

JOSEPH DANA MILLER: A LIFE DEVOTED TO CHANGING THE COURSE OF HISTORY

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One measure of a person's effect on how others think and act is how that person is remembered. And so, I begin this short biography of Joseph Dana Miller with what was said about him by Grace Isabel Colbron* shortly after his death, the 8th of May 1939, at the age of 77:

“In his earlier years when, as is natural, one's opinions are more strongly marked, he could sometimes be quite sharp in his comments. But as editor of a magazine read by all his comrades, he never allowed his own convictions to blind him. He was always fair and just, and always realized that his magazine was to represent and encourage all workers for the Single Tax, not just those that happened to agree with him on any particular line.”[2]

Joseph Dana Miller had spent most of his adult life as a leading journalist in the movement to see Henry George's vision of just societies realized. As was George, he sought with all he had to offer to change the course of history. By the late 1930s, his health had begun to fail. Then, in February of 1939 he was injured by a fall while on his way to a meeting of the trustees of the Henry George School of Social Science in New York City. Hospitalized, he fought to recover but slowly declined until death finally came.

It was in his early twenties that Joseph became an active supporter and personal friend of Henry George. He served as secretary of the Hudson County Single Tax Club and worked on George's 1886 campaign to be elected Mayor of New York City. He brought his full range of talents to the campaign, and so worked to develop into an effective speaker for the cause he embraced. Those who knew him commented on his eloquence as a speaker. However, his lasting impact was made with the pen. Many supporters of the Single Tax thought Joseph's writing talents equal to anyone in the movement. This was displayed as early as 1892, when his article arguing against a tax on income was included in a volume entitled *Who Pays Your Taxes?* Published by G.P. Putnam.

After the death of Henry George in 1897, Joseph quickly assumed a leading role among Single Taxers in New York City. In 1901 he founded the *Single Tax Review* with the support of a small number of contributors, and under his guidance the *Review* gradually gained a wide audience. Finances were always tight, yet Joseph continued the work in quarters hardly larger than a closet, dependent on volunteers to provide articles for each issue. In 1917, at a moment of almost exhausted finances, Joseph's editorial appealed to Single Taxers to decide whether the organ should survive:

“What the movement needs is more democracy. What it needs, too, is that the SINGLE TAX REVIEW, if it is to live, or whatever is to take its place, shall be in a position to

review, uninfluenced by the pressure of any group, committee or body of individuals, all questions of policy affecting the triumph of our principles.”

For Joseph, the *Single Tax Review* provided a regular opportunity for him to comment on both the internal dynamics of the Single Tax movement and on world events. He had already displayed his journalistic talents in an article titled “British Radicals and Radicalism,” appearing in the February 1900 issue of *The Arena*. One can only conclude that he was in periodic contact with those Liberals in Britain who were actively campaigning on behalf of the Single Tax. Later that same year, *The Arena* carried his article titled “Militarism or Manhood?” in which he raised penetrating questions regarding “the influence of the spirit of militarism upon the individual.” In this article he lays bare the horror of warfare:

“All militarism is savagery, not less so because it glitters with its helmets and moves to the rhythm of banners. War is essentially savagery in activity. All laws tending to humanize warfare are absurd and inconsistent, and every one is broken when it suits the convenience or the barbarism of the conquerors.”

In the *Single Tax Review* he would begin near fourly decades of editorial writing as well as personally reviewing one or more newly-published books in almost every issue of the *Review* and its successor publication, *Land and Freedom*. Out of the gate, his first book reviewed was John S. Crosby’s** *Government, An Inquiry into the Nations and Functions of the State*. His review challenged a number of Crosby’s assertions; yet, he wrote: “All single taxers should send for this book since it is both interesting and suggestive.” Over the years his reviews almost always captured the essence of the author’s success or failure in supporting whatever case was being made.

The early years of the *Single Tax Review* were characterized by a good deal of confusion among those who continued to embrace Henry George’s principles. Joseph urged support for establishing a national, independent political party. Others thought this was either impractical or would marginalize the movement from mainstream influence. In *The Arena*, he wrote:

“The Single Taxer is an earnest, persistent, and forceful advocate of his reform at all times except during an election. Then he is a Cleveland Free Trader, a Bryan zealot, a free silverite, or a Chicago Platform Democrat – anything but a Single Taxer.”

Looking objectively at the state of the movement in 1902 and for any sign of even a modest advance, he expressed hope that the people of Colorado would vote to adopt “the Australasian Tax System” that permitted exemption of property improvements. Success in Colorado, he argued, could then carry over to other states.

At the same time, Joseph sensed that the world’s imperial powers were heading toward an inevitable “life and death struggle.” He made this observation in a 1907 article appearing in the magazine *Government*. Somewhat surprisingly, he had nothing more to say about the coming of war until in 1916 he wrote a

review of Bertrand Russell's book, *Justice in War Time*. Joseph credits Russell for providing "amid the discordant, horrid controversies and bitter hatreds of the time, at least one great sane voice." He goes on to quote Russell on the history of the extraction by landowners of the people's rent and how a German victory could result in the taking of "the total economic rent of the land and natural resources of England." Rent-taking was, in this sense, the real objective in wars of either direct or indirect territorial conquest.

The *Single Tax Review* of January-February, 1916 had already carried Joseph's review of *How Diplomats Make War*, written in Britain by the Liberal Member of Parliament Francis Neilson. Neilson called for placing all treaty-making powers with the Parliaments of nations, depriving the foreign offices from binding governments to secret alliances and agreements. Of the book, Joseph wrote:

"This is, on the whole, the best contribution of permanent value to the literature of the war up to the present time. It sheds a new light on the sinister methods of secret diplomacy as practiced in the chancelleries of Europe."

Despite (or, perhaps, because of) the global commitment of human, tangible and financial resources to the conduct of war, Joseph began to assemble and edit the material of what became the *Single Tax Year Book*, published in 1917. Submissions came from Single Tax authors in many countries. Laser focused on documenting the history and progress of the Single Tax cause, the volume contained nothing about the continuing world war. Only in 1919, in an "Open Letter to President Wilson," did he comment on postwar plans for reconstruction under discussion by the governors and mayors of the United States:

"On their solution rest the hopes of a durable peace for the world and the success of the great Covenant which emerged from the Peace Conference at Versailles. On their solution depends also the power of our own people to survive the shocks of war and to bear the fiscal burdens imposed by the operations of our forces in France and on the sea."

That same year, 1919, Joseph stood as the Single-Tax candidate for the president of the Board of Aldermen in New York City. Then, following Henry George's path of reform journalist to potential public official, in 1921 Joseph accepted the Single Tax Party nomination for Mayor of New York City. Much had changed since 1897 when Henry George made his final bid for the office. Tammany Hall's control over the voting process and over the city's newspapers had grown even stronger, and public awareness of the single tax had essentially disappeared. Joseph received just 454 votes.

Single Taxers realized that something had to be done to reach a broader audience with the *Single Tax Review*. Ownership was turned over to the newly-formed Single Tax Publishing Company headed by Charles H. Ingersoll. Publication was expanded to monthly in an effort to attract new subscribers.

When these steps proved ineffective, a decision was made in 1923 to change the name to *Land and Freedom*.

By all accounts Joseph Dana Miller worked day and night to reignite enthusiasm for the cause. He never married. Frederic Leubuscher, long-time President of the Manhattan Single Tax Club, tells us that “the lady of his affections whom he was to marry died before that event could take place” and “he never thereafter showed any serious interest in any other woman.” Born in Jersey City, New Jersey, he remained there until he reached age twenty-five. Then, for many years thereafter he resided with the family of Harry White in Brooklyn. The record includes few details of his personal life. As Frederic Leubuscher wrote, “He was happiest sitting in a shabby little office writing about the philosophy that was religion to him. For relaxation he wrote poetry.” When the Whites moved from Brooklyn in 1936, Joseph returned to Jersey City to live with long-time friends. His recognition as a prominent public figure of the day is evidenced by an extensive interview printed in *The Jersey Journal* announcing his return. The journey from Jersey City to Brooklyn and back again had been a long one filled with enormous challenges.

In mid-1929, Joseph offered his thoughts on the link between business depressions and tariffs. He dismissed overproduction as a cause of economic problems and provided evidence that depressions occurred during times of high tariffs and low tariffs. Early in 1930, he editorialized on what he saw as the inevitable outcome of the new tariffs sought by U.S. Senator Reed Smoot of Utah and Representative Willis Hawley of Oregon. As the Depression deepened in 1932, Joseph addressed the nation’s war veterans, forcefully removed from their encampment in the nation’s capital, regarding the real source of their misery:

“The plight of the ex-service men is but one angle of the problem demanding a solution. ... The country belongs to less than ten per cent of the people, and the percentage is much less when land is considered according to value. Everywhere you turn you find the land preempted.”

Throughout the years of economic depression and government experimentation with interventionist programs, the pages of *Land and Freedom* repeatedly offered Henry George’s program as the solution. Joseph wrote a highly critical review of economist and Roosevelt adviser Rexford Tugwell’s book, *The Industrial Discipline and the Governmental Arts*, published in 1933:

“The fatal error which vitiates the philosophy of our Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, as it vitiates the laissez-faire doctrine, is the failure to understand the office which competition fills in the natural process of production and distribution. Had Prof. Tugwell seen this his book would never have been written.”

In another signed editorial appearing in the March-April, 1934 issue of *Land and Freedom*, he offered a critical assessment of the Roosevelt administration’s three key economic advisers. Deeper into the Depression, in 1936, he felt compelled to write:

“The prevailing confusions are numerous and many of them, as we have said, self-destructive. The real factors in distribution are calmly ignored and explanations for the existing depression in the oracular style are constantly forthcoming.”

I have found nothing published to indicate that Joseph Dana Miller thought – as late as 1938 -- the Depression would come to an end any time soon. Nor did he comment on the gradual increase in government spending on military arms as the world was being pulled into a Second World War. At the beginning of 1939 he did comment on the appointment of Harry Hopkins as Secretary of Commerce. “We are positive,” he wrote, “that he does not believe that there are any laws of business, that he entertains the same views that his chief does, namely, that the laws of political economy vary with each decade.” He did not live to experience the return of prosperity, a prosperity admittedly generated by preparation for war.

The *Land and Freedom* issue published soon after his death included was likely the last article he wrote, titled “Lost – The Individual.” He left us with this to contemplate:

“We have been too much concerned with the advancement of the race; too little with the right of the individual to live his life. Doubtless, these are related, but any progress of the race that leaves the individual overwhelmed and forgotten is not real progress.”

Many of his colleagues in the single tax community agreed. They felt a deep loss by his death. *Land and Freedom* managed to survive without him only until 1943. Joseph’s long-time friend, Clifford Kendal said this about him:

“I have known Joseph Dana Miller over thirty years, my active association with *Land and Freedom* dating back about ten years. His office was a meeting place for all his Single Tax friends, much of his inspiration coming from them and the conversations which took place there. I used to drop in frequently, and there developed a friendship resulting in cooperation in the work.

“Notwithstanding these years of cooperation, I feel that any characterization of Joseph Dana Miller by me, will be inadequate. He was the trained journalist who devoted his life to the Single Tax. He lived it and was not to be turned from his way of carrying out his purpose. He was very receptive to the ideas of others, putting forward his own views quietly and in few words. He preferred to keep all controversy out of his paper, and, having distinct ideas as to how such a paper should be conducted, did not depart from these ideas to any extent.”



*Grace Isabel Colbron (1869-1943) was born in New York City, but lived for many years in Europe. In her professional life she had practical experience on the stage and many years of literary work as a critic of books and plays. As a young women she become involved in the Single Tax movement and lectured frequently on behalf of the Henry George Lecture Association. She was a frequent contributing writer to the *Single Tax Review* and to *Land and Freedom*.

**John S. Crosby (1842-1914) was a U.S. author and lecturer on civics and government, an early supporter of Henry George and an active member of the Manhattan Single Tax Club.