

THE CHARTER OF THE IRISH NATIONAL LAND LEAGUE.

By The National Land League.

Taken from *The Irish Agitator in Parliament* by Philip Henry Bagenal, 1880. As adopted on its inaugural meeting on 21 October 1879 in the Imperial Hotel, Castlebar, County Mayo.

This body shall be known as the National Land League of Mayo, and shall consist of farmers and others, who will agree to labour for the objects here set forth, and subscribe to the conditions of membership, principles, and rules specified below.

OBJECTS.

The Objects for which this body is organised are—1st. To watch over the interests of the people it represents, and protect the same, as far as may be in its power to do so, from an unjust or capricious exercise of power or privilege on the part of landlords, or any other class in the community.

2nd.—To resort to every means compatible with justice, morality, and right reason which shall not clash defiantly with the constitution upheld by the powers of the British empire in this country, for the abolition of the present Land laws of Ireland, and the substitution in their place of such a system as shall be in accord with the social rights and interests of our people, the traditions and moral sentiments of our race, and which the contentment and prosperity of our country imperiously demand.

3rd.—Pending a final and satisfactory settlement of the Land Question, the duty of this Body will be to expose the injustice, wrong, or injury which may be inflicted upon any farmer in Mayo, either by rack-renting eviction, or other arbitrary exercise of power which the existing laws enable the landlords to exercise over their tenantry, by giving all such arbitrary acts the widest publicity, and meeting their perpetration with all the opposition which the laws for the preservation of the peace will permit of. In furtherance of which the

following plan will be adopted:—(a) Returns to be obtained, printed, and circulated of the number of landlords in this county, the amount of acreage in possession of same, and the means by which such lands were obtained; the farms held by each, with the conditions under which they are held by their tenants, and the excess of rent paid by same over the Government valuation. (b) To publish by placard or otherwise notice of contemplated evictions for non-payment of exorbitant rent, or other unjust cause, and the convening of a public meeting, if deemed necessary or expedient, as near the scene of such evictions as circumstances will allow, and on the day fixed upon for the same. (c) The publication of a list of evictions carried out, together with cases of rack-renting, giving full particulars of same, name of landlord, agents, &c., concerned, and the number of people evicted by such acts. (d) The publication of the names of all persons who shall rent or occupy land or farms from which others have been dispossessed for non-payment of exorbitant rents, or who shall offer a higher rent for land or farms than that paid by the previous occupier. (e) The publication of reductions of rent and acts of justice or kindness performed by landlords in the county.

4th.—This Body to undertake the defence of such of its members, or others of local clubs affiliated with it, who may be required to resist by law actions of landlords or their agents who may purpose doing them injury, wrong, or injustice in connection with their land or farms.

5th.—To render assistance when possible to such farmer members as may be evicted, or otherwise wronged by landlords or their agents.

6th.—To undertake the organising of local clubs or defence associations in the baronies, towns, and parishes of this county, the holding of public meetings and demonstrations on the Land Question, and the printing of pamphlets on that and other subjects for the information of the farming classes.

7th.—Finally, to act as a vigilance committee in Mayo, noting the conduct of its grand jury, poor-law guardians, town commissioners, and Members of Parliament, and pronounce on the manner in which their respective functions are performed, whenever the interests,

social or political, of the people represented by this club render it expedient to do so.

CONDITIONS OF MEMBERSHIP.

First, to be a member of any local club or defence association in the county, and to be selected by such club or association to represent the same on the central or county association. Second, a desire to cooperate in the carrying out of the foregoing objects and subscribing to the principles here enunciated, with a view of propagating the same and labouring for their successful application in Ireland, will qualify non-representative farmers or others for membership in this Body, subject to the subscription and rules laid down for same. Third, to pay any sum not under 5s. a year towards the carrying out of the foregoing objects and the end for which this Body is created—namely, the obtaining of the soil of Ireland for the people of Ireland who cultivate it.

DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES.

The land of Ireland belongs to the people of Ireland, to be held and cultivated for the sustenance of those whom God decreed to be the inhabitants thereof. Land being created to supply mankind with the necessaries of existence, those who cultivate it to that end have a higher claim to its absolute possession than those who make it an article of barter to be used or disposed of for purposes of profit or pleasure. The end for which the land of a country is created requires an equitable distribution of the same among the people who are to live upon the fruits of their labour in its cultivation. Any restriction, therefore, upon such a distribution by a feudal land system embodying the laws of primogeniture and entail, the amassing of large estates, the claiming of proprietorship under penal obligations from occupiers, and preventing the same from developing the full resources of the land, must necessarily be opposed to the Divine purpose for which it was created, and to the social rights, security, and happiness of the people.

‘Before the conquest the Irish people knew nothing of absolute property in land; the land virtually belonging to the entire sept, the chief was little more than the managing member of the association. The feudal idea, which views all

rights as emanating from a head landlord, came in with the conquest, was associated with foreign dominion, and has never to this day been recognised by the moral sentiments of the people. Originally the offspring, not of industry, but of spoliation, the right has not been allowed to purify itself by protracted possession, but has passed from the original spoliators to others by a series of fresh spoliations, so as to be always connected with the latest and most odious oppression of foreign invaders. In the moral feelings of the Irish people the right to hold the land goes, as it did in the beginning, with the right to till it.'

Those were the words of John Stuart Mill, the English political economist. The landlord system which an alien Government has imposed upon our country in the place of that which recognised no intermediate ownership between the cultivator of the soil and the State, has reduced Ireland to a degree of poverty and social misery, incompatible with the natural productiveness of this land, and the progressive prosperity of other civilised nations. The area of Ireland and the natural wealth of its soil is capable of supporting from twelve to twenty millions of inhabitants if restrictive land laws did not operate against the full development of the country's resources, and the unfettered cultivation of the land. Yet a population of eight millions, previous to the year 1857, was reduced by death, starvation, and exile, consequent upon an artificial famine and continued impoverishment, to little over five millions at the present day. Decreased population, with its concomitant absorption of small holdings into large estates, has produced no beneficial change in the condition of the existing farming classes, who are compelled by the coercion of necessity, in the absence of manufacturing industry, to an acceptance of a non-alternative bargain in the shape of an exorbitant rent in order to obtain the use of the soil. The dread of eviction or rack-renting must necessarily operate against that expenditure of labour and enterprise in the cultivation of the land and improvement of farm dwellings and premises, which follow in every country where the fruit of the people's industry is protected by the State. Hence the soil of Ireland is worse and less cultivated, and the livings and habitations of its agricultural class more wretched, than in any country in the civilised world. Over six million acres of Irish land are owned by less than three hundred individuals, twelve of whom are in possession of 1,297,888 acres between them, while five millions of the

Irish people own not a solitary acre. For the protection of the proprietary rights of the few thousand landlords in the country a standing army of semi-military police is maintained, which the landless millions have to support, while the conduct of the landocracy in the exercise of its legal privileges occasions almost all the evils under which our people suffer. Thus the right of the soil cultivators, their security from arbitrary disturbance, and incentives to local advancement, together with the general well-being, peace, and prosperity of the people at large, are sacrificed for the benefit of a class insignificant in numbers, and of least account in all that goes towards the maintenance of a country, but which, by the aid of existing land laws, extracts some twenty million pounds annually from the soil of Ireland without conferring any single benefit in return on the same, or the people by whose industry it is produced. If the land in possession of, say, 744 landlords in this country was divided into twenty-acre farms, it would support, in ease and comparative independence, over two and a half millions of our people. To substitute for such an unjust and anomalous system as the present land code, one that would show an equal protection and solicitude for the social rights and well-being of the labouring millions, as that shown for those of the wealthy, but non-operative few, is the principle upon which enlightened statesmanship aims at following in modern times, in order to meet the growing necessities of that popular intelligence and awakening civilisation which demands the sweeping away of those feudal laws opposed to the social progress and ideas of the age; sacrificing the interests of the few to the welfare of the many by the abolition of the feudal land codes, has laid the foundation of solid governments, and secured the content of peoples in most European countries. The interests of the landlords of Ireland are pecuniary, and can be compensated, but the interests of the people of Ireland, dependent upon the produce of the soil, is their very existence. In denouncing existing land laws, and demanding in their place such a system as will recognise and establish the cultivator of the soil as its proprietor, we neither purpose nor demand the confiscation of the interests which the landlords now hold in the land, but simply ask that compensation be given them for the loss of the said rights when the

State, for the peace, benefit, and happiness of the people, shall decree the abolition of the present system. We appeal to the farmers of Ireland to be up and doing at once, and organise themselves forthwith in order that their full strength may be put forth in behalf of themselves and their country in efforts to obtain what has brought security and comparative plenty to the farming classes of continental countries. Without an evidence of earnestness and practical determination being shown now by the farmers of Ireland and their friends in a demand for a small proprietary, which alone can fully settle the great Land Question of the country, the tribunal of public opinion will neither recognise the urgent necessity for such a change, nor lend its influence in ameliorating the condition, or redressing the social and political wrongs of which we complain. Let us remember, in the words of one of Ireland's greatest sons, that the land is the fount whence we all ultimately draw, and if the terms on which the land is cultivated be unfair, if the agricultural system of the country be unsound, then the entire structure is rotten and will inevitably come down. Let us never forget that mere appeals to the public to encourage native industry in other departments must be utterly futile as long as the great and paramount native industry of the farmer is neglected. In vain shall we try to rouse the national spirit if the very men who make a nation sink into paupers before our faces. Paupers have no country, no rights, no duties, and, in short, if we permit the small farmers to be reduced to pauperism, if we see them compelled to give up their lands and throw themselves on public relief, there is an end of Ireland.