degree to the dispersion of the property. The extravagance of the owner, his folly and his vice, tend also to dispersion; the desire for change of locality, the desire for change of investment. Thus, you see, there are natural forces at work which cause or promote the accumulation of **land**, and natural forces which as certainly cause and promote the dispersion of **land**. What we are arguing for is this—that these forces should be allowed to work naturally and freely, and that the law should not in any way interfere with them, but that **land** should change just as easily, and should go into the possession of other people by that change, as any other kind of property which men possess. And the result of such change in the law would be that **land**, as a whole, would find itself always in the possession of that class and those classes of the population which would do the best for the **land** itself and for the people who dwell upon it.

I have read to you the statement of Lord Derby that, in his opinion, there is no obstacle in our law to make the gratification which comes from the possession of **land** either impossible or difficult. In answer to that I will read to you an extract from a work by a lawyer quite competent to give an opinion on this question, and I shall leave his answer as a complete reply to the question of Lord Derby. The passage I am just going to read to you I have extracted from a work called “The Social Condition and Education of the People in England and Europe.” It was written twenty years ago by Mr. Joseph Kay, who is a Queen’s Counsel, and most competent to give an opinion on this question. He says:

“These laws were passed, were framed, and have been retained for the express purpose of keeping the **land** in the hands of a few proprietors, and depriving the peasants and small shopkeepers of any part of it and of the influence which its possession confers, and of supporting a great **landed** proprietary class, in order to uphold the system of aristocratic Government, and to give greater strength and stability to the Crown. It may be stated generally that these laws enable an owner of **land**, by his settlement or will, so to affect his estate that it cannot possibly be

sold, in many cases, for about fifty years, and in some cases for sixty, seventy, or a hundred years, after the making of the settlement or will.”

Perhaps many persons here may not be aware that this is almost the only country in Europe—I may even say the only country in the world—in which laws of this kind prevail. They exist to some extent in Russia, and in some parts of Austria; but in Germany, Holland, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, Italy, France, and the United States these laws are abolished, and every person there can sell or dispose of his **land** during his own life. If he dies without a will the law divides his **land** equally between his children. The law does not there make one son rich and leave all other sons and daughters poor. What would you think in this country if any rich **landowner**, having, say, six children, were to doom five of them to ignorance, to shut them out from education, from the training belonging to their position in life, and should give that training and education only to one child? But it would be no more monstrous than that he should shut them all out from his property, and give the whole of it to the one child. And yet such is our law, such is the custom of the country, based, I will say, upon the most immoral principle which law has ever sanctioned. **What we ask is this, for freedom of bequest, not for a forced partition of land. We ask that the land shall be the absolute property of each succeeding generation of men.** And what are the results of our system? That our tenantry are less independent, probably, than any other tenantry in the world; and our agricultural labourers, as you know, are, and have been, the most abject and most hopeless class of our labouring population. The repeal of the Corn Laws did not leave them untouched by its beneficent hand, for I believe that the wages of agricultural labour throughout this country have risen certainly more than 50 per cent. during the last thirty years under the operation of that great change in the law which the present Prime Minister and his party declared was to ruin the **land**, and especially to beggar the labourer. But although the labourer is better off than he was then, still I am obliged to admit what has been said of him by a paper that I have never before had to quote with approval—I speak of the Saturday Review. I recollect two or three years ago reading an article in the Saturday Review on this question of the **land**, and I noticed an observation in it so striking and remarkable that I could not forget it. The writer said that if our agricultural system be a paternal system, our agricultural labourer is its disinherited child.

But the country gentlemen and Lord Derby and his friends are perhaps not aware of

this fact—that refusal to come to some just arrangement on this question induces men to turn their eyes in directions some of which, in my opinion, are not only erroneous, but perilous, I think the proposition that I hear made that nobody should have any profit arising from the growth in value of the **land** he possesses, or that there should be a probate duty levied upon the **land** to the amount of 10 per cent., and that upon any man's death his property in the soil—one-tenth of all his acreage—shall be taken and divided amongst the peasantry of his neighbourhood, or that we should have a law of equal partition, such as prevails in many parts of Europe—I think these propositions come naturally from our present law and the present state of things, and to adopt any of them would only be going from one extreme of error and of evil to another. And, therefore, I repudiate the laws we have—the partition laws of some foreign countries—those propositions to which I have referred—I repudiate them all. I say there is a sound and a just principle upon which **land** should pass from one owner to another, by which all men in each generation, possessing **land**, shall have the power to deal with it as they like, and that the dead man and the dead hand shall not declare for half a century to come what shall be done with the estate.