

The Single Tax, January, 1898

A REMEMBRANCE OF HENRY GEORGE

William Lloyd Garrison Jr.

A contemporary estimate of Luther, Columbus, Galileo, Darwin, or any of the great men of history whose achievements mark an epoch, has but a limited and local value. Excepting through the imagination, perspective is impossible, and the influence of a powerful personality, whether upon friend or foe, must colour and deflect the judgment of the coolest. The noise and prejudice and atmosphere of the day assert their influence, for who shall escape his environment?

The statement of my individual judgment which the Independent requests concerning the strength and value of Henry George's economic work can only reflect the personal opinion of one who was, and still is, under the spell of his character and genius. Moreover, without the academic stamp, one's right to an economic opinion is quickly questioned. If Henry George's domain of thought were simply in the speculative field of political economy, dealing with details and drawing deductions from heterogeneous facts, the layman would have small excuse for entering upon the premises. But the author of "Progress and Poverty" was more than an economist—he was a seer. Where the many groped blindly amid conflicting social phenomena, he discovered the moral law and revealed it with marvellous illumination.

It was not the originality of Henry George's ideas regarding rent which differentiates him from other writers. Ricardo and Mill had seen and demonstrated its nature. The wrongfulness of land monopoly and private ownership of natural opportunity had impressed other minds before he had begun to think. The French physiocrats, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and others, to whom Mr. George conceded the largest credit, had comprehended the injustice.

Spencer, in particular, had formulated an ethical protest that stands immovable, in spite of the instability of its author.

It is true that his explosion of the old wage-fund theory and the Malthusian bugbear were invaluable contributions to economic discussion; but the supreme merit of the California printer was that, while seeing with others the source of social confusion, he alone saw clearly the remedy. His life henceforth was to be spent in carrying the glad tidings to all lands and peoples.

OPPOSITION FROM THE CHIEF PRIESTS.

When William Lloyd Garrison awakened to the enormity of American slavery he naturally expected immediate aid from the Christian church. Instead he met denial and abuse. When Henry George brought that divine ingredient of humanity which changed the dismal science to one of joy and hope, he received parallel treatment from those professing to hold in charge the garnered truths of economics.

How deeply he felt the repulse from those whose calling he was to exalt and glorify, was illustrated at the Social Science Association meeting at Saratoga in 1890.

"Let me say a direct word to you professors of political economy; you men of light and leading, who are fighting the Single Tax with evasions and quibbles and hair-splitting. We Single Tax men propose something that we believe will make the life of the masses easier, that will end the strife between Capital and Labour, and solve the darkening social problems of our time. If our remedy will not do, what is your remedy? It will not do to propose little goody-goody palliatives, that hurt no one, help no one, and go nowhere. You must choose between the Single Tax, with its recognition of the rights of the individual, with its recognition of the province of government, with its recognition of the rights of property, on the one hand, and Socialism on the other.

Gentlemen, do not quibble and split hairs about this matter. It is too solemn, too important. It involves the happiness, the health, the lives, the very souls, of human beings. It involves the progress of society, the fate of civilisation. If you have had superior education, if you have had what so many of us has been denied, the leisure for study, the opportunity to cultivate what is highest and best in your powers, the more it is incumbent on you to meet the question frankly and

fairly. If you will not accept our remedy, what is your remedy? There must be some deep wrong underlying our organisation to-day. If it is not the wrong we point to, the wrong that disinherits men of their birthright, what is it? There must be some way of securing to the labourer the proper reward of his toil, or of opening to every man willing to work opportunity to work. If you will not take our plan, what is your plan?"

THE LION AT BAY.

One blushes to remember the spirit of the trivial and evasive rejoinders to this impressive and pathetic appeal. But it was magnificent to see the lion at bay, while assailants plied every weapon of perplexity and annoyance. In the light of to-day how strange the record reads!

If one wishes to find the strongest evidence of Henry George's permanence, let him scan the pages of economic journals and addresses, the world over, since "Progress and Poverty" was printed. With rare exceptions the criticism of his ideas is antagonistic, often contemptuous. Time and time again was he refuted. It became a pastime to slay him. Yet is his theory more alive than ever, its advocates multitudinous and increasing. The Land Question, because it is fundamental, rises at every turn and confronts every economic writer.

A worthless or fallacious contention requires to be killed but once. This heresy is, after eighteen years, the despair of its would-be annihilators. If it could not be strangled in its cradle when Henry George, on his arrival from California, wandered a lonely stranger through the streets of New York, what promise now, when the great city pours out its tens of thousands to do reverence to his noble memory.

My judgment is that the name of the great reformer, like Abou Ben Adhem's, will, in the economic history of his time, lead all the rest. He has touched the marrow of truth in asserting that, unless mystery and confusion are banished from political economy, Democracy is doomed. The masses are unable to be students. The lore of books is not for the toiler whose daily labour is insufficient for his needs. There must be simple laws which common and untutored minds can grasp. There must be principles appealing to the unlettered as plainly as to the sons of

culture. To make clear the simple rule of justice and freedom, to reconcile the ways of God to man, was the mission of this world preacher.

Economists are useful, observation and collocation of social facts are essential ; but without the intelligent soul, laboriously constructed systems are devoid of heat and motion Into the inanimate body of political economy Henry George breathed the breath of life. It is a new science, no longer dismal. It throbs and pulsates with humanity. It has become a mighty instrument for the overthrow of oppression, delivered from the special keeping of a select few to become the possession of mankind. The prophet of San Francisco is no longer without honour in his own country, a country which embraces the world.