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The Followers of Henry George

By CHARLES A. BARKER

FIVE men in their relationship with a famous leader are the principal object of this study. While lacking any wish to be pedantic about very simple terms . . . I am not satisfied with "followers." For the five men there ought to be a word with some connotation of "associate" or even "partner" blended in, and with any hint of "blind follower" excluded. "Disciple" will not do, nor "colleague," so "follower" seems to be the best there is . . .

In the order of their principal connection with George, we may anticipate the names: Dr. Edward Taylor of San Francisco, an intellectual; Francis Shaw, Edward McGlynn, and Thomas Shearman; respectively a rich man, a priest, and a lawyer, all three of New York City; and Tom Loftin Johnson, statesman, of Ohio.

All of them associated with George at some time during the decade from 1878 to 1888, and every one continued a follower for the duration of life. That is, their story begins while George was bringing to advanced stage the manuscript of *Progress and Poverty*; and it becomes most important between 1885 and 1888—the high-water level of George's movement.

The West Coast

Dr. Taylor, the first follower-as-associate of the fully matured period of Henry George's thought, was the only Californian of the five. . . . Early in 1878 was gathered the Land Reform league of California, the first of hundreds of Henry George organizations. This group began as a Sunday afternoon discussion meeting of sympathetic men . . . As in future organizations, lawyers were important. James Maguire, later a judge and still later a Congressman, was a member . . . There were journalists and other professional people.

Quite different from those who urged George into campaigns for reform this friend [Dr. Taylor] cautioned him against too much public speaking, and also helped him to have the right surroundings for thinking and writing.

In the spring and summer of 1881 [after the publication of *Progress and Poverty*], opening his mail must have been exciting business for Henry George. Very soon he discovered that the book was making deep conversions. One letter early in 1881 opened his intimate connections with the elderly Francis Shaw of Staten Island; and about simultaneously Thomas Shearman took the initiative which led—by way of a six-year period of limited association—to the single-tax name, idea and reform movement.

Mr. Shaw became more than an investor, a real partner in Henry George consolidation and expansion. He had resources, both spiritual and financial, which belonged to him as a member of a Massachusetts reformist family.

Immediately Mr. Shaw proposed to buy newspaper space for printing large sections of *Progress and Poverty*, but accepted good advice when George recommended instead that he underwrite a cheap edition of the book and pay for its wide distribution among public libraries. Half a year later, while George was still abroad,



Henry George
—Courtesy San Francisco Chronicle

he and his brother subsidized the cheap British edition of *Progress and Poverty* and the *Irish Land Question*. No previous economic work had ever been so distributed, nor so widely discussed in working class and radical circles . . . Between late 1882 and early 1885 *Progress and Poverty* became much more nearly a national issue in Great Britain than it ever did in the United States. Without that subsidy, we may assume, the response would have been slower.

Call Dr. Taylor's contribution qualitative and Mr. Shaw's quantitative. With the two men behind him, George took his place near the head of the march of the eighties in what Shaw remembered as the "liberative war of humanity."

George first heard of Father Edward McGlynn while he himself was on the British side of the water, in the spring of 1882. The link between them was Michael Davitt, leader of the Irish Land League, who was in New York to get fresh support for his countrymen.

Dr. McGlynn's Contribution

A fighting priest, not really heterodox, but uncommonly independent, does seem to have been quite as natural for Henry George fellowship and counsel during the middle eighties, as a modest scholarly man was for 1878 and 1879, or a rich one for 1881 and 1882. The priest labored as he could in the mayoralty campaign of 1886, though Archbishop Corrigan tried to stop him entirely. But 1887, the year when suspension was changed to excommunication, revealed McGlynn's quality and influence in the movement. While Henry George's new weekly, the *Standard*, spoke for Catholic freedom in politics, the unfrocked priest threw himself into organizational work and speaking for the George movement. To be sure he overextended. In 1887 his urging, more than anything else, persuaded George to blunder into the state

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campaign; and later the two became for a period quite estranged.

But Father McGlynn made his welcome contribution, and in the troubled year, 1887, entirely to George's satisfaction, he founded and became genius as president of the Anti-Poverty Society. This organization—which spread from New York to other cities—approached interestingly close to becoming a religious sect of Henry George meaning—in a way the effort is reminiscent of the cult of Positivism in London.

Thomas Shearman, who ranks fourth in order of effective contribution as a follower-and-associate of Henry George, represents an utterly different situation and mentality. Member of a distinguished law firm and the writer of successful treatises for his profession, recipient of fees from the Erie Railroad, and active leader in Plymouth congregation and successful counsel for the defense of Henry Ward Beecher in the famous scandal, Shearman united in himself many of the well to do Protestant and intellectual elements which gathered behind George.

The Single-Tax Authorship

While the news is old that *Progress and Poverty* does not contain the rubric, "the single tax," the fact of history is not so widely understood that when the formula was offered the book was eight years old, and that a little-remembered lawyer [Shearman], not Henry George, originated it. It has been assumed that Henry George had been in fact a single-tax man from the California beginnings of his thought, and that only the name and organization came later. Anyone's careful reading of *Progress and Poverty* might have cast doubt on that legend. . . . This is not to say that George was less than enthusiastic about Shearman's idea and the organized movement which presently occurred. He did speak for it, about as the common supposition takes for granted. He took the formula

to Britain on his later, less important, visits, and introduced it in competition with other reforms. But there were limits to his enthusiasm. More than once he said that the name "single tax" lacked the dimensions of the underlying idea. And when inevitably the "single tax limited" came to open debate with the "single tax unlimited," the real issue was no less than whether or not *Progress and Poverty's* central proposition, that the land belongs to all the people and that economic rent should return to the community, the book's whole claim in the name of justice, would stand or fall.

Deviates from Marx

The temptation is irresistible to venture a might-have-been. Except that by 1887 George had been completely disenchanted about Marxist Socialists and socialism, and except that general labor politics of the order of his own United Labor party was for the present rendered all but hopeless by Haymarket and the consequences of Haymarket, and except for the

present loss of New York Catholics among his supporters, Henry George might well, it seems to me, have proven to be an indifferent single taxer instead of a strong one. Had this been so, the single-tax movement, quite limited, would have been Mr. Shearman's special deviation, and today Henry George would carry a different label in Mr. Everyman's catalog of history.

Certainly Tom Loftin Johnson of Cleveland, who was fifth among the followers-and-associates of Henry George and who became a sort of coadjuter at the end, is final proof that there was no ultimate channeling of Henry George ideas and loyalties all into the single-tax stream. As is well known, Johnson had accumulated a fortune mainly in urban railways and in steel—that is to say, from operations in monopolies or near-monopolies deriving from city growth and the private control of natural resources, the very first objects of Henry George's protest for economic justice. Yet this factor aside, Johnson had the qualities of an inventive, resourceful and generous capitalist George had admired.

National Prominence

It is too little noticed that numbers of men whose minds or consciences had been lifted by Henry George, came into national influence when Woodrow Wilson was elected. Secretary of Interior Franklin Lane and Congressman William Kent were among the number, both were from the West Coast, where George had never been forgotten. Louis Post came to public service from Chicago and Joseph Tumulty from New Jersey, where the George tradition preceded Wilson in the progressive impulse. But the largest cluster of Henry George consciences in Wilson's administration were old devotees of Tom Johnson in Ohio: Newton D. Baker, F. C. Howe, and Brand Whitlock. Wilsonian idealism was sometimes second-generation Henry George idealism, though the historian-president seems hardly to have discovered the fact.

In the record as history, the five followers-as-associates amply demonstrate the urban and educated-class content of the impulse for social reform which stemmed from Henry George. Their character makes more poignant and paradoxical the fact that from George's very earliest published writing (a letter addressed to the editor of California's ephemeral first labor newspaper) he thought first of labor. He reasoned always from the labor theory of value of classical economics—like Marx, in this alone—and he always spoke in behalf of the working-classes—not exclusively, but with special emphasis.

Views on Labor

But in his hour of history, in which 1886 and 1887 were crucial moments and a turning-point, it is plain that others than members of the American labor movement were better equipped to understand and accept *Progress and Poverty*. Not the indecisive Powderlys, but the McGlynn's, though Powderly campaigned in 1886; not the pragmatic Gompers's, although Sam Gompers worked hard as high lieutenant in that campaign, but the Johnsons and Shearman's represented Henry George's more natu-

ral and durable following. It seems fairer to say that organized labor abandoned social theory and reform politics after 1886, than to say either that it rejected Henry George particularly, or that George abandoned labor.

In the record as biography, finally, the five followers-as-associates establish George's character as the idealist, the source of inspiration and idea, hardly at all the disciplinarian, of a social movement. They indicate him to have been one from whom it was natural to move out in loyalty, yet choose one or several directions towards social reconstructions. Their roles help revise the old portrait of a single-track mind with a one-tax program. At center George was a Christian democratic moralist: a speaker for justice, freedom, equality and cooperation.

The largest generalization about his economic protest would be his utter opposition to all forms of private monopoly. But it would be truer to say that he permitted his followers, and permitted himself, to work towards a confusing number of goals, than to say that he concentrated narrowly on one reform, formula or effort.

The foregoing address, shortened here owing to space limitations, was made in Washington, D. C., before the American Historical Association, on December 30, 1952. Charles A. Barker, professor of history at Johns Hopkins University, after extensive research on Henry George, has completed one volume of a biography and is at work on a second.