

A TOWN PLANNER PIONEER



JOHN S. NETTLEFOLD

Knowing this, that never yet
Share of Truth was vainly set
In the world's wide fallow ;
After hands shall sow the seed,
After hands from hill and mead
Reap the harvests yellow.

Thus, with somewhat of the Seer,
Must the moral pioneer
From the Future borrow ;
Clothe the waste with dreams of grain,
And, on midnight's sky of rain,
Paint the golden morrow ! —Whittier.

In the death of John S. Nettlefold in his 64th year, which occurred last November, the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values has lost one of its foremost supporters.

At the close of his schooldays in Birmingham, he entered at once on a successful business career. But he was better known for his public service. Destined for a life in industry and commerce and with the necessary aptitude for it, he in early manhood turned with sympathy and understanding to the condition of the working people. To think seriously with him meant action, and he quickly found his place in the organized endeavour to solve the housing problem. He soon acquired a national reputation on town planning and housing reform, and in his book, *Practical Housing* (1908), proclaimed the truth: "Not only are lives lost through insanitary conditions, but, worse still, a chronic condition of low vitality and ill-health is fostered in our towns."

He was a member of the Birmingham City Council from 1898 to 1911, and was Chairman of its Housing Committee for a number of years. It was his experience as a municipal administrator that ultimately led him after hard striving to a consideration of the case against land monopoly, as the chief obstacle to his housing and town-planning ideals. He had been persuaded that the land question was of no special importance, and now he was finding out that it was all important. But he was an honest thinker, and once he realized the simple truth that the land value policy meant no taxation of houses, that "in short it conforms to every economic and moral requirement," he had no difficulty in coming

to the side of those who urged the policy as a necessary and fundamental step to all human progress.

Just before his unhappy breakdown in health in 1916, he sent me a message to be read at our Glasgow Conference, held at that date. It was in the following terms:—

"There are two schools of thought in land and housing reform—one school believes in public land purchase, the other in rating and taxing land values. The patriotic members of both schools have the same object in view, *i.e.*, the cheapening of land. Business men know that the advent of a fresh and rich buyer into a market where the supply is strictly limited always results in higher prices. Public land purchase must therefore raise the price of land, not lower it. I hold that rating and taxing land values must cheapen land. As a town planner of many years' standing I am much disappointed that so little, I might say nothing, worth having has resulted for the poorer classes from the Housing and Town Planning Act, 1909. In my opinion, nothing worth having for the poorer classes will result from this Act until it has behind it the rating and taxation of land values."

This bold pronouncement made a deep impression on our people everywhere and many compliments came from all parts of the country congratulating Headquarters on securing the support of this noted social reformer and man of affairs.

The enforced retirement of John Nettlefold thirteen years ago was a tremendous blow to the land value movement. His commanding services to housing reform were widely recognized and appreciated in all reform circles, and he was about to make as great a name for himself as an advocate of land value taxation: It was otherwise ordained.

Recovering what seemed to be a measure of lasting strength in the fall of the year, his correspondence with the Office was renewed with old-time spirit and good-will. In these letters he simply revelled in the thought of collaborating once again in the work at Tothill Street, which had still his unflinching adherence. In one letter (October, 1930) he passionately declared:—

"I believe the Taxation of Land Values to be a radical cure for many evils. The term Radical seems to have dropped out of use. I wish to be known as one. I am deeply interested in the movement. To me, land value taxation is one of the most important issues of the day, and Henry George was right all the time. But why on earth his gospel has been rejected by this country no fellow who has really studied his proposals can understand."

The work it was given to John Nettlefold to accomplish in the field of practical housing reform has not been in vain. He was a leader in the movement when there were not so many about the mission as there are to-day. As his nearest and dearest has said of him:—

"He most truly worked while he had the light and his work will last and be the sure foundation for work in the future. He wore himself out. He saw things too vividly and felt them too acutely; he could not spare himself in the righting of wrongs."

Out in the open road to economic justice, John Nettlefold was one man in ten thousand. Had he lived he would have taken a prominent place in developing opinion for the radical change in land tenure and taxation we exist to bring about. Because of his prolonged illness he was not at all known to our people. It is their loss. His friendship and whole-hearted devotion to the cause is one of my inspiring memories.

To Mrs Nettlefold and her family we extend our sincerest sympathy.

J. P.