

Professionalism and History

By F. DUPUIS



OBITUARY notices on the late George Macaulay Trevelyan, O.M., Regius Professor of history at Cambridge, pay merited tributes to his eminence as an academic historian. His works are sound, brilliant, interesting — and non-controversial. If one looks at the concluding words of his standard *History of England* for a summary of his views on the lesson of history, the result is disappointing. "In the earlier scene man's impotence to contend with nature made his life brutish and brief. Today his very command over nature has become his greatest peril. Of the future the historian can see no more than others. We can only point like a showman to the things of the past, with their manifold and mysterious message." If this is the only fruit of a lifetime's study it would justify the late Henry Ford's remarks that "history is bunk."

But in an unguarded moment Professor Trevelyan spoke differently. On his eightieth birthday, February 12, 1957, he is reported to have said his life was "as happy as one's can be during the fall of European civilisation." It is impossible to believe he had no opinion on the causes of this supreme catastrophe, but not a hint of his forebodings appears in his work. As a professional, working on a subject of universal concern, he found it inexpedient to disturb his readers. This in itself suggests one cause of social decay.

The course of human affairs depends ultimately upon general opinion. All improvement in opinion arises from controversy. Religious toleration, abolition of slavery, extension of the franchise, liberation of trade, all began in this way, and the reformers were amateurs. The accredited experts will always tend instinctively to ally rather than arouse controversy. The decay of civilisation has been marked during the last half century by an increasing mental servility to the experts. Whether or not the views of such historians as Hume, Gibbon, Macaulay, Grote and Acton were correct they all committed themselves to some definite opinions, which conflicted with others and none of these men was trained in the orthodox schools of the time.

(Although Lord Acton was Professor of History at Cambridge late in life, he had never previously held academical office. As a student he was refused admission at Cambridge.)

In economic thinking, also a subject of universal concern, the same trend is apparent. Adam Smith was a professor of moral philosophy, not economics; the Physiocrats, Ricardo, Mill, Henry George, Max Hirsch were all amateurs. Since economics became the preserve of the experts it has become sterile. To submit opinion on any *general* subject to a *specialist* is a logical absurdity.

No historian can record everything about everything. He must distinguish and emphasise some aspects more than others, and the value of his work depends upon the principle of selection. Historians usually treat the contest for power as their central theme. This is convenient and non-controversial. But it is far more important for mankind to learn how to check power over themselves than to read about great and powerful men who, as Lord Acton remarks, "are almost always bad men." Dr. Arnold suggested that history might profitably be studied "backwards," by taking some institution or set of laws, tracing its origin and judging whether its development accords with the original purpose. If we consult political economy to find the governing factors in human life Dr. Arnold's method should give meaning to history.

From a glance at early societies, before conquest and the corrupting influence of power have perverted the natural urge towards equal rights, it is evident that the right to land is the first subject for legislation. Where the essentials are obvious, men need no experts to inform them that the right to land is a question of life or death, liberty or servitude. And this is far from remaining ancient history for humanity today requires land with natural materials and forces just as primitive men required them. As life depends upon land its tenure is the first subject for historical study. And any standard history, such as Trevelyan's, affords enough information, however uncoordinated, to show how the development of society is governed by conditions of land tenure.

Although precise details of Saxon tenure are not given, it is clear from Trevelyan's account that the right to land was the mark of the freeman, lack of it the mark of the serf. The Norman kings, well aware that land was the source of power, granted titles to land only on condition of providing public services from rent. The Feudal system decayed as the larger landowners progressively denied their obligations. The monarchs, thus weakened, were

reduced to demanding extraordinary revenue through Parliament. As landowners dominated this assembly the burden of taxation was gradually shifted from rent to commodities, from landowners to the common people. The Great Rebellion made little difference because, as Lord Acton noticed, quoting Harrington, "it omitted to redistribute property." The Parliamentarian officers, having acquired estates, re-established the monarchy, under appropriate guarantees, as their safest insurance against any radical changes.*

During the earlier period of constitutional monarchy, 1688 to 1832, the landlords as M.P.s and magistrates governed England openly and directly. Thus all our "traditional parliamentary liberties" developed safely for landlordism. To question the land laws was made a penal offence. For a moment, after 1832, landlord power trembled but as no extension of the franchise has been followed by land reform the indirect power of landlordism has proved just as effective as direct power. Abolishing the laws of entail facilitated new recruits to the monopolists' ranks and the manufacturer and merchant landowners obscured the distinction between the landed and landless elements of society. The efforts of English land reformers at the beginning of this century marked a critical period in history, although historians ignore it. But the crude feeling evoked by the war and its aftermath turned the masses towards socialism with its blind hatred of "the capitalists" and frustrated reform. So the whole burden of taxation has been placed upon industry to provide the revenue for "solving" social problems by taking from everybody and handing out to everybody, including the industrialists suffering from the process.

The effects of taxing industry beget further taxation of industry — to relieve industry, already labouring under an ever-increasing burden of private rent. The contest for State favours fosters an atmosphere of universal selfishness, and as customary methods of taxation cannot meet the demand for assistance, the government covers the deficiency by debasing the currency. This is a politically convenient subterfuge as it robs honest thrift and wages while sparing the rich and, by its side effects, somewhat relieves industry for the moment, until rent has absorbed the advantage. The public dishonesty of currency inflation becomes the established system of government. We need look no further for the root cause of the decay of our civilisation. It is not in inflation itself, or in taxing

* General Monk, originally a Royal Officer who deserted to Parliament, was the main instrument of the Restoration. He became a duke with a state pension of £7,000 per annum and large estates. The yeomen who won Naseby and Marston Moor were not so fortunate. At the remarkable army discussions in 1647, Edward Sexby, speaking for the private soldiers, declared: "We have ventured our lives to recover our birthrights and privileges as Englishmen. But it seems now that except a man hath a fixed estate he hath no right on this kingdom. I wonder we were so deceived".

industry itself, but in the gradual transfer, traceable through history, by which the cost of maintaining communal services has been removed from Rent and imposed on labour and its products.

Professor Trevelyan could not possibly have missed the many examples of similarity between the decay of Roman civilisation and our own, leading in the same way to the decline of public spirit, the quality which no money can buy, and on which the whole social structure ultimately depends. If he had concluded his book with this warning it would have been more useful. But it might not have received the approval of a university depending on state grants and great endowments in land. Professionals cannot be unduly censored for the atmosphere in which their thoughts develop and the conditions which imperceptibly govern the publication of their works.

Fortunately, history provides many examples to show that no social trend is inevitable. Although the experts often given the impression that social forces are beyond man's control (and the Communists and National Socialists have exploited this fallacy) man, within the boundaries of natural law, is master of his fate. Periods of enlightenment, when public opinion throws off the yoke of mental authority, have in the past begun under circumstances which must have appeared very unpropitious to contemporaries, whatever the historians wise after the event, may now say.

NEWS FROM ISRAEL

"Land Prices Quadrupled In Four Years"

THIS is the title of an article published in *The Jerusalem Post* on July 27, 1962. Such an item could have been published under the same title in London, New York or elsewhere. But here is something peculiar. The article says:

"While building costs rose 9.2 per cent. in 1961, the prices of building plots soared by an average of 52 per cent. . . . As a result, the cost of land in January 1962 accounted for an average 30 per cent. of the price of flats sold by private builders, as compared with 15 per cent. in 1958. The figures for Tel Aviv were 45 per cent., against 23 per cent. four years ago. Plot prices quadrupled during that period, while apartment prices advanced by about 80 per cent. (building costs rose only 20 per cent.). It is primarily the rising price of land that has driven up the price of dwellings, particularly in well-to-do suburbs. Indeed, private building contractors maintain that their profit margins