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A Definitive Biography of Henry George

By GEORGE RAYMOND GEIGER

THE PUBLICATION OF THIS LONG-AWAITED WORK[1] has provided Henry George with the biography he has sorely needed. Indeed, it is a peculiar commentary on the decline of American liberalism that one of its dominant figures has had to wait fifty-eight years from the time of his death to receive the full attention of a trained biographer, at least one not in the family circle. Professor Barker's book is authoritative, scholarly, sympathetic, and complete. It is not a literary biography in the grand style, like the recent Packe life of John Stuart Mill, for an example; it is rather an historian's biography—which is not a synonym for dullness, although the book does contain some (almost necessary) dull sections. The attitude throughout is objective without being patronizing, and appreciative without being eulogistic. In short, the attitude is the proper one. If there is anything missing from the book, it is a clear-cut picture of George's personality, but in the case of a public figure and a reformer, that is always difficult to capture, and, for various reasons, particularly so in this case. But, at the outset, let us say that this undoubtedly will be the definitive life of Henry George.

I

WHAT SEEMS the most significant aspect of the present book is the placing of George in a context. This, of course, is not a novelty and it would seem indicated not only in a biography but for almost anything else as well. Yet Henry George has too often been regarded, even by those who ought to know better, as some kind of crank, isolated and unsupported. Whatever plausibility such an attitude could manage to scrape together vanishes entirely as Dr. Barker gives George's ideas balance and perspective by developing several large contexts as background. They include, for example, George's early California environment, the economic upheavals of the Eighteen Seventies, the rising class consciousness of the American laborer, the moral fervor of Christian social idealism, and the growth of the Radical and Fabian movements in Great Britain. Particularly impressive is the development by the author of George's formative

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period in the early California of 1858–79. Favored by long residence in California, Professor Barker has been able to enlist all the apparatus of scholarship in reconstructing the pioneer setting which greeted the nineteen-year old immigrant from Philadelphia.

The land question was never far absent from the California acquired from Mexico, and young Harry was impressed. The very question of whether San Francisco was itself a *pueblo,* and therefore owned by the community, plus the notorious gigantic land frauds involved in the substitution of a fee-simple for the Spanish land system provided fertile discussion, led presently by George's early friend, James McClatchy of the *Sacramento Bee.* Then there was the coming of the railroad, which provided George with the opportunity for his first serious economic writing. Also, the Chinese question, which provided George a different opportunity and one of his few excursions into anti-liberalism.

Professor Barker has done prodigious work in the sources of early California history, in tracing back all the articles and editorials written by George in his early journalistic days, in discovering in letters and documents all manner of interesting connections and cross-references bearing directly or indirectly upon the formative matrix of George's revolutionary concepts. Nor has the biographer overlooked the poignant years of "suffering and exaltation," in which George was reduced to being a tramp, to marrying with only a fifty-cent piece as his entire property, to stopping a man on the street for money to get food for a new-born baby. These tragedies, too, cannot be forgotten in establishing the context in which the philosophy of Henry George must be understood.

The building of this California background is perhaps the most original and needed part of the book. Which does not mean that Dr. Barker is presenting George's ideas as simply a pale reflection of early California. On the contrary, every attempt is made to demonstrate that there was a core of consistent protest and of fast-developing beliefs in George's mind, beliefs which applied even outside the ambit of the land question. For example, as early as 1868 in the *San Francisco Daily Times,* George was protesting the notion that the interests of the laborer were opposed to those of society in general. He was even then appealing for an economy of abundance, and, as Professor Barker notes, his editorials read "more like the Nineteen Thirties than the Eighteen Sixties." George also advanced ideas about currency and the Civil War debt which Professor Barker finds almost Keynesian and applicable even to Defense Bonds in 1955. Such interesting but peripheral opinions were of course eclipsed by George's first important economic writing in the *Overland Monthly* of

October, 1868 on "What the Railroad Will Bring Us," where, contrary to all the bullish enthusiasm of his fellow-Californians, he prophesied accurately the inevitable effects of growing wealth and for the first time made public his epic correlation of progress and poverty.

II

UNDERSCORED BY THE PRESENT BIOGRAPHER is the thoroughly radical and even at times class-conscious nature of George's early economic thinking. True, he later became completely disenchanted with "socialism," yet there is little if anything in George's career of reform that would give comfort to those of his followers who today would like to see him serve as a kind of conservative businessman's defense against a New Deal or worse. This problem of George's general social orientation involves a number of critical and related aspects of his general philosophy and needs to be developed a little, especially since Professor Barker himself gives it particular attention. This reviewer, for one, finds the author's approach unexceptionable, although others may wish to deprecate the emphasis. Perhaps, therefore, it is best to let the biographer speak largely for himself.

What Dr. Barker calls George's "maximum Marxism" appeared late in 1871, shortly before which George had made some not unfriendly remarks about the Paris Commune.

> On 8 December 1871, that is when the paper was new, the [San Francisco *Daily Evening*] *Post* said that, though "not prepared to take our stand squarely upon the principles of the European Internationals," it would endorse their general proposition that the existing constitution of society is radically wrong and vicious, and that what the world needs far more than any mere reform in government or a reform of any special abuse is "a REORGANIZATION under which every man's interest will not be, as it now is, opposed to his neighbour's." Such an idea is nothing to be brushed aside by calling it names—socialism, communism, or agrarianism. It is simply "an attempt to set aside the principle of *competition* on which society is now based, and to substitute for it a system of the state as in the main a family, in which the weaker brother shall not be pressed to the wall." America's "exaggerated individualism" demanded change, the editor [George] was certain (p. 201).

Professor Barker adds immediately, and anyone familiar with George's considered ideas will realize, that the 1871 statement was hardly a typical one and that this "mild flirtation" did not last. However, it is mentioned here for the purpose of broaching several cognate issues. One is George's perennial interest in government ownership of public utilities. In the early Seventies his *Post* led the attack on the Spring Valley Water Company and plumped for municipal ownership, (with George even sug-

gesting in the course of the debate that mountain water be impounded and used for irrigation). That this was not some youthful aberration stemming from journalistic controversy is attested by the books which appeared in the Eighties after *Progress and Poverty* had made its impact, chiefly *Social Problems* and, to a lesser extent, *Protection or Free Trade.*

What . . . few readers of Henry George's books have known, is that, though the emphasis on the socialization of industry is light in *Progress and Poverty,* the author had actually been consistent for sixteen years in asserting that natural industrial monopolies ought to be publicly owned and operated. In that degree George had long been a state socialist; and now, as he considered private corporations becoming larger and mightier than sovereign states, he stated the possibility that "a revolutionary uprising might be necessary to turn out the praetorians who were doing the corporations' bidding in government office." To his notion of California days, of what the nation-size natural monopolies actually were, the telegraph system and the railroad, he added the telephone; and, discussing the local monopolies natural in the economy of the modern city, he added electricity to the items previously specified, which were water, heat, and gas. In these areas George was as ready as anyone for socialization (pp. 426–7).

In August of 1883, George testified in Washington before a Senate committee to this effect:

Pressed rather hard on public ownership, he agreed, yes, that his "idea of communal ownership of land," as the question was phrased, was in some degree a socialistic proposition. Specifying less particularly than at other times what industries should be community-owned, he spoke perhaps more dogmatically than ever before, on that subject. "Practically I think the progress of events is towards the extension and enlargement of businesses that are in their nature monopolies, and that the State must add to its functions continually" (p. 436).

I think it is important that this usually underplayed aspect of George's thinking be more familiar than it is; but I also think it is important to include Professor Barker's summary of this whole matter, and so I venture to include an extended quotation:

For envisaging in biographical perspective George's role after 1887, no reminder to the reader is more essential than that from first to last Henry George, with only the slightest waverings of inconsistency, had always been a pro-capitalistic thinker. George was radical but not unusual as an opponent of monopoly, and he was both radical and unusual in wanting to transform the institutions of property in land. But he was always conservative as to capitalism, whenever business was competitive, and conservative as to our institutions of church and state. Such are the cross-hatchings of the lines of thought which give moderate tone to the ideological portrait.

Readers of the first part of this biography will remember that by the time *Progress and Poverty* was published George had made himself a spokesman for what this century calls a "mixed economy" and an "economy of abundance," both. And recent chapters have indicated that two books of the '80s, *Social Problems* and *Protection or Free Trade,* made him a mixed-economy man still more completely. The earlier book called for public ownership where natural monopolies exist, the products of certain phases of machine technology; and the later one spoke for free trade and free enterprise, wherever possible. Present readers, who will be representative Americans if they believe that abundance is the principal glory of our industrial economy, and who will also be likely to accept a mixture of free enterprise and public ownership as a desirable way of doing things, will have no difficulty in understanding that when the history of Henry George separated somewhat from the history of labor, he easily discovered new middle-class followers for his ideas (pp. 509–10).

These suggestions are significant, even if to some they may seem novel. In any event, they are more fruitful than the endless controversies (many of them traced out in the present volume) over the degree of "individualism" or "collectivism" in George's approach. Especially unrewarding is that dispute in recent years when terms like "Socialism" are too easily confused, either deliberately or inadvertently, with entirely different symbols like Stalinism and Soviet Communism. In these areas intelligible communication has just about broken down. Dr. Barker's argument seems to undercut what is at the very least a hackneyed disjunction in economic philosophy, and he makes a plausible case for George's appeal to seemingly opposed trains of thought.[2]

III

EQUALLY CONSTRUCTIVE is the author's handling of another debatable issue in George's work, the place of "single tax" both as a term and a program. (Chapter 17 is particularly important here.) As to the first, it is, of course, familiar that George himself used the term only sparingly until after his followers began to push it, and even then was doubtful of it as a symbol either of appeal or accuracy. As late as ten years after the publication of *Progress and Poverty,* he could write that "the term single tax does not really express all that a perfect term would convey. It only suggests the fiscal side of our aims." (In the New York *Standard,* 2 March 1889.) The use of the term was pushed by men like Thomas

[2] Professor Barker does not develop in any great detail the particular arguments between George and the socialists, although he does refer to Max Hirsch. It would have been helpful if there had been mention of Marx's damaging concessions in his chapter on colonization (33 of Vol. I, *Das Kapital*). In what are actually the closing words of the volume, Marx seems to be saying that the land question, not the question of capital, is the basic one. The Georgist argues that this concession has played too little part in the interminable discussions of Marxism.

Shearman, who were more interested in the legal and monetary aspects of the reform, and who, as Professor Barker points out, were believers in "single tax limited." George was clearly for an "unlimited" interpretation and he therefore never quite accepted the phrase by which, it appears, he will be forever known—and circumscribed.[3]

A second issue, really a corollary of the first, is whether Henry George was a single-idea economist. He is usually thought to be one. The biographer does not accept that interpretation. We have already seen that Dr. Barker has discovered a "mixed economy" orientation in the corpus of George's writings. But even if that is arguable, it is clear that at least two other major proposals, one economic the other political, occupied a considerable share of George's energies. Free trade was an integral part of his whole philosophy and *Protection or Free Trade* may well be the most cogent book ever to appear in this field. True, George did not separate it from his theory of the land question, but, even if separated, it can stand quite independently and can still be appealed to in these days of reciprocal trade agreements. Less well known is George's consuming interest in the Australian ballot. As early as 1871 George was far out in front in his advocacy of secret voting, and in 1889 his *Standard* formulated its program in a front-page box and the three elements were single tax, free trade, and ballot reform. George's social interests were broad and organized, not simply unilineal.

IV

BECAUSE SO MUCH ATTENTION thus far has been devoted in this review to the economic and contextual phases of George's work, a wrong impression may be gained of the biography. It must be made clear, then, as the author does in his preface, that George should be considered as above all a moral thinker and a religious one. The moral emphasis was more significant than what is sometimes connoted by the word. For it meant, in the words of John Dewey, that "a vital connection between ends, human values, and economic means is at the basis of George's distinctive treatment." Not that George was in any sense a pragmatist! On the contrary he was a theistic idealist (idealist in the technical metaphysical sense as well as in the ordinary) and a life-long anti-materialist. As early as 1874 he attacked with deliberation the "scientific materialism" of John Tyndall, and later that of Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer. Even earlier, in an extended youthful letter from California in 1861, which

[3] It is interesting to learn, in connection with the idea of a "single" tax, that in 1874 George believed that "theoretically the income tax is next to the land tax, the best and fairest which can be levied . . ." (Barker, p. 212).

Professor Barker calls the Millennial Letter, George lays down the essential tenets of immortality, teleology, and theism. Except for a brief boyish and nautical period of irreverence, these principles were to direct his philosophical and religious speculation.

This religious orientation was so strong that our biographer has no hesitation in labelling Part II of his book, about half of it, as "A Christian Effort," and one chapter of it (18) "Christian Democrat to the End." (During his lifetime George was widely accepted as a "Christian Socialist" and was so regarded even much later by scholars like Teilhac.) The most spectacular expression of George's religious appeal was, of course, the "Cross of a New Crusade," preached by the priest, Father McGlynn, and others chiefly before the Anti-Poverty Society, whose Sunday evening meetings had all the reverence and much of the ceremony of church service. Professor Barker goes into the difficult McGlynn Case—the priest was excommunicated and later re-instated—which had all manner of repercussions extending from the Vatican to George's Irish Catholic followers in New York City. As an aftermath of the dispute and in answer to Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum,* dealing with the new revolutionary social movements, George wrote his most measured and religious book, *The Condition of Labor.* (It should be noted that George's religious appeal was in no sense limited to a Catholic following. He also had decisive influence on the developing Protestant social-gospel movement.) George's philosophy had become all-embracing and was to appeal to many interests: to the fiscal reformer, to the political reformer (like Cleveland's great mayor, Tom L. Johnson), and now to the moral and religious reformer, to men like Tolstoi and Hamlin Garland.

It was this many-faceted appeal which helps to account for George's enormous influence, abroad as well as at home. This is not the place to parade again the mighty names, especially in Great Britain, who somehow managed to come within the range of his magic. (The recent articles in this JOURNAL by Professor Elwood Lawrence give a good report of George's British influence.) Professor Barker does a graceful and effective description of George's triumphal tours in the British Isles, and later in Australia, and shows how all phases of British radicalism, above all the Fabian Society, were involved with him—Bernard Shaw, Sidney Webb, Helen Taylor, Philip Wicksteed, John A. Hobson, Henry Hyndman, Joseph Chamberlain, to mention only names which come quickly to mind. George's success with English intellectuals was more striking than his acceptance by America's, yet Dr. Barker does paint an interesting picture of George at home to figures like Henry Adams and Robertson James,

brother of William and Henry. Yet this was the same Henry George who rocked Tammany Hall by almost becoming mayor of New York in 1886 and who challenged it again in 1897, the same Henry George whose funeral in 1897 provoked the greatest expression of popular emotion since the death of Lincoln and which was not to occur again until the death of Franklin Roosevelt.

The present book discloses other unusual centers of Georgist influence. For instance, chiefly because of Tolstoi, but not entirely so, George occupied a large place in Russian liberal discussions of the early twentieth century. (In this connection it is of interest to note a George prophesy of 1874, probably influenced by de Tocqueville: he foresaw two colossi, Russia and the United States, "each a continental power, which might, if they chose, divide the world between them.") Professor Barker also nails down the long-asserted Georgist impact on Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom by identifying Wilson's advisers before and after he became president; they include men like George L. Record, William U'Ren, Joseph Tumulty, Col. Edward House, Franklin K. Lane, Newton D. Baker, Herbert Quick, Louis F. Post, Brand Whitlock, Frederic Howe, all of them staunch followers of Henry George. As Dr. Barker writes, "in larger part than has often been noticed, the idealism of the administration of Woodrow Wilson was Henry George idealism renewed."

V

HENRY GEORGE was a dominating figure in the history of liberalism. His permanent place has now been fairly well established by this book.

Yet any significant treatment of an indigenous American radical must cause some embarrassment these days because it just doesn't fit. The liberal and the radical are in decline. (I use "radical," of course, in its original and historical sense, which automatically excludes the Communist.) The "new conservatism" is the vogue; a new Kirk-et-al. line (is it high- or low-waisted?) has for a season at least caught the eye of fashion and seems even to be persuading a number of professional liberals to look again at their wardrobes.

Now, this is not the place to examine the new conservatism, nor to deplore that even stranger rise of the doctrinaire liberal, *i.e.*, one who achieves "liberalism" by saying kind things about Communists. But it may be in place to observe that neither one of these deviations from "old-fashioned" liberalism or genuine American radicalism can claim the authority of Henry George. This has been clearly demonstrated by Professor Barker's researches.

Just where George's allegiances would be directed were he available today is not easily answered by historian, biographer, or anyone else. My point is that any discussion of him and his times is not merely an excursion to nostalgia; it is rather an exercise in rethinking and rehabilitating the premises of liberalism.

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THERE ARE A FEW minor negative points about the present book which a conscientious reader needs to include here as a kind of footnote, especially since the price of the volume seems somewhat out of line. There are perhaps the usual number of typographical errors, chiefly in the publication dates of books cited. The index is wholly inadequate, particularly for the section on Sources. Since most of the footnotes have been eliminated, the incompleteness of the index is a serious drawback. Finally, a biography selling for $9.50 might be provided with more illustrations than a mere frontispiece. In this lack, the book suffers in comparison with other recently-published biographies (the John Stuart Mill, again).

But it would be captious to end on such a downbeat. For this promises to be a celebrated biography.

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