

MELBOURNE, MANHATTAN AND THE MOHAWK CHIEF

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Manhattan, we are told, was bought by the Dutch from the Indians for trinkets worth twenty-four dollars. The familiar story has its counterpart on the other side of the world, as related by Alan Villiers in the article "Australia" in the National Geographic Magazine, September 1963:

"'This will be the place for a village,' settler John Batman jotted in his notebook as his Tasmanian schooner anchored four miles up the Yarra in 1835. For some knives, mirrors and blankets he acquired 600,000 acres from a party of aborigines he chanced to meet. Jagajaga, Cooloolook and their companions had no clear idea of what they were doing. It was tribal land; no aborigine had the slightest notion of private land ownership."

Arthur Guiterman, in his poem "A Deal in Real Estate" (in Ballads of Old New York, E.P. Dutton & Co., 1939) tells of the Manhattan Indian chief Wetamoset coming to the Dutch trader Barendt Cuyler and relating his dream, that Cuyler had given him a musket and a horn of powder. Cuyler took the hint and gave the chief a musket and a horn of powder. After an interval, on a visit to the chief's lodge, Cuyler related his dream - that Wetamoset and his tribe had given him "all of Papparinimin." Ruefully the stately sachem traced the boundary and said, "All that land is thine, my brother. Brother, let us dream no more."

A similar episode upstate New York is told in History of the City of New York by Lamb and Harrison (A.S. Barnes & Co., 1877):

"At one time a Mohawk chieftain coveted a new scarlet coat with gold lace which Sir William Johnson had just received from London. He hesitated only a day or two before calling at Johnson Hall in the familiar manner which Johnson himself had inaugurated and said he had "dreamed a dream." He had dreamed that the grand knight gave him the red coat. Sir William understood the significance of the hint, and in tender consideration of his own popularity, gave the chieftain the much desired treasure. But Sir William presently dreamed a dream. He went to see the chieftain and related it to him. He had dreamed that the chieftain and his council gave him a large tract of land, designating the boundary with geographical precision, from such a tree to such a rivulet. The gift was made, but the old Indian said, "Ugh! I no dream any more. White chief dream better than Indian."

Batman's place for a village is now Melbourne, a city of nearly one and a half million people. Land values there have skyrocketed, as they have in Manhattan, and as they no doubt have in the unidentified area upstate. Australian aborigines, like American Indians and other primitive peoples, recognized that each generation of men has equal rights to the earth and its resources, a truth proclaimed by Thomas Jefferson and Henry George, but generally ignored by "civilized" nations.

Widespread current discussion of the energy shortage and related problems of ecology, conservation and pollution of land, air and water indicate a growing realization of this truth, even though it is "only in broken gleams and partial light." This truth, that each generation of men has equal rights to the use of natural resources, is the common denominator that underlies the problems of ecology as well as those of economics, land tenure and taxation. I see in this an opportunity to tie in our Georgist principles with current interest in ecology. Many people will agree in the abstract that each generation has equal rights to the use of natural resources; how then can they claim that the benefit of land use should go to the men who first claimed a piece of land and to his heirs and assigns forever?