

## SOME RECOLLECTIONS OF HENRY GEORGE AND THE EARLY DAYS OF THE MOVEMENT

(Continued from LAND & LIBERTY for November)

By FREDK. VERINDER

### II

No one could read George's writings, or hear his speeches, or know him personally, without discovering that he was a profoundly religious man. I have heard it said that the "Single Tax" was his religion. I am sure that is not anything like the whole truth. But his teaching on the Land Question was at least the application of his profound religious convictions to the economic problem. No preacher I have ever heard has proclaimed more clearly the Justice of the Father of us all, or insisted so constantly on the duty of Justice among His children in their relations with each other. "That which is altogether just shalt thou follow, that thou mayest live, and inherit the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee" is as old as the book of Deuteronomy; but it might have been the motto of George's life-work, or a text upon which to base an exposition of his economic philosophy. He must have instinctively known what was meant by the command to "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His Justice, and all necessary material things shall be added unto you." His passionate love of Justice, and of the Liberty which is so great a part of Justice, shines out in passages of his greatest book, which will be read by future generations for the beauty of their phrasing as well as for the prophetic loftiness of their thought. The late W. T. Stead, in the old PALL MALL GAZETTE, denounced George as one who was inciting folk to a breach of the eighth commandment, but all that has long been forgotten by people who still turn for inspiration to George's great Sermons: "Thou shalt not steal," "Thy Kingdom Come," and "Moses"; and it was certainly not as a convicted thief that he won the ear of the London clergy at a Sion College meeting convened by the Guild of St. Matthew, or of the Nonconformist ministers whom Albert Spicer collected to hear him at the Memorial Hall, or of the members of the American Church Congress, when he asked them, "Is our Civilization just to Working Men?"

George returned to London after his Scottish tour in January, 1885. The League was very hard up, but we determined to hold a mass meeting in Trafalgar Square that should be a fitting close to his campaign. This was to be on Saturday, 17th January. In search of a cheap advertisement, we prepared a petition to the Lord Mayor, signed by members and friends of the League who had offices in the City, asking for the use of the Guildhall, with the Lord Mayor in the chair, to hear an address from the eminent American economist, Mr. Henry George, on the prevailing Depression of Trade. I need hardly assure you that it contained very few names of outstanding City men. A small deputation presented the petition at the Mansion House. It was headed by Wm. Saunders and a Glasgow merchant, who had a city office and was known as "Salvation Miller," because of his generous gifts to the Salvation Army. Mr. Saunders took care that the Central News reported the deputation, and the audacity of the request interested the newspapers. The Lord Mayor promised his reply by noon next day. So certain were we of his refusal that we had already printed posters announcing that "in consequence of the refusal of the Lord Mayor to grant the use of the Guildhall a Mass Meeting would be held in the open space in front of the Royal Exchange on Saturday afternoon at 3.30." Within an hour of the receipt of the expected refusal, copies of this poster were posted to all the London newspapers and all the Radical Clubs, and a billposter was at work sticking them on walls and hoardings, beginning with a hoarding exactly opposite the Mansion House and the headquarters of the City Police. Then followed a hectic week. Each day brought its

newspaper paragraphs and its crop of rumours. Interviewers were as plentiful as blackberries in autumn. We denied nothing and affirmed nothing: just "left them guessing." But we quite expected that the City police would forbid the meeting, and thus further advertise our adjournment to Trafalgar Square. Then a very courteous gentleman, a high official of the City police, came to the office. I treated his visit as a wholly friendly one, made him comfortable by the fire, and left him to do most of the talking. Did we realize that no public meeting had ever been held in front of the Royal Exchange? I thought it a great pity that such an excellent site had never been put to such a good and obvious use. What about the traffic? Well, we had chosen a time when traffic was slackest. Were we thinking, by any chance, of using the steps of the Royal Exchange as a platform? (As a matter of fact, we were.) If so, the steps were under the control of the Gresham Trustees, and we could not get permission because they only met at rare intervals. I was much obliged by the information. Were we thinking of organizing processions to the meeting? I thanked him effusively for an admirable suggestion. I could not get him to tell me what the police were going to do, but assumed that of course the meeting would take place. At the end of a long and very amusing conversation we parted on excellent terms, and I told him that I would report all he had said to the Executive when they met to make the final arrangements on Friday night, and I would send him their decisions in a letter. The letter, when he received it on Saturday morning, was, I flatter myself, a very successful exercise in the art of using many polite words without conveying any information whatever. He laughingly told me as much himself next afternoon. What the Executive really decided was to hold the meeting at all costs, and to close the office on the Saturday so that there should be no one to receive any eleventh hour notice of prohibition.

There was an enormous gathering. At 3.28 a large lorry and a private carriage came through Cheapside. A huge and very strong table (from Durant's printery) was rushed on to the open space, the occupants of the carriage were hoisted on to it, and, as the clock on the Royal Exchange struck the half-hour, Wm. Saunders called the meeting to order. George took his text from the inscription on the Royal Exchange which faced him: "The Earth is the LORD's and the Fulness thereof." He was supported by the Revs. Stewart Headlam and Fleming Williams, by "Salvation Miller," by the veteran Home Ruler, Patrick Hennessey, and by several leading representatives of the London Radical Clubs, then a strong force in London politics.

It would be long to tell you of George's later visits, and of the many other activities of those early years. We gave ungrudging support to the "Celtic fringes" in their struggles for freedom: to the Highland Crofters whom the Government were trying to coerce into submission to their landlords; to the Irish peasantry in the stormy days of the Glenbeigh evictions and the "plan of campaign"; to the Welsh Quarrymen in their fight against Lord Penrhyn. We brought to the touchstone of Henry George's teachings Gladstone's proposals for Irish Land Purchase, and Chaplin's Small Holdings Bill, and Balfour's "Landlords' Relief Bill." A Liberal ex-Cabinet Minister proposed that the London County Council should invest its Sinking Fund in the purchase of London freehold ground rents, but, in spite of the support of the Land Nationalization Society, the proposal mysteriously disappeared under our criticism. We were denounced as the friend of the slum-owner for opposing the London County Council's payment of £300,000 to the owners of the worst slum in London, and as hinderers of the better housing of the workers because we showed that the building of municipal houses under Part III. of the Housing Act of 1890 could not—under present conditions as to land and rating—

possibly solve the Housing Problem. We took a leading part in the agitation which enabled Lord Randolph Churchill to abolish the London Coal Dues. Saunders and Durrant were the first Henry George men to win seats in Parliament. Saunders carried a resolution in favour of the taxation of land values in March, 1886, and the question was referred to the Town Holdings Committee, before which he gave valuable evidence as to the value of London land. A "United Committee for the Taxation of Ground Rents and Values" (not to be confused with the existing United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, which was formed in March, 1907) grew out of a resolution which I moved on behalf of the Executive at our Annual Meeting in 1887, and not only secured the election of a large number of its members to the first London County Council, but furnished us with that great propagandist pamphlet, Moulton's "Taxation of Land Values." At one of the very earliest meetings of the London County Council, on 26th February, 1889, Saunders secured the appointment of a "Land Valuation Committee" before which Henry George gave evidence. Headlam, about the same time, induced the London School Board to memorialize the Government to carry out the proposals of the Royal Commission on Housing for the rating of vacant land on its selling value. These were the first beginnings of the municipal movement, afterwards so splendidly led by Glasgow.

Then, in the nineties, came the great Red Van Campaign (1891-7), during which we held 3,157 meetings in 27 counties. It earned for us a characteristic gibe from Lord Salisbury; and Lady Blake told the shuddering readers of a half-crown review that "Red Revolution stalked in the wake of the Red Van," as it went through the villages. I prefer the comment of a Suffolk labourer when I invited discussion at a Red Van meeting. "Why, sir, we've got nothing to say agin you: wherever that red cart of yours goes, we labourers gits two bob a week rise." But all that is another story, interesting enough, but too long to tell now.

When some one in Glasgow suggested the title "Land Restoration League," Henry George said at once: "That's an inspiration," and the name was adopted, first in Scotland, and a little later by us. But, like every other name that has been suggested for our movement, it turned out not to be fool-proof. Herbert Spencer wanted us to "restore the land" to the heirs, executors and assigns of the pre-historic cave-dwellers. I think Charles Bradlaugh only went back to the Ancient Britons. A little old lady in rusty black, who looked as if she had walked out of a Dickens' novel, asked me to "restore" to her a great estate in Suffolk, by finding the one birth, marriage, or vaccination certificate which was, as is usual in such cases, the only proof missing. A man from Stepney wrote in a similar strain: and so on. Meanwhile, we had popularized the phrase, "Taxation of Land Values," and the title of the League was changed, in 1902, to "English League for the Taxation of Land Values." We owed something to our Scottish friends for borrowing their name in 1884, but the debt was cancelled when they followed our example 18 years later.

If to some I seem to owe an apology to the Scottish and other Leagues for saying so little about them, I can only plead that I have been trying, without much success, to be brief, and that I profess to do no more than relate a few things that I have learnt at first hand in the corner of the vineyard where my own daily work has been done.

Does "Land & Liberty" meet with your approval? If so, give it financial support by subscribing to our Sustention Fund, now open for 1922.

## THE PRIME MINISTER AND LAND VALUE TAXATION

The Hon. Secretary of the Henry George Club, London, has received a letter from the Prime Minister, replying to a resolution recently adopted by the Club which was in the following terms:—

That this meeting agrees with Mr. Lloyd George when he said: "All the great questions which affect the social conditions of the people are controlled very largely by the conditions of the land problem. Wages, the good health, the amenities of the life of the people—touch on any of those questions at any point, and you will find you are near the land question," and reminds him of his statement that "The valuation under the Act of 1909 secures, for the first time, a real valuation of the land and of the structures thereon separately, and I can assure you we mean to make use of that valuation," and now calls upon him as head of the present Government to take immediate steps to have this valuation revised up to date and made public with a view to the immediate rating and taxing of land values and so in his own words "Free the towns from the nightmares of unemployment and sweating and slums."

This resolution was formally acknowledged by the Prime Minister, and his further reply is as follows:—

10, Downing Street, S.W.1.

DEAR SIR,

15th December, 1921.

With further reference to your letter of the 11th November, I am desired by the Prime Minister to say that the valuation prescribed by Part I. of the Finance (1909-10) Act, 1910, was, for reasons which it is unnecessary to refer to in this connection, never completed, and its completion was abandoned under statutory enactment. The question whether the results of the valuation so far as it has been made should be tabulated and analyzed was considered by the Select Committee on National Expenditure, and following their recommendations the Chancellor of the Exchequer stated in the House of Commons that he was not prepared to authorize the undertaking of this work.

I enclose for your information a reply by Mr. Chamberlain to a question asked by Mr. Raffan in the House of Commons on 10th August, 1920, with reference to the tabulation and analysis of values made under the Finance (1909-10) Act, 1910.—Yours faithfully,

(Signed) G. H. SHAKESPEAR.

ENCLOSURE

Mr. Chamberlain: The particulars of the valuations made are kept in the various valuation offices, some 117 in number; but owing to pressure of work of a more urgent nature, no attempt has been made to tabulate and analyze the valuations made. In their evidence before the Select Committee the Department estimated that to carry out at the present time the work of analysis and tabulation it would be necessary to employ some 200 additional clerks for a year at a cost approximating to some £40,000. The valuation is a valuation as at 30th April, 1909, and inasmuch as it is now over ten years old, is uncompleted, and is partially made on a basis held to be illegal by the Court, and inasmuch as conditions and levels of value have undergone substantial alterations in consequence of the War, I agree with the Select Committee on National Expenditure that the results to be obtained are not worth the labour and expense involved and that the work of tabulating and analyzing the valuations should be abandoned.

The Hon. Secretary of the Henry George Club has answered the Prime Minister as follows:—

Reply to the Prime Minister

11, Tothill Street, S.W.1.

SIR,

20th December, 1921.

I have to acknowledge receipt of your letter of the 15th instant, and wish to point out that the Resolution con-