

## A NEW BIOGRAPHY OF HENRY GEORGE

HENRY GEORGE. By Charles A. Barker, Professor of American History, The Johns Hopkins University. 697 + xvii pages. Published by the Oxford University Press, New York, \$9.50 and Oxford University Press (London: Geoffrey Cumberlege). Price, 57s. 6d.

Professor Barker calls his book "historical biography," and in another place, "a historical review of *Progress and Poverty*."

Part One, entitled "A California Protest," develops the theme that Henry George's life and thought was largely shaped by the California milieu of 1850-80. It describes in great detail the first forty years of George's life, his youthful hopes and aspirations, family intimacies and influence, George's experiences and travels as a young seaman, his emigration to California, his hard times there as a journeyman printer, and finally, his triumphs and travails as a fighting editor. Professor Barker presents a close study of George's editorials, tracing the development of ideas which culminated in the writing and publication of *Progress and Poverty* in 1879.

The other great influence on George's life and thought was the inheritance of the Christian philosophy.

Part Two, "A Christian Effort," is the story of Henry George after the publication of *Progress and Poverty* under chapter headings such as: "Prophet in the Old Country," "Not Without Honour in His Own Land," "Christian Democrat to the End," and "The Martyrdom of Henry George." It tells of the reception of his ideas by plain folk and fancy, his speaking tours in Great Britain and Ireland, his entry into and effect on politics at home, and, of course, the growth of the "single tax" movement. The book closes with a brief discussion of George's lingering influence in America, but no more than an enumeration of those countries in the rest of the world where his ideas possibly penetrated deeper.

\* \* \*

One cannot be both candid and kind about this book. As biography it is marred by the author's frequent essays into psychoanalysis; as history it is not always reliable; as composition it needs thorough pruning and revision. The useful results of Professor Barker's long labour have been buried in unprofitable "ifs" and surrounded with gratuitous comment and tortuous surmise. Worse still, the loose use of words such as "radical," "socialism," and "laissez faire" has led to a misrepresentation of George's own views. The crux of the matter may be that the author, avowedly a New Deal Democrat, continually tries to recast the thought of a man who utterly rejected socialism "even in such lamb's clothing as Bellamy enclosed it" because he believed it *promoted state power*.

Whenever Professor Barker lets Henry George speak for himself, his philosophy of freedom shines out:

"You say that you do not see in the single tax a panacea for poverty. Nor yet do I. The panacea for poverty is freedom. What I see in the single tax is the means of securing that industrial freedom which will make possible other triumphs . . ."

"It is on establishing liberty, on removing restrictions, on giving natural order full play, and not on mere fiscal change that we base our hopes of social reconstruction . . ."

"We want as few taxes as possible, as little restraint as is conformable to that perfect law of liberty which will allow each individual to do what he pleases without infringement of the equal rights of others."

Unfortunately, in this long and often tedious book, there is altogether too much Barker and too little George.

We learn that by his mid-teens George had read Emerson's new essays, dipped into books on American and British history, attended lectures on science, and belonged to a literary society. Professor Barker prefaces this information with the following comment, "Knowledge as tradition and cultivation, though in time he was to become a reader of poetry and the literature of ideas, never at any stage of his development appealed to Henry George." This is the sort of contradiction which mars so much of the book practically throughout.

Apparently in a search for originality of expression Professor Barker wanders into verbiage and stilted style. "George had too much honesty and too much mind not to have fears and doubts . . ." (163); "A quotation will show how near he verged, for a minute, to the spirit of European socialism." (201); "George remained always an ex-capitalist . . ." (279). In addition, there is the author's evident predilection for the psychiatrist's method and terminology: "There is a disappointing lack of testimonial about how George held up psychologically under the pressures of 1869." (120); "In a way we are dealing with the splitting of a political personality." (517), and so on.

The final presumption is Professor Barker's comment on George's unfinished last work, *The Science of Political Economy*. Professor Barker asserts that the fact that George accepted the nomination for mayor of New York, while he had not yet completed the new book and in the knowledge that the campaign might kill him, "represents a tacit acknowledgment by George that he was unable to weld a new system of economics . . . Or, just possibly, he admitted to himself alone that he had made a mistake of planning—that he was not the man, after all, to venture a compendious survey." That George did die during the campaign is tragic enough. That he should thus be judged by his latest biographer is past belief.

\* \* \*

When Professor Barker drops conjecture and sticks to historical exposition he is at his best. Chapters V to VIII cover the period when George, a one-man army, fought Western Union and the telegraph monopoly, exposed corruption in San Francisco's police department, championed the seamen's cause, and on all fronts pressed for reform. Each of these stories incidentally tells more about George's personality and character, his initiative, courage, and originality, than any amount of wearying dissection could do. Barker has also done a good job in gathering the facts on George's work with the Irish Land League, in relating George's associations with the short-lived American "Labour Party" movement, and especially in clarifying the tangle of the Father McGlynn affair. The bare facts of this case are worth relating.

Father McGlynn, a Roman Catholic priest who for several years openly and enthusiastically supported George's economic doctrines, roused the opposition of powerful men in the American hierarchy on that account, and in the end was excommunicated (1887). About the same time George's works were examined by the Congregation of the Inquisition and were condemned. To quote Professor Barker: "Rather than risk publicity and an American reaction, however, the cardinals (in their own words) 'decided to refrain from a published condemnation.' This meant that the bishops were

informed of the Inquisition's ruling and could act within the premises according to their individual discretion. Presumably this condemnation, and the possibility of action, holds to the present day." Although in 1892 Archbishop Satolli, new papal nuncio to America, re-instated McGlynn after having examined his opinions and found in them "nothing contrary to doctrine," one gathers from Professor Barker's story that in the Roman Catholic hierarchy the authoritative attitude of the Church to private land monopoly is still an unresolved question.

No one will quarrel with Professor Barker's evaluation of the religious impulse as a driving force in George's life of reform. So it was with Wilberforce, Owen, and countless others. But *a propos* of the "Californian orientation" of George's thought, it would be hard for anyone who shared Professor Barker's view to account for the growth of similar ideas at various times in scattered parts of non-Californian territory. The philosophies of Smith, Jefferson, Mill, Quesnay, Bastiat, Dove, Cobden, and George, surely spring from principles independently discovered, but principles everywhere the same. "It is a mistake," George himself said, "to which critics who are themselves mere compilers are liable, to think that men must draw from one another to see the same truths or to fall into the same errors." It is also a mistake to think that, because a man illustrates his argument with local detail and incident which lends it regional flavour, the region itself is father to the thought. More likely it is a storehouse of handy ammunition. Had Professor Barker elaborated the California theme less, had he filled in a little the skeleton outline of Georgeist reform proceeding abroad, he would at once have avoided a too-provincial thesis and improved the balance of his book.

\*  
\* \*

There are some curious misconceptions and a painful amount of confusion in Professor Barker's discussion of *Progress and Poverty*, and of later books, notably *Social Problems* and the unfinished *Science of Political Economy*. Probably the trouble is caused by the deficiencies mentioned earlier in this review: the intrusion of the "limited state intervention" philosophy of the author himself and the rather personalised use of words such as "radical" (apparently Professor Barker thinks a "radical" cannot "believe in business and capitalism," and he often seems to use the word as a synonym for "socialist").

For the most part, he confines his criticism of *Progress and Poverty* to "the political science of the book" rather than to the validity of the economic propositions. Asserting that "great changes can best be brought about through old forms," George advocated taxation of land values as the best way to effect the public collection of land rent. Professor Barker states that in effect George meant "local government should undertake the burden of a social and economic transformation in America." Barker is certainly making this assumption all on his own. George advanced his remedy not only in America, and not only for the lowest levels of government. The fact that George considered landrent a sufficient source of revenue for society shows that he envisaged all levels of government, local, State, and Federal, as applying a tax on land values. Barker has set up a straw-man, knocked him down, and then concluded that Henry George showed "an astonishing blindspot" toward domain policy in the U.S. and toward customary U.S. tax practice! It is too bad Professor Barker did not get some advice before he committed such a "criticism" to paper.

Related to the same misunderstanding, that only one level of government could draw revenue from LVT, is the complaint that George "ought to have noticed that only a world organisation with power to tax, or at least to distribute the proceeds of land-value taxation, would fit well his ideal scheme."

Professor Barker also regrets that George did not suggest "multiform applications of the remedy," or "variant applications" of it. It is difficult to understand how Professor Barker would explain acreage limitation, conservation programmes, or land classification as "variants" of land-value taxation.

For the sake of the record, Professor Barker might well have rounded off his treatment of *Progress and Poverty* with some representative modern criticism of George's economic propositions and in this way have gathered together the best that "20th century scholarship" offers as a critique of Henry George.

MARY RAWSON.

Professor Barker ventured daringly when he went beyond the bounds of biography and history into the field of economic and philosophic discussion. Miss Rawson in her severe but just criticism reveals the extent of his failure. The chronicler of facts has given the reader the results of painstaking research, the intensity and compass of which can be judged by reference to his 48 closely printed pages of "Notes on the Sources." But, continually to the distraction and often to the exasperation of the reader, the chronicler gives place to the pretentious essayist indulging in the irrelevant dissertation, disputable contention and obtrusive assumption such as Miss Rawson has instanced.

I write as one who had expected this book on Henry George's life and work to deserve the attention of students of all shades, but the more closely I examined its pages the less inclined I felt to any recommendation. Even as to facts, Professor Barker is misled by or has misconstrued the testimony on which he depended. The story as it relates to Great Britain is particularly defective. There is for example the statement (p. 414) that the 1885 Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes proposed that vacant city "funds" (misprint for "lands") be taxed at a rate of say 4 per cent on capital value." Not so. It was that vacant land, which as such is excluded from the valuation rolls, should be entered therein at 4 per cent of its selling value, for the local taxes (the rates) to be levied on the resulting annual value precisely as the rates are levied on all other property. The relevant passage was written by Lord Stanley of Alderley, one of the signatories of the report being the Prince of Wales, since King Edward VII. It was a welcome recognition of one of the unjust features of the British local rating system but nothing came of the recommendation then made. No such thing happened as is put on record in this book that "a few years later high urban land-taxes were actually imposed." All along and to the present day, vacant land has remained exempt from assessment to local taxation.

But it is the final chapter that really discounts Professor Barker as an authority. It were better had the book ended with the death of Henry George and no such sequel had been attempted sketching his pervading influence in the after years. The author rushes to conclusion failing hardly to glance at the practical progress, in the direction of land-value taxation, achieved in a number of countries such as Denmark, New