

THE SINGLE TAX REVIEW

A Record of the Progress of Single Tax and Tax Reform
Throughout the World.

JOSEPH FELS, SINGLE TAXER.

(For the Review)

By FRANK W. GARRISON.

It was only in the last decade of his life that Joseph Fels became thoroughly identified with the Single Tax movement, and yet in this short time he had become the outstanding figure in the cause. The three names which, above all others, symbolize the struggle are Henry George, Tom L. Johnson and Joseph Fels. George as Seer and Prophet, with his exceptional power of lucid analysis, awoke an answering vibration in the hearts of thousands of men and women throughout the world: Johnson, with his genius for practical politics, made a heroic effort to bring theory to the test of practice; and Fels, with his clear business instinct, reorganized the movement and increased its driving power many fold.

We may not hope to understand all the causes which induced him to leave the beaten path of wealth in order to dedicate his life to an unpopular ideal, but as we look back upon his past life, certain salient facts appear. He was born a child of poverty at Halifax Court House, Virginia, in the year 1854; his parents were Jews, living in the South where pride of race was a strong passion, and he thus experienced the double bitterness of the poor and the despised. But, with patient, if unconscious, stoicism he accepted life as he found it. Some schooling he had, but at the age of 17 he was forced to give his attention to money making, which proved a congenial occupation.

In 1891 he was married to Mary Fels of Keokuk, Iowa, and from this time forward his interest in social questions became ever more absorbing and was shared in equal measure by his wife. He had begun his business career as salesman for a soap maker in Baltimore, and in 1874 formed an independent concern in partnership with his father. Three years after his marriage the firm of Fels and Company moved to Philadelphia where the business grew to large proportions and the family fortunes were made.

During these latter years Mr. and Mrs. Fels, first at their home in Germantown, and afterwards in Philadelphia, kept open house and wel-

comed men and women interested in various forms of social betterment. Through Horace Traubel they came to know Single Taxers, and E. B. Gaston awakened their interest in the Fairhope colony. Following the idea suggested by Governor Pingree's potato patches, Fels started the Vacant Lots Cultivation Society. Owners of vacant lots were induced to permit their use as truck gardens, to be cultivated by the poor. The society supplied tools and seed. By working at odd times, or when out of employment, the cultivators were able to add materially to their own support and that of their families. Besides being one of the most self-respecting forms of charity, this enterprise had the advantage of revealing the amount of unused land in a crowded city, and showing that among the poor and unemployed are many persons eager to work. And if so much can be accomplished by cultivating city land, how much more productive it might be made if turned to the use which its location permits!

A new period in the life of Joseph Fels began in 1901 when his firm decided to open an office in London. For the first two or three years business absorbed every waking moment, and other interests were resolutely ignored. But acquaintances had been made, and among them were Kier Hardie and George Lansbury, men who were passionately devoted to the service of democracy. The business was at length firmly established, and the cry of the oppressed ringing in his ears called Fels back to the insistent social problem. A Vacant Lots Cultivation Society was started in London and the idea of establishing farm colonies was suggested. Many schemes were canvassed and found inexpedient before it was decided to buy 100 acres of land at Laindon in Essex. Able bodied paupers from the workhouse were there given an opportunity for healthful employment. It is a pathetic commentary on the Poor Law system to note that such men had become so relaxed through forced inaction that it was difficult to restore the normal power of neglected muscles.

This experiment was followed by one on a larger scale at Hollesley Bay where 1300 acres were purchased as a farm colony for the unemployed. The property had been used as an agricultural school and was provided with the necessary buildings. Here again, as in the case of the Vacant Lots Cultivation Society, was demonstrated the falseness of the common contention that unemployment is due to wilful indolence. Applicants were received and given employment, being free to return to their customary occupations whenever opportunity afforded. It had been the original idea to transform the property into small holdings as fast as the workers developed the requisite knowledge and skill, but before this plan could be worked out, circumstances arose which made it advisable to seek a new field of effort. The Local Government Board under the Tory administration, prior to 1906, had shown a friendly desire to co-operate with the managers of the Hollesley Bay Colony, but when John Burns assumed the Presidency of the Board, after the return of the Liberal party to power, the attitude of the authorities changed, and the original plans had to be abandoned. The government took over the colony and the small holdings feature was dropped.

Another experiment which brought the land question into prominence and received wide publicity was undertaken at Mayland, Essex, where 620 acres were bought and turned into small holdings. Although handicapped by adverse quality of soil and persistent bad weather conditions, much valuable experience was gained to offset elements of disappointment. It was shown, at least, that the land question is not merely an agricultural question.

One more venture remains to chronicle, the purchase of 125 acres in Worcestershire, in the Vale of Evesham, a fine fruit growing region. The land in this valley is cut up into numerous small plots in the hands of individual farmers who, through lack of organization, were handicapped in competing with the large land owners. Their fruit was marketed at Evesham where it was sold at auction, the auctioneer received $7\frac{1}{2}\%$ on the sales, and not always acting in the interest of the farmers. To better these conditions a co-operative Fruit Growers' Market was financed by Joseph Fels and established at the town of Pershore. The first year was disappointing, owing to faulty management, but enough was realized the second year to wipe out the deficit and pay a substantial dividend besides. The cost of marketing was reduced to 5% and members received a bonus of $2\frac{1}{2}\%$ on their total sales. After five years of uniform success the capacity of the market building was reached, and this year more shares were issued and over-subscribed among the growers who had already taken over from the Fels interest the bulk of the original issue. The turnover for the year 1913 was \$120,000 and is expected to be doubled in 1914.

The value of all these efforts to improve the conditions of the under dog is by no means to be measured by the renewed hope planted in the hearts of the large number of persons who benefitted directly by them and were temporarily, or perhaps permanently, lifted above the condition of misery and despair.

“...Many, I believe, there are
Who live a life of virtuous decency,
Men who can hear the Decalogue and feel
No self-reproach; who of the moral law
Established in the land where they abide
Are strict observers; and not negligent
In acts of love to those with whom they dwell,
Their kindred and the children of their blood.
Praise be to such and to their slumbers peace!
—But of the poor man ask, the abject poor;
Go and demand of him, if there be here
In this cold abstinence from evil deeds,
And these inevitable charities,
Wherewith to satisfy the human soul?”

The fruitful lesson to Joseph Fels was that all such schemes as have been recounted are mere palliatives and might be extended indefinitely without measurably diminishing the growing mass of poverty.

During this time contact with a wide variety of opinion had clarified his ideas. He was now living at 10 Cornwall Terrace, Regents Park, in the house that has become so familiar to the friends and acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. Fels. Here were met active spirits from the Labor Party, Socialists and Single Taxers—all sorts of men and women whose common interest was a burning desire to improve intolerable social conditions. Joseph Fels grew as naturally into the Single Tax as a bulb grows through the crust of earth into the sunlight.

The headquarters of the Single Tax agitation was at this time established in Glasgow under the title of the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, and Fels cast about for a means of widening the field of action and making a more effective instrument of the various societies which were more or less loosely affiliated. John Orr was brought to London as Press Agent, and in due course the United Committee followed and took up its quarters at 11 Tothill street, Westminster, within a stone's throw of the Houses of Parliament. *Land Values*, the organ of the movement, was published here under the able direction of John Paul, and literature of all kinds pertinent to the cause was sent broadcast over the land with a liberality heretofore undreamed of. A great organization was built up and the Scottish, Welsh and English Leagues and their subordinate branches were brought in closer touch with one another and infused with a new life. Continuous successions of public meetings in different parts of the country were arranged and general conferences were held periodically where prominent speakers attracted a wider public and resolutions were carried embodying the doctrine of Henry George as applicable to the existing political situation.

Without minimizing the cumulative effect of the work which had gone on unremittingly since British reformers were first aroused by the eloquence of Henry George, it may be said that the movement was shaped into a formidable instrument by Joseph Fels, and its concentrated power made available at a moment of vital importance.

The Liberal government, with its ample majority in the House of Commons, was unable to write any large measure of reform upon the statute book because of the strong and unyielding conservatism of the House of Lords. All measures of serious import to Liberalism were either contemptuously thrown out by the Lords or so mutilated as to be unrecognizable. The only way to get past the upper house was by incorporating a desired measure in the Budget which the Lords could not alter and were forbidden by precedent to reject. But as nothing could be included in the Budget which was not germane to a Money Bill, the question of taxation proved to be the only contentious matter that could be used as a supreme test of strength between the two houses.

The educational work throughout the nation had enlightened the minds of the voters and the Chancellor of the Exchequer found the way prepared for an attack upon the gigantic land monopoly whose chief beneficiaries composed the House of Lords. He therefore determined upon the course which

has now become historic, and in the famous Budget of 1909 provided for a valuation of all the land, exclusive of improvements—a second Domesday Book. It was this clause which enraged the House of Lords and induced them to disregard the unwritten constitution by rejecting the Budget. The result was an appeal to the country, the triumphant return of the Liberal party to power, and the Parliament act definitely limiting the veto power of the Lords. Meanwhile a strong group of land reformers, drawn from the Liberal and Labor parties, was formed in Parliament with the purpose of hastening the valuation and using it as a basis for the taxation of land values and the relief of industry. A memorial urging specific proposals of this nature was signed by 173 members of Parliament and presented to the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the spring of 1911, and formed the basis of resolutions from a large number of municipal bodies all over the Kingdom.

To have been instrumental in precipitating the most dramatic political event of recent times, and to have raised the interdependent questions of land and taxation to a place of vital discussion in Parliament and throughout the country is an achievement which might have satisfied the mind of any ordinary enthusiast, but to Joseph Fels it was only an episode in a world wide campaign. His restless energies carried him over half the globe and led him to organize the Single Taxers of many countries. Through his assistance societies were formed in Scandinavia, France, Spain and South America, and his help was extended to China where the devoted Dr. W. E. Macklin spreads the doctrine in the intervals between healing the sick and seeking the spiritual welfare of the sound of limb. Wherever the instincts of men revolted at the servitude forced upon them by the self-styled owners of the earth Joseph Fels was ready to go at a moment's notice with a copy of *Progress and Poverty* in one hand and a check book in the other.

His work in the United States is too well known to need detailed comment here. He showed the same indefatigable energy in visiting every locality where personal effort might serve to advance the cause. To the fund which bears his name, and which has been in operation for the last five years, he contributed a total of \$131,000 as against a public subscription of \$82,807. The avowed purpose of the fund was to establish the Single Tax somewhere in the country within five years, and this hope has been at least partly realized in Houston, Texas, and Pueblo, Colorado, not to mention marked advances in many other States. The three days Conference held in Washington in January was notable both for the size of the attendance and the public influence of many of the participants. It brought the question to the very doors of the White House where it must soon receive attention if the principles of the new freedom are to be thoroughly applied.

At the dinner which ended the Conference Joseph Fels, referring to some of the complimentary things which had been said about him, declared that he took no credit to himself for his labors in the cause of social justice. It was the occupation which he most enjoyed, "and," he concluded, "the years that I have spent in working for the Single Tax have been the happiest of

my life." Anything in the nature of eulogy would have been distasteful to him. He found his reward here in the sense of peace and the happiness that comes with the triumph over self and the vision of the world freed from the hell of involuntary poverty. "To discover to the world something which deeply concerns it," said Mill, "and of which it was previously ignorant; to prove to it that it had been mistaken in some vital point of temporal or spiritual interest, is as important a service as a human being can render to his fellow creatures."

MEMORIAL MEETINGS FOR JOSEPH FELS.

(For the Review.)

By JOHN T. McROY

The American tributes to Joseph Fels were made worthier commemorations through the presence of Josiah C. Wedgewood, M. P. At Memorial meetings in the United States and Canada, he gave eloquent testimony to the great work of Joseph Fels, and made vivid the appreciation felt in England. His long personal friendship with Mr. Fels, and his distinguished position as parliamentary leader of the Land Values group, alike combined to give great weight to his utterances, and to spur on the American movement.

The first meeting was held in Boston at the South Congregational Church on Saturday, March 7th. Professor Lewis J. Johnson of Harvard presided and spoke as follows:

ADDRESS OF PROF. JOHNSON.

"We have gathered here this evening to do honor to the memory of a lover of his kind.

Joseph Fels loved his neighbor so well that he was ready to assail in his behalf the basic world-injustice.

Fels's neighbor included every man, woman and child. In a peculiarly real sense, 'the world was his country and his countrymen all mankind.' He journeyed as few have done to visit his countrymen of all lands, to cheer them and guide them in their effort for freedom. In his friendship for them he would even make this world available to them—he would go so far as to open it to them; he would bring within their reach its boundless possibilities for greater happiness, and better rounded, richer, nobler lives.

The eye of his clear, keen, practical mind could readily follow the index finger of Henry George, and could see with Henry George that the children of the world were enduring unnatural, needless fetters, inherited, like the divine right of kings, chattel slavery, the subordination of women, from the folly, wickedness, selfishness or ignorance of the past.