

# Geoists in History

## Albert Jay Nock (1870 – 1945)

*By Karl Williams*

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The USA has an enormously powerful libertarian tradition that's hard for outsiders to appreciate, with the ideal of unfettered individual liberty being almost a religion there. Albert Jay Nock was an enormously influential educational theorist and social critic from this libertarian orientation, with his classic book "Our Enemy, the State" being virtually the bible of libertarianism.

But Nock was fiercely critical of those libertarians who just wanted the state to shrivel up and "let freedom reign". No, when it came to the all-important role of the state to restore our equal and common rights to land and natural resources, Nock was adamant that the state had a critical role to collect the rent of land. Those

libertarians who hold half-baked notions about letting monopoly rents fall into the hands of "enterprising" individuals are rightly dubbed Royal Libertarians!

Nock seemed to belong to another era, in which a true man of letters could flourish and be deeply appreciated by a genuine intellectual class. Nock was in turn clergyman, editor, professor, essayist, biographer and student of economics. He lived and breathed ideas to the point where little else mattered. He learned a vast array of languages (3 of them dead!) just to better understand the great writers in their original tongue. His was a lonely intellect whose bent for privacy amounted to a passion. He assiduously avoided making



money and acquiring fame if those pursuits in any way interfered with his intellectual pursuits.

His father was a hot-tempered steelworker and Episcopal clergyman and his childhood in rural Pennsylvania was one where his home-school education amounted to his folks not standing between him and his pile of books. How many kids do you know whose favorite book was Webster's Dictionary?

He did finally attend school at age 14 and after graduating jumped around while trying to find his place in a very alien world (to such a prodigious intellect). He actually had a brief career playing minor league baseball but then attended a theological seminary and was ordained as an Episcopal priest at age 27. Three years later he married and had two children but separated from his wife after only a few years of marriage. At age 39 he left the clergy and became a journalist. Now free to immerse himself in a world of ideas, he had finally found his place in the Sun.

His libertarian quest led him to accept total responsibility for his actions, but the other side of this coin was his peculiarly resolute resentment against the impositions by state, church or social conventions. He dubbed these impositions "purely artificial in substance and fraudulent in intention". Perhaps because of his independence of spirit, he was a deeply private man. Even close associates never knew where he lived.

It isn't easy to get inside Nock's head to understand his extremelibertarianism. He preferred to call himself a "philosophical

anarchist", calling for a radical vision of society free from the influence of the political state. He described the state as that which "claims and exercises the monopoly of crime". He opposed centralization, regulation, income tax, and mandatory education, along with what he saw as the degradation of society. He denounced in equal terms all forms of totalitarianism, including Bolshevism, fascism, Marxism and just about every type of "ism". His veneration for individual liberty can be seen from this telling passage "The practical reason for freedom is that freedom seems to be the only condition under which any kind of substantial moral fiber can be developed. Everything else has been tried, world without end. Going dead against reason and experience, we have tried law, compulsion and authoritarianism of various kinds, and the result is nothing to be proud of."

Let's look at his politics first, to better understand his economics. Nock took to laissez-faire economics, not because of its utilitarianism, but because of his abhorrence of political interventionism; even if the free market did not yield the greatest results, it was preferable to a regulated one. He was an anti-Statist because he revolted at the vulgarism of politics and its devotees; in his classic, *Our Enemy the State*, he likens the State to a "professional criminal class." He scorned reform movements because they all involve the use of political power which, on examination, will be found at the bottom of the condition the reformers would correct. He was for letting people alone because only under a condition of freedom can they improve themselves — if there is any capacity for improvement in them.

Nock's theory of political organization is important to grasp because it emphasises how there is a basic difference between government and the State, and it is a mistake to use the words interchangeably. Government is an institution arising from the needs of society; its function is to protect the individual in the enjoyment of the rights that inhere in him by virtue of his existence; its only business is the administration of justice. On the

other hand, the State is an antisocial organization, originating in conquest and concerned only with the confiscation of property. The State began with the practice of nomadic tribes swooping down on some agricultural community, confiscating the movable wealth and, after slaying the less productive inhabitants, carrying off to slavery a number of others. Slavery is the first institution of the State. Later on, the

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*"Henry George built up the most complete and most impregnable defense of the rights of capital that was ever constructed, and if the capitalists of his day had had sense enough to dig in behind it, their successors would not now be squirming under the merciless exactions which collectivism is laying on them, and which George would have no scruples whatever about describing as sheer highwaymanry."*

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raiding tribesmen, sometimes by invitation, would settle down among the producers as "protectors" and administrators, collecting tribute for their pains. Sometimes a merger between invaders and their subjects would take place, even by marriage, and a nation was born; but the instruments of confiscation were continued, and those who inherited them became the State.

Consistent with his libertarianism, Nock was a passionate opponent of war and what he considered the US government's aggressive foreign policy. He believed that war could bring out only the worst in society and argued that it led inevitably to collectivization and militarization and "fortified a universal faith in violence; it set in motion endless adventures in imperialism, endless nationalist ambitions," while, at the same time, costing countless human lives. Up against a state up to its ears in military propaganda, Nock's works were often censored during wartime.

While Nock's books were not often best sellers, they were closely read by some of the great intellectuals of his age - this suited Nock just fine! As a journalist, he achieved a devoted readership when, in 1914, he joined the staff of the Nation. While Nock didn't like the magazine's support for government interference with the economy, he did admire its courageous opposition to President Woodrow Wilson who maneuvered America into the First World War.

In the mid-1920s Nock scored the intellectual

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*"But the state had intervened; that was the whole trouble. The State had established one monopoly--the landlord's monopoly of economic rent--thereby shutting off great hordes of people from free access to the only source of human subsistence, and driving them into factories to work for whatever Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bottles chose to give them. The land of England, while by no means nearly all actually occupied, was all legally occupied; and this State-created monopoly enabled landlords to satisfy their needs and desires with little exertion or none, but it also removed the land from competition with industry in the labor market, thus creating a huge, constant and exigent labour-surplus"*

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daily lot of every single human being, that any thinker worth a cracker must surely discover then plunge into this vast field".

And Nock quickly hit the nail right on the head with this pithy utterance, "All this [set of problems] is due to the iniquitous theory of taxation with which this

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*"The American state at the outset took over the British principle of giving landlords a monopoly of economic rent. That shifted the switch; it established the State's character as a purveyor of privilege. Then financial speculators sought a privilege, and Hamilton, with his "corrupt squadron in Congress," as Mr. Jefferson called them, arranged it. Then bankers, then industrialists; Hamilton also arranged that. Then, as the century went on, innumerable industrial subgroups, and subclasses of special interest, were heard from, and were accommodated."*

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jackpot when a small group of wealthy American admirers funded his literary and historical work to enable him to follow his own interests.

Nock's curiosity and wide intellectual journeying inevitably led him to Henry George works, in which he became thoroughly grounded. Indeed, his devotion to the philosophy of Henry George was lifelong. To those who ask "So how did a deep thinker like Nock become involved in land tenure, tax policy and economics in general?", the only answer must be "Are you kidding? These issues are so crucial not only for abstract musings but for the

country has been so thoroughly indoctrinated - that a man should be taxed according to his ability to pay, instead of according to the value of the privileges he obtains from the government."

Nock was for four years the co-editor of The Freeman, the major vehicle for the geoist movement in the USA in the 1920s. Here and in his later freelance journalist career, he hammered away at those who called themselves libertarians

who failed to distinguish between the improper political means of obtaining wealth, such as from arbitrary taxation, and the proper economic means, from the collection of economic rent. As he wrote, "monopoly of economic rent ..... give exclusive rights to values accruing from the desire of other persons to possess that property; values which take their rise irrespective of any exercise of the economic means on the part of the holder."

In 1945, Nock developed lymphatic leukemia and gradually ran out of steam, dying aged 74. Just as he lived, his Rhode Island funeral service was low key and modest.

While his wishes for a quiet, private life and death came to pass, Fate changed its tune after his relatively unnoticed death. Most of his vast volumes of books, letters, journals and theses were posthumously



published, and many were reprinted (and sold out) many times.

I doubt that devoted thinkers like Nock still walk this Earth – if they are, would they be taking selfies whenever they won a gong? No, Albert Jay Nock was made of sterner intellectual stuff and cared for little else but the pursuit of Truth. And the greatest and most fitting reward for such a noble endeavor was to discover the immortal writings of Henry George.

Appropriately, after Nock's departure from this world, the Nockian Society was founded, with a membership which now extends worldwide. Nock would surely approve of the letterhead of this society which reads "No officers. No dues. No meetings."

Next issue: New Zealand's life-long geoist campaigner, publicist, author and economic researcher, Rolland O'Rega