

Plum Deal

by P. Gardner Goldsmith

At 78, my mother has decided to embark on a new career. She's going to become a plum grower.

She's not actually going to grow any plums, but she's going to be a "plum grower" nonetheless, and I really couldn't be more proud.

To display such entrepreneurial spirit at her age is truly admirable. Of course, it helps that the U.S. government recently announced a program essentially to pay plum growers to not grow plums.

It seems there is a glut of plums and prunes in the United States, and the secretary of agriculture is doing something about it. The Office of Management and Budget has authorized the Department of Agriculture to spend \$17 million to buy the sweet fruit from beleaguered growers and pay them \$8.50 for every plum tree they are willing to uproot. By destroying the trees, there will be fewer plums on the market, and the growers will see higher prices for their product. QED.

My mother plans to plant plum seeds, then offer to the government a deal whereby she will overturn the hazardous future trees, raze the soil, and promise to never grow plums again. Each potential tree could garner her \$8.50, and, destroyed in high numbers, that could mean plenty of extra cash in

her pocketbook. She might even hire an employee to not grow plums with her.

One of the nicest aspects of the program, other than its pronounced inclination toward deforestation and soil erosion, is that the federally purchased prunes will be offered to charities and schools, a policy that will no doubt contribute mightily to the atmosphere of learning and erudition our school systems already keenly foster. There can be nothing quite so edifying as being locked in a public classroom filled with children who've just gorged themselves on federally subsidized prunes.

The prune buyback program may seem a strange way to run an economy, more akin to Stalin's Soviet Union or Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*. But paying people to actually do the exact opposite of their chosen vocation is a tried and trusted mode of operation in the United States.

Since the venerated presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the U.S. government has spent roughly \$596 billion on agricultural supports, 90 percent of which has gone to large-scale producers of five products: corn, rice, wheat, soy, and cotton—the "fabric of our lives." The harrowed family farmer typically portrayed in heart-wrenching news broadcasts as the beneficiary of our "goodwill" rarely sees this booty. In fact, according to Chris Edwards and Tad DeHaven of the Cato Institute, "In 1999, the largest 7 percent of farms received 45 percent of all government subsidy payments. By contrast,

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the 76 percent of farms that are categorized as small received just 14 percent of subsidies.” Edwards and DeHaven also found that most farmers aren’t even in need of the socialist pork. With average household incomes calculated at \$64,347 in 1999, which is “17 percent higher than the \$54,842 average for all the US non-farm households,” farmers are far from the hay-chewing “land slaves” portrayed by propagandists such as John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*. (See Chris Edwards and Tad DeHaven, “Farm Subsidies at Record Levels as Congress Considers New Farm Bill,” Cato Institute Briefing Paper No. 70, October 18, 2001, p. 7.)

Most farmers on the dole don’t even qualify for mention in one of Willie Nelson’s noble yet increasingly tedious Farm Aid concerts. While Willie and his artistic cohorts diligently ply their craft to help save the anachronistic “family farm,” politicians cozy up to agricultural lobbyists in Congress, manipulating a corrupt and unconstitutional system.

The interstate commerce clause of the Constitution was written as a way to prevent states from imposing tariffs on products from other states. The Founders intended it to act as a check on arbitrary state law that might harm trade between the states. However, since the days of FDR, it has been used as a pre-emptive tool, to control and manipulate any product going over state borders. It has given politicians license to shower ill-gotten plunder on anyone for any reason, as long as a majority in the Capital approves.

My mother grew up while FDR was in office, when this absurd tradition began. Perhaps it’s only fitting that she latch onto this anti-economic, unconstitutional free ride that the Department of Agriculture is offering. It’s the kind of socialistic elitism Roosevelt loved, the sort of New Deal thinking that has given Washington dominance over all that is left of the American free-enterprise system. She can now get paid to not produce plums. It’s a shame Washington politicians also couldn’t get paid to do absolutely nothing. We’d all be a lot better off. □



Economic Reality and Farm Problems

Consumers and taxpayers bear the major costs of government farm programs. Price support programs mean that consumers face higher prices of milk, sugar, peanuts, tobacco, oranges, and other products. . . .

The notion of individual rights, including the ability of people to engage in voluntary exchange, is central to questions concerning the appropriate role of government in agriculture (and in other sectors). In the decentralized market process, maximum scope is provided for individual choice. Only through this approach can the nation’s agricultural resources be used most economically, serving the interests of farmers, consumers, and taxpayers alike. In agriculture, as in many other areas of economic activity, government might make its greatest contribution by attempting to do less.

—E.C. PASOUR, JR.

Lafcadio Hearn

by Frank Laffitte

Nearly a century after his death, Lafcadio Hearn is widely unknown. *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life* (1896) is being republished this year, but much of Hearn's work is out of print, and it's hard to find Hearn on library shelves or in used bookstores. Yet Hearn had a singular vision, and was one of the few authors of his day who correctly assessed the threat to liberty posed by socialist and nationalist movements of the nineteenth century. He wrote the following passage in 1878 in an editorial titled, "Were There Communists in Antiquity?": "The efforts of communism had only a temporary success, and their ultimate result was the establishment of a despotism at once merciless and all-powerful. A violent outbreak of communism in this republic might lead to a change in government which would leave the riotous class everything to regret."¹

This was not the opinion of a blithe booster of the Gilded Age. Hearn lived hand-to-mouth much of his life. He was born in the Ionian isles, raised in Dublin by a great aunt, and schooled in England and France until his family was impoverished. He came to America at 19 and found himself in such dire straits he slept in doorways or stables, in an abandoned boiler, and for a time in a box of paper shavings behind a print shop. Five-foot-three, hampered by debilitating shyness

and near blindness (he had lost an eye in an accident at 16 and was so nearsighted he had to hold books six inches from his good eye), at age 19 he nevertheless made his way as a reporter in Cincinnati and New Orleans. He wrote his editorial on communism while living on a salary of \$10 a week. Multilingual, astonishingly multicultural in his literary allusions, Hearn scandalized society with his freethinking heresies and his liaisons with women of mixed race.

In the late 1880s he spent two years in the Caribbean. In 1890 he moved to Japan, where he married into a samurai family, took a Japanese name (Yakumo Koizumi), taught English, and wrote about Japanese culture. Wherever he lived, he wrote poetic prose sketches of life there. He wrote about common people, their language, their folktales, their songs, their ghost stories, how they lived. The stories run the gamut from lurid murders to vivid character sketches and subtle insights about cultures. Besides these sketches he wrote novels, translations, and essays on literature, proverbs, names, insects, Buddhism, astronomy, Arabic culture, and Russian, French, and English literature.

Hearn was also an astute political philosopher. To the doctrinaire leftist, he was a reactionary. To the doctrinaire rightist, he was an iconoclast. In truth, he was nothing so simple. He was a cultured bohemian, a spiritual agnostic, an anti-industrial capitalist. Hearn never felt at home in bustling

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