The Unpredictable Mr. Nock's "HENRY GEORGE"

Surely the worth of a book must to an important degree be measured by its ability to hold the reader's attention. By such a minimum standard, Mr. Nock's "critical essay" on Henry George is pre-eminently a good book. I started reading my advance copy one night at nine, and could not get myself to bed until I had finished it five hours later. A newspaper man to whom I loaned the book picked it up at four in the morning, when he left his job, and lost a good part of his day's precious sleep because he could not lay it down.

My first reaction was to indite a panegyric—to tell in fulsome phrases the many reasons why every Georgist should—nay, must—read this book. Indeed, apart from one's opinion of Mr. Nock's point of view, aside from its sheer literary brilliance, here is a long-delayed critical study of Henry George, the man, the philosopher, the propagandist. Here is a sympathetic, though analytical evaluation of the environment that shaped his course through life. Here is a portrait of Henry George that we have not had before—a portrait painted with understanding and appreciation, but free from the conventionalized deification with which "followers" are wont to bedaub him. For Mr. Nock gives us George as a man, and therefore does not omit the frailties to which all men are heir.

Moreover, at least a plausible answer to the ever-recurring question "why is Henry George so little known or understood in his own country?" is offered in this book. It is not a simple answer. It goes deep into the roots of things. Not only was George's philosophic trend moulded by his environment, but the course of his career was similarly charted, and it is in this course that Mr. Nock finds the answer to the enigma of the "Forgotten Man of Anglo-American Civilization."

George was a depression baby. Poverty stalked him throughout his life. Deprived of even the limited educational facilities that stuffy Philadelphia of the early nineteenth century could have afforded him, George was early confronted with the problem of "getting on in the world." At sixteen, the eldest son

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of an indigent family of ten, he went to sea as foremast-boy. On his return he started learning his trade of printer, at two dollars a week. At eighteen, out of a job, as frequently happened during his life, he turned again to the sea, shipping as a storekeeper for a five months' trip to California. In 1858 the prosperity years of the gold rush vanished; the depression of 1857 had set in. From then on followed in rapid succession periods of employment and unemployment, the latter prevailing. That George retained through all these privations (shared by a wife and children) any philosophic instinct is little short of miraculous. But the bitterness of these years undoubtedly aroused in his sympathetic soul the urge to reform, and inclined him toward the art of propaganda rather than the reflective science of philosophy which seems to have been his natural bent.

The career of journalism into which printing led, inclined him to exaggerate the importance of events and of personalities, to the detriment of his philosophic instinct. The editorial office is prone to lay great stress on "movements," politics and politicians. To the reporter the things that are being done now loom much larger than tendencies which know no time limitation, and movement rather than ideas is of prime importance. In this environment George developed his polemic proclivities, his ardor for organizing, his urge for political action, none of which, Mr. Nock intimates, were inherent in the man, or conducive to the ultimate acceptance of his ideas. As he puts it:

"The predominance of the philosophical instinct effected itself gradually, and against all the force of wind and tide. The instinct abdicated at intervals throughout his life, it never scored a complete and lasting triumph, but when one sees what its power and persistence was and considers the crushing forces which were massed against it, one's emotion falls but short of reverent wonder."

Up to the time of "Progress and Poverty" Mr. Nock's analysis of George's development seems incontrovertible. And it is quite likely that the subsequent events, particularly the political phase of George's career, inevitably follow from the forces set to work in this early environment. I am inclined to agree that by his entrance into the political arena the "temperament of the reformer" overshadowed "the intellect of the philosopher," and to the detriment of a wider acceptance of the philosophy. George himself seems to have been reluctant to enter politics, apparently realizing that he had a greater mission than "throwing the rascals out." That the bitterness of

political struggle resulted in stamping George as a nostrum-pedlar, that he was almost completely misunderstood, that his philosophy became submerged in the personal recriminations and misrepresentations involved in politics, that he fell heir to a "lunatic fringe" of followers, who besmirched his philosophy by their mere attachment to his cause—all this is true. But, whether this accounts for the almost complete pall that fell over his teachings immediately following his death is quite another matter—one which probably never will be quite decided.

As Mr. Nock points out, the early part of the century was characterized socially by "movements" of all breeds, each seeking to reform the world by some politically-maneuvered nostrum. Politics was the thing. Whether George could have kept out of politics—because of this temper of the times, to say nothing of his nature—is questionable. Whether his philosophy—besmirched and misunderstood as it was—would, without politics, have obtained such notice as it did get (the impetus of which has lasted to this day), is another question that will never be answered satisfactorily.

Yet, one cannot but agree with Mr. Nock's observation that following George's death his philosophy virtually passed out of public notice. The only question is whether his political and propagandist activities had doomed his ideas to oblivion. Certain it is that all his work along these lines did not spread any lasting knowledge of his philosophy on a scale commensurate with its world importance. Only a minority of his professed followers really understood him. And Mr. Nock rightfully takes to task some of these followers who, with an eye to expediency, subverted the philosophy into either a fiscal reform or an economic theory, robbing it of the grandeur of a great moral and social ideal. And if George's methods of evangelizing, of organizing, of seeking political action failed, their efforts along these lines were even more miserable failures.

The peroration of Mr. Nock's book is perhaps the most interesting (and will undoubtedly be the most controversial) part of it. The methods of George, and of his disciples, says Mr. Nock, were based on the postulate that the masses can be educated.

"If that postulate be sound, then obviously George was right in his choice of methods, and the results might be expected to show, at least measurably, that he was right. On the other hand, if results are negative or positively unfavorable, the postulate is in doubt. There is no way of judging save by the results of practical experimentation, because the postulate is purely conjectural. . . . It seems that henceforth any review of George's career must take into account the question whether the general incapacity for acceptance of his philosophy, or of any philosophy, is circumstantial and temporary, or constitutional and permanent. . . .

"Some vague instinctive sense of this may perhaps even now be evident in the attitude of George's disciples of the second generation who have abandoned the idea of proselytizing-at-large. Perhaps on the other hand, they have merely made the salutory observation that the world's great philosophers never contemplated a mass-acceptance of their doctrines, but only their acceptance by an elite."

Students of Henry George should be thankful to Mr. Nock for having given us this book. It is most readable, informative, provocative. And regardless of whether we agree or disagree with his conclusions as to the merit of the course Henry George pursued, there is no doubt that in this generation, and perhaps for several generations to come, there are many who will accept it as a compass by which to chart their own course.

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