

A PIONEER OF THE SINGLE TAX—1859-60.

EDWIN BURGESS, OF LONDON AND OF RACINE,
WISCONSIN, U.S.A.

By L. H. BERENS.

Toward the middle of January we received from Mr. Joseph F. Darling, of Boston, the following letter:—

"DEAR SIR,—I am endeavouring to prove the authenticity of a MS. which purports to be a copy of the following book:—'Letters on Taxation of the Land. By Edwin Burgess. (Printed for circulation by Austin & Co., 17 Johnson Court, Fleet Street, London, E.C.—1871.)' Being a reprint of letters sent to certain American newspapers in 1859-1860, which I am also seeking. My object in looking up this book is to republish it, as it contains the Single Tax Doctrine, written by a working man for working men, independently of professional assistance. If you can assist me it will be deeply appreciated."

Finding that there was no copy of any such pamphlet in the library of the British Museum, I looked for it elsewhere, and was fortunate enough to find it among the 30,000 pamphlets collected by the late Charles Bradlaugh, M.P., now in the Gladstone Library, National Liberal Club, all of which have been carefully catalogued by the present able and courteous librarian and his predecessor. Of course, I duly communicated with my correspondent, assuring him of the authenticity of the book, the main contents of which I now propose to place before my co-workers, and that to my mind it was well worth being republished in full, more especially in the United States, where it was written, and to which the subsidiary arguments and allusions are specially applicable.

The letters are preceded in the pamphlet by "A Word of Explanation," which runs as follows:—

"The letters on the 'Taxation of the Land,' and the poems which follow, were first published in the journals at Racine, Wisconsin, U.S., in the years 1859 and 1860. The author, Mr. E. Burgess, formerly a London workman, had made his home in that city, where the subjects of Land Traffic and Occupancy were presented to his mind. During a long, painful, and eventually mortal sickness in his adopted country, he retained the warm sympathy he had always felt with what he thought the cause of justice, especially in relation to that class of the community whose lot it is to live by labour. Believing that good would come from the general adoption of his views, and particularly anxious for the improvement of his native country, he frequently expressed a desire for the publication of his effusions among English working men. Hence regard for his memory and deference to his wish, have prompted the reprinting and gratuitous circulation by his widow of this little book. It is offered to such of the working men of England as take interest in the subjects of which it treats, in the same spirit of sympathy which animated the author, and in the confidence that they will recognise and appreciate that spirit in his writings."

Then follows an introduction by the author under the title, "How to Legislate, Save Cost, and Prevent Tyranny," in which he puts the following series of pertinent questions to his readers:—

"Why are millions destitute while millions of acres of the people's land are kept a wilderness, and homesteads denied lest they should prevent its monopoly for railway monopolists, slave-holders, and land speculators?"

"Why are thousands, if not millions, of our sisters living in destitution or prostitution, or both, while the land is idle, or growing weeds instead of food?"

"Why is anyone obliged 'to beg a brother of the earth to give him leave to toil,' while there is plenty of land on which he might employ and enjoy himself? Why are not honesty, industry, and virtue made easy, instead of hard or impossible?"

"Why are poverty, misery, disease, and crime promoted, instead of prevented, by legislation?"

"Why is our labour taxed continually to give a premium to indolence, land monopoly, and slavery, to raise the price of land, and pauperise the labourer by keeping him landless?"

"Why is drunkenness promoted by exhausting, unrequited toil on the one hand, and sensualising indolence on the other, and by anxiety of mind consequent on the means of living being the most precarious, instead of the most certain? Thus are hope and joy killed instead of cultivated, and liquor drunk to drown the memory of hopeless degradation and misery."

"Then let us nobly awake! arise! and do our own legislation, and destroy the cost, tyranny, and corruption of Government, and make laws few, simple, and good, instead of many, complicated, and bad, and as uncertain in their meaning as the ingenuity of a lawyer can make them to sustain endless litigation."

"TAXATION CONSIDERED."

The above is the general title of the eleven letters the pamphlet contains. In letters one and two he considers taxation on industry and commodities, more especially the General Property Tax, as then and still levied in the different States of the Union, and his objections to which he summarises in the following telling passages:—

"Taxing people for their personal property—on their oath—is a premium on perjury, because those who lie the most pay the least taxes; and children born under such influences will be famous for lying—if there is any connection between cause and effect in the condition of parent and offspring."

"The means of valuing or assessing are very expensive, thus increasing the cost of government, as well as the cost of corruption."

"Taxing personal property prevents production, because the tax being added to the article for sale increases its price. . . . Hence less is sold and less is made, and the makers are less employed; and having, consequently, less with which to buy, the makers of other things will be less employed also—till the surplus workers will become paupers, and suffer much misery in consequence; many will become hopeless, and reckless because hopeless. Some will be tempted to commit crime for the temporary alleviation of their misery, which, repeated, soon becomes a habit. . . . If any person puts up a new fence, or makes any visible improvement, which employs the unemployed and prevents their continuance as paupers, and beautifies the city, they are taxed annually in proportion to the evil they prevent and the good they do."

"Taxing personal property is not only costly, corruptive, and pauper-making, and promotive of misery and crime, but inquisitorial, burdensome, and aggressive against our right to labour and enjoy the fruit of our toil unmolested; as long as we injure no one we should be protected against aggression, instead of suffering aggression. Are we not now taxed for the aggression instead of the protection against it?"

"Taxing people in proportion to their industry prevents industry; because when an industrial person labours twelve hours per day successfully, he must pay twelve times as much taxes, because he has made twelve times as much property to be taxed as if he had worked only one hour per day. . . ."

Then follows a passage which seems to me to entitle its author to be considered as second only to Patrick Edward Dove, who published his classical books in 1850 and 1854,

as a pioneer or forerunner of the modern Single Tax Philosophy: he continues:—

"Taxing personal property raises the price of land, and thus promotes its monopoly by the rich—because land being the source of our subsistence, which labour develops or increases, from which and on which all must live, and money instead of manhood being the qualification for owning land, it follows that in proportion as the taxes are on personal property, the land will be exempt, and it will be thus comparatively cheap or easy for the rich to monopolise; so that if all the taxes were on the land it would sell for the lowest price, and would be most difficult to monopolise; but if all the taxes were on personal property and none on the land, then the land would sell for the highest price, and labour would sell for the lowest price, because if the excessive competition of the landless and destitute workers, who by selling their labour for the smallest portion of its produce, would keep the land at its highest possible price; so when you want land to be low, and wages high, put all the taxes on the land; but if you prefer labour to be low and land high, you have only to put all the taxes on personal property. All articles of productive industry cost the keeping of the maker and contriver, but the land costs nothing for either. *It is the natural inheritance of all for all time*; and all should be protected in their possession, and those who own all the land should certainly pay all the taxes for keeping them in possession and their neighbours out of it."

"Taxing personal property promotes the monopoly of capital (as well as of land), because whenever labour can be bought for a small portion of its produce, the larger portion (or the unpaid labour) is owned by the capitalist in the name of profit, with which he can starve the landless workers into worse terms, as long as they continue landless, in proportion to their numbers and necessities."

"Taxing personal property by preventing production and promoting the monopoly of land and its products, makes the means of living the most precarious, especially for the landless, because there is less produced in proportion to the wants of the community; and as the land is high and labour low (from the taxes on industry and the competition of the landless) it is proportionately beyond the means of the poorly-paid labourer to purchase the land or even to rent it; and when the means of living are most precarious, the greatest anxiety is suffered by the landless, and the continuance of that anxiety causes nervousness, sleeplessness, misery, and insanity, which is transmitted to the offspring with increased force, and thus is insanity made hereditary."

"Taxing personal property promotes intemperance by making labour so cheap that the labourer must toil incessantly for a living, thus causing bodily exhaustion as well as mental anxiety to the landless workers, and indolence also on the part of those who live on the labour of others. Those whose bodies are exhausted by excessive toil, and whose minds are suffering from mental anxiety, crave stimulants to recruit the body and make the mind forget its care; while those who live in idleness on others' toil, crave stimulants to quicken the circulation which should be sustained by honest, temperate toil, carrying with it the moral satisfaction that for all they enjoy no one suffers. Then, and not till then, will the good be transmitted to the offspring, instead of the evil, as now."

"Taxing personal property by making land dear and labour cheap, promotes prostitution and disease to a fearful extent. Is not women more sensitive and weaker physically than man, and when she can get no just reward for her labour, and frequently no right to labour, need we wonder that she sells herself legally or illegally for the means of living? Are not the high

price of land and the low price of labour, or the no right to land and consequently no right of labour, the main cause? Is not the right to land denied to man and woman and given to money or its owners, as though money had more right to land than man or woman? And thus is woman driven by injustice, poverty, and misery into temptation, and prayed out occasionally in revivals—

"Pray folks out of temptation while driving them in, Is the usual way to atone for the sin;
To fight the effect, while feeding the cause,
You will find the foundation of most of our laws."

"Taxing personal property is the main cause of rent, interest, and usury; for the rent of land is but interest on the price, so that when the land is high the rent will be in proportion,* and all the wages of the landless are required for their support, they cannot buy land or build houses, or have capital for business, but must pay rent or interest for all. Usury is but interest or rent of money, *more than the law allows*, which is sustained by the extremes of rich and poor, caused by land monopoly and its causes."

Mr. Burgess concludes his second letter with the following warning, appeal, and demand for the Taxation of Land Values:—

"Let us not flatter ourselves that we are innocent of the effects, while we are sustaining the cause by our votes, advocacy, and laws. Do we really want permanent prosperity, and the interest of all to be honest and live on their own labour instead of speculating on the unpaid labour of others? Do we desire purity and truth instead of corruption and perjury to prevail? Then repeal all taxes on industry, and let the monopolists of land, the source of our living and the rightful inheritance of all, pay in proportion to the value of what they monopolise—then poverty, prostitution, and intemperance will soon be among things that were."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

* Here Mr. Burgess puts the cart before the horse. For it is the price of land that will be in proportion to the rent it yields, or may be made to yield, not *vice versa*.—L. H. B.

TAXATION OF FEU DUTIES IN SCOTLAND.

The Prime Minister received in his private room at the House of Commons yesterday afternoon, (28/6/07), a deputation from various bodies in Scotland upon the question of the recommendation of the Select Committee upon the Land Values Taxation (Scotland) Bill, that owners of feu duties, whensoever created, ought to be included within the category of owners of land, and so made liable for the owners' portion of local rates.

Mr. Caldwell, M.P., introduced the deputation.

Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman, in reply, said that all the speakers had told the same story and sung the same song. Everything connected with the burden upon land and the valuation and assessment of land was complicated, but they could put aside all questions regarding it, ancient and modern. Their sole object that day was to know whether the Government were going back upon existing contracts. To that question he could answer, in the most condensed form in which they were accustomed to answer questions in the House of Commons, by the words, "No Sir." (Cheers.) The Lord Advocate had said:—"I desire to associate this great and salutary reform with no violence whatever to existing contracts and with no invasion of rights sanctioned by the State." That was the view of the Government in the matter. (Cheers.) He could assure them that they had no idea of going back upon existing contracts, and, so far as alarms had existed in Scotland and elsewhere, they might be allowed safely and healthily to subside.—*The Times*.