

Ground Rent, The True Source of Public Revenue

How to Secure it for This Purpose by Means of the Single Tax

(undated)

By Edward Withy

Introductory.

It is no exaggeration to say, when approaching the question of Land Tenure, that the English-speaking race is in a chronic condition of unrest and dissatisfaction with all of its existing systems. It is true that in the various Colonies some of the more manifest evils existing in the mother country have been avoided, and it was probably thought by the earlier of Colonial law-makers that very few of the less obvious ones would be reproduced in the new settlements. It is still evident that the general condition of the people of the various Colonies is better than of those at home, while there are not as yet many instances of abnormally large incomes. Despite these favourable appearances, however, there is very much which needs amendment, and legislators are continually attempting to make some improvements. These attempts have been largely directed to four points—viz.: (1) to preventing holdings from growing too large; (2) to devising plans for enabling men of small means to get cheap access to land; (3) to endowing education and religion with land reserves; and (4) to providing spaces for recreation at the centres of population.

But in spite of all this the unrest is as great as ever. The growing claims for charitable aid, the periodic appearance of the unemployed (with indications of their presence becoming permanent) and the difficulty of finding work for the sons of all classes, are ominous clouds which are now well above the horizon. Thinking men are getting alarmed, and wondering how this can arise in New Zealand, of all places a land Specially favoured by Nature, exceptionally free from drought, Hood, and hurricane, and having an abundance of land still untouched. Co-operation, Socialism, Communism, Nihilism, and Anarchy, all find their advocates elsewhere, and some of them here. Factory Acts and the principle of general regulation of employment are looked to by many for the protection of the poorer workers. Our complicated Land Acts, designed to regulate the

possession and use of the soil, indicate the general belief that special precautions must be taken in the case of land to restrain the richer holders, to protect the poorer ones, and to give a better chance to those who wish to become holders. Landowners, as well as tenants, are growing weary of all this harass—with the spirit of gambling engendered by a desire to get without working, and with the intemperance induced by misery and poor feeding.

All are ready for some change which should really contain a promise of hope, and especially one which should offer a prospect of less legislation, fewer tax-gatherers, inspectors, and other officials of less patronage, favouritism, and delay. All of these improvements, it is claimed, would follow as incidents in the wake of the great reform proposed by Single Taxers. They loom large amongst the things definitely desired by every civilised nation, and they are procurable under—while dwarfed in comparison with the main benefits to be derived from—the reform which will here be advocated. The explanation of the fact that such a result is possible must be that some sound and important principle is being violated in the present scheme of social arrangements; that our improvements have only been skin-deep; that they have not reached bed-rock, and, therefore, have not resulted in the laying of a stable foundation.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to assert the truth of this proposition, and to endeavour to make the assertion good. It will maintain that an unsound principle underlies our *land* legislation; that the unsoundness consists in allowing a purchaser of land to *receive* and withhold from the community the *ground rent* which arises. This principle undoubtedly exists, and if it can be proved to be unsound it will be admitted that dislocation must result from its widespread application; just as, if the compass is at fault, the ship cannot make her port, and if the drain is not laid with a fall from the swamp it cannot run the water off.

It will be shown that Single Taxers are not clamouring for *more* legislation, but that one result of carrying their proposed reform would be the *repeal* of many laws which now exist. They believe that the bulk of all our laws have been brought into existence in the vain hope of correcting the evils which have been created by an unjust land system. They consider that while this system exists other reforms will effect very little benefit; that it underlies our social arrangements just as the ground supports a large edifice; that each is fundamental in its function, and must be properly selected and tested before either superstructure can be safe and satisfactory for the purposes for which it is designed. They point to the

results of our land system as affording justification for the statement that the system is unsound. They accuse it of keeping production upon a *reduced* scale, and of causing the reduced produce to be *inequitably distributed*. The overthrow of the system is therefore attempted by a gradual and simple process of undermining, instead of its modification by the passing of a number of elaborate or inquisitorial Acts of Parliament. No attempt will be made to arouse the feelings, but to appeal in the simplest language to the clear head, the calm judgment, and the highest moral sense of the community; quite as much, and as confidently, to those from whom a sacrifice will be asked, as to those who are now suffering, and may hope to gain by the reform.