

(The Australian Standard)

“The Standard”: The Early Years

‘A Journal to Advocate the Rights of the People in the Land.’

By Alan Katen Dunstan / November, 2005

‘...And then, alas! The growler’s wrath most meekly sank to rest,
And all his other glorious plans lay buried in his chest:
Like many other growling souls, he couldn’t stand the rub,
Of such a low-down, straight remark as ‘Send along a sub.’
‘The Growler,’ or ‘Send along a sub,’ – John Farrell, 1896.

With the number November 15, 1910, The Standard completed five years of publication. This was number sixty. The first issue appeared in December, 1905. To mark the event a competition was opened to find the three most successful canvassers for annual subscriptions to the paper; first prize was a copy of The Ethics of Democracy, by Louis F. Post; valued at 7s and 6d. In a second offer it was made possible to purchase every copy from No. 1 to No. 60, in bound volumes for 10s. per volume. In a flourish, not uncommon on such occasions, A.G. Huie, the editor, who first made his name with John Farrell at the Single Tax, was lavish in his praise of Joseph Hector Carruthers, an old boy of the Rockdale Branch who was then leader of the Liberal Party. Huie described Carruthers as a ‘Premier of more than ordinary courage and ability.’

The Premier’s efforts notwithstanding, when that first number appeared figures confirmed how little things had changed since the 1890s when it was first reported that New South Wales had nearly ten million acres of land locked up in the hands of just one hundred-and-eleven holders. Thus, the reality was - despite the best efforts of many single taxers - a few still held the best lands while large numbers of men and women went vainly seeking a few acres upon which to work and build a home.

The first Standard supplied a long felt want. There had been no paper since the Single Tax closed in 1898; and like the earlier paper, it too was established by and maintained by voluntary labour. In both publications only the printers, and ink and paper suppliers were paid. And in spite of the fact that the work was voluntary, it seems Huie asked little more than for subscribers to pay promptly. Although he often bemoaned the fact that while 4,500 Standards were printed at every issue, advertisers were difficult to attract. (The capital to start the paper was subscribed by about 150 friends of the movement to tax land values).

In any analysis, it should be conceded that solutions to social problems are always difficult to agree upon, and since single taxers have always held strong views, differences of opinion as to policy and methods could not then be avoided. Ergo, some who might fairly have been expected to be more reasonable ceased to take the paper or resigned. To those Huie argued - in the name of harmony and of achieving their common goal - that since Henry George’s aim was to establish the right of the people in the land, it was only fair that his great issue over-shadow all the rest. As

to details, George had never proposed (according to Huie) either to purchase, or confiscate private land. He was happy enough for owners to keep their land, as long as they paid to the community the annual increment of value that attached to it because of the community.

In the first issue Huie gave the reasons for starting-up. It was felt that some connecting link was required to bind Georgians together, some medium of propaganda and information that would keep them abreast of current events and would set out clearly the 'right' attitude on economic matters. Not unexpectedly, this last proviso proved troublesome. In the first place who was to say what was right? Was this to be the special province of the editor? As a test of assessing the right attitude, in 1905 it was (again) proposed to buy-out landowners and re-distribute the land. Huie was against the idea; despite the fact that after seven centuries of British misrule, purchase and distribution was the method finally adopted by the Irish for solving their land problem. Moreover in an editorial best described as prosaic, he ruthlessly severed connections with the past with the words: 'We do not believe in nationalizing the land. Let that be clearly and definitely understood. We are emphatically against [this] course and the consequent control of industry on the land by the State.'[?]

A 'Poor' Look

More generally, as to the look of *The Standard*, despite the best of intentions it might fairly be described as disappointing. Though it only cost a penny, it was a very slim volume of just four double-sided pages. The type-faces, too, were small and difficult to read and its appearance was austere (a belated attempt at gravitas?) and, with the exception of two poets, 'Hod,' and J.W. Bengough, no one was given a by-line. Nor were readers ever told Huie's Christian names; furtively, he was referred to merely as A.G. Huie. Likewise in *The Story of My Dictatorship*, which commenced in serial form with the first number, authorship was given a twist when the writer's name was never revealed, hence he or she succeeded in remaining nameless throughout. Such distancing, or lack of confidence, perhaps, was a feature. Thus true to form in an advertisement for books for sale at the Darlington Single Tax League, readers were simply told to address their requests to the 'Hon-Secretary.'

To the credit of the League, however, the books sold at very low prices: *An Exposure of Socialism* by Max Hirsh, was 3d; *Justice the Object, Scotland and Scotsmen, Moses, Thy Kingdom Come, and Thou Shalt Not Steal*, by Henry George, 1d. each *Extracts from Speeches* by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the newly elected British Prime Minister, cost a half-penny each (post free!). It should also be noted that Campbell-Bannerman came from the 'progressive' wing of the Liberal Party, and shortly after his win announced his intention to proceed with important social reforms, including rating upon land values.

Consistent Friends

On an equally positive note, many from the early days of the movement were still active. Among them Percy Meggy, secretary of the first Single Tax Conference in Sydney in 1889, was in Tasmania in 1905 writing for the *Hobart Mercury*. (Aged eighty and living in Moree, Meggy was still sending items to *The Standard* in 1933). Ignatius Bell who helped found the first League at Forbes was still active; as were J. Trant Fischer and Henry Joseph Fletcher. Fletcher, a New

Zealander, born in Auckland in 1860, came to Sydney in 1874. Ten years later he read Progress and Poverty and became a convinced Georgist from then on. In 1885, with Frank Cotton, James Ryan, Joseph Cook, John Farrell and a few others, they established a Land Nationalization paper at Lithgow with Farrell as editor. Showing his bona-fides, Fletcher, a successful commercial traveller, sank a hundred pounds into the [unsuccessful] venture.

Joe Cook; 'The First Labour Rat'

On a sour note before moving on, it must be said that Joseph Cook was then, ironically, 'a Republican of the most crimson complexion who made his first political speech at Eskbank in 1887.' He was then a recent 'blow in' and "young Lithgow miner, known in Farrell's Circle as the 'opium eater' because of his frequent fits of introspection. Farrell's disapproving verdict on the volcanic Eskbank outburst was that if Cook had had a gun he would cheerfully have blown off all the crowned heads of Europe, and chanted a triumphant Te Deum over the royal corpses. About twenty years on, Joseph Cook, (later Sir Joseph) onetime member of the Labour Defence League was to become leader of the Liberals Federally. Cook, elected as the member for Hartley in 1891 in the Dibbs Government, was to be Prime Minister from 1913 into the early months of World War I."

Another of the old hands was Peter McNaught, 'Master Workman' of the Knights of Labor, who in the 1890s served as Bill Lane's Co-Chairman in the "New Australia" folly. Another was Frank Cotton, Labour member for Newtown in 1891, who among other things, co-wrote the Labour Party's Platform in 1890.

The Changing Leadership

But there'd been considerable change in the leadership from earlier times. As the Standards went to press, this was most clearly seen in one J. R. Firth, the new president. Born in Yorkshire, Firth came to Australia as a boy and was educated at Burwood Public School. Some time after leaving school he went into his father's cardboard box making factory in Codrington-Street Redfern (boundary changes later put this in Darlington). He joined the Darlington Single Tax League in 1898, and in 1901 acted as chairman of the Henry George anniversary dinner. Besides his involvement with the Single Tax, in 1903 he was a member of the Freetrade Selection Committee. He was also a member of the Council of the Liberal and Reform Association and served for a time on the Council of the Chamber of Manufactures. He was likewise on the Central Executive of the Democratic Union and Honorary Secretary of its Concord Branch, and a member of the Greater Sydney Movement (?)

Like many single taxers Firth was a Christian, and having mentioned religion, thoughts turn immediately to Hessel Hall, a Wesleyan minister who found himself in trouble for publicly debating politics with E. W. O'Sullivan. Dismissed from the ministry Hall became an advocate for the Single Tax, but running on strictly Single Tax lines failed to win Darlington in 1897. There was also George Smailes, president of the Parramatta branch and Primitive Methodist preacher who won the seat of Granville for Labour in 1894 and 1895. There was, too, the overly zealous John Hindle M.P. founder of the Christian Endeavour movement who in the days of multiple representation, won Newtown with Cotton in 1891. The Reverend James Blanksby, a Primitive Methodist minister

from Newcastle, was another. Blanksby, a twice failed candidate for Newcastle West, argued for a progressive land tax and the nationalization of rent and interest, and urged people to ‘practice the socialism of Christ.’ Edmund Lonsdale M.H.R., too, was a preacher, as were Frank Cotton and Joseph Cook. But the list is far from complete.

Thus to no one’s surprise, Firth was treasurer of the Congregational Sunday School Union and delegate to the Congregational Union. He had also served as secretary of the Congregational Sunday School at Burwood for nine years.

On the vexed question of Free-trade or Protection, not unexpectedly Firth was an advocate for the abolition of all Customs duties, substituting in their place a tax on unimproved land values as the best means of assisting manufacturing industries.

Whether or not Firth was correct in this view, there was a desperate need for a substantial improvement in the economic condition of the people. And since preparations for the Labour Party’s annual conference coincided with the January issue in 1906, Huie pointed out that while Labour had been discussing social problems for years, there’d been little improvement. In fact while many laws had been passed with the help of the Labour Party, unemployment was as widespread in 1906 as it had been in 1895. He maintained that only six per cent of breadwinners had an income above two hundred pounds a year, and over forty-seven per cent of the alienated lands of the State were in the hands of just seven hundred and thirty persons.

Warming to the rhetoric Huie took the line that the unequal distribution of wealth ‘was not attained by the exercise of the qualities of ability, energy, and thrift, or the vices of sloth, improvidence, and drunkenness.’ After all “the rich man is often a fool,” he wrote, “and the poor man industrious and free from vice.” He concluded with the thought that taxing land values was the best means for workers of raising wages and improving their position.

Thus it would seem, to Huie at least, that the brilliant Augustine Duganne’s poem that Georgians recited with gusto in the ‘90s, still rang true:

Sunlight and breezes and gladsome flowers
Are over the earth spread wide;
And the good God gave these gifts to men,
To men who on earth abide;
Yet thousands are toiling in poisonous gloom,
And shackled with iron hands,
While millions of hands want acres,
And millions of acres want hands.

Spreading the Word

Likewise on the evidence, it seems single taxers were as vigorous and active in speech-making as ever. In April 1906, Edmund Lonsdale, the federal member for New England, spoke to the Literary and Debating Society at the Congregational School Hall, in Pitt-Street, on the subject of Justice and True Socialism. As if to prove that single taxers could be as argumentative as any Socialist, he argued that every man should get what he earned and cited the case of a man who

invested ten thousand pounds in land; claiming that man was not entitled to interest on his outlay. To Lonsdale it was the same as if a speculator had put money into a hollow log for ten years. "If it was still there," he asked, "would any interest have accrued?" He would get no interest because his money was idle, it had not assisted in production in any way. The same principle applied, he said, when money is invested in land that is not used. Lonsdale had spoken to members of the Balmain Congregational Literary Society in March on the same subject.

Also in March, and again connecting to the Church, Messrs. R.E. Scott and A. Trikojus gave talks at a meeting of the St. John's Literary and Debating Society at Darlinghurst. These men and one other, 'R. Trueman,' a 'hairdresser' from George-Street North, likewise 'continued' to spend Sunday afternoons selling Standards and making speeches in the Domain; apparently with success. Hampered by wet weather in February, ten dozen copies were sold, but in March, twelve dozen copies. These men also spoke regularly at the open-air meetings at Newtown Bridge on Saturday evenings.

Meanwhile Messrs. Peter McNaught, Huie and McEwin represented the League in a discussion on the question of taxing land values to pay the interest on the cost of building railways and tramways, held at the Villa Maria Debating Society. Two representatives of the League were scheduled to address the Beecroft Society in March and, with three other members, support taxing land values to pay the cost of infrastructure in a debate with members of the Wesley Church Society at Regent-Street. in the City.

The most contentious speech was Peter McNaught's address to the Debating Society at the Y.M.C.A., in April 1906. Proceeding upon Georgian lines he stressed the Single Tax was 'a reforming movement based upon ethics.' He told them that he wholly disagreed with the usual fanciful picture the papers were spruiking about the prosperity of the country. As a builder he had recently advertised for a 'few' men and hundreds applied - some said they'd work for 4s. a day. "In this country we once thought unemployment on this scale was impossible," he said, "but we've become like England where large numbers of children would go to school hungry, if it wasn't for the breakfast provided for them by the public authority."

On an equally bleak note, he made reference to the declining birth-rate and the unwillingness of young couples to marry. "That is," he said, "because it is too difficult to earn a living. Land is artificially dear and men are cheap. Now-a-days, a mother asks, when a suitor calls on her daughter, not whether he is a good man, but is he able to provide for her?"

Another important debate took place at Leichhardt Town Hall in June 1906 between Huie and George S. Beeby, a labour leaguer who would win Blayney for Labour in 1907 and 1910. Beeby, with William Morris Hughes and William Arthur Holman had been won over to the Single Tax during Henry George's 'barnstorming' tour in 1890 and with Frank Cotton, were then all members of the Balmain Single Tax League.

In the debate with Huie, Beeby affirmed the motion that 'the progressive land tax and nationalization of monopolies, were the most effective means of increasing production and promoting a more equitable distribution of wealth.' Beeby had, however, by 1906 abandoned Georgism. But one Georgian who hadn't abandoned his beliefs was Walter Eliot Johnson

M.H.R. Almost as the Huie-Beeby debate was underway, he was in the House condemning any notion of a progressive land tax.

It should also be noted that in another vigorous encounter, Huie took on H. Scott Bennett in a series entitled the Single Tax and Socialism. The arguments of both men were published for all to read in the International Socialist Review and The Standard in September 1909. Such debates were reminiscent of those that took place between Farrell and A. G. Yewen in the Daily Telegraph in the 1890s.

Huie relished his encounters with socialists, and on another occasion debated with J.J. Morrish. Huie affirmed the Single Tax would enable the workers to secure the full fruits of their labour. Morrish opposed the proposition on behalf of the International Socialist Club and the debate took place in the Club's rooms at 274 Pitt-Street.

In earlier times the Socialist Club was at 533 George-Street and was conducted by Bill McNamara, co-founder of the Australian Socialist League and father-in-law of Henry Lawson and John Thomas Lang. The old Socialist Club had over 300 newspapers filed, including Single Tax literature such as the London Democrat, Christian Commonwealth, Church Reformer, New York Standard and Australian Standard. What's more books were read or borrowed according to the 'honour system.' Consequently, it came highly recommended by Farrell as a reading room or place of debate and discussion.

The Executive

An election of officers and committee to form the Executive Council of the League was held soon after publication began, and the following is a list of some of those appointed: President, J.R. Firth; Vice-Presidents, the Reverend. W.H. Beale, Messrs, E. Lonsdale, W.E. Johnson, Ms.H.R., P. McNaught, J.T. Fischer and W.F. Keen; Hon. Sec., A.G. Huie; Hon. Tres., John Waugh; Committee – Mrs. J.A. Dobbie, Mrs. Keen, Mrs. McNaught and Mrs. T. Parkes, Others on the committee were: A. Oldfield, N.M. Thomas, G.H. Longmuir, E. Hould, T. Bull and William Wallace (W.W). Lyght.

It is appropriate to pause here to recount a short story involving the Rev. W.H. Beale, the new Vice-President. At John Farrell's funeral in the Catholic section of the Rookwood necropolis in 1904, Frank Cotton, one of Farrell's oldest friends, was to speak at the grave but 'broke down' and could not. What is more, the priest who was to conduct the service never arrived. Consequently Beale, ex-president of the Methodist Conference who attended as a friend, led the prayers at graveside.

“Worthy of his Hire.”

Returning to the main theme, one of the executive's first decisions was to acknowledge work of A. G. Huie who had served as Honorary Secretary of the League since 1901. He was finding it impossible to continue in a voluntary capacity, and rather than 'lose him' the council resolved to organize a fund that would secure his services as paid Secretary of the League. This was done by publishing 'Forms of Promise' in The Standard which after filling out, were to be returned with

the promise to make regular contributions towards Huie's salary and providing him with a suitably equipped office.

Not Good News

We now come to one of the bleakest moments in the early years. In November 1908, Firth's factory was destroyed by fire. P. J. Firth, J. R. Firth's father, had been in business on the site since 1893 and had built it up from a small concern to an important industry employing 100 people. Losses exceeded ten thousand pounds, only part of which was covered by insurance. As a necessary consequence, J. R. Firth resigned from the League and The Standard to help his father re-establish himself. Regrettably the Darlington STL, whose headquarters were in the factory was also destroyed and all of its books and pamphlets, lost. Following the fire, the Sydney League's office was established at 81 Elizabeth-Street ('kindly lent temporarily').

Even before the fire at Firth's, there been gloom enough with Edmund Lonsdale's defeat in New England. The same could be said of W. Conroy for Werriwa. Adding to the gloom, some months after it was learned that a block of land in George-Street, near the G.P.O., had sold for more than one-thousand-and-thirty pounds a foot. Georgians asked would the property be subject to the Labour Party's progressive land tax? Sadly, they quickly learnt from 'Mr. Neilson's' speech in the Legislative Assembly that the progressive tax would not apply. Ergo, city land monopolists, like country 'cockies,' were to be exempt.

Moreover, in the fourth year of publication the problem of attracting advertisers was still difficult. The story is clearly seen in Huie's woebegone list of advertisers for October 1909. Besides one advertisement for 'Aunt Mary's Baking Powder' and one for 'Pearson's Sand Soap,' no large employer was represented. Most representation came from small businesses, viz; a watchmaker from Burwood and a pastrycook from Glebe. And finally, without comment, Henry Jones – Consulting Phrenologist, 87 Market-Street.

The saddest news was Max Hirsch's death in 1909; ironically on the day Taft was installed as chief of the country that boasted the highest tariff in the English speaking world. Hirsch was born in Cologne in 1852 (or Wevelinghoven, near Dusseldorf in 1853 – there is some confusion about the place and year). This arises from the fact that after his father's death in 1873, when Max and his brother Joseph were already in England, their mother with her six younger children, moved to Cologne, and later in 1882 to Berlin.

Briefly, Hirsch was educated at the University of Berlin and between 1872 and 1879 travelled through Europe, North Africa and Western Asia as a representative of British manufacturers and in 1879 came to Australia in the same capacity. In 1892 he gave up business to devote himself wholly to the dissemination of his political and economic ideas. He ran a journal in Melbourne called the Beacon, and was one of the founders of the Freetrade Democratic Association of Victoria; plainly he saw himself as a great instrument against protection and special privileges. He returned to England in 1905 and died in Vladivostok in 1909. The body was cremated in Shanghai, and the ashes sent to Berlin. To the discomfort of some, 'Hirsch was a Jew who attended the Synagogue.'

The appointment of Sir George Houston Reid in 1910, to the post of High Commissioner also calls for comment. Accordingly under a heading: 'Sir George Reid, A Political Obit,' The Standard writer said that "No man did more to help freetrade before federation, and no man did more to put back freetrade in Australia after federation, than G. H. Reid." The writer added sardonically: "There is one consolation, Sir George can, by exporting himself to London, do less harm to Australia than if he remains..."

That same year The Standard likewise reported the political demise of Alfred Deakin and the elevation of Andrew Fisher. Fisher, the Labour leader, straightway undertook to "make Australia a better country to live in." This laudable objective was to be achieved mainly through three planks, viz: 'Nationalization of Monopolies,' 'New Protection' and a 'Graduated Tax on Unimproved Values.' This was the same non-combatant – and ignoramus, who at the outbreak of World War I declared Australians "would fight to the last man and the last shilling."

Trouble at the Mine

Previously other big stories included the 'Great' Lock-out at Broken Hill in 1909, and the Newcastle Coal Strike of the same year; both were events of more than ordinary importance and were dealt with sympathetically by The Standard. It might also be said that in both places the miners were not getting a fair deal, and they knew it. In plain terms, the Lock-out occurred when the Broken Hill Proprietary Mine and its partner Block 10 wanted the men to accept a reduction in wages. The men refused, the mines shut down, and the men were shut out. On November 2, police were dispatched from Sydney, ostensibly to keep order, but apparently to irritate the men into committing acts of violence. Through the whole affair Delprat, a Dutch Jew whose previous experience was in bossing Spanish miners in Andalusia, took a course of action that was to earn him the town's hatred. A reduction in wages was sure to inflame the men and many writers since have argued that this was Delprat's strategy: 'Faced with falling lead prices it suited him to close the mine for a period so that the company could divert its capital to its interstate interests. Rather than sacking the miners, Delprat had organized them to lay themselves off.' On this subject we should remember Farrell's remarks on the 1890 Maritime (and Shearers') Strike and the 1891 Queensland Shearers' Strike. Farrell wrote, in the broad context of the weakness of unions when pitted against monopoly: "Like protection by tariff trades (sic) unionism is warfare, and not only between capital and labor (sic) but between labor and labor."

Workers and Landlords

One other story related to mining was published in 1909. This was a story headed 'Why Wages are Low' and was given wide coverage in The Standard. Adapted from a work by Edward McHugh entitled Land Values, the article explained how the expropriation of people from the soil, is the primary cause of the unjust distribution of wealth. In the context of an Atlantic crossing by the Lusitania, the author discussed the 'colossal' plunder due to landlordism, and the dreadful disparity between royalties on coal and seamen's wages. For example, the Lusitania's crew, we are told, had a contingent that included 120 trimmers, 192 firemen and 21 greasers who between them, at the rate of between 3s, and 3s and 8d each per day, earned 538 pounds per round trip of 10 days duration. During those ten days coal consumption amounted to 16,800 tons. Thus royalties at 1s and 3d. per ton amounted to 1,050 pounds. Or more plainly, royalties paid to

one man exceeded the wages of 333 men by 511 pounds and 10 shillings. (The highest paid man on the ship of course was the captain, and he received 50s. a day).

Women in the Movement

Before proceeding, some mention is warranted of those friends of The Standard, the Women's Single Tax League. Sadly women were mentioned only rarely, nevertheless they did valuable work with a oneness of purpose. In March 1910, a page was devoted to the League in honour of their President 'Mrs. Arnold,' on the eve of her departure for Europe. To celebrate, a simple presentation of a bouquet of flowers was made by Miss Marie Kinchington. In response, Mrs. Arnold thanked her friends and co-workers for a 'beautiful farewell.' She also reminded them that while 'Charity bails the boat, the Single Tax solves the leak.' Short addresses by other speakers, songs and recitations, all contributed to making an enjoyable evening. The musical part of the programme was organized by Mrs. J. A. Dobbie whilst the report for The Standard was written by Sophia Lowrey. (The minimum subscription of the Women's Branch was 1s. per annum).

The Joseph Fels Fund

Periodically the editor received through the post all manner of items. One of the most unusual was a letter from John Paul, of the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, London. The letter was to inform Huie that 'Joseph Fels, of Philadelphia,' was offering two-hundred-and-fifty pounds per annum for five years, on condition that a similar amount be raised for propaganda work in New South Wales. When this was announced, the Women's League decided to have tea rooms at the Royal Easter Show in aid of the Fels Fund. (Their rooms were called The Wattle Tea Rooms, and were situated 'next to the Bee Pavilion').

Who was Joseph Fels? According to The Standard, he was 'a millionaire Jew and idealist' who made his money out of 'naphtha' (an obsolete name for petroleum). But it seems he was fiercely dedicated to the Single Tax and put up sums in excess of \$100,000 a year for five years to carry on 'the struggle' in England, America, Switzerland and New Zealand; and now Australia. One final point remains to be made. The Standard also reported that Fels was 'returning to London' to continue the fight for "the land for the people," and had told Israel Zangwill that he would "finance the repatriation of Jews to Palestine." One wonders how all that turned out?

Alan Katen Dunstan, November, 2005.