

SOCIALIST OR INDIVIDUALIST?

In "The Field" of 2nd March, the illustrated journal devoted to land and estate interests and country pursuits, the well-known writer and author Mr H. J. Massingham gave in his article "A Countryman's Journal" the following appreciation of Henry George. It was well done but some of Mr Massingham's observations called for friendly criticism which the Editor published in the issue of that Journal dated 30th March.

WHAT ADMIRABLE reading these days is Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*! Being an extremely old-fashioned type of Socialist, he still remains human and not subjugated by the sinister fetic of the—"Collective man," worthy successor in the procession of man-made monsters of the "Economic Man." How remarkable that he should have seen that our civilization had begun to crumble and decline sixty years ago when Victorian optimism, confidence and self-enrichment were at their apex! Yet he saw it and compared the England of 1879 with the Rome of Augustus. He said in 1879 that Europe was rushing down a steep place into barbarism and here is Europe in it. He points out how readily a Government of universal suffrage and theoretic equality may pass into despotism, "in the name and with the might of the people."

Suffrage may make it easy for the jobber, the demagogue to seize the source of power, and great disparity between rich and poor makes the most ideal of democratic forms a shadow. Where great inequality of wealth exists, "the more democratic the Government the worse it will be." "The best gravitate to the bottom, the worst float to the top and the vile will be ousted by the viler." A corrupt oligarchy may exist without affecting national character; a corrupt democracy whose wealth and power are open to the lowest "must finally corrupt the people, and when a people becomes corrupt, there is no resurrection."

This transformation of popular Government into despotism, he says, "is rapidly going on under our eyes," and he prophesies the dictatorships of our time. "Industry everywhere tends to assume a form in which one is master and many serve, and when this is so the one will control the others." So in religion: "What is going on is not a change in the form of religion, but the negation and destruction of the ideas from which religion springs; Christianity is dying at the root and nothing arises to take its place."

"In the great cities are to be found the greatest wealth and the deepest poverty and here the rich corporations and powerful pecuniary interests can pack the places of power with aristocrats in all but the virtues of aristocracy. As corruption becomes chronic, strong unscrupulous men will become the exponents of blind popular desires and passions. The sword will again be mightier than the pen and carnivals of destruction, brute force and wild frenzy will alternate with the lethargy of a declining civilization." Was not this man also among the prophets?

For Henry George, the foundations of justice and liberty were built on the land and here he was as right as Cobbett. The struggle for wealth and power as a national aim began with the first Tudor enclosures and the progress of the nineteenth century in economic expansion was founded upon the last of the enclosures. Therefore George was right; the land is the measure of all human rights and without land there are none. The machine minder in a factory has the right to vote, but none to order his own existence nor any responsibility for the beginning, end or quality of his work. That he gets only from the land which has been taken from him.

Now George saw in the communal rights of the mediæval and Saxon peasants—viz., the Village Community—the real ground for his campaign to abolish private property. There he made his great mistake, but only from ignorance. The whole point of the Village Community is that it was an institution of communal rights and private property harmoniously intermingled. The "lands" were privately owned, but they were ploughed in common and after harvest they became open to common grazing. They were managed by a field jury chosen by the whole village.

This mutual compromise between two seemingly opposed principles has nothing to do with the academic Utopias, so popular nowadays, but was a solid historical achievement that lasted more than a thousand years. It had its faults—what human system has ever been without them?—but they have been grossly exaggerated in comparison with its intrinsic virtues. Granted every one of these faults, yet good work, stability, co-operation, creative craftsmanship, variety of life, absence of extreme poverty, self-dependence and a true social communion flourished under it. And if a visitor from Mars saw the land in the fifteenth century and was suddenly transported thence to the twentieth, which would he think the most backward? No realized ideal is possible in human affairs, but the ideal in co-operative ownership is the nearest which can even fulfil Henry George's two supreme purposes of liberty and justice.

H. J. MASSINGHAM.

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To the Editor of THE FIELD (published 30th March).

SIR,—Mr H. J. Massingham's tribute to Henry George as a social philosopher and social reformer, and one who predicted what would happen if social justice were not done, will be appreciated by many who have themselves been impressed by *Progress and Poverty*. It should also stimulate many who do not know that remarkable book to take up its study. There is, however, a strange lack of appreciation of certain very important matters on the part of Mr Massingham. Why does he call Henry George a Socialist, whether if "an extremely old-fashioned type" or not? The term "Socialist" or "Socialism" is so often used vaguely to mean anything you like so far as policy is concerned. In the widest sense it embraces all protest against social conditions as they are, and all effort to bring about the better distribution of wealth and opportunity. But the strict or scientific definition of Socialism is that state of affairs in which the Government will own and control all land, factories, farms, buildings, plant and machinery, etc., and place business generally in the care of appointed officials.

It is just because George made such a fundamental distinction between property in land and property in things that he has been regarded and scolded as well, by the State Socialists, as the most intractable individualist that ever wrote or preached. He drew this distinction—that what the community created through its presence and activities, namely, the economic rent of land, belonged to the community, and that what the individual produced by his application of labour and capital belonged to the individual. That is, in a word, the George philosophy.

It is therefore astonishing to see Mr Massingham, in spite of his acquaintance with *Progress and Poverty*, charging George with the proposal to "abolish private property." On the contrary, George held sacred the property in things produced. Such he would secure to

the individual, and such he would prevent the State from appropriating, by making illegal any taxation on the results of work on buildings, improvements and commodities bought and sold. He was the complete and logical Free Trader, who would liberate all private enterprise from monopoly and privilege and fiscal burdens, which was to be done by "abolishing all taxation save that upon land values."

Of course, one cannot in a letter expound this principle and policy any further; but I do take Mr Massingham to task for not observing, in the first place, that when George was referring to the mediæval age he was pointing out that the landholders held their land subject to the feudal dues, and that stage by stage they had contrived to repudiate their dues and the over-lordship of the sovereign, so that stage by stage taxation in so many vicious and injurious forms has been thrown upon production and exchange. Fiscally, if the feudal system of the dues required from landholders was modernized, we would have the taxation of land values to-day and Free Trade in its fullness. State management, interference and regimentation would be a thing unheard of because absolutely unnecessary.

Secondly, the fault running through Mr Massingham's statement is common enough, unfortunately, in thinking and speaking of land only in agricultural terms. This is to forget all about high rents in towns and cities, the speculation in land values in their midst and surroundings; and not to recognize that the question of the price of land for all purposes in both town and country is "the land question" and the industrial question, too, which is basically, as George saw it, the relationship of rent to wages. "To see human beings in the most abject, the most helpless and hopeless condition, you must go, not to the unfenced prairies and the log cabins of new clearings in the backwoods, where men single-handed is commencing the struggle with Nature and land is yet worth nothing, but to the great cities, where the ownership of a little patch of ground is a fortune."

Yours faithfully,
A. W. MADSEN.

INCREASED FARES The Railway Ramp

At the commencement of the war control of the railways was taken by the Minister of Transport. He now proposes that passenger fares and freight charges should be increased by ten per cent. It appears from the Minister's statement in the House of Commons on 23rd April that this increase is intended to cover an increase of working costs which is estimated to amount to £22,500,000 for the 19 months ending on 31st March, 1941. This is equivalent to an increase of £270,000 per week. On the other hand the Minister stated that the receipts of the railway companies had increased by £9,750,000 during the 32 weeks since the commencement of the war. This is an average increase of £305,000 per week, and more than the average estimated increase in working costs.

Unless it is desired to place the railways in a better financial position than that in which they were when war broke out, there is no excuse for the increase in fares and freight charges. The extra charges will be for the benefit of railway shareholders. This appears to be an extremely undesirable result of Government control, especially when it is remembered that a large part of the nominal capitalization of the railways represents merely monopoly rights in the shape of the value of the land on which the lines, stations, and other property of the companies is situated.

GEORGE NICOLL BARNES

It is now over fifty years ago that I first got knowledge of "Progress and Poverty." I espied it one cold winter's night on a wretched little contraption of a second-hand bookstall in the City Road. It cost me sixpence and it opened up for me a new world.—THE RIGHT HON GEORGE BARNES.

Nothing that has been written, in the many Press appreciations of the life and work of George Nicoll Barnes, reveals the true inspiration of his devoted life of public service as does his own confession, which is quoted above.

He passed to his rest on 21st April after long illness, full of years (he was 81) and of honours—Privy Councillor, Companion of Honour, and Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causâ*. He could look back on an extraordinarily varied career. The boy who went to work in a Dundee jute factory at the age of ten, and afterwards served an apprenticeship in engineering, became later the General Secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering Union. He took part in the formation of the Labour Party, entered Parliament in the memorable election of 1906, and was Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1910. During the Great War, he became the first Minister of Pensions in 1916, and then a member of the Supreme War Cabinet. At the Peace Conference at Versailles, he strove skilfully, persistently and successfully for the establishment of the International Labour Office, in whose work at Geneva he took an abiding interest. It survived, as the *Manchester Guardian* notes, "as the only one of the idealistic provisions of the peace treaties which did not degenerate into a broken promise."

Feeling that his special work in the Government had been done, he resigned. "The time has come," he wrote to the Prime Minister, "for me to resume my place in the ranks." But he was sent as one of the British delegates to the first Assembly of the League of Nations.

He was too honest to be a mere Party man, and, on more than one occasion, sacrificed opportunities of advancement because of his faithfulness to principles which he held sacred.

Half a century ago he read his sixpenny copy of *Progress and Poverty* with his almost life-long friend, the late Frederick Batty. They both joined the English League, and both remained faithful supporters of the League and of the United Committee for the rest of their lives. Barnes has been one of the Vice-Presidents of the League for many years. Whatever might be the political group with which he was working, he remained faithful to his own deepest convictions. The Independent Labour Party published a pamphlet which he wrote, when he was M.P., on "Henry George." The Engineers' Union, whose secretaryship he resigned, because the Executive was supporting a strike, which he believed to be unjustifiable, published in their monthly journal, some years later, a series of articles from his pen on Taxation of Land Values. It is pleasant to know that he retained the respect of those from whom he separated himself because of honest differences of opinion on important questions of principle.

Through all his great public career in times of stress and strife, he remained the same modest, unassuming, "dependable" man who came into our movement fifty years ago.

The sympathy of those with whom he thus became associated will go out to his widow and family in their heavy bereavement.

FREDK. VERINDER.