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Book Review: The Mutualist & the Moralist

Sidney E. Parker

1979

Libertarian Broadside No 7: *Selected Essays by Laurence Labadie*, introduction and appendices by James J. Martin \$1.50; *Libertarian Broadside* No 8: *Uncivil Liberty by Ezra Heywood*. Introduction by James J. Martin \$1.00. Published by Ralph Myles Publisher Inc, Colorado Springs.

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Retrieved 10/26/2021 from https://freedomnews.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Freedom-1979_06_30.pdf

Originally published in *Freedom*, June 30, 1979

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When Benjamin Tucker left the USA in 1908 and went into self-imposed exile in Europe, propaganda for his brand of anarchist mutualism did not cease. Articulate associates such as Clarence Lee Swartz, John Beverley Robinson, E.H. Fulton, Joseph A. Labadie and others kept up the work he had begun over thirty years before. By the 1930s, however, old age, death or disillusionment had silenced them. They had no successor – except one: Laurence Labadie (1898–1975), the son of Joseph.

A self-taught industrial worker, Laurence Labadie issued a series of pamphlets and leaflets which he printed on the small hand press he inherited from his father. In addition, he occasionally managed to get articles published in such libertarian journals as *Man*, *Resistance*, *A Way Out* and *The Indian Libertarian*. Towards the end of his life he even made the columns of a university publication called the *Journal of Human Relations* – a somewhat ironic event in view of his often expressed scorn for academics.

Like other Tuckerians, Labadie was a firm believer in the mutualist economics promulgated by Proudhon and Wm. B. Greene. Communism, even of the “anarcho” variety, he regarded as a species of infantilism. The only economy worthy of free individuals was, he thought, one in which private property and free competition prevailed: “When all forms of private property are abolished, exchange hampered or prohibited, competition wiped out, and money forbidden, the liberty and independence of the individual is gone, and there remains a tyranny as totalitarian and despotic as can be imagined.” (*Reflections on Socio-Economic Evolution*), Economic exploitation did not come from private property, but from monopolies created by the State. The three main forms assumed by these monopolies are “the control of the circulating medium – money and credit, private property in land not based on occupancy and use, patent rights and copyrights, and tariffs.” (*Anarchism applied to Economics*) Abolish the State, establish freedom of credit and competition and an anarchist society would result.

Such a society would not, however, be equalitarian, for Labadie regarded inequality of ability as inevitable and any attempt to artificially produce equality as tantamount to authoritarianism. The only “equality” he saw as both possible and desirable was “equality of opportunity”. He subscribed to Proudhon’s view that communist egalitarianism might well do away with the exploitation of the weak by the strong, but only in order to substitute the exploitation of the strong by the weak.

Laurence Labadie was a little-known figure during his lifetime. This first collection of selected essays, which fittingly appears in the *Libertarian Broadside* Series edited by his friend James J. Martin, should serve as a means of introducing a wider public to this pungent and provocative advocate of anarchy. Dr Martin also contributes a fascinating memoir of Labadie, together with one of their mutual friend Agnes Inglis, for many years curator of the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan.

Ezra Heywood’s *Uncivil Liberty*, first published, in 1873, has a certain curiosity value as an example of an early tract advocating woman’s suffrage and equality of legal rights. However, its overblown rhetorical style, heavily charged with appeals to abstract and unverifiable principles, its irritating moral meanderings which almost qualify the author as the Mary Whitehouse of “free love” (at one point he denounces women who have abortions as “perverted”), do not endear it to this reviewer...

S.E. PARKER