

MR NOCK'S "HENRY GEORGE"

THE REMARKABLY full and carefully documented *Life of Henry George* by his son must ever remain a standard source of information. There is room none the less for some shorter work which for the rapid reader will throw into relief the salient points of George's career and which will at the same time indicate the nature of George's contribution to the world of ideas. This need Mr Albert Jay Nock has attempted to meet in his centenary tribute, *Henry George: An Essay*.

The sub-title is apposite. It is little more than an essay. It makes no attempt to tell the detail of George's life. With that there can be no quarrel. What is permanent in him is the legacy of thought and ideals he has left to the world. The incidents of his earthly sojourn are important only as they throw light upon that. The selection and the emphasis placed upon these incidents may be open to criticism, but the method adopted by Mr Nock is sound. What a book of this kind must make clear, if it is to fulfil its task, is the essence of philosophy that George gave to the world. In this Mr Nock has hardly succeeded. For those who know George's philosophy Mr Nock is stimulating, and may well induce reconsideration of cherished beliefs; but it is to be doubted whether those who are not familiar with it will rise from the perusal of this book with any clear comprehension of the economic, social and ethical teaching of Henry George.

Yet Mr Nock's essay is a work of art. There is a unity of purpose running through it which carries the reader almost breathlessly from beginning to end. It is a magnificent tribute to George, to his character as a man and to his intellectual achievement, but it is not wholly a portrait of Henry George; it is a picture of him super-imposed upon a portrait of Mr Nock.

There runs throughout this book an appalling description of the poverty of the environment in which George was brought up and lived most of his life, not merely of physical poverty, indeed almost squalor, but of intellectual poverty, lack of opportunities of culture and of refinement. The picture is drawn in too dark colours. So far as it is true, the impression of Henry George's intellectual achievement is strengthened; he had indeed to be endowed with profound genius to overcome as he did the handicaps of the society in which he lived.

But the background which Mr Nock has provided to George's life serves another purpose; it explains "the general furniture of his mind, certain postulates about the intellectual and moral constitution of man; about the political organization of society; about family life; about the nature and purpose of education." These postulates Mr Nock considers to have been mostly mistaken, and to have been the cause of George's faith in the virtues of political action and his assumption of the rôle of a crusader, all of which to Mr Nock was an egregious mistake. George was a social philosopher and he should have confined himself to that rôle. He should have devoted himself to writing books for and cultivating the acquaintance of the refined and educated minority, and have left the task of popularizing his ideas to look after itself.

It is an interesting thesis and an easy one for Mr Nock to elaborate sixty years after *Progress and Poverty* was written. It fits in with the cynical thought of our time in its contempt for the masses, in its doctrine of the functions of an *elite* as expounded by Sorel and Pareto and as seized upon and turned to practical uses by Mussolini and others. But at that time it could no more have occurred to Henry George than it could

have occurred to John Stuart Mill, though the latter was brought up in the full enjoyment of all that classical philosophy and the culture of his age could give him.

The doctrines of the physiocrats, so like George's in almost every respect, were the possession of an *elite*, but they did not save France. The Revolution came, sweeping away good and bad before it, and the ideas of the physiocrats were lost in oblivion to be painfully rediscovered long after.

Mr Nock loses no opportunity of disparaging George's "irrational faith in political action." Speaking of George's candidature for the mayoralty of New York in 1886 he says: "It is not quite true that the opposition to George was as largely engineered by 'the forces of organized monopoly and greed' as his friends thought it was. There was that, of course; but he had against him also the considerable body of moderate and disinterested opinion which in America has always been apprehensive of what John Adams, Madison, Randolph, Gerry, Hamilton, foresaw as the 'excesses,' the 'dangers,' the 'turbulence,' of unchecked and unmodified mass-rule." In this one hears the authentic voice of the aristocrat, the same tone and the same arguments, for instance, as the more intelligent defenders of the privileges of the House of Lords used in this country when the powers of our second chamber came into question. Indeed the very word "democracy" and everything associated with it fills Mr Nock with repugnance.

The fact is that Mr Nock is a queer mixture of aristocrat and anarchist. The "state" is an evil thing and should be destroyed. Mr Nock's anarchist bias is illustrated by his remark that George's "acquiescence in the shocking miscarriage of justice which hanged the Chicago anarchists, Spies, Parsons, Engel and Fischer, accused of complicity in the murder of certain policemen in 1885, alienated great numbers of people." This very minor incident in George's life is impartially recorded in the biography by his son, from which it appears that George wrote an article on behalf of free speech, condemning the breaking up of a meeting to express sympathy with the Chicago anarchists, in the course of which he said that after reading the review of the testimony given in the Supreme Court decision he thought that the accused were guilty under the laws of Illinois. He went on to say that he thought there were mitigating circumstances and pleaded for the commutation of the death sentence. George may or may not have been right in his opinion on the legal aspects of the question, but his conduct does not deserve reproach, and least of all to be stigmatized as acquiescence in a shocking miscarriage of justice.

Mr Nock's anarchism in fact goes so far as to deny that economic rent should be used for state revenue. He favours "a local confiscation of rent" rather than "the disadvantageous policy of national confiscation which George contemplated." As Mr Nock clearly deprecates all existing forms of taxation, it is evident that he would leave the state without revenue, and therefore that there could be no state under his dispensation. Curiously enough, Mr Nock refers with approval to Thomas Paine's remark in *Agrarian Justice* that "Every proprietor, therefore, of cultivated land owes to the community a *ground-rent*, for I know no better term to express the idea by, for the land which he holds." He says that Paine thus leaves "clear the distinction between taxing (which in theory may or may not bear on production, but in practice invariably does) and rent-collecting, which does not bear on production." Apart from the unwarranted implica-

tion that a tax on land values bears on production, it is evident that it has never occurred to Mr Nock that rent-collecting involves far more interference by his *bête-noire*, the state, than taxation of land values does.

Yet, though all this and more may be said in criticism of Mr Nock's essay, it is a book to be read and re-read. His opinions are sincerely and strongly held, and the very strength of his disagreement with some aspects of George's actions throws into higher relief his admiration of George's contribution to human thought. Take for example this passage on *Progress and Poverty*:

"It is to-day, in point of circulation, the most successful book on economics ever printed; its sales have run to a total of more than two million copies. In two respects it is unique in economic literature; it is the first and only serious attempt to establish the cause of industrial depressions, and the cause of involuntary poverty; and it is the only book of which the author could say, after eighteen years of white-hot controversy, that he had not seen a single objection to any position taken in the book which had not been fully met and answered in the book itself. Its reasoning has never been successfully impugned, and its economic premises are of course beyond question; they are a matter of common observation, common knowledge. Count Tolstoy said most truly that 'people do not

argue with the teaching of George; they simply do not know it: and it is impossible to do otherwise with his teaching, for he who becomes acquainted with it cannot but agree.'"

Or again this on *The Condition of Labour*:

"All his battles were fought to vindicate the natural rights of man as against those who would deny or over-ride them. In its eloquent attestation of this purpose, and of the ethical sanction which he invoked upon this purpose, his letter to the Pope has great permanent value. As an *apologia pro vita sua* its value even exceeds that of the section which ends *Progress and Poverty*. Probably no one can quite complete his understanding of George, or quite round out an appreciation of him, without a sympathetic reading and re-reading of this letter."

There are many other passages which one would like to quote, but the reader must be referred to the book itself. (In the United States copies of the special paper bound edition at the price of \$1 post-paid may be obtained from the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 32 East 29th Street, New York. In Great Britain copies of this edition may be obtained from the Henry George Foundation, 34 Knightrider Street, London, E.C.4, at the price of 6s. post free.)

F. C. R. D.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Mr E. J. Craigie, M.P., after attendance at the New York Conference and Centenary, had intended to remain in the States till 13th October fulfilling a number of speaking engagements. Owing to the war, however, he had to alter his plans and get home sooner. He made for Los Angeles to reach the "Monterey" sailing on 13th September. His train was 19 hours late. By 30 miles motor drive to the Wilmington Pier he arrived to find the boat out in mid stream, but by a handy tender and a final clambering up on the rope ladder, he got safe on board. Mr Craigie writes from Adelaide, 16th October, expressing great appreciation of his election as President of the International Union, not only as honour to himself but as a compliment to the Australian movement. Immediately upon his arrival home he visited his Flinders constituents and addressed their Henry George Centenary celebration. The election of himself as President of the Union has pleased them and the city and local papers have featured it.

The *People's Advocate*, of which Mr Craigie is editor, has produced in its August number an exceptionally fine centenary edition, with art cover, its contents being of permanent value. The biographical articles are well done. In the "Interesting Stories of the Author" of *Progress and Poverty* by San Franciscans who knew him, credit is given to James McClatchy, founder and editor of the *Sacramento Bee*, for having inspired Henry George to write the book. There is an informing description of the visit to Australia in 1890, supplementing the information given in the *Life* by details of the tour in South Australia and Western Australia. It was in Adelaide that he met Mr L. H. Berens and Mr Ignatius Singer, who themselves afterwards came to England and are known by their work *The Story of My Dictatorship*, besides for many other and abiding services to the movement in this country, Mr Berens being the Hon Treasurer of the English League for many years. Mr Berens presided at the second Adelaide lecture and he and Mrs Berens were hosts to Mr and Mrs George during their stay. Other features in this excellent issue

of the *People's Advocate* include a convincing statement on principle and policy and a summary of the paper *The Taxing and Rating of Land Values in Australia* presented by Mr Craigie at the New York Conference. The Journal is the organ of the Henry George League of South Australia, George Parade, Adelaide; subscription 2s. a year in Australia and 3s. to other countries.

The *Adelaide Advertiser* has been carrying a series of weekly articles, which the League has contributed, advertising at the same time the literature it has for sale and enlisting support for its work.

NEW SOUTH WALES

The August issue of *The Standard*, "An Australian Journal to Advocate the Rights of the People in the Land," is a double number of 40 pages containing matter of exceptional interest. The Journal is in its thirty-fourth year, being published monthly by the Henry George League of N.S.W., editor A. G. Huie, at Daking House, Rawson Place, Sydney, subscription 2s. a year within the Commonwealth and 3s. a year to other countries. This is a Souvenir Memorial number celebrating the Henry George Centenary, and appropriately one of its main features is the account it gives of the land values legislation in New South Wales and the influence of the League and its many active members in achieving so much. It is an inspiring statement which is a tribute to these men and women and particularly to the constant industry and vigilance of Mr Huie himself. The long list of co-workers and the notes on their contributions by voice and pen, and in many cases by financial help and sacrifice, is very impressive.

The Sydney Single Tax League as it was first called, preceded by that formed at Darlington, was inaugurated in September, 1901, and after the early years of struggle *The Standard* was successfully launched in 1904, since when it has never failed to appear each month. Already in 1901 proposals for a comprehensive Local Government Bill which would embody the rating of land values were in the forefront of Parliamentary discussion and the League made it its business by deputation and other