HENRY GEORGE

A PAPER READ BY THOMAS E. LYONS, OF THE WISCONSIN TAX COMMISSION BEFORE THE MADISON LITERARY CLUB, DECEMBER 13, 1915

We print Mr. Lyons' address because it is of interest as coming from a man of breadth and culture who is yet not a Single Taxer.—EDITOR SINGLE TAX REVIEW.

An effort to choose a subject combining some degree of public interest with substantial achievement, from a limited acquaintance in that company, has led me to undertake a review of the life and labors of Henry George. While his theories run counter to general opinion and he is persona non grata to the economists, his teachings exerted a considerable influence on the thought of his time and he still has an ardent and numerous following. His life and labors, therefore, may not be unworthy of an hour's consideration.

There is nothing of special interest or significance in the early life or antecedents of Henry George. He was born in Philadelphia in 1839 of a middle-class American family derived from English stock with an admixture of Scotch and Welsh. His father, Richard Samuel Henry George, was a man of ordinary intelligence and limited means, whose business alternated between holding a clerical position in the Philadelphia custom house and conducting a printing establishment devoted to the publication of religious magazines and treatises. The mother was a "Mary Vallance," daughter of John Vallance, a Scotch engraver of some prominence, a woman of domestic habits and rather narrow range of vision, but of deep religious nature. The conditions of the home were wholesome but commonplace; the atmosphere calculated to repress rather than develop independence of mind or spontaneity of feeling; the soil uncongenial for virile and expanding boyhood.

While the family income was sufficient to maintain the parents and ten children in modest circumstances, the practice of economy was necessary and constant. Thrift was a cardinal virtue in the George household—a kind of Ninth Beatitude. The children had the usual educational facilities of the period, but developed no special aptitude or interest in study. Young George received his first training at a private school for children and later attended the Mount Vernon Grammar School and Episcopal Academy. There is nothing in his brief school career to distinguish him from the average schoolboy unless it be his particularly bad spelling. Undoubtedly the greatest influence in his formal education was the opportunity, secured through a family friend, of attending the lectures and reading the magazines in the Franklin Institute. Here we find the first manifestation of interest in intellectual work.

Even at this early period the problem of self-support was present in the boy's mind with the full approval of his parents. At the age of fourteen he sought and secured employment as general helper in a crockery store at the munificent salary of two dollars a week. With this employment his school-days came to an end. High school or college had he none. Even this employment was intermittent, and the boy was constantly on the lookout for a more remunerative position. A great-uncle, Richard George, had been a prosperous ship-owner and the traditions of his achievements were common property in the George household. This circumstance did not fail to excite the interest of the younger members, and one of young George's early ambitions was to emulate the example of his ancestor and seek his fortune on the sea. Through the interest of a friend of the family he finally secured service on the vessel "Hindoo," then about to sail for East India and Australia, and was signed as a seaman under the label A. B. (able-bodied), the only degree he ever received. Thus at the early age of sixteen Henry George took his place among the toilers, to whom he was later to dedicate the service of his life. The "Hindoo" sailed from Philadelphia in April, 1855, rounded the Cape of Good Hope, touched at East Indian and Australian ports and returned to Philadelphia in June, 1856. The voyage was slow and the hardships great, but the interest to the young sailor absorbing.

After returning to Philadelphia and a brief respite at the family home, young George again sought employment in that city, but with limited success. He learned to set type and acquired some degree of proficiency in that work, which stood him in good stead later during the trying years in California. The employment was irregular and the wages small, and his nature craved a wider field and less restricted environment. The slavery agitation had now become acute, and so great a human crisis could not fail to arouse his sympathies. The elder George was a Democrat, and while not ipso facto in favor of slavery, supported the Buchanan administration. Even the religious mother, who abhorred cruelty in every form, found authority in her family Bible to support the institution. This led to frequent discussions, accentuated differences in the family circle, and tended to make the growing boy restive under the rigid conventions and rather cold morality of his surroundings.

The Pacific Coast had already begun to attract attention. Tales of the wonderful wealth it contained and the opportunities it offered, appealed to his youthful imagination. To be sure, it could only be reached by doubling Cape Horn, but this was no deterrent to our young hero, for the only real freedom he had ever known was while on board the "Hindoo." He accordingly sought and secured employment as steward on the schooner "Schubrick," which set sail for California in 1857. The trip presented the usual hardships and vicissitudes of a long voyage with the means of navigation then in vogue, but it finally came to an end; on the 27th day of May, 1858, the "Schu-

brick" crossed the horn of the Golden Gate and anchored in the harbor of San Francisco.

The wonder and charm and breezy freedom of the new country profoundly impressed young George. He dreamed of a time when the new State would contain a population greater than that of New England, and when San Francisco would rival New York in magnificance and power. He even vaguely beheld himself as an important factor in the life of this growing section and, in some mysterious way, serving its people. The means by which this miracle was to be wrought was yet unknown. But sunshine and dreams were not coin current at restaurant and lodging house; even at this early day the stern realities of life asserted themselves on the Pacific Coast—soon to be intensified by a bitter struggle between wealth and power on one hand and labor and poverty on the other. The discovery of gold ten years before and the more recent discovery of the greater wealth of fertile soil and virgin forest had attracted the youth and energy of the older States to California, believing it to be a veritable El Dorado. Many of these were disappointed, and instead of gathering gold on the sands or shovelling it from the mines, were compelled to earn their livlihood as best they might. The competition was sharp and the struggle for existence acute.

The important problem for young George was self-support; but with the utmost willingness to work he could not find employment. He had burned his bridges in the East, and his pride would not permit him to return. To abandon California for the sea meant years of isolation and practical servitude before the mast. He, therefore, resolved to hold out, but the problem was not easy nor the prospect encouraging. Employment as a journeyman printer was neither regular nor remunerative, and at times he was reduced to the direst poverty, scarcely knowing where the next meal was to come from. His associates were few and these mostly former acquaintances from the East, who were as helpless and needy as himself.

In this unpromising situation he assumed another responsibility. In 1860 he formed the acquaintance of Annie C. Fox, a young lady of seventeen, fresh from the convent school at Los Angeles. This acquaintance proved mutually congenial and resulted in frequent meetings. The thought of marriage, however, could not be entertained, for George could scarcely support himself, much less a wife and family; but a crisis in the fortunes of the young lady brought matters to a climax. She was the orphan daughter of an English Protestant father and Irish Catholic mother, who had separated on account of religious differences. The father disappeared and the mother soon after died of grief, and the daughter was informally adopted by an aunt and her irascible husband. The latter disapproved of George's attentions and finally requested him to discontinue his visits, at the same time rudely reproving the girl. Smarting under the sting of this humiliation she decided to leave San Francisco to seek self-support elsewhere. When she communi-

cated this decision to Henry George, he impulsively drew a coin from his pocket, declared it was the only thing he had in the world, but if with knowledge of this fact she would consent to marriage, she should never leave San Francisco. The contract was closed, a minister employed and the ceremony performed that very day. The alliance thus hastily formed stood the test of privation and hardship for more than a third of a century with unbroken harmony and increasing loyalty to the end.

This added responsibility intensified both his efforts and his needs. The succeeding years were ones of extreme poverty for the young household. Irregular employment as a printer furnished only the barest necessities, and occasional ventures in the mining field to better his condition successively exhausted the few dollars in reserve. George's natural dignity and rigid loyalty to principle were ill-suited to the California of the adventurer and the miner. He lacked the comradarie necessary for mingling in the Bohemian life immortalized by Mark Twain and Bret Harte. But the isolation and hardship which would have disheartened others made George more thoughtful and reflective. Realizing his responsibilities and defects he resolved to make more systematic use of his resources and to adopt a more rigid discipline for himself. He accordingly wrote out a programme pledging himself to study each day the problems of the next; to do whatever fell to his lot with promptness and dispatch, and in the meantime to begin a systematic course of reading. Hitherto, while he had reflected much, his reading had been desultory and ill-directed. There was thus far no indication of the intellectual concentration and mental resourcefulness which characterized his later years. Indeed his whole career up to his time, tested by the modern standard of efficiency, must be rated a failure.

For closer identification with the life of the community about him, he now joined a fraternal organization, attended labor meetings and took part in a local debating club. A feature of his contributions to these gatherings was his independence of judgment and the clearness with which he presented his views. For the support of himself and family he still relied upon the printer's case, and occasionally wrote an article for the paper on which he was employed without disclosing his identity.

Throughout the Civil War George's sympathies were strongly anti-slavery. He followed its varying fortunes with deepest interest and was greatly rejoiced at its close. Then came the news of the assassination of Lincoln, which impressed him profoundly. Impelled by the necessity of expressing his convictions in some way, he wrote an article descriptive of the scene in Ford's Theatre as the assassin entered the President's box, fired the fatal shot and leaped to the stage in full view of the audience. The unsigned article was sent to the *Alta California* and published by that paper the next day. When inquiry disclosed that it was written by Henry George, the editor invited him to write an account of the memorial exercises then

about to be held at San Francisco. Instead he wrote an appreciation of Lincoln's character, which appeared as the leading editorial in the next issue. These Lincoln letters practically transferred him from the printer's case to the contributor's desk and editor's sanctum. They attracted the notice of the newspaper fraternity, and George was frequently requested to write occasional articles on a variety of subjects after that time.

During the succeeding ten years he was successively connected as reporter, editor or part owner, with numerous California newspapers, all of the struggling type organized in opposition to the existing press, which was dominated by capitalistic interests. Most of these ventures were short-lived and failed either through lack of support or absorption by older journals, but George's connection with several of them was even shorter than their lives, his retirement in every case resulting from difference of opinion as to management. He had definite notions of the mission of a newspaper and the duty of a journalist, which he refused to modify from considerations of policy. Throughout his life he seemed utterly incapable of compromise on a question of principle, however great the cost to himself. During his connection with these newspapers he wrote several leading articles on current issues, such as the effect of the new transcontinental railroad then in process of construction, California land policy, the tariff and the Chinese question. The latter was printed in pamphlet form and won commendation from John Stuart Mill.

About this time an effort was made to organize an independent paper in San Francisco of State-wide circulation, but the established press had control of the news service to the Pacific Coast and the new enterprise could not secure it. George's thorough knowledge of conditions in California, coupled with his skill in argument, led to his selection as the proper person to negotiate for the service required. He was accordingly sent to New York, where he met the representative of the Associated Press and successfully refuted every objection raised to furnishing the service, but nevertheless failed to secure it. The trip proved advantageous, as it resulted in an invitation to write a series of articles on conditions in California for the *New York Tribune*, and other experiences which profoundly influenced his after life. One of these was referred to in a speech during his campaign for the candidacy of Mayor of New York seventeen years later in the following words:

> "Years ago I came to this State from the West unknown and knowing nobody. I saw and realized for the first time the shocking contrast between monstrous wealth and deepest want; and here I made a vow from which I have never faltered—to seek out and remedy if I could the cause that condemned little children to live such a life as you know them to live in the squalid districts."

The increasing recognition of George's ability as a writer brought him compensation sufficient to support his family in frugal comfort, but little beyond. His one additional luxury was a mustang pony which he rode about

the streets and suburbs of San Francisco. The practice benefitted his none too rugged health, and afforded the aloofness and opportunity for thoughtful reflection which had become his settled habit. On one of these rides an incident occurred on the outskirts of San Francisco to which he ascribed great significance. Inquiring of a passing teamster as to the price of land in that vicinity he was informed that there was no land for sale in that neighborhood, but that land on a distant hillside, where cattle were grazing, could be obtained for $1,000 an acre. Referring to this incident later Mr. George said:

> "I well recall the day when, checking my horse on a rise that overlooked San Francisco Bay, the commonplace reply of a passing teamster to a commonplace question crystallized as by a lightning flash my brooding thoughts into coherence. 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."

The constant presence of want and suffering in the midst of plenty and the contrast between enormous wealth and distressing poverty had weighed upon George's mind for many years. That such a condition could exist in a land of unlimited resources, and in the presence of increased production, excited his wonder and amazement, and he could not accept it as the natural order. He therefore, set himself the task of finding out what that natural order was. The tragedy of life in the slums of New York, and the reply of the passing teamster in the suburbs of San Franciscoe, pitomized the condition and suggested the cause. The remedy was yet to seek.

In 1871, at the age of thirty-two, Henry George first undertook the solution of this problem in a pamphlet entitled "Our Land and Land Policy—State and National." The pamphlet briefly outlined the doctrine more fully set forth in "Progress and Poverty" later, but lacked the exhaustive and orderly development of that work. The article drew favorable mention from Horace White, of the *Chicago Tribune*, David A. Wells of New York, and the chief of the National Bureau of Statistics, but otherwise attracted little attention outside of California. His writings on the Chinese question, the new transcontinental railroad and the pamphlet on the land question brought him some recognition as an economist and led to an invitation to deliver a special lecture on political economy before the California University in 1877. His name was also frequently mentioned for a position in the faculty, but the scant respect for recognized authority, and the unorthodox views expressed in his lecture defeated his chance for the proposed chair. His editorial work won him political recognition in the State, and ultimately secured him the appointment of inspector of gas meters, a position ill-suited to his taste, but welcomed because it supplemented an always meager income. He was twice nominated for the legislature on the Democratic and Labor tickets, but failed of election each time. A speech in support of the Demo-

cratic candidate in 1876 was distributed as a campaign document. In 1877 he delivered the Fourth of July oration at San Francisco, making a clear and orderly argument on vital questions then pending, and closing with a noble apostrophe to liberty.

These incidents indicate his growing popularity and widening influence, but his great work was yet before him. The riddle of the sphinx remained unanswered. An entry on his journal on the 18th day of September, 1877, informs us when "Progress and Poverty" was begun.

The problem which Henry George undertook to solve in writing "Progress and Poverty" was formulated as an "Inquiry into the cause of industrial depression and of increase of want with increase of wealth and the remedy." A momentous inquiry this, involving the whole problem of the distribution of wealth and well worth the life service of any man; a problem which had troubled the great and good of all the ages and baffled the efforts of statesmen and economists to solve. Even in favored California, a country of unlimited resources, and sparsest population, the specters of want and suffering had already raised their heads. Wherever man had gone in all his weary pilgrimages these specters had pursued to harass and torment; "Nor poppy nor mandragora, nor all the drowsy spirits of the economic world had this far served to medicine them to sleep." How then could this unknown printer hope "to appease them?" He could at least make an honest effort, and his determination to do so is thus expressed in the introduction to the first edition of his book.

> "I propose to beg no question; to shrink from no conclusion, but to follow truth wherever it may lead. In the very heart of our civilization today women faint and little children moan. Upon us is the responsibility of seeking the law, but what that law may prove to be is not our affair. If the conclusions which we reach run counter to our prejudices, let us not flinch. If they challenge institutions that have long been deemed wise and natural, let us not turn back."

However mistaken his diagnosis, or defective his remedy may be, the succeeding years furnish ample proof that he scrupulously adhered to this programme.

In the face of many interruptions the book, begun in 1877, was completed in March 1879. It was written under great difficulties at the cost of many sacrifices. George had never accumulated any reserves, and the problem of support for himself and family was constant and pressing. Indeed, it was largely due to the kindness of friends and the forbearance of creditors that he was able to write the book at all. But the end was not yet, for a publisher and readers had to be found. When the manuscript was completed it was submitted to eastern publishers and, like many of its great prototypes, declined by each of them in succession. Harper thought it revolutionary; Scribner was polite but sceptical; Appleton wrote: "The manu-

script 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 did not have the means to go East to treat with the publishers in person and was compelled to rely upon the kindness of friends; but they were persistent and finally secured a proposal from the Appleton Company to publish the book if the author would furnish the plates. This was a difficult condition to comply with for a man without means and in debt, but there was no other alternative. Arrangements were finally made with a former associate who had a printing office, that the plates should be made at his shop. George did much of the typesetting himself, revising the text as the work progressed. Friends in San Francisco assisted in securing subscriptions for the author's edition at $3.00 per copy, and through these means five hundred copies were printed. His feeling of gratitude at this time and his confidence in the ultimate success of the book are indicated in a letter transmitting a copy to his father, then eighty years of age. He writes:

> "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 permitted to live to write it and that you have been permitted to live to see it. It represents a great deal of work and a good deal of sacrifice, but it is now done. It will not be recognized at first, maybe not for some time; but it will ultimately be considered a great book and will be published in both hemispheres and translated into different languages. This I know, though neither of us may ever see it here."

The confidence here expressed was to be further tested by months of anxious waiting, but the prediction was fulfilled earlier than he ventured to hope.

Soon after the book was published the Home Rule agitation in Ireland reached an acute stage. Eviction, coercion and imprisonment were the order of the day. George was invited to write a series of articles for the *Irish World*, the leading organ of the Land League in America, and was later sent to Ireland as a correspondent. These articles were afterwards elaborated and embodied in a pamphlet, entitled "The Irish Land Question," which was widely distributed among the tenants. The denial of the right of private ownership of land found ready acceptance in a country largely controlled by alien landlords, and exploited for their use. George also lectured in many of the leading cities of Ireland, and his teachings were hailed in that country as gospel, and soon spread to Scotland and England. The agitation created a great demand for his book, which was soon after published in a six penny edition and later run as a serial in English and American newspapers. Within two years after the publication of the author's edition the book had found its way into all parts of the world, and had become the subject of almost universal discussion in Great Britain.

Yes, Henry George had written a great book. A book purporting to attack the citadel of privilege in its strongest hold, a book grounded on common experience, dedicated to the service of common humanity and expressed in language which it could understand. A book destined to exert a world-wide influence on the thought of his time. The importance of the subject considered, the mastery of principles involved, power of analysis, and range of information displayed, would have done credit to any author; but coming from a man trained in the school of adversity, without titles or degree, hitherto unknown in the field of economics, it was a great achievement. The treatment of the subject was orderly, the argument clear and convincing, and the style elevated and sustained. But it was not so much confidence in the soundness of its doctrines or effectiveness of its remedy that appealed to the general reader as the evident sincerity of purpose and loftiness of motive which pervaded its pages. It was an eloquent book, pleading for equality and justice the world over, instinct with human sympathy, aflame with the ardor of conviction and abounding in passages which throbbed and palpitated with life. It stirred the brain and aroused the emotions of common men, and let the light of hope into the gloom of the hitherto dismal science. The author was hailed as an apostle of a new dispensation, and his teachings as the gospel of a better day to come.

(To be continued)

INDEPENDENCE DAY ORATION DELIVERED BY E. G. LeSTOURGEON, JUNE 30, BEFORE THE SAN ANTONIO ROTARY CLUB AND THE CIVILIANS' TRAINING CAMP

No one could be prouder than I to address you on this occasion. Although the toastmaster has introduced me as being of French descent perhaps no one here has a better right to appear before you. My great grandfather, my grandfather, my father and myself have followed that flag in the various wars that have been waged by the Republic.

Addresses delivered on the Birthday of our Nation are likely to be trite and hackneyed. There are certain things that are usually said on this occasion that I shall refrain from saying. You have heard them many times delivered in more glowing terms than I can ever hope to command and presented with graces of oratory and rhetoric that I do not possess. I shall discuss other phases of the life-history of America and certain things that have grown out of the establishing of this great Republic.

I do not mean by that to slight the glorious sacrifices made by the Fathers, but I desire to interpret their work in the light of present day conditions and in line with the ultimate desire that was in their hearts when the Declaration was signed.