

# HENRY GEORGE NEWS

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## A Builder of Democracy By LEO HIRSCH

THE YEAR 1898 was a memorable one for me because of two events which helped to shape my future years. One was planned; the other was mere chance. The first was a hard-fought victory over my Irish-American competitors for the right to establish my business habitat at the corner of Superior Street that fronted the Wedel House in Cleveland, Ohio.

My determination to help in the support of my family of which I was the youngest member and my willingness to meet and fight all comers yielded me the privilege of selling newspapers and shining shoes on that particularly busy spot.

The second event occurred during my second week on that corner in the form of a remarkable contact. It was around eight in the morning when I saw a streamlined carriage drawn by two beautiful horses stop at the curb and a somewhat heavy-set man alight. He whistled and beckoned to me and said: "Boy, kindly mind this team until I get shaved."

I did so with trepidation as this was my initial experience minding horses. For this he rewarded me with two silver dollars and on three successive occasions repeated the performance. My benefactor was the prominent Cleveland business man, Tom L. Johnson. Out of this tenuous acquaintance grew a friendship that inspired me and profoundly influenced my life. He had a direct effect on my future thinking and political philosophy. I learned to admire him greatly and believed deeply in his ideas and ideals. In a large measure he became my teacher and I was the willing, eager pupil. He encouraged me to become civic minded and he was the first person to introduce me to the writings of his teacher and friend, Henry George. At first he sent me Henry George's *Social Problems* and later *Progress and Poverty*.

The reading of these books revealed to me that Henry George was plagued by the problem of poverty in the United States and I soon became aware that no other reformer had attacked it so fundamentally or so eloquently. As he stated, "Poverty is not merely deprivation; it means shame, degradation, the searing of the most sensitive part of our moral and mental nature as with hot irons; the denial of the strongest impulses and sweetest affections, the wrenching of the most vital nerves."

It was Henry George's purpose to humanize and democratize our political economy that it might serve social ends, rather than class exploitation. He deliberately tried to fuse economics with ethics and that, of course, was contrary to the prevailing practices of the day. He believed that without economic justice political democracy remained a myth. "Democratic government in more than name can exist only where wealth is distributed with something like equality—when the great mass of citizens are personally free and independent, neither fettered by their poverty nor made the subject by their wealth," he wrote.

This equality he insisted could be attained only by the land reform—truly, "the greatest of



Tom L. Johnson

social revolutions." He constantly emphasized that our great material development necessitated a higher moral standard. I quote him further:

"Civilization, as it progresses, requires a keener sense of justice, a warmer brotherhood, a wider, loftier, truer public spirit. Failing these, civilization must pass into destruction . . . For civilization knits men more and more closely together and constantly tends to subordinate the individual to the whole and to make more and more important social conditions."

Henry George's works had a tremendous circulation in Ohio, largely because of the fact that Tom L. Johnson had been won over to his views. There followed a sincere and lasting friendship between Johnson and Henry George. No pupil ever gave himself more completely to a teacher than Johnson did to George. The result was Johnson's determination to alleviate social injustices through the political medium. He became a convinced single taxer and free trader.

Before he entered the political arena, he had already won outstanding successes in business, so he was a business man before he became a reformer. He had the imagination, the courage and daring that enabled him to rise from poverty to distinction and economic power while

still in the middle thirties. The street railway systems of Louisville, Indianapolis, Detroit and Cleveland, were largely developed by him. He had the rare gift and judgment of the executive in selecting capable and efficient business associates and assistants.

All these successes however, were accepted in a spirit of modesty and always present was the deeply felt desire to serve the public. He was determined to create a new order in social values, both in politics and business, and he unquestionably helped to educate the public for the acceptance of social progress through government. He was a constant challenge to orthodox concepts of political science and economics.

During his early business successes Tom Johnson never considered fundamental causes—he was mainly interested in results. But from the time that he first read Henry George's clear diagnosis of our present economic disease, viz.: monopoly capitalism, he began to question the economic system which permitted monopoly. He often said, "We ourselves have created monopoly by law." He continued to fight vigorously against the monopolies and he was re-elected again and again in the face of powerful opposition by the traction and utility magnates.

Johnson's two terms in Congress were chiefly devoted to the enunciation of the doctrines of the single tax and free trade. He rendered distinguished service to Henry George's campaign for the mayoralty of New York. His emphasis on social values and his clear exposition that a piece of land is in and of itself valueless until the people enhance it, shook the basis of our ancient outmoded concept of property.

Johnson planned to translate his philosophy into practice. He first sought and won the office of Mayor of Cleveland in 1901, retaining it until 1910. The remarkable characteristic of this leader was that, while he was at all times consumed with the fire and zeal of the reformer; the sound, practical administrative knowledge that he acquired in his business career permitted him to give his city honest, economical and efficient government. In retrospect, I can truly say that he was the best mayor of the best governed city in the United States.

In his short autobiography, *My Story*, published toward the end of his life, he wrote: "To give good government wasn't the thing I was in public life for. It was a side issue, merely. While we tried to give the people clean and well lighted streets, pure water, free access to the parks, public baths and comfort stations, a good police department, careful market inspection, a rigid system of weights and measures, and to make charitable and correctional institutions aid the unfortunates and correct the wrong doers and to do the hundred and one things that a municipality ought to do for its inhabitants, while we tried to do all these things and even to outstrip other cities in the doing of them, we never lost sight of the fact that they were not fundamental."

He fully realized that great changes, epochal

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## A Builder of Democracy

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changes, were rooted in deep undercurrent economic trends and are often caused by the acts of individual leaders whose vision is always with the betterment of humanity. He believed intensely and sincerely that the roots of economic evil were in land taxation and monopoly.

The great revolutionary innovations he conceived and applied in city government spread their influence everywhere. Home rule as distinctly separated from state rule, municipal control of utilities, honest police administration, progressive welfare activities, originated in Johnson's Cleveland administration, and became new standard practices in many other cities.

To me, Johnson's outstanding quality and the one for which he deserves to be remembered, is his quality as a teacher. He was convinced that real reform must be slow and evolutionary and that a political leader's powers are only as great as is the public's capacity to understand and accept and live with the reforms he projects. Perhaps more than any leader of modern times Tom Johnson conceived his paramount job in public office to be that of the educator. The educational function, as he saw it, was the evolutionary aim and goal toward which the whole effort of social reform should be directed. Under these teachings the nation experienced a political renaissance. The evolutionary aim, ethically interpreted, is the perfection of man.

I visited him frequently during the last years of his life and he never abandoned the hope that other leaders would arise and take hold where he left off. He expressed infinite faith in the American people to right wrongs and injustices when they are taught to understand the ethical means to be used as well as the objectives of needed social reforms. Men everywhere were influenced by his unconquerable faith in democracy, and he made a historic contribution to our civilization.

Leo Hirsch of New York has lectured extensively on ethics and economics and is a regular contributor to *Unity*, a Unitarian magazine published in Chicago. His articles have also appeared in *The Standard and School and Home*, both New York publications.

Dorothy Worrell, editor of the *Barnstable Patriot*, a weekly newspaper in Hyannis, Massachusetts, founded in 1830, the oldest newspaper on Cape Cod in continuous publication and one of the oldest weeklies in the United States, is another author appearing for the first time in *The Henry George News*. We welcome her initial article on this page and hope for more in the future.