

THOMAS PAINE

This year is the bi-centenary of the birth of Thomas Paine. It is appropriate for us to recall that this great reformer had something to say about the land question. His pamphlet on *Agrarian Justice* was written in the winter of 1795-96. It is still in print, together with essays by Thomas Spence and William Ogilvie, in a volume entitled *Pioneers of Land Reform* (Bohn's Popular Library, price 2s.).

The following extracts will show that Paine had grasped very clearly the fundamental distinction between the personal right to improvements and the public right to the value of land. He was not aware of the simple and practical means of carrying out the reform stated by Henry George, and proposed as a rough and ready means, a scheme of inheritance taxation. This is not surprising, for some years were yet to elapse before Ricardo popularized the Law of Rent. But the principle is there, and as Paine says in this pamphlet: "An army of principles will penetrate where an army of soldiers cannot. It will succeed where diplomatic management would fail. It is neither the Rhine, the Channel, nor the Ocean, that can arrest its progress. It will march on the horizon of the world and it will conquer."

To preserve the benefits of what is called civilized life, and to remedy, at the same time, the evils it has produced, ought to be considered as one of the first objects of reformed legislation.

Whether that state that is proudly, perhaps erroneously, called civilization, has most promoted or most injured the general happiness of man, is a question that may be strongly contested. On one side the spectator is dazzled by splendid appearances; on the other he is shocked by extremes of wretchedness; both of which he has created. The most affluent and the most miserable of the human race are to be found in the countries that are called civilized. . . . Civilization, therefore, or that which is so called, has operated two ways, to make one part of society more affluent, and the other part more wretched than would have been the lot of either in a natural state. . . . The first principle of civilization ought to have been, and ought still to be, that the condition of every person born into the world, after a state of civilization commences, ought not to be worse than if he had been born before that period. But the fact is, that the condition of millions, in every country in Europe, is far worse than if they had been born before civilization began, or had been born among the Indians of North America of the present day.

It is a position not to be controverted, that the earth, in its natural uncultivated state, was, and ever would have continued to be, the COMMON PROPERTY OF THE HUMAN RACE. In that state every man would have been born to property. He would have been a joint life-proprietor with the rest in the property of the soil, and in all its natural productions, vegetable and animal.

But the earth in its natural state, as before said, is capable of supporting but a small number of inhabitants compared with what it is capable of doing in a cultivated state. And as it is impossible to separate the improvement made by cultivation, from the earth itself, upon which that improvement is made, the idea of landed property arose from that inseparable connection; but it is nevertheless true, that it is the value of the improvement only, and not the earth itself, that is individual property. Every proprietor, therefore, of cultivated land, owes to the community a *ground-rent*, for I know no better term to express the idea by, for the land which he holds. . . .

There could be no such things as landed property originally. Man did not make the earth, and, though he had a natural right to *occupy* it, he had no right to

locate as *his property* in perpetuity any part of it; neither did the Creator of the earth open a land-office, from whence the first title-deeds should issue.—From whence then arose the idea of landed property? I answer as before, that when cultivation began, the idea of landed property began with it; from the impossibility of separating the improvement made by cultivation from the earth itself upon which that improvement was made. The value of the improvement so far exceeded the value of the natural earth, at that time, as to absorb it; till, in the end, the common right of all became confounded into the cultivated right of the individual. But they are nevertheless distinct species of rights, and will continue to be so as long as the world endures. . . . Though every man, as an inhabitant of the earth, is a joint proprietor of it in its natural state, it does not follow that he is a joint proprietor of cultivated earth. The additional value made by cultivation, after the system was admitted, became the property of those who did it, or who inherited it from them, or who purchased it. It had originally an owner. Whilst, therefore, I advocate the right, and interest myself in the hard case of all those who have been thrown out of their natural inheritance by the introduction of the system of landed property, I equally defend the right of the possessor to the part which is his.

Cultivation is, at least, one of the greatest natural improvements ever made by human invention. It has given to created earth a ten-fold value. But the landed monopoly, that began with it, has produced the greatest evil. It has dispossessed more than half the inhabitants of every nation of their natural inheritance, without providing for them, as ought to have been done, an indemnification for that loss; and has thereby created a species of poverty and wretchedness that did not exist before. . . . The fault, however, is not in the present possessors. No complaint is intended, or ought to be alleged against them unless they adopt the crime by opposing justice. The fault is in the system, and it has stolen imperceptibly upon the world, aided afterwards by the Agrarian law of the sword. . . . The contrast of affluence and wretchedness continually meeting and offending the eye, is like dead and living bodies chained together. Though I care as little about riches as any man, I am a friend to riches, because they are capable of good. I care not how affluent some may be, provided that none be miserable in consequence of it.—But it is impossible to enjoy affluence with the felicity it is capable of being enjoyed, whilst so much misery is mingled in the scene. . . . The superstitious awe, the enslaving reverence, that formerly surrounded affluence, is passing away in all countries, and leaving the possessor of property to the convulsion of accidents. When wealth and splendour, instead of fascinating the multitude, excite emotions of disgust; when, instead of drawing forth admiration, it is beheld as an insult upon wretchedness; when the ostentatious appearance it makes serves to call the right of it in question, the case of property becomes critical, and it is only in a system of justice that the possessor can contemplate security.

To remove the danger, it is necessary to remove the antipathies, and this can only be done by making property productive of a national blessing, extending to every individual. When the riches of one man above another shall increase the national fund in the same proportion; when it shall be seen that the prosperity of that fund depends on the prosperity of individuals; when the more riches a man acquires, the better it shall be for the general mass; it is then that antipathies will cease, and property be placed on the permanent basis of natural interest and protection.