

The man we are remembering

by George L. Collins

HENRY GEORGE emerged on the American scene with the publication of his first book, *Progress and Poverty* in 1879. His stirring call for liberty through economic equity quickly captured worldwide attention and placed him among the front rank of economic and social philosophers.

His central idea was that poverty grew with advancing wealth because land monopoly and speculation absorbed all the increase brought on by progress. The thesis first appeared in a series of editorials, then as a pamphlet, in 1871. George had been a journalist. Still in his teens and trained as a printer, he had left his native Philadelphia in the 1850s for San Francisco. There, after failed adventures in search of gold, he practised his trade, working for several newspapers, rising from printer to reporter to editor. He became publisher of his own newspaper and a leading citizen of San Francisco by the time *Progress and Poverty* was published.

In his youth, he was exposed to the anti-slavery sentiment alive at home in abolitionist Philadelphia. During periods of hard times and depressions in California, he personally suffered the pangs of hunger, unemployment and uncertainty. This background helped to make him an ardent student of the science, which in his estimation, should explain the cause and supply the cure for the problem of the persistence of poverty with the increase of wealth.

Reading the economic writers of his time — Prof. Henry Carey, Henry Fawcett, James Rogers, etc. — he found a jumble of confusion and contradiction in their definitions, analyses and conclusions. Even masters of classical economics such as John Stuart Mill and David Ricardo, who, like himself, took their lead from the great Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations*, fell into errors of thought that to George's mind befogged the subject.

Progress and Poverty was not an attempt to redesign economics. It was a search for answers to the problems of poverty, unemployment and depressions. But to find those answers, George discovered that he had to bring precision to the terms, consistency to their use and observation to the estimates, which his forerunners had not done.

In 565 pages George's eloquence, logic, pas-

sion and optimism was said to have fired the imagination of princes and paupers. Men of letters and the unschooled found his call a clarion, sounding the start of a better day.

Count Leo Tolstoy sang his praise. "People do not argue with the teaching of George," he wrote, "they simply do not know it. He who becomes acquainted with it cannot but agree." George Bernard Shaw credited *Progress and Poverty* and George's eloquence for his involvement with political economy and social problems.

Motive force

REDUCING the effort required to transform natural materials into desirable objects has been the persistent aim of mankind since the dawn of civilization. We not only yearn to breathe free but strive to extend our lives, increase our comfort, gain more leisure and expand our scope while expending the least possible effort. This precept, posited as the motive force of economic behaviour, underlies Henry George's economic analysis.

The social analogue of the physical law that motion seeks the line of least resistance is, he explained, "that men seek to gratify their desires with the least exertion." The never ending desire of human beings for material goods propels the march of industry. Its stride, lengthened by invention after invention, reduces the toil required to produce each item and to satisfy every want. The resulting abundance fosters trade with ever more distant peoples, bringing with the exchange of goods different fashions, customs, methods and ideas.

Perhaps being conscious of his physical frailty, of how quickly his energy gives way to fatigue, and driven by an unquenchable desire for more and better things, mankind stumbled on to the idea of using the results of his own actions upon nature not only for consumption but as instruments to lighten his toil and increase his rewards. Seeds are planted and through germination yield new crops. Iron ore is smelted, milled, fabricated and fitted together in machines that are used to make other desirable things. Labor stored up in all the ways that multiply productive efficiency and output, is a third factor of production. Capital, "wealth used to produce more wealth;" tools in the hands of labor, acting upon natural resources, had made production a thing of almost magical ease.

In his introduction to *Progress and Poverty* George wrote: "Could a man of the last century — a (Benjamin) Franklin or a (Joseph) Priestly — have seen, in a vision of the future, the steamship taking the place of the sailing vessel, the railroad train of the wagon, the reaping machine of the scythe, the threshing machine of the flail; could he have heard the throb of the engines that in obedience to human will, and for the satisfaction of human desire, exert a power greater than that of all the men and all the beasts of burden of the earth combined.

"Could he have seen the forest tree transformed into finished lumber — into doors, sashes, blinds, boxes or barrels, with hardly the touch of a human hand; the great workshops where boots and shoes are turned out by the case with less labor than the old-fashioned cobbler could have put on a sole; the factories where, under the eye of a girl, cotton becomes cloth faster than hundreds of stalwart weavers could have turned it out with their hand looms; could he have seen steam hammers shaping mammoth shafts and mighty anchors, and delicate machinery making tiny watches; the diamond drill cutting through the heart of the rocks, and coal oil sparing the whale.

"Could he have realized the enormous saving of labor resulting from improved facilities of exchange and communication — sheep killed in Australia eaten fresh in England, and the order given by the London banker in the afternoon executed in San Francisco in the morning of the same day; could he have conceived of the hundred thousand improvements which these only suggest, what would he have inferred as to the social condition of mankind? . . . Plainly in the site of the imagination, he would have beheld these forces elevating society from its very foundations, lifting the very poorest above the possibility of want, exempting the very lowest from anxiety for the material needs of life."

Ownership

ALAS such was not the case. Poverty and want and all the social and political evils that grow upon it were everywhere increasing. Wages failed to keep pace with the growth of wealth because monopoly and speculation kept land out of the reach of working men, leaving the great majority no alternative but to work at subsistence wages or not at all.

George's remedy, to establish equal rights to land by collecting its annual value in lieu of taxes,

was an appeal to justice, for "unless its foundations be laid in justice the social structure cannot stand." Justice dictates what belongs to whom. And the rightful possession of property, the ability to say that something belongs exclusively to someone, without reservation and without injury to any other person due to that possession, is the unalterable standard of justice. George made the case that labor was the sole basis for such claims.

"What constitutes the rightful basis of property? What is it that enables a man justly to say of a thing, It is mine! From what springs the sentiment which acknowledges his exclusive right as against all the world? Is it not, primarily, the right of a man to himself, to the use of his own powers, to the enjoyment of the fruits of his own exertions? Is it not this individual right, which springs from and is testified to by the natural facts of individual organization — the fact that each particular pair of hands obey a particular brain and are related to a particular stomach; the fact that each man is a definite, coherent, independent whole — which alone justifies individual ownership? As a man belongs to himself, so his labor when put in concrete form belongs to him."

By this standard no one could claim rightful, exclusive ownership of land for no labor produced it. Nor could the rent, or value of land be individually claimed for it is the entire community of people and their actions who make it what it is. The reform was based on sound economic reasoning and ethical principles.

HIS monumental work in the hands of a New York publisher, George moved to the city in 1880. Success for the book was not immediate but by 1881 it had been published in England, was translated into German and French and had begun to attract considerable attention.

George, and the leaders of the Irish Land League, who were battling English landlordism in the struggle for a free Ireland, found common cause. His second work, *The Irish Land Question*, made its appearance in 1881. The same year, he set sail for the British Isles as a correspondent for the New York newspaper, the *Irish World*. He found great acceptance of his ideas in Britain and his popularity flourished there.

In the ensuing years, his lectures and articles both at home and abroad, placed him at the center of philosophical debate, social ferment and agitation for economic reform. George was convinced when *Progress and Poverty* was completed, that he had unveiled a timeless truth

which, if heeded, would right the basic social wrong and bring abundance to all who labored and would justly reward all who prudently used their capital. And all his enterprises thereafter were undertaken with the aim of promoting the adoption of his land tax reform.

In the concluding chapter of *Progress and Poverty* he wrote: "The truth that I have tried to make clear will not find easy acceptance. If that could be, it would have been accepted long ago. If that could be, it would never have been obscured. But it will find friends — those who will toil for it; suffer for it; if need be, die for it. This is the power of truth."

In *Social Problems* (1883) George addressed the critical issues one by one. Arguments from every side of the question — concentration of industry, unemployment, machinery and inventions, public debts, farm problems — were examined with the precision and perceptiveness he had displayed from the beginning of his career. The solution to the problems was everyone's charter: "Let no man imagine he has no influence. Whoever he may be, and wherever he may be placed, the man who thinks becomes a light and a power."

The Scottish philosopher, Duke of Argyll, wrote a stinging denunciation of George's ideas, labelling them communistic. It was issued under the title, "The Prophet of San Francisco," an obvious attempt at ridicule. George's followers turned the slur into a mantle which George wore with pride. His reply to the duke's attack titled, "The Reduction to Iniquity," was published in 1884, together with "The Prophet of San Francisco," in a book with the title *Property in Land*.

From the early days in San Francisco, George took political stands in support of his ideals. On several occasions, they led to his candidacy for public office. One office that he did not seek was urged upon him in 1886. Against his early protestations, a combination of 165 labor unions drafted him to be their candidate for Mayor of New York. He waged a titanic though losing battle against the Tammany Hall-controlled Democrats, with support unlike any that had ever been previously mounted. He won 31% of the vote, out-running the Republican candidate. His Democratic opponent was Abram S. Hewitt, who as a congressman had given George his first writing job in New York preparing a Congressional report in 1880. George had also sailed close to the Republican standard bearer, young Theodore Roosevelt, who was a member of the Free

Trade Club, when George had a brief association with it in 1880.

In the spring of 1886 George finally published his brilliant defence of free trade, *Protection or Free Trade*. He had been working on it off and on for three years, had even lost the first manuscript and had to rewrite it. The book was published by his own Henry George & Co., and rivalled *Progress and Poverty*, the best selling book on economics at that time, sold nearly two million copies by the time of George's death in 1897. Protectionism was but one impediment to the free exercise of labor. Free Trade is to be championed as a means that justified the end — free land and full liberty. "Whether we have a protective tariff or a revenue tariff is in itself of small importance, for though the abolition of protection would increase production, the tendency to unequal distribution would be unaffected and would soon neutralize the gain. Yet, what is thus unimportant as an end, is all-important as a means. Protection is a little robber, it is true; but it is the sentinel and outpost of the great robber — the little robber who cannot be routed without carrying the struggle into the very stronghold of the great robber. The great robber is so well entrenched, and people have so long been used to his exactions, that it is hard to arouse them to assail him directly. But to help those engaged in a conflict with this little robber would be to open the easiest way to attach his master, and to arouse a spirit that must push on. To secure to all the free use of the power to labor and the full enjoyment of its products, equal rights to land must be secured."

The book was read into the *Congressional Record* by his fervent advocate and patron, Tom L. Johnson of Ohio, and five other congressmen.

Church teaching

AS 1887 began, George founded *The Standard*, a weekly newspaper of thought and opinion. The paper waded into the controversy in the Roman Catholic Church which arose out of the political advocacy and active campaign for George's candidacy by a priest, Father Edward McGlynn. George's ideas were ruled contrary to church teaching and Father McGlynn was ordered to cease and desist. He refused and was excommunicated, but ultimately reinstated.

The controversy in the church reached the highest level. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical, "Rerum Novarum." It was seen as a repudiation of George's philosophy based on a perception of it as socialistic and anarchistic.

George immediately replied with *The Condition of Labor — An Open Letter to Pope Leo XIII*. He very carefully and respectfully set out the tenets of his doctrine in five chapters with this succinct summation.

"Here is the answer, the only true answer: If men lack bread it is not that God has not done his part in providing it. If men willing to labor are cursed with poverty, it is not that the storehouse that God owes men has failed; that the daily supply he has promised for the daily wants of his children is not here in abundance.

"It is, that impiously violating the benevolent intentions of their Creator, men have made land private property, and thus given into the exclusive ownership of the few the provision that a bountiful Father has made for all. Any other answer than that, no matter how it may be shrouded in the mere forms of religion, is practically an atheistical answer."

In the remaining years of the century respect for George and his reform philosophy grew. All around the world land value taxation was debated and adopted in many places. His thoughts about the money question, a subject he intended to elaborate in the book which was to have been his magnum opus, *The Science of Political Economy*, was beginning to crystalize. His recommendation that a failing Johnstown, Pennsylvania company pay its workers with certificates backed by the bonds of its debtor, saved the company during the financial crisis of 1893.

Henry George had been distracted from his work on *The Science of Political Economy*, begun in 1891, by the demands for lectures, speeches,

travels and other books, over the years. But the final interruption came in October, 1897, when he was once again persuaded to run for Mayor of New York. His public support was thought to be as great as before, if not greater, but he was in failing health and the strenuous effort claimed his life five days before the election. *The Science of Political Economy* was left unfinished.

Cultural achievement

HENRY GEORGE fills a prominent place in the history of economic thought. He was an active reformer but he developed an economic and social philosophy which in the minds of many noted scholars rank him among the great minds of the ages.

Will Lissner, until recently the editor of *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, wrote in a centennial tribute to *Progress and Poverty*: "It is a work in the utopian tradition of Plato's Republic, one of the works that, like the various sacred scriptures and other timeless creations of the human mind, have spurred the human species on to greater heights of cultural achievement."

In a similar vein Prof. John Dewey has said: "Henry George is one of the great names among the world's social philosophers. It would require less than the fingers of the two hands to enumerate those who, from Plato down, rank with him . . . No man, no graduate of a higher educational institution has a right to regard himself as an educated man in social thought unless he has some firsthand acquaintance with the theoretical contribution of this great American thinker."

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