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A Tribune of the People

By MARSHALL CRANE

HENRY GEORGE died in 1897, less than a week before the election which would have made him mayor of New York. Hundreds of thousands who had never met him or seen him, heard the news of his death with a sense of intimate personal loss. Moved by the common catastrophe, journalists transcended party differences. One editorial comment on his passing especially deserves to be remembered:

"He was a tribune of the people, poor for their sake when he might have been rich by mere compromising; without official position for their sake when he might have held high office by merely yielding a part of his convictions to expediency. All his life long he spoke, and wrote, and thought, and prayed, and dreamed of one thing only—the cause of the plain people against corruption and despotism . . . He died as he lived. He died as he would have wished to die—on the battlefield, spending his last strength in a blow at the enemies of the people. Fearless, honest, unswerving, uncompromising Henry George!"

Many of the thumbnail sketches of Henry George in biographical dictionaries and encyclopedias, remark on the decline in popularity of his economic doctrines shortly after his death. Some speak of a more recent renewed interest in them. But very few give any clue to the nature of this popularity, or to its source.

The truth is that, to the people to whom he spoke and for whom he lived and died, George himself was greater, much greater, than his or any other political economy could ever be. Of the thousands who filed so slowly and sadly past his bier probably not one in ten really understood the reforms he advocated. To them he was not just a political economist. Many did not know even the meaning the phrase. To them he was the fearless champion of liberty, the friend of the poor and oppressed, the man who had given a great life in the struggle for economic justice. He was the prophet who preached the gospel of fair play, a decent chance in life for the downtrodden, an even break for the millions who so obviously were getting the short end of the rope.

The Epithets Were Varied

To the forces of entrenched privilege he was just an annoying gad-fly; a jerk-water journalist from the West, without the sort of influence which could do them tangible harm, but an annoyance, just the same.

To the political machines he was a "reformer," one of a bothersome species of interferers who in the long run did not seem to get very far in their efforts to change the world, but who, nevertheless, could be very troublesome at times.

To the teachers and writers of orthodox economics he was just another dissenter. There were many such, of varying degrees of unregeneracy.

The plain people, as they so often do, saw the man himself, not a shadow-picture cast by him. They might not understand his theories, but he had known the poverty which they knew only too well, and offered them the hope of progress away from it. Though they did not entirely comprehend the method which he proposed, they believed in what he was working for with all their hearts. It was their cause no less than his.

A Common Faith

And to these plain people, apparently so thoughtless in their decisions, so often governed by the emotions of the moment, so amoral, it was the moral element that was the keynote to Henry George's message. They flocked to his standard not because of his economic doctrines, but because he stood fearlessly for what was right, for equality between man and man, for justice.

How wise, or how fortunate, the Danish Georgists were in naming their movement the party of Justice. We in this country might do very well to carry on our fight under the same banner.

For the idea of justice is something which everyone understands. There is little likelihood of the average voter becoming a student of political economy for some time to come. But we can win his support if we can persuade him, even in a general way, of the inherent rightness and justice of these principles which will eventually set him free.