

# Land & Liberty

JOURNAL OF THE UNITED COMMITTEE FOR THE  
TAXATION OF LAND VALUES LTD.

177 VAUXHALL BRIDGE ROAD. LONDON. S.W.1  
TELEPHONE 01 834 4266

JANUARY & FEBRUARY, 1979

ISS No. 0023-7574

Established: JUNE, 1894

Nos. 1,1016 & 1,017

VOL. LXXXVI

Managing Editor

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Annual Subscription:

U.K. and Sterling Area: £4.00

U.S.A. and Canada: \$7.50

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## About the Authors



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THE TITLE of Henry George's famous book *Progress and Poverty* conjures up varying images. To those who have no more than a passing acquaintance with George's life and with his work, the impression of a passionate reformer with a single idea—the Single Tax—is dominant. Yet to describe *Progress and Poverty* as a book that advocates a tax on land values as a substitute for other taxes is like describing Hamlet as a ghost story; it tells you nothing of the book and certainly offers little inducement to read it.

But millions have read it. When it was first published 100 years ago it caused a sensation that went around the world. It was viciously attacked and widely applauded. It is true that its message is predominantly political—that is why it was both condemned and praised. But as a book it offers far more than a political message.

*Progress and Poverty* is a treatise on political economy that still challenges prevailing economic orthodoxy, its confusions, contradictions and inadequacies; it is a book that philosophically treats of the nature of man, his history, his motives and his destiny; it is a book about ethics, liberty and human rights.

It is full of paradoxes. It sympathises with the socialists but attacks socialism; private property is staunchly defended and vigorously attacked — for with impeccable premises and devastating logic George showed the economic and ethical distinction between property in land and property in the products of man. He observed the widespread corruption in political life yet saw politics and not revolution as the pathway to reform. And of course his book was about the greatest paradox of all — the persistence of poverty amid advancing wealth.

Various economic and political nostrums have been tried since George's day and they lie in ruins while poverty around the world still persists and bloody revolution seems to the landless the only way out. In Britain *Progress and Poverty* has been invoked by the ignorant or cunning to support travesties of George's basic reform, all of which have aggravated rather than eased the evils of our land tenure system.

The book is not without its faults, but these are either superficial or irrelevant. The thesis

Vic Blundell re-examines the book published 100 years ago

# The Philosophy of HENRY GEORGE

remains intact and is being confirmed as every year passes.

Many of the descriptive passages in the book match anything to be found in English literature, particularly the illustration of the unbounded savannah. Often in the midst of his exposition of a point George slips into an eloquent style which, though perhaps not to everyone's taste, shows the power and breadth of his imagination and the great moral force that motivated him. On the faulty Malthusian analogy between man and all other animals:

"He braves the scorching heat of the desert and the icy blasts of the polar sea, but not for food; he watches all night, but it is to trace the circling of the eternal stars. He adds toil to toil, to gratify a hunger no animal has felt, to assuage a thirst no beast can know."

"Out upon nature, in upon himself, back through the mists that shroud the past, forward into the darkness that overhangs the future, turns the restless desire that arises when the animal wants slumber in satisfaction. Beneath things, he seeks the law; he would know how the globe was forged and the stars were hung, and trace to their origins the springs of life..."<sup>1</sup>

On selfishness: "Short-sighted is the philosophy which counts on selfishness as the master motive of human action.... Call it religion, patriotism, sympathy, the enthusiasm for humanity, or the love of God — give it what name you will; there is yet a force which overcomes and drives out selfishness; a force which is the electricity of the moral universe; a force beside which all others are weak.... To be pitied is the man who has never seen and never felt it."<sup>2</sup>

On man's dependence upon land: "...the products of the sea cannot be taken, the light of the sun enjoyed, or any of the forces of

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**HENRY GEORGE** was born 1839. Died 1897. *Progress & Poverty* published 1879.

Ran for Mayor of New York in 1886 and 1897.

George's later books were *Social Problems*, *Protection or Free Trade?* *Perplexed Philosopher*, *Condition of Labour* and *Science of Political Economy*. George lectured in England, Ireland, Europe and Australia. *Progress & Poverty* has been published in numerous editions and in several condensed editions and has been translated into many languages. *Progress & Poverty* is included in the White House library of outstanding American books. There have been a number of biographies of Henry George including the first by his son Henry George Junior.

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nature utilised, without the use of land and its products. On the land we are born, from it we live, to it we return again — children of the soil as truly as is the blade of grass or the flower of the field."<sup>3</sup>

George was not always in eloquent mood. In exasperation at the faulty logic of John Stuart Mill (though he acknowledged his greatness and 'warm heart and noble mind') George resorts to a four-letter word. He quotes Mill as follows: "The land of Ireland, the land of every country, belongs to the people of that country. The individuals called land owners have no right in morality and justice to anything but the rent, or compensation for its saleable value." To which George retorts: "In the name of the Prophet — figs!" If the land of any country belongs to the people of that country, what right in morality and

justice, have land owners to the rent?"<sup>4</sup>

As well as a writer, philosopher, economist, lecturer and reformer, George was also a politician. He stood twice as a candidate for the Mayoralty of New York. On the second occasion (1897) during the latter days of his campaign he was introduced to an audience of working men as "the great friend of labour." However, unlike a typical politician he denied it and responded:

"I have never claimed to be a special friend of labour. Let us have done with this call for special privileges for labour.... I have never advocated nor asked for special rights or special sympathy for working men! What I stand for is the equal rights of all men!"<sup>5</sup>

Those who have read *Progress and Poverty* years ago should read it again. They will be reminded of its relevance to the world's problems since it was first published right through to the present today — and it will provide fresh inspiration to work for "the first great reform."

To those who have never read this classic I can do no better than quote John Dewey, the famous American educator and professor of philosophy at Columbia University:

"It would require less than the fingers of the two hands to enumerate those who, from Plato down, rank with Henry George among the world's social philosophers... No man, no graduate of a higher educational institution, has a right to regard himself as an educated man in social thought unless he has some firsthand acquaintance with the theoretical contribution of this great American thinker."

#### REFERENCES

1. *Progress and Poverty*, 1971 edition., Robert Schalkenbach, New York, pp. 135-6.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 463.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 363.
5. *Life of Henry George*, Henry George Jrn., p. 605, R.S.F. New York