

FRANCIS NEILSON

IN the early hours of Thursday morning, April 13, 1961, death came quietly to an outstanding leader of the Georgeist Movement, Francis Neilson. He was in the third month of his ninety-fifth year.

Born in Birkenhead in 1867, Francis Neilson was the eldest of nine children. Both his parents went to work, leaving little time for family life, except on Sundays, when readings from the Bible were a regular part of the home worship. As the eldest, it fell to Francis to memorise and recite the selected passages.

With nine mouths to be fed, it is understandable that young Neilson left school at the age of fourteen and began to fend for himself. After trying his hand at a variety of jobs, he decided to test his luck in the United States, crossing the Atlantic as a third-class passenger, a lad of eighteen, "sick all the way".

His first job in the new country was as a checker in New York's Washington Market; his second was as a longshoreman on the West Street docks; his third was as a labourer in Central Park. It is characteristic of the fate which carried Francis Neilson from poverty to wealth, that sixty years later he lived in a fashionable hotel overlooking the very spot where he once wielded a pick and shovel. And it was like him, also, that he made no effort to hide the circumstances of his humble beginning.

Neilson's fourth job, a minor clerical one, brought to an end this period of aimless drifting. It was here that he met a Negro, named Johnson, a college graduate, who, because of his colour, worked as a Pullman porter. Johnson showed him what it meant to be a member of an under-privileged group—the unskilled and semi-skilled group of white workers in which the boy found himself, or the group barred by the accident of race from better occupations. The lesson struck home, and from that time on, the quest for knowledge became young Neilson's "magnificent obsession". He haunted libraries and went hungry to buy books. His literary diet ranged from the classics to books on economics, archaeology, art and music, and included every field that offered a challenge to his expanding intellect.

Although he had read much on socialism, an ideology which he rejected, Neilson's real interest in social reform began one evening when he attended a lecture at Cooper Union. The name of Henry George was mentioned and during the question period Neilson asked for further information about this man. The speaker answered by giving him a copy of *Progress and Poverty*. This was another turning point, for with the reading of that book, Neilson became a convinced and dedicated follower of Henry George.

In the years that followed, Neilson tried his hand at

writing, acting, and stage directing. It was in the latter field that he scored his first outstanding successes, becoming associated with no less a personage than Charles Frohman, for whom he directed plays and operas, both in New York and London.

It was not until the Boer War that Neilson began to take an interest in politics. He joined the old Liberal Party which was advocating land-value taxation and free trade, and soon became the leader of the party's "Young Radical" wing. Gaining repute as a political orator, in the general election of 1909 he stood successfully for the Hyde Division of Cheshire, entering the House of Commons the following January. Here he remained for six years, until World War I led him, as a pacifist, to resign. Bent now on a literary career, he returned to America and became a United States citizen in 1921.

Within six weeks after his resignation from Parliament, Neilson had dictated his first book, "How Diplomats Make War", an exposé of the machinations of the warmakers. Brought out anonymously in New York, the book went through a succession of printings and translations. Other works followed, and at the time of his death he had written over sixty books, a substantial number of articles, plays, and several librettos for light opera. For a time he was associated with *The Freeman*, a journal of opinion and literary criticism. With him in this venture were Albert Jay Nock, Suzanne LaFollette, Van Wyck Brooks, Geroid Tanquary Robinson, and Walter Fuller.

The books for which Francis Neilson is best known in the Georgeist Movement are: "The Eleventh Commandment" (1933); "Man at the Crossroads" (1938); "In Quest of Justice" (1944); and "From Ur to Nazareth" (1960).

"In Quest of Justice" was the outgrowth of a lecture series which he gave in Chicago under the auspices of the Henry George School. "From Ur to Nazareth", his last published work, is a 461 page book on the life and mission of Jesus. This monumental document was actually written after his sight failed, and was brought to fruition through the devoted assistance of his literary secretary, Miss K. Phyllis Evans.

Mr. Neilson became a regular contributor to the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, a quarterly, soon after its founding in 1941, and from time to time selections of these articles were published in book form. Included among these volumes are "Modern Man and the Liberal Arts", "The Roots of Our Learning", and "The Cultural Tradition". One of his most popular essays, "Henry George the Scholar", is now available in pamphlet form.

Francis Neilson fulfilled the mission towards which his inner drives and faith directed him. If his goal of economic justice has not been reached, he most assuredly brought it nearer to the thousands of people all over the world who read his books and share the logic of his inspired convictions. There are those, too, who will remember in another way. These are the nameless men and women with whom he shared some of the good

fortune that finally came to him. They will revere not only his great mind, but the great heart and generous spirit that found expression in many unsolicited and welcome deeds.

At his own request, Mr. Neilson's body was cremated and his ashes placed in a niche of Liverpool Cathedral in recognition of his service to the Cathedral and the Choir School so dear to his heart.

INDUSTRY AND THE RATES

LETTERS REPRINTED FROM THE FINANCIAL TIMES

From P. R. Stubbings, General Secretary, Rating Reform Campaign, May 23.

A VERY simple adjustment would transform the rating system to the satisfaction of all progressive firms, industrial and commercial, as well as most householders.

As now levied rates fall partly on site values of developed land and partly on the development. Vacant sites and farm land are rate-exempt. As a result, every improvement made attracts an increased assessment. Yet sound municipal government makes sites, not buildings, more valuable.

The solution, then, is simply to exempt all buildings and other improvements from assessment and rating, and to rate all land, whether used or vacant, urban or rural, on its current site value. Besides reducing the rates liability of all well-improved properties, land value rating would squeeze much of the speculative element out of land prices and promote general development and improvement. It works well overseas. A trial land valuation and survey of one or two suitable sample areas would show how it would work here. Such an investigation need cost little and could be quickly made. Mr. Donald Wade, M.P., tabled an Amendment on those lines to the Rating and Valuation Bill but, unfortunately, it was not taken.

From G. H. Webster, May 23

IT IS significant, to my mind, that your leading editorial of May 16 decrying the rating system, had nothing better to offer in its place.

While agreeing that the rating of annual property values is in certain respects anomalous, I would submit very strongly that it is the only prac-

ticable method of financing local authority expenditure.

Various alternatives have been canvassed—the two main ones being (1) A local income-tax; this method falls down at once solely on the grounds of allocation and collection. The people to be taxed would frequently move in many cases, from one rating area to another. How are the authorities to keep track of them?

(2) Rating of site values: Apart from the fact that many dispute the so-called "beneficial economic effects" of such a tax, one is faced with more complex valuation problems than in the case of the present system. How does one, for example, without resort to very arbitrary "rules of thumb," ascertain the site value of a flying freehold?

The rating system has been with us since 1601, and over the years a comprehensive body of case law has been built up. As the article points out (political objections apart) preferential treatment could be given to hard-pressed areas. Far better to improve the system than to throw the whole thing overboard and start afresh with something completely untried.

A start might be made by relieving the rates of the huge burden of certain national services (for example, education) which should be met entirely out of central government funds. Then perhaps the rates could be devoted to purely local purposes and local industries would not be so concerned about what the rate poundage is going to be on their new assessments.

From J. A. Cunnington, May 27

MR. G. H. Webster takes you to task for decrying the present rating system without offering anything better in its place. He dismisses

a local income tax as being impracticable but ends his letter by recommending the transfer of certain heavy expenditure to the Central Government which, as I see it, would mean more on the normal income-tax. He rejects Land Value Rating for several various reasons which, collectively, suggest that he has not gone into the subject very thoroughly.

Mr. Stubbings pointed out in his letter on the same day that Land Value Rating works well overseas. I will add that it is used with success in both old and new countries.

In this country it would provide increased revenue for hard-pressed local authorities, would bring into use additional land, so easing the chronic shortage (much more artificial than most people realise) and by generally reducing land prices the community would not have to pay so much for public buildings, roads, bridges, etc.

While the present system penalises improvement, encouraging only the speculator, land value rating is an incentive measure and a tax on inactivity.

Let the Government make a test survey and see for themselves that the 1601 ruins can be cleared away and replaced by a structure more suited to the 60's.

From P. R. Stubbings, May 27

PERFECTION in human affairs is unattainable and some complexity is unavoidable however local government is financed. Overseas experience suggests, though, that Mr. G. H. Webster is mistaken in believing that valuation for site value rating would be more complicated and arbitrary than for the present rating system. The contrary is the case.