

Henry George Memorial Conference at Cooper Union

by Lindy Davies

An international scholarly conference on Henry George, "in Commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of His Death," was held at Cooper Union in New York City on November 1st. The conference was organized by Dr. Ed O'Donnell, a Professor of History at Hunter College, and was sponsored by the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation. An audience of over 100 included local academics as well as a who's who of Georgist scholars and activists. The presentations placed Henry George and his movement in various contexts: the political currents of his time, the strategies used by the single tax movement and the persistent social afflictions of our society.

Of particular interest to students of Henry George and his movement were papers that explained the backdrop and development of issues that have remained current, and even contentious, in the movement to this day. Sarah Henry of Union College, in her paper "Direct Democracy and the Politics of the Single Tax in the Progressive Era," showed how single taxers united behind the issue of popular referendum in Oregon, in the attempt to prepare the ground for a popular victory for George's reform. The referendum initiative succeeded — but the strategy backfired. Single taxers were forced into double-talking soft-sell tactics in the attempt to win votes from farmers who saw their own land values rising as new settlement caused a land boom.

A number of papers, including those by Robert Weir of Bay Path College, Mark Lause of the University of Cincinnati, and conference organizer Ed O'Donnell, explored facets of the relationship between Henry George and the labor movement in the gilded age. The catalyzing influence of the single tax movement was explored from many angles. George's prominence in New York City politics provided a hopeful example for many progressive and labor-oriented reformers. Although George himself said he didn't think he could win the race for Mayor of New York in 1897 but he was running "to raise hell", the fact that his candidacy was a credible threat to the status quo was a source of great vitality for progressive politics. Ed O'Donnell's paper, "The Talisman of Lost Hope: Henry George and the Formation of a Working-Class Political Economy," addressed the question of what it was in George's style and message that brought about the unique phenomenon of a work of political economy becoming a

best-seller.

Other presenters included Laurence Moss of Babson College, Editor of the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, on the timelessness of George's free trade argument, David Hyde of Rutgers on single taxers' influ-



Edward McGlynn "between two popes" in Puck

ence on the development of a progressive alternative theatre in the US, and Mason Gaffney on "Henry George, Edward McGlynn, and Leo XIII". Sam Thomas of Michigan State University offered a slide presentation of Henry George in caricature, explicating the marginalia of a series of *Puck* spreads lampooning George.

Perhaps the most stimulating paper of the day was offered by Ron Yanosky of Harvard. "Henry George's Economy of Race" compared George's equalitarian stance in *Progress and Poverty* with the many starkly bigoted statements he made in print, earlier in his career as a San Francisco journalist. George's opposition to Chinese immigration, and statements about the "stagnation" of Chinese culture, are well-known — but his comments on race went further — and have not, Yanosky found, been widely examined. Echoing widespread public sentiment of his day, George referred to Africans as a "childish," backward race, and vigorously called for even harsher military campaigns against the dwindling Native American resistance to US settlements.

However, George's statements on such matters in *Progress and Poverty* and his later works unequivocally deny such repellent views, and there is some indication that George himself saw the evolution of his views on this matter as a crucial step in the maturation of his thought. Could it be that George's resounding denunciation of Malthusianism was energized by the evangelical fervor of a convert? If so, Dr. Yanosky's paper may show "the Prophet of San Francisco" having accomplished a transformation that much of our society has yet to achieve.