

CONSERVATION AND RURAL LIFE

AN IRISH VIEW OF TWO ROOSEVELT POLICIES

BY SIR HORACE PLUNKETT

This is the first of four articles in which the author discusses the scope and aim of Mr. Roosevelt's rural life and conservation policies, their intimate relation to the farmer, and the Co-operative Movement as a practical method of promoting agricultural prosperity. In a letter to Mr. Bryce, the British Ambassador, Mr. Roosevelt declared that in the matter of the Country Life Commission "we Americans owe much to Ireland and to Plunkett in the work we have been doing in the United States." Sir Horace spent ten years in cattle ranching in Wyoming and farming in Nebraska. After his return to Ireland from the United States he devoted much time and effort to the reorganization of agriculture on the co-operative system and to the foundation of Government assistance to agriculture and industry. He was a member of Parliament from 1892 to 1900, and for the next seven years was the chief officer of the Department of Agriculture for Ireland.—THE EDITORS.

I AM asked by The Outlook to write upon conservation and rural life, which its distinguished contributing editor presented to the world as two of his "policies." The term implies politics, and politics has for most people a meaning as far removed from what Mr. Roosevelt had in mind as are the conceptions of my sporting neighbor in County Dublin, Mr. Richard Croker, from those of my older acquaintance Aristotle. My subject has essentially no party significance, and will, of course, be so treated. It emerged from its long sleep in the last Administration. It is equally the concern of the present, and will be of future Administrations. In 1908 the conservation idea brought every State in the Union into consultation with the Federal Government—brought Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Bryan on to the same platform. Outside of political life a National Conservation Association has been formed (with that foremost leader of civic thought, President Eliot, at its head) to organize public opinion in favor of the needed legislation and administration. In the same fruitful year, which will be memorable for the Conference on Conservation, the Country Life Commission was appointed to provoke discussion upon a question more complex and no less important. But familiarity with the superficial facts gives to the country life idea a deceptive simplicity which obscures alike its inherent importance and its intimate relation to the sister policy.

I purpose in these articles, written at a

time when public opinion newly formed is awaiting plans for public action, to offer to the readers of The Outlook some thoughts of a foreign observer upon these twin policies. I feel strongly that the decision of the issues raised in the great stock-taking of National resources and searching of the National conscience, upon which the mind of the United States has embarked, must profoundly affect not only the future of the Republic but the progress of Western civilization. My main conclusions are that the two policies are interdependent and must be considered together, both in a diagnosis of the conditions and in their treatment; that the farmer, now the chief waster, must become the chief conservator; that this will require a reconstruction of rural life; and that this reconstruction, while social and political in its larger aim and ultimate result, must be primarily economic in its method.

Much that is not obvious would follow from the acceptance of these propositions. I feel, therefore, that it is incumbent upon me to give some account of the experiences which have produced the point of view from which I write. By happy accident I have had unusual opportunities of observing a wide range of conditions, human and material, which are the subject-matter of the conservation and rural life ideas. My interest in these two policies is due to the fact that they embrace political, social, and economic problems, the study and working out of which in my own country happens to be the task in which I try to justify my existence.

In 1899 a bill was introduced into the British Parliament for adding to the machinery of Irish Government "a Department of Agriculture and other Industries and for Technical Instruction for Ireland." During the ensuing seven years I was the officer chiefly responsible for the organization and setting to work of this institution, whose purpose and functions are sufficiently indicated by its somewhat cumbersome Parliamentary title. For the last thirty years, commencing with ten years as a ranchman along the foothills of the Rockies, I have had business interests in the Western States. As a student and worker upon the social and economic problems of Irish country life, I have studied rural conditions over a wider area in the United States than my business engagements demanded.

While I was a Government official I continued to run across the Atlantic for my annual holiday. The study of American conditions and institutions was helpful to me in my departmental work, and brought me to Washington. On one of these visits, in the winter of 1905-6, I called upon President Roosevelt to pay my respects and to express to him the immense obligation I was under to some members of his Administration. I wished especially to acknowledge my indebtedness to that veteran statesman Secretary Wilson, the freshness and vigor of whose work and ideas seem to increase with advancing age. Mr. Roosevelt questioned me as to the exact object of my inquiries, and when I told him, he asked me to come again and discuss with him more fully than was possible at the moment certain economic and social questions which had engaged much of his own thoughts. He was greatly interested to learn that in Ireland we have been approaching many of these questions from his own point of view. He made me tell him the story of Irish land legislation and of recent Irish movements for the improvement of agricultural conditions. Ever since his interest in these Irish questions—to *the* Irish Question we gave a wide berth—has been maintained on account of their bearing upon his policy of rural life.

More than any other man with whom I have discussed the problems of rural life Mr. Roosevelt grasped the paramount im-

portance of the human factor, which often presents the closest analogy where there is the widest diversity of physical conditions. And not only did we become more and more impressed with the extent to which this is the case as between Ireland and the United States, but I was able to show, as I will now explain briefly to the readers of *The Outlook*, that circumstances have arisen which have made the economic strengthening and social betterment of the Irish farmer a matter of urgent Irish, British, and Imperial concern.

Ireland is passing through an agrarian revolution. There, as in many other European countries, the title to most of the agricultural land rests upon conquest. The English attempt to colonize Ireland never completely succeeded nor completely failed; consequently the Irish never ceased to repudiate the title of the alien landlord. In 1881 Mr. Gladstone introduced one of the greatest agrarian reforms in history, which it was hoped would settle the Irish Land Question once for all. He set up an independent tribunal, with power to determine what was a fair rent for the tenant to pay the landlord. As long as this rent was paid, the tenant could remain in perpetual occupation; if he wished to vacate his holding, he could sell to the highest bidder his occupation interest, to which this legislation had given a very substantial value. This boon of fair rent, fixity of tenure, and free sale—the three F's, as they were called—was certainly a bold attempt to put an end to a desolating conflict centuries old.

The scheme failed; not, as I think, so much from its inherent defects as from the circumstances of the time. A new factor, foreign competition, chiefly from the newly opened tracts of virgin soil in the New World, led to a fall in agricultural prices. Improved and cheapened transportation, together with processes for preserving produce fresh over the longest routes, soon showed that the new factor had come to stay. A bad land system on a rising market might succeed better than a good one on a falling. So, single ownership in the landlord, and dual ownership as provided by Mr. Gladstone, having both failed, public opinion reverted to the course recommended forty years ago by John Bright, and single ownership by the

occupier of the land was decreed. Several minor experiments in land purchase with the help of State credit having succeeded, in 1903 Parliament finally decreed that sufficient money should be provided to buy out all the remaining agricultural land. In a not remote future a billion dollars will have been advanced by the British Government to enable the tenants to purchase their holdings, the money to be repaid in easy installments over a period of some seventy years.

Twenty years ago it was foreseen that things would take this course, and a few Irishmen conceived and got to work upon what has come to be Ireland's rural life policy. The position taken up was simple. What Parliament was about to do would pull down the whole structure of Ireland's agricultural economy, and would clear away the chief hindrance which had obstructed economic and social progress. But upon the ground thus cleared the edifice of a new rural social economy would have to be built. This work, although it needs the fostering care of Government, and especially liberal facilities for a system of education intimately related to the people's working lives, belongs mainly to the sphere of voluntary effort.

The new movement, which was started in 1889 to meet the circumstances I have described, was thus a movement for the upbuilding of country life. It followed the lines of the formula which Mr. Roosevelt adopted in his Message transmitting to Congress the Report of the Country Life Commission—better farming, better business, better living. We began with better business, which consisted of the introduction of agricultural co-operation into the farming industry. To this part of the threefold scheme of rural progress I shall return later. Here I may say that we gave precedence to it because we could not develop in unorganized farmers a political influence strong enough to enable them to get the Government to do its part toward better farming. The plan succeeded, and we got the department I have named above. That department is constituted mainly for the purpose of giving to the Irish farmers all the assistance which can be legitimately given by public agencies and at public expense. The assistance consists chiefly of education.

But education is interpreted in the widest sense. Practical instruction to old and young, in schools, upon the farms, and at meetings, lectures, experiments, and demonstrations, the circulation of useful information and advice, and all the usual methods known to progressive governments, are being introduced, with the chief aim of enabling the farmer to apply to the practice of farming the teachings of modern science. Better living is sought by using voluntary associations, organized primarily for business purposes, for social and intellectual betterment. Other organizations having no business aim are encouraged to do similar work. Above all, a redirection of education in the rural schools in order to make country life more interesting and attractive has got to be thought out, both in Ireland and America.

These details will, I hope, have a more than personal relevance and importance. They were necessary to support an opinion, based on my American and Irish experience, that, while in the more richly endowed New World Republic the problems of rural life were coming within the range of Governmental policies, in Ireland, a country almost wholly dependent upon its agricultural resources, the problem is obviously one of national existence, and its solution has become a matter of extreme urgency, owing, as I have shown, to a combination of economic changes and political events.

After this somewhat lengthy digression, I return to my studies in Washington, the purpose and character of which I have already explained. In these years there came into my life another remarkable personality. To the United States Forester, Gifford Pinchot, I owe my earliest interest in the conservation policy. In counsel with him I came to regard the two policies here discussed as one organic whole. So I must say here a word about the man who more than any other has inspired whatever in these articles may be worth printing.

I first met Gifford Pinchot in his office in Washington in 1905. I was not especially interested in forestry, but the Forester was so interesting that I listened with increasing delight to the story of his work. I noticed that as an administrator he had a grasp of detail rare in an idealist,

and a mastery of method which is not usually found in men who have had no training in large business affairs. I thought the secret of his success was a love of work and sympathy with workers which have gained him the devotion and enthusiastic co-operation of his staff. It is, however, as a statesman rather than as an administrator that his achievement is and will be known.

When I first knew the Forester, I found that already the conservation of timber was but a small part of his material aims: every National resource must be husbanded. But over the whole scheme of conservation a great moral issue reigned supreme. He stuck affectionately to his job, but it was not to him mere forestry administration. In his far vision he seemed to see men as trees walking. The saving of one great asset was broadening out into insistence upon a new test of National efficiency. The people of the United States were to be judged by the manner in which they applied their physical and mental energies to the development and conservation of the natural resources of their country. The acceptance of this test would mean the success of a great policy for the initiation of which President Roosevelt gave almost the whole credit to Gifford Pinchot.

There is one other name which will be ever honorably associated with the dawn of the conservation idea which Mr. Roosevelt elevated to the status and dignity of a National policy. In September, 1906, Mr. James J. Hill delivered what I think might be characterized as an epoch-making address under the title of "The Future of the United States." This address presented for the first time in popular form a remarkable collection of economic facts, which formed the basis of conclusions as startling as they were new. Let me attempt a brief summary of its contents.

The supply of coal and iron, a prime factor in the Nation's industry and commerce, was being exhausted at a rate which made it certain that long before the end of the century the most important manufactures would be handicapped by a higher cost of production. The supply of merchantable timber was disappearing at a much more rapid rate. But far more serious than all other forms of wastage

was the reckless destruction of the natural fertility of the soil. In the total result the National economy will, according to Mr. Hill, work out in some such way as this: Within a period for which the present generation was bound to provide, this veritable Land of Promise would be hard pressed to feed its own people, while the manufactured exports to pay for imported food would not be forthcoming.

This sensational forecast was no purposeless jeremiad. Mr. Hill told his hearers that the danger which threatened the future of the Nation could be averted only by the intelligence and industry of those who cultivated the farm lands, and that they had it in their power to provide a perfectly practicable and adequate remedy. This was to be found—if such a condensation be permissible—in the application of the physical sciences to the practice and of economic science to the business of farming. It is significant that this great railway president opened his campaign for the economic salvation of the United States by addressing himself not to politicians nor professors, but to a representative body of Minnesota farmers.

Lord Rosebery once said that speeches were the most ephemeral of all ephemeral things, and for some time it looked as if one of the most important speeches ever delivered by a public man on a great public issue was going to illustrate the truth of this dictum. In spite of the immense burden of great undertakings which he carries, Mr. Hill repeated the substance of this address on many occasions. It seems strange that his facts and arguments should have remained unchallenged and yet unsupported by other public men. This fact alone seems to me to emphasize the necessity for stimulating public debate upon the conservation issue.

Mr. James Bryce, the British Ambassador, speaking recently at the University of California, said: "We can all think of the present, and are only too apt to think chiefly about the present. The average man, be he educated or uneducated, seldom thinks of anything else." But I think there are special circumstances in the history of the United States which account for the extraordinary unconcern for what is going to happen to the race

in a period which may seem long to those whose personal concern fixes a limit to their gaze, but which is indeed short in the life of a nation. After the religious, political, and military struggles through which the American Nation was brought to birth, there followed a century of no less strenuous wrestling with the forces of nature. That century stands divided by the greatest civil conflict in the world's history; but this only served to strengthen in a united people those indomitable qualities to which the Nation owes its leadership in the advancement of civilization. The abundance (until now considered as virtual inexhaustibility) of natural resources, the call for capital and men for their development, the rich reward of conquest in the field of industry, may explain but can hardly excuse a National attitude which seems to go against the strongest instinct of the whole animal kingdom—that of the preservation of the

race. It is an attitude hitherto attributed to my own countrymen, as illustrated by the question asked of an earlier advocate of conservation by a mythical Irishman, "What has posterity done for me?"

The last time I saw President Roosevelt—it was on Christmas eve, 1908—he expressed his hope that when the more picturesque incidents of his Administration were forgotten, public opinion would become friendly to his conservation and rural life policies. I ventured to express my confident belief that he would not be disappointed in this aspiration. Already the authors of the conservation policy have the immense satisfaction of seeing a general agreement arrived at that the present generation, while enjoying the material blessings with which not only nature but the labor and sacrifices of their forefathers have so bounteously endowed them, shall have due regard for the welfare of unborn generations.

GUARDING THE POOR MAN'S SAVINGS¹

BY JOHN HARSEN RHOADES

AS a symptom of the prevailing trend towards paternalism that to-day more or less characterizes the disposition of our Government, the postal plan for conserving the savings of the masses through the agency of Federal authority continues to enlist the sympathies of the people. It is small wonder that public interest is aroused when we note the many post-offices conveniently distributed for the collection of deposits, and the fact that the poor man's savings will be protected by the United States Government. There is little doubt that, if the question were put before our people to-day, nine-tenths of the voting population of the United States would favor a postal savings system; and yet, in reality, inasmuch as it is a technical banking subject, nine-tenths of the people, at the moment at least, are incompetent to pass judgment upon the question.

The postal savings bank, properly organized, would be of service to the American people; but in attempting to establish such a system we are confronted with this perplexing problem:

What will the Government do with the funds received?

When this question is satisfactorily answered, the postal savings bank will be welcome. It is a question, however, that can be answered neither by the average citizen nor by the average man in Congress. It is one that requires the services of the financier, for it is a banking proposition. It has been a financial problem of long standing, but so far remains unanswered, and I fear it will remain so for many years to come; nevertheless, it is fully as important as that of convenience and safety.

Briefly put, there is small doubt of the desirability of the postal savings bank; that is conceded. Nor is there any danger that it will conflict with the present

¹ Editorial comment on the subject of this article is made on another page.—THE EDITORS.