

# The *Humor* of Henry George

**G**EORGE had an important message to give to the world, and he was in dead earnest about it. He had no time to fool around, but he did have his humorous side. His expressions of it were mostly to illustrate his point, but this he did effectively.

In the single-purposed *Progress and Poverty* there is not much humor. This exalted work alternates between solid economic reasoning and flights of inspiration. But who can forget "In the name of the Prophet—figs!"—George's suitable comment on Mill's statement that the land belongs to the people and the landowners have no right to anything but the rent. And perhaps you remember George's story about the anti-slave American lecturing to a Scottish audience and arousing their sympathies—until he told them the daily diet of a slave, which turned out to be better than that of a Scotch crofter!

Using Malthusian mathematics, George imagines Adam computing the future growth of his first baby based on the rate of growth in its early months—and figuring that by age thirty it would weigh 175,716,339,548 tons.

Perhaps George wasn't trying to be

funny when he called man "the daughter of the horseleech." Anyway, we know what he meant.

In *Social Problems*, written more popularly, George unbends more frequently, and feels free to say that "the best use that could be made of our great law libraries . . . would be to send them to the paper-mills," and to compare the national debt to "a check upon the First National Bank of the Moon" (not an impossibility these days).

George loved to use stories to illustrate his point, and in one of these he imagines that all the millionaires of New York are suddenly seized with a passion to out-spend one another in providing all kinds of services to the city, even to the point of begging themselves. "All these benefactions would increase rent," he said. In these latter days we have seen much of this sort of thing happen, especially in New York.

Tariffs and customs come in for their measure of scorn in *Social Problems*. "The first thing every man is called upon to do when he reaches this 'land of liberty' is to take a false oath; the next thing he is called upon to do is to bribe a Custom-House offi-

After talking with that teamster about \$1,000 an acre land something clicked in the mind of Henry George and he hurried home to work it out.

The drawing is by George Tomfohr of Kalispell, Montana.



cer." A little more seriously he says (thinking of "infant industries"), "Nature knows no 'Baby Act.' We must live up to her conditions or not live at all."

Of course it is in *Protection or Free Trade* that tariffs are held up to the full light of George's reason and ridicule. There he uses several imaginative stories to buttress his case. He has a village, with protectionist logic, argue that great cities have theaters, therefore the village must subsidize a theater in order to become a great city. With a straight face, he proposes a "bounty" system to encourage home industry, as superior to the protective system. With typical foresight, he imagines his bounty system being used to encourage the development of aerial navigation (Alas, we seem to have adopted the bounty system without dropping tariffs).

George describes his own meeting with a group of men who, when he declared he was an out-and-out free trader, were amazed and shook hands with him "as they might have shaken hands with the 'Living Skeleton' or the 'Chinese Giant'." He goes on to gently deride timid free traders. "When entirely convenient they will speak, write, attend a meeting, eat a dinner or give a little money for the cause, but they will hardly break with their party or 'throw away' a vote."

In *A Perplexed Philosopher* George's anger with Herbert Spencer makes his humor searing, when it occurs, but he relaxes in the last chapter with a piece of fiction called "Principal Brown," to illustrate Spencer's predicament in recanting his earlier views on the land question. Brown becomes a school principal in a Southern town during slavery. He is at first anti-slave, but a series of incidents induces him to rationalize his views more and more until he evolves into a complete champion of slavery. It

is a satire worthy of Mark Twain and suggests that George might have become a humorist had he wished.

In *The Land Question*, too, George cannot resist an imaginative story. He supposes that Captain Kidd establishes piracy as a respectable business and hands it on until his great-great-grandson comes to accept it as the most natural thing in the world. But at last, society gets tired of the business and wants to abolish it. Mr. Kidd becomes indignant, speaks of vested rights and claims that if society insists on interfering, it must compensate him for at least as much as he could make in twenty years' successful pirating. You need not be told that George is really talking of land monopoly.

*The Science of Political Economy* is a deeply reflective work, but the old humor twinkles through. He takes a shot at one of his favorite targets, the custom house: "I am writing these pages on the shore of Long Island...nearly opposite the point where our legalized robbers, the Custom-House officers, board incoming steamers to ask strangers to take their first American swear, and where if false oaths really colored the atmosphere the air would be bluer than is the sky on this gracious day."

More than once in this book George uses illustrations from boyhood. Perhaps he was at the age when such reminiscences crowd into the mind. Here is a little conversation he indulges in, to illustrate one of the many meanings of the word "use":

"First Boy—What's the use of that crooked pin you're bending?"

"Second Boy—What's the use! It's use is to lay it on a seat some fellow is just going to sit down on, and to make him jump and squeal, and to hear the teacher charging around while you're busy studying your lesson, and don't know anything about what's the matter."