

Specialisation in the Wide World

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SOME years ago Charles Sale wrote an amusing little book entitled "The Specialist" in which he drew attention to the value of special skills in society. The special skill with which Mr. Sale was principally concerned, and without which our *amour propre* would greatly suffer, was that of the privy builder! In more serious vein, various authorities have, from time to time, noted the trend towards even greater specialisation: the cult of knowing more and more about less and less and ultimately, one supposes, to knowing everything about nothing.

A decade or more ago, at the outset of my professional engineering career, I could see that, unless considerable care was taken, I too would become a specialist on some small part of the industrial machine. Indeed, not to accept this as inevitable is fatal for the young technologist bent on technical success. No doubt this holds for all professions but the prospect held no appeal for me and, with due respect to Mr. Sale, in 1952 I sailed for Australia for a general widening experience. There I spent two very happy years "specialising" in such things as bush shirts, Land Rovers — and sunshine.

The money from a well-paid job in a simple environment over a period of two years enabled me to make a leisurely trip home, visiting places in the Far East *en route* accessible only to the serious traveller with time to spare. All too soon, however, I was back in London again at an office desk and whilst fighting my way home by tube one evening a young man thrust a card into my hand. Rightly or wrongly, cards thrust into my hands do not command my immediate attention and thus it was not until a day or two later that I came across the card at the bottom of my briefcase.

"Become your own economist," I read. "Henry George School of Social Science offers free courses at Great Smith Street." I had never heard of Henry George, but it sounded interesting and the price was certainly right, and so I decided to enrol. I took the Basic Course that winter, followed by International Trade. These studies acquainted me for the first time with the eternal land question and although, both then and now, other things

interest me more, I shall always be grateful to the young man who gave me that card.

Aided with a grounding sheet, albeit a modest one, I started to raise land matters with my colleagues and since those days I have discussed the idea of land-value taxation with a wide circle of friends and acquaintances. Since most of these talks have been with landless people these principles have, not unnaturally, been received with interest, although without much enthusiasm. Opposition has invariably been from amongst those of my more wealthy friends, but so far I have not been able to elicit a purely logical argument against the principle of land-value taxation. As the principles enunciated by Henry George strike at the very roots of accepted values in our society, it would be more than surprising if the changes he proposed were accepted without a great deal of resistance.

I have repeatedly noticed that, in spite of their protestations to the contrary, normal intelligent people do not think logically on all matters. It is an effort to do so and such thinking can lead to disturbing thoughts about one's own sense of values. Far better for one's peace of mind, therefore, to continue to think illogically! Few people, after all, are as honest as the Canadian I once met in the mountains of British Columbia who most effectively ended one of our talks by saying: "Don't argue with me, even if I am wrong!" Perhaps we all have a tendency to such dogmatism and no one likes to lose face — although few would care to admit it.

The philosophy of the engineer, an applied scientist, is basically simple and sound. "Theory and Practice," the motto of a well-known engineering college, aptly describes it and it might well be applied to most fields of endeavour and certainly to economics and the land question. First understand the problem thoroughly, secondly work out its solution unemotionally, and thirdly take action. I believe that the Henry George Schools partially adopt this approach with their concentration on the fundamental issues involved.

There is a danger, however, that, whilst painting in the details, sight will be lost of the canvas as a whole. That

the man in the street has never heard of Henry George is perhaps proof of this argument. The land problem is so immense that unless the movement develops far-seeing leaders in considerable numbers, I find it difficult to see how the ideas of Henry George will ever be accepted on an international scale. They do in fact require a complete reorientation of men's minds and a most drastic revision of the *status quo* amounting to a mild revolution. Social revolutions have occurred in the past, it is true, but always with outstanding leaders to muster and channel the new ideas of millions into a policy which itself eventually becomes the new *status quo*. Such leaders have generally been despotic in character and have provided the driving force throughout the history of mankind—for good or ill.

Following my orientation into the philosophy of Henry George in 1956, I sailed for Canada and for the next year worked in the Coastal Mountains of British Columbia. The Kemano-Kitimat area of the Tweedsmuir National Park is owned by the Aluminium Company of Canada Ltd., and the fact that land values have greatly increased as development has proceeded does not detract from the great beauty of those mountains. My work was demanding and my spare time was fully occupied, so I did not, as I might otherwise have done, consider how a modern Henry George might have tackled land valuation in such an area. Its short history, however, should interest all Georgeists.

Before World War 2 the Provincial Government of British Columbia was anxious to develop its province from both a national as well as a provincial point of view. The abundance of water power potential on the West Coast and the growth of the aircraft industry made aluminium production a most suitable industry to develop. Discussions followed between the Provincial Government and the Aluminium Co. of Canada Ltd., who in turn initiated extensive surveys in what was virgin mountainous country 400 miles north of Vancouver. The taming of that harsh but magnificent country by ALCAN engineers is well known but the cost in hard cash, vision, skill and lives is less generally appreciated. Kitimat with a present population of some 15,000 is expected to grow to about 50,000. Its population enjoys a high standard of life with more economic freedom than one might expect in a "company town." The aluminium plant dominates the town but it is difficult to see how any Government policy but the most liberal — or the most dictatorial — would have attracted industry there in the first place.

If the late J. Ruper Mason could read this, I have no doubt at all that he would immediately send me a massive pile of documents on similar projects in California explaining just how the matter should have been approached. Unfortunately, that gentleman is no longer with us, but I shall not forget the impact of his per-

sonality on me for a long time. Shortly after I left British Columbia I travelled by a circuitous route to New York and, passing through San Francisco, I was able to call on Mr. and Mrs. Mason.

I could not linger in beautiful San Francisco and left the next day for my trans-continental journey to New York by bus. There I made early contact with the Henry George Schaal at 50 East 69th Street — a palatial headquarters by English standards. My studies there were negligible as were my contributions to the Movement, but I was happy to accept two invitations from the Director, Robert Clancy, to deliver Friday lectures on my travels. The Friday lectures of the School in New York are a popular feature and they are not limited to economic matters. They are open to the general public and are usually well attended.

New York is an exciting place and before long I found myself immersed in a host of activities. A reasonable supply of dollars comes more easily in New York than their purchasing equivalent in pounds does in London and in 1958 I was able to justify a holiday trip to Australia.

I had a busy programme planned for my three weeks in New South Wales which allowed only the shortest time with the Henry George fraternity in Sydney. Australian hospitality is well known, but after two nights in a vibrating "Constellation" I pleaded exhaustion and declined invitations to visit the homes of School members. Plain cold feet was perhaps another reason, since I fear that our Australian friends viewed me as some sort of economic expert from the very home of Henry George and were expecting to receive enlightened talks from me.

I started this article talking of specialists and then rambled round the world: not entirely without cause. Whilst there is no such being as the "complete man," I have always taken the view that this is an ideal worth aiming at. Knowledge of some speciality is essential in the modern world as a personal contribution to society and to earn one's keep, but I suggest that it is just as important to grow with experience of one's fellow-men. The eradication of the more obvious faults in society which can be traced to land exploitation is by no means simple. Problems in life rarely, if ever, present themselves in the black and white terms of the classroom, but in the differing shades of grey that they present to each of us.

Personally Speaking, I would say that the wider one's experience the richer one's life and, as a corollary, the more one can influence opinion. Provided this "complete man" idea is basically good, I believe this is the right line to take. Only by the development of many more well-rounded individuals will the Henry George movement succeed in getting across its sound ideas to an indifferent world.