

the Henry George News

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Joseph S. Thompson

THE man who will be remembered by so many on the East Coast, the West Coast, in England and elsewhere for his brilliance as a lecturer, a writer and a leader of the Henry George movement, is dead. One with the silence now is the voice that reached out to embrace his audiences on the frequent occasions when he was sought out as a toastmaster. He was a prominent civic leader, and the San Francisco Chronicle extolled him as the "patriarch of a remarkably gifted dynasty whose talents added luster and elegance" to the city where all of his 92 years were lived.

Joseph S. Thompson's death on September 17th brought to an end a long, productive life made happy to the end by an admired and admiring wife, Germaine. She is an enthusiastic exponent of his views and when she defends them on television programs, her native French charm makes her a chic and convincing addition.

Joe Thompson's introduction to Henry George dates back to 1912 when he heard Joseph Fels say in Oakland, "read *Progress and Poverty*." It was terse, but it was enough. In 1949 when there was a desire for a San Francisco extension of the Henry

George School to be started Mr. Thompson generously offered to make it possible. He has remained the only president of that flourishing organization.

In 1959 he was named president of the International Union for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade at the conference in Hanover, West Germany. In 1960 he became the fourth president of the HGS and was honored at a banquet in New York, succeeding John Cromwell Lincoln. He was followed in the presidency in 1968 by Arnold A. Weinstein.

Honored and respected in his business, the Federal Pacific Electric Company, Mr. Thompson compiled an abridgement of *Progress and Poverty* especially for business men. In a preface to his book, *More Progress and Less Poverty* he wrote: "For 25 years I have been advising my business friends to read *Progress and Poverty*. It is a large order for most busy men to undertake a 565 page book on another man's say-so. But if they only knew it, the ideas contained in it are as important to them as their list of customers. For in this book by Henry George is contained a correction of age-old abuses which have throttled business energies and the simple basic economic principles which must be followed if our wealth-producing agencies (business) are to retain their

business freedom. . . . After years of thoughtful consideration, during which I have gone back time and again to Henry George, I am convinced that he offers a sane and comfortable path between those two extremes so often suggested as inevitable yet so inimical to the American way of life—communism and Fascism."

Mr. Thompson was noted for clear, brief statements such as, "What do cities do when you park your car in the street? They have meters and you pay for space. It doesn't matter whether you have a jalopy or a Cadillac, you pay the same. Carry the idea further and let the cities charge for using valuable land, regardless of whether there is a shack or a fine building on the land."

"The raw value of oil, coal and trees is publicly created. It certainly is not privately created. It is therefore public property. The public should collect 100 percent of this undeveloped value, leaving the returns from exploration, development and human effort in the hands of those who create them," he wrote on one occasion.

On another, "there can be no just title to *the value* of an exclusive possession of the soil. A tax cannot be levied on land values. Land has a rental value. Part of it is publicly collected. What is left is privately collected. The more the public collects the less there is left. If the public took all (as it should) none would be left. As 'land value' is capitalization of 'what is left' land value disappears as a private asset."

In a book entitled *Taxation's New Frontier*, published in 1961 by the

Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, he examined the background that encouraged America to develop into the greatest industrial nation with the highest living standard, and noted that taxation was negligible and free land was abundantly available in its early history. He saw the country "facing declining impetus and the restricted freedom of 'welfare' pensions in old age unless we deal properly with two evils: the income tax and the disappearance of free land."

In a letter to the editor (HGN Jan. 1963) he objected to the phrase "Henry George theory," in these terms: "none of us can ever say too much in praise of the lucidity with which Henry George presented certain facts to so great a number of people, and what he wrote is no theory now but a thoroughly established fact. Perfection is not attainable, but I would never admit that there could be any other solution with one small fraction of its value. There will always be problems, but more evils will be corrected by 'Henry George's theory' than by any other course or plan or combination of plans that have been brought to light."

As the cheerful host of the international (HGS) conference in New York in 1964 he reflected the growing social trend by exploring an income for every inhabitant of the U.S. on the basis that each is an equal owner of the nation's land.

We are grateful for the more than ninety years that he enjoyed and for the years of friendship shared with him. Much sympathy from all friends flows out to Mrs. Thompson and the surviving family.

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