

# Poverty Rediscovered

FROM THE DEPTHS: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States, by Robert H. Bremner, New York University Press, 1956, 270 pages, \$5.50

Reviewed by MARSHALL CRANE

THE poor ye have always with you." Since that famous incident in Bethany some seventy generations of mankind have lived and died, most of them in poverty. Quite a number of people maintain that such misery is inevitable, part of the nature of things, but most Georgists, like other economic liberals, do not share this opinion. However, one must admit that the burden of proof in this argument does seem to lie on the shoulders of the liberals. For no one can ignore the fact that a sizable majority of the human race has always been undernourished, ill-clad and poorly housed.

The author of this most interesting and informative addition to the annals of the poor speaks of it as an account of "the discovery of poverty in the United States" from the end of the Civil War to the present time, a characterization which is in no way less true just because of the many other discoveries and rediscoveries which have been published the past two hundred years.

But Robert Bremner is less concerned with the mere fact of poverty than with the gradual realization, by Americans in all walks of life, that it is, and always has been, a social problem of the first magnitude. This is the discovery of which he writes, as well as of the development of techniques, of greater or lesser effectiveness, for the relief of the multitudinous forms of human suffering which owe their existence to poverty.

As might be expected, Mr. Bremner is something of a "welfare stater."

This, of itself, will hardly endear him to the average Georgist. For though he believes that "no single figure in the last two decades of the nineteenth century was more successful than Henry George in arousing public opinions to an awareness of the social origins of wealth and poverty," he is inclined to think of him as a "classic liberal," one of a well-meaning but irrational and archaic sect whose great heresy is their adherence to the doctrine of individual rights and responsibilities.

Nevertheless, no sober Georgist can read a book of this type without doing some very serious thinking. As he sees it, these distortions of the body economic are, one and all, end results of a single cause—the private appropriation of ground rent. Moreover, he is firmly convinced that the removal of this cause will eventually result in the disappearance of the horrible effects. Just the same, "eventually" is a vague term. And the process of removal itself is likely to be a very gradual one, judging from the areas where it is already being effected.

If this is true, how right, how realistic is our attitude towards the assumption by the community of responsibilities which have pertained to the individual in the past? There can be no doubt that such an assumption does threaten the integrity of the rights of the individual, at least theoretically. But no less true is the fact that it also seems to make many individual duties things of the past. Indeed, many such duties could not be discharged by the citizen of today even if he wished to do so. Responsibility a right, and the questions which arise when either is involved are surely among the toughest that ever face the amateur social and political scientist.