

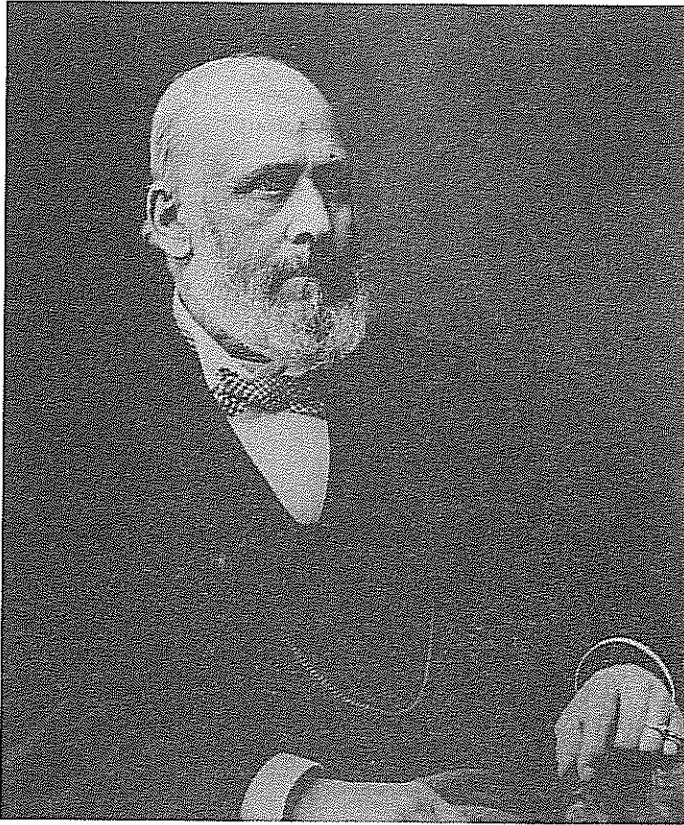
Geoists in History

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Thorold Rogers 1823 – 1890

By Karl Williams



"Every permanent improvement of the soil, every railway and road, every bettering of the general condition of society, every facility given for production, every stimulus applied to consumption, raises rent. The landowner sleeps but thrives."

We geoists might first appear to be a pessimistic lot to outsiders, but if you scratch us a bit harder you'll see that we actually hold enormous hope for the great prosperity and fulfillment of humanity. Henry George was virtually alone in predicting that the lot of the average person (the bottom 90%) would **not** improve in the 20th century, no matter what technological advancements were made, as long as the rent from land was allowed to continue to be misappropriated into private hands. Dead right there, HG.

Thorold Rogers, one of the founders of modern British economic history, looked back to the past and came to the same conclusion as HG. That is, after rigorously examining historical records he asserted that, contrary to every smug preconception we hold, Rogers concluded that things were actually much easier for the common man centuries ago. Moreover, his momentous historical research pretty much proved it but why is it that so few people nowadays are aware of this fact?

James Edwin Thorold Rogers was born in unremarkable (if relatively comfortable middle class) circumstances in Hampshire. He was educated in Arts at King's College

London and Magdalen Hall, Oxford, but then seemed to have a resurgence of religiosity and was ordained into the Anglican Church. Indeed, he became a bells-and-smells High Church man, and was the curate of St. Paul's in Oxford. But then the pendulum swung back, with his interests gradually returning to academia. He then began to devote himself to classical and philosophical tuition in Oxford as well as displaying an increasing interest in politics. He was instrumental in bringing about the Clerical Disabilities Relief Act whereby an Anglican clergyman (such as himself) could basically relinquish the rights and privileges of his office. He threw off his dog collar and never looked back.

Freed of church authority, Rogers became even more involved in the classics and devoted himself to classical and philosophical tuition in Oxford with success, with his publications including an edition of Aristotle's Ethics. Rogers' interest then took another and more fateful turn in the direction of economics, and in 1859 he was appointed professor of statistics and economic science at King's College, London, a post which he filled till his death. In 1862 he also became Drummond professor of political economy at Oxford.

Around this time he truly found his place in the sun, and began to progressively publish his great magnum opus - the monumental *History of Agriculture and Prices in England* from 1259 to 1795 and *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, as well as other works on political economy, ethics, law, and politics.

Whether you put it down to Providence or dumb luck, the whole direction of a man's life can sometimes turn on a single event. In Rogers' case, it was how his elder brother married the sister of the great Richard Cobden, who became a mentor to Rogers. Cobden held deep geoist convictions and was also an advocate for free trade, nonintervention in Europe and an end to imperial expansion. It was Cobden, who gained fame and acclaim by repealing the corn laws which enriched the landed class, who declared his geoist ideals with this famous utterance, "You who shall liberate the land will do more for your country than we have done in the liberation of its trade." Rogers was to say of Cobden, "he knew that ... political economy ... was, or ought to be, eminently inductive, and that an economist without facts is like an engineer without materials or tools." This was to spur Rogers on to unearth the wealth of facts he used as the basis for his *History of Agriculture*. Rogers duly became absorbed in the whole geoist paradigm, editing Cobden's speeches and essays.

There's something about geoism and politics that seems to radicalize a man, and Rogers became an outspoken iconoclast in many fields and he developed a reputation as having a boisterous and intemperate nature - does this ring any contemporary bells, dear reader?! Rogers' tenures were characteristically energetic, and he delivered frequent lectures enlivened by racy anecdotes and incisive comments on contemporary personalities and issues. He became a great political agitator and was celebrated as a caustic wit and humorist.

His monumental study of the economic conditions of the English in centuries past bore its first fruit in 1866 with the publication of the first two volumes of his *History of Agriculture and Prices in England*. This dealt with the period 1259-1400 and was a minute and masterly record of the subject, and it's no surprise that this is the work upon which his reputation, such as it is, mainly rests. Two more volumes (1401-1582) were published in 1882, a fifth and sixth (1583-1702) in 1887, and he left behind him at his death copious materials for a seventh and eighth. In 1868 he published a

Manual of Political Economy, and in 1869 an edition of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. In 1875 he collected and edited the *Protests of the Lords*, which is the social history and life of the English peasantry in his own East Anglia. In all his research he deployed historical and statistical methods to analyze the key economic and social questions in Victorian England. As an advocate of free trade and social justice he distinguished himself from many others within the so-called English Historical School. Rogers' intimate acquaintance with Cobden led Rogers to take an active part in politics, and near the end of his life he was elected to the House of Commons as a Liberal from 1880 to 1886.

This is not the time to wrap up this biog, for Rogers' colossal work would, if unearthed in its entirety today and made widely known, blasts the smug world of economics to smithereens. What Rogers undertook were detailed studies on how, with the Enclosures of the Commons, the proportion of the public revenue derived from land had greatly declined over the centuries, to the great disadvantage of the common man. How's this for a killer quote, to summarise in a sentence the thrust of his findings? "The people had fared better under the despotic monarchs than when the power of the state had fallen into the hands of a landed oligarchy who had first exempted themselves from taxation."



Do you understand the immensity of Rogers' findings, dear reader? His monolithic research essentially substantiates the classical Law of Rent with hard data which covers the centuries of English history from when land was accessible to all to the point when it had basically been enclosed by the Lords. You tell 'em, Thozza: "I have stated more than once that the 15th century and the first quarter of the 16th were the golden age of the English labourer, if we are to interpret the wages which he earned by the cost of the necessaries of life. At no time were wages, relatively speaking, so high, and at no time was food so cheap. Attempts were constantly made to reduce these wages by Act of Parliament, the legislature frequently insisting that the Statute of Labourers should be kept. But these efforts were futile; the rate keeps steadily high, and finally becomes customary, and was recognised by parliament."

Rogers provides details of the daily wage of artisans, agricultural labourers, skilled craftsmen, carpenters, plumbers and joiners and concludes that, after food, clothing and

shelter, the English labourer with a family of five in the 15th century still had two-thirds of this salary left. And, rather than the general impression that the commoners busted their guts from dawn to dusk, Rogers asserts that, before the Enclosures, their working day was quite modest on length. In fact, after a plague when good land was relatively accessible, Rogers calculated that so-called peasants only worked about 14 hours a week. Now that's what I call Ye Merrie Olde England! It is not coincidental that about 80% of revenue in those times came from land rents (which fall on the landholder, and cannot be passed on) rather than taxes on income.

It's hard to fathom why Rogers hasn't secured a lofty place in history considering the mighty implications of his work. Karl Marx, who had a great deal of respect for Rogers' conscientiousness, made extensive use of his studies in *Das Kapital*. Rogers was also one of the first to reveal several crucial aspects of England's social development during the Middle Ages, including the evolution of the manor, the mass shift from the *corvée* (the unpaid labor - as for the maintenance of roads - required by a lord of his vassals in lieu of taxes) to cash rent in the 14th century, the subsequent stratification of the peasantry, and the growth of pauperism during the Reformation. But he and his work have today been largely forgotten, and if you Google his name you'll get only a few sketchy entries. But the measure of a man is not found in his Google results (try telling that to a Generation Y kid).

Next issue: one of the foremost leaders in the movement for Australian federation and later Australia's second prime minister, Alfred Deakin

“The rent of land, which had risen without effort on the part of the owner some twelve times in the course of the seventeenth century, was deemed to be a peculiarly fit subject for taxation.”

