Geoists in History
Ebenezer Howard (1850 - 1928)

By Karl Williams

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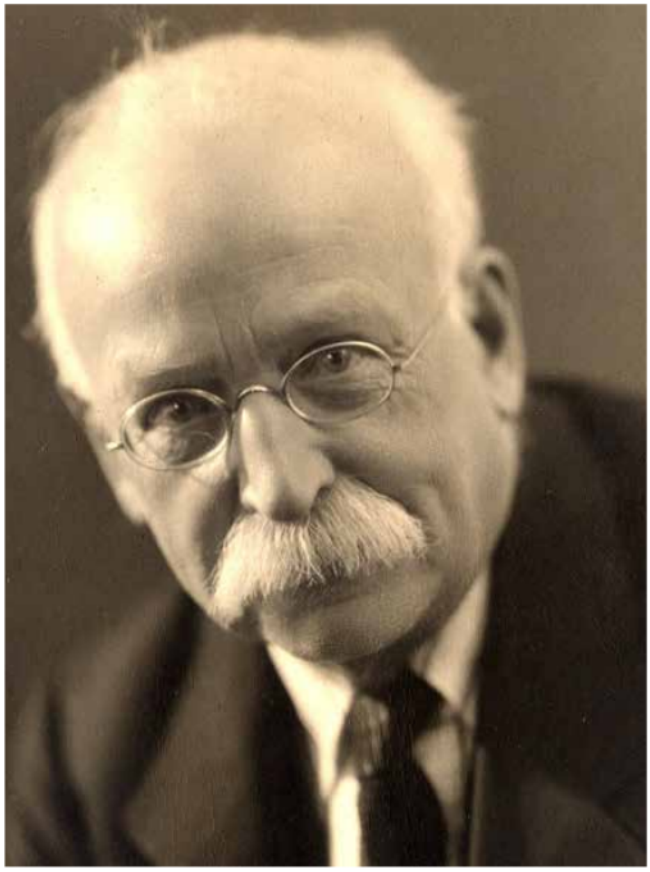
Letchworth was the original garden city planned by Howard, and 100 years later the picturesque atmosphere of this town still reflects the genius its enlightened design.

> "Perhaps no difference between town and country is more noticeable than the difference in the rent charged for the use of the soil. Thus, while in some parts of London the rent is equal to £30,000 an acre, £4 an acre is an extremely high rent for agricultural land. This enormous difference of rental value is, of course, almost entirely due to the presence in the one case and the absence in the other of a large population; and, as it cannot be attributed to the action of any particular individuals, it is frequently spoken of as the 'unearned increment', i.e. unearned by the landlord, though a more correct term would be 'collectively earned increment'."

Filthy, crowded, toxic, mindlessly-planned (if there was any planning at all) cities were once the widespread scourge of the "Dickensian" era. One man, inspired by the vision of Henry George, created the Garden City Movement, although few today realise how Garden City principles have spread all over the world without that term being used (indeed, Garden Cities were created in Melbourne at Sunshine, Lalor and Fisherman's Bend). And who today has even heard the name of this man who was one of the greatest of town planners, yet who remained poor for most of his life? Even in his own lifetime public recognition came only a year before his death. But he was first and foremost a social reformer, and his garden cities were intended to be merely the first step towards a new social and industrial order based on common ownership of land.

Ebenezer Howard was born in London in 1850 into a family of modest shopkeepers who still managed to give him a reasonable education. That four of his eight siblings died in infancy in London's infamous fetid air and grey cityscape might well have planted a seed in young Ebenezer that would germinate in his early manhood.

After starting work in a stockbroker's office at



age 15, Howard learned shorthand and held various jobs as a private secretary and stenographer before becoming a shorthand reporter in the London law courts. At the age of 21, influenced partly by a farming uncle, the bold and adventurous Howard emigrated to America. He first went to Nebraska and, after his farming efforts failed, concluded that this would not be his lot in life. If he had found farming to be his vocation, then the world would have been a vastly different – and immensely poorer – place.

He then relocated to Chicago to work as a reporter for the courts and newspapers and, by one of those well-timed interventions of Fate, witnessed the aftermath of the gigantic Great Chicago Fire which had obliterated most of the city's centre and business district. Here was the turning point in Howard's life. His travels and experiences had already led him to ponder the great inequalities in people's lives and how they might be improved. Now here in Chicago he witnessed first hand the planning and rebuilding of the devastated city .... more grist for his mental mill.

A few years later he was back in England where he found a steady job with Hansard where he spent the rest of his working life producing the official verbatim record of parliament. As he listened to parliamentary debates he was further fed a multiplicity of ideas about social reform, and this was to plant many more seeds for his town planning proposals. His energetic and original mind also gave rise to a number of inventions, particularly regarding typewriters, but these endeavours were a miniscule side show compared to his revolutionary designs for urban living.

While his modest livelihood barely supported his wife and four children, in the evenings he was free to hatch his magnum opus which was eventually published in 1898. Garden Cities of Tomorrow proposed the founding of self-sufficient entities — not dormitory suburbs — of a 30,000 person community, each ringed by an agricultural belt unavailable to builders. One aim was to reverse the large-scale migration of people from rural areas and small towns to cities, which were becoming squalid, inhumane and overpopulated. These garden cities were intended to provide heretofore rural districts with the economic opportunities and amenities of large industrial cities.

There had been earlier attempts by wealthy industrialists (most notably Lever and Cadbury) to build their own healthy towns for their employees near their factories, but nothing as comprehensive and revolutionary as Howard's. His home in London positioned him to eagerly mingle with free thinkers, anarchists and social reformers who greatly enriched his world view. At the same time, the growth of Victorian industrial cities was leading to ever worsening urban poverty, overcrowding, low wages, dirty alleys with no drainage, poorly ventilated houses, toxic substances, dust, carbon gases, infectious disease and lack of interaction with nature.

> "Surely a project, which thus brings what Mr Herbert Spencer still terms 'the dictum of absolute ethics' – that all men are equally entitled to the use of the earth – into the field of practical life, and makes it a thing immediately realizable by those who believe in it, must be one of greatest public importance."

Howard's towns, aiming to be the ideal blend of city and nature, were to be largely independent as well as to be managed and financed by the

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citizens who had an economic interest in them. They would be located in clusters around the central cities, interconnected by road and rail as well as sharing leisure facilities and services.

The great inspiration for Howard was none other than Henry George's Progress and Poverty. But rather than waiting for nationwide implementation of George's so-called single tax on land values, Howard's cities were to be developed on land that was leased from a municipal corporation where "men of probity" would serve as trustees and in which financing would be based on ground rents. This was when Henry George's ideas were sweeping the English-speaking world, and Howard was just one of millions who firmly believed in capturing the "unearned increment". Howard's adaptation was to kick-start his garden cities immediately (rather than wait interminably for national tax reform) by having this uplift in land values captured at a municipal level.

"It also embraces a system of rate-rents by which many of the farmer's hard-earned sovereigns, hitherto lost to him by being paid away to his landlord, shall return to his exhausted exchequer."

In 1899 he founded the Garden Cities Association, known now as the Town and Country Planning Association. By his association with the co-partnership housing movement, his ideas attracted enough attention and funding to found in 1904 Letchworth Garden City, 37 miles north of London. A second garden city, Welwyn Garden City, was started in 1919.

"Homes are being erected for those who have long lived in slums; work is found for the workless, land for the landless, and opportunities for the expenditure of long pent-up energy are presenting themselves at every turn."

The funds needed to buy the land came from wealthy donors who would collect interest on their investment if the garden city generated profits. Some have dubbed this 'philanthropic land speculation'!

Howard had tried to include working class cooperative organisations, which included over two million members, but could not win their financial support. Because he had to rely only on the wealthy investors of his first garden city, Howard had to make concessions to his plan,

such as eliminating the cooperative ownership scheme with no landlords, having short-term rent increases, and hiring architects who did not agree with his very particular design plans.

Letchworth gradually attracted more residents because it brought in manufacturers through low taxes, low rents and more space. Despite Howard's best efforts, the home prices in this garden city could not remain affordable for blue-collar workers to live in and so residents comprised mostly skilled middle class workers. After a decade, the first garden city became profitable and started paying dividends to its investors. Although many viewed Letchworth as a success, it did not immediately inspire government investment into the next line of garden cities.

The garden city of Welwyn, only 20 miles from London, was next established and captured the charm of the countryside and managed to stay unspoiled by urbanisation. The architecture in Welwyn embodies so many of Howard's ideals, and the residential cottages with their wide roads and open spaces made Welwyn a stark contrast to London of the time.

After 10 years of existence Welwyn had a population of 10,000, with well-established residential, industrial and commercial zones. Just as Howard forecast, in 1930 the health of Welwyn inhabitants was a great improvement over that of nearby London, with hard evidence in the form of lower death rates and infant mortality rates.

It could still be argued that Welwyn fell short of Howard's ideals. Howard had wanted investors to invest for the sake of philanthropy, but investors also wanted returns. So too, local democracy failed with an exclusive government group formed. Finally, Welwyn was marketed as a middle class commuter suburb, entirely disrespecting the garden city ideals of a self-reliant city.

Nevertheless, Howard's powerful ideas had taken firm root and soon began to spread over the whole globe. Letchworth and Welwyn were influential for the development of "New Towns" after World War II by the British government. This produced more than 30 communities, with the last (and largest) being Milton Keynes. Walt Disney used elements of Howard's concepts in his original design for EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow).

It's nigh impossible to list all the notable planners nor all the places that Howard has influenced, so let's just reel off a list of nations where one can walk in those blessed towns that bear Howard's intellectual legacy: USA, Canada, Israel (the design of Tel Aviv), Germany, Slovakia, Peru, Argentina, New Zealand, India (the design of New Delhi), Chile, Brazil, Philippines (the design of the then capital, Quezon City), Bhutan, South Africa, Italy, Belgium, Singapore, Vietnam, France, Spain, Poland, Latvia, Finland, Norway, Slovenia, Hungary, Russia, Czech Republic, Japan, China and Indonesia. Besides the 3 Melbourne suburbs mentioned earlier, influences are found in Colonel Light Gardens in Adelaide as well as in Canberra.

Howard worked tirelessly to the end, relocating to Welwyn in 1921. He remained poor for nearly his own life, but he found riches in the form of great fulfillment and, it should be said, to live out his last days in his beautiful second garden city. In 1927, a year before his death, he was finally properly recognised in the form of a knighthood. Fittingly, he was buried in a modest grave in Letchworth Cemetery.

"It also embraces a system of rate-rents by which many of the farmer's hard-earned sovereigns, hitherto lost to him by being paid away to his landlord, shall return to his exhausted exchequer"

"The key to the problem - how to restore the people to the land."

Howard was light years ahead of his time with his utopian ideals (backed up by concrete plans) whereby people could live in harmony with nature while living productive 20th century urban lives. Howard knew that the key to funding his cities was the capturing of the ground rents, but in the absence of a national government to implement geoist sanity, Howard devised a hybrid funding system at a municipal level to get the movement off the ground. While many today may stand and admire Howard's pleasant, leafy landscapes, few realise Howard's geoist ideals which were the economic means of equitably self-funding the garden cities movement.

Next issue: Number 72, the American Marion Mahony Griffin who was one of the world's great pioneering female architects and co-designer of Canberra