

The Land of Iran

by ALAN ST. DENIS

MOHAMMED REZA PAHLEVI, Shah of Iran, ascended the throne of his ancient realm in 1941, but only recently (26 years later) did he consent to a formal coronation. He had frankly explained his long refusal to take part in such a ceremony: "It is not a source of pride to become king of a poor people."

The Shah's words reflected royal vanity, to be sure; but they were also discerning and refreshingly honest. His people *were* impoverished—and unbelievably backward. In fact, they remained so until the early 1950's, when a political upheaval threatened Pahlavi's shaky kingdom. He took firm command, and established two major goals: to modernize Iran, and to free its masses from the blight of poverty that had afflicted them for centuries.

The first step to be taken, obviously, was to ascertain the cause of Iran's social and economic ills. To his credit, the Shah recognized that they stemmed primarily from a deeply entrenched system of private land-ownership. Practically every acre of land was owned by a comparatively limited, and immensely wealthy group known as "the Thousand Families." Protected by a private army, and aided by a venal bureaucracy, these dynastic landlords greedily mulcted the peasantry, exacting huge rents from tenant-farmers who were ostensibly sharecroppers, but actually were no better than serfs.

The Shah sponsored education, granted women equal rights, encouraged industry, and otherwise sought to bring Iran into the Twentieth Century—but he realized that no advance would mean anything as long as landlordism

prevailed. So he concurrently decreed a far-reaching land-reform program. The vast estates were broken up and distributed among their former tenants at very low cost. (It is noteworthy that the Shah's own royal lands were included in the process, and were the first to be parceled out.) As a result, the general populace now enjoys a prosperity they and their ancestors had never known.

Again, all credit to the Shah for his vision and his efforts. But unhappily his well-intended reforms, even if temporarily beneficial, in the long run are doomed to failure, for they are economically unsound. For one thing, landowners were compensated for the land taken from them, receiving shares in numerous industrial enterprises the government has nationalized. Secondly, taxation continues as before. Thus out of Iran's production a goodly share must be devoted to the payment of taxes and to the reimbursement of the land-monopolists.

Even worse, though for a time the *fellabeen* may glory in the possession of their little plots of earth, tilling them will not be economically rewarding in the light of today's agricultural modes. Inevitably the tiny farms will be sold to willing buyers, and ultimately the tide to large areas will vest once more in the hands of private exploiters. And the noble endeavor of the Shah will come to naught, unless by then (hopefully!) he will have had occasion to study the principles of Henry George. Perhaps one day a monarch as powerful and as benevolent as he will decree the true remedy for the problem of poverty.

Kul Bhushan, executive editor of New Era Associates, and director of the Henry George extension in Nairobi, Kenya, has named his second son Necum (law), reflecting his interest in the letter N (New Era College and New York, where he says he met "wonderful people" three years ago at the international conference). An older son is named Nyay, which means justice.