

From the book:

The Foundations of Freedom: The Land and the People / 1912

A REMINISCENCE OF HENRY GEORGE

By W. Darvell

“And when the stream
Which overflowed the soul was passed away.
A consciousness remained that it had left.
Deposited upon the silent shore
Of memory, images and precious thoughts
That shall not die, and cannot be destroyed.”
Wordsworth.

When, in 1889, I heard that Henry George was going to speak in Workington, although the place was forty miles from where I lived, I determined to hear him. I am not now certain how I became aware of the projected meeting. It may have been through “The Democrat,” a monthly publication, at that time edited by Mr. William Saunders, or Mr. F. Verinder, with whom I was in correspondence at the time, was likely to have told me of the meeting. George was touring the country at the time. At the request of William Saunders and others he made a third visit to this country, and met with enthusiastic encouragement everywhere. He started from New York in March, 1889, being accompanied by his wife and two daughters.

Many signs of progress had become apparent since his last visit. Mr. T. P. O'Connor announced as one of the basic principles of "The Star," his new London daily paper, “the taxation of Land Values.” and Lord Chief Justice Coleridge, speaking to the Scottish Judicial Society with reference to the land laws of the United Kingdom said: “These may be for the general advantage, and if they can be shown to be so, by all means they should be maintained; but if not, does any man with anything he is pleased to call his mind deny that a state of law under which mischief can exist, under which the country itself would exist not for its people, but for a mere handful of them, ought to be instantly and absolutely set aside?” Leo Tolstoy also had begun his advocacy of the Georgean philosophy, which he never relinquished till his death. In an interview with a press correspondent he declared: “In

thirty years private property in land will be as much a thing of the past as now is serfdom. England, America, and Russia will be the first to solve the problem. . . . Henry George has formulated the next article in the programme of the progressive liberals of the world.”

The Prophet himself bears witness to the progress made. After a campaign which comprehended the length and breadth of Great Britain and two visits to Ireland, lecturing almost nightly and meeting and talking with many distinguished people, Henry George declared at a farewell gathering in London: "The temper of the audiences had changed. It was not this time to hear a strange thing that they gathered; it was to hear something of which they had more than an inkling. And the men who took part—who came forward to occupy the chairs, or sat on the platform to move the votes of thanks that are customary there on such occasions—were men who formerly would not have thought of being in such a place. They were, generally speaking, the local notables, the file leaders, the active Liberal party. Our ideas are in the air; men get them without knowing where they come from; men get them without thinking they are getting them: and men get them who still look upon us as cranks and visionaries. Mr. Henry Labouchere, M.P., for instance, recently declared in a speech to his constituents that he was not such a visionary as Henry George. He did not propose to take the land from the landlords and rent it out again. What he was in favour of was putting a tax on Land Values!"

The meeting I went forty miles to attend at Workington was no exception to the rule. From start to finish it was altogether sympathetic and enthusiastic for the policy outlined by Henry George. With one exception, and that a dignitary of the Church of England, George raised sympathy and enthusiasm, but it was entirely by the irresistible truths that he gave utterance to. He stood quietly, I should say humbly, before his great audience, almost without an apparent muscular movement, but his arguments, plainly stated and very easy of comprehension, told with immense effect. He first showed man's entire dependence upon land, its all-comprehensiveness—"all nature outside of man"—and how helpless labour was without its use. Following this was the illustration of the immense power of those who owned "the land on which all must live," and urged that "naturally the

labourer ought to get more" as the means of production increased, but this was found not to be the case, because he was practically the slave of the owner of land. The reason the labouring class was the poorest class was because it was the disinherited class. God never made a mere labourer, a man simply with the power to labour, and with nothing to exert his labour upon. God did not bring man there until He had first made the earth, and He put man upon it to bring forth by his labour the things to satisfy his wants. A man who had no legal right on the soil of his country was as unnatural a thing as a bird without air or a fish without water.

Some time afterwards, followed by his audience with rapt attention, the Prophet came to the practical question of how to give back their inheritance to the people, the very simple and workable one of abolishing all taxation save that upon Land Values, which he said was simply going back, in a form adapted to their times, to the same good old methods which existed when holders of land had to make return to the State for the advantages which they enjoyed. The more they thought over and tested this question of the Single Tax on Land Values, the more would they see that it agreed with every maxim of Justice, with every dictate of good policy, and with every rule of sound morality.

Everybody agreed with Henry George except Canon Thornley, the gentleman above alluded to, and he was another example of the confusion into which some minds get regarding this great reform. He read an extract from "Progress and Poverty," in which he said it was proposed to raise wages, extirpate poverty, etc., by appropriating land by taxation. Mr. George denied that he ever proposed to put a tax on land, whereupon the Canon handed him the book. The Prophet quietly passed it on to the Chairman, who advised the Canon to put on his spectacles. When it was discovered that the word was "rent" and not "land," the Canon said "Exactly the same thing," and Mr. George quietly remarked that there was a great difference. The audience saw it, and cheered the Prophet, and to this very day, all along that sea-girt part of England the sturdy miners and others will be found to respond enthusiastically to anyone who will deal with the land question as Henry George did at Workington.

At the close of the meeting, I marched up on to the platform, right between the Prophet and Canon Thornley, and extending my

hand, said: "Will you shake hands, Mr. George? I am a workman, and have come forty miles to hear you." "Yes, certainly," he replied, and I held in close grip the hand which had panned for me the gospel truth of "Progress and Poverty." He was humble as a child, and if ever the power of truth shone in a man's face from a sincere heart, it was there and then. I felt too full and too diffident to speak any other words, and turned away mute from his inspired presence. I do not exaggerate, and I offer no apology for saying, I felt the place whereon I stood was holy ground. This reverent feeling may not perhaps be quite understood except by those who have first "become as little children," and then mastered Henry George's book. "Progress and Poverty" is a message from God, whose will it reveals in language requiring neither cleric nor politician to interpret. The very message that Christ brought to the chattel slaves of His day Henry George brought to the modern wage slaves.

The lecture was followed by newspaper correspondence, in which Canon Thornley showed the influence which Malthusianism had upon him, and how little he understood the real philosophy of the Single Tax on Land Values. A more eminent man than he (the Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone), in the year but one following, showed how little even a great mind could grasp this teaching of the Prophet of San Francisco. For in the House of Commons, after roundly denouncing Henry George, and handing him over "to the tender mercies of the right hon. gentleman (Mr. Chaplin)," he made the following remarkable declaration at the close of his speech:—"There is another subject embraced in the scope of the motion (in favour of taxing the rental of land), viz., the taxation of ground rents. It is beyond all doubt that under our present system ground rents enjoy undue exemption. In London, in particular, the owners have long enjoyed, at the expense of the ratepayers, privileges which are in reality unjust. It is undoubtedly a matter in which the people of London look to Parliament to effect a material change and improvement in their condition, and in which, on grounds of justice as well as high policy, it is important to make a change in the law. The motion will keep alive the protest against these things, and undoubtedly the time will come when these efforts will bear fruit." Single Taxers will agree that this is excellent doctrine, and entirely in accordance with the teaching of "Progress and Poverty." When the intelligent portion of the community get as clear a grasp of Henry George's teaching as Mr.

Gladstone apparently unconsciously possessed, we shall not be long in settling the question entirely to the satisfaction of George's disciples and with infinite advantage to the people generally.