

# THE COMMONWEAL

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## NOTES ON NEWS.

THE O'Brien incident in New York is worth noting. It must be admitted at once that Mr. O'Brien would have injured the present prospects of the cause of Home Rule—that is, more explicitly, the establishment of a semi-independent Irish parliament at Dublin—if he had identified himself with the Land Nationalisers and semi-Socialists of New York. But on the other hand, his refusal has also injured the cause of Irish independence, looking at it from a broader point of view. The Land Nationalisers and other more advanced politicians may well say, Is it a foregone conclusion, then, that all the Irish Parliamentary Party look forward to is an imperfect form of peasant-proprietorship—*i.e.*, the creating of a number of small landlords in place of the few big landlords already existing?

Well, as a matter of fact that is the idea of the parliamentary Irishman; and if he went further than that he would be ahead of the ordinary Irishman—in Ireland, at all events. Nor need we wonder at that. The land question is the side of the question of exploitation which naturally thrusts itself forward in Ireland; and the share that the cottar tenant has in it is a war between his industry on one side and a poor soil and a coarse form of robbery on the other; and any alleviation of his lot will for the time put him in heaven, so to say, and make him a very conservative and property-loving character. All this, of course, is what the parliamentary Irish politician is reckoning on, and consequently he won't trouble himself to even consider the landless labourer who will still remain after the advent of peasant proprietorship, or indeed the future of the peasant proprietor himself, which will, in two words, be ultimate ruin.

Perhaps sometimes we Socialists have been tempted to envy the simplicity of the one-plank platform of the Irish agitator, but such an incident as this of Father M'Glynn *versus* Mr. O'Brien shows the dull side of it. In fact revolutionists cannot evade the duty of keeping their true aim clearly before them, and asking themselves if it is worth the trouble, and they must accept as a necessary consequence of the carrying out of that duty all the unpopularity and lack of support and jeers at their want of practicality which they are sure to encounter if they go straight to their object.

Meantime a Socialist can hardly help chuckling when he thinks that Father M'Glynn, who has really made a straight revolutionary hit at that terrible revolutionist Mr. O'Brien, may in his turn find himself denounced as a capitalist-saver one of these days: may, or certainly will, unless he moves forward with the times. To-day there can be found respectable people who are moved to indignation by the spectacle of a certain class of landlords exercising their undoubted legal rights to the full; though the greater part of landlords, since they are not driven to act so dramatically, are allowed to do as they please without comment. At some future time not far distant there will be found probably respectable persons who will wish to take away this legal power from all landlords. There, however, the respectable people will stay their advance, for the next step will be the attack on all capital—that is, really, property; and all respectable people have capital in some form or other. Well, so it goes—he that endureth to the end shall be saved.

The triumphant Tories are determined to show us how feeble a barrier Parliament is between any faction that may have crept into power and the liberties of the people. By the time of the date on this number of *Commonweal* the parliamentary resistance to the Coercion Bill will be at an end, and for all practical purposes it might as well have never been begun. As to Mr. Smith's urgency resolution it was taken sheepishly enough by the House, and was clearly looked upon as a matter of little consequence. And indeed it is not of much consequence, considering what Parliament is.

It may well be hoped that one day the people will take possession for their own use of the noble buildings which their forefathers built in the days when they were striving to break the bonds of feudal tyranny, and had not yet foreseen the straiter bonds of capitalism. All Socialists therefore should join in the protest which Mr. Frederick Harrison made at the meeting of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings against the destructive tomfoolery now going on at

Westminster Abbey. It is an easily read token of the sincerity of the *conservatism* of the bourgeois, when a building, which is still perhaps, in spite of all the degradations it has suffered the most beautiful in Great Britain, is to be subjected to the risk of total destruction, and the certainty of great damage for an idiotic piece of Court humbug that nobody, not even the very flunkeys themselves, cares a rush for.

Apropos of this grievous nonsense our readers may have noticed some of them perhaps with disapproval, that there has not much been said about the Jubilee (one is really ashamed to write the word) in the pages of the *Commonweal*. That is to be explained, I suppose, by the mere contempt with which Socialists look upon the whole subject. But the "great event" of it is so near that one may perhaps say as much as this, that the powers that be are determined to use the opportunity to show what a nuisance the monarchy and court can be as a centre of hypocrisy and corruption, and the densest form of stupidity.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

## FREE COMPETITION.

BEHIND THE SCENES.

In an article on "Social Experiments" published in the *Commonweal* of March 5th, I promised to give at some future time a more full account of the difficulties which the competitive form of industry places in the way of co-operative production. The present seems a good time to fulfil my engagement, as the question of co-operation and our attitude as Socialists towards it has been brought up in the issue for June 4. I will start, then, by trying to answer the question, Is co-operative production likely to upset the present system?—I mean, of course, what is generally understood by the term co-operative production. Now, from the societies which already exist or have existed for the purpose of co-operative production I think we may learn that the difficulty does not lie in the producing of goods. It is quite possible and comparatively easy for a body of working men, having the requisite amount of capital, to hire competent men and start a factory for the production of some articles of general use. They can get workmen as skilful as any one else can, and foremen as well able to look after the work and see that it is done properly. But unfortunately the production of good articles is not the chief difficulty about a modern concern; it is the buying of raw material and selling the finished article which requires the special "business faculty" of which so much is made and which gets paid so highly. The result of competition is to render trading very much like gambling. The constant fluctuations in prices, the careful watching and successful foreseeing of which is very often the chief cause of a man's financial success, make it almost impossible to carry on business with any certainty of being able to make both ends meet.

Another great cause of difficulty is the rapidity with which fashions will change. A firm settle down to make a certain class of goods, and behold, by next month nobody will buy them! Some one else has brought out something newer and managed to get it into fashion, and the success for the present is his. The following month, perhaps, he is cut out by a third man; and so it goes on, the element of gambling being uppermost again. Now the faculty which can always see the way things are going to turn and always manage to be on the paying side of these changes, is a comparatively rare one, and consequently can command a high price. Now it seems to me that co-operative productive societies are likely to fail chiefly through want of this faculty in their managers. As a rule they do not start with very large capitals, and cannot afford to give a very high salary to tempt a first-class business man to take the management. And the first-class business man can always get credit and do so well on his own account, that he will only take the management of another concern on condition of receiving a high salary.

It is found sufficiently difficult to keep old established businesses going without some special competitive faculty, and the difficulties are enormously increased with anything just starting. Many readers of the *Commonweal* will have heard that Mr. Thompson of Halifax has turned his cloth-factory into a co-operative concern. He was lecturing in Oxford last term on his scheme, and I asked him whether he thought there would be any chance of success for a concern started by working men. He said that any business started afresh would have scarcely any chance at all. His business is an old and well-established one, and