

“Willing to Wound, Afraid to Strike”

By DOUGLAS J. J. OWEN

THE foundations of a just peace, and expectations of a better world, continue to be favorite topics of discussion in the British press. An important example was the letter in *The Times* of December 21, signed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, Cardinal Hinsley and Rev. W. H. Armstrong, Moderator of the Free Churches. It is unique to have four such signatures to one document, which contained ten essential conditions of peace, the last item being: “The resources of the earth should be used as God’s gifts to the whole human race, and used with due consideration for the needs of the present and future generations.”

No one could quarrel with this somewhat abstract sentiment so long as no content is imported into it. Its value is in the recognition that there is a land question that must be settled before peace can come.

Further significance is given to the dictum by the specific suggestions for dealing with the land made by one of the signatories, Dr. Wm. Temple, D. D., Archbishop of York, in “The Hope of a New World,” a reprint of his broadcast addresses. Dr. Temple’s proposals deserve extended consideration in an American journal, not only because of the eminence of the author and his wide influence, but because his approach to land reform is so typical of British tendencies, revealing as it does, the influence of Henry George’s work whilst betraying a reluctance to accept his teaching.

The Archbishop’s premises are very near those of Henry George. He states (p. 53): “Thus in the Law of Moses purchase of land in perpetuity is forbidden, for the land belongs to God and is granted by Him to His people for their use. Now it is the Common Law of England at this moment that all the land of England belongs to the King as representing the whole community and the divinely constituted authority within it. And so-called landowners hold the use of the land but not absolute dominion”. This of course, is pure theory. In practice landowners hold, not so much the use of land, as the power to say who else shall use it and on what terms, and this power is absolute.

After stating the principle, Dr. Temple proceeds: “It must, however, be recognized that the rural landlord discharges many social functions, and ownership of agricultural land, subject to consideration of the public welfare, should not be subject to the same restrictions as ownership of industrial stocks and shares; moreover, as family tradition is in this field a valuable social asset I should personally urge the total exemption of all agricultural land from death duties.”

Verily, the voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau. A note is appended to the chapter, suggesting that it would be quite easy to exempt from death

duties all land already exempted from local taxation as agricultural land. American readers may appreciate the fact that unused land in Great Britain, however valuable, is subject to no taxation except insofar as it is valued for death duties purposes and even then the tax is steeply graduated, so that one-tenth of an acre worth £5000 belonging to a person who had no other property would be under a small tax, whereas if this £5000 land belonged to a man who had, say, property worth £100,000 elsewhere in the country, the tax would be very high. Death duties are not the onerous burden that is often pretended, for an inheritor of a large estate may pay the death duty by selling a small strip of his estate to builders, and the payment of the duty may be spread over a number of years. In a similar way, the British Income Tax in its schedules A to E has the so-called “property tax” schedule A, excluding the value of all land which is not put to any use, however valuable it may be. It is in the rural areas with their large county estates that the disuse of valuable land has its worst social consequences, and it is this land, already free from the local taxation imposed upon rural cottage property, that Dr. Temple in his capacity as a leader of public opinion, would exempt from death duties.

Urban landlords, however, as distinct from the rural species, are to be subject to “gradual elimination . . . by drastic death duties.” Willing to wound but afraid to strike, we must be *drastic* but only *gradually*!

English single taxers have always pointed out the defects of the death duty legislation, and have had something to put in its place. Dr. Temple cannot be ignorant of this alternative to death duties and of the true application of the Law of Jubilee, for on p. 59 he says: “A vivid account of the Mosaic Legislation concerning Economics can be found in *My Neighbor’s Landmark* by Verinder, lately republished by the Henry George Foundation.” He goes on, indeed, to advocate a kind of inversion of the taxation of land values, when, after stating that he would forbid the sale of urban land except to the public authority, he proceeds: “Thus, for example, the London County Council would in course of time become the ground-landlord of London, and *could then use the ground rents for public services . . .*” (Italics mine). Can the Archbishop really be unaware of the fact that the London County Council does not want land in their area to be dealt with in this way; that, on the contrary, the L.C.C. have moved heaven and earth, as recently as 1936, to secure powers to levy “rates” (local taxation) on land values? (This was described at length by the present writer in his article, “The Battle of the Towns,” *LAND AND FREEDOM*, Nov.-Dec. 1940).

Dr. Temple’s plan, to buy first and then use the rent of

land for public purposes, is identical with all land-nationalization-by-purchase schemes, although he repudiates the land-nationalizers. We may ask all those who would take still more from the over-burdened taxpayer in order to buy land, how this accords with the principle that the resources of the earth are God's gift and that the land belongs to God.

When the Archbishop shrinks from possible identification with the Henry George cause, like Naaman at the waters of Jordan, it appears to be because he desires the "safeguarding of tradition and of family connection with agricultural land", and "the many social functions discharged by the rural landlord". This function of rural county magnates in an earlier age has been vividly described by a Conservative historian, Arthur Bryant, in "English Saga 1840-1940", in which he says:

"The real rulers of England were still the greater squires. In the course of a century and a half of monopoly and splendid unblushing corruption, they had inch by inch pared the powers both of the Crown and of the smaller squirearchy. In the latter eighteenth century, in their hunger for ever more land, they had even destroyed the English peasantry

"One sees them in the tell-tale pages of Mr. Creevey; with their rentals multiplied out of all measure by improved agriculture and urban expansion but already divorced by their staggering wealth from that close contact with reality and their humbler fellow-citizens which had enabled their forebears to obtain power."

These quotations give point to my article, "County versus Country" (LAND AND FREEDOM, Sept.-Oct., 1940), and are a corrective to Dr. Temple's too generous estimate of the place of the rural landlord in the scheme of things.

It is certainly unusual for an Archbishop to descend into the economic arena with specific proposals. "The best suggestion known to me here," says Dr. Temple, "is that a general valuation of all land should be made as soon as possible, and no sale at a higher price than this, nor rent at more than a fair percentage of this, be permissible, unless it can be shown that an increase in value has been caused by the action of the landlord." This is put forth to thwart unreasonable expectations, such as that of "turning to private profit the additional value which land may acquire through the enterprise of others or through communal activity." Here is a recognition of the fact that land values are due to communal activity and also that under private ownership there are expectations and speculations in the rise of land values, confirming Henry George's chapter on "The Effect of the Expectation Raised by Material Progress," in "Progress and Poverty", Book IV. "Hence", says George, "from the fact of speculation in land, we may infer all the phenomena which mark these recurring seasons of industrial depression."

The obvious solution is ignored by Dr. Temple save for a hint about Verinder and Henry George, and in its place is set up something that reeks of the discredited Lloyd George increment legislation of 1909-10. We may take leave of the Archbishop with the most revealing quotation of all from p. 59: "But there should be no mere confiscation. The new order must not be introduced with callous indifference to reasonable expectations encouraged by the old order".

Callous indifference forsooth! Is the new order to be introduced with callous indifference to the misery, poverty and continuous robbery caused by the private monopoly of land in town and country? What about the reasonable expectations of the common people everywhere that fundamental justice shall be done and the earth made free to all on just terms?

Certainly the expectations of land monopolists have been stimulated by all the talk of new orders and reconstructions. Speculation in bombed sites is known to be rife. So much so that the Government has had to take action by setting up a Committee of five to consider as a matter of urgency the means of preventing speculation in land in bombed areas.

British followers of Henry George have not been unfaithful or unfruitful in their work. But it seems as though God had hardened the hearts of priests and rulers until, plague following upon plague, they shall at last allow the people to have an entrance into the promised land.

Land Speculation Impedes Defense

By GAULT MacGOWAN

[Reprinted from *The New York Sun*]

THE United States Government's program of building a string of air bases in the West Indies is receiving setbacks as a result of the operations of land speculators in areas adjacent to suitable sites, according to information received here (London).

It is understood that speculators operate in the guise of tattoo artists, photographers, tobacconists, dance hall operators and the usual camp followers. They flock to the neighborhood of military depots and proposed bases and buy options on acreage from the simple farmers.

The swap of destroyers for authorizations to build bases on British territory was made with the understanding that the United States would acquire the necessary land, paying suitable compensation to the local owners. While the most likely land formerly was most reasonably priced, it is understood that intelligent owners immediately boosted their prices sky high, while the land sharks besieged the unintelligent peasants, buying valuable options for a few dollars apiece. One large landowner is understood to be asking \$5,000,000 for certain territories devoted to tropical produce.