

THE BACKGROUND to the decades of the 1880s and 90s is important because it helps explain why it was only ten years after the publication of Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* that pure Single Tax Leagues appeared in Australia.

The 1880s were good years for most Australians. Everyone had a few bob, even the poor folk could own their own cottages, the economy was buoyant, and new ideas flourished. In such an optimistic atmosphere Utopian schemes became very popular subjects for debate. Alfred Wallace, Karl Marx and Ed. Bellamy all had their supporters, and George's was only one of half a dozen new reform plans in favour.

The 1890s were about as different as you could imagine: bank crashes, depressions, strikes, droughts and epidemics rolled across the country. For the first time, political parties – Free Trade, Labour and Protectionist – appeared in Australia. Unions went political, employers regrouped, and people began to think of themselves as belonging to classes. In these troubled times Henry George's call for social reform and his fiery rhetoric caught the attention of thousands; the Single Tax movement as a popular front began.

THE STORY of the single tax starts in Robinson's bookshop, Adelaide, in 1880. Miss Catherine Helen Spence, a serious-minded woman, purchased the only copy of *Progress and Poverty* on the shelves, read it and was impressed. She was a good free-lance journalist, and she reviewed George's book for the prestigious new monthly, the *Victorian Review*. The review appeared in 1881 and immediately triggered a storm of controversy, with pro and con George articles flashing to and fro for the next three years.

Articles on George next appeared in the *South Australian Register* and *South Australian Advertiser*, in the *Victorian Argus* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. By 1883 the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* was publishing *Progress and Poverty* as a serial, running it for three months twice a week and, in Adelaide, George's friend, William Webster, was writing a regular land reform column. George was news.

We might ask why this was all happening at this time. *Progress and Poverty* helped, as did the general interest in Utopian reform literature, but the basic reason was the failure of Australia's 1860s Settlements Acts to unlock the land. Largely because land had to be sold to the highest and therefore the richest bidder (usually the local squatter), the land had not passed into the hands of hopeful small farmers, and by the 1880s colonial governments were looking at alternatives.

Chief among the alternatives were Alfred Wallace's land nationalisation plan and George's land tax plan, and followers of these two schemes joined together in 1884. They became the Land Nationalisation League (LNL), pledged to demand state ownership of all land plus a land tax on unimproved values, to end monopoly.

**South Australia 1880s.** The earliest LNL was formed in Kapunda, South Australia, during May 1884. The editor of the local paper, the town's land agent and the barrister Patrick McMahon Glynn (later to be Federal Attorney General), met at a rowdy public meeting and constituted themselves a League on the spot. Within two months the LNL had 200 members.

Branches were opened in Adelaide, Gawler, Angaston, Terowie and Tarlee. Later in the same year, the South Australian government passed the Bray Act, enabling taxation of  $\frac{1}{4}$ d. in the £1 on value exclusive of improvements. South Australia therefore became the first colony to apply George's tax.

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# LAND - LOCKED!

## Why Australia turned to land value taxation

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### By Airlie Worrall

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After this success the LNL rested on its laurels until 1886, when Lewis Berens and Ignatius Singer began the first LNL paper, *Our Commonwealth*. Berens was a jeweller and Singer ran a chemical works, but both were deeply involved in the labour movement. Indeed for a short time in 1887 *Our Commonwealth* was the official trades journal, a link which endured until 1894/5 when Single Taxers and Unionists fell out, both in South Australia and New South Wales.

**New South Wales, 1880s.** While South Australia was the earliest and most enduring Georgeist colony, New South Wales was always the largest in terms of members and branches. This was because NSW had a strict free trade government, as opposed to the mildly protectionist parliament of South Australia, and many single taxers also belonged to its ruling Free Trade Party.

The first organised NSW Georgeists were to be found in NSW. Forbes, like Kapunda, was an old mining town turned to sheep and wheat farming, and was also in an area where squatter vs. selector feeling ran high.

Early in 1883 the town bootmaker, Ignatius Bell, and his friend, William Dickinson, read about George's theories in articles in the *Bulletin* and in the radical U.K. journal, *Reynolds Magazine*. For the next four years they and their friends met as a discussion group, until in 1887 they became the Land Nationalisation Society of New South Wales.

Recruits soon began to flood in. The most important new member was Frank Cotton, who in later years was to become President of the NSW STL, MLA for Newtown and a founding member of the new Labour Party. He was appointed full time travelling lecturer for the single tax, and in no time at all had founded branches in Cowra, Sydney, Goulburn, Young and Gundagai.

Towards the end of 1887 he landed in Lithgow, where he met fellow single taxers, "The Mad Poet" John Farrell and Joe Cook, coal miner, visionist and later P.M. of Australia. In this august company the *Lithgow Enterprise* and *Australian Land Nationaliser* soon appeared and sales to reformers interstate and overseas soared. But local advertisers boycotted this radical weekly, and revenue fell away. Clearly, greener pastures were required, so Farrell and Cotton sold the paper and moved to Sydney in 1889 to join the rising wave of Georgeist fervour which was centred there.



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The shift to Sydney was vital to the careers of both men. Farrell became editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and Cotton embroiled himself in Labour councils and single tax work. That year, the combined Land Nationalisation Leagues of South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland met in Sydney to debate their future. In a landslide vote non-Georgeists were expelled and the LNL's became Single Tax Leagues. The New Crusade had begun.

**The 1980s and the STL.** The 80s had been the decade of the LNL's, whose members had been Wallaceites, as well as Georgeists, but the STLs of the 1890s were evangelical Georgeists to a man.

A sudden rise in branch establishment was experienced in 1890, with 21 new STLs founded, compared with 13 the previous year, and these seem to have coincided with the vastly popular visit to Australia by Henry George himself during March, April and May.

*Progress* (1889) and the *Beacon*, the longest-running Australian single tax paper (1883-1900), were printed. *Our Commonwealth* (1880-8) was replaced by the *Pioneer* (1890) and *Roughshod*, which was in turn succeeded by the *Voice*. In NSW there was the *Lithgow Enterprise*, the *Australian Standard*, the *Democrat* and the *Single Tax*. Eleven papers in as many years, some surviving far longer than many district or town newspapers.

In addition, Georgeists produced thousands of tracts and pamphlets, South Australia and Victoria especially distributing up to 35,000 a year. Every Georgeist had to belong to one of the Leagues' activity committees, and through these committees came hundreds of newspaper articles, letters-to-the-editor, lay sermons and petitions. Verbal propaganda was equally extensive. In any month STL members would be speaking at up to 30 city venues, on street corners, vacant lots, in parks and at dozens of evening lectures and debates.

The STLs continued the tradition of the travelling lecturer, and three times a year Max Hirsch, Harry Taylor and John King would depart their cities and head for the bush to speak on the single tax. In Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales their target was the farmer, nominally a free trader because of his interest in wheat exports and machinery imports, but not yet a single taxer.

The incessant travelling eventually caused breakdowns in the health of the lecturers, and the Victoria and South Australia STLs decided to send replacement lecturers abroad in two Red Vans. These vans, modelled on English examples, were painted bright red and emblazoned with slogans, and were fitted out with sleeping and cooking facilities. During 1894 and 1895, they toured all of Victoria and South Australia several times before lack of finance forced the end of the programme.

**THE THIRD** type of noteworthy activity is possibly the most interesting, for Georgeists were Australian leaders in the practice of Utopia. By this I mean that the single taxers of the 1890s set out to practise what their predecessors of the 1880s had only preached, by setting up co-operative communes.

The first of these was William Lane's "New Australia", founded in Paraguay after Labour's defeat in the great strike. Single taxers formed one of the largest groups of the first contingent of settlers in Paraguay; 30 STL members and their families were present. Personality problems with Lane destroyed "New Australia" after a few years, but back home in Australia other Georgeists were launching their own co-op, this one at Murtho, in South Australia, near Renmark.

Murtho was the brainchild of a chemist, John Birks, the most influential member of the South Australia STL. Birks and his extensive family selected Murtho in 1894, and around fifty people settled there soon after. They farmed, ran dairy cattle and grew citrus fruits and vegetables for their own needs. Land and equipment was held in common and the Murtho council met every evening in the schoolhouse to allot work for the following day. Social life was a feature of the colony, and Murtho had churches, parties, dances, study groups and boating to pass its leisure time.

Murtho did not operate after 1900 as a single tax colony. It had a difficult life, besieged by drought, and met with the same fate as "New Australia". Critics said it failed because it held land jointly, not individually, thereby violating a basic tenet of George's theories.

**C**ONTEMPORARY historians have in general discounted the single tax and its influence, but it is possible that with new evidence as to the identity and activities of Georgeists, this opinion will have to be revised.

It is certain that the publicising of George's analysis of land monopoly and his method of land taxation made such taxation the favoured method of unlocking the land.

South Australia introduced land value taxation on unimproved value in 1884, New South Wales in 1895, and Victorian Georgeists were only narrowly defeated on a similar bill in the same year. On a municipal level, NSW, SA and Queensland Georgeists had fought a running battle from 1889 to ensure that local councils had the option of rating on site values. This campaign bore fruit in Queensland first in 1890 and in South Australia in 1893.

Victorian and New South Wales Georgeists kept up the fight into the new century and eventually met with success after 1915.

The final evaluation of the importance of LNLs and STLs rests not only with these legislative successes but with the extent of popular support for George's ideas. With eleven newspapers, 7,000 members one hundred odd branches and a triumphant tour by George to cap everything, the single tax must be accounted one of the more significant movements in nineteenth century Australian history.