

## EVILS OF OUR PUBLIC LAND POLICY.

THE cry of agricultural distress which has been heard for the last seven or eight years in the British islands, is finding an echo, faint, perhaps, but audible, in some of the older portions of the United States. The latest illustration of this fact is seen in connection with the fall in the price of fat cattle in the East, consequent on the successful shipment of dressed beef from the Western plains; and Western competition, in one form or another, is the thing most commonly complained of as a cause of diminished prosperity. An intelligent Maryland farmer recently said to me that this competition is felt by the farmers of his vicinity in everything they produce except the most perishable products, but chiefly in grain and hay. A resident of Loudon county, Virginia, informs me that grain culture has ceased to be profitable there. Beyond the Alleghanies, at least as far west as Ohio, complaint is heard of the diminished profits attending the fattening of stock.

It is needless, however, to multiply illustrations, since the existence of an agricultural depression more or less serious in the Eastern part of the country, appears to be pretty widely recognized. As one indication of this I may cite a writer in the agricultural columns of the New York "Weekly Tribune," who says it must be acknowledged "that Eastern farms are degenerating; that there is not apparent the thrift and energy of earlier days; that farm buildings, through lack of painting, indicate reduced incomes," and "that farm mortgages have increased in size and number." This writer appears to have a theory of his own as to the cause of this lack of prosperity, for he says that "Eastern farmers are slow in adopting needed reforms in methods," and that "many do not realize the rapid changes of the times, the results of the development of vast fertile territories," and of "the shifting of controlling centers of production,"—in other words, of Western competition.

It seems entirely probable that Eastern farmers, like most of their fellow men, are not so quick as even they themselves might wish in perceiving what is for their own advantage, and in learning how to adapt themselves to changing circumstances. Hence the advice tendered them by experienced agriculturists, as to the adoption of improved methods of farming, may be both acceptable and useful.

There is, however, a matter of a different kind which appears to me to be worthy of their attention. The exceptionally rapid

development of Western agriculture has not been a purely spontaneous phenomenon; nor has it been due so largely, as is supposed by certain writers, to the cheapening of transportation. That, of course, has been a circumstance favorable to agricultural development in the West, but the cheapening of transportation has itself been the consequence mainly of an agricultural development due to other causes. In the report on the internal commerce of the United States for 1880, by Joseph Nimmo, Jr., Chief of the Bureau of Statistics, it is shown (pp. 6 and 7) that while the charges per ton of freight on three of the leading trunk lines were reduced sixty per cent. between 1868 and 1880, the increase during the same interval in the quantity of freight transported was more than two hundred per cent.

The fact that other causes than cheapened transportation have been actively at work in promoting the development of Western agriculture is sufficiently patent; and what more especially concerns the farmer is that one of these causes is the course pursued by the Government with respect to the public domain. So far as the farmer's interests suffer from the action of the Government, they suffer from a cause subject in part to his own control; and he may fairly raise the question whether that action is, on the whole, so wise and beneficent that, notwithstanding the harm it does him, he ought to acquiesce in its continuance.

Within the last twenty-one years grants of land, almost equal in aggregate area to the thirteen original states of the American Union, have been made to States and corporations—in the main directly to the latter—for the purpose of hastening the construction of railroads in the public-land States and territories. These extraordinary premiums to railroad builders for making the public domain accessible in all its parts,—together with the premiums for settlement upon it offered by our practice of parting with valuable land gratuitously, or at a merely nominal price, or permitting its gratuitous use without title, in unlimited quantities as grazing grounds,—have operated as immense subsidies devoted to the rapid extension of agricultural and pastoral industry over new ground;\* the Western

\* This, too, while our protective tariff was largely based on the assumption that the tendency of our people to agricultural pursuits was already too great and needed counteracting by special inducements to engage in the manufacturing industries.

farmer or stock-raiser, in practically receiving his land for nothing, being placed at a great advantage over his Eastern competitor, whose land usually represents a large investment of capital.

It is possible, however, to conceive of a public-land policy thoroughly liberal to the actual settler, of which the Eastern farmer would have no occasion to complain. Under such a policy the public lands would have been scrupulously reserved for those whose labor was to make them fruitful, and not given away in large quantities even for so desirable an object as the construction of the transcontinental railroads; though at the time when the Pacific Railroad acts were passed it might have been well enough to provide for some assistance to such enterprises out of revenues to be derived from the public domain. It would have been the aim of the Government to allow to each settler a sufficient amount of land for his personal needs, limiting the quantity as near as practicable by his power to cultivate it without hired labor, and granting no more than this unless at its full commercial value.\*

A homestead law rests upon a sound and beneficent principle, if it merely relieves the settler from paying tribute for the privilege of applying his own labor and that of his family to the utilization of the gratuitous bounties of nature. Whatever goes beyond this in giving public land, or the free use thereof, to individuals, involves the principle of pauperism; which can never be more odious or less excusable than when the recipient of public charity is far above the need of it, as, for example, are the great stock-raisers of the Western territories, whose capital returns them from thirty to fifty per cent. per annum, or even more, in consequence of the advantage they have in being allowed to use Government pasturage without compensation.

Under such a policy as has been roughly outlined—supposing it to have been practicable in the past, as it certainly will be in the future—the course of settlement in the West would have been quite different from what it has been. Few persons would have cared to advance far into the wilderness and live for years in comparative isolation, for I am supposing the existence of a system which would not have offered them any inducement to do so,—a system under which no present

sacrifice of the advantages of society and the conveniences of civilized life would have enabled them to reap future profit on monopolized land at the expense of later comers. There would always have been free land to be had, in proper quantities, just across the line of previous settlement, within reach of roads and bridges, school-houses, churches, stores, and market towns. These advantages, as a rule, would have very much more than counterbalanced any superiority of soil to be found at a distance in an isolated situation, and settlement would consequently have progressed with something of the regularity of spreading waters, flowing round some of the least desirable lands as these flow round the higher ones, but compactly covering all that were adapted to advantageous use.

Favored by the comparative density of population, the mechanical and manufacturing industries would promptly have taken root in the new soil, keeping nearly abreast with the development of agriculture, and furnishing so large a local demand for its products that there would have been comparatively little left for shipment to the Eastern markets. In short, under such a policy there would have been a symmetrical development of the industries of the newly settled districts, and but little, if any, derangement in those of the older communities. Population in the West might have increased in numbers even more rapidly than it has done, but being less preponderantly agricultural or pastoral, it would have interfered far less with the interests of agriculture in the older States. That some such policy should be promptly adopted is a matter of great interest, not only to the Eastern farmer, but to the nation as a whole.

The policy actually pursued has for its worst effect the concentration of the richest lands and mines, the best town sites, and the most valuable water privileges in the hands of a comparatively small number of the early occupants of the country, leaving these to drive as hard a bargain as they please with those who may arrive on the ground somewhat later. A region comprising hundreds of millions of acres, still belonging to the Government, has been brought largely into use for pasturage purposes, in which no communities can be said to have been formed, the population—such as there is—consisting almost exclusively of men without families employed in herding. In the great wheat country of Dakota there is a somewhat similar state of things, the large farms, thousands or even tens of thousands of acres in extent, being worked by hired men, varying in numbers according to the season, and having no per-

\* In view of the fact that no price could at present be obtained bearing any just relation to the future appreciation of the lands disposed of, and for other important reasons which need not here be discussed, this value should, in my opinion, be paid in the form of an annual rent, the Government retaining its title to the lands, but giving to the settler a sufficient security of tenure to justify him in making permanent improvements.

manent footing upon the land. The more extensively the Western country is converted into such farms, the more seriously will its settlement interfere with the interests of Eastern agriculture. In this connection it is worthy of note that while the number of farms of more than 1,000 acres fell between 1860 and 1870 from 5,364 to 3,720, it rose between 1870 and 1880 from 3,720 to 28,578. During that decade the total number of farms in the country increased by fifty-one per cent., while the number of farms comprising more than 1,000 acres increased in the same period by six hundred and sixty-eight per cent. A portion of the increase in the number of these large farms was probably due to the division of farms of several thousand acres into two or more of more than one thousand acres each, but in the main it undoubtedly represents a tendency to a rapid growth of the system of large farming. In the West, I think, this is especially the case, and it is in that section that the percentage of increase in the number of large farms has been greatest. While it seems to be the fact that the system of large farming is attended by important and desirable economies in the processes of agriculture, the modicum of advantage derived from these economies by the public will be purchased far too dearly, if it is only to be had by permitting gigantic monopolies of the soil, under which the lion's share of all the benefits derivable from the system in question must fall into the hands of a few persons.

It is to be hoped that, under favorable provisions of law, agricultural coöperation may afford a wholesome substitute for monopoly as a means of securing the advantages connected with farming on a large scale. The prominent part played by railroad grants in promoting the formation of the great farms of the North-west indicates that the interests of Eastern agriculture would be subserved by an enforcement of the forfeitures incurred by various railroads—*forfeitures* under which grants having an aggregate area considerably exceeding that of the German Empire are now subject to the will of Congress, and might be restored to the public domain, if there were a public sentiment on the subject sufficiently strong, and if it were manifested with sufficient clearness, to stir that body to action.

Another consideration which has favored large acquisitions of land is the commutation feature of the homestead law. This allows a money payment of two hundred dollars to be substituted for four and one-half years of the prescribed five years' residence, and renders it easy for a capitalist to acquire

numerous homestead tracts at the nominal price of \$1.25 an acre, by hiring men to make a pretense of settling on them, who, at the end of six months, can take out patents and transfer the titles to their employer. The pre-emption, timber-culture, and other settlement laws are successfully abused for a like purpose, and there is, in fact, a general laxity—partly in the laws themselves and partly in their administration—which makes our public land the easy prey of the monopolist.

In large portions of the pasturage region the laws appear to be openly defied, many of the "cattle kings" proceeding in the most high-handed manner to fence in vast tracts of Government land, barring up public roads which run across their illegally appropriated ranches, and, at the point of the rifle or revolver, forbidding intending settlers to exercise their rights under the laws of the country.

But, apart from abuses and violations of law, our public-land laws are themselves far too liberal to the settler; that is, they are liberal to the settler of the present, at the expense of the settler of the future. In an official document submitted to Congress, in February, 1880, it was pointed out that, under existing laws, 1120 acres of public land may be taken by one person; and although this may not often be practicable, it is practicable in many cases to take up 480 acres: 160 as a homestead, 160 under the preëmption law, at \$1.25 an acre, and 160 under the timber-culture act, for the trifling labor of planting and caring for ten acres of timber—a labor which might well be exacted of every homestead settler in the regions wherein timber-culture is desirable, and one which the settler might profitably perform on his own account, even though it were not required.

Not only in the interest of the farmers of the older States, but on broad national grounds, we need a public-land policy radically different from our present one. What its general character should be, I have already endeavored to indicate, and, in the brief space now remaining to me, I can only add that it should be based on an intelligent recognition of the evils which land monopoly has entailed upon more densely peopled countries in both modern and ancient times; that it should take account of the fact that our own country must soon be as densely peopled as any of these; and, finally, that its guiding principle should be, "The land for its inhabitants, now and always." On our present public-land policy we might fitly affix as a motto the reckless and ill-omened sentiment: "After us the deluge."

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