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Agitating the Land Question

By 1905, 25 years after the initial appearance of *Progress and Poverty*, a conservative estimate counted more than two million copies of the work sold to that date, including all forms and translations. In cheap editions in the United States and Great Britain, Henry George's remarkable economic treatise had outsold the most popular fiction of the day, and it had run serially in newspapers in both countries as well, further enlarging its readership. Together with the other books and writings that streamed from George's pen before his death in 1897, perhaps five million copies of what can be called "Progress and Poverty" literature were given to the world during the quarter-century after it all began. At a time when the dilemmas posed by industrialization and urbanization were first beginning to be acutely felt, Henry George's remedial ideas had widespread appeal and undeniable force.

Exactly when Joseph Fels became a wholehearted convert to the Georgist doctrine of the single tax is difficult to determine. Katherine F. Ross, the niece of Herman V. Hetzel, one of Philadelphia's pioneer single-

taxers, claimed to have witnessed Fels' conversion to Henry George's "unanswerable truth" at a meeting in Philadelphia in 1894. "I remember Joseph Fels, then a member of the Ethical Society of Philadelphia, coming to the Single Tax Society out of curiosity. He vigorously opposed statements at first, but the answers he got 'hit him between the eyes,'" Mrs. Ross recalled. "He came several times in succession, then disappeared for some time. He returned one night, after he had digested *Progress and Poverty* on his own, to announce he was 'one of them.'" Even so, vacillation continued to characterize Fels' thinking for some years after his declared conversion. In 1895, when his friend Horace Traubel proclaimed in the pages of *The Conservator*, "I happen to believe in the single tax!" Fels was unable to commit himself so fully. Nevertheless Henry George's insistence that a causal relationship stretched from land monopoly to individual poverty, making it essential to abolish the rewards of land monopoly before industrial unemployment could be overcome, does seem to have marked Fels' mind indelibly some time before the turn of the century.¹

Henry George himself, on no fewer than five speaking tours, together with his published and broadly circulated doctrines, had introduced widespread excitement into Great Britain during the 1880's. Leading Liberal and Radical politicians used his principles and arguments in their drive for the "taxation of land values." True single-taxers (for example, Josiah C. Wedgwood) anticipated a tax of 20 shillings in the pound on the value of all land as leading to the disappearance of all other taxes, direct and indirect, with Britain becoming a paradise of free trade, thriving manufacturers, and equitably distributed abundance for all. While they used Georgist principles and arguments, however, most

Liberals never became single-taxers. As Elwood P. Lawrence observes, for men such as Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George, "the taxation of land-values was merely another means of raising revenue, important as a political issue because it appealed to the newly enfranchised 'have-nots.'" And as such, it was repeatedly compromised by political expediency.

But Henry George's ideas did provide a catalyst for socialism's development in British politics. Pioneer socialists including the Webbs and George Bernard Shaw acknowledged their debt for insights into the effects of landlordism to the author of *Progress and Poverty*, though each rejected his remedy. Henry George taught the Fabians to propagate their new ideas through political action. Lawrence holds that he inspired them to believe that their hoped-for social revolution could "be accomplished by a political method, applicable by a majority of voters, and capable of being drafted as an Act of Parliament by any competent lawyer." British socialists eventually were alienated from George when he rejected out-and-out socialism in favor, as they saw it, of merely tinkering with his palliative for social injustice, but his views on the land issue and his ability to put the case in human terms continued to give him common ground with socialists and reformers of related persuasions.²

Moreover, political evolution intensified Henry George's influence. The Labour Party regarded a tax on land values as a form of land nationalization, an article of the party's credo. Taxation of land values was as antithetical at first to a majority of the Liberals' thinking, however, as it was to Conservatives—until Joseph Chamberlain, a land reformer by conviction, emerged as spokesman for the Radical faction of the Liberal Party. Chamberlain made it evident that his objectives and Great Britain's interests in land and

social reforms were virtually identical with Henry George's, and by the eve of Chamberlain's defection over home rule for Ireland, the definitions for "Chamberlain," "Radicals," and "Henry George" had become virtually synonymous in the popular mind. Before he retired, Chamberlain convinced the Radicals of the truth of Henry George's theory of the unearned increment, and of the wisdom of imposing a land-values tax of four shillings in the pound.

During the years from 1889 to 1906, when the Tories were in ascendancy and Irish home rule and the Boer War overwhelmed social issues, the burden of promoting a tax on land values was borne by individual single-taxers and the English and Scottish Land Restoration Leagues. In June 1902 the Scottish Committee's monthly paper, *Land Values*, explained its backers' purpose: "We have pleaded and argued as politicians, not for 20 shillings in the pound, but for a beginning, for the taxation of land values, and that is how the question is coming along." What this influential journal wanted was the single tax introduced on the installment plan. The Radicals had little chance to apply the principles of Henry George and Joseph Chamberlain at the parliamentary level, however, and so the popular movement entered into practical politics through the swelling agitation among municipalities for local taxation of land values. The initiative provided by the Glasgow City Council in 1889 and 1895, and sustained by the London County Council almost from its creation in 1889, to petition Parliament in favor of a local land tax had, by 1906, enlisted the support of no fewer than 518 local authorities. When the Liberals came to power in 1906, under the leadership of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, enactment of a land-tax bill was expected almost as a matter of course.

To underwrite that expectation, the United Com-

mittee for the Taxation of Land Values was inaugurated at a meeting held on March 23, 1907. Composed of the English and Scottish leagues and the Irish Society for the Taxation of Land Values, the United Committee took over control of *Land Values*, the movement's monthly organ, and began issuing special publications and sponsoring public conferences and demonstrations in favor of the policy it was created to promote.

Though he was involved with the development of land colonies and small holdings in England at this time, as well as with the Fairhope Single Tax Colony in Alabama, vacant-lands cultivation projects on both sides of the Atlantic, women's suffrage, educational reforms—and plans for a Zionist haven to be founded on single-tax principles—it was in 1907 that Fels interested himself in the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values.

He disagreed with any retributive taxation based simply upon ability to pay, as he elucidated in a letter, published November 6, 1907 in the *London Tribune*:

In my opinion it is not at all necessary to shift the burden to the shoulders of those best able to bear it, but to place it where the burden (if such it can be called) belongs—namely, the land and all special privileges resulting from the possession of the land. "Whenever there is in any country uncultivated lands and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural right," [he further explained, quoting Jefferson's letter to Madison of October 28, 1786] The earth is given as a common stock for man to labour and live on. If, for the encouragement of industry we allow it to be appropriated, we must take care that other employment be provided to those excluded from the appropriation. If we do not the fundamental right to labour the earth returns to the unemployed."³

Besides the United Committee, a number of separate leagues for taxing land won his approval, and he was soon giving them money and endeavoring to enlarge their influence through the press, by mass meetings and demonstrations, and by the distribution of literature. His involvement grew to major proportions when Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George included proposals for land valuation and taxes in his budget of 1909, and on April 17, 1909, at Newcastle-on-Tyne, at a conference staged by the United Committee, Fels addressed the conferees along with Peter Burt of Glasgow, Arthur Henderson, M.P., and R. L. Outhwaite, a future M.P.

The Liberals sought a tax on land values for Scotland first, on the assumption that when it became law they would follow with an overall measure for England and Wales. Twice the House of Commons, in 1907 and 1908, had passed a Land Values Taxation (Scotland) Bill—the “Glasgow Bill” as it was popularly known, and twice the House of Lords had rebuffed it. A taunt by Winston Churchill stiffened the peers’ resistance, because it forecast the ultimate question along class divisions. “The House of Lords had by its veto in the past,” Churchill declaimed, “been able to arrest or delay many valuable reforms, but the reform of the land laws of this country, wisely, bravely, determinedly guided, would forever destroy the veto power of the House of Lords.”

It was obvious to Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith, who had inherited a financial deficit of mounting proportions from Campbell-Bannerman, that other steps would have to be taken. His new tactic was to promote the taxing of land through a finance bill, which, in recent tradition, the upper house dared not veto. The result was Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George’s Budget of 1909.

Universally known as the “People’s Budget,” Lloyd

George's measure rocked the country with its challenge to the landed interests, touching off, in Prime Minister Asquith's words, "a ringing debate between wealth and poverty." Thus, a matter of taxes was elevated into an explosive issue of the "haves" against the "have-nots," becoming defined indelibly as a contest of the "Peers *vs.* the People."

Fels had offered £5,000 or more to the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values as early as October 1908—if a matching sum were raised to duplicate his gift—and he increased his offer to £10,000 a year in 1909 and 1910, once again providing that equal amounts must be subscribed by others. "It is owing to this magnificent and generous support, more perhaps than to anything else," declared John Orr, the United Committee's press agent in February 1910, "that the movement has made such great progress in Great Britain and in the world during the past year."

In the House of Commons, the epithets "unfair," "ludicrous," "unjust," "monstrous," "preposterous," and "impossible" were hurled by the Conservatives against Lloyd George's determination to tax land values, with Captain Ernest G. Pretyman, M.P., leading the outcry. Pretyman and his fellow Tories were also denouncing Fels' demands for a tax of six pence in the pound in land values, together with his widely circulated intention to subscribe thousands of pounds to promote this goal. Their stated objection was that Mr. Fels was not even a British subject; he was an American.⁴

Fels of course by this time felt as much at home in England as he did in the United States. He was dividing his time between the two countries, as he told Booker T. Washington, because he was "greatly interested in the land question on both sides of the Atlantic." In fact, Robert Pollok, a Scottish builder and property

agent, had approached George Lansbury in December 1907 to ascertain if Fels would be willing to stand for the House of Commons. He wanted Fels to contest one of Glasgow's divisions, "about the surest seat in Great Britain," he said, where "all the spade work has been done."

"Thank Mr. Pollok for me," Fels replied to Lansbury, "but I still am American and can't do the M. P. trick." It was regrettable. He felt qualified on at least one score: "The average Englishman is pretty stubborn, as you know," he wrote to one of them who had emigrated to Fairhope, "and sometimes tries to push through his own way of viewing things, to the detriment of the other chap, though he may have the very best intentions. One has to watch oneself in these matters. I have frequently to pull myself together in the same way, as I have become more and more an Englishman."⁵

Perhaps there were other reasons for his declining the opportunity to enter politics as a contestant for office. For one thing, he distrusted all political parties and politicians, although he was willing to support their goals whenever he could. He was searching for the *one* measure which would accomplish his philanthropic aim, to alleviate the condition of the common man, and politicians had to resort to compromise. Consciously or unconsciously, perhaps, he was seeking to duplicate his discovery and promotion of Fels-Naptha Soap, which at one stroke had assured his business success. "I am beginning to get a good deal of single-tax literature into the Labour and Socialist papers on this side," he had exulted in a letter from London to his friend, Gaston, at Fairhope, Alabama, in May 1908,

in which work I am a good deal opposed by the straight-coated Land Values people, who uphold the Liberal

party. The Liberal promises are about like the Tory promises however, and neither the one party nor the other believes in doing anything until it is forced.

For another thing, he would have to cooperate closely with Britain's socialists if he entered politics directly, and he distrusted their ideology. He inevitably came into conflict with the socialists around him, because he would not leave them alone. He did, however, maintain friendly relationships with them, as his wife related in a letter to Anna Barnes:

The room where he [H. G. Wells] spoke was packed, and Joe and I having stopped to assure ourselves that Keir Hardie was better (he has been ill enough to make us uneasy for several days) were late at the meeting. But, as we stood still in the middle of the hall, Mr. Wells came down to us and said, "I have a beautiful big arm-chair up there for you, Mrs. Fels," and so I sat beside him with Mrs. Wells and with G. B. S. [Shaw] just in front of us, facing us and others of the Fabian elect close about us. Shaw played his usual Mephistophelian part. He was there, interested as Mr. Wells in the dissemination of socialistic idea and feeling, and yet he spoke words calculated to undermine whatever impression Mr. Wells had produced. The wisest, as it seemed to me, and most constructive after-speech was that of Mrs. Webb. While she spoke I found myself stirred by her and my heart warming toward her as never before.

The differences between Fels and Britain's olympian theoreticians of proletarianism reached a climax when Fels wholeheartedly endorsed the taxation of land values. This dispute between Georgism and Fabianism resembled, in its frequently expressed good humor and personal regard, earlier socialistic repudiations of the single tax. Keir Hardie and George Lansbury unflag-

ingly admired Fels and his purposes, Sidney Webb, H. G. Wells, and Peter Kropotkin were affable toward him, repeatedly hospitable, and generous in sentiment, and George Bernard Shaw (whom Fels had described to his wife as "a chameleon kind of fellow") took him seriously enough to disagree at length with him. Shaw did this in such a magnificently mocking letter that Fels was soon asking his permission to print and broadcast it with his own refutation. Here is the text of Shaw's disagreement:

I was much shocked that evening when [Sidney] Webb told me that it was you who had called out at the end of the meeting. I thought it was one of the profane.

It would never do for me to take the chair at your meeting. I am violently opposed to the notion that the social question is now a land question, except in the sense that every question is a land question. I have always wanted to have Voltaire's *Homme aux Quarante Écus* [1768], the tract in which he smashed up old Mirabeau's single-tax panacea (*l'impôt unique*), translated & reprinted as a Fabian tract. We had trouble enough in the old days to get rid of Henry George's impossible distinction between land & capital, between industry & agriculture, without reviving it again. All attempts to distinguish between income derived from rent of land & interest on capital are futile. All notions that you can solve the social problem for men by giving every one of them access to land are as impossible as giving them all access to a city office or an electrical workshop. Until you organize men's industry for them in their own interests and attack unearned incomes as such, regardless of their source (thereby getting such a mass of capital into the hands of the State that it *must* be used immediately *as* capital for the support of those thrown out of parasitic private employment), you will not achieve the purposes of socialism.

Webb's remedy is a remedy for *unemployment*, and it incidentally lays the foundation of the machinery of socialism. I know of no trick that you can play with the land outside his scheme that will be of any use except to make small masters, or large ones, out of monsters with a depraved taste for the revolting pursuit of agriculture, against which Nature herself protests by immediately striking down with fever the man who first strikes pick or spade into her virgin bosom. How you, who have prospered by the blessed & beneficent work of making men's clothes clean (men with clean clothes need no washing—would that Mahomet had understood this instead of preaching ablutions!), how you, I say, can deliberately set to work to make their clothes dirty, as agriculture alone can do, passes my understanding. But it is always the same: the lunacy of country life always attacks the manufacturer first.

This admixture of reason, bombast, opinion, and jocularity was received by Fels in 1909 in response to his request to Shaw to chair a meeting in support of the taxation of land values. Shaw, writing from North Africa, concluded with this paragraph: "Algiers in spring is not the place for economic treatises, and I write at random in great haste, as I am packing for my departure to Tunis via Biskra. But I have said enough to show you that I am not the man for the chair at your meeting. If you want more, come out & let us argue it to a finish in the desert." Undismayed, Fels plunged ahead with his outspoken support of Lloyd George's "People's Budget."⁶

Chancellor of the Exchequer Lloyd George had been confronted in 1908 by an anticipated deficit of about £14 million, owing to the additional income needed to pay for recently enacted old-age pensions and labor exchanges, the projected national insurance, and con-

struction of warships in the spiraling naval race with Germany. Beyond this need for new revenues, the party of Asquith and Lloyd George had determined to force a showdown with the House of Lords, which for two years past had thwarted the chief measures of Liberal policy—education, temperance, land reform, Welsh disestablishment, and Irish home rule. The introduction of a tax on land and a system of land valuation were the means they devised to effect a measure of land reform and rescue the Liberals, who had a heavy majority in the House of Commons, from the obstructionism of Britain's Tory-dominated peers. It was a popular approach, moreover, to obtain the required funds from the group comprised of those most able to pay—the landlords. The Liberals would have a major triumph if the upper house accepted his budget with its tax on land, while rejection of the budget would be so serious a breach of constitutional practice that the Liberals would be able to command support to reform the House of Lords, in which case taxation of land could be readily enacted.

Lloyd George intended first to have all land in Great Britain assessed, as separate and distinct from improvements upon it including buildings or structures of whatever character. He would provide thereupon for a tax of a half-penny in the pound on the land values so determined (the equivalent in American terms of about one cent in five dollars at rates of exchange then operating). His third approach to the land question was in a budgetary sense the most patently Georgist. It provided for a 20 per cent tax on the "unearned increment," a duty applicable to increases proved to have arisen in the value of undeveloped lands and calculated on the price of land whenever it was sold or transferred after April 1909.

The land valuation proposal aroused the fears and passions of the landed interests more than the taxation measures, since land valuation was the blade of the entering wedge, as all parties understood. As Fels told members of Chicago's City Club when the deeper implications of Britain's domestic contest were beginning to be grasped in the United States,

The valuation is what those interested in getting this land tax want. When the people of Great Britain come to know that which they have not known for over two hundred years—namely, what their land is worth—they will begin to feel that they should hang a few of the land thieves and run the balance of them out of the country. The way to run a thief of this sort out of the country is to tax him out of it.

Fels fought the fight for the budget as veritably "a human steam engine," in the view of one acquaintance. Only five weeks after the struggle commenced, he was writing about it to Gaston at Fairhope:

I've been so crazy busy over this Budget Bill for Taxⁿ of Land Values that about everything else was knocked out of my head. If the Lords don't throw out the whole of the Budget Bill (which would mean something pretty serious), I've done the big thing of my life so far.

"I'm really beginning to do something, to help along, to push on the right lines, and think I may, after all, leave the world some better for having lived in it," he wrote to Earl and Anna Barnes.

This is a consolation much prized by me, and will put off the pangs of old age a bit. At last I've learned how to use money to advantage, and the lesson I've mastered

is a most simple one—to put *myself* into the spending of the money and use the new power this use of myself develops as fast as it develops. I'm 20 years younger in the power to think straight in my line. Too bad the 20 years are not actual ones.

“I've become quite a press writer these days, or rather signer,” he continued, “for I get lots of good folks to write things for the papers, which the public seems willing to read and digest provided I sign 'em. This adds to my fame, and swells my opinion of the fellows who do the real work.”

In a letter of June 19, 1909, to Dan Kiefer, he wrote:

This morning I had breakfast with Lloyd George for the purpose of talking over the fact that about 40 members of Parliament on the Liberal side are kicking against the land values part of the Budget. I am to see him again in a few days, and there will no doubt be a big association formed for the purpose of agitating the land question all over England, which will not only be joined in by the Government party but by all radical reform associations outside including the Labour people and socialists.

His excitement was part of England's awakening to the land question. Meetings everywhere were singing “The Land Song” (a song which the Henry George movement had originated) to the tune of “Marching through Georgia”:

The Land! the Land; 'twas God who gave the Land!
The Land! the Land! the ground on which we stand!
Why should we be beggars, with the ballot in our hand?
‘God gave the Land to the People!’^s

While Parliament debated Lloyd George's bill, Fels

drove himself unstintingly to promote the cause of land valuation and taxation. His most effective appeals were directed to businessmen:

So far from inflicting any burden on enterprise or industry, a rate or tax on the value of land would afford them stimulus and encouragement. Production of raw materials, which, after all, is an essential preliminary of manufactures and commerce requires the use of land in sufficient quantity and on fair terms. This is denied to it by our present system of land tenure. Even a moderate rate or tax on the value of land, whether used or idle, would incline the owners to meet the offers of those who desire to develop it. In this way such a tax would benefit the landowners themselves, and by increasing production would contribute to the prosperity of all classes in the country.

The House of Commons passed the Budget Bill in November with a safe majority. Then it went to the House of Lords, where more than three-fourths of the peers voted to defeat it. Asquith promptly asked King Edward to dissolve Parliament on the grounds of a breach of the constitution.

On December 18 Fels sailed for the United States aboard the *Lusitania*. "I am looking forward to a general election here in January. . . . England will never be the same old England as far as land monopoly is concerned," he wrote to Gaston before sailing.

"There is a tremendous fight on now between Lords and Commons here, but I think the Liberals will be returned again (maybe with a smaller majority) at the coming election," he advised Earl Barnes. "I'm cocked and primed to make speeches right along and whenever people won't throw eggs. There are eggs & eggs," he added in a note written aboard ship.

"The prophecy is that 324 Liberals, 49 Labour and socialists, 83 Irish, and 214 Conservatives (Tories) will gain seats in the English Parliament," he wrote to Gaston upon arriving in Philadelphia. "We'll see how this pans out. The Labour & Irish votes strengthen the Liberals on our question," he concluded—erroneously, as it turned out.⁹

The general election in January 1910 weakened the Liberals' hold on the House of Commons. They returned to power with only a slender margin over the Tories, their radical trend having cost them many independent voters. The Liberals were dependent now upon support from the Labour members and the Irish Nationalists, which would be granted only if they introduced measures wanted by these minorities.

"If we were inclined to hang closely to any political party, we should be disappointed with the results. . . ," John Orr of the United Committee wrote at once to Fels. "The victory has not been decisive enough to put down the Lords. The Liberal campaign has steadily and rapidly weakened. . . , and as soon as expedient we shall have to come out on our own critical lines."

John Paul, editor of *Land Values*, was more reconciled once the picture clarified itself:

Well we have not got the overwhelming majority of 1906, but we were over sanguine—if we ever really expected such a victory. As it is we have done handsomely, coming out with a Liberal and Labour majority over the Tariff Reformers [protectionists] of 64 for the United Kingdom, and including Ireland a majority of 124. This should bring the Liberal, Labour, and Irish Nationalists into better agreement, and make them line up together for the Budget, the Lords Veto, and a sweeping measure of electoral reform. . . The land clauses of the Budget are more than justified by the election results. Where

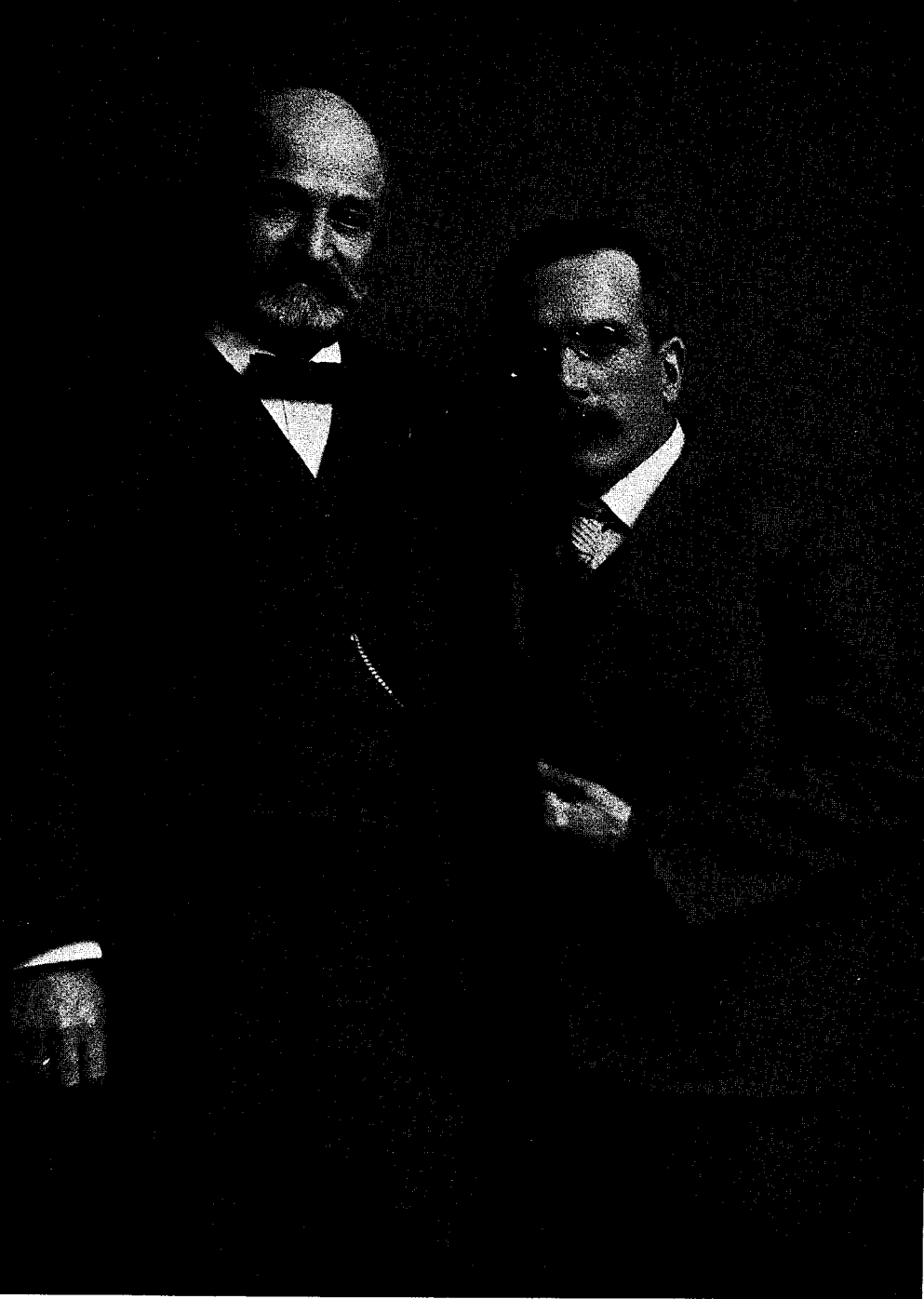
the land clauses were to apply, the Government won, and where their application was denied the Government lost. . . . We had a good place in the fight here in London, and in many places throughout the country our literature was well circulated. It was by far and away the best effort of the kind we have ever made, thanks to your financial backing.

Even George Lansbury lost his parliamentary seat in the first election of 1910. "You haven't heard from me for the reason I wrote Walt [Coates]," Fels said in a letter to Lansbury from Philadelphia,

that of heartsickness for you and your disappointment at the election results. I am sure you will believe me when I say I never spent money more gladly than to help you. That you didn't win was only an incident of the war. All wars have victories and losses. This has only been a setback not a defeat, so I view it. You're welcome to my help and my sympathy in loss. It takes a good loser to finally win. I haven't a regret beyond what I tell you.

At the same time Fels was being quoted as having told a meeting earlier in one of the committee rooms of the House of Commons that "The taxation of land values in this world is the way to heaven in the next."¹⁰

When the fight resumed, the Irish Nationalists, led by John Redmond, insisted that a Parliament Bill to muzzle the Lords should get priority over the budget, in order to expedite home rule. Redmond compromised only when Asquith agreed to press for both measures at the same time. The Parliament Bill was first read in Commons on April 14, 1910, and the budget was reintroduced on April 20. The budget passed without a division in the House of Lords on April 28, the peers of



Joseph Fels and John Paul, the editor of *Land Values*, about 1911

the realm yielding to the outcry against their obstinacy, and the Royal Assent was given the next day. Tempers were running high, nevertheless, as vituperative attacks by Captain Pretyman and his cohorts against Joseph Fels demonstrated. When Edward VII died unexpectedly on May 6, the Parliament Bill ran into a snag in the House of Commons. The Liberals were to blame for the sovereign's death, it was charged, inasmuch as they were desecrating property and the throne, threatening religion, and disrupting the empire. Crowds hissed the Prime Minister and members of his Cabinet in the streets.

Fels had sailed with Mary for England from New York on March 23, plagued by Fairhope's turmoil and the old disputes between his brother and himself at Fels and Company, but at the same time with his spirits lifting because Tom L. Johnson, Cleveland's traction magnate, single-taxer, and ex-Mayor, went with them. Johnson, who had been defeated in his try for a fourth term the preceding November, was looking forward to a banquet to be staged for him and Fels by the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values. Shortly after the banquet Fels set off for the Continent, to France, Germany, and Denmark, to preach the gospel of the single tax.¹¹

Before 1890, one or more of Henry George's books had been translated into German, French, Italian, Swedish, Danish, Dutch, and Norwegian, with George himself corresponding with most of his translators. In Germany an older movement for land reform had reached a climax on July 4, 1886, with the establishment of the *Land Liga* and its acceptance of Henry George as its master. In Norway, the future speaker of the *Storting*

(parliament), Viggo Ullmann, a brilliant orator and emerging political leader even then, translated *Progress and Poverty*, and proclaimed its message throughout Norway, while Arne Carborg launched a Norwegian reform movement based upon Henry George's ideas.

But on the Continent it was Germany that had gone farther in Georgist directions than any other nation. Prussia gave the power to tax land values to its municipalities, and most of the other states followed. Three systems prevailed, more or less concurrently: a tax on capital values including improvements; a tax on sales; and a tax rising as high as one-third of unearned increments during possession. Germany's leasehold of Kiaochow in China was governed almost entirely on modified single-tax principles, except for regulatory levies against opium and dogs, and the Minister for the Colonies intended to extend this system gradually to all of Germany's overseas possessions. Ironically, German imperialism was as much the means of introducing Georgism to China as the work of Nanking Christian Hospital's renowned American missionary and single-taxer, Dr. William E. Macklin. (Fels assisted Macklin financially to distribute George's *Protection or Free Trade?* in a translation freely adapted to Chinese thought and literature, just as Macklin's version of *Progress and Poverty* had been distributed.)

During June of 1908, Fels had written to an acquaintance traveling in Austria: "I think you will find throughout Germany the taxation of land values is coming to the front very fast, and I hope you will investigate it in whatever places you visit." Only the week before this letter, Fels himself had been in Germany on business for four days and had visited a number of open-air schools of the type he was establishing at Mayland. A year later in 1909, in a letter from Great Britain, he

informed another correspondent how his interests were expanding geographically: "I am deeply interested in helping the taxation of land values here and in many other countries (or, as it is known there, the single tax), and my whole time, as well as a great deal of my money, is being given to this one object." Upon visiting Copenhagen in June 1910, he offered £200 yearly for five years to promote Georgism in Denmark, on the condition that equal sums be raised, and he donated Henry George's works to 12 Danish libraries, as well as embroiling himself personally in the single-tax movement in Denmark, including its factional controversies.¹²

Half a century before, after having lost Norway to Sweden in 1814, the Kingdom of Denmark had lost a third of her remaining territory to Prussia in 1864, together with a million more subjects out of a total of two and one-half million, including 200,000 Danes. This second loss eliminated the Danish liberals and returned the great landowners to power, but ordinary farmers could now turn the rights they had acquired against the landlords, and between them there raged the bitter struggle about the constitution that dominated Danish politics until 1901. Simultaneously, a revolution in the country's agriculture was sparked by the loss of foreign markets for grain to Russian and North American competition, and the ordinary farmer became a husbandman concentrating on cows, pigs, and poultry for the production of butter, bacon, and eggs.

This development would not have been possible without the leadership and enlightenment afforded by the parish schools and the Folk High Schools, as inspired by the clergyman N. F. S. Grundtvig, with his romantic and pragmatic blend of individualistic technological advancement and revivalistic cultural piety. The high schools (together with the College of Agriculture in

Copenhagen), in addition to their work of improving the methods of farming, supplied the requisites for Denmark's cooperative movement, and then substantially shaped the politics of Danish life. Parliamentarianism won out against the entrenched interests in 1901. A Liberal Left party of smallholders joined by the intellectuals of Copenhagen emerged four years later to demand social reforms, land-values taxation, state copyhold for smallholders, and the reduction of national defense from levels of costly futility to a frontier and maritime police. The smallholders particularly wanted to broaden Denmark's ancient land dues into a system of comprehensive land-values taxation. They wanted access to land that had been inefficiently exploited or withheld from cultivation altogether, and they sought to enlarge the advantages to themselves of selling their agricultural products freely. Denmark's disciples of Henry George were an integral part of this peculiar national heritage. As a result, they became more influential in the long run than their ideological equivalents in the other Continental nations.¹³

Five members of the Henry George League greeted Joseph Fels and his party at Copenhagen's terminal. Foremost was Jakob E. Lange, lecturer on Botany at the Agricultural School in Dalum, a few miles from Odense on the central island of Fyn, the translator of *Progress and Poverty* into Danish and the nation's pioneer single-taxer. Mr. Folke-Rasmussen, president of the Henry George League, was present, as were Dr. phil. Villads Christensen, and Miss Ida Wennerberg representing the enigmatic invalid, Miss Brun, the movement's patroness. Also Sophus Berthelsen was there, Lange's disciple, the founder and publisher of *Ret* (Justice), of which 4,000 copies went out each month, mostly to the *husmænd* (small farmers) to tie them to Georgist thinking.

In 1910 Danish land was valued and taxed at the amount it yielded, which meant, according to the revenues collected, that the small farmers' lands must be worth nine times as much as the large estates and five times as much as substantial farms of the same quality. As Mrs. Signe Bjørner explained to John Orr, "It is very plain to the *husmand* that in taxing his land at this rate his work, the intense labor which makes every inch of his land yield its utmost, is being taxed." The small farmer grasped the injustice of this state of things, but he was too individualistic for socialism. He was, instead, eager to divert the profit to himself of labor and improvements exempted from taxation. He wanted a single tax on all land according to its unimproved value, thereby making the land of large estates, big farms, and smallholdings proportionately worth the same.

On Sunday, June 12, Joseph Fels was guest of honor at the Henry George Festival near Odense. This meeting, which took place in a little wood adjoining the buildings of the agricultural school, attracted between 400 and 500 small farmers. To this crowd Fels spoke through an interpreter about the struggle for land reform being waged all over the world, concentrating his remarks upon the significance of circumstances in Great Britain, where conditions were worse than in Denmark, he told his audience. A half-million people were walking the streets of London not knowing from day to day where the morrow's food would come from, while the nobility kept one-third of the land uncultivated for hunting and game preserves. He was an American, Fels explained, and he had no right to vote in England, but he was blessed with riches, and intended to use his wealth to eliminate conditions which permitted some to live in luxury while thousands starved. The introduction of land valuation into the Liberal Party's budget had been of the greatest importance. When the

British people realize what their land is worth, Fels predicted, they will ask, "Why aren't these values ours?" Ever since Henry George wrote his immortal works, his followers have advocated economic freedom, and it pleased him, Fels proclaimed, to see how far the Georgist movement had come in Denmark. "Here is education and a craving for education," he shouted. "Here is a majority with weapons in their hands. If they use them with intelligence, the future will be theirs. If they don't, they deserve to remain in poverty and to have bad conditions." (Cheers and applause.) Yet nowhere, Fels emphasized, could any triumph be as important as the victory close to the grasp of England's Georgists, since the influence of England was greater than that of any other country.

Returning to Copenhagen, Fels told the Henry George circle there that the distance of the Danish movement's center from the kingdom's capital city and the limitations of its propaganda were outstanding weaknesses in an otherwise thriving agitation. "I regard this as absolutely unfavorable," he stated, declaring that given the proper circumstances, victory could be won in Denmark within five years, owing to the advanced enlightenment of the population. Toward that prospect he himself proposed to contribute 500 British pounds sterling to establish a secretariat in Copenhagen providing "a useful information bureau for our great cause for the whole of this country."

"But you should do as we have done in England with great success," he directed his Danish friends.

Assemble all who are active within the movement for committee-meetings in the capital, say every month, partly to report what has been going on in the different circles all over the country, partly to make plans for the further work for our cause. It will pay.

And you should not neglect the politicians, but supply them with valuable information. The best thing to do would be to get some representatives of the movement elected to Parliament. Even if they would be few in numbers, it will be of the greatest importance when they plead our cause with strength and stability. In England we started with very few, but now the truth by its own power has won the majority. And at our last election we also concentrated our propaganda on the constituencies where our adversaries stood. We succeeded more than once in upsetting them, and in putting in a good man in their place. Do the same here!¹⁴

Having delivered his exhortation to the Danes, Fels returned to his home in England.

Back in London, in his capacity as Honourable Secretary of the Vacant Land Cultivation Society, Fels submitted the Society's annual report in the Guildhall, London, on July 13, 1910 (a display of vegetables decorating the great table in the center of the hall). Fels drove home two points at the meeting: the readiness with which men returned to the land even under the most unpromising conditions, and the insuperable difficulty of obtaining land in Great Britain under the prevailing sway of landlordism:

Everything would be reversed, all stiffness and difficulty, if the tenure and taxation were reversed. Whether it was in London or outside, the policy which would oblige the landowners to offer their land would change everything, and the connections between men and the land would be so rapidly and widely established that the problem would be the one of obtaining labour.

Fels never missed an opportunity to drive home the theory of the single tax and its resultant benefits. He

arranged for every voter in Great Britain to receive a packet of single-tax propaganda, some 200 million leaflets in all. He attended practically every congress of British trades unions from 1909 on to distribute leaflets to the delegates. Whenever a new journal appeared, he clamored to be allowed to explain his cause in its pages. "It mattered nothing that the purpose of the paper was different from, even on occasion antipathetic to the single tax," his wife observed. "If the purpose was different, then his article would introduce a little variety, and if it was antipathetic the editor could point out his errors in a leader."

At Antwerp in July 1910, at the urging of Tom L. Johnson, Fels stormed the International Free Trade Congress. "I have no desire whatever that those of the delegates who believe in the taxation of land values (or the single tax) should dominate the Free Trade Congress," Fels assured John de Witt Warner, from whom he requested American Free Trade League credentials. "We simply want to be heard on our subject, as we were not given that opportunity at the Congress in London about 3 years ago." Fels took about 25 British Georgists to Antwerp ready to support proposals for free trade far exceeding those of most of its professed adherents, but the chairman and organizers of the Congress rebuffed Fels' insistence that free trade could prevail only under the single tax. When procedural objections were raised against him, Fels seized the opportunity presented by tributes to Richard Cobden. His appreciation of Cobden was unsurpassed, but he coupled to it a eulogy to Henry George as the man who had fulfilled Cobden's postulates. "I later went on to Bremen," he wrote to Earl Barnes, "to help Israel Zangwill in his Jewish emigration schemes. Zangwill is the big Jew of the world to my way of thinking."¹⁵

Again Fels intruded himself, this time at the International Congress on Unemployment held in Paris, September 18-21, 1910. He appeared by special invitation as a private person not representing any delegation, but managed to speak at length in all three sections of the gathering, the statistics of unemployment, labor exchanges, and unemployment insurance—"not without objection from part of the audience, who were impatient at hearing translations of my addresses," he reported drily. "Of course you will know what I had to say on these things," he wrote to a friend.

I take it we cannot do better, wherever possible, than by attending all such conferences and showing those assembled the utter futility of palliative measures, and the absolute necessity of attacking unemployment at its base. I do not think I ever before felt more bitter against a set of well-dressed and well-fed people who did not know what they were talking about, and I imparted as much bitterness to what I said as I know how.

A few days later in Manchester, Fels was at a conference for advocates of the taxation of land values. It opened at the Town Hall with a rousing address by the Lord Advocate, the Rt. Hon. Alexander Ure, M.P., "the lion of the North," and on Sunday, October 21, Fels was among the speakers at the great demonstration in Alexandra Park.

In a letter to Wisconsin's Senator La Follette, Fels conveyed the fruits of his new experiences:

I have lately been in Denmark & Germany looking into the taxation of land values' matters in those countries. The Germans are pretty complicated in their methods of getting at reforms. If there are 20 ways of doing a thing, the learned German selects the most difficult. Denmark

is very different, however, in that the economic philosophy of Henry George is coming through the common people and small farmers. I think Denmark is really more hopeful than England, though of course the object lesson will not be nearly so large nor as important.

To Louis Post, editor of *The Public*, he complained that the United Committee's demands for his funds were conscienceless, "almost driving me into the work-house in consequence." But then he continued:

You will be surprised to hear that I am to divide an evening in the pulpit of the City Temple on Monday evening the 17th inst. with Lloyd George. I don't know his subject, but mine will be 'Vacant-lot Cultivation,' and I will hang my story to this innocent title. . . .

I am booked to sail for that side 29th inst., and am coming to Chicago if for only a day or two in the early winter. I do want to spend a week at Fairhope too.

Instead, his and Mary's concern for young Efrem Zimbalist took them hastily to Hamburg and back to Copenhagen again. "I've postponed our sailing to Nov. 5th by *Lusitania* of Cunard Line," he scribbled to Kiefer. "Please announce to your & my friends. Sorry but the week on the Continent necessitates delay. Am about used up. . . ." ¹⁶

The fate of the House of Lords was being sealed as the Fels departed. Asquith secured an agreement from King George V to dissolve Parliament for Great Britain's second general election of 1910.

"Now that the elections over there are an assured thing," Fels wrote to Lansbury from Philadelphia, "you must win your seat. . . . See Walt [Coates] frequently. He needs you to hold him up." Three days later he

wrote, "I am praying for your success, and that of the balance of us. I think you will have a walkover."

Mary also unburdened her thoughts: "Whichever way it turns for you," she wrote to Lansbury on the eve of the polling,

well, things will remain the same for you. For you will be the same man. You will want to help, and you will go on helping with every good thing in your way. So I hope you will be glad if you win and not sorry if you fail in this particular thing. Failing will not be failure, it will simply mean *other doing*.¹⁷

The results of the December election were almost identical on the surface with the previous verdict. Liberals and Tories practically tied, the balance of power reposing again with the Irish Nationalists and Labourites. The diehard factions of suffragists and Welsh disestablishmentarians were strengthened also, if only because of the Government's precarious margin. This was the third successive victory for the Liberals, but their strength was now grievously compromised. They were at the mercy of the willful minorities in Parliament, and they were to be debilitated further by the victory still to be achieved over the House of Lords.

George Lansbury had won at any rate. He was now one of 42 Labour members, one of the very few actual working men who could write M.P. after his name. Once more the House of Commons passed the Parliament Bill to deprive the Lords of their absolute veto, yet the diehards refused to surrender. So the new king, George V, reluctantly following the precedent of 1832, agreed to create as many new peers as would be required to enact the measure in the upper house. His action settled the matter. Early in August 1911 the

Lords passed the Parliament Act with many peers abstaining. The power to legislate now lay directly in the House of Commons. The roads to various utopias at last lay open—home rule for Ireland, disestablishment of religion in Wales, votes for women, the taxation of land values.

The land-values taxation group in Parliament had drawn up a memorial soon after the 1909 Budget had won approval, in it demanding extension of the taxation of land values. The memorial urged the Government to develop its policy by making the revenues from land taxation and evaluation available for public needs, freeing industry from the burdens of monopoly and taxation, increasing domestic food production by bringing more land into cultivation and abolishing duties on food. The elections of 1910 delayed the presentation of this memorial until May 1911, 173 M.P.s having by then signed it. Lloyd George's appointment of his Enquiry Committee led the land-taxers to rejoice, since they expected the memorial's proposals would become incorporated in the final report preliminary to legislation.

There was cause for concern, since Prime Minister Asquith, speaking at Ladybank on October 5 had flatly stated:

One thing, of course, I will say, as it seems necessary to repeat what I have said already in the House of Commons, and that is that, whatever the proposals of the Government may be, they will not embrace what is called the policy of the single tax—which, to my knowledge, has not a single supporter in the present Cabinet—and which, in my opinion, and, I believe, in the unanimous opinion of my colleagues also, by singling out for the purpose of bearing the whole burden of taxation the land to the exclusion and relief of all other

forms of property, is consistent neither with justice nor with expediency.

But Asquith's repudiation of the single tax failed to mention the real issue: the taxation of land values, on which his own record was consistently in favor. As a result the belief that Lloyd George's land program would implement the proposals of the memorial of 1911 persisted.¹⁸

But before pursuing Joseph Fels further in this connection, we should turn to his involvement with another cause—or, at least another aspect of *the* cause—his involvement with Zionism.