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Parliamentary Echoes.

A GLIMPSE INTO SOUTH AUSTRALIAN HISTORY.

[By H. S. T.]

AGAIN and again have proposals of land reformers been turned wide by the assertion that it was to its large landowners that South Australia owed its salvation in the early years of its settlement. Now that the Agricultural Holdings Bill has been under discussion in the House, we have had the same old gag introduced. South Australian Company, in common with many private individuals, was once so fortunate as to buy a lot of land from the Government, and because with the money thus obtained the colony was tided over seasons of depression, therefore we must forever bow the knee to them, must forever leave them undisturbed in their power to levy tribute on us.

Even granting that our fathers did receive some temporary gain from the company's money, is that a reason why we, their sons, should place our necks beneath the company's feet? Is it a reason why we should leave them in such a false position that we have first to gain their permission and pay them tribute, before we are allowed to live at all in many portions of the land of our nativity? For consider what is meant—this selling by our fathers of the land on which and from which we alone can live. It was not like the selling of buildings or improvements, which are formed by human labor. For the nature of the things is such that they soon fall to decay and ruin. Had it been a transaction with things of this nature it would have ended with the original parties to it; the company would have secured their purchase and the Government its money, and we could have been in nowise affected by it. But this selling of the land by our fathers was equivalent to giving the company a perpetual mortgage over the labor of us, the children of the grantors, and over the labor of our descendants; it was like a bargain by which one person sells his posterity to be the slaves of another man for ever and ever. And yet this is the bargain we are asked to uphold; as if such landowners as the company had not long since received over and over again the value of their purchase - money. Because they did our fathers a fancied service, are we to be their partial slaves

For all time and for ever? No, Mr. Legislators, even if it were as you say ; even if these early landowners were the benevolent guardian angels of our destiny you wou [sic] have us thank them, even under such conditions we would demand the alteration of these cruel land laws. But do people really know under what conditions South Australia was settled ? Do the workers of this colony really recognize the wrongs, the hardships and injustices, which they have had to contend with because of the Wakefield system of colonisation, or do they even know what that system was? We question very mach whether they do, nay, we an certain they do not, or long ere this they would have risen to demand the reversion of this cruel, heartless system, and the destruction of its traces. For the benefit of the people, our legislature among the number, we will give a little sketch of the founding of this colony, and the early working of its land laws.

In 1829, Mr. Edward Gibbon Wakefield aroused no little attention in England by the publication of his colonisation theory. It was written in the form of a letter, purporting to have come from Sydney, and gave an account of the evils to be experienced then by gentlemen, and propounded a scheme to remedy them. According to the book, New South Wales was a wretched place for English gentlemen to emigrate to, but a Paradise for working men. The chief evil to be fought was the *excessive cheapness of land*; since the effect of this, as Mr. Wakefield pointed out, was to raise wages so high and place such facilities in the way

of all men for settling on the soil, that folks who wanted to live in a state of gentility found it was no easy job to do so. Wakefield proposed to found in South Australia a Paradise colony for *rich* men, and the basis of his scheme to effect this end was that a high price should be charged for land, so as to prevent the poorer people from purchasing it. The money received from the sale of land, he proposed to devote to bringing out young men and women who would act as servants to the wealthier colonists. This scheme found immense favor in London, and in 1833 the South Australian Association was formed with power from the British Government to sell waste lands and apply the proceeds to assist immigration. It was on such a basis as this, a basis whose ostensible object it was to keep the masses dependent upon the clan that the colony was established in 1836.

The Wakefield system proved a failure. The folks who had come out under the notion that servants would do all their work were not inclined to reclaim the waste lands they had purchased, but preferred to buy and hold city land with an eye to the future “unearned increment.” The result was that Adelaide was turned into a scene of reckless speculation and gambling in land. At length the collapse came, and with it come the prospects of a better time. With the collapse of the fictitious prosperity came a decided fall in land values, and this fall, by enabling many farmers of humbler means to get upon the soil, saved the colony.

In 1840 an event occurred which illustrates yet more strongly the manner in which early South Australian affairs were conducted wholly and solely in the interests of the wealthy landed class. Land was selling in Port Phillip for 5s. an acre; while for land of no better quality £1 was being asked in this colony. The result was that the population was flowing towards Port Phillip, and the “Home authorities,” so infatuated were they still with the Wakefield theory, decreed that no land in New South Wales was to be sold at less than 12s. per acre, and that a very large portion of it was to be sold at not less than £1 an acre. Naturally enough this caused great discontent in Now South Wales, but it had the effect of wringing sufficient money from our settlers to preserve for a time this “rich man's Paradise” from bankruptcy.

In 1841 Governor Grey arrived, and did much to impair our wanted fortunes. He was evidently no believer in Wakefield's theory, for he exerted his powers to the utmost to get men settled on small farms and stations; but in this policy he *was greatly impeded*, the historian grimly relates, *by the high price of land*; for “Wakefields' friends in England were not as yet convinced that their favorite scheme was detective. ‘To lower the price’ said they, ‘will be to ruin the colony,’ and lest such a thing should happen, they raised the price of all lands, whether good or bad, to one pound per acre.”

And so the tale proceeds. Let the workers cast an intelligent glance back over the history of our early days; let them recognise the manner in which the poor were kept poor that the rich might grow richer, and it will not be long ere the cry will come from their ranks that the great landlord's turn that been in the past, *let the landless have their say !*