

Biography of Henry George

by Mark Hasted

Although almost unknown today Henry George was the most important economist and radical social thinker in 19th century America. Indeed, he took economic theory to the public so effectively that he was probably, by the time of his death, the third most famous man in the United States being eclipsed in public recognition only by Mark Twain and Thomas Edison.

Henry George was born in Philadelphia on 2 September, 1839 and was the second of ten children of Richard and Catherine (Vallance) George. His family were strongly Protestant and were comfortably well-off without being wealthy.

Henry completed only 5 months of secondary school before leaving to take a job as an office boy in an importing house. At 16 in 1856 he shipped out as cabin boy on the vessel Hindoo which sailed to Melbourne and Calcutta. On his return he learnt type setting for 9 months before shipping out again to California. Leaving the ship in San Francisco he headed for British Columbia to join the gold rush but the expedition was a failure.

Henry returned to San Francisco where he married Australian born Annie Corsina Fox. Times were very hard then and the Georges lived in real poverty. By 1865 the family, with the addition of 2 young sons, was near starvation. Despite this, Henry continued to improve his mind with dedicated study and was starting to get a reputation as a writer.

George's application and talents were finally rewarded in 1866 by Noah Brooks who gave him the job of reporter at the *San Francisco Times*. There, he rose rapidly to the position of managing editor. About that time he had an article published in the *Overland Monthly* where he first gave an indication of the ideas for which he would later be famous.

Henry George's full realisation of American social problems occurred during a trip to New York in the late 1860s. There he observed extreme wealth but was disappointed to find it existing side-by-side with poverty so harrowing and degrading that the victims of it had lost the will to escape. The people in between lived in a dread of poverty that was in some ways as paralysing as the poverty itself.

In 1871 Henry George and William Hinton established the *San Francisco Evening Post* and made a great success of it by selling the newspapers for one cent each. That same year Henry issued a pamphlet *Our Land and Land Policy* in which he

advocated the single tax on land. After four happy years Henry was forced to leave the newspaper following a disagreement with a major creditor over the paper's position on railway monopolies.

Henry George was becoming increasingly active in local politics. In particular he became a strong critic of mining interests, political corruption and land speculation. He was unsuccessful as Democratic candidate to the state legislature but Governor Irwin gave him the job of state inspector of gas meters.

This job was undemanding enough to give Henry the opportunity between 1877 and 1879 to complete his masterpiece *Progress and Poverty*. Henry was unable to find a publisher and so self-published an edition of 500, doing much of the type setting himself. When the first 500 sold quickly the publisher D. Appleton & Co. were happy to take the plates. The book became a sensation in both America and England selling hundreds of thousands of copies. Translation into numerous languages followed. The English scientist and writer, Alfred Russell Wallace, described *Progress and Poverty* as "the most remarkable and important book of the present century."

Henry George now found himself in great demand as a writer and moved to New York in 1880. There he became involved with the Irish nationalist community and wrote *The Irish Land Question* (Later re-titled *The Land Question*). This led to being sent on assignment by *Irish World* to Ireland and England in 1881-1882. Around that time Henry also had a series of essays published in Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper*. These essays were later collected and re-published in book form as *Social Problems*.

Henry returned to New York from his overseas trip a hero. He allowed himself to be persuaded by a petition of 34,000 voters to run for **mayor** of New York in **1886** as the candidate of the labour organisations. [Henry \(68,110 votes\) lost to the Democrat Abram Hewitt \(90,552 votes\)](#).

Interestingly, Theodore Roosevelt, later to become president of the United States, came third with 60,435 votes. Henry's supporters strongly suspected that fraud had cost their candidate victory.

Also in 1886 Henry George issued his spirited defence of free trade entitled *Protection or Free Trade* which has sold over two million copies. Publication was delayed because the manuscript was lost when it was nearly complete requiring a laborious re-write.

Henry George toured England again in 1888 and 1889. In 1890 he visited Australia and New Zealand to very enthusiastic welcomes. His visit to Australia was the

catalyst for the formation of the one of Australia's two major political parties, Australian Labor Party. By now Henry George was an extremely accomplished public speaker a contrast to himself earlier when he said "to face an audience, it seemed to me, required as much courage as it would to face a battery."

The first clear indication of ill health occurred when Henry suffered a mild stroke in the winter of 1890-1891. Despite this he continued writing and speaking prolifically and produced *The Condition of Labour* in 1891 which was a reply to Pope Leo XIII's encyclical labour on land ownership. The next year he produced a critique of social philosopher Herbert Spencer called *A Perplexed Philosopher*.

In 1897 Henry was persuaded yet again to run as candidate of the labour organisations for mayor of New York in opposition to Tammany Hall. At the same time he was working very hard to complete the book that he saw as his crowning achievement, *The Science of Political Economy*. Due to the constant writing, speaking and travelling Henry's health was deteriorating. Henry's doctor warned him that the stress of another political campaign would likely prove fatal.

Henry George died, possibly from a stroke, in the early morning of 29 October 1897 just four days before the mayoral election having spoken at several meetings the previous evening. Henry's eldest son, Henry George Jr, continued the campaign on his father's behalf but was soundly defeated, gaining only 22,000 votes. Henry Jr also saw to the completion of *The Science of Political Economy*.

Such was the respect for Henry George that an almost unbelievable crowd of over 100,000 people joined the funeral procession to his burial site in Brooklyn.