

Henry George Reconsidered, By Rhoda Hellman. Carlton Press, New York, 1987. 273 pp. \$12.95. Reviewed by Robert Clancy.

Rhoda Hellman has been studying the Georgist movement for a long time, with special attention to the Henry George School, and this book is the fruit of her cogitations, a well-written and thoughtful work. She feels that there is an enigma about the movement which she has tried to fathom. There has not been general acceptance of Henry George, yet his followers continue with unabated enthusiasm in what she describes as "a lively limbo... neither a success nor a failure."

To resolve this enigma she begins with a biographical study of George - a quite sympathetic portrayal; and she herself notes that George evoked much warm admiration even on the part of those who disagreed with him.

Proceeding with a study of the movement, she focusses on Thomas Shearman, whose book Natural Taxation proposed the name "single tax." George accepted this term with moderate acquiescence. Further, Shearman advocated the "single tax limited" - a proposal to collect only so much of the rent as was needed to support limited government. Miss Hellman thinks that this was the serpent in the Georgist Eden. It is true that many Georgists supported the "single tax unlimited" - public collection of all the rent; but still, she notes, the emphasis was on single tax and not on other aspects of Georgist philosophy and reform.

These other aspects Miss Hellman finds to be indicated by George's advocacy of government ownership or control of "businesses which are in their nature monopolies", such as public utilities, and at the time, railroads. She also cites George's references to "the power of large aggregates of capital" and believes that George himself in his late years, as well as his followers, were mistaken in slighting this matter. She feels that "ultra-individualists" took over the movement.

Miss Hellman pays special attention to classes at the New York Henry George School which she observed over a period of twenty years (1950-1970). In these classes she sensed a drive on the part of teachers to roll on to a standard Georgist conclusion in catechism fashion, passing over students' doubts and difficulties.

This period mostly overlaps the period when I was Director of the School. I too visited classes - indeed I visited just about every one at Headquarters, advanced as well as basic. I feel that Miss Hellman, while being an attentive observer, is rather selective in the kinds of comments and objections from students that she cites - they happen to coincide with her own views - the "liberal" stance, favoring unions, income tax, etc. I heard a great many varied comments from students, conservative, liberal and just argumentative. The aim undertaken was understanding rather than assent, although there was a solid core of agreement with the basic principles.

Other interesting observations are brought out in the book, but Miss Hellman concludes with her advice to Georgists to reject the Shearman line and restore what she sees as the larger implications of George's philosophy - which would include various government controls, some taxes on large incomes and corporations and a check on other privileges. This, she feels, would restore the Georgist philosophy to the mainstream.

Thus Miss Hellman does not quite "see the cat" as do orthodox Georgists - as the central picture among the maze of trees; she still sees a lot of trees, with parts of a cat (perhaps like the Cheshire cat among the trees).

An answer would be that since George's day, a lot of these "other things" have been adopted - anti-trust laws, regulations of business as well as utilities, a graduated

income tax, the growth and clout of unions, rent controls, welfare measures, even public ownership of transportation - almost everything, indeed, except the single tax. The result is a hodge-podge and a mess, with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Can it be that we (and Henry George) are right in contending that, reform as you will, leaving rent largely untaxed will result in "the robber that takes all that is left"? With land values and rents sky-rocketing, should not the "all-devouring rent thesis" be more seriously looked at instead of sniffed at?

But Henry George Reconsidered is still a rare treat. Not many books are devoted to George and the Georgist movement. We can only welcome a discussion of the ideas. After all, the alternative is silence!

(Rhoda Hellman's book is available from the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation for \$12.95.)