

Henry George: The Prophet of San Francisco (Part 2)

Why It Matters:

At one point in his life, Henry George was considered the third most famous American—behind Mark Twain and Thomas Edison. Today, he’s no longer well known. Why?

By Martin Adams / 14 November, 2014



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This is Part 2 of Henry George’s life story. Part 1 can be found [here](#). For more information about how land reform can create meaningful work, restore our ecology, and bring more wealth into our local communities, I invite you to read my book [Land: A New Paradigm for a Thriving World](#).

At one point in his life, Henry George was considered the third most famous American, behind Mark Twain and Thomas Edison. His book *Progress and Poverty* had by then sold into the millions, and he was traveling around the world, deftly expounding upon his visionary insights with the fierce passion of a man touched by a transcendent realization that he would devote the rest of his life to sharing. And yet, his renown diminished soon after his death; today, Henry George — once known as “the prophet of San Francisco” — is no longer well known to the general conscience of the public, despite the significance of his discoveries.

What happened? Albert Jay Nock, his biographer, shed some light when he wrote about Henry George in 1932, thirty-five years after George's passing. According to Nock, after George gained fame through the publication of his books, his followers urged him to pursue political office in order to put his theories to practice. Although hesitant at first, George reluctantly agreed, perhaps sensing that he might be able to reach a wider audience as well as have a chance to implement his policy recommendations. When he asked Annie, his wife and most ardent supporter, whether he should take up the struggle for political office at the behest of his followers, she responded: "you should do your duty at whatever cost."

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am not for the poor man. I am not for the rich man. I am for man." —
Henry George

We'll never know whether Henry and Annie George fully anticipated the cost they would bear in the years to come as Henry embarked upon the long and impossible struggle for political office. Because of his fierce opposition to the land monopoly, he had considerable powers arrayed against him, and because he did not pander to the short-term interests of the masses either, he appeased neither political side. Although though he was probably the most effective public speaker of his time, according to Nock, he did not adopt the tactics of the demagogue or the practical politician. He sided with neither the liberal nor with the conservative base, but remained dogmatically adhered to his unerring principles: once, for example, someone introduced him to a working-class audience as one who was always for the poor man, but George began his speech by saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, I am not for the poor man. I am not for the rich man. I am for man."

Henry George ran for the position of mayor of New York City in 1886; he beat future U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt by a wide margin, but lost to

Abram S. Hewitt, who was backed by the corrupt Tammany Hall power elite. After this defeat, he and his writings became discredited in the eyes of many: with this, according to Nock, vanished “whatever credit he may have had in America as an economist and philosopher, leaving him only the uncertain and momentary prestige of a political demagogue, an agitator, and a crank. To political insiders, he was the worst of all liabilities, a defeated candidate. To America at large, he was just another bogus prophet.”

“But I have got to die,” George once replied to a medical doctor who warned him that the pressure he was under might kill him. “How can I die better than serving humanity?”

Yet even though George lost the political race and his reputation in the process, he had propagated a movement. Several years prior to his death, George remarked “I could die now and the work would go on. It no longer depends upon one man. It is no longer a ‘Henry George’ movement — a one-man movement. It is the movement of many men in many lands. I can help it while I live; but my death could not stop it.” Despite setbacks and the enormous forces arrayed against him, he devoted the remainder of his life to his calling without fail, even as his health deteriorated under the pressure of his daily schedule. “But I have got to die,” George once replied to a medical doctor who warned him that the pressure might kill him. “How can I die better than serving humanity? Besides, so dying will do more for the cause than anything I am likely to be able to do in the rest of my life.” Perhaps George felt his approaching death when he said to his wife Annie three weeks prior to his passing that “the very great advancement of our ideas may not show now, but it will. And it will show more after my death than during my life. Men who are now holding back will then acknowledge that I have been speaking the truth. Neither of us can tell which of us will die first. But I shall be greatly disappointed if you precede me, for I have set my heart on having you hear what men will say of me and our cause when I am gone.”

Henry George just turned 58 when he ran once more for the mayoral office of New York City in 1897. Albert Jay Nock shares with us what happened: “Three weeks 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; then he fell into silence, and never spoke again. Mrs. George put her arm about him, led him back to his bed with some difficulty, and there he died.” He was given a hero’s farewell: over 100,000 people attended his funeral while his wife listened, undoubtedly with a heavy heart, to the many praises sung of him.