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## HENRY GEORGE: THE MAN AND HIS WORK

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HENRY GEORGE'S boyhood followed the course laid out by the storybooks that used to be written around the romance of American life. He did not exactly run away from school or run away to sea, but he did what came to the same thing. He served notice on his parents so firmly that they decided to let him have his own way. In the matter of schooling they perhaps thought it was just as well, for he seems to have been an all-round failure at any kind of book learning.

When he was forty years old, he suddenly appeared before the world as the master of a superb English prose style, a style that very few writers have equalled. Everybody of any literary experience at once began to wonder where in the world he could have got it, and how, and when. His record was open. With virtually no schooling, he had been a sailor, a typesetter, a tramp, a peddler, printer, shop clerk, newspaperman, weigher in a rice-mill, ship's steward, inspector of gas meters, gold-seeker, farm labourer. There was clearly nothing in any of these pursuits, or in all of them put together, to raise a man's prose style to that high level. How did he come by it?

It is usually said that he learned to write by hard practice, mainly between 1865 and 1870, and it is true that his actual career as a writer began in that period. But he did not get his style then, for he always had it. Scraps of a diary that he kept on shipboard show that he wrote the same clear, precise, and beautiful English at seventeen that he did at forty.

George never wrote a sentence that needed a second reading to tell not only what it meant, but the only thing it could possibly mean, or be made to mean. In this respect he stands with the most formidable champion of the established order that he ever had to face—Professor Huxley—and with all its force of clearness and precision, his style has also a grace of warmth and colour which Huxley's has not.

But as George himself would have said, a man's style must come from somewhere, it must have a cause. A person is not simply born knowing how to do that sort of thing. More probably he got it from the kind of English that he was brought up to hear and speak at home, and from his familiarity with the English of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer.

He went to sea in April, 1855, and his voyage on the *Hindoo* lasted a year and two months. After the reunion with his people was over, the next thing was to cast about for something to do. His father got him a place with a printing firm to learn typesetting, where he stayed nine months, long enough to become a good journeyman compositor, and then quit in consequence of a row with his foreman. Finding that there was simply nothing doing in Philadelphia, he went to Boston, working his way on a topmast schooner

that carried coal. There was nothing doing there either; so, on his return, attracted by reports of the fortunes being made on the Pacific Coast, he shipped on the lighthouse tender *Shubrick*, which was going on the long voyage around the foot of South America, for service out of San Francisco.

While he was working at the case there happened one of those trivial incidents that turn out to be important in setting the course of one's life. He heard an old printer say that in a new country wages are always high, while in an old country they are always low. George was struck by this remark, and on thinking it over he saw that it was true. Wages were certainly higher in the United States than in Europe, and he remembered that they were higher in Australia than in England. More than this, they were higher in the newer parts than in the older parts of the same country—higher in Oregon and California, for instance, than in New York and Pennsylvania.

George used to say that this was the first little puzzle in political economy that ever came his way. He did not give it any thought until long after; in fact, he says he did not begin to think intently on any economic subject until conditions in California turned his mind that way. When finally he did so, however, the old printer's words came back to him as a roadmark in his search for the cause of industrial depressions, and the cause of inequality in the distribution of wealth.

His trade kept him only very precariously, for times were not easy even then, and there was no great demand for printing or printers. Moving from paper to paper in all kinds of capacities, from typesetter to editor and part owner, by 1868 he had become prosperous enough to start a bank account. His editorial career was very spirited; he was in one row or another all the time, and while it may be said that in his treatment of State and local grievances he was on the popular side he always lost. He made things lively for the Associated Press news monopoly, but though he got an anti-monopoly bill through the legislature, all that happened was that the monopoly broke his paper. He fought the Wells-Fargo express monopoly, and lost again—too much money against him. He attacked the Central Pacific's subsidies, and ran for the Assembly as a Democrat on that issue, but again there was too much money on the other side—the Democrats lost, the Central Pacific quickly bought up his paper, merged it with another, and George was out.

The railway was bringing in population and commodities, which everybody thought was a good thing all round, yet wages were going down, exactly as the old printer in Philadelphia had said, and the masses were growing worse off instead of better.

About this matter of wages George had had other testimony besides the old printer's. On his way to Oregon a dozen years before, he fell in with a lot of miners who were talking about the Chinese, and ventured to ask what harm the Chinese were doing as long as they worked only the cheap diggings. "No harm now," one of the miners said, "but wages will not always be as high as they are to-day in California. As the country grows, as people come in, wages will go down, and some day or other white people will be glad to get those diggings that the Chinamen are working." George said that this idea, coming on top of what the printer had said, made a great impression on him—the idea that "as the country grew in all that we are hoping that it might grow, the condition of those who had to work for their living must become, not better, but worse." Yet in the short space of a dozen years this was precisely what was taking place before his own eyes.

Still, though his two great questions became more and more pressing, he could not answer them. His thought was still inchoate. He went around and around his ultimate answer, like somebody fumbling after something on a table in the dark, often actually touching it without being aware that it was what he was after. Finally it came to him in a burst of true Cromwellian or Pauline drama out of "the commonplace reply of a passing teamster to a commonplace question." One day in 1871 he went for a horseback ride, and as he stopped to rest his horse on a rise overlooking San Francisco Bay—

"I asked a passing teamster, for want of something better to say, what land was worth there. He pointed to some cows grazing so far off that they looked like mice, and said, '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 over 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 more for the privilege."

He rode home thoughtful, translating the teamster's commonplace reply into the technical terms of economics. He reasoned that there are three factors in the production of wealth, and only three: natural resources, labour and capital. When natural resources are unappropriated, obviously the whole yield of production is divided into wages, which go to labour, and interest, which goes to capital. But when they are appropriated, production has to carry a third charge—rent. Moreover, wages and interest, when there is no rent, are regulated strictly by free competition; but rent is a monopoly-charge, and hence is always "all the traffic will bear."

Well, then, since natural resource values are purely social in their origin, created by the community, should not rent go to the community rather than to the individual? Why tax industry and enterprise at all—why not just charge rent? There would be no need to interfere with the private ownership of natural resources. Let a man own all of them he can get his hands on, and make as much out of them as he may, untaxed; but let him pay the community their annual rental value, determined simply by what other people would be willing to pay for the use of the same holdings. George could see justification for wages and interest, on the ground of natural right; and for private ownership of natural resources on the ground of public policy; but he could see none for the private appropriation of economic rent. In his view it was sheer theft. If he was right, then it also followed that as

long as economic rent remains unconfiscated, the taxation of industry and enterprise is pure highwaymanry, especially tariff taxation, for this virtually delegates the government's taxing power to private persons.

George worked out these ideas in a tentative way in a forty-eight page pamphlet with the title, *Our Land and Land Policy, National and State*, which did not reach many readers, but added something to his reputation as a tribune of the people. The subject mulled in his mind through five years of newspaper work, at the end of which he lost his paper and was once more on the ragged edge. He wrote to Governor Irwin, asking him "to give me a place where there was little to do and something to get, so that I could devote myself to some important writing." The governor gave him the State inspectorship of gas meters, a moderately well-paid job. This was in January, 1876; and in March, 1879 he finished the manuscript of a book entitled *Progress and Poverty; An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions, and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth; The Remedy*.

Ireland at that time was front-page news on every paper printed in the English language. Parnell and Dillon crossed the ocean, spoke in sixty-two American cities, addressed the House of Representatives, and took away a great fund of American dollars wherewith to fight the battles of the rack-rented Irish tenant. They were followed by the best man in the movement, Michael Davitt, who came over late in 1880 to tend the fire that Parnell and Dillon had kindled. George met him and got him "under conviction," as the revivalists say, and then wrote a pamphlet entitled *The Irish Land Question; what it involves, and how alone it can be settled*.

From that moment Henry George was, in the good sense of the term, a made man. The pamphlet was a masterpiece of polemics, a call to action, and a prophecy, all in one. Published simultaneously in America and England, it had an immense success. The American branch of the Land League immediately put George on the lecture platform, and when the Irish troubles culminated in the imprisonment of Davitt, Dillon, Parnell, and O'Kelly, an Irish newspaper published in New York sent him to the seat of war as a correspondent. His reports to the *Irish World* got wide distribution. He spoke in England, and addressed huge audiences in Scotland. Returning to Ireland, he got still wider publicity out of being locked up twice on suspicion.

All this celebrity was a great lift for *Progress and Poverty*. The book suddenly became an international best seller. The *London Times* gave it a five-column review which made its fortune in all the British possessions; the review came out in the morning, and by afternoon the publishers had sold out every copy in stock.

For the next two years George lived before the populace, speaking and writing incessantly, and directing the development of his doctrine into a distinctly political character. He was probably the most effective public speaker of his time—the *London Times* thought he was fully the equal of Cobden or of Bright, if not a little better—but he never took advantage of an audience, or flattered the galleries, or left the smallest doubt of where he stood and what was in his mind.

When the Republicans suddenly raised the tariff issue in 1888 the Democratic committee asked George to go on the stump. They arranged a long list of engagements for him, but after he made one speech they begged him by telegraph not to make any more.

The nub of his speech was that he had heard of high-tariff Democrats and revenue-tariff Democrats, but he was a no-tariff Democrat who wanted real free trade, and he was out for that or nothing; and naturally no good bi-partisan national committee could put up with such talk as that, especially from a man who really meant it.

In George's view, freedom of exchange would not benefit the masses of the people a particle unless it were correlated with freedom of production; if it would, how was it that the people of free trade England, for example, were no better off than the people of protectionist Germany? None of the official free-traders could answer that question, of course, for there was no answer. George had already developed his full doctrine of trade in a book, published in 1886, called *Protection or Free Trade*—a book which, incidentally, gives a reader the best possible introduction to *Progress and Poverty*.

He laid down the law to organized labour in the same style, showing that there was no such thing as a labour problem, but only a monopoly problem, and that when natural resource monopoly disappeared, every question of wages, hours and conditions of labour would automatically disappear with it. His sympathies and affections, however, were always with the rank and file of revolt against the existing economic order; his heart was with all the disaffected, though his mind might not be entirely with them. When the labour unions of New York City decided to enter the mayoralty campaign of 1886, they looked to George as the best vote-getter in sight, and gave him their nomination.

The campaign was uncommonly bitter. The other candidates were Hewitt and Theodore Roosevelt, and their methods bore hard on George in ways that Hewitt, at any rate, must somewhat have gagged at, for he was a man of breeding—still, he lent himself to them. It was easy to villify George, because the allegation that he was a sheer proletarian leader was true enough, as far as this campaign went; he was officially and by nomination, a labour candidate. Hewitt won the election nominally—in all reasonable likelihood he was counted in—but George's vote was so large that the *New York Times* saw in it "an event demanding the most serious attention and study"; while the *St James Gazette*, of London, in a strong grandmotherly vein, advised "all respectable Americans to forget the trumpery of party fights and political differentism, and face the new danger threatening the commonwealth."

The last ten years of his life were devoted largely to a weekly paper, *The Standard*, in which he continued to press his economic doctrine. He revisited England, where he found his former popularity still holding good. He also made a trip around the world, and was received magnificently in his former home, California, and in the British colonies. His main work during this period, however, was writing his *Science of Political Economy*, which his death interrupted; fortunately not until it was so nearly finished that the rest of his design for it could be easily filled in.

In this period, too, his circumstances for the first time in his life, were fairly easy. He had received some small gifts and legacies, and latterly a couple of well-to-do friends saw to it that he should finish his work without anxiety. It is an interesting fact that George stands alone in American history as a writer whose books sold by the million, and as an orator whose speech attracted thousands, yet who never made a dollar out of either.

His death had a setting of great drama or of great pathos, according to the view that one chooses to take of it. The municipal monstrosity called the Greater New York was put together in the late 'nineties, and some of George's friends and associates, still incorrigibly politically minded, urged on him the forlorn hope of running as an independent candidate for the mayoralty in 1897. Most probably he thought it would be one more chance, almost certainly his last, to bear testimony before the people of his adopted city with the living voice.

He opened his campaign at a rapid pace, speaking at one or more meetings every night, nearly always with all his old clearness and force. Five days before election he spoke at four meetings in one evening, and went to bed at the Union Square Hotel, much exhausted. Early next morning his wife awoke to find him in an adjoining room, standing in the attitude of an orator, his hand on the back of a chair, his head erect and his eyes open. He repeated the one word "yes" many times, with varying inflections, but on becoming silent he never spoke again. Mrs. George put her arm about him, led him back to his bed with some difficulty, and there he died.

*Progress and Poverty* is the first and only thorough, complete, scientific inquiry ever made into the fundamental cause of industrial depressions and involuntary poverty. The ablest minds of the century attacked and condemned it—Professor Huxley, the Duke of Argyll, Goldwin Smith, Leo XIII, Frederic Harrison, John Bright, Joseph Chamberlain. Nevertheless, in a preface to the definite edition, George said what very few authors of a technical work have ever been able to say, that he had not met with a single criticism or objection that was not fully anticipated and answered in the book itself. For years he debated its basic positions with anyone who cared to try, and was never worsted.

Like John Bright, nearly everyone credited the "American inventor" with a brand-new discovery in his idea of confiscating economic rent. George did in fact come by the idea independently, but others whom he had never heard of came by it long before him. Precisely the same proposal had been made in the eighteenth century by men whom Mr Bright might have thought twice about snubbing—the French school known as the Economists, which included Quesnay, Turgot, du Pont de Nemours, Mirabeau, le Trosne, Gournay. They even used the term *l'impôt unique*, "the single tax," which George's American disciples arrived at independently, and which George accepted. The idea of confiscating rent also occurred to Patrick Edward Dove at almost the same time that it occurred to George. It had been broached in England almost a century earlier by Thomas Spence, and again in Scotland by William Ogilvie, a professor at Aberdeen. George's doctrine of the confiscation of social values was also explicitly anticipated by Thomas Paine, in his pamphlet called *Agrarian Justice*.

George's especial merit is not that of original discovery, though his discovery was original—as much so as those of Darwin and Wallace. His great merit is that of having worked out his discovery to its full logical length in a complete system, which none of his predecessors did; not only establishing fundamental economics as a true science, but also discerning and clearly marking out its natural relations with history, politics, and ethics.

[Extract from the series of Articles, "Henry George, Unorthodox American," by Albert Jay Nock, recently published in Scribner's Magazine and printed with acknowledgments.]