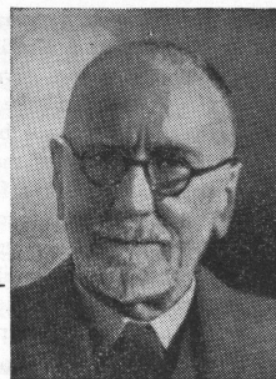


An Engineer's Philosophy

By AUSTIN H. PEAKE, M.A.



Until his retirement in 1945, Mr. A. H. Peake was a University Lecturer in Engineering at Cambridge. Active in public affairs as a Liberal, and member of Cambridge Borough Council (1912-22). Member of United Committee and former chairman of the Executive, International Union, Mr. Peake has attended all the Union's Conferences (except New York, 1939) since Oxford, 1923.

THE FIRST DECADES of my life were years of steady prices. Eggs cost one penny each or less according to season. Milk rose to threepence a quart when house to house delivery began, and there it remained. Our currency was based on a gold standard, and inflation, that meanest form of taxation, was unknown.

The price of land, however, did not remain steady. In the vicinity of growing towns the increase was often colossal. On the advice of the Prince Consort the profits of the Great Exhibition of 1851 were invested in land in growing London. The fund grew considerably before the close of the century, when it was used to found science research scholarships, one of which took me to Cambridge. Generally, however, the constantly increasing value of land went into private pockets while at the same time the British rating system encouraged owners, as it does still, to hold land out of use and penalised those who made improvements. Of course there were also national taxes on thrift and industry though not on so damaging a scale as today.

A great educational campaign to remedy these evils by taxing and rating land values contributed largely to the sweeping Liberal victory in the General Election of 1906. But there were also Conservatives, even in Parliament, who were in favour of land-value rating. Incidentally it was during the life of that Parliament that a bill was passed enacting that any oil discovered in Britain in the future should be national property. As it was not generally thought that oil ever would be found, there was little if any opposition.

I remember how the very suggestion of taxing land values caused the advertised price of land for sale on a building estate to be halved, with advantage to all concerned, including the vendor who was enabled to sell rapidly.

Because of my interest in, and adverse criticism of, our rating system, and without any other apparent qualification, I was appointed an overseer, one of that body—long since abolished—of unpaid amateurs whose function it was to assess for rates properties on which improvements had been made. An interesting and instructive case I remember came before the overseers in the early days of the first world war. Gardeners and others in Cambridge were invited to cultivate building plots that were lying derelict and infested with weeds. Permission was granted by the owners, rent free for a period. Then the overseers were told the plots must be assessed for local rates. I

held the view that the assessment should be nil (as it had been while the land lay idle) but as no precedent could be found for such a course we were obliged to persist until finally an assessment was made. I knew other cases where the growing of a few vegetables was stopped lest rates should be incurred, and where excellent fruit growing in the gardens of unoccupied houses was allowed to fall and rot for the same reason. This, be it remembered, was in war-time.

Once, when the assessment committee of the Cambridge Borough Council on appeal reduced the rates on a building because it was badly lighted and really somewhat unhealthy, I heard a muttered exclamation "Is this the law?" from a fellow member who was, or who thought that he was, opposed to my views. Of course all concerned understood that if ever the premises were improved, the assessment would be raised again.

All that was some 40 years ago but despite the changes which have been made in rating law (and they are mostly for the worse), and in spite of excellent examples of reform in other lands, our system of local taxation remains stupidly harmful, comparable with the discarded window tax of earlier days. It is a special form of purchase tax, is increasingly burdensome and should be abolished.

The various forms of national taxation inflicted when you earn and when you buy, when you save and when you die, are regarded by most people as right and proper, or as necessary evils. Yet such confiscation if carried out by private individuals would be called stealing—and so it is. If this misappropriation by the government of what belongs of right to the individual is to be reduced and finally abolished, taxation must be shifted progressively on to the value of land.

Land value is created and maintained by the presence and activities of the community. Advertisements of land for sale with their details of nearness to town centres, railways, schools, etc., make this quite clear. Notwithstanding

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man-made laws to the contrary the instinct is right that tells us that this value really belongs to the community. So also is the instinct that tells us that what a man earns is his. It does not belong to the state. These truths often remain hidden from intelligent and highly educated people, although they are grasped instinctively by simple unlettered races and people. They object to laws made by one generation that will disinherit some members of generations yet unborn. "How can we sell the birthright of our children?" they ask when invited to sell land outright. We who advocate the taxation of land values propose, in effect, that this country should retrace the steps in taxation that, over the centuries, have been taken in the wrong direction. As Henry George tersely expressed the matter:

"We should take for the community what belongs to the community—the value that attaches to land. We should leave sacredly to the individual all that is produced by the individual."

I cannot recall my first introduction to the writings of Henry George. I know that it was some years after the experiences earlier related that I read his *Progress and Poverty*. Consequently I did not have the experience of which Charles Smithson told me. As he read he pencilled in the margin objection No. 1, objection No. 2 and so on, then reading on he turned back the pages and crossed out each objection in turn until finally every objection had been crossed out. From then on he "felt he had a gospel to preach."

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As an engineer I was at once attracted by the opening paragraphs of the book. Engineers and scientists know the advantages of labour-saving machinery and know how enormously applied science can increase the efficiency of man's toil. They know also that full employment is not an end in itself but only a means to an end, and they recognise the delightful irony in

He feasted sumptuously every day and was gorgeously arrayed
Not at all because he liked it, but because 'twas good for trade.
That the people might have cotton he clothed himself in silk,
And drank up quarts and quarts of cream that they might have skimmed milk.

Yet often their hopes are dashed. I well remember, for instance, my old professor, Sir J. A. Ewing, in his presidential address to the British Association saying that as a young man he had thought advances in applied science then taking place would usher in a golden age for mankind. He had become disillusioned but he confessed to being also somewhat puzzled.

The persistence of want, and the fear of want, in spite of the continuous and wonderful advances in applied science troubles and perplexes many thoughtful people, not least among whom are scientists and engineers. To them no better advice can be offered than that they should read *Progress and Poverty*. Therein they will find the answer to what Henry George called "the riddle of the sphinx" and "the great enigma of our times."

Henry George's writings attract for many reasons: the careful definition of terms, the logical reasoning—for
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which in itself, I have heard it said, his books are well worth reading—their warm humanity clothed in noble language, the search always for causes and the insistence that it is only through the awakening of thought and the progress of ideas that civilisation can advance.

The range of his thought is tremendous as he studies past history, the rise and fall of civilisations, the progress of scientific achievement and the possibilities of attaining a higher civilisation than the world has yet known. And in his *Science of Political Economy* there is an aside which I find simply amazing, and on which I have never seen any comment. He says: "It might be that what we call matter is but a form of energy." This was written when Einstein was a boy and there was no such branch of science as nuclear physics.

Tributes to Henry George's outstanding abilities as political economist, logician and social reformer, are legion. They have come from eminent men and women in every part of the world and with the most diverse outlook—for instance, from Helen Keller, from Dorothy Thompson, the American authoress, and from Count Leo Tolstoy. One that has for me a particular appeal was paid by the Austrian journalist, Bruno Heilig, who suffered torment in the Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald. Relating how after his escape to Britain he read *Progress and Poverty*, he says that it was with growing excitement that he read the chapter on How Modern Civilisation May Decline. "It was as if history had been written in advance, the thought impressing me that simply by altering the tense of verbs from the future to the past, one could turn the form of prophecy into a narrative of fact. . . . There is hardly a page or paragraph which does not apply almost literally to the happenings in Germany itself."

When giving expression to his hopes for world peace, Henry George puts first, as always, the necessity of ensuring justice. He rediscovers for himself the truth that whatever blessings of peace and prosperity mankind desires, the first essential is the seeking after righteousness. Towards the end of *Progress and Poverty* he says:

"I have in this inquiry followed the course of my own thought. When, in mind, I set out on it, I had no theory to support, no conclusions to prove. Only, when I realised the squalid misery of a great city, it appalled and tormented me, and would not let me rest for thinking of what caused it and how it could be cured. But out of this inquiry has come something I did not think to find, and a faith that was dead revives."

I, too, have found something of which I had not previously thought. My link with the philosophy of Henry George has brought me the valued friendship of a great number of people here and in many lands across the sea. The long picture gallery of memory contains the portraits of many who have passed from the stage, but there are many whom to meet is great happiness, and new friends both young and old are continually added to the number.

To have known and to know them is a joyous privilege.