

## SOME RECOLLECTIONS OF HENRY GEORGE AND THE EARLY DAYS OF THE MOVEMENT

BY FREDK. VERINDER

*The following is a slightly abbreviated report of the Address delivered by Mr. Fredk. Verinder at the Henry George Commemoration Meeting held on 21st September, at the offices of LAND & LIBERTY, under the auspices of the London Henry George Club, the English League, and the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values.*

### I.

The English League, under the name of the "Land Reform Union," was founded, "with the object of agitating for the Restoration of the Land to the People," in the early part of 1883, by some friends who had been meeting at each other's houses to discuss PROGRESS AND POVERTY. I have before me a list of the (nearly) 200 people who subscribed to the Union in its first year. . . .

The great Irish patriot and land reformer, Michael Davitt, at once ranged himself on the side of the new movement, and, in October, 1883, addressed a great meeting in St. James's Hall, London, calling forth a storm of disapproval and abuse from the London and Provincial Press. Other meetings followed. Meanwhile the Land Reform Union was in communication with Henry George himself. A guarantee fund was raised, and, in the opening days of 1884, George arrived at Euston, where he responded to an enthusiastic welcome from a mass meeting of working men. A few days afterwards he spoke at a great demonstration in St. James's Hall, over which Henry Labouchere presided. Ruskin wrote "wishing Mr. George all success in his efforts and an understanding audience." Plymouth, Cardiff, Birmingham, Bolton, Liverpool, Newcastle, Glasgow, Greenock, Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen, Inverness and Wick, Leeds, Oxford, Cambridge and Hull were visited in turn. Back in London, he was boycotted by the proprietors of the large halls, but a meeting was held in Shoreditch Town Hall, and the British campaign—mainly organized by Edward McHugh and Richard McGhee—closed with a banquet at the Criterion. On his way home, he spoke, with Michael Davitt, in Dublin.

It was during this visit to Scotland that the Scottish Land Restoration League was founded. The Liverpool Reform Club invited George to a public dinner, but hastily withdrew the invitation after the St. James's Hall meeting. But "the common people heard him gladly," and there was no organized opposition except at the Oxford University meeting. The Press was almost universally hostile.

At the first annual meeting of the Land Reform Union, on 7th May, 1884, the name of the organization was changed to "English Land Restoration League." The Hon. Officers—H. H. Champion, Treasurer, and Percy Frost, Secretary—resigned, having joined Mr. Hyndman in the Social Democratic camp. Wm. Saunders, head of the Central News Agency, became Hon. Treasurer, and I was elected Secretary. . . .

The first public mention of PROGRESS AND POVERTY in this country was made, so far as I can trace, at one of the meetings of the Guild of St. Matthew, by two speakers in the discussion who had just returned from the States. One of the very earliest reviews of the book "on this side" was written by a clerical member of the Guild—my friend the late George Sarson—and reprinted by the Land Reform Union as a pamphlet. J. Chas. Durant printed a sixpenny quarto edition, which Kegan Paul published. The publishers were astonished beyond measure at the demand for it. . . .

When I took up my work as secretary of the English Land Restoration League, the Executive were passing for press a Manifesto drafted by Henry George. Its adoption caused Bernard Shaw's resignation. Sidney Webb went later, giving me as his reason that "the League was working against all the things that he was working for."

Before many months I met Henry George himself. He

returned to this country for a campaign in Scotland, but his first and last meetings were in London, and I had to try my hand at organizing meetings on the grand scale. The "send-off" took place at St. James's Hall and was a magnificent success. Wm. Forsyth, President of the Scottish League, came up to take the chair; Helen Taylor, Michael Davitt and Henry George were the chief speakers—a combination of Scotch, English, Irish and American eloquence which has rarely been equalled.

I do not propose to offer you to-night any estimate of George's place as an economist. I have been trying, with voice and pen, for more than 38 years to show my faith by my works. You show, by your presence here as members of the Henry George Club and of the English "Henry George" League, celebrating the 82nd anniversary of his birth 24 years after his death, that you need no words from me about that. But I am one of the rapidly diminishing band who knew the Prophet of San Francisco personally, who met him face to face and worked with him side by side, who sat at meat with him in his charming family circle, who organized meetings for him and heard him speak at them, who at close quarters could learn to love the modesty and sweetness of his character as well as admire the greatness of his intellect. I have picnicked with him in Epping Forest and "up the river," and watched with him from the Eiffel Tower the illuminated fountains in Paris, when he was the "President of Honour" of the great International Congress on the Land Question (in 1889) and I was Secretary and reporter of the English Section. So, before the time comes when we know George only as we know the remote leaders of the world's thought, merely through their writings and the effects of their work and the researches of their biographers, you may perhaps like to hear some personal recollections of one of yourselves who knew him in his habit as he lived.

He came to the League office one day and found me in converse with a newly-joined member, who had spent thirty years in research at the Record Office and had long ago convinced himself that there was no constitutional basis for private property in land. The older members of the League will remember the learned antiquarian and historian, doctor of laws, who wrote for us in the early days under the pen-name of "John Wheelwright," and who would never allow anyone to use the word *landowner* without protest. An old man, well over six feet in height, with aquiline nose, long beard, and flashing eyes, he poured out a flood of learning, and Henry George listened as keenly and as modestly as I hope I did. When "John Wheelwright" left, George turned to me. "Age and learning combined with youth and enthusiasm" (I was a young man then) "will do great things," and he added: "Keep your eye on that old man: he *knows*." The learned doctor was a member of the League till the day of his death, and I spent many a profitable hour with him in the office and at his home.

The sight of poverty—he himself had had bitter experience of it, as all readers of his son's "Life" of him know—was so painful to Henry George, that, although he knew and had proved that so-called "Charity" is, in the long run, no remedy, he could never resist the sight of a man or woman who was "down and out." He was here at a time of acute trade depression, and I do not think I ever took a walk with him that did not leave him the poorer. An out-of-work man never escaped his observant eye: his hand went straight to his pocket: he left one for a moment or two; money and kind words cheered the poorer brother up, and George came back to his companion with a deeply troubled look on his face.

My old friend, William Saunders, for 11 years Treasurer of the League, and successively M.P. for East Hull and Walworth, met George in New York, before he came to England, and heard him speak. It may encourage some of our younger members who fear to speak in public to know that Saunders, coming away from the meeting, said:

"Why does this man, who writes so well, try to do what he cannot do at all, and what he probably never will do well—speak in public?" Yet indomitable perseverance, great care in preparation, dead earnestness, and that most valuable asset, a sense of humour, enabled George to become one of the most effective platform speakers of our generation. I have seen him sway great audiences as few men can, and gain their assent to great and vital truths. At the end of a great oration, perfectly phrased and closely reasoned, one wondered whether anything finer could have been given to the audience. But then came the final test: the unprepared replies to questions from his hearers. One of them comes to my mind at once. In our great meeting at Lambeth Baths a Social Democrat asked: "But what about Capital?" Quick as lightning came the perfect reply: "My friend, when you've got the cow, you've got the milk!" A moment's silence, and then an audience of London working men roared their approval of a reply which did more than answer a question. It made men think for themselves.

That was George's method of propaganda, and he used it fearlessly. I have heard that the morning after his lecture at Cardiff he took a Turkish bath. In the cooling room a number of Cardiff gentlemen were discussing the newspaper reports of the dreadful revolutionary speech of an American agitator, and abusing him pretty freely. George joined in the conversation. Was it true that this American had been attacking the great Marquis of Bute? Did he rightly understand that the Marquis was the owner of Cardiff? Well, he himself was only a casual American visitor, but he had seen the splendid docks, the fine streets, the excellent buildings, etc., etc., which the Marquis had created, and was it quite fair. . . .? etc., etc. Immediately the whole crowd fell upon him with one accord, anxious to explain that it was not the Marquis, but the municipality and private enterprise that had made all these improvements upon land for which they paid rent to his noble lordship. George was content to hear them finally endorsing his views; he had too keen a sense of humour to spoil a good joke by telling them his name. I like, too, the story of the young Scotch landlord who was his chance travelling companion on a journey from one meeting to another. He started abusing the American demagogue for the over-night speech reported in the morning paper. A long argument followed, till the young man, unable to reply, played his last card. "But, sir," he said, "this land has been in my family 700 years. What do you think of that?" "Well," was the unexpected reply, "don't you think it has been in your family long enough?" Another Scotch landlord travelled with him for part of a journey. Excited by what he found reported in his newspaper, he too began the usual abuse. He found his fellow-traveller such a good listener, so interested in learning other folks' views, so reasonable in argument, that he gave him his card, as the train approached his destination, and invited George to pay him a visit if ever he came that way again. George made a difficulty in finding one of his own cards, and it was only as the train started again that a stupefied Scotch landlord found himself on the platform, alternately contemplating a card which bore the legend "Henry George, New York," and the smiling owner of that name, who was waving a friendly farewell from the departing train to the man who had lately been abusing him to his face.

You can now perhaps dimly understand how delightful this widely-travelled, widely-read thinker could be in the more intimate circle of those who were privileged to be his friends; courteously listening even to the youngest of us, drawing out the best that was in us, illustrating every argument out of his profound knowledge of men and things, and driving home his point with the sort of apt but funny story which is one of the most characteristic products of the American mind.

(To be continued.)