

**THREE LECTURES ON THE RATE
OF WAGES: DELIVERED BEFORE
THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,
IN EASTER TERM, 1830**

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Three Lectures on the Rate of Wages: Delivered Before the University of Oxford, in Easter Term, 1830 by Nassau William Senior

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NASSAU WILLIAM SENIOR

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ON THE
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WITH A PREFACE

ON THE
CAUSES AND REMEDIES OF THE PRESENT
DISTURBANCES.

Bellicue causas et vitia et modos
Tractas, et incedis per ignes
Suppositos cineri doloso.

By NASSAU WILLIAM SENIOR,
OF MAGDALEN COLLEGE, A.M.;
LATE PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL ECONOMY.

LONDON:
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE-STREET.

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P R E F A C E.

THE following Lectures contain little that is not well known to many of my readers, and still less that is peculiarly and exclusively appropriate to the present emergency. They were written and delivered in a period of profound tranquillity; but we are now in a state which may require the exertions of every individual among the educated classes, and many may have to assist in executing, or even in originating measures for the relief of the labouring population, who are not yet sufficiently familiar with the principles according to which that relief is to be afforded.

Under such circumstances, it has appeared to me that advantage might be derived from a short explanation of the ambiguities and fallacies which most obscure the subject of wages—the most difficult and the most important of all the branches of political economy.

My principal object, however, has been to draw attention to the elementary proposition, that *the rate of wages depends on the extent of the fund for the maintenance of labourers, compared with*

the number of labourers to be maintained. This proposition is so nearly self-evident, that it may appear scarcely to deserve a formal statement; still less to be dwelt on as if it were a discovery. It is true that it is obvious and trite; but, perhaps, on that very account, its practical consequences have been neglected. In the first place, if this proposition be admitted, many prevalent opinions respecting the effects of unproductive consumption, of machinery, and of free-trade, must be abandoned; and to show this, is the object of the second and third of the following Lectures. And in the second place, it must also follow that the rate of wages can be raised, or, what is nearly the same, the condition of the labouring classes improved, only by either increasing the fund for their maintenance, or diminishing the number to be maintained.

The principal means by which the fund for the maintenance of labourers can be increased, is by increasing the productiveness of labour. And this may be done,—

First, By allowing every man to exert himself in the way which, from experience, he finds most beneficial; by freeing industry from the mass of restrictions, prohibitions, and protecting duties, with which the Legislature, sometimes in well-meaning ignorance, sometimes in pity, and some-

times in national jealousy, has laboured to crush or misdirect her efforts; and,

Secondly, By putting an end to that unhappy system which, in the southern counties, has dissociated labour from subsistence—has made wages not a matter of contract between the master and the workman, but a right in the one, and a tax on the other; and, by removing the motives for exertion, has rendered, as far as it has been possible, the labourer unworthy of his hire.

The only effectual and permanent means of preventing the undue increase of the number to be maintained, is to raise the moral and intellectual character of the labouring population; to improve, or, I fear we must say, to create habits of prudence, of self-respect, and of self-restraint; to equalize, as by nature they are equal, the wages of the single and the married, and no longer to make a family the passport to allowance. But these are necessarily gradual measures—they are preventive, not remedial. The only *immediate* remedy for an actual excess in one class of the population, is the ancient and approved one, *coloniam deducere*.

It is of great importance to keep in mind, that not only is emigration the sole immediate remedy, but that it is a remedy preparatory to the adoption and necessary to the safety of every other.

The principal cause of the calamities that we are witnessing, has been the disturbance which the poor-laws, as at present administered in the south of England, have created in the most extensive and the most important of all political relations, the relation between the employer and the labourer.

The slave (using that word in its strict sense) cannot choose his owner, his employment, or his residence; his whole services are the property of another, and their value, however high, gives him no additional claim. On the other hand, he is entitled to subsistence for himself and his family: clothing, lodging, food, medical attendance—everything, in short, which is necessary to keep him in health and strength is provided for him, from the same motives, and with the same liberality, that they are provided for the other domestic animals of his master. He is *bound* to labour, and has a *right* to be maintained. Extreme idleness may subject him to the lash, but extraordinary diligence cannot better his condition. He is equally incapable of being benefited by self-restraint, or injured by improvidence. While single, he receives a bare subsistence; if he have a family, his maintenance rises in precise proportion to his wants: the prudential check to population does not exist,—it is kept down, if at all, by oppression

on the part of the master, or vice on that of the slave. This, notwithstanding the various degrees of mitigation which have been introduced by custom or by law, is, in substance, the condition of slaves, wherever slavery exists.

In such a country distress begins, not, as in the case of a free country, with the lower orders, but with the higher. A bad system, therefore, can continue there much longer, because the class affected have farther to fall; and, for the same reason, the ruin, when it does come, is sudden and irremediable. While misgovernment, by excessive or ill-placed taxation, by commercial restrictions, by allowing insecurity of person or property, by applying any artificial stimulus to population, or under any other of its numerous forms, is gradually wasting the surplus that belongs to landlords and capitalists, the slave population may scarcely feel its effects. Subsistence is all they are entitled to, and *that* they must receive as long as their labour produces it. But the instant that surplus is gone, and distress reaches those whose previous maintenance was only equal to their necessities, what is there between them and absolute destruction? If the evils which have been so long accumulating in some of our West Indian islands had affected a free country, the whole population would, long ago, have risen to redress

them. But, as yet, they have reached only the slave-owner. He has found his property gradually wasting away; he has found that his slaves every year consume a larger and a larger proportion of what they produce; but even still he has something to lose: and while that is the case, *their* situation is unaffected. When the whole produce has become only sufficient to feed the negroes,—a time which, under the present system, is rapidly advancing in some of the older islands,—the whites must abandon them as a field for all the moral and physical evil that slaves, helpless by education and desperate from want, will mutually suffer and inflict*.

The freeman (using that term in its full meaning) is the master of his exertions, and of his residence. He may refuse to quit the spot, or to change the employment, in which his labour has become unprofitable. As he may refuse to labour at all, he may ask for his services whatever remuneration he thinks fit; but as no one is bound to purchase those services, and as no one is obliged to afford him food, clothing, or any of the necessaries of life, he is forced, if he would subsist, to follow the trade, and dwell in the place, and exert the diligence which will make his services worth pur-

* This is one of the modes in which slavery may be extinguished, but it is a dreadful abuse of language to call it euthanasia.