

Wallace and Land Nationalization

*A lecture given to the Linnean Society of London on Saturday 15 April 2000
as part of the Broadstone Cemetery Meeting*

At the age of 14, in 1837, Wallace came to London and lived for a few months with his brother John who was an apprentice joiner. During that period he used to visit The Hall of Science – just off Tottenham Court Road. Here he came into contact with the followers of Robert Owen and eventually attended one of Owen's lectures. Later he remarked:

“I have always looked upon Owen as my first teacher in the philosophy of human nature and my first guide through the labyrinth of social science.”

Wallace considered Owen to be the founder of the socialist movement in London and the real founder of modern Socialism, having already created by 1833 the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union. As well as discussing Owen's socialism they also debated Paine's *Age of Reason*.

Later that same summer (1837) Wallace was sent to stay with his eldest brother William to learn to be a surveyor. Following a short sojourn as an apprentice clock maker, in 1840 he returned to helping William who was now working in the Welsh Marches, with much of his surveying being undertaken for the enclosure of common lands and the fencing off of moorland. In *My Life* Wallace notes that it was these enclosures, near Llandridod Wells, that finally made him aware of the injustice to the labouring classes of the General Enclosure Act. However, it was not until some 30 years later, at the very end of the *Malay Archipelago* (1869), that Wallace first entered the debate by criticizing land tenure – pointing out:

“We permit absolute possession of the soil of our country, with no legal rights of existence on the soil, to the vast majority who do not possess it. A great land holder may legally convert his whole property into a forest or a hunting ground and expel every human being who has hitherto lived upon it.”

Shortly afterwards John Stuart Mill invited Wallace to join his proposed Land Tenure Reform Association and to serve on its committee (1870). Wallace was delighted and one of his first proposals to the Association was that:

“The State be empowered to buy back land for itself and to resume possession of any land on payment of its value while the state should be made the owner of historic monuments as well as buildings.”

Wallace clearly had in mind the stone bridges of Dartmoor and the stone Circles of Stonehenge and Avebury, which he had recently visited. He also noted that some monuments had already been destroyed:

“The blowing up of the Long Stone – a remarkable monolithic monument in Gloucestershire blown up with gunpowder by the farmer because it cumbered the ground.”

Ironically, in 1877 William Morris, whom Wallace much admired, formed the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings but it was not until John Lubbock's

Preservation of Ancient Monuments Act of 1882, that Stonehenge and Avebury passed from private to state ownership. Sadly, the death of Mills in 1871 put an end to the Association.

It was at this point that Wallace moved to Grays and spent the next two years on building a house in an old chalk pit. Finding a cement works nearby he decided to construct his house mainly of concrete (one of the first in the UK).

Four years later (1876) he went to live in Dorking and then moved to Croydon where he remained from 1878-1881. It was during this latter period that Wallace was made aware of the burning issue of Irish landlordism (1879-80) and with it the Irish Land League. Eventually he became so incensed with what he considered the unsound principles expounded by the Irish Land League that he wrote a long article for the *Contemporary Review* entitled, *How to Nationalize the Land – a radical solution to the Irish Land problem* (published 1880). As a direct consequence, Mr A.C. Swinton and some colleagues formed the Land Nationalization Society in 1881, with Wallace as the President.

Wallace, however, was on the move yet again and this time built a small cottage at Godalming (Nutwood Cottage) into which he moved in Spring 1882. Here he engaged in his favourite occupation, gardening (by the time he moved on again he claimed or boasted that it contained more than 1000 species of plant). Moreover, now that he had been granted a Civil List Pension of £200 p.a. he was able to devote his long summer evenings to writing. His book *Land Nationalization its' Necessity and its Aims* was published in March 1882. In it Wallace investigated the history of land tenure back to the Domesday Book and then compared it with the situation in much of Europe. Based on his advocacy of Land Nationalization he insisted on upholding not only the rights of way through fields, woodlands and along the seashore, but more particularly, the right to roam.

In *Land Nationalization* he reiterated the need for State tenancy on bare land, with the ownership by the tenant of all that was added to the bare land. Thus the State was *only* the Ground Landlord and could not interfere with the tenant who held a *perpetual lease*. Elsewhere in his book he suggested planning for green belts:

“The interposition of belts of park and garden at certain intervals around dense centres of population”

but added:

“A class of improvement which the ruinous competition prices of land held by private owners now renders impossible”.

Despite his pessimism, green belts and national parks have subsequently been established. The Land Nationalization Society played an important role in the development of Socialism in the UK. It organized lecture tours to disseminate its message and to try to convince the trade-unions that the abolition of land monopoly was at the very root of all social reforms. The message from both it and the Land and Labour League (founded in 1869) was “Land for the people”.

Wallace himself both wrote and lectured all over the UK on Land Nationalization in the period 1880-85. In 1882 he was joined by the American Henry George – an



Wallace's house at Grays. The Thurrock Local History Society has (on the suggestion of the A.R. Wallace Memorial Fund) recently had it given Grade II listing on architectural merit.

advocate of single tax – who like Wallace believed in sweeping land reforms. It is said that Henry George influenced Keir Hardy every bit as much as Friedrich Engels and Eleanor Marx. From Wallace's deliberations on Land Nationalization we arrive at today's proceedings.

The Wallace Memorial Fund has ensured that Wallace's tomb has become an Historic Monument by its renovation and by the eventual placing of a bronze plaque on its base outlining his considerable achievements – especially the theory of evolution.

In his land nationalization pamphlets Wallace proposed that all buildings erected on the land should remain the property of the family that built them. Thus on Wallace's argument his monument and his gravestone should remain the possession of his family in perpetuity. Ironically, only in privately owned cemeteries is this the case. Thus Karl Marx and his statue are safe in Highgate Cemetery* as are Cuvier's and Oscar Wilde's in Père Lachaise, Paris.

* Just across the path from Marx lie the cremated remains of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) who in 1852 published a sketch of organic evolution and subsequently (1864) coined the phrase "survival of the fittest".

Sadly, municipal cemeteries, although owned by the State as Wallace would have advocated, have monuments placed upon them paid for by relatives; the latter do not have a perpetual lease. That this is the case can be gathered from the Broadstone Cemetery authorities preventing previous attempts to clear nettles and brambles from Wallace's grave and the fact that the renewal of the lease for a further 100 years costs us £455! Perhaps we should be thankful that they intend to keep the Cemetery and not try to sell it off for building land as Lady Porter attempted to do with some London cemeteries.

Finally, I should like to reiterate George Beccaloni's plea for a Wallace Museum. What more fitting place than the house he built at Grays in Essex, using cement and concrete for perhaps the first time in a UK dwelling. While it already has a blue plaque, for someone who cast such an influence over the 19th Century, a museum would be far more appropriate.

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Footnote

Wallace was born in Usk, Monmouthshire. When I was at school I was taught that Usk was a parish and Parliamentary Borough of England, separated from Gloucestershire by the River Wye, and that Newport, Monmouthshire, which had been a municipal borough since Richard II, was in England. Usk was originally part of Gwent, or Siluria, which the Saxons never succeeded in conquering. It was made an English county by Henry VIII and abounds with British and mediaeval remains. It is reputed to be the birthplace of Edward IV and Richard III.

In 1828, when Wallace was five, the family moved from Usk to Dulwich and thence to Hertford where Alfred, like his brother, attended the local grammar school. Eventually, in 1840, he returned to Wales where he assisted his brother in surveying the Welsh Marches.

Today Usk is in Gwent, so perhaps both the Welsh and the English can claim Wallace as their own!
