

INTRODUCTION

THE AVERAGE reader may well ask, Why reprint Frederic C. Howe's *The Confessions of a Reformer*? The book contains no sensational exposés, no behind-the-scenes stories of great events. It is not the self-portrait of one of the movers and shakers of history. It is far from a literary masterpiece. Though an appealing personality, Howe was more a politician than a profound thinker. Even as the autobiographical record of a humble toiler in the vineyard of reform, his account suffers at times from a frustrating lack of detail, at other times from lapses of memory.¹ Yet notwithstanding these qualifications, the book remains an important intellectual document which illuminates the strengths and weaknesses of the liberal mind in twentieth-century America.

The theme is a familiar one in modern American autobiography—a theme explored by such different writers as Henry Adams and Lincoln Steffens. *The Confessions of a Reformer* is the story of Frederic C. Howe's education, or rather of his unlearning the inherited values and prejudices of his youth.² Frederic Clemson Howe was born November 21, 1867, in Meadville, Pennsylvania. His mother was of Swedish-Quaker descent; his father, a furniture manufacturer who sold his products locally, was of Scotch-Irish stock. Though his father

1. See, for example, Eugene C. Murdock, "Cleveland's Johnson: First Term," *Ohio Historical Quarterly*, LXVII, 1 (January 1958), 46, n. 33; Hoyt Landon Warner, *Progressivism in Ohio, 1897-1917* (Columbus, 1964), 203, n. 13.

2. For biographical data I have relied primarily upon *The Confessions of a Reformer*. Additional biographical material has been drawn from Hoyt Landon Warner, "Frederic Clemson Howe," *Dictionary of American Biography, Supplement Two* (New York, 1958), 326-328, and Howe's obituary in the *New York Times*, August 4, 1940. A perceptive account is Robert H. Bremner, "Honest Man's Story: Frederic C. Howe" ["The Civic Revival in Ohio"], *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, VIII, 4 (July 1949), 413-422.

was a broad-minded man for his time and place, the constricting atmosphere of small-town society was intensified by the family's financial difficulties, which reinforced the drive toward genteel respectability. The world of Howe's youth "was a comfortable little world, Republican in politics, careful in conduct, Methodist in religion."³ After graduating from high school, he went on to Meadville's pride, Allegheny College. But his five years at Allegheny were more of the same. The college was a stronghold of evangelical religion with exhortations to duty, dedication to moral uplift, and comforting assumptions about virtue and vice, good and evil.

Howe's ambition was to become a newspaper editorial writer. He decided that he must first prepare himself in economics, politics, and history. So after graduating from Allegheny College in 1889, he entered Johns Hopkins University for graduate study. His experiences at Hopkins—broadened by travel in Europe and study at the University of Halle in 1891—marked the beginnings of his intellectual awakening. Economist Richard T. Ely showed him the darker side of the triumphant industrial capitalism; Woodrow Wilson and James Bryce castigated evils of party politics and called for an end to the rule of the spoilsman and politician; Albert Shaw captured his imagination with his vision of the possibilities of the city. He reveled in the spirit of free inquiry that animated the Baltimore institution—a freedom that made his years there a "great adventure" of the mind. Johns Hopkins, he later recalled fondly, "taught men to think, not what to think."⁴ He imbibed the gospel of service—the scholar in politics, the duty of the educated man to take the lead in redeeming the promise of democracy—that pervaded the Hopkins atmosphere. His doctoral dissertation, "The Federal Revenues and the Income Tax,"⁵ foreshadowed his lifelong interest in tax questions.

Howe received his Ph.D. in 1892 and set out for New York

3. Howe, *The Confessions of a Reformer*, 10.

4. *Ibid.*, 31-32.

5. Howe, "The Federal Revenues and the Income Tax," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, IV (January 1894), 557-581.

to make his mark in journalism. But in the hard times of 1892-1893 he was unable to find a job. Abandoning—at least temporarily—his dream of becoming a journalist, he decided that the law would offer more security and enrolled in New York Law School. The year was a terrible grind. He could not awaken much enthusiasm for the subject; he was trying to cram two years' work into one; and he was working part-time in a lawyer's office to meet his expenses. But the experience was another step in his unlearning process. Firsthand contact with the poor of the city taught him truths he had not learned in Meadville, nor even at Johns Hopkins: that all unemployed were not loafers, that all crime was not the result of personal depravity, and that the political boss prospered because of the services that he—and he alone—performed for the poor of his district. He learned that the saloon was the poor man's club, and his brief apprenticeship at moral uplift with the Reverend Charles H. Parkhurst's Vigilance League left him with the lasting conviction that regulatory legislation aimed at the saloon resulted in more ill than good, and with a lasting contempt for the hypocrisy that too often animated do-gooders.

His hope of finishing his law studies within a year was stymied by a new ruling of the Board of Regents which required two years' study before admission to the bar. Broke, Howe returned to Meadville, a seeming failure. But his doldrums did not last. His uncle took him into his law office where he continued to prepare for the bar; he had his first experience in politics; and he met his future wife, Marie H. Jenney, who was studying for the ministry at the local Unitarian Theological Seminary. He used his Hopkins background to get a job in Pittsburgh as secretary of the Pennsylvania Tax Commission, and he passed the bar examination. Pittsburgh—and the entire state of Pennsylvania—was then controlled by the Quay machine. Disgusted by the rampant corruption he saw around him, dismayed by the oppressive atmosphere that stifled all free discussion, appalled at the hypocrisy of the city's business leaders, Howe resigned his job and turned his back upon the opportunities offered by his personal and family contacts in Pittsburgh.

He moved in 1894 to Cleveland, attracted by its possibilities for beauty and its still small-town qualities. There he landed a job with the law firm of Harry and James Garfield, the sons of the late President. At first the job involved no more than sitting in the outer office and doing whatever odd tasks came his way. Taking advantage of his spare time, he wrote a book-length study of *Taxation and Taxes in the United States Under the Internal Revenue System 1791-1895* (1896) that won him a national reputation as a tax expert.⁶ In 1896 he became a partner in the renamed firm of Garfield, Garfield, and Howe. He kept his hand in the academic field by lecturing on finance at Western Reserve University and teaching corporation law at Cleveland Law School. But he was never happy with the law. He balked at its complexities and technicalities, which he found more calculated to frustrate than serve justice. He found judges—and thus the law—unresponsive to the far-reaching social and economic changes occurring in American life. And he found his work as a corporation attorney more and more irreconcilable with his maturing social conscience. The conflict was a painful one for Howe—and one never fully resolved—for he liked the comforts and status that money and professional success brought. He salved his conscience by vowing to put aside a nest egg, give up the law at forty, and devote the rest of his life to writing. This uneasy compromise was made tolerable by his relations with the Garfields. Though their partner's reform activities were a business liability, they never complained or sought to influence him.

Howe's first ventures into reform followed the path trod by so many sensitive young men of his time and background. He went to live in a settlement house, became active in the Charity Organization Society, joined an informal group pushing for the building of a European-style civic center in Cleveland, and served as secretary of the local "good government" organization, the Municipal Association. His work with the Municipal Association brought him into the fight over the renewal of Mark Hanna's street railway company franchise. In a scholarly study, "Taxation of Quasi-Public Corporations

6. Howe, *Taxation and Taxes in the United States Under the Internal Revenue System, 1791-1895* (New York and Boston, 1896).

in the State of Ohio and the Franchise Tax," he showed how the existing tax system permitted the railroads and public utilities to escape paying their proper share of the tax burden.⁷

In 1901 Howe was drafted to run on the Republican ticket for City Council from his district as the "good government" candidate backed by the Municipal Association. He had shown maverick tendencies by resigning as a trustee of the Charity Organization Society when he became convinced that organized charity was intended to make life more comfortable for the well-to-do by keeping poverty out of sight, and that charity would be unnecessary if the wealthy men who supported the Society paid their workers a living wage. Still, he remained within the mugwumpish tradition in his approach to municipal reform: the aim was to throw the rascals out and elect university-educated, honest business and professional men.

The turning point in his life came in 1901. During the election campaign he fell under the spell of Tom Johnson, and through Johnson he became a convert to the single-tax philosophy of Henry George. For Howe, Johnson was "one of the greatest statesmen America has produced": a man tolerant of others' frailties, yet himself a man of rare courage and intellectual honesty who would make no compromise with expediency, a man who lived life to its fullest with an open mind and an open heart, a political boss—but in behalf of the public wealth rather than private gain. From Johnson, Howe received "the better part" of his education. He imbibed the Jeffersonian gospel that government should be as decentralized and close to the people as possible—a belief that, in terms of the realities of American political life, underlay his demand for municipal home rule. Johnson emancipated Howe from the "evangelistic morality" of his youth that blamed social ills upon personal shortcomings. The trouble was not bad men but bad institutions; the solution was to change the system so that men could give free reign to their more generous and noble impulses. As with Johnson, the single tax became "the passion of his life—

7. Howe, "Taxation of Quasi-Public Corporations in the State of Ohio and the Franchise Tax," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, XIV (September 1899), 157-180.

a passion for freedom, for a world of equal opportunity for all . . . free from poverty, free from fear, free from vice and crime." ⁸

Although elected as a Republican, Howe became the Democratic mayor's champion in the City Council. In 1903, at odds with the Republican leadership and still unwilling to commit himself to the Democratic party, he tried for re-election as an independent but ran a poor third. Thereafter he threw in his lot with Tom Johnson and the Democratic party. Howe joined with his Johns Hopkins roommate, Newton D. Baker, the head of the city Law Department; Reverend Harris R. Cooley, the director of the Department of Charities and Correction; and Peter Witt, the city clerk and the mayor's "number one trouble-shooter," to form the Johnson inner circle in the decade-long struggle over the street railway issue that wracked Cleveland. Johnson had been elected on a platform calling for municipal ownership and the immediate reduction of the fare from five to three cents. Ohio law did not permit the first, while Johnson's fight for the three-cent fare sparked a long and bitter contest in the City Council, the state legislature, and the courts, and before the voters. The final settlement did not come until after Johnson's defeat for re-election in 1909. The new franchise provided for a sliding scale of fares to give the street railway company a 6 per cent return on a compromise valuation. Under this arrangement the three-cent fare prevailed from 1910 through 1917. But though the battle was won, the larger war was lost. Johnson's—and Howe's—dream of municipal ownership was stillborn. Municipal ownership would not come until 1942.

The energies expended in the street railway fight hindered Johnson's broader program of city building. But even with this handicap, the gains were striking. His insistence upon administrative efficiency and honesty in the city departments won for Cleveland Lincoln Steffens' accolade of "the best governed city in the United States." Johnson brought cheap natural gas into the city over the bitter opposition of the artificial gas companies, and a start was made toward a municipally owned electric power system. Public services were ex-

8. Howe, *The Confessions of a Reformer*, 17, 127-145.

panded: garbage collection, street cleaning, and the lighting of street gas lamps were taken out of private hands and made municipal services; water rates were cut while service was improved; strenuous efforts were made to eliminate substandard tenement houses; plans for a new civic center were adopted and work begun; hazardous grade crossings were eliminated; public baths were built, the park and playground system was expanded, and new municipal recreation facilities were opened. The boldest departure was the humanitarian treatment accorded the city's underprivileged and unfortunate. The "Golden Rule" policy adopted by the Police Department put an end to indiscriminate arrests for minor infractions; a realistic policy of law enforcement accepted drinking and private gambling as inescapable but sought to eliminate their most offensive and injurious features; a farm colony was established to care for the aged and sick; penal reforms were introduced to assist the rehabilitation of criminals; a liberalized parole system was instituted to free men who lacked the money to pay fines; and special treatment was provided for juvenile offenders.⁹

Johnson was continually hampered in carrying out his program by the state legislature, and in 1903 he plunged into state politics and ran for governor. Although he was defeated, the growing reform spirit in Ohio carried the Democrats to victory two years later behind John M. Pattison. In the Democratic sweep Howe was elected to the State Senate, where he became chairman of the Committee on Committees and served as leader of the reform forces. But his bill to impose a six-mill

9. Warner, *Progressivism in Ohio*, 54-86; Tom L. Johnson, *My Story* [ed. by Elizabeth J. Hauser] (New York, 1913), esp. xi-xxxiii, 108-294; Lincoln Steffens, *The Struggle for Self-Government* (New York, 1906), 161-208; Edward W. Bemis, "The Cleveland Street Railway Settlement," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, XXIV (May 1910), 550-560; and Delos F. Wilcox, *Analysis of the Street Railway Problem* (New York, 1921), 434-456, 751. Eugene C. Murdock has published an informative series of articles on Johnson: "Cleveland's Johnson," *Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, LXII, 4 (October 1953), 323-333; "Cleveland's Johnson: At Home," *ibid.*, LXIII, 4 (October 1954), 319-335; "Cleveland's Johnson: Elected Mayor," *Ohio Historical Quarterly*, LXV, 1 (January 1956), 28-43; "Cleveland's Johnson: The Burton Campaign," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, XV, 4 (July 1956), 405-424; "Cleveland's Johnson: The Cabinet," *Ohio Historical Quarterly*,

tax on the franchise value of public utilities and railroads was killed in the Senate, while the Republican-dominated House voted down his proposal to forbid free railroad passes to legislators, blocked increased municipal home rule, defeated a bill to permit popular referendums on street railway franchises, and failed to act on a constitutional amendment to institute the initiative and referendum that Howe had pushed through the upper chamber. Disagreement between the two houses blocked adoption of mandatory direct primary legislation. The only substantive reform triumphs were the passage of a bill imposing a two-cent-per-mile passenger fare on the railroads and replacement of the fee system for county officers with fixed salaries.

The second session of the legislature in 1908 was more productive. Although Howe's reintroduced franchise tax bill went down to defeat, legislation was adopted strengthening the position of the mayor in municipal government, extending the merit system to all city departments, and providing for the holding of referendums on street railway franchises. A corrupt practices law was passed barring corporate contributions to political parties or candidates. The new primary law made direct primary elections mandatory for the nomination of county, township, and municipal officers, members of the General Assembly, and judges in all counties except the two largest, where it was left optional; required the selection of delegates to congressional and state nominating conventions at primary elections; and regulated the election of party

LXVI, 4 (October 1957), 375-390; and "Cleveland's Johnson: First Term," *ibid.*, LXVII, 1 (January 1958), 35-49. Illuminating is the series of articles by Robert H. Bremner in the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* under the overall title "The Civic Revival in Ohio"; see the following: "The Civic Revival in Ohio," VIII, 1 (October 1948), 61-68; "Reformed Businessman: Tom L. Johnson," VIII, 3 (April 1949), 299-309; "Municipal Ownership and Economic Privilege," IX, 4 (July 1950), 477-482; "The Street Railway Controversy in Cleveland," X, 2 (January 1951), 185-206; "How Privilege Fights," XI, 2 (January 1952), 203-214; "The Political Techniques of the Progressives," XII, 2 (January 1953), 189-200; "Humanizing Cleveland and Toledo," XIII, 2 (January 1953), 179-190; "Harris R. Cooley and Cooley Farms," XIV, 1 (October 1954), 71-75; and "Police, Penal and Parole Policies in Cleveland and Toledo," XIV, 4 (July 1955), 387-398.

committees and the determination of representation at party conventions. The legislature also approved measures to prevent sale of fraudulent stock; provided for stricter regulation of state banks; strengthened the child labor and pure food and drug laws; permitted cities to regulate tenements; authorized counties to prohibit the sale of liquor after a referendum; and established commissions to investigate relief for the blind, penal conditions, and the coal mining industry. The most spectacular event of the session was an investigation spearheaded by Howe into graft and corruption in the state treasurer's office. The climax of reform in Ohio did not occur until the 1912 constitutional convention, the governorship of James M. Cox (1913-1914), and Newton D. Baker's two terms as mayor of Cleveland (1912-1915). But Howe's labors in Cleveland and in the state legislature prepared the ground for these later triumphs.¹⁰

At the end of the session in May 1908 Howe returned to his law practice in Cleveland. In 1909 he was elected to Cleveland's five-man Board of Quadrennial Appraisers. The Cleveland tax system badly wanted reforming—and Howe had long agitated the question.¹¹ Valuable downtown property, the street railways, and the public utilities were underassessed, while the heaviest tax burden fell on the small homeowner. Immediately after his election as mayor, Johnson set up a special bureau, the so-called Tax School, to make a scientific and thorough appraisal of property values based on market price. But his efforts to implement the new assessments, tax the franchise values of public utilities, and increase the grossly undervalued assessments of the railroads were stymied by the legislature, the courts, and Republican state tax officials. He went to work educating the public, and in 1909 the legislature enacted the Quadrennial Assessment Act. Under this new

10. Warner, *Progressivism in Ohio*, 105-210; Robert H. Bremser, "Self-Government" ["The Civic Revival in Ohio"], *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, X, 1 (October 1950), 27-91, and "The Fight for Home Rule" ["The Civic Revival in Ohio"], *ibid.*, XI, 1 (October 1951), 99-110.

11. See, for example, Howe, "The Taxation of Railroads and Other Public-Service Corporations," *Proceedings . . . of the Thirteenth Annual Meeting of the National Municipal League . . . 1907 . . .* (Philadelphia, 1907), 306-316.

legislation, Howe and his fellow assessors took the first step toward implementing the single tax by increasing the valuation of land and reducing the valuation upon improvements. Howe recalled this as the most satisfactory experience of his political life. And he regarded the rapid building up of Cleveland in the years that followed as proof of the wisdom of his remedy.¹²

While the struggle in Cleveland was still at its hottest, Howe began to explain the Johnson program to the country at large, first by articles in the popular magazines,¹³ then in his book *The City: The Hope of Democracy*. He took aim at what he saw as popular fallacies regarding the city. One target was the traditional suspicion and distrust of the city as a menace to the nation's institutions. Howe gloried in the rise of the city to dominance in American life; he saw in it "a new force in the world—a force of unmeasured possibilities." A second target was the misconception popularized by James Bryce's *The American Commonwealth*—that the American city was the most glaring failure of democracy. Howe pointed to the gains made within the last decade in city after city. And he insisted that the failures of the cities were due to too little, rather than too much, democracy. The cumbersome and complicated machinery of government—the nominations of candidates by delegate conventions, the diffusion of authority and responsibility, the constant interference in municipal affairs by state legislatures—opened the door for the boss. The first step toward fulfilling the hope of the city was a thoroughgoing democratization through home rule, the initiative and referendum, the direct primary, and the concentration of responsibility in the mayor and single-chamber council.

But Howe never deluded himself that tinkering with the mechanisms of municipal government was a panacea. He postulated an "Economic Interpretation of the City" that blamed the corruption, the glaring disparities of wealth, the

12. Warner, *Progressivism in Ohio*, 7-10, 87-104, 197-199, 227-231; Robert H. Bremner, "Tax Equalization in Cleveland" ["The Civic Revival in Ohio"], *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, X, 3 (April 1951), 301-312.

13. See, for example, Howe, "Cleveland—A City 'Finding Itself,'" *The World's Work*, VI, 6 (October 1903), 3988-3999.

poverty, vice, crime, and disease found in the city upon "the economic environment which creates and controls man's activities as well as his attitude of mind." The solution was the single tax. Its appeal to so many municipal reformers of the day is not hard to explain. Part of the attraction was that Henry George's philosophy explained so much that was wrong in the cities at the turn of the century. The tremendous rise in land values accompanying the growth of population was there for all to see. The resulting increase in rents became a tax upon the entire community for the benefit of a handful of landowners, while more and more people were forced into worse and worse slums. The same analysis applied to the so-called public service corporations. Their swollen profits came at the expense of those least able to carry the burden. And the desire to acquire and safeguard highly profitable franchise privileges was the foremost source of political corruption. The muckraking articles of Lincoln Steffens, reinforced by his own experience in the Cleveland three-cent fare fight, taught Howe this. The solution was to remove the temptation by municipal ownership—a message he underscored in his semi-fictionalized *The Confessions of a Monopolist* (1906),¹⁴ whose protagonist was a composite of Tom Johnson (before his conversion) and Mark Hanna.¹⁵

To municipal reformers of Howe's generation, the most attractive feature of the single tax was its promise of radical change by non-radical means.¹⁶ The taxation of the unearned increment in land and franchise values appealed to a producers' ideology deeply rooted in the Jeffersonian tradition.

14. A perceptive summary of the book is Robert H. Bremner, "The City: Hope of Democracy" ["The Civic Revival in Ohio"], *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, XII, 3 (April 1953), 305-310. The quotes are from Howe, *The City: The Hope of Democracy* (New York, 1905), vii-viii, 303.

15. Howe, *The Confessions of a Monopolist* (Chicago, 1906).

16. Although I do not share all their conclusions, I am indebted to the following studies of the influence of Henry George and the single tax in the progressive era: Charles A. Barker, *Henry George* (New York, 1955), 620-635; Ransom E. Noble, Jr., "Henry George and the Progressive Movement," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, VIII, 3 (April 1949), 259-269; and Robert H. Bremner, "The Single Tax Philosophy in Cleveland and Toledo," ["The Civic Revival in Ohio"], *ibid.*, IX, 3 (April 1950), 369-376.

Thus Howe made a sharp distinction between privilege-based monopoly and the legitimate, competitive businessman who depended for success "upon his own energy, thrift, and enterprise." More importantly for a man like Howe, to whom freedom was "the law of life," the single tax carried none of the frightening connotations of governmental regimentation associated with socialism. Once the barriers to opportunity imposed by law-created special privileges were removed, free competition would guarantee the distribution of rewards according to merit. The single tax would supply the revenue needed to expand public services without increased taxes upon consumers and workers. Forcing idle land into productive use would give the poor more work—and thus higher wages—and eliminate slums by stimulating the building of more and thus cheaper housing. The resulting psychological transformation would revolutionize municipal life. The lure of financial profit from special privileges led the most talented and able members of the community to seek private gain at the expense of the general welfare. With that temptation removed, they could freely devote their energies to public service, while the extension of municipal activities would inspire in the people at large a new sense of civic patriotism. "There would be created," he rhapsodized, "a union of all the people, seeking in conscious ways the betterment of human conditions. . . for then there would be no class, no powerful influence, whose control of the government was dependent upon the persistence of the *status quo*."¹⁷

In 1910 Howe applied his single-tax philosophy to the larger problem of *Privilege and Democracy in America*. The history of mankind, he philosophized, was the struggle for "the control of the government for economic advantage." "All of the relations of society," he explained, "were created by the class which ruled. And the class which ruled was the class which owned." The United States was no exception: ". . . it was economic freedom that made America what she is." Free land lay "at the foundation of our democracy." But the day of free land was over. Privilege was in the ascendant, and through its control over the machinery of government it

17. Howe, *The City: The Hope of Democracy*, 73-74, 312-313. Howe's comment on freedom is in *The Confessions of a Reformer*, 324.

transferred to the few—"by means of law"—the wealth created by the labor of the many. With the avenues of opportunity closed, political democracy was threatened. Yet Howe remained hopeful. Henry George had foreseen the danger and provided the remedy: taxation of land values, public ownership of railroads and public utilities, and free trade. "The open door, the open highway, and the socialization of the land," Howe proclaimed, "will destroy the tribute now exacted by monopoly. It will usher in a social order in which men will be as free from the fear of want as they are from want itself. . . . It will insure equality of opportunity in every walk of life and will guarantee to the worker all that his genius, his talent, or his labor produces." And in so doing, America "will restore the foundations upon which democracy is laid."¹⁸

Meanwhile, his enthusiasm for the city as the hope of democracy had led Howe to investigate municipal government in Europe. The first fruit of his studies was his *The British City: The Beginnings of Democracy* (1907). Howe found the British city free from corruption, honestly and efficiently run. And he hailed the progress it had made in the municipal ownership of street railways and gas, electric, and water works, in the expansion of educational and recreational opportunities for the poor, and in municipal housing and slum clearance as hopeful signs of an awakening democracy. But at the same time he found poverty at its worst in the British city—the result of the continued ascendancy in British politics of a privileged, land-monopolizing aristocracy. The exemption of land from most taxation, the shifting of the tax load onto the tenant and the poor, and the heavy—and year by year increasing—burden of rent was responsible for the poverty, unemployment, overcrowded slums, and even physical ugliness of the British city. The special privileges of the landowner and the resulting penalization of enterprise and labor were to blame for the decay Howe saw in all departments of British life. As in the United States, the new democracy of the cities was at war with the rule of privilege. Its war cry was the taxation of land values. Forecasting the Lloyd George budget

18. Howe, *Privilege and Democracy in America* (New York, 1910), vii-x, 301-302.

fight. Howe was doubtful about the outcome. So powerful were the forces of privilege and so strong the habit of deference that the odds were "fearfully against the people."¹⁹

In contrast, Howe found German cities the most advanced in the world in providing services for the working classes, in promoting beauty and comfort, in making provisions for leisure and cultural activities, and in city planning. The German city—unlike the American—"subordinates property to humanity."²⁰ And he found that principle not limited to the municipal realm.

Not that Howe was an uncritical admirer of things German. He was repelled by Prussian militarism and authoritarianism. He lamented the weakness of democratic institutions and representative government, the excessive centralization at the expense of the states, the exaggerated respect for official authority, the caste system that ran through the fiber of German life, the threat to intellectual freedom from state control of the universities, and the subordination of the individual to the state. He appreciated the positive achievements of the German educational system, but he deplored its inculcation of discipline and obedience at the expense of initiative and individuality.

Nevertheless, even after the outbreak of World War I he risked popular disapproval to praise Germany for its systematic encouragement of industry and commerce, its regulation of business in the public interest, its efficiency and scientific planning for the future, and, most importantly, its concern for the health and welfare of the masses and its farsighted legislation for the protection of the worker from the costs of industrialism and urbanization. "No other country," he declared, "has so greatly improved the well-being of so large a portion of the people. This is the real explanation of her power; this lies back of her military achievements; this explains her advance in trade, the growth in her overseas commerce, and the rise of her merchant marine. . . ." ²¹

19. Howe, *The British City: The Beginnings of Democracy* (New York, 1907). The quote is from page 301.

20. Howe, "City Building in Germany," *Scribner's Magazine*, XLVII, 5 (May 1910), 601-614.

21. Howe, *Socialized Germany* (New York, 1915). The quote is from pages 324-325.

Howe summarized his studies of European cities in *European Cities at Work* (1913),²² and with his European findings as a basis for comparison he reassessed the American city in his *The Modern City and Its Problems* (1915). The single tax remained the keystone of his thinking, but he approached the problems of the city and the progress toward their solution from a broader viewpoint than in *The City: The Hope of Democracy*. Howe found much to recommend about the American city. In many of its functions—such as education, fire protection, public libraries, parks, and playgrounds—the American city led the world. And many of its shortcomings, as compared with European cities, were the result of conditions that had no parallel abroad. Because of their newness American cities lacked the historic traditions of their European counterparts. The United States had no office-holding class with a tradition of public service. In Europe voting was limited to the property-owning or taxpaying class; the United States was seeking to train great masses of people in the art of self-government—a task made more difficult by the presence of large foreign-born populations in the American city. American political institutions had been designed for a rural society. Lack of home rule handcuffed the city, while the cumbersome and complicated machinery of government provided by most charters prevented the expression of the popular will. The individualistic philosophy that was the heritage of this country's agricultural past exalted property rights over the public welfare. The trouble with the American city, Howe declared, was "institutions, traditions, and public opinion which have failed to keep pace with the problems we have been called upon to face."

Much progress, Howe reported, had been made since the turn of the century in remedying these shortcomings. In state after state, home rule had been granted. In city after city, new and simpler charters had provided for the short ballot, the initiative, the referendum, and the direct primary. A new class of men had been elected to office, improved standards of efficiency had been instituted, and great strides had been made toward rooting out graft and corruption. Even the tax system of the American city was more just than in Europe. In the

22. Howe, *European Cities at Work* (New York, 1913).

British city, limiting the vote to taxpayers and placing the burden of local taxes on the tenant, resulted in strong pressures to keep down expenditures. Most of the German taxes—the income tax, the business taxes, the tax on unearned increment in land values—were progressive, but the excessive influence of the property-owning class in municipal affairs gave rise to similar demands for keeping taxes low. In the American city, by contrast, the leading source of revenue was the tax on land. And because the landowner could not shift this burden, there was strong popular support for a generous provision for municipal services. Much remained to be done, Howe warned his readers: implementation of the single tax on land values and the exemption of improvements, municipal ownership of street railways and public utilities, and, most importantly, adoption of the scientific approach to the growth of the city he found in Germany. The planlessness with which most American cities had developed was “in many ways,” he concluded, “. . . our most costly failure. . . comprehensive town planning is the most important task in the programme of city reclamation.”²³

The success of his first books stimulated Howe to give up his law practice and leave Cleveland after finishing his work reforming the city's tax structure. He had found the law increasingly irksome, while the alienation of former friends and associates by his support of Tom Johnson exacted its emotional toll. Having put aside a large enough nest egg to assure himself an independent income, he decided to move to New York and devote himself full time to his writing. There he became director of the People's Institute, which carried on a broad program of educational activities at Cooper Union. To provide opportunities for the expression and development of the talents he found among the poor of the East Side, he founded the People's Music League and the Drama League of America. He was caught up in the exciting ferment of the arts and politics in Greenwich Village. His apartment on West Twelfth Street became a gathering place for the circle around *The Masses*—Max and Crystal Eastman, Art Young, Inez Milholland, John Sloan, Floyd Dell, and John Reed. He was a

23. Howe, *The Modern City and Its Problems* (New York, 1915). The quotes are from pages 209-210, 369.

frequent visitor to Mabel Dodge's Fifth Avenue salon, where he mingled with radicals such as Emma Goldman and Big Bill Haywood, poets like Edward Arlington Robinson and George Sylvester Viereck, avant-garde artists of the Alfred Stieglitz group, and pundits of the Lincoln Steffens and Walter Lippmann stripe.²⁴

In 1911 Howe became secretary of the newly launched National Progressive Republican League. He had spent two winters teaching political science at the University of Wisconsin and had returned filled with admiration for the new organization's moving spirit, Senator Robert M. La Follette, "WHOSE WORK IN WISCONSIN," he wrote in the dedication to *Wisconsin: An Experiment in Democracy* (1912), "LAID THE FOUNDATIONS FOR A DEMOCRATIC COMMONWEALTH."²⁵ When the La Follette presidential boom collapsed, Howe refused to climb upon the T.R. bandwagon. He never forgave Roosevelt for supporting Congressman Theodore Burton in his 1907 race for mayor of Cleveland against Tom Johnson. Instead, Howe voted for his former teacher at Johns Hopkins, Woodrow Wilson. Increasingly active in New York "good government" circles, he and Professor Frank Goodnow of Columbia University made an exhaustive investigation of the administration of the city's schools. He was a member of the committee of citizens that nominated Wilson Democrat John Purroy Mitchel for mayor in 1913 on the Fusion party ticket. Though Mitchel won, his emphasis upon economy and efficiency at the expense of larger human values disappointed Howe. In 1914 Wilson appointed Howe United States Commissioner of Immigration at the Port of New York. He accepted because he saw in the job an opportunity to relieve suffering and injustice. For the next five years he waged an only partially suc-

24. On the Village scene and *The Masses*, see Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917* (Quadrangle Books ed., Chicago, 1964), 279-329, and William L. O'Neill, ed., *Echoes of Revolt: The Masses, 1911-1917* (Chicago, 1966).

25. Howe, *Wisconsin: An Experiment in Democracy* (New York, 1912), [v]. For Howe's role in the National Progressive Republican League and close personal ties with La Follette, see Belle C. and Fola La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette* (2 vols., New York, 1953), 224, 265, 284, 306, 314-318, 331, 387-389.

cessful battle to humanize Ellis Island, to overcome the inertia and hostility of the bureaucracy, to protect the immigrant from those who sought to exploit him, and to help the newcomers find jobs.

These years saw Howe move to the left politically. Part of the explanation was his bitterness over what he regarded as betrayal by his "sort of people" in the Cleveland street railway fight;²⁶ part was the influence of his newly found friends. But the most important catalyst was World War I. Even before moving to New York he had embraced a highly oversimplified economic interpretation of history. So when the European conflagration broke out, he had a ready explanation at hand. The desire by the ruling—and by definition, owning—classes at home for special privileges abroad had led to imperialism. The focal point of the conflicting imperialist ambitions of the powers was the Near East, where German activities threatened British, French, and Russian economic, political, and strategic interests. And these imperialist rivalries had culminated in the war. "It is," he exclaimed in *Why War* (1916), "the struggle of high finance bent on the exploitation of weaker peoples that has turned Europe into a human slaughterhouse. . . ." Could the United States avoid this pitfall? "Ambitions and fears have been aroused," he warned, "that have united the privileged classes in a movement for financial imperialism, for a great naval programme, for colossal expenditures for preparedness. . . ."²⁷

When Secretary of the Treasury William G. McAdoo proposed to throw the major share of the tax burden for increased military expenditures upon the lower and middle classes, Howe joined with John Dewey and George L. Record in organizing the Association for an Equitable Federal Income Tax to push for placing the cost of preparedness upon those in the higher income brackets. Taking advantage of aroused public feeling, a West-South coalition in Congress voted new income and inheritance taxes which represented a striking

26. Howe, *The Confessions of a Reformer*, 321-322.

27. Howe, *Why War* (New York, 1916). The quotes are from pages viii and xi. Howe emphasized the importance of German penetration into the Near East in causing the war in *The Only Possible Peace* (New York, 1919), esp. 33-185.

triumph for the advocates of a progressive tax policy.²⁸ In the 1916 election Howe rallied behind Wilson as the only hope for the continuation of peace and progressivism.²⁹ After the United States entered the war, he made his bow to the popular insistence upon German war guilt. The Junker military caste that ruled Germany, he explained in *The Only Possible Peace* (1919), not satisfied with diplomacy and economic penetration, had resorted to *Machtpolitik* to win Germany its place in the sun. But he continued to insist that the only lasting peace was a peace that would remove the economic causes of war. His alternative to imperialism was freedom, self-determination for subject peoples; temporary international guardianship over those not prepared for self-rule; free trade; neutralization and international control of all trade routes, land or sea; free and equal access by all nations to the natural resources of the earth; and equality of opportunity for investment in backward countries, with an international tribunal to protect the inhabitants from exploitation.³⁰

Howe was dismayed by the administration's repressive actions to muzzle dissent. And he was disheartened to see big businessmen hostile to the aims of the New Freedom placed in seats of authority. But he regarded Wilson's Fourteen Points as the only hope for a democratic and lasting peace. Through his friendship with George Creel, head of the Committee on Public Information, he was named a member of the American mission to the peace conference as an expert on the eastern Mediterranean. At Paris came his final disillusionment. Wilson, trapped by his lack of expert knowledge, his fear of revolution, and his overweening personal egotism and supersensitivity, abandoned one principle after another. Howe denounced the resulting League of Nations as an Allied-dominated international police force to protect the division of spoils made at Paris. Rather than a peace to end war, the Treaty of Ver-

28. Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917* (New York, 1954), 192-196.

29. Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace, 1916-1917* (Princeton, 1965), 124-125.

30. Howe, *The Only Possible Peace*, esp. v-xi, 20-22, 54-55, 186-265. His peace recommendations were summarized in Howe, "Economic Foundations of the League of Nations," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, LXXXIII (May 1919), 313-316.

sailles sowed the seeds of future conflicts. Rather than making the world safe for democracy, the war had undermined democracy at home. The progressive movement was dead; big business was back in public favor; labor was on the defensive. Howe's plea for a federal public works program to ease the transition to peace went unheeded.³¹ Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane's proposal for a national resettlement program to place returning soldiers on the land—which Howe had extolled in a hastily written book as a step toward economic democracy—lay bottled up in Congress.³² The "Red Scare" was at its height. Rather than carry out deportation orders against his conscience, Howe resigned his post. Liberalism, Howe concluded sadly, had failed—and so had his own class. "It had failed at home; it had failed abroad."³³

In his *Revolution and Democracy* (1921), Howe painted a grim picture of monopoly extending its grip over every aspect of American life. During the war, he had written an angry philippic blaming the high cost of living upon the stifling of production by monopoly.³⁴ Thorstein Veblen's 1919 series in *The Dial* on "Contemporary Problems in Reconstruction"—published two years later in book form as *The Engineers and the Price System*—sharpened his thinking along this line. Taking his lead from Veblen, Howe pictured sabotage rampant in the United States.³⁵ Industry was suppressing new inventions

31. His plea was in Howe, "A Constructive Program for the Rehabilitation of the Returning Soldiers," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, LXXX (November, 1918), 150-153. The lack of planning for peace is described in John D. Hicks, *Rehearsal for Disaster: The Boom and Collapse of 1919-1920* (Gainesville, Fla., 1961), 1-15, 35-36.

32. Lane's proposal is discussed in Paul K. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1959), 50-54; for Howe's enthusiastic espousal of the idea, see his *The Land and the Soldier* (New York, 1919).

33. Howe, *The Confessions of a Reformer*, 320.

34. Howe, *The High Cost of Living* (New York, 1917), esp. v-vii.

35. On the Veblen articles, see Daniel Bell, "Introduction," in Thorstein Veblen, *The Engineers and the Price System* (New York, 1963), 2-35, and Joseph Dorfman, *Thorstein Veblen and His America* (New York, 1934), 438-447. Howe did not formally acknowledge Veblen's influence in *Revolution and Democracy* (New York, 1921), but the similarity between his ideas and Veblen's—especially Veblen's first essay, "On the Nature and Uses of Sabotage"—is too striking to be mere coincidence.

and limiting production to charge monopoly prices. Wall Street was stifling new enterprise by its control over credit. Land speculators were keeping half the nation's cultivatable land out of use. Even labor was affected by the new spirit. Having no say in management, given no share in profits, laid off when business was slow, the worker was reacting by slacking off, sabotaging production, striking.

The industrial feudalism that had grown up since the Civil War had in turn, Howe contended, resulted in political feudalism. In every age and country, he insisted, the political state reflected the will of the most powerful economic class. Thus, in the United States after 1865, control of the political state had fallen into the hands of an exploiting, parasitical class which was muzzling dissent, shifting the burdens of society from the privileged few to the masses, and leading the United States down the fateful road of imperialism and war. Privileged wealth controlled the press, public opinion, education, and even the churches. As a result, a new psychology had appeared. The exploiting type had replaced the producer in public esteem. But there were hopeful signs. The ever heavier burdens of monopoly were sharpening the lines of division between the producers—whom Howe variously defined as workers, farmers, professional men, persons of small means, engineers, and builders—and the exploiting class and its hangers-on. Everywhere throughout the world, the producing classes were stirring and beginning to realize their strength.

In this mood, Howe hailed the Bolshevik Revolution for overthrowing the regime of privilege and establishing a government based upon the producing classes. But his deep love of freedom saved him from the fate—to which so many liberals of his time succumbed—of becoming a Soviet apologist. At the height of his pro-Soviet enthusiasm, he lamented the suppression of freedom in Russia.³⁶ He called for the abolition of the wage system, but he did not favor the nationalization of industry. The harassment of dissent before and after the armistice had reinforced his long-time suspicions of the political state. Industrial democracy would come through cooperation, and Howe's ideal was not the Soviet Union but Denmark. The Danes had shown the world that men could through co-

36. Howe, *Revolution and Democracy*, xviii-xix, 189-195.

operation successfully build a democratic society which eliminated privilege without subjecting the individual to bureaucratic regimentation.³⁷ Even in the depths of the Great Depression, Howe would extol the Danish way as a middle way between capitalism, on the one hand, with its false individualism that served as a mask for privilege, and communism, on the other, with its tendency "to centralization, to bureaucracy, to the encouragement of the autocratic rather than the democratic impulses of men."³⁸

The Danish model remained his dream for the United States. But he had lost his faith in "the 'goodness' of my class." Self-interest allied the middle class with privilege. Labor must take the lead in the work of social reconstruction. Attracted by their support of the Plumb Plan for government ownership and operation of the railroads, he hoped that the railroad brotherhoods would provide the base for building the new cooperative commonwealth. He became associated with Edward Keating in editing the brotherhoods' weekly paper, *Labor*. He even induced the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers to open a cooperative bank in Cleveland as a first step toward his larger goal. Advocacy of the Plumb Plan brought the railroad brotherhoods into politics. Howe was convinced that neither of the existing parties represented the producers; each was dominated by the exploiting class. A new party was needed that would represent the "primary producers"—the workers and farmers.³⁹ Hoping to build a farmer-labor alliance, Howe played a prominent role in organizing in February 1922 the Conference for Progressive Political Action. With the financial backing of the railroad brotherhoods, the CPPA actively campaigned in the congressional elections of 1922. The results were so encouraging that the Conference took the lead in launching the Progressive party of 1924 with Robert M. La Follette as its standard bearer.⁴⁰ The outcome

37. Howe, *Denmark: A Cooperative Commonwealth* (New York, 1921), esp. iii-ix, 182-199; Howe, "A Political Utopia," *The Nation*, CXXVII, 3294 (August 22, 1928), 178-179.

38. Howe, *Denmark: The Cooperative Way* (New York, 1936), 1-17.

39. Howe, *The Confessions of a Reformer*, 324-335.

40. On the CPPA and the launching of the Progressive party, see: Kenneth C. MacKay, *The Progressive Movement of 1924* (New York, 1947), 54-79, 110-142.

was a bitter disappointment to Howe. Although confident of the final triumph of justice over privilege, he decided to retire from politics and devote himself to personal self-development, to expanding his horizons and gaining a larger understanding of life and its meanings.

There *The Confessions of a Reformer* ended. In the 1920's Howe remained in semi-retirement. In the summers he ran an informal "School of Opinion" at his home on Nantucket Island; he spent his winters studying and traveling in Europe. But in 1932 he returned to the political wars, actively supporting F.D.R.⁴¹ After the passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act to raise farm prices, Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace thought that there should be someone to look after the interests of the consumer. At the suggestion of economic adviser Louis Bean, he appointed Howe Consumers' Counsel for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration in July 1933. Howe's efforts to organize consumers in a militant campaign against food profiteers made him the target of bitter attacks by food processors and distributors. The attacks on Howe merged with the larger struggle under way in the AAA between the "agrarians" and the "liberals." The "agrarians," led by AAA Administrator George N. Peck and his successor Chester Davis, wanted to increase farm prices within the existing agricultural system; the "liberals," grouped around AAA General Counsel Jerome Frank and looking for intellectual leadership to Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Rexford G. Tugwell, wanted a broad program of social reform. When the showdown came in 1935, Wallace backed Davis.⁴² In the "purge" of liberals that followed, Howe was removed as Consumers' Counsel but kept on in the Department of Agriculture as a special adviser to the Secretary. In this capacity Howe worked with his close friend Tugwell—whom he praised for his "vision . . . of a different kind of America"

41. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933* (Boston, 1957), 421-422.

42. The struggle within the AAA is described in: Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston, 1958), 40-84; William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York, 1963), 75-76, 139; and David E. Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers: The Story of Sharecroppers in the New Deal* (Urbana, Ill., 1965), 37-153.

—in formulating plans for the new Resettlement Administration.⁴³ In 1937 he left the department to become a consultant on farm tenancy and cooperatives in the Philippines. After finishing this assignment, he undertook a study of European banking for the Federal Monopoly Committee. He was completing this when he died of heart trouble on August 3, 1940.

Howe was a prolific writer but not a first-rate mind. His books were too hastily written, rambling, and repetitive; he was more a polemicist than a trail blazer. In his division of society into producers versus non-producers, in his denunciations of privilege and law-created monopolies, in his pleas for equality of opportunity, and in his defense of local self-government and suspicions of the too powerful state, he was a latter-day Jacksonian in a different and far more difficult world. Because of the highly oversimplistic economic interpretation of history to which he subscribed, his answers to complex problems were too simple, too pat. For all his unlearning, Howe never fully escaped from the "evangelistic psychology" of his youth.⁴⁴ His remained a world of moral absolutes. Justice, democracy, and freedom were on one side; on the other, privilege, monopoly, and imperialism. Like so many reformers of his—and our—generation, Howe was too prone to view the world in black and white.

Yet, at a time when most of his contemporaries looked upon the city with pessimism or even anxiety, Howe preached a message of hope. He was among the first to call for comprehensive city planning to deal with the manifold problems accompanying rapid urbanization. He plotted the path of more and improved services for its citizens that the American city of the future would follow. He was a noble soul who fought tirelessly against injustice and man's inhumanity toward man, without thought of personal gain or glory. And he was no armchair warrior in that struggle. He fought on the hustings and in legislative chambers to make Cleveland the "City on a Hill" Tom Johnson dreamed of; he labored to protect the immigrant from exploitation; he was a stalwart

43. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 157. Howe's praise for Tugwell is in Richard S. Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt* (Columbia, Mo., 1966), 116.

44. Howe, *The Confessions of a Reformer*, 17.

champion of woman's suffrage; he courageously defended traditional liberties and the right of dissent in a time of hysteria; and he struggled to keep burning the flame of reform in the dark days of the 1920's. At the same time, his dedication to freedom saved him from the pro-Soviet illusions to which too many liberals fell prey in the years between the wars. If *The Confessions of a Reformer* illustrates the weaknesses of the twentieth-century American liberal mind, so also does it testify to its lasting and enduring strengths.