



George Henry Evans & The Origins Of American Individualist-Anarchism



By **Kenneth R. Gregg, Jr.**

There are three distinct libertarian elements that coalesced into the Individualist-anarchist movement of Benjamin Tucker's day. The abolitionist movement, with its emphasis upon rejection of slavery in all forms, black slavery, chattel slavery (beginning with the demand for women's rights and later evolving into the demand for total freedom of sexual relations), state sovereignty (leading to a rejection of all government) is the most familiar to the students of the Individualist-anarchist movement. The other two movements, the land reform movement and the adult education movement (best embodied by the Workingman's Institutes and Mechanic's Institutes which originated in Scotland and England and spread throughout Great Britain, Europe and the United States) are far less well-known by students and scholars alike.¹

To date, there is no extended scholarly work on either of these movements, nor much literature on them compared to the extensive work that has been done on the abolitionist movement. There are no works detailing these two movements which carefully delineate their growth, ideology or the major figures involved.² The work which Josiah Warren praised as the "soundest exposition that ever had been made or ever could be made of the two principles" (Sovereignty of the Individual and Cost the Limit of Price) of

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which Warren had been the leading proponent was originally delivered as one of the regular courses of lectures before the New York Merchant's (Mechanic's) Institute during the winter of 1850-1. This course, entitled the "True Constitution of Government in the Sovereignty of the Individual as the Final Development of Protestantism, Democracy and Socialism," by Stephen Pearl Andrews, was published later in 1851 as *The Science of Society*, the work that was "the first and perhaps the most lucid expression of what would come to be called American Anarchism." The importance of the efforts of the Mechanic's and Workingman's Institutes, however, is not an issue which I am going to deal with here, though I did want to briefly mention it.

What was the most successful libertarian effort of the nineteenth century in America? Many would answer "the abolitionist movement and the freeing of slaves following the Civil War." But is this in fact the case? If one examines the legal structure before and following the Civil War, a good case can be made that Lincoln didn't free the slaves, but, rather, nationalized them. Whereas before the Civil War, the American legal system was (nominally) based upon natural law and natural rights principles, these natural rights trappings were scrapped during (and after) the Civil War, thus unleashing a far greater growth of the State and intrusions into the personal rights of all, both black and white. The character of American law was increasingly positivist in nature after the unsuccessful War of Southern Independence, thus ensuring the success of the centralizing efforts of the Northern power blocks. Viewed in this light, the abolitionist movement must be regarded as a failure in accomplishing the goal of freedom for all. While both black and white were thereafter to be treated equally, equal slavery for all should not be considered equivalent to equal freedom. Taxes and regulations over the individual grew at a rate that was almost as rapid as the growth of special privileges to Northern business interests.

Where, then, should we look to success? Perhaps to the land reform movement.

George Henry Evans' Early Career

*Our refuge is upon the soil, in all its freshness and fertility -
our heritage is on the Public Domain, in all its boundless
wealth and infinite variety. This heritage once secured to us.*

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*the evil we complain of will become our greatest good.
Machinery from the formidable rival, will sink into the
obedient instrument of our will - the master shall become
our servant - the tyrant shall become our slave.*

George Henry Evans,
Workingman's Advocate,
July 6, 1844

George Henry Evans was born on March 25, 1805 in rural Herefordshire, England and came to central New York with his family as a child. (His older brother, Frederick W. Evans, later became one of the leaders of the Shakers.) After having spent much of his youth apprenticed to a printer in Ithica, he moved to New York City in 1829 and immediately jumped into the radical labor movement, helping to found the New York Workingman's Party and editing the organization's journal, **The Working Man's Advocate**. He became an enthusiastic admirer of Robert Dale Owen, who had also just recently arrived in New York from his father's abortive activities in the Mid-west. While Evans continued to provide space in **The Working Man's Advocate** to such radical causes as the communism of Thomas Skidmore and the "public" (i.e., State financed and regulated) education schemes of Robert Dale Owen, once the Working Man's Party collapsed, these other ideas were swept to the wayside by Evans' proposals.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the attraction of Owen to Evans was their mutual rejection of religion, for the areas of disagreement between Evans' **Working Man's Advocate** and Owen's periodical, **The Free Enquirer** were relatively few (in terms of religion). Under Evans' hand, **The Working Man's Advocate** was a journal of both land reform and free-thought. Evans was a Painite radical who dabbled with atheism and used the pages of the journal and the office of the paper to publish, advertise and sell free-thought works such as Palmer's **Principles of Nature**, Kneeland's **Evidences of Christianity**, Voltaire's **Philosophical Dictionary**, Paine, Shelley, Volney and, of course, d'Holbach, the father of atheism. Free-thought bookstores were advertised in **The Working Man's Advocate** and Evans' later periodicals, **The Man**, **Young America**, **The Radical** and the others. He was also a supporter and participant of the annual Paine Birthday Celebrations within the radical community in New York and reported the proceedings in **The Working Man's Advocate**.

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By the eady 1830's, the Working Men's Parties had collapsed into a plethora of schismatic groups. Evans' association with many of the former "Workies" continued, although moving into other areas. Evans remained enthusiastic in his support for various radical Painite causes. In 1834, he became the vice-president of the Working Men Opposed to Paper Money, rejecting the calls for an inflationary money supply ("Rag Money System" as it was denounced by the Painites both in England and in America) and supporting a hard gold policy. Many of his associates, including John Windt, became active in the Loco Focos, the radical free-trade wing of the New York Democratic Party.

One of the constant concerns of Evans throughout his adult life was that of Indian rights. As he said in the November 1841 issue of *The Radical*:

The Government of the United States is, and has been for years, bringing indelible disgrace upon itself by its most iniquitous and merciless treatment of the Indian tribes; and for what? To possess itself of their lands, not for the use of its own people, for they have millions upon millions of acres yet uncultivated and untouched, but to be held for the benefit of speculators! Yes, the republican government of the United States is lavishing the blood and treasure of its own citizens, and hunting and destroying the Indians with worse than savage ferocity, because they will not consent to sell their birth-right for a mess of pottage; because they will not abandon the homes of their childhood, the graves of their fathers, to strangers! In history, in *our own* history, this cruel treatment of the Indians will be classed with the unsurpassed exterminating persecutions of the aborigines of Hispaniola by Columbus and his followers. What will be said of us in Indian tradition should any *Indians* be spared to tell their tale?

Of late years fraud appears indelibly stamped upon all our transactions with them. Treaties have been made with a few bribed chiefs, not authorized by their tribes, and then enforcing the stipulation at the point of the bayonet. Thus have the Cherokees and Seminoles been treated. The present war with the latter is a war of aggression on the part of the United States, evidently with the view of acquiring territory, without the shadow of reason or justice to support it.⁴

This brings us to the issue that concerned George Henry Evans

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for the bulk of his adult life: Land Reform.

Land Reform

"Thus were the first landholders usurpers and tyrants; and all who have since possessed their lands, have done so by right of inheritance, purchase, etc., from them; and the present proprietors, like their predecessors, are proud to own it, and like them, too, they exclude all others from the least pretence to their respective properties. And any one of them still can, by laws of their own making, oblige every living creature to remove off his property (which, to the great distress of mankind, is too often put in execution)."

— Thomas Spence, 1775

Evans, like others before and after him, was in the (fundamentally) English radical tradition. There were two central themes to this tradition: (1) The historical doctrine of the Norman Yoke, and (2) the labor theory of property.

Briefly, the Norman Yoke theory went like this. When the "free" peoples of England had their "ancient liberties" usurped by William the Conqueror (with, of course, the aid of the Normans who came with him), England's land was taken away from the rightful owners (the Anglo-Saxons) and distributed amongst the conquerors as spoils of the victory. Thus, the land titles were in the hands of the descendants of the usurpers. Justice demanded that the land titles should be taken from the receivers of the "ill-gotten gains" and placed in the hands of all the people of England. Many of the English radicals (including Thomas Paine, Thomas Spence and William Ogilvie) recommended that in order to correct the ills of British society, the lands must be taken over by the state and the rents from the land redistributed.⁵ Thus, the power of the large land owners and land speculators would be destroyed.

The labor theory of property was the other major element of Paineite radicalism. In their view, the only moral justification for ownership was in labor. Ownership was the social recognition of the natural relationship between the product of labor (property) and the producer (the laborer). A laborer had an absolute right to the product of his (or her) labor because it was his (or her) creation. It was not the community that created the axe or plow or stand of wheat, but some *particular* laborer.

But the other side of the coin, so to speak, was that since the

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land was not the creation of any *particular* individual, no individual could own the land (or land value). As Thomas Paine said in his **Agrarian Justice**:

. . . As it is impossible to separate the improvement made by cultivation, from the earth itself, upon which that improvement is made, the idea of landed property arose from that inseparable connection; but it is nevertheless true, that it is the value of the improvement only, and not the earth itself, that is individual property. Every proprietor, therefore, of cultivated land, owes to the community a *ground-rent* . . . for the land which he holds.

Evans viewed the American government in much the same light as the English radicals saw the British government. The American government was aggressively forcing the Indians off of their lands to make way for large land speculators and land owners, making it a general policy to sell the lands, not to small farmers, but rather to a "Landed Aristocracy" (the American version of the English landed gentry class) who would then control the Western lands.

With regard to the labor theory of property, Evans was more consistent (I feel) with the doctrine than were many of the English radicals. As Evans said in **The Radical** (April, 1841):

This difference between a monopoly in land, or in (other) property I consider wide, and distinct. *Land* is not the produce of labor; *Property* is any thing produced by labor. Therefore, I say, land is *not* property. A monopoly of land deprives some of their just and natural means of acquiring property; with equal rights (including the right of land) guaranteed, an accumulation of property in the hands of individuals could not prevent others from acquiring property, *as it now can*; nor do I think there could be any excessive accumulation as there now is.

Evans believed that neither individuals nor the government had any right to traffic in land. The speculators that he abhorred had no right to purchase large tracts of land from the government, and the government had no right to sell the public lands. Rather, the only right to the land that anyone had, was the right of *Occupancy-and-Use*. So long as the individual (or family) occupied and used the land, it was theirs. Evans (and his followers) estimated that, for an average family, the requirements for their use — including tillage soil, buildings, barn and recreation area — was 160 acres. To this they would have a right, once they had occupied

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and used the land for a period of time (fourteen months, as I recall). However, just as owners of large tracts of land and the government did not have the right to "traffic in its sale," neither did the farmer. Hence, while he could not sell the land, neither could the land be taken away from him for purposes of paying off his debts.

While the land speculator and the growing "Landed Aristocracy" were of concern to Evans, it was the control of the public lands by the government that was of paramount importance. It was estimated in 1852, that in the preceding sixty years only 100,000,000 acres of the public lands had been sold (and these lands, complained Evans, were sold primarily to land speculators who had intimate connections with the American government), while 1,400,000,000 acres still remained at the disposal and control of the government.⁶ It was the federal government that his efforts were primarily directed against.

Beginning slowly and quietly, in the year of his political coming out, 1829, until his death, Evans organized the Agrarian League to accomplish his aim of land reform. His political experiences had taught him that a minority party could not hope to win by its own votes, and that politicians cared more for offices than for principles. They (the politicians) would endorse any measure that could provide them with a block of supporters (certainly if the supporters held the balance of power). Evans' plan, then, was to ask any and all candidates for a given office to support the "pledge of the Agrarian League." In exchange for the acceptance of the "pledge," the candidate would be promised the support of the "Workies" that Evans had in his camp. The Agrarian League slowly became connected with many of the organizations of its day; trades' unions (Irish and German unions, the General Trades' Union and the National Trades' Union), Working Men's Parties, the Loco Focos and even the burgeoning Republican Party.⁷

When Evans began his crusade in 1829, he had the support of his friends and only a few newspapers (including, of course, his own) in New York. By 1850, his efforts had sown their seed. Of the over 2,000 papers that were published in the United States, at least 600 of these supported land reform. By the time of Evans' death on Feb. 2, 1856, the National Reform Association (as the Agrarian League was later called) was a force to be reckoned with.

In 1862, the first of the homestead laws were passed by Congress. It provided that any citizen, either the head of a family or

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twenty-one years of age, could acquire a tract of the Public Domain (federal public land), not exceeding 160 acres. As a condition for acquiring title to the land, the homesteader was obliged to settle on, and cultivate, the homestead for a period of at least fourteen months. The law expressly declared that no land so acquired could be levied against by creditors for the satisfaction of debts. Evans had won six years after his death.

Part of the attraction to Evans' proposal by the Eastern working men was that many of them viewed themselves as locked into the jobs that they held under the Northern business interests. This "Northern Slavery" was viewed as an evil comparable to, and for some, greater than the negro slavery of the South. As Evans said in the **Working Man's Advocate** (July 6, 1844) in a reply to the abolitionist Gerrit Smith:

I was formerly, like yourself, sir, a very warm advocate of the abolition of (black) slavery. This was before I saw that there was white slavery. Since I saw this, I have materially changed my views as to the means of abolishing negro slavery. I now see clearly, I think, that to give the landless black the privilege of changing masters now possessed by the landless white, would hardly be a benefit to him in exchange for his surety of support in sickness and old age, although he is in a favorable climate.

Evans adopted the "safety-valve" theory. That is, if the working men of the East (and others who were oppressed) could but have an alternative to their conditions, then they would be free to choose to stay at their jobs or leave for greener pastures. Those who looked at the conditions in the Eastern cities and found them not to their liking, could, in the phrase of Evans' follower, Horace Greeley,^s "go West, young man, go West."

One of Evans' first disciples was Lewis Masquerier, a native of Kentucky who had abandoned the communism of Owen for the individualism of Evans. He remained active in Evans' National Reform Association, along with Joshua K. Ingalls for many years. Both men drifted into anarchism before the Civil War, and Ingalls came to write for the anarchist journal, **Liberty**, edited by Benjamin Tucker.

Another admirer of Masquerier, and former compadre with him in the Owenite ventures, was Josiah Warren. While Warren was leery of political organizations, he supported many of the activities of Evans and the National Reform Association, printing pamphlets

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for them, acting as an agent for Evans' journalistic efforts.

Ideologically, Evans' principles remained with Ingalls for the rest of his life. He remained steadfast in his defense of the principles of the limitation of ownership of land, inalienability of land ownership and homesteading in general. Ingalls also was active in the Land Tenure Reform Association and the Land and Labour League of England in the early 1870's. But for many of his admirers, his activity in the anarchist movement brought Ingalls his greatest acclaim. As Ezra Heywood said in *The Word* (April, 1880):

"After Josiah Warren and Wm. B. Greene, from no other American have we received so much genuine intellectual assistance in labor reform as from J.K. Ingalls."

During the 1880's this grand old man of land reform gave classes (Industrial Economy Lectures) out of his residence in New York near Senecal Lake to the younger anarchist radicals, wrote for Tucker's *Liberty* and worked with many of the anarchists of his day.

Ingalls differed from Evans on his views of using the power of the vote to accomplish the Land Reform, however. As Ingalls was to write in the pages of Tucker's *Liberty* (June 24, 1893):

Under a sublime delusion that class-made laws are likely to right his wrongs, the workingman helps load up the gun by voting, despite all experience that, when it is discharged, it is the worker, and not the exploiter, who gets hurt. But he will go on voting just the same for the same *regime* if not with the same political party."

He was to have his disagreements with Tucker over the nature of economic rent. Ingalls agreed (again) with Evans that economic rent is the payment of a monopoly price that exists solely because of government intervention in the land market. Tucker argued that, contrarily, economic rent would exist whether or not a government existed. Indeed, Tucker's strongest castigation of Ingalls came from this (*Liberty*, June 7, 1890):

I am surprised to find such a close thinker as Mr. Ingalls endorse the absurd notion . . . that economic rent is simply the result of superstition and ignorance.

Be that as it may, the occupancy-and-use doctrine of George Henry Evans became the central core of the property theory of Benjamin R. Tucker and many of the other anarchists in *Liberty* and other anarchist periodicals of the day. Rejection of land titles

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and the assertion of the *right* of occupancy-and-use was the mainstay of Individualist-anarchism. The Individualist-anarchists applied the occupancy-and-use theory to a far wider context than did Evans; to children, capital, patents and copyrights, etc., etc. The doctrine that Evans developed to fight the power of the government's control over the public lands was now a full-blown philosophy designed to destroy the State. Now the Individualist-anarchist had an *objective* standard to judge the justice of the property relationships between man and man, and man and State.

Footnotes

1. The free-money and free-banking efforts by various radicals of the mid-nineteenth century are not treated here because the proponents in the freedom-in-money movement were not separate and distinct from the other radical movements of the day. The three categories; abolitionist, land reform and adult education, seem to me, upon reading the literature of the day, to be the clearest classifications of American radicals on the early and mid-nineteenth century American scene.
2. There is the biography of Thomas Hodgskin, the English free-market anarchist who was one of the founders of the Mechanic's Institute in London during the 1920's, but this work by Elie Halevy needs to be revised and updated. The author is doing some work on this, which should be completed soon.
3. On F.W. Evans, see, for example, Charles Nordhoff *The Communist Societies of the United States* (New York; Dover Publications, 1966), pp. 153-68.
4. See also Evans' comments in *The Working Man's Advocate*, September 17, 1831.
5. William Ogilvie, in his *An Essay on the Right of Property in Land* (1781) suggested a more complicated scheme in which families homesteading forty acres of land would be exempt from paying any ground tax to the (local) government. He suggested an exemption of 200 acres for land in North America, foreshadowing the 160 acre limitation of the homestead movement in the United States. The best source of information on "The Norman Yoke" is Christopher Hill's *Puritanism and Revolution* (New York, Schocken Books, 1958), pp. 50-122.
6. See John R. Commons, et al., *The History of Labour in the United States* (New York; MacmillanCo., 1958), p. 526.
7. It is interesting to note that it was one of Evans' close associates, Alvan E. Bovay, who moved to Wisconsin, and organized at Ripon (Wis.) the first conference of Whigs, Democrats and Free Soilers that adopted the name "Republican Party" in 1854.
8. Oddly, the relationship between Greeley and Evans is only touched on by all of the biographies of Greeley that the author has examined.