The Henry George News

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"An Event Long Overdue"

HENRY GEORGE. *By Charles Albro Barker. Oxford University Press, New York,* 1955. xvii *and* 696 pp. $9.50.

Reviewed by ROBERT CLANCY

Here it is at last — a book that shows the whole of Henry George—or as much as can be revealed in a book. Here is a biography that tells the story as it was lived—absorbing, thrilling and mightily significant.

Professor Barker has moulded a life-size Henry George in the round—and what's more, a Henry George who lives and breathes and moves in a real environment. And the other characters and events that he (and the reader) meets on the way are just as convincing.

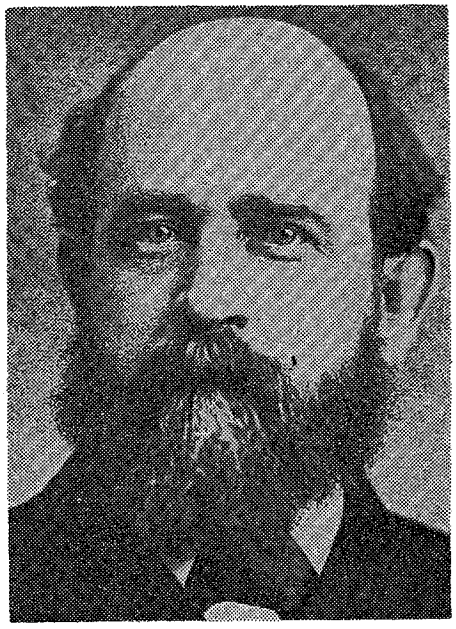
It would be difficult to find followers of any man or philosophy as intensely devoted as are the admirers of Henry George. But, if possible, Dr. Barker's book shows a Henry George of even greater stature than could have been known before now. Not his most ardent disciples, not his closest intimates, not his own adoring family, saw all of George's greatness as we may now see. Professor Barker has made a contribution that cannot be overestimated and is beyond praise.

The books about Henry George that have hitherto appeared have all made some special contribution. The earliest life of George was by his son, Henry George, Jr.—a careful and dutiful document. The later biography by the daughter, Anna George de Mille, was a warm and loving work in which the father was seen best when facing his family. George R. Geiger's *The Philosophy of Henry George* was a scholarly synthesis and philosophic interpretation of all the source material readily available. And Albert Jay Nock's essay on George brought literary criticism into the picture. These are probably the four leading works on Henry George — and now they are joined by a fifth, and I will say greatest, work.

If I may be permitted an analogy, it is as though George, a modern Moses, had been seen only among his people, out of sight now and then, reappearing with the tables of the law which were then studied and interpreted. Now we may see the long silent years when he matured at Pharaoh's court, we may be with him beside the burning bush, we may follow him right to the summit of Mt. Sinai.

How did Dr. Barker happen to write this book? Barker, now a professor of history at Johns Hopkins University, counters this with the question, how is it that the job has remained undone for so long? At any rate, in his preface, the author relates his awakening interest in his subject during the depression of the 1930's, when he was in California; his decision to write the book, and his long detective work looking into sources. And at the end of the book there appears a stunning "Notes on the Sources" with a 45-page bibliography!

With much first-hand research in California, the author has done a special job on George's California period which were the crucial years



Henry George (frontispiece)

of his life, from early manhood to the writing of *Progress and Poverty* at the age of forty.

The California panorama is spread before us with peculiar vividness. We are permitted to see and touch it during its exciting development from a wild frontier to a modern civilization within the unbelievable span of two or three decades. And we are also permitted to look close up at Henry George, who was growing right along with all this. Barker's treatment of this period, in which he brings to light a wealth of new material, may well be his chief contribution.

Chapter X is a very important one in the book, being devoted to an examination of *Progress and Poverty*. Professor Barker's treatment of this classic parallels his treatment of its author. We are given a close look at the book and at the same time our view is directed to other books and ideas and influences which went into its shaping. It is as though *Progress and Poverty* were at the center of an exhibition, with ribbons running from its various pages to other related books from which George drew knowledge or inspiration. The lines are many and complex. There are also other ribbons showing the influence of George's book on his younger contemporaries, like Frederick Jackson Turner and John Bates Clark, though George's influence is reserved for the final chapter of Barker's book. Some interesting discoveries are revealed, such as the probable influence on George of Alexander Del Mar's theory of interest based on the generative forces of nature.

Chapter X is a gold mine, but one could miss sensing in this chapter the irresistible flow of *Progress and Poverty,* the dynamic and logical build-up from beginning to end. No doubt the type of analysis done by Barker made this sacrifice necessary. However, *Progress and Poverty* itself can be consulted easily enough—and this chapter is, after all, a critique — a most scholarly one, at that. Nothing quite like it has appeared up to now.

The chapters on George's later life bring in more hitherto inaccessible material, and there is valuable new documentation on the case of Father McGlynn. In these chapters, Barker shows more clearly than I have ever seen before, the phases of development in Henry George's outlook, and the emergence of the movement that has since been associated with his name.

Here I must take issue not so much with the author's thesis as it is developed, but with the description of it on the book's jacket. This is what is said: "Professor Barker's new interpretation shows that the single tax, for which Henry George is remembered, was more largely his followers' work than his own and that his own greater importance lay in stimulating land reform and other social reform in Britain, labor and urban-reform politics at home and in offering doctrinaire free-trade criticism to American tariff policy."

I am reminded of a remark Picasso made when he was praised for his influence on "functional design": "How would Michaelangelo feel if he were praised because someone had designed a new sideboard based on his Moses?" Britain's Town and Country Planning Act, which is unfortunately linked with Georgism in the book's last chapter, is not even a decent sideboard—it is more like a Rube Goldberg invention, as our English colleagues were the first to point out.

The Fiscal Theme Was Central

The single tax (though the name was supplied by a follower), stripped of some dreariness and timidity which developed in the movement, remained the central theme in Henry George's life and thought. It is what distinguished him from any other Fourth of July orator, and even from any other land reformer. The economic undergirding led to the single tax. The ethical implications surrounded it. The philosophic superstructure was reared upon it. When Henry George lectured or wrote about wider questions it usually was in order to lead into an area that would in turn lead to the single tax. If some of his hearers or readers did not take the second step but went off at tangents—like G. B. Shaw and the Fabians—that wasn't George's fault! The ramifications are

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Charles A. Barker, author of Henry George, will be the guest of honor at the annual dinner of the Henry George School of Social Science on April 20th at the Town Hall Club, 123 West 43rd Street, New York. The price is $4 and reservations should be made in advance.

Other speakers will be Agnes de Mille, William M. Oman of Oxford University Press, and Broadus Mitchell of Rutgers University. Lancaster M. Greene will be toastmaster.

The book, "Henry George" will be published on April 21st. Autographed copies will be available to dinner guests only, at $7.50. A special price of $8.50 will be granted those ordering through the school after April 20th, though the list price is $9.50.

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complex and the influence has been many-sided, but in any evaluation of Henry George, the single tax cannot be relegated to an inferior position.

All this, I repeat, is prompted more by the blurb on the jacket than by the book itself. For the author develops his story in the most satisfying and well-balanced manner. If his thesis was as described on the jacket, then he certainly put one over on this reviewer.

Among the most controversial features of Henry George's life were his various forays into politics. Dr. Barker seems to have achieved a remarkable closeness to George's thought processes, and by the time he has built up the political settings the reader would be disappointed to learn that George did anything other than he did. At the points when George decides to abandon politics, the reader is ready for that, too.

Among the features of this biography that impressed me most was that a tone of scholarliness and objectivity was maintained throughout — the author does not obtrude himself, as did Nock in his essay, and even after some 700 pages you could not tell whether he was a "Georgist" or otherwise. And yet he is warmly sympathetic to his subject and frequently goes to some trouble to demonstrate that George was right on this or that matter. He never once seems to lose balance, perspective or objectivity. I think this is a noteworthy achievement, and the book should prove highly acceptable to skeptics and savants as well as to *aficionados* and crusaders.

A word about the book itself — it is a very handsome production beautifully printed — a joy to behold and to hold in one's hands. It has an arresting photo of George as a frontispiece, and it is well indexed.

Yes, *Henry George* by Charles Barker is a once-in-a-lifetime affair. I don't see how it could miss opening the eyes of the academic world to the importance of Henry George— an event long overdue.