

# WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

1564-1616

On April 23rd we celebrate the birthday of him whom Carlyle declared was the natural king and unifying head of all English-speaking people.

In England, for many years preceding the birth of Shakespeare, enclosures of the public lands by the powerful landholders had proceeded apace. To resist this, in 1549, at Norwich, 20,000 labourers gathered under Robert Kett, himself a landholder, and formed a camp, levelling fences and hedges, and destroying enclosures in the surrounding country. This Norfolk rising lasted for more than a month, and was finally suppressed by German mercenaries. Kett and his brother were hanged in chains, and more than 10,000 country folk were put to death in that year. Enclosures continuing, in 1607 great assemblages of men, women and children again attempted to recover their ancient rights in land by levelling hedges, etc. These so-called "rebels" were defeated; John Reynolds, the leader, being hanged, drawn and quartered.

The audiences of 1608, present at Shakespeare's play, "Pericles," no doubt well understood the inner meaning of the following dialogue, also the broad hint to the Crown (Act II., Scene I):—

Third Fisherman: "Master, I marvel how the fishes live in the sea."

First Fisherman: "Why, as men do aland, the great ones eat up the little ones. I can compare our rich misers to nothing so fitly as a whale; a' plays and tumbles, driving the poor fry before him, and at last devours them all at a mouthful. Such whale have I heard on o' the land, who never leave gaping till they've swallow'd the whole parish, church, steeple, bells and all."

Third Fisherman: "But if the good king, Simonides, were of my mind we would purge the land of these drones that rob the bee of her honey."

Pericles: "How, from the finny subjects of the sea these fishers tell the infirmities of men."

The contempt with which humble petitioners against these enclosures were treated by those in authority is shown in II. King Henry VI., Act. I., Scene III.

(The Duke of Suffolk is mistaken for the Lord Protector.)

Suffolk: "What's here?" (Reads.) "Against the Duke of Suffolk for enclosing the commons of Melford. How now, sir knave?"

Second Petitioner: "Alas, sir! I am but a poor petitioner of our whole township."

Queen Margaret (tears the petition): "Away, base cullions."

Petitioners: "Come, let's begone." (Exeunt Petitioners.)

Not without significance are the words in another play:—

"This England is now bound in with shame, with inky blots, and rotten parchment bonds."

Mr. Hallam states in a well-known passage:—"No letter of Shakespeare's writing, no record of his conversations has been preserved." We certainly have at least one conversation reported at first-hand. It relates to a proposal made in 1614 by some of the local proprietors for the enclosure of certain common lands. The Corporation of Stratford strongly opposed the project on the ground that it would be a hardship to the poorer members of the community. Their clerk, Mr. Thomas Greene, who was related to Shakespeare, was in London about the business in the same year. Under date November 17, Greene says, in notes that still exist: "My cosen Shakespear comyng yesterday to town I went to see him how he did. He told me that they assured him they ment to inclose no further than to Gospell Bush, and so upp straight to the gate in Clopton hedg, and take in Salisburyes peece; and that they mean in April to survey the land, and then to gyve satisfaction, and not before; and he and Mr. Hall say they think ther will be nothyng done at all." This proves that the agents of the scheme had seen Shakespeare on the subject. There is evidently on Shakespeare's part a disapproval of the proposed enclosure.

Nine months later, when the local magnates again were bent upon pushing their scheme, the Corporation of Stratford-on-Avon appealed to Shakespeare, in London, through their clerk, Thomas Greene, to exert his influence against the plan of enclosure. He now took a more decided stand, and pronounced strongly against the whole business. We have a notice, dated 1st September, 1615, to the effect that Mr. Shakespeare had on that date told the agent of the Corporation that "he was not able to bear the enclosing of Welcombe." As he had local proprietary rights and pecuniary interests through which he would have benefited by the enclosure, his strong expression of feeling must refer to the wrong which he felt would be inflicted upon the people by the enclosure of the Welcombe Common fields. [Does not all the foregoing throw light on the questioned authorship of the plays?]

The information regarding "enclosures" is quoted from "The Encyclopædia Britannica," Ninth Edition, pp. 743/4. For what reason is this now suppressed? See the latest edition.

Shakespeare died eight months later. It is a pleasure to know that in the closing months of his life our great poet was looked up to and that he took upon himself the responsibility of manifesting his opposition to the robbery of the people of their birth-right in the land. It shows the sense of justice in him who said: "You take my life when you do take the means whereby I live" ("Merchant of Venice").

We here are reaping the dire results and bitter punishment from this self-same evil operating in England, centuries ago, and still perpetuated there.

In Australia, on every hand we witness, but, to-day with the public acquiescence, the enclosure of the people's lands against the people's interests. In town and country, all around us, lie enclosed areas of valuable land, largely held idle for speculative increase in value. Quite ignored is the equal right of all to the land, which is the birthright of all. Governments—like people, like politicians—take no steps to assert that right.

Our lands pass from hand to hand to the highest bidder; mercenary principles rule. The landless have no appeal. They are ignored. Their equal right to also possess those lands is not recognised. They must beg of those who "own" or "rent" land for permission to work and live.

To allow to live, or to sentence to death, is to-day, as ever, in the hands of the possessors of land. Herein is the underlying cause of the curse of unemployment and the tragedies arising therefrom. Of parents maddened by undeserved poverty. The absence in many of all hope in life. Do the holders of enclosed, unused, valuable land realise in these tragedies their own blood guiltiness?

While we have advanced a stage in that those who protest against our evil land system are not hanged, drawn and quartered, yet, on the other hand, the masses, to-day, have lost the insight of their forefathers in seeing that the underlying reason for involuntary unemployment and undeserved poverty lies in the enclosure by the few of land needed by the many.

Georgeans are doing their utmost that the People shall learn this fundamental cause of their troubles. That all employment finally rests upon access to land. That there is a better way than that of the brave martyrs, the Ketts, the Reynolds, and their followers.

viz., the Georgian way, to level the fences now shutting up unused valuable land against human activities.

Unless the people's leaders, in pulpit, platform and press—whether now ignorant, or suppressing their knowledge, it is equally to their shame—awake from apathy and also help in proclaiming the brotherhood of all in the land there is the danger ahead of an era of blind socialistic legislation and sacrifice of existing freedom in crude endeavours of the toilers to end their subjection to the curses arising from, but which they do not trace to, our private land monopoly system.

Were the common right of all in the land asserted, and the value of land arising from the community's presence and activities taken as "The People's Land Rent"—in proportion to the value of the land held—that is, were the rental value of land to go not into private pockets, but to the whole of the people, to whom it belongs, who earn it by their presence and joint activities; and were all our depre-datory, confiscatory, taxation coincidentally abolished, then both land and industry would be freed. Bonafide land users would immensely benefit. Our vast quantities of unused valuable land, now held for speculation and causing an artificial value in all used land, would become available for use, and all production and private possessions, be entirely free from the burdens of taxation.

There would then be no incentive to hold valuable land idle and every incentive to put land to use. Unemployment and undeserved poverty would disappear as does the mist before the sun.

The alternative to unemployment, supported strongly by so-called "Champions of Labour," but involving the legislative degradation of Labour, is the disgraceful one of doles, at which every manly Australian should hang his head in shame.

Landlordism, the mere "owning" of land, produces nothing, and is entitled to no share in production. Only the holding of land for use is justifiable. The task society must face, in the words of Shakespeare, is to "purge the land of these drones that rob the bee of her honey."

Only in according justice to all in their relation to the land can Australia hope to truly progress. On those lines then, "Advance Australia."

—F. T. Hodgkiss.

---

—Reprinted from "Progress" — Subscription, 2/- per annum. The Henry George League of Victoria, 18 George Parade, Melbourne, C.I. Secretary, D. England. Subscription, 4/- per annum.

---

Ruskin Press, Melbourne