

## Cleveland's Mayor—Tom Johnson

CLEVELAND, "The City on a Hill," will celebrate this month the 100th anniversary of Tom Johnson's birth. Born July 18, 1854, his death on April 10, 1911 "stopped the heart of the city" for two hours while the cortege passed through lines of silent men and women. Flags were at half mast and two hundred thousand persons saw Tom L. Johnson's last journey. He was buried at Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York, beside Henry George.

"There was nothing to find out in Tom Johnson except his greatness," wrote Frederic C. Howe in *The Confessions of a Reformer*. "The single tax was the passion of his life—a passion for freedom, for a world of opportunity for all. For the promotion of this philosophy he had stopped making money. To that end he had entered politics. He had a vision of a new civilization free from poverty, free from fear, free from vice and crime; of a new society that would be born when the stranglehold of special privilege was loosened."

Himself a successful monopolist, Johnson knew that monopoly would collapse when its supports were taken away. Tax land values to the full, he said, at a rate that would appro-

priate this unearned form of wealth, and monopolies dependent on natural resources would be forced to a competitive basis. The discovery of Henry George's writings made this monopolist into the most dangerous enemy that monopoly could have.

Evidently a man living far in advance of his time, he invented a model for a railway without wheels. The idea was to eliminate friction. Passengers and freight, he maintained, could be moved through the air at great speed by synchronizing electric currents, the one lifting, the other pulling. Theoretically there was no limit to the speed, although risk was reduced to a minimum. Experts from the General Electric Company at Schenectady studied the model and made a favorable report. Still skeptical, the company sent Charles Steinmetz to examine it—he found the idea basically sound. Negotiations were opened for building a larger model "but they fell through because the company demanded control of the patents which Mr. Johnson would not abandon."

He began his career a poor man, and rose to a position of wealth and prominence in the street railways business. Despite early poverty

he spent money generously, though he gave nothing to organized charity. In eight years he spent his entire fortune of several millions, and faced the possibility of a return to poverty with little apparent concern.

"Tom" (the form of address he preferred), was tolerant of everything, including conventional morals and religion. He judged no one and seemed to have no hatreds. "He talked with antagonists with the ease most men reserve for a circle of intimates," wrote Mr.

Howe. "He had wisdom as well as knowledge—the wisdom of deep understanding . . . Frankness was one of the elements of his strength."

As recorded by the above author, who was for years a close friend, there was on a certain occasion a public hearing in Cleveland City Hall when the doorkeeper came in and whispered to the mayor (Mr. Johnson) that a woman outside was raising a row. Mr. Johnson stopped the proceedings and had her admitted. She was Emma Goldman and demanded a permit to speak on the public square, but presumed she would be stopped or put in jail.

"No, Miss Goldman," said the mayor, "you won't be stopped and you won't be put in jail. You do not need a permit to speak. The public square does not belong to me; it belongs to the people of Cleveland. I would not stop you if I had the power to do so, and nobody else has any such power. That is what the 'Beehive' [now known as Freedom Corner] is for."

After his death, Mr. Johnson's admirers erected a statue of him on this spot on the public square. The book which he holds in his hand is of course *Progress and Poverty*! The rostrums at the four corners of the statue were intended for speakers. Freedom Corner is still popular and visitors to Cleveland these summer evenings could probably join a group of listeners or make a speech themselves (on Henry George?) beside the statue of Tom Johnson.



—Photograph by William Rep

Tom Johnson statue  
in Cleveland Public Square