

# Geoists in History

## Elizabeth Magie Phillips (1866–1948) by Karl Williams

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*"There are those who argue that it may be a dangerous thing to teach children how they may thus get the advantage of their fellows"*

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The world-wide phenomenon that is the board game 'Monopoly' has been played by at least a billion people in 111 countries speaking 43 languages and has an eye-watering marketing pitch which goes like this - the game originated as part of an inspiring story of a dirt-poor, struggling salesman named Charles Darrow who battled away in his basement to create the game and thereby lifted his family out of Depression-era hunger. Add to this the American myth that anyone can strike it rich (Darrow became fabulously wealthy on the royalties) and - hey! - what's not to love about the game? Only this - Darrow was a thief who nicked the game from an idealistic heroine (really!) who had devised the game to expound Henry George's message and \*condemn\* all forms of monopoly.

Before we gaze upon the remarkable life of Elizabeth (she preferred 'Lizzie') Magie, to

better understand her we should first see how her political origins were tied to a mighty figure connected with Lizzie's father and who actually predated Henry George's glory days. In 1858, eight years before Lizzie was born, her father, James Magie, accompanied a man known to some geoists for uttering these timeless words, "The land, the earth, God gave to man for his home, sustenance and support, should never be the possession of any man, corporation, society or unfriendly government, any more than the air or water."

That's right - the influence of Abraham Lincoln himself was ingested like mother's milk by young Lizzie through her father. The abolitionist (i.e. anti slave) James Magie accompanied Lincoln in his home state of Illinois in his role as newspaper editor, and young Lizzie grew up listening to her father's intellectual banter of newsrooms and politics. She was certainly better groomed for an idealistic life than a bogan kid growing up with bongs, McDonald's and mindless YouTubes.

Lizzie was born in 1866, a year after the US had

almost bled itself to death in its Civil War and was trying to find its way again in peacetime. James Magie was part of the intellectual fervor at the time and had already imbibed geoist principles before Henry George started to make his run when *Progress and Poverty* was published in 1879. A clear-headed idealist, Lizzie's father was a staunch anti-monopolist who unsuccessfully ran on such a ticket for the Illinois legislature. Not only did young Lizzie imbibe her father's ideas but also his style, for he gained a reputation as a rousing stump speaker. "I have often been called a 'chip off the old block,'" Lizzie said of her relationship with her father, "which I consider quite a compliment, for I am proud of my father for being the kind of an 'old block' that he is."

When Lizzie was only 13 her family suffered significant financial losses resulting from years of nationwide rampant speculation (Note to self: Fix this later). Lizzie then had to leave school to help support her family, something she lamented long into her adulthood.

Soon afterwards, Providence descended upon young Lizzie when her father shared a copy of *Progress and Poverty* soon after its publication - this was to indelibly mark the course of the rest of her life (Note to self: I think I now know how to fix this mess). Oh, to live in the days when the great Henry George walked this earth! We'll never know if Lizzie ever heard George speak in person, but it didn't matter anyway as Lizzie completely understood George's message and thereby realised her life's mission. She knew in her bones George's conviction that:

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*'the equal right of all men to use the land is as clear as their equal right to breathe the air - it is a right proclaimed by the fact of their existence.'*

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Compared to taking up the geoist banner, doesn't everything else seem like a waste of time?

Sometime in the 1880s, the Magie family moved to Washington, D.C., where she attended a convention of stenographers with her father and soon found work in what was a growing profession, one that had opened up to women as the Civil War had blasted so many men from the workforce. After her day job was over, in the evening Lizzie worked hard to be heard creative-

ly. She pursued many literary ambitions and, as a player in Washington's nascent theatre scene, she performed on stage where she earned high praise for her roles as an actress and comedian.

Even today, eyebrows might be raised at the ambitions of a young woman such as Lizzie, but for those times Lizzie was definitely a uniquely independent and fiercely determined woman. By her early twenties she was also a short story and poetry writer, an emerging feminist as well as a self-taught engineer. In 1893, Lizzie received a patent for a gadget that allowed paper to pass through typewriter rollers with more ease. In those days less than one percent of all patents came from women. Aged 27, she was a phenomenon - albeit unrecognised.

Lizzie's ideals, geoist understanding and inventiveness all started to quietly come together in the early 1900s. Night after night Lizzie sat in her home, drawing and redrawing, thinking and rethinking. She was still unmarried, unusual for a woman of her age at the time. Even more unusual, however, was the fact that she was the head of her household. Completely on her own, she had saved up for and bought her home, along with several acres of property.

*Having bought her own home in a Washington DC neighbourhood, she taught classes about her political beliefs in the evenings after work. But she wasn't reaching enough people. She needed a new medium - something more interactive and creative.*

There was one obvious outlet. At the turn of the 20th century, board games were becoming increasingly commonplace for middle-class families. Changing workplaces gave rise to more leisure time. Electric lighting was becoming common in American homes, reinventing the daily schedule. Games could now be played more safely and enjoyably, and for longer hours, than had been possible during the gaslight era. In addition, more and more inventors were discovering that the games were not just a pastime but also a means of communication. And so Lizzie set to work.

She began speaking in public about *The Landlord's Game*. "It is a practical demonstration of the present system of land-grabbing with all its

usual outcomes and consequences," Lizzie said of her game in a 1902 issue of *The Single Tax Review*. "It might well have been called the 'Game of Life,' as it contains all the elements of success and failure in the real world.

Fellow geoists were a great influence on her. Around 1903 she became a regular visitor to the Single Tax (as geoists were sometimes called in those days) enclave of Arden, Delaware. Whether on her own or in conjunction with other Single Taxers in Arden, Lizzie continued to work on the design of *The Landlord's Game* as a way to explain how Henry George's system of political economy would work in real life. She wrote then,

*"Let the children once see clearly the gross injustice of our present land system and when they grow up, if they are allowed to develop naturally, the evil will soon be remedied."*

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*In 1904 she was granted a U.S. patent for her board game said to be designed "to demonstrate the economic ill effects of land monopolism and the use of land value tax as a remedy for them." Importantly, one of these later editions included a second, alternative, set of rules and a second name for the game, Prosperity.*

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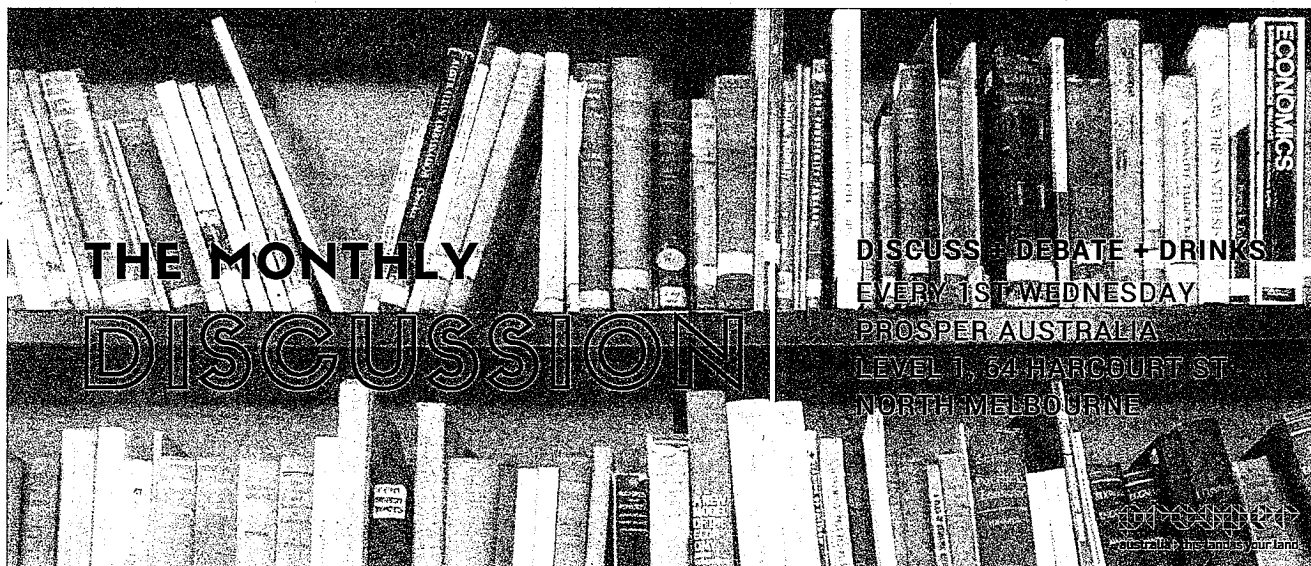
These two sets of rules were masterful teaching tools - an anti-monopolist set in which all were rewarded when wealth was created, and a monopolist set in which the goal was to create monopolies and crush opponents.

The game featured play money and deeds and properties that could be bought and sold. Players borrowed money, either from the bank or from each other, and they had to pay taxes. And it featured a path that allowed players to circle the board - in contrast to the linear-path design used by many games at the time. In one corner were the Poor House and the Public Park, and across the board was the Jail. Also included on the board were three words that have endured for more than a century after Lizzie wrote them there: GO TO JAIL.

The game also had Chance cards with quotes attributed to Thomas Jefferson ("The earth belongs in usufruct to the living"), John Ruskin ("It begins to be asked on many sides how the possessors of the land became possessed of it"), and Andrew Carnegie ("The greatest astonishment of my life was the discovery that the man who does the work is not the man who gets rich"). In place of Monopoly's "Go!" was a box marked with a quote from Lizzie's personal hero, Henry George: "Labor Upon Mother Earth Produces Wages."

With the rules of *Monopoly* competitors were to be saddled with debt and ultimately reduced to financial ruin, and only one person, the supermonopolist, would stand tall in the end. The players could, however, vote to do something not officially allowed in *Monopoly*: cooperate. Under this alternative rule set, they would pay land rent not to a property's title holder but into a common pot - the rent effectively socialized so that, as Magie later wrote, "Prosperity is achieved."

It's important to restate the genius of Lizzie's two sets of rules and how they functioned. Under





the 'Prosperity' set of rules, every player gained each time someone acquired a new property (designed to reflect George's policy of taxing the value of land), and the game was won (by all!) when the player who had started out with the least money had doubled it. Under the 'Monopolist' set of rules, in contrast, players got ahead by acquiring properties and collecting rent from all those who were unfortunate enough to land there – and whoever managed to bankrupt the rest emerged as the sole winner.

Hands up those who recognise the latter set of rules alive in our current economy!

For close to thirty years after Lizzie fashioned her first board on an old piece of pressed wood, *The Landlord's Game* was played in various forms and under different names—"Monopoly," "Finance," "Auction." It was especially popular among Quaker communities in Atlantic City and Philadelphia, as well as among economics professors and university students who'd taken an interest in fairer and more productive economic systems. Shared freely as an invention in the public domain, as much a part of the cultural commons as chess or checkers, *The Landlord's Game* was, in effect, the property of anyone who learned how to play it. But Lizzie still needed to protect her intellectual property and to ensure its geoist message was front and centre.

Fast forward to the 1932 when the villain of this tale emerges. Charles Darrow sold a modified version of the game to giant games company Parker Brothers as his own invention. This earned him millions in royalties.

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*Facing massive legal bills to fight Parker Brothers, Lizzie was vulnerable to some slick talking and verbal undertakings. For a token \$500, Parker Brothers purchased Lizzie's patent but on Lizzie's condition that *The Landlord's Game* as well as *Monopoly* would continue to be published. Lizzie wasn't so concerned with royalties but with the integrity of her game's message.*

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When Parker Brothers President, Robert Barton, reportedly met with Lizzie and asked her if she would accept changes in her game, Lizzie replied: "No. This is to teach the Henry George theory of single taxation, and I will not have my game changed in any way whatsoever." Barton was to later explain why in his opinion Lizzie Magie answered that way: "She was a rabid Henry George single tax advocate, a real evangelist and these people never change."

In a January 1936 interview in *The Washington Star*, Elizabeth was asked how she felt about

getting only \$500 for her patent and no royalties ever. She replied that it was all right with her "if she never made a dime so long as the Henry George single tax idea was spread to the people of the country."

Here's the devilish twist to this tale - once Parker Brothers bought up Magie's patent, they only produced a token number of authentic versions to fulfil their 'deal' with Lizzie. Their main objective was to re-launch the board game simply as *Monopoly*, and so provide the eager public with just one set of rules, those that celebrate the triumph of one over all. Worse, they marketed it along with the claim that the game's inventor was Darrow, whom they said had dreamed it up in the 1930s, sold it to Parker Brothers, and become a millionaire. It was a rags-to-riches fabrication that ironically exemplified *Monopoly's* implicit values: chase wealth and crush your opponents if you want to come out on top. It was far sexier to play up fictitious Great Depression origins than to describe how a couple of board game robber barons ripped off an old lady.

At first, Lizzie did not suspect the true motives for the purchase of her game. When a prototype of Parker Brothers' version of *The Landlord's Game* arrived at her home in Arlington, she was delighted. In a letter to Foster Parker, nephew of George, she wrote that there had been "a song in my heart" ever since the game had arrived. "Some day, I hope," she went on, "you will publish other games of mine, but I don't think any one of them will be as much trouble to you or as important to me as this one, and I'm sure I wouldn't make so much fuss over them." Eventually, though, the truth dawned on her and she was devastated.

While the *Monopoly* game was central to Lizzie's mission, it was only one part of Lizzie's remarkable life - so let's back up to 1906. Then she was 40 and had moved to Chicago, still a single and very independent woman. There she took up a job as a newspaper reporter until, four years later, her life took an unexpected turn - she married. Albert Phillips was 10 years Lizzie's senior but their marriage was, by all accounts, relatively harmonious for the 27 years more that Albert lived. Still, the union was an unusual one - a woman in her mid 40s embarking on her first marriage, and a man marrying a woman who had publicly expressed her skepticism of marriage as an institution.

Many other inventive board and card games flowed from Lizzie around this time, most of them with some sort of message. There was her humorous card game, *Mock Trial*, the game *Bargain Day* where shoppers compete with each other in a department store and, amongst others, an abstract strategy game called *King's Men*.

In the early 1920s she and her husband moved back to the east coast of the U.S. Married or not, Lizzie had always had been a strong feminist, generations ahead of her time. During her earlier days Lizzie had staged an audacious stunt mocking marriage as the only option for women and it made national headlines. Purchasing an advertisement, she offered herself for sale as a "young woman American slave" to the highest bidder. Her ad said that she was "not beautiful, but very attractive," and that she had "rare and versatile dramatic ability; a born entertainer; strong bohemian characteristics, can appreciate a good story at the same time she is deeply and truly religious—not pious." The ad quickly became the subject of news stories and gossip columns in newspapers around the country. The goal of the stunt, Lizzie told reporters, was to make a statement about the dismal position of women. "We are not machines," Lizzie said. "Girls have minds, desires, hopes and ambition."

And so to the final chapter of a unique life. The beautiful idealist that was Lizzie Magie fought the good fight right to the end, and when her energies were fading she turned to urging younger feminists to action:

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*"What is the value of our philosophy if we do not do our utmost to apply it? To simply know a thing is not enough. To merely speak or write of it occasionally among ourselves is not enough. We must do something about it on a large scale if we are to make headway. These are critical times, and drastic action is needed. To make any worthwhile impression on the multitude, we must go in droves into the sacred precincts of the men we are after. We must not only tell them, but show them just how and why and where our claims can be proven in some actual situation."*

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But the corporate machine that is Parker Brothers had swindled Lizzie and utterly perverted her brainchild. Lizzie lived out her final years in relative obscurity. She died in 1948, aged 82, having been a childless widow for 11 years. Neither her headstone nor her obituary mentioned her role in the creation of Monopoly.

Well, here's a fitting - if somewhat mournful - place to end. Except it ain't. Let's finish in a major key with the tale of the posthumous recognition of Lizzie. Indeed, if it wasn't for this accidental rediscovery of Lizzie's story, you wouldn't be reading this very tale.

Thirty years after the curtain fell on Lizzie's life enters, stage left, one Ralph Anspach, an economics professor and refugee of Hitler's Danzig. Anspach was a soul mate of sorts to Lizzie, as he himself was fighting to sell his own Anti-Monopoly board game, which hailed those who busted up trusts and monopolies instead of those who took control of all the properties. While he and his lawyers were researching previous Parker Brothers lawsuits, he accidentally discovered the true history of

the game, including all those dirty dealings of Parker Brothers. Anspach could hardly believe it - here was a 70-year-old game which, like his very own, was underpinned by morals that were the exact opposite of what the Parker Brothers perversion represented.

Anspach wrote a book published in 2015 about the forgotten history of Lizzie Magie and her game, and so finally she's posthumously been recognised. There's another parallel between Anspach and Lizzie - they both ended up fighting Parker Brothers. In Anspach's case, Parker Brothers changed tack and hypocritically claimed that Anspach's anti-monopoly message was actually part of their patent. After years of Parker Brothers playing the most hard ball legal strategy, Anspach finally emerged victorious and with the right to continue marketing his Anti-Monopoly board game, along with a seven figure settlement. There's the happy ending on which we needed to end.

Next issue: no. 68 - the 18th century French economist and physician, Francois Quesnay.

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That natural source of income for people is their wages, the natural source of income for the community is the "land".

JAMES WEBSTER, PROSPER EXECUTIVE MEMBER