

W. R. LESTER

IN A LETTER of greeting to this journal on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary, June, 1915, Mr. Lester wrote:

"The Taxation of Land Values is not merely an immediately practicable device for securing to the whole people their equal right to the use of the earth, but it also forms in itself a complete social philosophy. It means compliance with the natural order and therefore the undoing of the horrible knot in which Society has got tied up."

Here was the dominating thought which inspired all Mr. Lester's endeavours and which, being so firmly grasped and so truly interpreted, gave him his masterly power to teach what freedom enjoins and to reveal the rich rewards she promises if men will but find her. The thought came to him comparatively early in life, a new light met with by the fortunate accident which any of us in like case mark gratefully in our calendar. He had graduated M.A. of Glasgow University in 1881. There followed three apprentice years in France and Germany in training for his profession as engineer. Returning to Glasgow to take up his business career, he became interested in economic questions, and devoted much study to Socialism as expounded by its leading exponents. In 1886 he heard Henry George speak, but the Socialist tenets had been so absorbed, that it was not until he made contact with the men of the Scottish League, and really had the opportunity for the thorough discussions he eagerly gave to any matter, that the Georgeist view prevailed. And often he said how greatly he was indebted to John Paul in particular for that tuition. This new and able advocate joined in the movement some 15 years before the words quoted above were written. He had soon become President of the League, his capacity to argue and explain the policy from the practical point of view proving no less than his ability to expound its moral justification and its association with freedom and equal right in the fullest sense. But it is in the latter respect that he gained the greater repute, and made the greater contribution, as his writings so amply testify.

Retiring from active part in the engineering business Mr. Lester came south and at his home, at first in Biggleswade, Beds, and later in Horsted Keynes, Sussex, he took up the country life, making agriculture more than a hobby, for he worked hard at it. He joined and was for a time President of the English League. When the United Committee was formed in 1907 he was elected its Hon. Treasurer, continuing in that office until his death. As speaker at many meetings all over the country, as writer and pamphleteer, and generous in financial support, he served the movement well. He stood for Parliament twice, contesting Mid-Norfolk in the general elections of January 1910 and December 1910, those rousing campaigns for Land Value Taxation and the Land for the People, and although unsuccessful, the defeats were only by small margins of votes. But there his political aspirations ended, and he was content to shed them for the sake of the freedom to devote himself to purely educational activity. His recreations were study, painting and walking—how often those rambles and engaging discussions on the Sussex Downs!—and he travelled much. Jamaica he visited in 1920 and Russia in 1935, but it was the repeated pilgrimage to the Alps, for in younger years he had been a mountaineer, that took him most abroad. On these visits to the Continent, sadly interrupted by the wars, he lost no opportunity to meet and speak with friends of the movement, or attend any assembly they were holding. He gained information by ready conversation with anyone who could talk intelligently about social and economic conditions, and made a point of doing so, to put on record in these columns what he learned. A notable example was the result of his visit to Jamaica. The picture he drew of social conditions there, his report of talks with

labourers and employers, his attribution of the poverty among the people to their landlessness and deprivation under indirect taxation (*Land & Liberty*, May, 1920) should be in the portfolio of every Minister and M.P. who claims any authority in colonial matters.

His first published pamphlet was his rejoinder to Professor Smart's criticism of the Single Tax. To our International Conferences he gave his illuminating papers, *Capturing Foreign Markets, True Free Trade and Laissez Faire* and *Natural Law in Social Life*, the last-named afterwards published in pamphlet form as companion to his *What is Property?* Unfortunately these and others of his publications, such as *A Business Man's Question*, are out of print, but in any decision affecting the republication of books and pamphlets now exhausted, the continuing demand for Lester's writings could well have consideration. In circulation are his *Unemployment and the Land*, which has had the widest sale of all, and is now in its fifth edition, his *True National Dividend*, dealing with social credit doctrines, and the brochure *What is Land Value Taxation*, admirably suited by its simple and concise statement to meet the enquirer who wants a quick and clear grasp of the principle. But there is so much else and only on file. After going back on the pages of *Land & Liberty* for these reminiscences and seeing how much Lester wrote was of lasting nature, a wish remains. If a selection of his many articles, essays and reviews were put into book form we should at once have a welcome addition to our permanent literature and a worthy memorial to this honoured upholder of freedom's cause.

A. W. M.

Words spoken by the Rev. F. Stenton Eardley, Rector of Horsted Keynes, to a gathering of relations and friends of Mr. W. R. Lester, M.A., at Keynes Place, before his interment in St. Giles's Churchyard, Horsted Keynes, Sussex, on March 21, 1946.

It is exhilarating to reflect that the teaching, character and personality of William Richard Lester cannot be buried in our churchyard. There was so much about him that was distinctive of great powers of mind that many of us were almost startled to discover his great simplicity and humility.

Yet it was these qualities even more than his teaching which captured our respect, our esteem and our love.

Lester felt a deep revulsion against anything in Church or State or custom which tended in the least degree to rob men of rights inherent to them by virtue of their birth upon this planet, rights to express themselves in work and worship freely and fully and in accordance with the divinely revealed intentions of the Creator.

In fine, Lester loved his fellowmen. Consequently he was always profoundly disturbed whenever he thought that he perceived any attempt being made to rob them of freedom of access to the land by the restriction of their elementary rights.

That which made his writings and his speeches so impressive was his unswerving respect for the intelligence of his readers and hearers. The "tub-thumper" and he had nothing in common. During more than a quarter of a century as his neighbour in this Sussex parish I often had the privilege of listening to Lester's exposition of the teachings of Henry George and sometimes in my pig-headedness and rather peevish obtuseness I must have sorely tried his patience, but he never once let me know it.

Such patience is only possessed by those who essentially are right and know that they are right.

6d. THE TRUE NATIONAL DIVIDEND. Examination of "Social Credit." By W. R. Lester, M.A.

3d. UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE LAND. By W. R. Lester, M.A.