

the Henry George News

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Francis Neilson

IN the early hours of Thursday morning, April 13, 1961, death came quietly to an outstanding leader of the Georgist movement, Francis Neilson. He was in the third month of his ninety-fifth year.

Born in Birkenhead, across the River Mersey from Liverpool, in 1867, Francis Neilson was the eldest of nine children. Both his parents went to work, leaving little time for family life, except on Sundays, when readings from the Bible were a regular part of the home worship. As the eldest, it fell to Francis to memorize and recite the selected passages.

With nine mouths to be fed, it is understandable that young Neilson left school at the age of fourteen and began to fend for himself. After trying his hand at a variety of jobs, he decided to test his luck in the United States, crossing the Atlantic as a third-class passenger, a lad of eighteen, "sick all the way."

V. G. Peterson



His first job in the new country was as a checker in New York's Washington Market; his second was as a longshoreman on the West Street docks; his third was as a laborer in Central Park. It is characteristic of the fate which carried Francis Neilson from poverty to wealth, that sixty years later he lived in a fashionable hotel overlooking the very spot where he once wielded a pick and shovel. And it was like him, also, that he made no effort to hide the circumstances of his humble beginnings.

Neilson's fourth job, a minor cler-
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Francis Neilson

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ical one, brought to an end this period of aimless drifting. It was here that he met a Negro, named Johnson, a college graduate, who, because of his color, worked as a Pullman porter. Johnson showed him what it meant to be a member of an underprivileged group—the unskilled and semi-skilled group of white workers in which the boy found himself, or the group barred by the accident of race from better occupations. The lesson struck home, and from that time on, the quest for knowledge became young Neilson's "magnificent obsession." He haunted libraries and went hungry to buy books. His literary diet ranged from the classics to books on economics, archaeology, art and music, and included every field that offered a challenge to his expanding intellect.

Although he had read much on socialism, an ideology which he rejected, Neilson's real interest in social reform began one evening when he attended a lecture at Cooper Union. The name of Henry George was mentioned and during the question period Neilson asked for further information about this man. The speaker answered by giving him a copy of *Progress and Poverty*. This was another turning point, for with the reading of that book, Neilson became a convinced and dedicated follower of Henry George.

In the years that followed, Neilson tried his hand at writing, acting, and stage directing. It was in the latter field that he scored his first outstanding successes, becoming associated with no less a personage than Charles Frohman, for whom he directed plays and operas, both in New York and London.

It was not until the Boer War that Neilson began to take an interest in politics. He joined the old Liberal party which was advocating land value

taxation and free trade, and soon became the leader of the party's "Young Radical" wing. Gaining repute as a political orator, in the general election of 1909 he stood successfully for the Hyde Division of Cheshire, entering the House of Commons the following January. Here he remained for six years, until World War I led him, as a pacifist, to resign. Bent now on a literary career, he returned to America and became a United States citizen in 1921.

Within six weeks after his resignation from Parliament, Neilson had dictated his first book, *How Diplomats Make War*, an exposé of the machinations of the war-makers. Brought out anonymously in New York, the book went through a succession of printings and translations. Other works followed, and at the time of his death he had written over sixty books, a substantial number of articles, plays, and several librettos for light opera. He was a co-founder of *The Freeman*, a journal of opinion and literary criticism. With him in this venture were Albert Jay Nock, Suzanne LaFollette, Van Wyck Brooks, Geroid Tanquary Robinson and Walter Fuller.

The books for which Francis Neilson is best known in the Georgist movement are: *The Eleventh Commandment* (1933), *Man at the Crossroads* (1938), *In Quest of Justice* (1944), and *From Ur to Nazareth* (1960).

In Quest of Justice was the outgrowth of a lecture series which he gave in Chicago under the auspices of the Henry George School. *From Ur to Nazareth*, his last published work, is a 461 page book on the life and mission of Jesus. This monumental document was actually written after his sight failed, and was brought to fruition through the devoted assistance of his literary secretary, Miss K. Phyllis Evans.

Mr. Neilson became a regular contributor to the American Journal of Economics and Sociology, a quarterly, soon after its founding in 1941, and from time to time selections of these articles were published in book form. Included among these volumes are: *Modern Man and the Liberal Arts*, *The Roots of Our Learning*, and *The Cultural Tradition*. One of his most popular essays, "Henry George the Scholar," is now available in pamphlet form.

Francis Neilson fulfilled the mission toward which his inner drives and faith directed him. If his goal of economic justice has not been reached, he most assuredly brought it nearer to the thousands of people all over the world who read his books and share the logic of his inspired convictions. There are those, too, who will remember him in another way. These are the

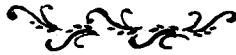
nameless men and women with whom he shared some of the good fortune that finally came to him. They will revere not only his great mind, but the great heart and generous spirit that found expression in many unsolicited and welcome deeds.

At his request, Mr. Neilson's body was cremated. On the Tuesday following his death, his ashes were taken to Liverpool Cathedral where they will rest. An impressive service was held, attended by a hundred and fifty boys from the Choir School so dear to his heart.

Ed. Notes

The story of The Freeman was related in articles in HGN of May and June, 1957.

The Henry George School is currently distributing complimentary copies of "Henry George the Scholar" to public libraries throughout the country in memory of Mr. Neilson.



Wednesday, June 21st, is the date of the annual banquet of the Henry George School for all friends near and far, who will be eager to hear the two guest speakers: Countess Alexandra Tolstoy and Agnes deMille. It will be at the Shelburne Hotel, Lexington Avenue and 37th Street, New York.

Springtime is conference-planning time and the program for the 17th Annual Conference of the Henry George School at Hartford, Connecticut, July 12-16, is slowly taking shape. The Statler-Hilton Hotel offers attractive guaranteed rates of \$7 for single rooms and \$13 for double rooms, all with bath.

The conference program will include panel talks on economics, round table discussions by school directors, a boat ride on the Connecticut River, and a banquet on Saturday evening.