

The Story of "Progress and Poverty"

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY BENJAMIN W. BURGER, AT THE HENRY GEORGE CONGRESS

HENRY GEORGE had just passed his thirty-eighth birthday, in September 1877, when he sat down to write "Progress and Poverty."

His life had already been replete with adventure and flashes of color.

At the age of fourteen, his school days were ended. He secured a job as helper in a crockery store in Philadelphia, at a weekly wage of Two Dollars.

Two years later, he left for New York, to sign as a seaman on the schooner "Hindoo," at a salary of Six Dollars monthly. After rounding the Cape of Good Hope, he reached East India and Australia.

Subsequently he made a trip to Boston on a coal schooner and in June, 1856, he returned to Philadelphia, where he learned the printing trade.

He had difficulty finding employment, so became a steward on a schooner sailing for California. After one hundred and fifty-five days at sea, during which the ship had several narrow escapes from foundering, he passed through the Straits of Magellan, crossed the Horn of the Golden Gate, and anchored in San Francisco Harbor, on May 27th, 1858.

Having heard of the discovery of gold on the Frazer River, in Western Canada, he determined to go there, but after working his way as seaman to Victoria, B. C., he changed his plans because of discouraging reports he had received.

George decided to return to San Francisco. In 1861, at the age of 22, he married.

In 1865, he wrote the first article for which he received money. He discussed the Assassination of President Lincoln. (His first vote, by the way, had been cast in 1860, for Abraham Lincoln.)

In the San Francisco *Times* of November 30th, 1866, he published a leading article entitled "Two Giants," discussing the apparent sympathetic approach of the United States and Russia toward each other.

In October, 1868, he wrote for the *Overland Monthly* an excellent article, seven thousand words in length, entitled "What the Railroads Will Bring Us," for which he received Forty Dollars.

In the same year, he went to New York in an unsuccessful attempt to procure for the San Francisco *Herald*, membership in the Associated Press.

Early in 1869, he wrote for the New York *Tribune* an article "The Chinese on the Pacific Coast," which brought him favorable notice from John Stuart Mill.

Later he wrote for the same paper a series of articles on conditions in California.

He wrote for the *Overland Monthly* a short story entitled "How Jack Breeze Missed Being a Pasha."

It is an excellent piece of fiction, redolent of the sea, and reminds one of Dana or Conrad.

George squeezed all of his sea experience into this story, and did it mighty well.

Twice he was nominated for the Legislature on the Democratic and the Labor tickets, and twice defeated.

He was Secretary to the Democratic State Convention, in 1871, and a delegate to the Democratic National Convention at Baltimore, in 1872, which performed the posterous feat of nominating Horace Greeley for President.

As early as 1869, he wrote an editorial in which he advocated the taxation of land values.

Later he wrote another editorial to supplement the first. Finally in 1871, in the course of four months, he wrote a forty-eight page pamphlet, "Our Land and Land Policy," in which he called attention to the fact, as it appeared to him, that a tax on land values is the most equitable of all taxes.

One thousand copies cost George Seventy-five Dollars. Twenty-one copies were sold at Twenty-five cents each; the rest were given away to good people who promised to read them. In my collection, you will find one of these excessively rare pamphlets.

In 1876 he delivered an address, "The Question Before the People. What is the Real Issue in the Presidential Campaign?"

The same year the Governor of California appointed him Inspector of Gas Meters, at a salary of Eighteen Hundred yearly.

Many years later, George stated to Noah Brooks that this position was no sinecure; that it imposed upon him a great deal of work, and that he hired some of his work to be performed by others without entire loss of his official pay, and he had done that, George said, in order to get time to do some writing, which he thought was important.

On July 4th, 1877, he delivered an oration "The American Republic, Its Dangers and Its Possibilities."

The following year, he delivered a lecture, "Why Work is Scarce, Wages Low, and Labor Restless."

In 1878, at the age of thirty-seven, he was invited to deliver a course of lectures on Economics, in the University of California. He gave one—that was all they could digest.

With this varied experience behind him, and with a wife and two children, and but little money, George started, on September 18th, 1877, to write "Progress and Poverty."

He carried on the work of composition upon the book with the greatest care. He wrote, and re-wrote, revised, and re-revised proofs until he felt himself satisfied.

He was always disorderly in the use of his tools and worked in the midst of a litter of papers and books, yet his manuscript looked neat.

After eighteen months of hard work, the book was completed in March, 1879. In the writing of it, he had drawn on the four Public Libraries of the City of San Francisco, besides his own collection of about eight hundred volumes.

Years later, George wrote:

"On the night on which I finished the final chapter of "Progress and Poverty," I felt that the talent entrusted to me had been accounted for—felt more fully satisfied, more deeply grateful than if all the kingdoms of the Earth had been laid at my feet."

On March 22nd, 1879, he shipped the completed manuscript to D. Appleton & Co., publishers in New York.

Six weeks later they wrote him:

"The manuscript has the merit of having been written with great clearness and force, but is very aggressive. There is little to encourage the publication of such a work at this time, and we must, therefore, decline it."

George then requested his brother Tom, in Philadelphia, to go to New York, to seek a market for the book. Tom submitted it to Harpers, who thought it revolutionary, and to Scribners who were polite but sceptical.

Next he interested Professor Swinton, and several other New York friends. They called at Appletons and again placed the manuscript before them. Appletons finally agreed to publish the book if George would advance the money for the electro-type plates. This George was unable to do, but he agreed to make the plates himself, which was satisfactory to the Appletons provided Professor Swinton would take on his own account one hundred copies of the book. This was satisfactory to Professor Swinton.

On May 17th, 1879, in the printing office of William M. Hinton, in San Francisco, Henry George, standing in his shirt sleeves at the case, set up the first two stick-fulls of type himself.

Five hundred copies of the book, known as the "Author's Edition," were struck off, and on October 4th, 1879, the plates made from this type were shipped East to the Appletons.

When the book was finished, George sent a copy to his father, eighty-one years old, living in Philadelphia.

He wrote him:

"It is with a deep feeling of gratitude to our Father in Heaven that I send you a printed copy of this book. I am grateful that I have been enabled to live to write it, and that you have been enabled to live to see it.

"It represents a great deal of work and a good deal of sacrifice, but now it is done. It will not be recognized at first—maybe not for some time—but it will ultimately be considered a great book, will be published in both hemispheres, and be translated into different languages. This I know, though neither of us may ever see it here. But the belief that I have expressed in this book—the belief that there is yet another life for us, makes that of little moment."

After many years of intensive search both in England and in the United States, I have been able to gather 15

copies of the "Author's Edition," all of which are here on display.

As the economic problem presses more and more insistently for solution, and the Single Tax as the sovereign remedy for our economic ills becomes more and more clearly perceived, these volumes, will, I believe, become increasingly valuable.

The manuscript of "Progress and Poverty," as submitted to Appletons in 1879, as well as a portion of the original first draft of 32 pages, was donated in 1914 by Henry George, Jr., then a Representative in Congress from New York, to the Congressional Library in Washington, D. C.

In 1925, Anna George deMille, Henry George's daughter, presented to the New York Public Library an incomplete copy of the manuscript of "Progress and Poverty."

The book did not go well at first. A page review in the New York *Sun* soon after publication, gave it a great lift.

One of Mr. George's friends, a Mr. Healy, who kept a book store in San Francisco, and was the chief distributor of "Progress and Poverty," has said that he sent for two hundred copies, but that more were given away than were sold during the first two years after publication.

The reviewer for the San Francisco *Chronicle*, under date February 1st, 1880, wrote:

"Notwithstanding the comparative obscurity of this writer as compared with Ricardo, Adam Smith, Mill, Spencer, and others, on the same subject, his volume will attract much attention among advanced minds."

Appletons brought out the first regular market edition of "Progress and Poverty," in January 1880, and the second in July of the same year.

They recently informed me, that they had printed, all told, seventeen thousand copies from the original plates.

Shortly after beginning publication of the book, they wrote George suggesting that he come to New York; that his presence would stimulate the sale of the book. Therefore, in August 1880, George borrowed money and came East on a third class ticket, leaving his family in San Francisco.

Slowly the book began to circulate.

In February 1883, George, without charge, permitted J. W. Lovell & Co. to issue a twenty cent paper-covered edition.

George never concerned himself with making money out of "Progress and Poverty," or indeed out of any of his works.

What he primarily cared for was to have the seed of his doctrine sown far and wide; all else was secondary.

The New York *Times* January 28th, 1883, referred to the Lovell paper-covered edition as:

"A still cheaper type edition of a book which has made, and justly made, its mark in the United States, in Germany, in France and in Great Britain."

The edition numbered fifteen thousand copies, and was exhausted in less than a week.

George was continually presenting copies of "Progress and Poverty," and his other books, to his numerous friends and admirers.

In my collection you will find 8 presentation copies of "Progress and Poverty" alone, besides 14 copies of his other books.

The first English edition of "Progress and Poverty," was issued in 1881 by Kegan Paul & Co. A second and third English editions followed in 1882 and 1883.

The first German edition was published in Berlin, in 1882. A cultured German, named Von Gutschow, had been so impressed by the book that he asked for permission to translate it, which George freely gave on the single condition that the translation should be faithful. George could read no foreign language, but he afterward had assurance that this translation was excellent.

The first French edition was published in 1888 and according to a writer in *Land and Liberty*,

"It disappeared at once from the book stalls and from the publishing trade in mysterious fashion."

Henry George & Co. published the book in 1886 and 1887. The Sterling Publishing Co. issued an edition in 1897. Doubleday and McClure published the book in 1898. Their successors, Doubleday Page & Co. began its publication in 1903.

Henry George, Jr., in his introduction to the 25th Anniversary Edition of "Progress and Poverty," under date of January 24th, 1905, wrote:

"Probably no exact statement of the book's extent of publication can be made; but a conservative estimate is that embracing all forms and languages, more than two million copies of "Progress and Poverty," have been printed to date."

The latest edition is the 50th Anniversary Edition, just published by the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation.

"Progress and Poverty," has also been translated into Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Italian, Finnish, Russian, Spanish, Hungarian, Dutch and Chinese.

How was George inspired to write the book?

He tells us. He was once riding on horseback in the hills back of Oakland.

"Absorbed in my own thoughts, I had driven the horse into the hills until he panted. Stopping for breath, I asked a passing teamster, for want of something better to say, what land was worth there. He pointed to some cows grazing off so far that they looked like mice.

"I don't know exactly, but there is a man over there who will sell some land for a thousand dollars an acre.' Like a flash it came upon me that there was the reason of advancing poverty with advancing wealth. With the growth of population, land grows in value, and the men who work it must pay for the privilege of working it. I turned back, amidst quiet thought, to the perception that

then came to me and has been with me ever since."

At another time, referring to the same incident, George stated:

"I there and then recognized the natural order—one of those experiences that make those who have had them feel thereafter that they can vaguely appreciate what mystics and poets have called the ecstatic vision. Yet at that time, I had never heard of the Physiocrats or even read a line of Adam Smith."

George did not invent the Single Tax. He never claimed to have invented it. The taxation of land values had been glimpsed by the French School of Economists, known as Physiocrats, almost a hundred years before "Progress and Poverty."

Patrick Edward Dove, a Scotch landlord of culture and generous aims, in a very remarkable book, entitled "The Theory of Human Progression," originally published in England, in 1850, also had elucidated the Single Tax Theory, long before George.

George's relation to the Single Tax, was rather that of expounder and apostle than inventor or discoverer. He made the idea clear, he buttressed it with arguments so cogent, foresaw objections with such prophetic insight, and answered them so conclusively, and withal showed so plainly that the idea is part of the scheme of the Universe, that history will always associate it with his name.

In his last work, "The Science of Political Economy," published posthumously, George stated that he had never heard of the Physiocrats and had read very little of the economic classics at the time he wrote "Our Land and Land Policy," which was the acorn from which the oak, "Progress and Poverty," grew.

Quesney, Mill, Spence, Thomas Paine and others, somewhat resemble the Norsemen whose keels touched the American shores centuries before those of Columbus; but nothing followed upon the event; they might just as well have stayed at home; while George is like the immortal Genoese with whose discovery the fortunes of mankind were changed.

No book in this age has made so profound an impression as "Progress and Poverty." No economic treatise has ever been so widely read. The eloquence of its style, the gleanings from literature, the skillful marshalling of facts and figures, the earnest moral, even religious enthusiasm of a great idea and a dominant purpose, sweep your sympathies along with the rushing tide of argument.

George's literary art is of the finest. His sentences are never involved, his choice of words is exact, his diction is simple yet rich, his thoughts expressed with transparent lucidity, and the different parts of his subject thoroughly well joined.

Independently of the economic matter of the book, there are so many facts contained in it, so many illustrations, and so many similes, all so interestingly combined, and so eloquently told, that the book on this account alone:

is unique; while considered merely as a political economic treatise, it is safe to assert that it is without a rival.

It is one of the most noteworthy facts connected with Henry George that with but little formal schooling, he should have achieved a style so marvelously excellent.

What manner of man was this who had written "Progress and Poverty?"

First he was a highly spiritual man. He was possessed of serenity, a certain inwardness, a measure of saintliness. Moreover, like all spiritual-minded people, George seemed always to be possessed of a great secret. This air of interior knowledge, of the perception of that which is hidden from the uninitiated, is a common mark of all refinement, esthetic as well as moral.

George believed in Democracy. He believed that human beings possessed indefeasible worth. That does not mean equality of gifts, or equality of mental energy, or equality of any of the traits that lead to success. It means equality in the same sense that each human being is a vehicle of some talent, however small, the bearer of some gift, however seemingly inconsiderable, which in the sum total of humanity's development is needed; that each one in his place and with his gift, however insignificant in appearance, is, in fact, indispensable.

The sole reason for ascribing such worth to human beings, is that the moral law enjoins us to do so. Before ever we have discovered whether a man has worth in him or not, the moral law enjoins us to ascribe it to him, to treat him as if he had it, to see him in the light of the possibilities which he has never made good and which he never wholly will make good. Thus, and thus only, shall we bring to light, in part at least, the precious things in his nature, the existence of which we can only divine. The moral law is wholly misunderstood if it be founded on the actual worth or value of men, for none of us has great worth or value. The moral law, as George conceived it, is a law for the eliciting of possibilities. It enjoins us that we shall invest others with a garment of light, that we shall ascribe worth to others, and to ourselves in order that they and we may become worthy. This is the spiritual conception which regulated George's attitude toward friends and foes.

Forty-six years ago, a Priest, who is still living, wrote to George a letter, suggesting that he become a Catholic.

George replied in part as follows:

"Once in a daylight, and in a city street, there came to me a thought, a vision, a call—give it what name you please. But every nerve quivered. And there and then I made a vow. Through evil and through good, whatever I have done and whatever I have left undone, to that I have been true. It was that that impelled me to write "Progress and Poverty," and that sustained me when else I should have failed. And when I had finished the last page, in the dead of night, when I was entirely alone, I flung myself on my knees and wept like a child. The rest was in the Master's hands. That is a feeling

that has never left me, that is constantly with me. And it has led me up and up. It has made me a better and purer man. It has been to me a religion, strong and deep, though vague—a religion of which I never like to speak, or make any outward manifestation, but yet that I try to follow."

What a self revealing picture of a Spiritual Man!

Henry George Memorial Congress

Pittsburgh, Sept. 23-25, 1929

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