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GERRIT SMITH A FORERUNNER OF HENRY GEORGE.*

• This editorial, contributed by William Lloyd Garrison, was written at Boston on the seventieth anniversary (October 21, 1905) of the historical assault upon Mr. Garrison's distinguished father by a proslavery Boston mob.

A generation ago the name of Gerrit Smith, of Peterboro, N. Y., was widely known throughout the country, especially in anti-slavery, temperance, and other philanthropic circles. In the exciting days of John Brown and Harper's Ferry he unjustly suffered proslavery opprobrium for alleged complicity in the plan attempted.

Gerrit Smith inherited large landed possessions to which, later, he added extensively, becoming the owner of a princely domain. His father, Peter Smith, of Holland descent, was a partner of John Jacob Astor in his youthful days of enterprise and adventure, when the great fur trade that enriched both partners was in process of establishment.

Each had a keen instinct for land investments, Astor more shrewdly placing his in the heart of New York City, while Smith acquired vast areas in the center of the State. Beginning with sixty thousand acres at \$3.53½, from the Oneida Reservation, the latter subsequently bought lands sold for taxes, and, in the single county of Oneida, paid the State \$3 per acre for 80,000 acres. He was reputed to own nearer a million than a half million of acres, his property being measured by square miles.

Inheriting his father's business aptitude, Gerrit Smith also became an immense purchaser and dealer in unoccupied lands, buying 18,000 acres in the town of Florence when scarcely more than 21 years old, an investment of \$14,000, which, in a few years, reached a valuation of half a million.

The singular part of the story, as his biographer says, was the fact that his power of wealth "was his help, not his ruin; that it was his opportunity, and not his temptation; that it furnished a solid base for his intellectual and moral operations, not a grave in which his manhood was buried; that he could wear the purple and still be a king." There is hardly anything stranger in fiction than this plutocratic land-monopolist arriving at the same conclusions regarding the wrongfulness of land monopoly as those later enunciated by the needy San Francisco printer, Henry George, in "Progress and Poverty."

The conviction which forced itself on Gerrit Smith soon took action in lavish gifts of land to landless people. He evidently questioned the justice of keeping what he had not earned and could not improve. In 1846 he wrote: "I am an Agrarian.—I would no man were so regardless of the needs and desires of his brother men, as to covet the possession of more farms than one." To the colored men of New York

State he made out 3,000 deeds, conveying land of 40 to 60 acres each, placing the selection of beneficiaries in the hands of a committee of well-known citizens. In 1849, he selected a thousand persons living in 58 different counties, to receive gifts of land, \$10 in money accompanying each deed. "Nor shall I be blamed for distributing the thousand parcels among white persons exclusively," he wrote, "by any who are informed that 3,000 colored persons have received deeds of land from me, entirely free of all charge either for the land, or for the expense of the perfected deeds thereof."

In January, 1850, he proposed to make similar gifts to 500 males and 500 females. Subsequently concluding that money would be better for women than land, he bestowed \$50 on each woman, sufficient to purchase 40 acres of government land. In his letter to the committee accepting the labor of selection, he said: "I need not say how deeply I feel that every person needs to be admitted owner of a parcel of land. This every person should be, without having to pay for it." At this date, Henry George was approaching his eleventh year.

It detracts nothing from the generous intention of the giver of this bounty that it disappointed expectation and proved a practical failure. Charity was never yet a solvent for injustice. Owing partly to the unfertile conditions of many of the allotments, but more to lack of skill and industry on the part of the recipients, the lands eventually passed into abler hands, were absorbed by debt, or acquired by speculators.

It seems strange that Gerrit Smith whose clear sight led him to protest against gifts of land from the public domain "to soldiers, railroad and canal companies," because the soil would soon become the property of land speculators, should not have seen that the same destiny attached to his private benefactions. In his later support of the Homestead bill, when in Congress, he expressed his illogical faith that individual allotments to actual settlers by the general government would ensure permanency.

In 1852, to his great surprise, Gerrit Smith was elected to Congress as an independent. In a letter to the voters who supported him he stated his political creed, enumerating its peculiarities in seven articles. Two of these are as follows: Article 2 affirms "That the right of the soil is as natural and equal as the right to the light and air." Article 4 declares "That the doctrine of free trade is the necessary outgrowth of the doctrine of human brotherhood; and that to impose restrictions on commerce is to build up unnatural and sinful barriers across that brotherhood."

It is evident that the writer did not suspect the close relation of the articles, as he interposed one on political rights between them. But he followed the proper sequence, the natural right of access to the source of production properly preceding the assertion of the natural right freely to exchange the resulting

products of labor.

The discussion of the Home stead bill in the House of Representatives, February 21, 1854, gave Gerrit Smith his opportunity for expression on the land question. The resolutions offered by him and the substance of his speech, which it is the purpose of this preliminary explanation to introduce, are to follow.* Like all men wiser than their time, he met with the impatient hostility of his hearers.

•See "Gerrit Smith on the Homestead Bill" In this week's Miscellany department of The Public.

Herbert Spencer's "Social Statics," containing the famous and subsequently expurgated ninth chapter on "The Right to the Use of the Earth;" was published in England in 1850. It received no attention in that country until a notice of it appeared in the "British Quarterly Review," in 1876, although it was reprinted in America by Appleton & Company in 1864. In 1850, also, Patrick Edward Dove published anonymously a book on "The Theory of Human Progression and Natural Probability of the Reign of Justice," asserting therein the fundamental postulates of the single tax philosophy.

There is no evidence or probability that Gerrit Smith had even heard of these publications at the date of his speech on the Homestead bill. The coincidence indicates that consciousness of the injustice of land monopoly, traceable throughout history in the expressions of ethical thought, was fast ripening for practical and political application. It was soon to find its consummate flower in "Progress and Poverty."

Independent investigators are often unconsciously abreast in search of a pressing truth or a scientific development. Contemporaneous announcements of discoveries like those of Darwin and Wallace on evolution, and of Edison and Swan regarding the incandescent electric lamp, mark the fruition of long years of obscure labor and thought by unknown pioneers of human progress.

As a matter of historical interest it seems worth while to preserve such records as they come to light. If the enduring fame which is the prize of him who, arriving at a psychological moment, incarnates and typifies an epoch, the memory of unrecognized workers in the field, who saw the vision and toiled in faith for its realization, should be honored and preserved.

It is noteworthy, indicating the natural kinship of the anti slavery and single tax movements, that the editor of the "Liberator," in the issue of March 8, 1854, thus characterized Gerrit Smith's address: "Mr. Smith has just delivered a radical and able speech in the House, on the distribution of public lands." Of course, the immediate and concrete question of Negro emancipation obscured the question of land monopoly, and Henry George himself declared that without the abolition of slavery the progress of land emancipation was barred.

WM. LLOYD GARRISON.

GERRIT SMITH ON THE HOMESTEAD BILL.

Extracts from the Speech of Gerrit Smith on the Homestead Bill, delivered in Congress February 21, 1854. See editorial article by William Lloyd Garrison in this issue of *The Public*.

RESOLUTIONS BEFORE THE HOUSE.

Whereas, all the members of the human family, notwithstanding all contrary enactments and arrangements, have, at all times, and In all circumstances, as equal a right to the soil as to the light and air. because as equal a natural need of the one as of the other:

And whereas, this invariably equal right to the soil leaves no room to buy or sell, or give it away; Therefore,

1. Resolved, That no bill or proposition should find any favor with Congress which implies the right of Congress to dispose of the public lands, or any part of them, either by sale or gift.
2. Resolved, That the duty of civil government in regard to public lands, and, indeed, to all lands, is but to regulate the occupation of them; and that this regulation should ever proceed upon the principle that the right of all persons to the Soil—to the great source of human subsistence—is as equal, as inherent, and as sacred, as the right to life itself.
3. Resolved, That government will have done but little toward securing the equal right to land, until it shall have made essential to the validity of every claim to land both the fact that It Is actually possessed, and the fact that it does not exceed in quantity the maximum, which it is the duty of government to prescribe.
4. Resolved, That it is not because land monopoly is the most efficient cause of inordinate and tyrannical riches on the one hand, and of dependent and abject poverty on the other; and that it is not because it is, therefore, the most efficient cause of that inequality of condition, so well-nigh fatal to the spread of Democracy and Christianity, that government is called upon to abolish it; but it is because the right, which this mighty agent of evil violates and tramples under foot, is among those clear, certain, essential, natural rights which it is the province of government to protect, at all hazards, and irrespective of all consequences.

SPEECH OF GERRIT SMITH.

I am in favor of the bill because I am in favor of what I interpret the bill

essentially to be—let others interpret it as they will. This bill, as I view it, is an acknowledgment that the public lands belong, not to the government, but to the landless.

And now to my argument, and to my endeavor to show that land monopoly is wrong, and that civil government should neither practice nor permit it; and that the duty of Congress is to yield up all the public land to actual settlers.

I admit that there are things in which a man can have absolute property, and which without qualification or restriction he can buy, or sell, or bequeath, at his pleasure. But I deny that the soil is among these things. What a man produces from the soil he has an absolute right to. He may abuse the right. It nevertheless remains. But no such right can he have in the soil itself. If he could he might monopolize it. If very rich he might purchase a township or a county; and in connection with half a dozen other monopolists, he might come to obtain all the lands of a state or a nation. Their occupants might be compelled to leave them and to starve, and the lands might be converted into parks and hunting grounds for the enjoyment of the aristocracy. Moreover, if this could be done in the case of a state or a nation, why could it not be done in the case of the whole earth? But it may be said that a man might monopolize the fruits of the soil, and thus become as injurious to his fellow men as by monopolizing the soil itself. It is true that he might in this wise produce a scarcity of food. But the calamity would be for a few months only, and it would serve to stimulate the sufferers to guard against its recurrence by a more faithful tillage, and by more caution in parting with their crops. Having the soil still in their hands, they would have the remedy still in their hands. But had they suffered the soil itself to be monopolized, had they suffered the soil itself, instead of the fruits of it, to pass out of their hands, then they would be without remedy. Then they would lie at the mercy of him who has it in his power to dictate the terms on which they may again have access to the soil, or who, in his heartless perverseness, might refuse its occupation on any terms whatever.

What I have here supposed in my argument is abundantly—alas! but too abundantly—justified by facts. Land monopoly has reduced no small share of the human family to abject and wretched dependence, for it has shut them out from the great source of subsistence, and frightfully increased the precariousness of life. Unhappy Ireland illustrates the great power of land monopoly for evil. The right to so much as a standing place on the earth is denied to the great mass of her people. Their great impartial Father has placed them on the earth, and in placing them on it has irresistibly implied their right to live of it. Nevertheless, land monopoly tells them that they are trespassers, and treats them as trespassers. Even when most indulgent, land monopoly allows them nothing better than to pick up the crumbs of the barest existence; and, when, in his most rigorous moods, the monster compels them to starve and die by millions. Ireland—poor, land-monopoly-cursed and famine-wasted Ireland—has still a population of some 6,000,000; and yet it is only 6,000 persons who have monopolized her soil. Scotland has some 3,000,000 of people, and 3,000 is the number of the

monopolists of her soil. England and Wales contain some 18,000,000 of people, and the total number of those who claim exclusive right to the soil of England and Wales is 30,000. I may not be rightly informed as to the numbers of the land monopolists in those countries, but whether they are twice as great, or half as great as I have given them, is quite immaterial to the essence of my argument against land monopoly. I would say in this connection that land monopoly, or the accumulation of the land in the hands of the few, has increased very rapidly in England. A couple of centuries ago there were several times as many English land holders as there are now.

I need say no more to prove that land monopoly is a very high crime, and that it is the imperative duty of Government to put a stop to it. Were the monopoly of the light and air practicable, and were the monopolists of these elements (having armed themselves with title deeds to them) to sally forth and threaten the people of one town with a vacuum in case they are unwilling or unable to buy their supply of air, and threaten the people of another town with total darkness in case they will not or cannot buy their supply of light; there confessedly would be no higher duty on Government than to put an end to such wicked and death-dealing monopolies. But these monopolies would not differ in principle from land monopoly; and they would be no more fatal to the enjoyments of human existence itself than land monopoly has proved itself capable of being. Why land monopoly has not swept the earth of all good is not because it is unadapted and inadequate to that end, but because it has been only partially carried out.

The right of a man to the soil, the light, and the air, is to so much of each of them as he needs, and no more; and for so long as he lives, and no longer. In other words, this dear mother earth with her never-falling nutritious bosom and this life-preserving air which floats around it and this sweet light which visits it, are all owned by each present generation, and are equally owned by all the members of such generation. Hence, whatever the papers or parchments regarding the soil which we may pass between ourselves, they can have no legitimate power to impair the equal right to it, either of the persons who compose this generation, or of the persons who shall compose the next.

It is a very glaring assumption on the part of one generation, to control the distribution and enjoyment of natural rights for another generation. We of the present generation have no more liberty to provide that one person of the next generation shall have ten thousand acres, and another but ten acres, than we have to provide that one person of the next generation shall live a hundred years, and another but a hundred days; and no more liberty to provide that a person of the next generation shall be destitute of land than that he shall be destitute of light or air. They who compose a generation are, so far as natural rights are concerned, absolutely entitled to a free and equal start in life; and that equality is not to be disturbed and that freedom is not to be encumbered by any arrangements of the preceding generation.

I may be asked whether I would have the present acknowledged claims to land disturbed. I answer that I would where the needs of the people demand it. In Ireland, for instance, there is the most urgent necessity for overriding such claims, and subdividing the land anew. But in our own country there is an abundance of vacant and unappropriated land for the landless to go to. We ought not, however, to presume upon this abundance to delay abolishing land monopoly. The greediness of land monopolists might in a single generation convert this abundance into scarcity. Moreover, if we do not provide now for the peaceable equal distribution of the public lands, it may be too late to provide for it hereafter. Justice, so palpable and so necessary, cannot be withheld but at the risk of being grasped violently.

It is said that all talk of land monopoly in America is impertinent and idle. It is boasted that in escaping from primogeniture and entail we have escaped from the evils of land monopoly. But the boast is unfounded. These evils already press heavily upon us, and they will press more and more heavily upon us unless the root of them is extirpated—unless land monopoly is abolished. In the old portions of the country the poor are oppressed and defrauded of an essential natural right by the accumulation of farms in the hands of wealthy families. In the new, the way of the poor, and indeed of the whole population, to comfort and prosperity is blocked up by tracts of wild land, which speculators retain for the unjust purpose of having them increase in value out of the toil expended upon the contiguous land.

And why should we flatter ourselves that land monopoly, if suffered to live among us, will not in time get laws enacted for its extension and perpetuity as effective even as primogeniture and entail? To let alone any great wrong in the hope that it will never outgrow its present limits, is very unwise—very unsafe. But land monopoly is not only a great, but a mighty wrong; and if let alone it may stretch and fortify itself until it has become invincible.

A much happier world will this be when land monopoly shall cease; when his needed portion of the soil shall be accorded to every person; when it shall no more be bought and sold; when, like salvation, it shall be "without money and without price;" when, in a word, it shall be free, even as God made it free. Then when the good time prophetically spoken of shall come, and "every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree," the world will be much happier, because, in the first place, wealth will then be so much more equally distributed, and the rich and the poor will then be so comparatively rare. Riches and poverty are both abnormal, false, unhappy states, and they will yet be declared to be sinful states. They beget each other. Over against the one is ever to be found a corresponding degree of the other. So long, then, as the masses are robbed by land monopoly, the world will be cursed with riches and poverty. But when the poor man is put in possession of his portion of the goodly green earth, and is secured by the strong arm of Government in the enjoyment of a home from which not he nor his wife nor his children can be driven, then is he raised above poverty, not only by the

possession of the soil, but still more by the virtues which he cultivates In his heart whilst he cultivates the soil. Then, too, he no longer ministers to the undue accumulation of wealth by others, as he did when advantage was taken of his homeless condition, and he was compelled to serve for what he could get.

I would add in this place that inasmuch as land monopoly is the chief cause of beggary, comparatively little beggary will remain after land monopoly is abolished.

The world will be much happier when land monopoly shall cease, because manual labor will then be so honorable because so well-nigh universal.

It will be happier, too, because of the general equality there will then be, not in property only, but in education, and other essential respects also. How much fewer the instances than now of a haughty spirit on the one hand, and of an abject spirit on the other! The pride of superior circumstances, so common now, will then be rare. And rare, too, will be that abjectness of spirit, so common now (though, happily, far from universal) in the condition of dependent poverty, and the difficulty of overcoming which is so well compared to the difficulty of making an empty bag stand up straight!

Another gain to the world from abolishing land monopoly is that war would then be well-nigh impossible. It would be so if only because it would be difficult to enlist men into its ranks. For who would leave the comforts and endearments of home to enter upon the poorly-paid and unhonored services of a private soldier? It was not "young Fortinbras" only who in collecting his army, Shark'd up a list of landless resolute, but in every age and country war has found its recruits among the homeless among vagabonds.

And still another benefit to flow from the abolition of land monopoly is its happy influence upon the cause of temperance—that precious cause which both the great and the small are in their folly and madness so wont to scorn, but which is, nevertheless, none the less essential to private happiness and prosperity, to national growth and glory. The ranks of intemperance, like those of war, are to a great extent recruited from the homeless and the vagrant.

How numerous and precious the blessings that would follow the abolition of land monopoly! By the number and preciousness of those blessings, I might entreat civil government the earth over to abolish it. But I will not. I prefer to demand this justice in the name of justice. In the name of justice I demand that civil government, wherever guilty of it, shall cease to sell and give away land—shall cease to sell and give away what is not its own. The vacant land belongs to all who need it. It belongs to the landless of every clime and condition. The extent of the legitimate concern of Government with it is but to regulate and protect its

occupation. In the name of justice do I demand of Government, not only that it shall itself cease from the land traffic, but that it shall compel its subjects to cease from it. Government owes protection to its subjects. It owes them nothing else. But that people are emphatically unprotected who are left by their Government to be the prey of land monopoly.

The Federal Government has sinned greatly against human rights in usurping the ownership of a large share of the American soil. It can of course enact no laws and exert no influence against land monopoly whilst it is itself the mammoth monopolist of land. This Government has presumed to sell millions of acres and to give away millions of acres. It has lavished land on States and corporations and individuals, as if it were itself the Great Maker of the land. Our State Governments also have been guilty of assuming to own the soil. They too need to repent. And they will repent if the Federal Government will lead the way. . . . And if the Governments of this great nation shall acknowledge the right of every man to a spot of earth for a home, may we not hope that the Governments of many other nations will speedily do likewise? Nay, may we not in that case regard the age as not distant when land monopoly, which numbers far more victims than any other evil, and which is, moreover, the most prolific parent of evil, shall disappear from the whole earth, and shall leave the whole earth to illustrate, as it never can whilst under the curse of land monopoly, the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man?

Let this bill become a law and, if our Government shall be consistent with itself, land monopoly will surely cease within the limits of the exclusive jurisdiction of that Government. But let this bill be defeated, and let success attend the applications for scores of millions of acres for soldiers, and for hundreds of millions of acres for railroad and canal companies, and land monopoly will then be so strongly fastened upon this nation that violence alone will be able to throw it off. The best hope for the poor will then perish. The most cherished reliance for human progress will then be trodden under foot.

My reference to the speculator affords me an occasion for saying that, not only the lands which you let soldiers have, but also the lands which you let railroad companies and canal companies have, will get into the hands of land speculators. That is their sure and speedy destination; and it is in those hands that land monopoly works its mightiest mischief, and develops its guiltiest character.