

LEO TOLSTOY AND HENRY GEORGE

The centenary of Tolstoy has lately been celebrated all over the world. The great novelist, the painter of war, dramatist, thinker, seer and apostle, his remarkable life and work, have been acclaimed in papers and books, in pictures and commemorations, and homage is paid to him as one of the great minds and leaders of the age.

And Tolstoy was all that; but one fact seems not to be known, or not to have been mentioned, by all these writers and worshippers—that the great prophet was at the same time a disciple of Henry George, subscribed sincerely and openly to his social and economic teaching, recognized its truth, strength and wisdom; wrote books, letters and articles about it and realized its full bearing upon his own outlook on life and affairs.

"How I admire Henry George," he wrote, "his language is so genuinely Christian, his style is so clear and his illustrations are so striking. He has shown us the first step that must be taken. His ideas will become a force—yes, they are already a force."

In another letter (to a German Land Reformer) Tolstoy wrote: "I have been acquainted with Henry George since the appearance of his *Social Problems*. I was struck by the correctness of his main idea, and by the unique clearness and power of his argument, which is unlike anything in scientific literature and especially by the Christian spirit, which also stands alone in the literature of science, which pervades the book. After reading it, I turned to his previous work *Progress and Poverty*, and with a heightened appreciation of its author's ability. . . . He was the first to give a simple, straightforward answer to the usual excuses made by the enemies of all progress, which affirm that the demands of progress are illusions, impracticable, inapplicable. The method of Henry George destroys this excuse by so putting the question that by to-morrow committees might be appointed to examine and deliberate on his scheme and its transformation into law."

But Tolstoy was not merely content to acknowledge Henry George's doctrine. He has worked to advance it by means of his writings and by his life. In his novel *Resurrection* he makes the hero, the young estate owner Prince Nekludoff, advocate Henry George's ideas on the land question and lets him adopt them on his estate so that we see them in actual operation for the benefit of all parties.

Also in talks with his countrymen Leo Tolstoy tried to spread a knowledge of Henry George and his philosophy and he held meetings with Russian peasants to discuss the subject.

"We sat round the tea urn," he says, "and talked about the future of our country. Usually two different proposals were brought forward—one was to divide up the whole of the land and give it in equal pieces to every grown man; others would give the land to the communes to be cultivated jointly. But when I came forward with Henry George's proposals they all immediately agreed that we had found the one right solution."

In a later letter Tolstoy wrote: "Every time I read Henry George's books I have to admire the clarity of his language, the masterly style, his power to convince, and there arises in me a feeling of contempt for those who treat it with silence. His ideas are stated so plainly and so forcibly that he who begins to think

about these questions cannot end without accepting that teaching, if he has only known how to study it aright. I am always moved by the Biblical history of Moses, who himself was not able to see the Promised Land to which he was leading his people. Nor is it really required that one should see the fruits of one's efforts. Those are among the best of men who carry on the most important work in the world, not only without expecting any reward but even without hope of seeing established that truth to which they have devoted their lives. Henry George seems here to have shared the fate of the Israelite leader."

"Tell him that I honour and love him," writes the aged friend of humanity as he closes this letter about Henry George.

During his severe illness when Tolstoy was near to death it is told that he reproached himself because he had not done enough to spread the knowledge of Henry George, and hardly was he better again before he wrote a new message "To the Working People of All Countries" in which he maintained that the only thing that would help them out of their difficult condition was free access to land. In this he wrote: "I regard Henry George's scheme as the most just, beneficent and above all the most easily practicable that I know."

From all this we may fully understand that he had very little confidence in parliamentary institutions and the other modern substitutes for the real economic freedom of the people. Tolstoy even declared himself against the reform proposals which in the time of the Czar were proposed by the Zemstvo Congress, and declared that they would be an actual obstacle to real social progress. He obviously felt that there must also be a religious and moral regeneration before any change in representation could be anything else than an exchange of tyrants; and when in this respect he points to the west as an example—France, England and America—he is surely right. In these free countries the people suffer in spite of all their political rights, under an economic despotism which puts them in much the same position as Tolstoy's Russian peasant.

It is also told that when Tolstoy was asked what he would do if he was the dictator of Russia he answered: "I would first use my power to carry through Henry George's reform; then and not till then would I give my people political freedom." In these words lies a deep truth that political freedom by itself is worth little or nothing so long as the people suffer under economic bondage in any shape. Henry George's reform will enable every worker by hand or by brain and the whole people, to evolve for themselves the conditions for political righteousness and free government, which cannot be overturned because it is built upon a moral foundation.

Tolstoy's words are therefore a pregnant message to modern democracy.

During Henry George's life there was at one time a plan to bring about a meeting between these two great men. Danish friends were also engaged on this project when Henry George died in 1897. Opportunity however was given to Henry George's eldest son, Henry George, Junr., to bring a personal greeting in a visit paid* to the invalid Tolstoy at his home at Yasnaya Polyana in the summer of 1909, just a year before Tolstoy died.

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* Of this visit, Henry George Junr., wrote a vivid description which was published in the *World's Work* of February, 1910, and was reprinted in the March, 1910 issue of *Land Values*.—EDITOR, *Land & Liberty*.