

# LAND & LIBERTY

Editor: V. H. Blundell

AUGUST & SEPTEMBER, 1962

SIXPENCE

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## EDITORIAL

### Stones of Comfort

RECENTLY, in reviewing in these columns publications of the FAO, the opinion was expressed that this and similar bodies of the UNO perform services to mankind the benefits of which are undeniable. This should not, however, be taken to indicate that all the activities of such organisations are of equal value. The report of a recent joint session of FAO and UNO on "Consideration of Commodity Problems," for instance, represents an example of costly futility it would be hard to beat.

Here is the despairing conclusion that dominates the delegates' report: "The prospects for the current decade, if present trends and policies are maintained, is one of continuing agricultural surpluses side by side with continuing food shortages and malnutrition." Acknowledging thus the cold realities of the situation, what had the assembled delegates to offer the starving millions faced with all these food surpluses, forever out of their reach? The stones of academic discussion.

#### Economic Mixture as Before

There was much talk of "lack of foreign exchange" in underdeveloped countries and of "economic aid" to correct this. They even gave serious thought to methods of "improving the pattern of agricultural production in non-industrialised countries," which presumably must be interpreted as adding further to the agricultural surpluses which the undernourished citizens of such countries would still be unable to buy. Concern was expressed about the "unfavourable outlook for the exporters of agricultural products" and some even suggested that the national policies of the advanced countries could be adjusted without, apparently, saying how. "The fact that increases in income in these countries did not necessarily result in increased demand for certain food and beverages was an obstacle to the growth of trade" was also noted. But

no one, it seems, had the wit to ask *whose* incomes were concerned. A classic example of how statistics of averages, and such fantasies as "national income" figures, can hide or distort realities. The fact that the millionaire, however much his income may increase the national total, can eat no more than his fill (usually much less than that of a manual worker) occurred to nobody. A faint whisper of doubt was indicated by some delegates who concluded that "reduction in tariffs and internal taxes could be important in some regions."

As a gesture of comfort to the hungry millions, the report stressed that its discussions were of a preliminary nature only, and that further discussion was recommended to future meetings of the two bodies. What is more, it also recommended that agricultural "projections" should be prepared for mainland China, the U.S.S.R. and Eastern European countries. Perhaps in the mysteries behind the Iron Curtain lay the magic solution; who knows?

Meanwhile, discussion ranged over a sea of ideas, old and new, from marketing boards and stabilisation funds to the more modern forms of "compensatory finance" such as insurance and "export price maintenance." A condensed version of the report concluded with this illuminating piece of verbiage: "Certain delegations discussed the importance of confining any system of compensatory financing to losses related to short-term fluctuations in prices. They emphasised that, in order to deal with long-term problems affecting export proceeds, other appropriate types of international action would have to be taken, such as special consideration in the allocation and use of foreign aid and the adjustment of measures in importing countries that restricted exports from primary producing countries."

Modern economic scientists and social reformers will not look at the *fundamentals* of the poverty and hunger question. Perhaps they dare not, for if they do they will inevitably be led to question the moral and economic structure of land tenure systems which permit the monopolisation of the earth and its resources by a few. The danger is that they may be forced to recognise the injustice of the private ownership of land only when it is too late to do anything about it, when communism, with its promise of a better life brings ruin, slavery and disaster—more stones instead of bread.

**THE SCIENCE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY.** by Henry George. The Meaning of Political Economy; the Nature of Wealth; the Production of Wealth; the Distribution of Wealth; the Nature and Origin of Value; Money. The subject-matter is introduced with an instructive historical survey of the teaching of economics in the academic world. Cloth. 545 pages. 10s. 6d.

## NOTES OF THE MONTH

### FOR WHOM THE TOLL BENEFITS

A FEW months ago a new toll bridge across the Tamar River was completed, linking Devon and Cornwall. It was the first of its kind to be opened since the reign of Queen Victoria, and the forerunner of two more to be built across the Forth and Severn. In the arguments that have ranged around these new toll bridges, many people have forgotten the extraordinary survival of the old ones. Mr. Neil Marten (Cons. Banbury) moved in the Commons recently that ancient tolls should be extinguished and as for new toll bridges, he was of the opinion that the tolls should be extinguished immediately the revenue therefrom had paid for the cost of construction, or within twenty years at the latest.

Although the House resolved that the Government should take steps to extinguish old tolls which now have no valid purpose, difficulty has arisen over the basis of compensation.

Mr. Marten, in a letter to the *Observer*, recently said that the Earl of Abingdon's toll bridge over the Thames at Swinford brought in an estimated income of £6,000 per annum, and that the capital sum arrived at so as to give fair compensation would be an astronomical figure.

A short while ago, the Aldwark Toll Bridge in Yorkshire came up for sale and was advertised as producing a tax-free income of over £2,000 per annum. The auctioneer decided that it was worth at least five figures and said: "It should be specially valuable to surtax payers, but we've even had enquiries from Switzerland and America." George III was responsible for granting the original charter for this toll bridge and others and, apparently, this was one of his favourite pastimes.

Winchester College has a toll bridge at Southampton which they have owned since 1385, Dulwich College has a toll road in London, and a bridge in Nottingham belongs to a Guards colonel. Altogether there are thirty-one toll bridges and roads in Britain.

This is privilege on a small scale but nonetheless privilege all the same. What is perhaps more important than freedom from taxation for perpetuity (granted by the whim of a King who hated getting his feet wet) is that by the terms of the charters *nobody is allowed to build rival bridges or run ferries within a given distance*. Perhaps it would be a good thing if history repeated itself in some respects, for as recently as 1913 a crowd tore out the gates over Maidenhead Bridge and threw them into the Thames.

This is not to say that toll roads and bridges are necessarily a bad thing; provided there is no monopoly this method of raising construction costs might well be considered more just than the usual alternative, which is