

1879

PROGRESS AND POVERTY

1979

In the middle of a night in March 1879, a man finished writing a book, and flung himself on his knees and wept. He had kept his vow to find the cause and if possible the cure for poverty amidst progress. The man was Henry George and the book was Progress and Poverty.

One hundred years have passed. The book is still in print, it is being honored on its centennial, and a movement has been built around it. That much cannot be said of many books!

Progress and Poverty is the only book undertaken with the aim of solving the problem of poverty in a fundamental way. Surely it deserves attention just for that reason. This quest took George on an inquiry that covered much territory; the ramifications are many. Classical political economy, beginning with Adam Smith and the Physiocrats, was brought to its logical climax; questions of practical politics, history, even philosophy and religion, were delved into; and a world-wide movement was launched. Some day there ought to be an annotated Progress and Poverty, with commentary, references, sources, follow-ups, etc. - as was done recently for Shakespeare by a noted scholar. (George himself wanted to do this with Smith's Wealth of Nations.)

And speaking of Shakespeare, he is alive and well after 400 years, his works are widely read and staged in the original language. Similarly, though George wrote with 19th century rhetoric, there is a quality to his book that has an immediate, direct and enduring appeal, and it cannot easily be bowdlerized. We can explain it at greater or shorter length, but we cannot rewrite this classic.

Progress and Poverty can be read many times over. Those who have done so avow that they find something new in it each time. Try it. Open at random at any page and you're apt to find something you did not notice before. Better yet, re-read the whole book from beginning to end. Wouldn't that be a fitting thing to do on its centennial?

As soon as we get into the Introductory, "The Problem," we realize that here is a friend of man, like Robert Burns, Thomas Jefferson, Victor Hugo. Then we get into abstruse economic reasoning but always illumined by the purpose for which the book was written. As we proceed, we seem to be on a journey of discovery led by a sentient guide who knows where he is going but has to probe his way through the difficulties. And we arrive!

Step by step it unfolds. The problem of poverty is defined. Theories about it (wage-fund, Malthusian) are refuted. It is pin-pointed as a distribution problem and the laws of distribution are forged. The rent of land is singled out and it is shown how material progress under present conditions causes rent to press against wages. Various remedies are disposed of and the true remedy pointed out. The way to apply the remedy is developed - public collection of rent via land value taxation - the Single Tax. The possibility of real progress with the shackles of poverty removed is opened up.

And we cannot help but notice that this book, written 100 years ago, is talking about today! It is as though George from a high vantage point saw us and our world in 1979, and still beyond us into the future.

Yet George was a fallible human being and a child of his own time. He was not a messianic authority figure to be followed without question. Far from it! He himself urged every one to think for himself. A man of ordinary background, he was highly motivated and used his head - and showed what could be done by relying on

one's thinking processes and referring to "the familiar facts of intelligent observation." We are reminded of Albert Einstein who was thought to have a special brain which was studied after his death - it was found to be an ordinary brain! But while he was alive, Einstein used it. That's what George did - and all he asked of others.

The typical Georgist is an independent thinker who has converted himself; he does not hesitate to criticize or disagree with George, but finds that the basic structure stands. Single Taxers claim that Progress and Poverty has never been successfully refuted. It has been attacked, ignored, dismissed, damned with faint praise, declared obsolete, put into a crackpot category - but not refuted. The trouble is that it has never been taken seriously enough for systematic study by most of the academic economic establishment.

And yet that establishment cannot claim to have possession of economic wisdom and know-how with Progress and Poverty out of the running. Quite the contrary! Besides the fact that economists disagree - fundamentally - among themselves, and contradict themselves, modern economists are at an impasse. Unfortunately, when they admit they don't have the answer to today's problems, they also aver that nobody has!

Yet the analysis in Progress and Poverty still holds up and still addresses itself to conditions we are experiencing today - "the familiar facts of intelligent observation" - and does deserve serious consideration. George's remedy, though never applied on a large scale, is supported by facts and reason, and works to the extent that it is tried, in the form of land value taxation. It has won friends - including some famous ones. Many are working to promote it.

After 100 years, Progress and Poverty is still making its way. Its day has yet to come. Perhaps within the next 100 years...?

SOME QUOTES FROM "PROGRESS AND POVERTY"

"This association of poverty with progress is the great enigma of our times... It is the riddle which the Sphinx of Fate puts to our civilization and which not to answer is to be destroyed."

"Each form of industry, as it is developed by division of labor, springs from and rises out of the others, and all rest ultimately upon land, for without land, labor is as impotent as would be a man in void space."

"Unless we can come back to first principles, unless we recognize natural perceptions of equity, unless we acknowledge the equal right of all to land, our free institutions will be in vain; our common schools will be in vain; our discoveries and inventions will but add to the force that presses the masses down!"

"The reform I have proposed accords with all that is politically, socially or morally desirable. It has the qualities of a true reform, for it will make all other reforms easier."

"In our time, as in times before, creep on the insidious forces that, producing inequality, destroy Liberty. On the horizon the clouds begin to lower. Liberty calls to us again. We must follow her further; we must trust her fully. Either we must wholly accept her or she will not stay."

"Liberty means justice, and justice is the natural law."