

A Single-Taxer from Way Back

By MARSHALL CRANE

THE French Physiocrats, who wrote during the generation just before the French Revolution, are often referred to as the first single-taxers. Perhaps they were too, though de Gournay, who coined the famous phrase, *Laissez faire, laissez passer*, preceded them by a generation or more, and still earlier, at the very beginning of the century, the Marquis de Vauban published a work identifying the land as the only equitable source of taxation.

The amateur of early economists finds many little gems in the works of the moralists, theologians, and philosophers of the whole Christian era. The medieval Jewish and Moslem writers of northern Africa and Spain repay the searcher with many choice bits. In Christendom, St. Thomas Aquinas is probably the most noted Georgist in embryo, but not a few of the early Christian Fathers display similar leanings.

However, it is not until the curtain rises on the eighteenth century that the more strictly economic thinkers begin to appear on the scene. The earlier ones made few friends, and did not influence people noticeably. Some of them were real "characters," but only a handful rate more than brief mention in a few dusty reference books. Their works are unread collectors' items, though they mark the birth of social science in the modern sense of the term.

One of these pioneers was Thomas Spence, an English bookseller and economist. Students may perhaps recall a paragraph (p. 185) in Henry George's *Science of Political Economy* paying tribute to him. He is certainly one of the "earlies" who has received much too little attention.

Thomas Spence was born in 1750, at Newcastle-on-Tyne. It is not unlikely that he thought in social terms from his earliest years, as he was one of a family of nineteen children. His father, a netmaker and shoemaker, was his only teacher, but he must have been a pretty good one, as Thomas was employed as a clerk as a young man. He was of an inquiring turn of mind, and became a member of the Newcastle Philosophical Society in his early twenties.

His "Fame" Grew

Henry George speaks of Spence's expulsion from the society in 1775, shortly after he had presented a treatise on the rights of man. George, whose source of information was a pamphlet by H. M. Hyndman, the English socialist, assumes that Spence was expelled because of the unpopularity of his opinions. Actually this was not the case. The subject of human rights was very fashionable with "philosophers" of that time (v. Burke, et. al.) and many members were in complete agreement with the ideas he expressed. But the brash young author committed an unpardonable sin when he had his treatise printed and hawked on the streets of Newcastle. Horrified at this breach of gentlemanly propriety, the sedate and learned brethren voted him out at their next meeting.

Not long afterwards Spence left Newcastle for London, where he set up a bookstall in High Holborn. Here he sold books, developed and expounded his economic system in numerous tracts and pamphlets, and became a very annoying flea in the ear of the authorities. He

was in and out of trouble for most of the rest of his life.

If he had presented his ideas in scholarly phrases and clothed them in the dignity of hard covers they would probably have been ignored. But Spence's works appeared in pamphlet form. They were addressed to the populace, in language understandable even to the police. As a result of this he spent many months as a guest of the Crown.

In 1784 he spent six months in Newgate gaol for the publication of an objectionable pamphlet. In the years that followed he served a number of short spells in the poken, usually, it seems, without any specific, formal charge having been made against him, and without trial by jury. However, in 1801 he was sentenced to twelve months imprisonment for seditious libel, in connection with a pamphlet entitled "The Restorer of Society to its Natural State."

But in spite of his trials and other tribulations, his economic philosophy won many adherents. He had come to London at a time when the new science of political economy was attracting the attention of the thoughtful. The reforms which he proposed had appeal for both the speculatively minded and the practical. They were based on sound ethical principles, and were simple and easily understood.

Reform in a Nutshell

Briefly, he proposed:

That all men have an equal right to the products of nature, including land.

That to insure an equal enjoyment of this right, the inhabitants of each parish should form a corporation, in which the title to the land should be forever vested. (A parish was roughly comparable to a township or, if an urban parish, to a ward.)

That parish officers should collect rent on all land and, after sufficient deductions had been made for local and national expenses, should divide the remainder among the parishioners.

That there should be no other taxation of any kind.

That neither trade, employment, or the freedom of movement of the citizens should be subjects to toll, excise, franchise, license, or restriction of any sort.

That one day in every five should be a sabbath or day of rest.

That, as true equality is impossible unless education is available to all, free public schools should be supported by the state.

That to provide for the common defense, while still obviating the necessity for the burden of a large standing army, every able-bodied man should be liable for service in a militia.

That each parish should elect a representative to the national assembly or parliament.

That "Whether the title (of the chief executive officer of the state) be king, consul, president, etc., is quite indifferent to me."

This was the Spencean system of land nationalization. There seems to be no reason to qualify the statement that, though he lived and wrote a hundred years before Henry George, Thomas Spence was a very thorough-going single-taxer. There are differences between his plan and George's, of course, but upon examination they prove to be differences of policy

and procedure rather than of basic principle. To change or eliminate any one of them—the sabbatical fifth day, the militia, the general political set-up, or even the form of the parochial corporation—would not alter the essential nature of a system which, like Henry George's, stands firmly on the thesis that the value of the land belongs to all men.

Thomas Spence died in 1814. Those who had admired him and his works formed a Society of Spencean Philanthropists, which kept his name alive for some years.

In the fifth edition of his *Principle of Population* Thomas Robert Malthus has left us a passage attacking the Spencean economy, on the grounds that the annual value of the land had been greatly over-estimated—a statement which he does not even attempt to substantiate—and that, even at the highest estimate, it is insufficient to meet the costs of government. Every Georgist has heard the same arguments many times. Even Malthus does not presume to question the ethical principle upon which Spence's system rests.

Since Thomas Spence's death a biography or two, a few essays on his work, and still fewer books have seen the light. Almost none are available today, except perhaps at the largest libraries. Very occasionally he is mentioned in books on the history of economics.

But there are two undying monuments to his memory, and no economist who has been damned by Malthus and lauded by Henry George will ever be entirely forgotten.

[In February, 1952, Archibald C. Matteson, Jr., wrote in *The Henry George News*, "You deserve to know Thomas Spence better." Marshall Crane, in the foregoing article, proves that at least one reader has further explored the works of this bold character.]