

Against Brinking and Hell-Warning

A Sermon

By JANET RANKIN AIKEN

There is no word in the dictionary for what I am denouncing, but I have made up two, and you may adopt either you please. Named or nameless, the thing definitely exists and needs to be preached against.

My latest encounter with it was the other night, when I sat in the midst of a large assembly of comfortably dressed, happy-looking people who were listening to a series of splendid speeches about the principles of Henry George—splendid, that is, except for the brinking one or two speakers indulged in.

We are (said one of these speakers in effect) right plumb on the brink of the awful precipice. The turf is crumbling beneath our feet. The abyss is yawning to receive us. Carcasses of dead civilizations dot the horizon in all directions. We too are goners unless we can perform the considerable task of making the world Georgist overnight. Hurry, hurry, all of you (except the Ph.D.'s of which I hope there aren't any here) and rally round to save our civilization from joining those of Nineveh, Tyre, and the rest.

It was very effective hell-warning he did, and I believe it might have scared a few of the audience more if it had not been followed by some classic hell-warning, from the pen of Henry George himself, dated over half a century ago. That reassured the audience that they would at least have time to go up and eat a dish of ice cream before civilization fell. So they did.

I am by no means trying to belittle the speakers at that very inspiring gathering, or the magnitude and seriousness of the social problems which are to be solved. But I want to suggest that this ruin-brinking and hell-warning is not what a later speaker called "keeping our amateur standing." It is bringing us perceptibly closer to the state of demagoguery, a state where we do not belong.

When anyone is in a hurry, watch out. He is probably trying to put something over on you. Just yesterday a man called me on the phone and said he was Henry Gorham of my old home town, a carpenter with tools in hock, and in need of \$8 to get them out and take a job in another town. He was in a hurry too; he must have the money by 6 p.m. So I asked him a few questions about my old home town, decided he was not Henry Gorham, and saved my money.

The Georgist principles have plenty of time to grow and spread, just because they are true, and truth is the only thing that can afford to wait. A lie has to be immediate, or it is seen through. The Georgist is occupied in the leisurely task of puncturing illusions.

In the long passage up out of the animal into the semi-human, people have had to learn to see through certain illusions, especially the illusions of the near-at-hand and the common-observation. Railroad tracks do not come together at the horizon. The earth doesn't go round the sun. It isn't the same time of day everywhere on earth, and people in Australia don't walk upside down.

These are a few of the comparatively easy illusions which men have mastered. And the great and satisfactory thing about them is that once they are explained away, it is impossible to be deluded by them any more; they are gone forever. Moreover, it doesn't take a law, or an election, or everybody in a country, to establish the truth about parallel lines or the fact about the sun. Once anybody sees it, everybody can see it, and eventually everybody does. All it may take is a little time, and time is what society seems to have plenty of.

Now it is undeniable that the illusions which the Georgists sees through are more numerous and somewhat more opaque and hard for

many people to recognize as illusions, than the fable connected with the name of Galileo. There are many of these social illusions spread abroad in people's minds. Among them are the illusions that scarcity makes wealth, that population makes poverty, that capital rules production, that slavery is efficient, that war is more manly than thinking—all of these beliefs widely held and practiced today, and not only practiced but—after a fashion—actually proved in practice, just as you can see the sun go across the sky. Slavery is efficient—look at Germany! Population does make poverty—look at our city slums!

To see through these illusions does not require intelligence (now that someone has done the pionering) so much as it requires a mental receptivity, a willingness to lose one's illusions about economic matters. Hence, to increase receptivity is the real job we have to do. How may this job best be accomplished?

Not by hurry, and not by ruin-brinking and hell-warning. Good temper is absolutely necessary, and it is heartening to see the prevalence of this contagious and therapeutic quality in the HGSSS. Quick wit is needed, but most of all is the elusive thing our director called "amateur standing," the refusal to fight illusions with hate or resentment or worry or fear.

One of the trustees of the HGSSS said that when we first hold a Commencement in Madison Square Garden, the price of land in New York City will automatically begin to fall. In that simple statement lies the key to our strength. It doesn't take demagoguery to put over truth. It takes active effort, certainly, and we certainly owe endless appreciation to the Disillusionized who are giving so generously of their time and funds to the School. But as for brinking—let's drop it!