Radicalism's Finest Hour

B. W. B.

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT accused him of having both feet planted in mid-air. To Woodrow Wilson he was the man who went too far. Cassells Dictionary sees him as a member of the more advanced section of the Liberal Party. Whatever he may have been it cannot be denied that the influence of the Radical in British politics today is a mere shadow of what it was.

At Westminster in the 1970s there may well be men who place basic moral principle before political expedient but the combined clamour of their voices does not exactly shatter our eardrums. Too often, the dictates of party dogma and the siren-song of electoral prudence stifle the call of conscience.

Yet a century ago — or, more precisely, from about 1860 to 1914 — the political pulse of Britain was warmed and quickened by a succession of principled men, dedicated to the liberal tradition, to whom words such as "progress" and "reform" meant nothing if not starting from fundamentals. To tackle social problems other than at their roots (Latin: *radix*) was, to them, to dodge the real issues. And from the hustings and their seats in the House of Commons, men such as Bright and Cobden, Gladstone, Morley, Campbell Bannerman, Lloyd George and many more made Radicalism the most potent political force in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain.

In 1906 it seemed that the long surge of Radicalism had reached its commanding peak. Spurred by its Radical pacemakers the Liberal Party had won a great electoral victory. With a majority of more than 200 seats they held complete sway over the House of Commons, and with the Prime Minister — Campbell Bannerman — cast in their own mould, the Radicals seemed poised for their greatest advance in social reform since the election of 1868.

But what happened? Did they achieve their aims and quietly disband? Or did failure and the consequent disillusionment grind Radicalism into the dust of history?

A broad and revealing searchlight on the fortunes of British Radicals during those critical years between 1900 and 1914 is provided by a new book,* edited by Professor A. J. A. Morris and containing contributions from fifteen distinguished academic authors. Campaign by campaign it examines Radicalism's struggle during those fifteen eventful years, surveys the ideological bastions against which it pitted its strength and the forces against which it crumbled.

Not that the Radicals were without their successes. At home, the long campaign against the House of Lords veto ended with the eclipse of that body as a major force in British politics and the destruction of its power to thwart progressive Liberal legislation. Abroad, the Radicals emerged from the Boer War with increased support for their opposition to imperialism.

But against other forces the Radicals often laboured in vain. Against repression in India they achieved few of their objectives. The delicate purity of Radicalism was not proof against the creeping taint of Socialism and many Liberals, especially those whose Radical fervour became blunted with the cares of office, were too ready to compromise. The steady rise of nationalism, with controversy centred on whether the navy should build up to meet the German menace, caught them increasingly divided and the outbreak of war in 1914 virtually completed their disarray.

But of all the battles fought by the Radicals none was more epic, none more tensely fought, than the campaign for land reform recounted by Roy Douglas in an essay entitled "God gave the land

Edwardian Radicalism 1900-1914, Routledge & Kegan Paul, £5.75.

to the people". Although the final victory eluded them there is little doubt that this was the Radicals' finest hour.

Under the powerful influence of Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* the campaign for the taxation of land values had made dramatic progress in Parliament during the early years of the new century. Typical of the Radical attack was Campbell Bannerman's speech at the Albert Hall during which he said:
"We wish to make the land less of a pleasure-ground for the rich and more of a treasure-house for the nation."

In 1906 the House of Lords was once more acting as long-stop for the Tory minority in the Commons and any land-value legislation stood to be strangled in the Upper House. But Lloyd George, master of political tactics, had no doubts about the way the pieces should be played. Introducing minor taxes (but with a country-wide land valuation) in his 1909 Budget he forced the Lords into a full-scale conflict, not only over the disgorgement of part of the "unearned increment" but over the power of the Upper House itself.

For despite the derisory revenue expected from the embryo land taxes in the first year, they stirred the full might of the Lords' fury and, in an unprecedented act of lunacy, they threw out the Budget.

The ensuing general election was marked by the widespread singing of the Liberal Land Song and a pitch of public enthusiasm for land reform never known before. By the end of 1911, after a further electoral victory had finally broken the power of the Lords, the way ahead for legislation on the land question seemed wide open.

But appearances were deceptive and time, for the Radicals, was slipping away. The Liberal Government, shorn of its original block-busting majority, was now treading warily across the thin political ice. The land valuation, essential for the introduction of a full-scale land tax seemed, to the Radicals, to be moving at a pace to match the Government's lethargy and, unless some vigour could be injected, would not be completed until at least 1915. Taking advantage of by-elections they secured the entry to Parliament of a number of pro-land taxers and this, for a time, spurred the Government into some semblance of activity. A programme of legislative action was drawn up for the 1914-15 session. But the rally could not last. The war, always the arch-enemy of social legislation, was looming across the North Sea.

The outbreak of hostilities in 1914 finally killed both the Government's land reform programme and the solidarity of the Radicals. Tragically they found themselves divided between the pro-war and pacifist camps. As the war ground on, their influence waned further and eventually, at the head of a coalition government, his Radical convictions sacrificed to the lure of continued office, Lloyd George presided over the repeal of his own land-tax legislation.

The disintegration of the Radicals after fifty years of growing influence and persistent campaigning was not the end of the land story. But the first great assault on the injustice of land monopoly was over. Future battles would be fought by a new generation.

Professor Morris's book inevitably raises the question: where are the Radicals now? Where are today's successors to the social crusaders of the early years of the century? Thin on the ground, perhaps, but while men have the power of logical thought reports of Radicalism's demise would seem to be exaggerated. Indeed, evidence of its tenacious cling to life may be noted in the most unlikely places. In 1964, for example, in the U.S. presidential election, words were spoken which could have formed a Radical rallying cry at any time up to 1914:
"Moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue, Extremism in the defence of liberty is no vice."

If such words can be used by Barry Goldwater in the highest political circles of twentieth century U.S.A. there must be hope that other ringing phrases such as "peace, retrenchment and reform" and "God gave the land to the people" will yet be heard again.