AJES Vol. 8 No. 3 APR 1949 pp 299–309

The Civic Revival in Ohio

Reformed Businessman: Tom L. Johnson

By ROBERT H. BREMNER

OF ALL THE LEADERS of the Civic Revival none had a clearer mental picture of his goal than did Tom L. Johnson, and none had a more definite program for achieving it. If there can be said to be any tragedy in a life dominated by a courageous struggle to realize an ideal, it was, in Johnson's case, that he was never allowed to apply to the problems of the city the remedy which he felt was fundamental to their solution. A man who liked directness, he had to work indirectly; a man who was convinced that there could be no compromise with privilege, he had to accept, in the biggest fight of his life, a so-called victory that involved just such a compromise. Johnson was indebted to Henry George for both his goal and his program but the ability, conviction, and resourcefulness with which he pursued his ideal were his own. He was not an original thinker although he accepted new ideas as eagerly as most men hold on to old ones.[1] He had a beautiful vision of a gleaming "city on a hill." Primarily, however, he was an active man. He was interested in physics and mathematics but his hobby was inventing things, not studying pure science. He liked big things. When he read, it was books like Gibbon's "Decline and Fall." In politics, if he is remembered at all, it will be because, as one of his greatest admirers expressed it, "Tom Johnson first projected in deeds what other men only dreamed or wished or wrote or thought."[2]

I

EARLY IN 1900 rumors began to circulate in Cleveland that one of that city's most picturesque characters was planning to return to Cleveland to re-establish a permanent residence there. Tom Johnson, the traction magnate, the stock manipulator, the steel man, the ex-Congressman, the single-taxer, was coming home. The new rumors supplanted earlier news-

[1] *Cf.* the characterization of Johnson in Frederic C. Howe, "The Confessions of a Reformer," (New York, 1925), pp. 127–9.

[2] Lincoln Steffens to Tom. L. Johnson, Oct. 23, 1908; "The Letters of Lincoln Steffens," edited by Ella Winter and Granville Hicks, (New York, 1938), I, p. 206. If we are to judge by the opinions expressed in his letters, the only other contemporary figure for whom Steffens had as much respect as he did for Johnson was Nikolai Lenin.

paper talk that Johnson and his brother were forming a syndicate to operate the street railways of Honolulu. It was generally believed that Johnson's return was prompted by a desire to re-enter politics but no one knew whether it was his old seat in Congress or the mayoralty that he sought. The newspapers agreed that his immediate object was election as a delegate to the National Democratic Convention to be held that summer in Kansas City At any rate, his election as a delegate to the convention was obtained by one of his political lieutenants on April 18, 1900.

Many people then felt toward Johnson as they were to feel all during his later political career. He was "a mysterious man," "an enigma."[3] It was not that his political views were unknown (for he had made them clear in his two terms in Congress and by his support of Henry George in the latter's two campaigns for mayor of New York City), but that they were inexplicable.

How could the president of a street railway company believe in municipal ownership? How could a steel manufacturer advocate free trade? Or, conversely, how could a sincere opponent of monopoly conscientiously allow himself to make money out of the practices he condemned? Such a man must be a demagogue.

Johnson was never able to convince these people of what his friends called his "larger morality." One of his supporters commented rather bitterly on how "puzzlingly funny" it was that men who were the prey of every get-rich-quick concern and confidence game, men who believed without question whatever their newspapers or party leaders told them, became suddenly skeptical and very wise whenever the sincerity of Tom Johnson was discussed.[4] They were simply unable to understand a man so emancipated that he did not feel obliged to make excuses for the way he made his money.

Johnson announced his retirement from business at the Jackson Day Dinner held in Cleveland early in January 1901.[5] At the same time he disclaimed any interest in political office. Nevertheless, about a month later, on the night of Feb. 6, 1901, a delegation of fifty prominent Democrats called on Johnson at his home. They brought with them a petition, which bore upward of 15,000 names, asking him to become a candidate for

[3] See the newspaper opinions of Johnson reprinted in *The Public*, XIV, pp. 673–768 (July 21, 1911), especially the quotation from *The Palladium* (New Haven), April 13, 1911, on p. 704.

[4] Joseph Dana Miller, "President Roosevelt and Mayor Johnson as Typical Representatives of Opposing Political Ideals," *The Arena*, XXX, pp. 146–51 (Aug. 1903), especially p. 150.

[5] *Cleveland Leader*, Jan. 7, 1901.

mayor. Johnson then consented.[6] He was unopposed at the Democratic primaries and was elected on April 1 by a margin of more than 6,000 votes.[7]

The very first thing he did as mayor was to break a tradition. It was customary for newly-elected officials to wait for two or three weeks after the election before qualifying for office. Fearing that the incumbent mayor would give his consent to an ordinance signing away the city's rights to a strip of lakefront land, Johnson had previously obtained an injunction preventing him from acting on this issue. On April 4, immediately after the Board of Elections had completed its official count of the votes, he took the oath of office. There were then just thirty-seven minutes before the injunction was to expire.[8]

With this dramatic step Johnson began the first of his four terms. In hardly more than a year his activities had become so menacing to privilege that, in order to stop him, his enemies had to overthrow the government not only of Cleveland, but of every city in Ohio.

II

JOHNSON WAS NO MORE of a reformer than was Jones. When serious young Fred Howe, who thought politics should be a crusade against politicians and spoilsmen, first saw him, he was disappointed. Johnson was not the kind of businessman Howe counted on to redeem politics. He was not indignant enough.[9] Probably the most conspicuous thing about Johnson's personality was his attractiveness to people. There was a charm about this unafraid, happy kind of man that made people like him. Thirty years after his death a friend remembers the combination of delicacy and gusto with which he would devour a huge Sunday morning breakfast.[10] A generous man was Johnson, but greedy, too. Greedy for work, greedy for affection, and greedy for accomplishment.

Brand Whitlock wrote a short story called "The Gold Brick." The central figure was the mayor of a large city. After a hectic campaign he was asked: "Is there anything better in life than to know you have done a good thing, and done it well?" "Yes, just one," the mayor replied. "To have a few friends who understand."[11] Johnson had that kind of friends.

During his nine years as mayor there gathered around him a group of

[6] *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Feb. 7, 1901.
[7] *Cleveland Leader*, April 2, 1901.
[8] Tom L. Johnson, "My Story," edited by Elizabeth J. Hauser, (New York, 1911), p. 117.
[9] "Confessions of a Reformer," pp. 88–90.
[10] Interview with Peter Witt, March 24, 1942.
[11] *The American Magazine*, LXVII, pp. 42–51 (November 1908).

talented young men of whom Newton D. Baker, Frederic Howe, and Peter Witt are only the best known. Their relations with him were not those of courtiers, not even those of disciples. They were fellow-workers who had caught his enthusiasm for making Cleveland a city on a hill. Because Johnson was such a good companion, the work they did with him was fun. More than that, he made them feel that it was valuable work.[12] In after years nearly all of Johnson's associates remembered their service with him as the most important period of their lives.

The personal charm of Tom Johnson is a very important factor in the history of the Civic Revival. It helps to explain the spirit that dominated the Cleveland movement as long as he lived. It inspired men in other cities to take up the fight against privilege and, it seems hardly necessary to say, it attracted many people to the movement who might have been unaffected by intellectual appeals.

Charm alone did not make Tom Johnson one of the outstanding political leaders of the twentieth century. He had in addition a quality which we will call intellectual integrity. Neither success nor defeat could distort his honest way of looking at things. When he arrived at a decision his mind was convinced by the facts in the case, not duped by his own rationalizations. When it had been proved to his satisfaction that the Henry George philosophy was true, he accepted it wholeheartedly even though it meant that he must give up his old ideas and admit that his business was wrong. He did more than just accept it, however. He began to work for it.

Critics have asked, "If Johnson was convinced that the business in which he was engaged was immoral, why didn't he get out of it immediately?" The answer is that he was not concerned with his personal goodness or badness. He did not have Golden Rule Jones' troubled heart. What he was interested in was advancing the single tax movement. Henry George showed him how he could help by making money. Without defending his economic activities, he continued them as long as they were useful to the movement to which his energies were dedicated. When he was ready—that is, when he thought he had enough money to last him the rest of his life and to enable him to devote himself solely to politics—he retired.

Johnson's mind had a kind of literalness that went beyond mere unreasoning optimism. He looked at things straight and what he saw was the important thing, the constructive thing, the thing one could build

[12] For a discussion of Johnson's relations with his friends see Howe, "Confessions," pp. 127–128.

upon. When he was a little boy, it was said, he didn't cry when his toy animals were knocked over—there were two still standing. On election night in 1909, when it was plain that he had been defeated for re-election, he waited up until early in the morning to see how his candidates for the Board of Quadrennial Appraisers had made out. Four out of five of them were elected. To him that was the important thing about the election.[13]

Johnson realized something of what was in store for him when he became mayor of Cleveland. Shortly before the election Fred Howe asked him why he didn't break with the discredited politicians who were connected with his campaign. If he did, Howe was sure that the respectable voters would flock to his support. "Your good people will never vote for me," Johnson told Howe. "No matter what I do, they will oppose me. This fight cuts too deep. It hurts too many interests and disturbs too many opinions. The only people who will follow me are the poor and the politicians who will follow them."[14]

Before the fight was over Johnson had lost his money and ruined his health. But he was no martyr. He did what he wanted to do and what, being the kind of man he was, he had to do. When he left office in 1910 he could truthfully say of the years of his mayoralty: "I have had more of misfortune in those nine years than in any other period of my life. As that is true, it is also true that I have had more of joy. In those nine years I have given the biggest and best part of me. I have served the people of Cleveland the best I knew how."[15]

III

JOHNSON WAS FORTY-SEVEN years old when he became mayor of Cleveland. He had been a money-making businessman, and was recognized as a leading exponent of the single tax. His only previous political experience had been his two terms in Congress. That within a short time after becoming mayor he was able to establish a reputation as the foremost municipal executive in American history was typical of his career.

Johnson caught on fast. He was born in Kentucky in 1854. His father, a slave-holder who owned a cotton plantation in Arkansas, took part in the Civil War. At the close of the war the penniless family was stranded in Staunton, Virginia. Tom, aged eleven, worked out a deal with the conductor of the one-train-a-day which entered the town: the con-

[13] For an account of Johnson's reaction to this election see Elizabeth Hauser, "The Last Chapter" in Johnson, "My Story," p. 296.

[14] This is a paraphrase of a conversation quoted in Howe, "Confessions," 98.

[15] Quoted in *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Jan. 2, 1910.

ductor sold papers only to Tom; Tom sold them for as much as he could get. He made eighty-eight dollars out of this monopoly. With the money so obtained, the Johnson family was enabled to move back to Louisville. At the age of fifteen he entered the street railway business as an office boy.[16] Within a year he had been made secretary of the company. At twenty-two he was married, was a successful inventor,[17] and had purchased the majority interest in the Indianapolis street railway system.

To make this last enterprise pay he had not only to rejuvenate the run-down property but also to fight William H. English, the most important political figure in the city and one of the most powerful financially. English, from whom Johnson had bought his interest in the company, used his wide influence to embarrass the company in every way possible. It was apparently his hope that Johnson would be unable to meet his financial obligations and that the road would consequently revert to his control. But Johnson, working with another group of bankers, was successful in this contest and was eventually able to buy English's minority stock.

In 1879, just ten years after his entry into the street railway business, Johnson was bidding against Mark Hanna for franchises in Cleveland. Johnson counted his relations with Hanna as among the most influential experiences of his life, for from Hanna he learned the connection between business and politics.[18] He had bought a small street car line on the West Side of Cleveland which he began to operate with nineteen mules and four second-hand cars. His first important struggle with Hanna was caused by his attempt to obtain the right (or privilege, as he would later call it) to extend this line to the Public Square. When this had been won, the issue between the men shifted to Johnson's effort to secure East Side lines which, by connecting with his older West Side ones, would enable him to offer the riders through service.

In 1893 Johnson's Cleveland lines consolidated with two other important street car systems there. The resulting company controlled sixty per cent of the Cleveland street railway business.[19] Johnson sold his interest in this company in 1894 and 1895 "and never afterwards had any pecuniary connections with street railroads" in Cleveland.[20] At this time Johnson

[16] The following account of Johnson's business career is based upon the early chapters of "My Story."

[17] Of the first coin fare box in use in the United States.

[18] "My Story," p. 28.

[19] This company was popularly known as the "Big Con." About a month later Hanna secured control of the remaining Cleveland street railway systems. The public and the newspapers promptly dubbed this the "Little Con." In 1903 the two companies merged to form the Cleveland Electric Railway Company, or, the "Con-Con."

[20] Johnson, "My Story," p. 88.

had, or later acquired, interests in street railway systems in Detroit, Brooklyn and St. Louis. As a street railway magnate Johnson seems to have made as much money out of stock manipulation as he did out of the actual operation of the lines under his control.[21] He would engineer the consolidation of several street railway systems into one large company which would be capitalized at a much higher figure than the sum of the capitalizations of the constituent companies. Then Johnson would sell out his interest in the new company at a large profit.[22]

In the late eighteen eighties Johnson branched out into the steel business. Just before the Johnstown flood he helped to organize a steel rail mill in that city. During the flood Johnson was made administrator of the three million dollar charity fund contributed by the American people to the relief of Johnstown. This was an experience, he stated later, that made him aware of the dangers of charity and doubtful of its efficacy as a solution to fundamental wrongs.[23]

Several years later, at about the same time that Jones was opening the Acme Sucker Rod Company in Toledo, Johnson built the Lorain Steel Company at Lorain, Ohio. He was thus one of the first steel producers to realize, and to act upon his realization, that the most economical point for the production of steel was shifting from the Pittsburgh area to the lake shore.

In both their Johnstown and Lorain ventures Johnson and his associates purchased large tracts of land around the sites of their mills so that they would be able to profit from the increased land values that would result from the growing up of communities around the mills. In other words, they were acting upon the single tax theory.

IV

JOHNSON WAS AT THE HEIGHT of his enjoyment of his business career when the incident occurred that was to change his outlook on life. One day in 1883 while riding a train between Indianapolis and Cleveland he read a book by Henry George. The book was a cheap edition of "Social Problems." Johnson followed this up with "Progress and Poverty."

What he read disturbed him. It sounded true but he didn't want to believe it. Then Johnson did an amusing and typical thing: he took "Progress and Poverty" to his lawyer, told him to read it, and to find out what was the matter with it. When the lawyer's objections to George's

[21] Howe, "Confessions," p. 87.
[22] This is what he did in the Cleveland deal mentioned above.
[23] Johnson, "My Story," pp. 40–4.

8 20

teachings failed to satisfy him, Johnson confessed himself a convert to a philosophy that was as yet unnamed. At his first opportunity he went to see George in Brooklyn.

Out of their first meeting stemmed a friendship that lasted as long as George lived. This was Johnson's richest experience. From the beginning, his relations with George were those of pupil and teacher. At their first interview Johnson found himself telling George the story of his life. "I can't write and I can't speak," he said, "but I can make money. Can a man help who can just make money?"[24] George sensibly replied that there was room in the movement for a money-maker, but instead of pressing this point told Johnson that, having never tried, he didn't know that he couldn't write or speak effectively. He urged Johnson to enter politics.

Johnson disregarded the latter suggestion for the time being. His initial contribution to the propagation of George's ideas was to buy two hundred copies of the philosopher's latest book, "Protection or Free Trade." He sent one to every clergyman and lawyer in Cleveland. He gave financial support to all of George's political campaigns and later contributed heavily to single tax publications such as the *Cleveland Recorder* and to *The Public*.[25]

His first political speech was made in 1888 during George's campaign for Secretary of State in New York. In the same year he was nominated for Representative to Congress by the Democrats of the twenty-first Ohio district. According to Johnson's account the nomination came to him unsolicited. He had never voted before. Unsuccessful in this election, he was nominated again in 1890, and this time defeated his Republican opponent, Theodore Burton. He was re-elected in 1892 but in the election of 1894 lost to Burton.

Johnson, whose informal style of speaking contrasted with the turbid "bloviating" then in vogue,[26] was at his best in answering questions and in handling hecklers. In the mid-nineties, after he had taken charge of the question period at a single tax meeting, George told him: "I can go now. There is someone else to answer the questions."[27]

George was with Johnson much of the time the latter was in Congress. During his first term Johnson was a member of the Committee on the

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[25] Louis F. Post, "Our Tom L. Johnson Memorial," *The Public*, XIV, pp. 673–4 (July 21, 1911).

[26] To "bloviate" was an expression coined by Warren G. Harding to describe his own style of flowery oratory; Samuel Hopkins Adams, "The Incredible Era" (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1939), p. 35.

[27] Johnson, "My Story," p. 54.

District of Columbia. He obtained the passage of a resolution authorizing an investigation of the assessment of land values in the District of Columbia and was named chairman of the investigating committee. The report of this committee was an examination of the taxing methods employed in the District. It brought to light a staggering under-assessment of real estate for tax purposes. It revealed also that while residential property was being assessed at from seventy to eighty per cent of its market value, land held for speculative purposes (*i.e.*, vacant lots) and valuable business property was assessed at as little as ten per cent of its market value.[28]

Although representing a district supposedly strongly in favor of a protective tariff, Johnson advocated free trade in and out of Congress. In the spring of 1892 he was one of the six men who succeeded in having George's "Protection or Free Trade" read into the *Congressional Record* in its entirety. Over a million copies of this were then printed and distributed as campaign material under congressional frank. At the Democratic National Convention in 1892 Johnson was instrumental in getting the minority report on the tariff plan, an endorsement of free trade, adopted on the floor of the convention.

While in Congress Johnson was able to say, "As far as I am personally concerned I am a thorough-going monopolist, and would be willing, outside of this Hall, to take advantage of any of the bad laws that you put upon the statute books; but I will not defend them here."[29] His business activities in the later eighteen nineties, however, brought his principles and practices more and more into conflict.

After his defeat for re-election to Congress in 1894, Johnson took over the management of the Detroit street car lines. At this time Hazen S. Pingree, the Governor of Michigan and former mayor of Detroit, was attempting to establish a municipally-controlled street railway in Detroit. Johnson credited Pingree with impressing upon him the practicability of the three-cent fare. He claimed that he did nothing to hinder Pingree's low-fare road except to make his own line better than it.

Johnson's company eventually bought out the three-cent-fare road Pingree had hoped to make the nucleus of a municipal system. Later, however, he co-operated with Pingree in an attempt to sell the whole street railway system of Detroit to the city. This effort failed because of the opposition of important citizens of Detroit to Pingree and popular distrust of Johnson.[30]

[28] Select Committee to Investigate Tax Assessment in the District of Columbia, *Assessment of Taxes in the District of Columbia*, 52 Cong., 1 Sess., Report 1496.

[29] *Congressional Record*, 53 Cong., 2 Sess., p. 641, Jan. 10, 1894.

[30] Johnson recounts his Detroit experience in "My Story," pp. 91–97.

Johnson's traction interests in Brooklyn gave him a glimpse of a city-owned street car line in operation. He saw enough to convince him of the practical possibilities of municipal ownership and operation of municipal transportation facilities. This was a theory in which he had believed at least since his Johnstown days. Johnson had already liquidated his Cleveland street railway ownings and in 1898 he began to withdraw entirely from the transportation business. Shortly afterward he sold his steel interests.[31] By 1901, as we have seen, his retirement from business was complete.

He was now ready to devote himself to politics with the advancement of the single tax and the principle of municipal ownership of public utilities as his chief objectives. In February 1901, before his nomination for mayor, he proposed to build a street car line in Columbus that would operate at a three-cent fare, and under close municipal supervision, but his offer was rejected by the city council.[32]

V

YOUTH, VIGOR, PERSONAL ATTRACTIVENESS—Johnson brought all these characteristics to the movement he headed in Cleveland. In him were combined the idealism of a radical democrat, the conviction of a man who had found a philosophy that satisfied him intellectually and spiritually, and the sheer ability which we associate with the successful business executive. Business had given him practice in handling big things, big sums, and big ideas. In conflicts with business rivals like English and Hanna, he developed the extraordinary resourcefulness which was to be such a valuable asset to the Civic Revival in Cleveland. He learned from the inside how privilege fights and for what. And he learned, too, that, while privilege may be an evil influence, it need not be composed of evil men.

Henry George made Johnson a radical by showing him that poverty is social in its origin, rather than individual. From him Johnson learned that there is more real satisfaction in fighting for just social conditions than there is in the most complete personal success. Every idea that Johnson took from George seemed confirmed to him by his own later experiences in business and politics.

Johnson was unique in one respect: his ability to combine principle with expediency. His goal was the abolition of privilege and poverty through the use of the single tax, free trade, municipal ownership of all public utilities, home rule for cities, and direct legislation. He kept this goal

[31] Carl Lorenz, "Tom. L. Johnson, Mayor of Cleveland," (New York, 1911), p. 9.
[32] *The Cleveland Leader*, Feb. 3, 5, 1901.

squarely before him and never pretended that he was or would be satisfied with any accomplishment less than its achievement. But to obtain it, he would use any weapons at hand.

To get closer to it he would work for any immediately attainable reforms. If he could not at first get the single tax adopted, he would take tax revision; if state laws denied the city the right to own its utilities he would take municipal control of utilities until the laws had been changed. Meantime he would work for home rule that would enable the city not only to devise its own form of taxation but also to own its street railways, electric light and power stations, and gas plants.

Johnson did not look upon these expedients as compromises. Neither were they victories. They were simply steps forward towards the end he had in view. He was more interested in definite accomplishment (not for himself, but for the cause he served) than in consistency of dogma.

Johnson's resiliency, his ability to take advantage of the current situation to make such gains as were immediately possible without once losing sight of his ultimate object is what makes him the leading spirit in the Civic Revival and, in the writer's opinion, one of the foremost political leaders in the Progressive period.

Johnson was laying the foundations. He knew what he hoped the completed structure of his city on a hill would look like and he was ready to take—and did take—bold steps to finish it. If he was not satisfied with the slow progress he had made, he was not disheartened by its slowness. He had faith in the ability of the people of Cleveland to complete the work they had begun under his leadership.

We must keep this in mind when we say that Tom Johnson failed to achieve his goal. If he failed, the failure is not his alone.

Ohio State University

Citizen Participation in Legislation

THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION announces publication of a booklet, "Working with a Legislature," (96 pp., $1.90), which, while addressed to librarians, will also be of interest to service organizations that are dependent upon legislation for the continuance of their programs. It tells how to go about securing the passage of a good bill, what to do, and what not to do in planning and carrying out a campaign. With the exception of the last chapter, only state legislation is considered. The author is Beatrice Sawyer Rossell.