

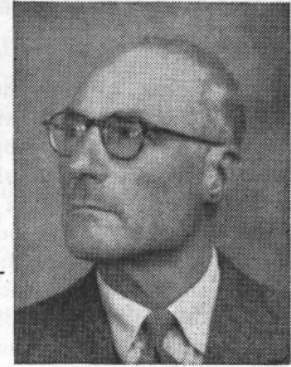
# A Planter's Story

By FRANK DUPUIS

**M**Y INTRODUCTION to land value taxation and free trade did not arise from any natural interest in land or taxation or economic. So far as I thought about such things at all I regarded land as the concern only of farmers and taxes, finance and economics as subjects for experts. What first started me on a line of enquiry leading ultimately to land value taxation was seeing queues of men at labour exchanges when I came home to England, after nearly twenty years in Central Africa, during the trade depression that paralysed Europe from 1931.

The contrasts to be observed between the effects of the depression in Africa and England were striking enough to arouse my curiosity. In Africa the collapse of export markets had meant bankruptcy to many planters and some traders and had aroused discontent among native producers but no African was either destitute or even badly in want. The "unemployment problem" simply did not exist. To find in England, where people were supposed to be so much richer and wiser than "natives," multitudes depending upon public assistance even for food, and begging for hard work as if it were a charity to be dispensed by the generous, was startling. It impressed me as unnatural although my English friends, to whom it was customary, did not regard it so. They were satisfied that all differences between England and Africa could be explained by industrialisation. But they could not tell me how. I thought they condemned in advance any suggestion that a more primitive society might have some lesson to teach them. Was not the black man a poor brother in need of their help and guidance? they asked. As I knew that the black man was just the same as other people and quite capable of providing for himself, I was less disposed to accept assurances which others seemed to pass without question.

The Social Creditors, then much in vogue, said that unemployment derived from gold currency and the bankers. But I recollected that in Nyasaland banks operated normally and gold was in current use. The Protectionists declared that imports put British workers out of jobs. This seemed obvious to me at the time; but I could not reconcile it with the fact that we had no Protective duties in Nyasaland. I remained puzzled. I might have yielded to the suggestion that unusual concern about such things was morbid had not the 1935 election revived general interest. I had not seen an election since boyhood and supposed that principles would be debated. From reading history I was drawn towards liberty and I knew that my doubts about Free Trade were inconsistent with my feelings. As the



*After education partly in Belgium and Germany Mr. Frank Dupuis served in the German East African campaign. Remaining in Nyasaland after the war, he managed cotton, tobacco and sisal estates. He joined the United Committee in 1937 and from 1949-52 was honorary assistant secretary to the International Union. F. D. P. has contributed many articles to LAND & LIBERTY.*

Liberal Party had been founded on Free Trade enthusiasm I hoped to be enlightened.

I noticed that the Liberal candidate in my constituency rarely mentioned Free Trade and then only apologetically. Meeting him personally I asked if he really believed trade could be free. He answered that Adam Smith was right in principle but conditions had now changed. Freer trade depended upon international agreement; so too did social policy. He believed that social services and public works to relieve unemployment were needed and that they could not be provided while so much was spent on armaments. All depended on the League of Nations. This gentleman was obviously sincere, his sympathies were akin to mine; but he left my ideas on liberty hopelessly confused. But my ignorance, indeed fear, of economics rendered me helpless. Attempts to read economic pamphlets and articles with their emphasis on finance and statistics had convinced me I was too dull to master this subject.

With rather forlorn hope I happened to look at an abridged edition of *The Wealth of Nations*. To my surprise it was written in excellent English and referred me not to statistics but to matters of common observation. It was positively interesting! Wealth, I discovered, was not money but the material things men made for themselves from natural materials and capital (or stock) was only the tools. Trade was the exchange of goods for goods, to mutual advantage; money only a convenient instrument in the transaction. By dismissing money from my thoughts I found the whole economic process became clear. To hinder trade at national frontiers was as absurd as preventing trade between one town and another. Trade was an individual, not a national affair. State interference could not help and must inevitably injure the general interest. I began to think that modern economists, starting always with money, were like men trying to understand Rembrandt's *Night Watch* by detaching a square inch of the picture and examining it under a microscope.

Nevertheless, Adam Smith was not concerned with the employment problem and so, meeting the candidate again,

*Land & Liberty*

I asked why, if the Free Trade principle was sound, as it appeared to be, unemployment had occurred when trade was free. He said he thought "the land value tax people" had some theory about this. As I had never heard of them he gave me the address where I might apply.

So it came about that my first introduction to land value taxation came from reading W. R. Lester's pamphlet, *Unemployment and the Land*.

I read and re-read this pamphlet. By lucid analysis of the elements in all production it showed how unemployment occurred and recurred everywhere that land could be monopolised. I saw immediately how in "native" countries, where most land was still virtually free, trade depression never reduced the people to such humiliating conditions as where land was all privately owned. Every statement tallied so exactly with my experience that I thought it must be too good to be true. I suspected there must be some "catch" which eluded my inexperienced grasp. Otherwise, I thought, this land question would be on the lips of all those experts and other prominent figures who talked of solving the unemployment problem.

But when I asked others, more experienced than myself, to point out the flaw I obtained no satisfaction. I was told that Lloyd George had tried land value taxation and that it had failed. Socialists said that it was capitalism, Conservatives that it was Socialism. Some told me that land value taxers were mere fanatics who hated landlords, others assured me that the whole controversy was out of date. All this was beside the point. None pointed to any obvious fallacy in the principle, or seemed anxious to do so. The general reluctance to discuss it mystified me. It was as if I had unearthed something more dangerous than Bolshevism.

Finally, I decided to approach the publishers of Mr. Lester's pamphlet. I did so with some reluctance as I could not whip up any hatred of landlords and, sensitive to ridicule, I dreaded fanaticism.

At the headquarters of the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values I noticed a remarkable readiness to supply me with all the available serious attempts to impugn the principle of land value taxation. The courteous Mr. A. W. Madsen seemed almost apologetic that there were so few. After I had studied these at leisure and examined the lamentable flounderings of a great man like Herbert Spencer in his long-cogitated attack on Henry George I decided that I could rule out any "catch."

Then I read *Progress and Poverty* and began to realise that in seeking the cause of unemployment I had discovered the law of human progress and the root of human decay; how civilisations arise and why "the earth is the tomb of

dead empires, no less than of dead men." I found a comprehensive social philosophy into which the speculations of other liberal thinkers fitted in perfect harmony. My faith in Western civilisation and in human nature itself was re-born. I saw how our civilisation *need not decay*. Henry George no more invented this philosophy than he invented the sun or moon. It was no more than everyone's innate sense of justice intelligently applied to social life. But in Henry George I recognised a master spirit able to arouse the thoughts and inspire the hearts of others.

On this occasion I was not able to provide myself with the usual excuses to "let someone else get on with it." I discovered, by diligent enquiry, that even in a small town one could find a few persons of an enquiring disposition. Not every political party was so well supported that it could afford to expel a member who provoked free discussion on appropriate occasions. Local editors also were not averse to intelligent controversy in their pages. Newspaper controversy, I found, helped to clarify one's own thoughts and to develop the practise of expression.

Having had the privilege of meeting many Georgeists I now smile at my original fears of fanaticism and landlord hatred. I well remember our amusement at a meeting of some hundred land value taxers to discover that the great majority were, in fact, owners of land.

Some people are surprised that we hold so firmly to our convictions against the prevailing drift of thought and the course of events. Perhaps some of these do not realise *how impossible it is to give up an opinion acquired by study in favour of a notion accepted on trust*. They cannot imagine the satisfaction of striving not against persons or parties but against common error; of knowing that every step gained is in the sphere of sound thinking, the point from which all improvement begins. I know of no circumstances in which, at trivial cost, one can gain so much unalloyed pleasure as in joining the Georgeist fellowship. One is at once a freeman in a society of intelligent men and women, young and old, united in sympathy but as varied in experience, vocation, condition and background as it is possible to be; poets, artists, mathematicians and accountants; labourers, clerks and "capitalists": this is the true classless society. And it is a society which presents its members with the key to friendship in almost every corner of the world.

And there is an even higher consideration. Rembrandt used paint and canvas; and with one's nose to the picture this is all one can see. But, surveyed from the proper distance, one sees design and colour that has elevated men's conceptions and enriched their lives for hundreds of years. Wealth, land and labour are material things in our daily existence. If, frightened of "economics," we seek in ignorance a vain refuge from the gloomy chaos of the world, they are nothing more. Seen in proper relation to natural law, however, these material things assume a new aspect. Through them, beyond the present gloom, we catch glimpses of the Great Design of all the ages.

#### For Your Friends

Four copies of W. R. Lester's 20-page pamphlet *UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE LAND*. One shilling, post free, from our offices. Single copy 3d., plus 2d. postage.