

Preface to Thackeray's *The Land and the Community*

Henry George, 1889

In its original form this book was the thesis which, according to custom, was presented by the Rev. William Thackeray, when applying, in the early part of this year, to his University of Cambridge for the degree of Doctor of Laws. Somewhat expanded, and arranged so as to facilitate reference, it is now laid before the general public in a form which I trust will give it a large circulation and enable it to do a most useful work.

The manner in which Mr. Thackeray has treated the subject, the fullness and clearness with which he has dwelt upon its historical and legal aspects, the attention he has given to the matter of compensation so much mooted in this country, and the religious feeling and conservative disposition which he has manifested throughout, seem to me to peculiarly adapt this book to English thought, and especially to the thought of that influential section of the English people with which, as a graduate of one of the great Universities and a clergyman of the Established [vi] Church, he comes into closest touch. At the same time its directness and compactness, and an arrangement which facilitates reference and adapts it to the requirements of teaching, specially fit it to the needs of the time.

That the relations between the land and the community constitute the burning question of the immediate future, not only in Great Britain but in all English-speaking countries, is now obvious. The idea that all men are equally entitled to the use of the natural elements, and that the value which attaches to land with the growth and improvement of the community constitutes the fund from which public expenses should properly be met, have made such great progress during the last ten years that they are now "in the air." The habit of thought which attached to land itself those rights of Individual ownership that properly attach only to the things which human labour produces from land, and which ignorantly assumed that private property in land always had existed and always must exist, have now been so shaken that first perceptions of the equality of right to the use of the fundamental basis of all life, the indispensable element of all production, are reasserting their sway, and ideas which a little while ago would have seemed to the great majority, even of the disinherited, as too radical for sober consideration, are diffusing themselves rapidly, steadily, and in many cases almost unconsciously.

To give force and definiteness to these ideas ; to make manifest their conformity with historical [vii] experience and religious truth ; to put them in such relation that the recognition of common rights in land may strengthen, not weaken, the recognition of individual rights in the products of labour ; to supply ready answers to the fallacious arguments by which the defenders of vested wrongs on the one hand and the deniers of all rights of property on the other hand are endeavoring to confuse the essential distinction between what God created and what man has produced, between the natural reservoir from which human labour must draw and the things which labour may for awhile withdraw from that exhaustless reservoir and put into shapes adapted to the satisfaction of human needs — there is needed some clear and simple exposition of essential principles and important facts.

This need it seems to me Mr. Thackeray has well supplied. Without going over all the ground or entering into the controversial arguments or economical reasoning which seemed to me necessary in *Progress and Poverty*, he has reached the same conclusions. First unraveling the tangled skein of our history in such way as to show how the peoples of the English speech, losing their earlier perceptions in a long course of usurpation and tyranny came to regard the land itself as subject to those rights of exclusive ownership which properly attach only to the things which labour draws in from land, Mr. Thackeray has then set forth the principles that ought to govern the relations between the community and the element which is alike necessary to all its members, [viii] and shown how easily these principles may be applied in the conditions of the present day. And finally he has shown how such application, insuring their natural rights to all and conforming the most fundamental and important of all social adjustments to the supreme law of justice, would, without injury to any, open the way to a civilization as much higher than that which now exists as that is higher than barbarism.

I should like to commend this work, which I hope will soon pass into a popular edition, to members of school boards who are anxious to make national education a means of diffusing the most important of all knowledge among the rising generation, to superintendents and managers of Sunday schools, and especially to those who hope for the conversion of the official ministers of religion, and particularly the bishops and clergy of the Church of England, to a living and practical faith in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men.

The authority and influence of a body that ought to be foremost in the endeavor to establish justice and of those who ought to be first to welcome truth, have been so often used to bolster vested wrongs and to cover up the truth that threatened them, that to many who read this book, it will be, as it is to me, a special gratification that its author is a clergyman of the Church of England and an honored graduate of one of the great English universities. And I fancy there will be few who will dissent from Mr. Thackeray's proposition that that portion of the [ix] public fund which has been saved from private appropriation for the support of the church and the maintenance of institutions of learning should under the salutary conditions which he suggests, be continued to such purposes. This, certainly, will be the case if the church and the universities shall be found to contain many men like Mr. Thackeray who will be led by his example to come forth on the side of equal justice and lend their influence to the restoration to the disinherited millions of their rights in the bounty of their Creator.

And it is to be hoped that the eloquent appeal with which Mr. Thackeray closes his book will not long be without some response. In the van of the American movement to secure to the whole people equal rights in land are to-day men, who are large owners of land and whose selfish interests would seem to prompt them to defend existing injustice. I have faith enough in human nature to think that some such men must ere long appear in England. As discussion goes on, as thought is aroused, as the true relation between men and the planet on which for a brief space they in their generations are called to dwell, becomes clearer and clearer in the public mind, those who would be ashamed to claim more than their rightful share in anything else will become ashamed to claim more than their rightful share in the earth. And even before that day comes it is not likely that we shall wait in vain for at least some men belonging to the class which seems to profit by the general wrong [x] who will deem it their highest duty and find it their greatest joy to do their utmost for the overthrow of that wrong.

But no matter who comes or who holds back the good cause will go forward. The truths that Mr. Thackeray has in this book set forth are even now so deeply planted in the public mind and public conscience that their triumph is but a matter of time. All any individual can do is to hasten that a little or a little to retard it. Nay, even those who oppose help forward as well as those who toil to advance. Truth grows clearer by opposition. All it need fear is to be ignored. And this book itself is one of the many indications that the day for that has passed.

Henry George.