

BOOK REVIEW

LONDON'S STRANGE GROWTH

"LONDON'S OVERGROWTH, AND THE CAUSES OF SWOLLEN TOWNS"
BY S. VERE PEARSON

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London: A mighty metropolis containing one-fifth of a nation's population. A magnetic center of human activity. Samuel Johnson said of it, "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford." There is a world in such a city. And the social problems and maladjustments, too, of a world are here focalized.

"Cobbett compared London, even in his day, to a great wen growing upon the fair face of England. . . . While London, Liverpool, Leeds, Manchester and Nottingham have grown, the village life of 'merrie England' is all but extinct. Two-thirds of the entire population are crowded into cities."

So wrote Henry George in 1883. And today London still grows. And still the rural population of England is being depleted as London and other big cities exercise greater gravitational pull. One can begin walking across London in the morning and by evening he will still see no stretch of green fields. Why this huge city, why this unnatural growth? Dr. S. Vere Pearson, in "London's Overgrowth and the Causes of Swollen Towns," analyzes this problem, handles the subject in masterly fashion and presents the full facts of the case and explores more deeply into causes.

It is quite natural, Pearson points out, that London should be a center of population, because it is ideally situated for commerce and communication. "The growth of a city is not the result of political decree or control, but conforms to the first law of economics, namely, that man seeks to fulfil his desires with the least possible effort." What is unnatural is this rapid absorption of neighboring towns, the ribbon developments, the crowding of building after building, the disappearance of open spaces. This constitutes a waste of time, money and energy, and a menace to public health. The same law of economics is working, but under what conditions? "Cheaper land and more space for expansion has been the main motive actuating the movement of London manufacturing firms outwards, but this desire for cheap land has been conditioned by the necessity of being within easy reach of the metropolis, and for this reason firms are willing to pay twice the price for land in the fringe of greater London than for land with similar industrial facilities in other parts of England." (D. H. Smith, quoted by Pearson.) Land speculators take up sites and hold them for a high price. The search for cheaper sites leads to a constant search further out. And so London spreads out. In the meantime, agricultural laborers, also harassed by high rents, give up farming and seek their fortunes in the city. And so London continues to swell its numbers.

All this shift of population is in accordance with economic laws. One of the most fascinating chapters in the book is the one on "Natural Laws Governing the Distribution of Population and Industries." Dr. Pearson is also author of the earlier book, "Growth and Distribution of Population" (reviewed in LAND AND FREEDOM, January-February, 1936, by Gilbert M. Tucker). In the present volume it is easy to see that here is a man who has studied the population question deeply, and whose remarks on the subject carry weight.

Pearson also understands the land question, and the consequences of private collection of rent. He takes up the problems of London, one by one—transportation, communication, housing, public health, disposal of refuse—and shows clearly how improvement in these directions is balked at every turn by landlordism. Rents soar, selling prices are boosted—"compensation" is demanded—whenever there is even talk of a project that would improve London. For

instance, the Charing Cross Bridge project. "Out of a contemplated cost of nearly £17,000,000 for this bridge nine years ago, no less than £11,000,000 was required for 'compensation' to landlords. . . . The latest news of this scheme is worse still. A report was submitted to the London County Council on February 23, 1937, showing that the total net cost of an adequate scheme would be £32,500,000, of which about £28,000,000 would be compensation to property owners."

Slum clearance projects in London have to contend with soaring rents, as they have to everywhere else. One would think that government officials would have learned something concerning slum clearance and better housing after so many failures, due to speculative rent. Repeated mistakes and failures would be unthinkable in, say, wireless—but we are far behind in the social sciences. "Most workers cannot afford to rent or buy a good house." Add to high rents the high taxes that must be paid, to appreciate the plight of the worker. London County Council built a group of flats to re-house slum-dwellers in the Hoxton section. "With the incurable hopefulness of the poor, many of the Hoxton families moved into the new flats, delighted to come into a healthy district to a clean, light, airy, well-built home, and hoping somehow to be able to scrape together the rents, varying from 13s. 6d. to 19s. 3d. a week. They assumed that these rents constituted their full liability. But they were met with a demand from the Hackney Borough Council for rates, to be paid *quarterly in advance*. Many of them, faced with demands they could not possibly meet, left; probably returning to some slum. Others were served with summonses." (Verinder, quoted by Pearson.)

In New York City, exorbitant rents cause sky-scrapers. In London there are no skyscrapers, but a different kind of crowding exists. "It is more an overcrowding of persons in the house rather than of houses on the ground." And if London does not build upwards, "the pressure of ground rent forces people to be always burrowing underground not only to ease the difficulties of traffic, but to obtain more room for shops and offices. . . . Deep excavation is practiced as a more profitable use of the site."

So long as the rent of land goes into private pockets, London will have an unnatural growth. Officials have tried to stop this growth by artificial means—by circumscribing a green park-like belt around London, which would prevent further expansion. "The mere announcement that this policy of buying areas to keep green for ever is to materialize . . . has already sent up land prices." And of course, money to buy the land and pay for the project would have to be borne by tax payers. Even if the project is carried through, it will scarcely stop the growth of London so long as present conditions continue.

Dr. Pearson gives many more instructive illustrations of the effects of land speculation and land monopoly—and also of an unwise system of taxation. It is interesting to observe the various forms they assume due to local conditions, and yet how the phenomena themselves are the same as in the rest of the world. The remedy proposed by Pearson is the only remedy that will work—the collection by the community of the rent of land, which is the value that is created by the community—and the abolition of all other taxes. This remedy, Pearson points out, will give agriculture a new stimulus, for sites will be more easily secured. Many workers from crowded cities will return to the soil, and villages will spring up, rural life will be revived. And what will happen to London itself? "This: many of the visions of the best town-planners will become actualities . . . Once again in the heart of London mother earth will blossom and smell sweet."

Dr. Pearson trusts British intelligence to finally adopt the true remedy. But . . . "In the meantime the octopus is still spreading its tentacles. . . . London keeps on growing still, keeps on growing still."

ROBERT CLANCY.