

# ADDRESS TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS.

By Charles Stewart Parnell.

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Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen of the House of Representatives, I have to thank you for the honour that you have conferred upon me in permitting me to address this august assembly upon the state of affairs in my unhappy country. The public opinion of the people of America will be of the utmost importance in enabling us to obtain a just and suitable settlement of the Irish question. I have seen, since I have been in this country, so many tokens of the good wishes of the American people towards Ireland I feel at a loss to express my sense of the enormous advantage and service which is daily being done to the cause of my country in this way. We do not seek to embroil your Government with the Government of England, but we claim that the public opinion and sentiment of a free country like America is entitled to find expression wherever it is seen that the laws of freedom are not observed.

Mr. Speaker and gentlemen, the most pressing question in Ireland is, at the present moment, the tenure of land. That question is a very old one. It dates from the first settlement of Ireland from England. The struggle between those who owned the land on the one side and those who tilled it on the other has been a constant one, and up to the present moment, scarcely any ray of light has ever been let in upon the hard fate of the tillers of the soil in that country. But many of us, who are observing now the course of events, believe that the time is fast approaching when the artificial and cruel system of land tenure prevailing in Ireland is bound to fall and to be replaced by a more natural and more just one. I could quote many authorities to show you what this system is. The feudal tenure has been tried in many countries. and it has been found wanting everywhere, but in no country has it wrought so much destruction and proved so pernicious as in Ireland. We have, as the result of that feudal tenure, constant and chronic poverty. We have our people discontented and hopeless. Even in the best years the state of the people is one of constant poverty, and

when, as on the present occasion, the crops fail and a bad year comes round, we see terrific famines sweeping across the face of our land and claiming their victims in hundreds of thousands. Mr. Froude, the distinguished English historian, gives his testimony with regard to this land system in the following words:

“But of all the fatal gifts which we bestowed upon our unhappy possession was the English system of owning land. Land, properly speaking, cannot be owned by anyone. It belongs to all the human race. Laws have to be made to secure the profits of their industry to those who cultivate it; but the private property of this or that person, which he is entitled to deal with as he pleases, land ought never to be, and never, strictly speaking, is. In Ireland, as in all primitive associations, the land was divided amongst the tribes. Each tribe owned its own district. Under the feudal system the property was held by the Crown, as representing the nation, while the subordinate tenures were held with duties attached to them and were liable, on non-fulfillment, to forfeiture.”

Now, I look upon this testimony of Mr. Froude’s as a most important and valuable one, coming, as it does, from an English source and a source which cannot be called prejudiced in favour of Ireland. As Mr. Froude says, property has its duties under the feudal system of tenure as well as its rights, but in Ireland those enjoying the monopoly of the land have only considered that they had rights, and have always been forgetful of their duties, so that, bad as this feudal tenure must be, it has worked in a way to intensify its evil tenfold. I find that a little further on Mr. Froude again speaks to the following effect:

“If we had been more faithful in our stewardship Ireland would have been as wealthy and prosperous as the sister island, and not at the mercy of a potato blight. We did what we could. We subscribed money. We laid a poor law upon the land, but all to no purpose. The emigrants went away with rage in their hearts and a longing hope of revenge hereafter with America’s help.”

I could multiply the testimony of distinguished sources and distinguished men to the same effect, but I shall content myself with quoting from one more, Professor Blackie, the professor of Greek in

Edinburgh University, who, in the 'Contemporary Review' of this month, writes as follows:

“Among the many acts of baseness branding the English character in their blundering pretence of governing Ireland, not the least was the practice of confiscating the land, which by real law, belonged to the people, and giving it, not to honest, resident cultivators which might have been a polite sort of theft, but to cliques of greedy and grasping oligarchs who did nothing for the country they had appropriated but suck its blood in the name of land rent and squander its wealth under the name of fashion and pleasure in London.”

Now, we have been told by the landlord party as their defence of the system, that the true cause of Irish poverty and Irish discontent is the crowded state of that country, and I admit to the fullest extent that there are portions of Ireland which are too crowded. The barren lands of the West of Ireland, whither the people were driven from the fertile lands after the famine, are too crowded, but the fertile portions of Ireland maintain scarcely any population at all, and remain as vast hunting grounds for the pleasure of the landlord class. Before, then, we talk of emigration as the cure for all the ills of Ireland, I should like to see the rich plains of Meath, Kildare, and Tipperary, instead of being the desert wastes they are to-day, supporting the teeming and prosperous population that they are so capable of maintaining. You may drive at the present moment for ten or twenty miles through these great and rich counties without meeting a human being or seeing a single house, and it is a remarkable testimony to the horrible way in which the land system has been administered in Ireland that the fertile country had proved the destruction of the population, instead of being their support.

Only on the poor lands have our people been allowed to settle, and there these are crowded in numbers far too great for the soil to support. I should like to see the next emigration from the west to the east, instead of from the east to the west—from the barren hills of Connemara back to the fertile plains of Meath, and when the resources of my country have been fully taken advantage of and fully developed, when the agricultural prosperity of Ireland been secured, then, if we have any surplus population, we shall cheerfully give it to this great country. Then our emigrants will go willingly and as free men, not

shovelled out by a forced emigration, a disgrace to the country that they came from and to humanity in general. Then our emigrants would come to you as come the Germans, with money in their pockets, education to enable them to push out to your Western lands instead of hanging about the Eastern cities, doomed to hard manual labour, and many of them falling a prey to the worst evils of modern city civilization.

I have noticed within the last few days a very remarkable testimony to this question of overcrowding in one of the newspapers of this country, the American "Nation," a journal, I believe, distinguished in the walks of literature, and whose opinion is entitled to every weight and consideration. The "Nation" says that the remedy for Irish poverty is to be found in the great multiplication of peasant properties, and not by emigration as many suppose. There is little question that emigration is good for those who emigrate, but it leaves gaps in the home population which are soon filled up by a fresh poverty-stricken mass.

A writer in the London "Times," giving an account of the island of Guernsey, shows that it supports in marvellous prosperity a population of 30,000 on the area of 10,000 acres, while Ireland has a cultivable area of 15,500,000 acres, and would, if as densely peopled as Guernsey, support a population of 45,000,000, instead of only 5,000,000 as at present. The climate of Guernsey, too, is as moist as that of Ireland, and the island is hardly any nearer to the great markets, but nearly every man in it owns his own farm, and the law facilitates his getting a farm in fee on easy terms.

Now, Mr. Speaker, and gentlemen of the House of Representatives, the remedy that we propose for the state of affairs in Ireland is an alteration of the land tenure prevailing there. We propose to imitate the example of Prussia and of other Continental countries where the feudal tenure has been tried, found wanting, and abandoned; and we also propose to make or give an opportunity to every tenant occupying a farm in Ireland to become the owner of his own farm.

This may perhaps seem at first sight a startling proposition, and I shall be told about the rights of property and vested interests and individual ownership, but we have the high authority of Mr. Froude, the English historian, which I have just quoted to you, that land, properly speaking, cannot be owned by any man. "It belongs to all the

human race. Laws have to be made to secure the profits of their industry to those who cultivate it, but the private property of this or of that person, which he is entitled to deal with as he pleases, land ought never to be, and never, strictly speaking, is." We say that if it can be proved, as it has been abundantly proved, that terrible suffering and constant poverty are inflicted upon millions of the population of Ireland, then we may reasonably require from the Legislature that, paying due regard to vested interests and giving them fair compensation, they should terminate the system of ownership of the soil by the few in Ireland and replace it by one giving the ownership of the soil to the many. We have, as I pointed out, historical precedents for that course.

The King of Prussia, in 1811, by Royal Edict, seeing the evils of the feudal tenure, transferred all the land of his country from the nobles to the tenants. He compensated the nobles by giving them bonds bearing four per cent interest, and he ordained that the tenants should repay to the State the principal of these bonds by annual instalments of five per cent, extending over a term of years. The preamble to this edict is so very remarkable that I would venture to trespass upon your time for a moment to read it, if you would permit it:

"We, Frederic William, by the grace of God King of Prussia, having convinced ourselves both by personal experience in our own domains and by that of many of lords of manors of the great advantages which have occurred both to the lord and the peasant by the transformation of peasant holdings into proprietary by the commutation of the rents on the basis of a fair indemnity, and having consulted in regard to this weighty matter experienced farmers, ordain and decree as follows: — That all tenants of hereditary holding, whatever the size of the holding, shall, by the present edict, become proprietary holding after paying the landlords the indemnity fixed by the Act."

But we have also precedents afforded by the Legislature of Great Britain for this course. The Legislature of Great Britain has already, under the Bright clauses of the Land Act, expressed its approval of the principle that a class of peasant owners should be created in Ireland. That Act permitted the State to advance to the tenants desiring to purchase their holdings two-thirds of the purchase money. This two-

thirds was to be repaid by instalments of five per cent, extending over thirty-five years. Those clauses have remained, for a variety of reasons which I could not venture to trespass on your time long enough to explain, up to the present time a dead letter, but I see that Mr. John Bright, the eminent Reformer, one of the originators and fellow-labourers with Cobden in the repeal of the Corn Laws, now comes forward and proposes to amend these clauses very considerably, so as to make them more workable. In a cable from London I find that, speaking at Birmingham the other day, Mr. Bright proposes to appoint a Government commission to go to Dublin with power to sell land of landlords to tenants wishing to buy and advance them three-fourths of the purchase money, principal and interest to be repaid in thirty-five years.

Such a measure, Mr. Bright believed, would meet the desire of the Irish people. The commission should assist the tenant to purchase whenever the landlord was willing to sell. He recommended compulsory sale only where the land was owned by London companies, as in the case of large tracts near Londonderry. He expressed the belief that self-interest and the force of public opinion would soon compel the landlords to sell to the tenants. Now this proposal is undoubtedly a very great reform and an immense advance upon the present state of affairs, and while we could not accept it as a final settlement of the land question, yet we should gladly welcome it as an advance in our direction and be willing to give it a fair trial.

The radical difference between our proposition and that of Mr. Bright is that we think that the State should adopt the system of compulsory expropriation of the land, whereas Mr. Bright thinks that it may be left to self-interest and the force of public opinion to compel the landlord to sell—that is the word he uses “compel.” While I agree with Mr. Bright in thinking that in all probability, if his proposal were adopted, the present land agitation in Ireland, if maintained at its present vigour, would compel the landlords to sell to the tenants at fair rents. I ask the House of Representatives of America what would they think of statesmen who, while acknowledging the justness of our principle that the tenants in Ireland ought to own the land, shrinks, at the same time, from asking the Legislature of his country to sanction that principle, and leaves to an agitation, such as is now going on in

Ireland, the duty of enforcing that which the Parliament of Great Britain should enforce.

I think you will agree with me that this attempt on the part of the British Parliament to transfer its obligations and its duties to the hopeless, starving peasantry of Connemara is neither a dignified nor a worthy one, and the sooner our Parliament comes to recognise its duties in this respect the better it will be for all parties and the Government of Great Britain. Mr. Speaker and gentlemen, I have to apologise for having trespassed upon your attention at such great length, and to give you my renewed and heartiest thanks for the very great attention and kindness with which you have listened to my feeble and imperfect utterances in reference to this question. I regret that this cause has not been pleaded by an able man, but at least the cause is good, and although put before you imperfectly, it is so strong and so just that it cannot fail in obtaining recognition at your hands and at the hands of the people of this country.

It will be a proud boast for America if, after having obtained, secured, and ratified her own freedom by sacrifices unexampled in the history of any nation she were now, by the force of her public opinion, alone, by the respect with which all countries look upon any sentiment prevailing in America—if she were now to obtain for Ireland, without the shedding of one drop of blood, without drawing the sword, without one threatening message, the solution of this great question.

For my part, I, as one who boasts of American blood feeling proud in the importance which has been universally attached on all sides to American opinion with regard to this matter, I feel proud in saying and believing that the time is very near at hand when you have, in the way I have mentioned, and in no other way, been a most important factor in bringing about a solution of the Irish land question.

And then, Mr. Speaker and gentlemen, those Irish famines, now so periodical, which compel us to appear as beggars and mendicants before the world—a humiliating position to any man, but a still more humiliating for a proud nation like ours—these Irish famines will have ceased when the cause has been removed. We shall no longer be compelled to tax your magnificent generosity, and we shall be able to promise you that, with your help this shall be the last Irish famine.

