

## Henry George: Inspiration for Truth-Seekers

by Dr. Cay Hehner

Henry George had several qualities rare among men in general and among economists and philosophers in particular. He had a rare grasp of complex economic relations and an inimitable gift for clear expression. Endowed with the systematic and critical mind of a scientist, he could create the precise and graceful prose of an Emerson. It is not surprising that his *Progress and Poverty*, shortly after its commercial publication in New York, 1880, became a bestseller that outsold the *Kapital* of Karl Marx, and was translated into all major world languages. With the aid of George's lecturing tours of the U.S., Europe and Australia, the book inspired the formation of innumerable land-reform organizations. His popularity increased to such a degree that only his countrymen Mark Twain and Thomas Edison surpassed it. Bernard Shaw even went so far as to include George's major work (in between the Bible and the Fabian Essays) in the stage directions for *Candida*.

Another trait which distinguishes Henry George strongly from the field of social thinkers is his courage in following an independent line of inquiry regardless of the personal consequences. Marx espoused - rightly or wrongly - the cause of the suppressed working class to the virtual obliteration of every class or individual who did not fit this bill. Herbert Spencer forsook his original economic acumen with astounding ease when confronted with the persuasions of the British country squire. Modern-day economists do not even think twice when implicitly lobbying, in their "objective research," for the interests of the richest special interest. Henry George, on the other hand, displayed a

consistent and unusually libertarian largesse of mind. He would cater to nobody and nothing short of the absolute truth. His vision of true economic and social relations was his promised land, which could not fail to materialize for the benefit of all. As a deep humanist, who had been brought up on Jeffersonian ideals of equal opportunity for all, he loathed war in all its forms. And as a man of Scotch extraction (the only place in the world where it seems that economy is imbued directly through mother's milk) war was simply too costly and wasteful an affair to be seriously considered.

It did not matter to him that his vision might not materialize during his lifetime. Patiently, even doggedly, George opted for the evolutionary step-by-step rather than the revolutionary approach. The principles he had discovered had, he believed, the inevitability and infallibility of the natural laws of physics.

Henry George loathed all attempts to render economics an "esoteric" science understandable only to the initiated few. He even forsook a Chair in economics offered at the University of California, for George's clarity of exposition rendered the academic pulpit unnecessary. In his life, writings and works, he stands for honesty and lucidity - qualities which need not shun the encounter with common sense. All the people who would like to scrutinize or investigate his findings are welcome: "While we may not be scientists or philosophers we too are men." Thus he concluded one of his finest books. [*A Perplexed Philosopher*]

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