

# Banishing Darkness

By R. J. RENNIE, B.Sc.



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IT WAS in the summer of 1921 that I, then a young graduate in engineering of the University of Glasgow, first set foot in Manchester, to complete my apprenticeship in Trafford Park. I had secured lodgings at the home of Mr. A. H. Weller, and my first meeting with him was the start of a friendship which endured until his death, over 30 years later. The Great War had been over for only three years. Like most young men of that time I was interested in politics and looking forward eagerly to the brave new world which the politicians were promising for those who had fought so hard, through so many weary years, to keep our shores inviolate. Mr. Weller presented me with a copy of *Progress and Poverty*, which I still possess. I read the book from cover to cover and was immediately impressed by the clarity of Henry George's expositions and the irrefutable logic of his arguments. The elegance and essential equity of his solution for the economic ills of mankind completely captivated my imagination. Even to this day I cannot understand why his philosophy does not similarly appeal to all reasonable men, who have the welfare of their fellows at heart.

As might be expected Mr. Weller promptly enrolled me as a member of the Manchester League for the Taxation of Land Values, of which he was secretary. At their meetings I met many of the stalwarts of "the Movement," as it was called in those days. Nearly all of them are now dead, but in their day and generation they laboured hard in the service of the cause which they held so dear. My rôle then was to listen and learn, but I did help to some slight extent by canvassing for Mr. Weller when he stood for election to Manchester City Council. Though on that occasion he was unsuccessful, he did become a councillor of the city some years after I left Manchester.

In 1926 I returned to my native city of Glasgow to take up an appointment on the engineering staff of the electricity supply industry, in which I have now completed over 30 years' continuous service. My work during the following 13 years involved long hours on duty and much overtime and night work so that my active connection with the movement ceased for nearly 15 years.

It was in the early 1940s that I first made the acquaintance of the staff of the United Committee at 4 Great Smith Street, Westminster, whither they had moved after the office in Knightrider Street had been destroyed during an air raid. I had accepted an appointment in London in January, 1939, and had come to live there with my wife and family in the spring of that ill-fated year. As a friend of Mr. Weller I received a most cordial welcome from

Mr. A. W. Madsen and from all other members of the staff. I gradually resumed my former active participation in the work of the movement, becoming in due course a member of the United Committee and being eventually elected to the executive committee.

Any who lived in London during the last war will realise that little could be done except to keep the flag flying. When the rumble of the last V2 rocket had died away, Mr. V. H. Blundell decided that the time had come to resume the economic classes of the Henry George School of Social Science and I became one of the students of his first post-war class. Having thus gained an insight into the methods used in conducting these classes, I duly became a tutor myself. "Teaching others teacheth yourself" is an old proverb which I proved to be true, for the study which I undertook in preparation for each class and the many arguments which I had with the students, greatly improved my own knowledge and appreciation of Henry George's philosophy.

When the electricity supply industry was nationalised in 1948 I returned to Glasgow to take up a new appointment. A branch of the Henry George School of Social Science was established in that year under the auspices of the Scottish League for Land Value Taxation. The classes were conducted by Mr. MacSwan then honorary secretary of the Scottish League. As so often happens, there were among those attracted to the study of political economy a number of able and highly intelligent men, who have retained their connection with the school and whose assistance as tutors of the various classes has been invaluable. The school had only been functioning for about two years when Mr. MacSwan emigrated to the United States of America and I succeeded him as secretary of the Scottish League. During the past eight years the school has continued slowly but surely adding to the number of people possessing a thorough knowledge and understanding of the fundamental laws of economics.

*Land & Liberty*

The enormous technical advance witnessed during the first half of the present century has been achieved solely by patient scientific search for the laws which govern the physical world around us. Having once established the physical laws by theoretical investigation and practical experiment, scientists and engineers have proceeded to design and construct in strict accordance with these laws the multitudes of machines and apparatus on which modern civilisation depends. Because each component part of these machines is made to comply with fundamental principles they perform their various functions efficiently. Economic laws govern man's social life, as inevitably as the physical laws govern his material environment. Everywhere they are virtually disregarded and it seems reasonable to infer that the economic chaos evident throughout the world stems from this cause. It is perhaps the supreme tragedy of this age that, though Man has wrested from Nature the supreme secret of the material universe, what goes on inside the atom itself, there should exist such abysmal ignorance of the simple principles which govern our economic relationships with our fellow men.

To my mind, Henry George's most outstanding contributions to the science of political economy is his clear exposition of the inevitability of the economic laws which govern the distribution of wealth in any society, simple or complex, and his demonstration that only by making legislation conform to the economic laws will mankind ever attain true freedom for the individual. The principles enunciated by him provide the means by which any man may judge the policies of any political party, and the lodestone by which governments may steer a straight course towards true democracy.

Unfortunately the world today is becoming more and more sharply divided into opposing camps. The remarkable persistence with which the governments of the Communist countries adhere to the political principles of Marx and Lenin provides them with a powerful psychological advantage over those of the West, where politicians, whether Conservative or Labour, Democrat or Republican, spend their time frantically setting their sails to every wind

which blows, leaving the ship of state to drift aimlessly in a sea of uncertainty.

Private property in land, which Sir Winston Churchill once aptly described as "the mother of all monopolies" is the Achilles heel of what has come to be known as "the Western way of life". Unless this fundamental truth is speedily recognised, there is grave danger that the whole world may sink back into a new Dark Age, in which individual liberty may be submerged under a flood of Communist tyranny. But we who strive for justice for all men and privilege for none should not be discouraged by the difficulties confronting us. Recent events in Hungary and elsewhere have revealed the weakness of the "planned economy" with its inevitable concomitant, the denial of the right of every man to win a livelihood for himself, by applying his skill and energy to the material resources granted by God equally to all men. This inalienable right is probably more clearly recognised in agriculture than in industry and this may be the reason why Communist governments find it harder to coerce the peasant than the town dweller and from time to time are compelled to admit that all is not well with collective farming.

A tax on land values would be the first step towards the emancipation of the people from the grip of monopoly and privilege. It is precisely because the powerful landed interests realise that such a tax would sound the death knell for the unjust privileges they have enjoyed for centuries that they have opposed resolutely every attempt made during the past 40 years to put a measure for the taxation of land values on the Statute Book. The goal for which those who are imbued with the philosophy of Henry George are striving (at home and abroad) is nothing less than a social revolution which will restore to every man his birthright—an equal right with his fellows to his native land. And when it comes, as come it must if civilisation is to survive, it will be the first revolution in the long and turbulent history of mankind to be achieved without bloodshed and misery; the first to bring benefits to all men and hardships to none; and the first to provide a reasonable hope of peace on earth and goodwill towards all men.

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