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MR G. BERNARD SHAW AS A GUIDE

When Mr Bernard Shaw writes a new book one may sit down to enjoy it uncomfortably. The charm of his style and the freshness and humour of his ideas will provide enjoyment for sure; his purpose will be to make us thoroughly discontented with existing conditions so that a healthy discomfort will settle upon us. How far he is to be taken seriously and how far as a humorist it is always a pleasant intellectual exercise to seek to find out. As a destructive critic he is pre-eminent, and destructive criticism has its undoubted value. Until people realize that a change is badly needed, they will not bestir themselves to make a change. As he himself says, "I am by profession what is called an original thinker, my business being to question and test all the established creeds and codes to see how far they are still valid and how far worn out or superseded, and even to draft new creeds and codes."

It is not in the drafting of new creeds and codes that Mr Shaw shows any signs of inspiration, even though, as in this his latest work, 84 chapters and an appendix are devoted to the drafting.

*The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism** suggests by its title the advocate who wheedles the jury by flattering its intelligence. As a guide away from present conditions it is effective enough. No one can read the lurid description of our present-day conditions of life told in these pages—often with somewhat ludicrous over-statement, as when he refers to Eton and Oxford as prisons—without being thoroughly uncomfortable about them and without being infected with the writer's yearning, obviously sincere, for a way out.

But a guide must be a guide some-where, and whether many intelligent women will follow Mr Shaw on the road to his Socialism is an open question. "His Socialism," we say advisably, for it is not the Socialism of Marx nor of the Labour Party nor that of the Fabian Society, nor even that of the Bernard Shaw of 1891. It is a Socialism of equal pay with punishment meted out to idlers and a rationing of children to prevent that awkward law associated with the name of Malthus from upsetting his calculations.

His is, according to Mr Shaw, the only form of practicable Socialism. We must assume, therefore, some little internecine argument among our Socialist friends.

The defects of our economic conditions are plain to all who think and feel, and Socialism, whether of Mr Shaw's brand or any other, offers one promise of a happier land. If there is no alternative promise one can well understand the discontented flocking to the Socialist standard in the hope that somehow some of that promise will be fulfilled. But there is an alternative,

and a much sounder one, and Mr Shaw knows it well. In a remarkable chapter, entitled "Your Rent," he paints the picture of Landlordism so eloquently and faithfully that that chapter by itself could be reprinted with the greatest advantage as a tract for the Taxation of Land Values:—

"If we had only had the sense and foresight to insist that all rents should be paid into a common stock and used for public purposes . . . there need have been no slums, no ugly, mean streets and buildings, nor indeed any rates or taxes; everybody would benefit by the rent; everybody would have to contribute to it by work; and no idler would be able to live on the labour of others. The prosperity of our great towns would be a real prosperity shared by everyone, and not what it is now, the enslavement and impoverishment of nine persons out of every ten in order that the tenth should be idle and rich and extravagant and useless. This evil is so glaring, so inexcusable by any sophistry that the cleverest landlord can devise, that, long before Socialism was heard of, a demand arose for the abolition of all taxation except the taxation of landowners, and we still have among us people called Single Taxers who preach the same doctrine."

So ends an admirable chapter, but the next one opens with bathos. "Now the Single Taxers are not wrong in principle; but they are behind the times." Why? Because "land is not the only property that returns a rent to the owner. Spare money will do the same. Spare money is called Capital." Mr Shaw does not pause to consider the essential differences between the rent of land on the one hand and interest and profits on the other. As long as he deals with true rent he is convincing. It is where he draws a false analogy and speaks of rent of capital that his foothold becomes insecure. From that stage onward the guide becomes unsteady, and, if any intelligent woman follows him thenceforward, she must be agile over obstacles. In his purpose of blazing a new trail, Mr Shaw ignores the accepted meaning of economic terms. There is not only rent of capital but there is also rent of ability, and all three rents apparently are to be treated as different heads of the same beast. "Privately appropriated rent, whether of land, capital or ability, makes bad blood; and it is of bad blood that civilizations die."

Mr Shaw refers to Henry George and apparently he has read *Progress and Poverty*, although, one gathers, a long time ago. If he had refreshed his memory of that book he would have seen the essential difference between what he calls rent of capital or of ability, and what he properly calls rent of land, but in no way does he deal with that essential distinction, drawn plainly

* Constable, 15s.

enough not only by Henry George but by Marshall and all the orthodox economists. One can only assume that he has forgotten it or purposely ignored it. Yet it is essential, and one can see plainly the points of the compass: Remembering that difference, the compass points to the public ownership of rent; forgetting it, the compass points to Socialism.

In his Appendix the writer gives a short and not very complete history of the development of economic ideas. It is worth repetition:—

“Between Karl Marx and the Webbs came Henry George with his *Progress and Poverty* which converted many to Land Nationalization. (Sic.) It was the work of a man who had seen that the conversion of an American village to a city of millionaires was also the conversion of a place where people could live and let live in tolerable comfort to an inferno of seething poverty and misery. Tolstoy was one of his notable converts. George's omission to consider what the State should do with the National Rent after it had taken it into the Public Treasury stopped him on the threshold of Socialism; but most of the young men whom he had led up to it went through (like myself) into the Fabian Society and other Socialist bodies. *Progress and Poverty* is still Ricardian in theory; indeed it is on its abstract side a repetition of De Quincey's *Logic of Political Economy*; but whereas De Quincey as a true-blue British Tory of a century ago accepted the capitalist unequal distribution of income, and the consequent division of Society into rich gentry and poor proletarians, as a most natural and desirable arrangement, George as an equally true-blue American Republican was revolted by it.”

Does this satisfy anyone familiar with Henry George as a summary of his teaching? The application of the National Rent when received by the Treasury has nothing to do with his principles. In no way is it possible to see that Henry Georgeism becomes Socialism by adding to it a consideration of how the State is to expend its revenue. As a matter of fact Henry George did consider that question; and yet, as Mr Shaw complains, he did not pass through the Socialist door. We are content with the advantages which will accrue from the change we advocate in the method of obtaining the national revenue. We may leave to others, and until that change, the questions of expenditure.

In 1891 Mr Shaw read a paper upon “The Impossibilities of Anarchism” before the Fabian Society. It was a tract for Socialism, though not quite the Socialism which Mr Shaw commends to the intelligent woman of 1928. There again he dealt faithfully with the land question, but in passing: “Up High Street, down Low Street, over the Bridge and into Crow Street, the toilers may sweat equally for equal wages; but their product varies; and the ground rents vary with the product. Competition levels down the share kept by the worker as it levels up the hours of his labour; and the surplus, high or low, according to the fertility of the soil or the convenience of the site, goes as high rent or low rent, but always in the long run rack rent, to the owner of the land.” Many another quotation of equal point might be made from the Bernard Shaw of 1891 or the Bernard Shaw of 1928 with equal satisfaction to the followers of Henry George.

Froude wrote of Cicero that in him nature half made a great man and left him uncompleted. In Bernard Shaw nature made a Henry Georgeist, but Mr Shaw treats the job as incomplete. All that he adds to his Henry Georgeism in his constructive work is unstable and unattractive. It is a thousand pities that he has not seen that the return to the people of the value that is

in the people's land would of itself, without the trammels on liberty and the discouragement to industry and enterprise and all the artificial and impossible rearrangements involved in his scheme, remove the evils which he paints with his vivid brush and bring about the better state of things for which he longs with such evident sincerity.

What an advocate for the Taxation of Land Values is not so much lost as buried in Mr Shaw!

B. A. L.

A MITCHAM CASE

Price, £47,185; Rateable Value £103

Expressions of the strongest indignation, reports the *Mitcham Herald*, were made at a meeting of the Mitcham Urban District Council (Surrey) on 28th August to consider a report of the Housing Committee relative to the claim of Messrs. Mizen Bros. of £47,185 for 17½ acres of land at Bordergate, which the Council propose to develop for housing purposes.

The price asked is equivalent to £2,706 an acre. The Housing Committee considered this demand excessive, and, on the basis of expert opinion, have offered less than half the sum, being prepared to go to arbitration if it is not accepted.

We have ascertained that the 17½ acres in question are assessed for local taxation at an annual value of £103. As it is market garden land (claimed by the owners to be worth £2,706 an acre!) it bears only one-quarter of the rates levied, and the annual burden upon it is not more than £20. And under the Government's fraudulent “de-rating” scheme, such land will pay nothing at all.

These material facts were not brought before the Council. The expressed indignation only spoke of the price being “excessive,” and it leads no farther than to an arbitration court, there in any case to offer the owners “less than half” of their claim. The land either is or is not worth £47,000 or £23,000, more or less. Like all other land, it should have been assessed at its real value and rates and taxes should have been paid accordingly. The Mitcham protest would have said something to the purpose if it had taken the shape of a determined demand upon Parliament to alter the law and levy rates and taxes on land values, so to cheapen land and smash the monopoly that is holding up housing and industrial development everywhere.

OUR EDITOR

We are happy to say that Mr John Paul is making steady improvement in health. He still remains at home but with returning strength there is every prospect that he will soon be able to get out of doors and have the benefit of a stay on the South Coast, there to speed the good progress towards his recovery.

A. W. M.

Spiritual Economics: A Plea for Christianity in Action. By John Emery McLean. Published by the Henry George Foundation of America, 1928. 75 cents (3s.). This useful publication is less a book than a group of essays linked by a burning sense of injustice at the sight of organized religion tolerant to evil, when profitable. The able author knows the remedy as well as do his publishers, and shows how many of the errors of society which are so painful to theologians would simply vanish under economic justice. Illustrations and authorities are largely transatlantic, but while specially useful in the U.S.A., it is a work for our students anywhere. It can well be lent to clerical acquaintances.

Copies, price 3s. each, may be had on application to our offices.