

The Irish Famine

by OSCAR B. JOHANNSEN

THE Irish potato famine of the 19th Century is recalled in a book entitled *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849*, by Cecil Woodham-Smith, an Englishwoman. This shocking tragedy made its imprint on the United States in many ways, for as a result of it hundreds of thousands of Irish fled Ireland to the more hospitable shores of the United States with results on our nation's economics as well as politics.

To Georgists it is particularly important, for as a result of this famine landlordism became so repugnant to the Irish that Henry George's works made a profound impression on the Irish intellectuals, and George himself became an idol of the Irish people.

In the early part of the century, the Irish peasants were almost entirely dependent upon potatoes for food. The British owned most of the land and rented it out to the people under a particularly vicious system of sharecropping in which almost all such produce as vegetables and grains went to pay the rent. The peasants largely subsisted on potatoes as these could be easily and cheaply grown on small bits of land. However, time and again the potato crop failed. When this happened the peasant was in a desperate situation for he had to pay the rent or lose his land. Thus he starved himself in order to sell all the other produce to pay the rent. In 1845 a blight struck the potato crop resulting in its total failure. It struck Ireland, England, Holland and France but as the Irish were so dependent on potatoes, the loss of their crop was a major disaster.

It is estimated that about £3.5 million worth of potatoes were ruined.

Peasants died by the thousands in their miserable huts or by the roadsides if they were evicted from their postage size plots. And this was going on while practically all the produce raised in Ireland was going to England to pay the rent for the land on which the Irish lived. It is believed that they paid £6 million a year in rents alone when the blight struck. By 1851, 1.5 million out of 8 million Irishmen had starved to death and another million had fled to the United States, Canada and other parts of the world.

This dreadful calamity created a hatred for the British which persists to this day. The British government's handling of the crisis did practically nothing to alleviate conditions.

Those in control of the government believed in the principles of private enterprise and laissez faire to which all Georgists willingly subscribe. However, what they did not know then, and few know today, is that fundamental to laissez faire philosophy, which means a fair field to all with favors to none, is that land be freely available. With land rack-rented by the British, the Irish were at the mercy of speculators in foods. They literally had to sell their very souls to obtain something on which to live, while the British army protected the British landlords in their ownership of land.

This is equivalent to people being on a well provisioned ship but with an armed man guarding the hold against everyone but the speculators, who in turn, then sell the goods to the people who do all the work while the absentee landlords and speculators get all the benefits.

Is it any wonder that private enter-

prise suffered in the eyes of the Irish as well as many sympathetic English? Possibly George Bernard Shaw's acceptance of socialism stems from his knowledge of how his people suffered under this mistaken application of laissez faire. It is difficult to convince anyone that when both land and labor are free, such occurrences are impossible. Shaw read *Progress and Poverty* and owed much of his philosophy to Henry George but did not think George went far enough. He felt the government had to protect the people from exploitation like that which occurred in the potato famine.

Have we learned anything since then? It is doubtful. The reviews of this book indicate little understanding of the fact that the entire system of tenure was at fault. Instead the reviewers seem to attribute it to stupidity and too rigorous an application

of the concepts of laissez faire. Paradoxically, therefore, this book instead of helping focus attention on the land may result in helping to implement socialist doctrine.

This points up the fact that it is not easy for people to grasp the subtleties of the philosophy of Henry George. Either they go too far and become socialists, or they don't go far enough, and become the libertarians of today who can't seem to make up their minds as to just where the government should step in and where it should stay out.

The Georgist walks a tightrope between these two opposing forces. It is exhilarating if he stays on the rope. He can only do this by constantly studying and re-studying his basic concepts, for Georgism is freedom—and freedom is difficult to define.

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A Student's Mandate to Georgists At Recent New York Commencement

Religion teaches us that we are all brothers under the Fatherhood of God. The Christopher Movement gives us a mandate to do something active for our brothers. The Moral Rearmament Movement underscored that mandate to put spiritual ideas to work in social action. The trade unions can become vehicles for such action, and Georgism gives you an economic philosophy that will solve the basic problem of the worker and boss—the problem of a fair wage. Once this problem is solved the distrust and mutual antagonism will be removed, and labor and management can with harmony solve their remaining problems.

The need is great—the laborers are few. Do not be discouraged by the

enormity of the task before you. The light of truth given to you in this school must be shielded by you—must grow within you—must burst forth and enlighten others. Taxes that stifle man's initiative—that encourage a man not to improve his home—that encourage citizens to be liars and cheaters—must indeed be done away with.

Take *Progress and Poverty* home. Read it and re-read it. Argue it and discuss it. Explain it and expand it. Talk about it. Sell it and push it. You have the right to do it—the responsibility to do it—the need to do it. With determination and perseverance you will not fail. Henry George is not a failure. We Georgists have not yet begun to fight.

—John Kennedy