

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HENRY GEORGE. By George Raymond Geiger. Introduction by John Dewey. 581 pp. New York: The Macmillan Company. \$3.

By WILLIAM MacDONALD

PHILOSOPHY," according to Professor Geiger, "needs no definition. It may be taken to mean whatever is called up in the mind by the word itself." What has been thus "called up" is in the main "a select group of disciplines" limited to mathematics, logic, metaphysics and "a mythological psychology," together with some recognition, more recently accorded, of biology and physics, but "sciences as dismal as economics or as worldly as sociology have not yet found a complete welcome in that philosophic melting-pot." In the mind of Henry George, however, economics, or at least so much of the subject as specially interested him, was inseparable from ethics, and it is the resulting philosophy, if such it may be called, that Professor Geiger undertakes to expound.

George's apparent preoccupation with the "riddle of poverty" suggests that a remedy for poverty was what he was chiefly concerned to devise. His reaction to poverty, however, Professor Geiger points out, was not merely the sentimental one of most social reformers, although his early life gave him abundant cause to feel its emotional weight, but rather "the realization of what might be termed the pathological function of want and the fear of want." The difficulty, as he saw it, was that of formulating a sensible system of ethics in a society which economically was unbalanced. As long as poverty remained a determining social influence, the attainment of the higher satisfactions of life was impossible, and since the higher satisfactions, to him, were moral rather than material or physical, the approach to the problem through economics had an ultimate ethical claim. Instead of divorcing economics and ethics he sought to unite them.

The need of such connection was emphasized by the familiar alliterations "progress and poverty," "wealth and want." How was it, George asked, that advance in material civilization meant "a direct and corresponding advance in those vicious by-products of crime, want, misery"? Why did wealth increase while the gulf between the rich and poor widened? Clearly, as it seemed to him, the situation involved ethical distortion as well as economic maladjustment, and unless ethics and economics were to be relegated to separate spheres a solution must be found that would comprehend both. To adapt a remark which Professor Geiger cites from William James, George could

not be content to think of God as a gentleman. "In a world of sweat and dirt" He "cannot refuse to get His hands soiled."

The main facts of George's life, admirably summarized by Professor Geiger from the monumental biography by Henry George Jr., may be briefly rehearsed for the sake of placing the man in his time. Born in Philadelphia in 1839, he left school before he was 14, voyaged to Australia in 1855-56, and in 1858 went to San Francisco, where for the next twenty years he lived, often in extreme want, as a journalist. Eventually a sinecure office afforded some financial relief, and in 1877 he began "Progress and Poverty," finishing it in 1879. With his return to New York, in 1880, the book, which had had only a small sale, suddenly became popular; he was invited to Ireland and England to lecture on the Irish land movement, and when he came back to New York, in 1882, he had won an international reputation. Before long he was again in England lecturing for the Land Reform Union,

and by 1886 had published his "Social Problems" and "Protection and Free Trade." In the latter year he was an unsuccessful candidate for Mayor of New York against Abram Hewitt, he made a lecture trip to Australia in 1890, supported Bryan in the campaign of 1896, and in 1897 again ran for Mayor but died suddenly a few days before the election. A hundred thousand persons, it was reported, passed before his body as it lay in state in the Grand Central Palace, an equal number prayed outside in the street, and "the vast funeral cortège that followed the body down to City Hall and across the Brooklyn Bridge" to Greenwood Cemetery "proved to be one of the deep tributes ever paid to a private citizen."

George's special interest in the land question, as well as in the underlying antithesis of poverty and progress, was a product of his California experiences and observations. For twenty years he had seen, in a frontier community, the phenomena of rapidly increasing wealth and spectacularly high wages followed by declining wages and hard times. The waste of the public domain and the orgy of land speculation had gone on before his eyes, with land prices rising when the prices of goods fell. In place of a continuance of the early prosperity he saw, or thought he saw, the approach of suffering and discontent, and "he believed that here was a miniature of civilization itself." The sudden popularity of "Progress and Poverty," accordingly, is easily explicable, Professor Geiger thinks, by its

"prophetic fervor and almost holy sincerity" and by "the practical and simple suggestion" which it offered to a public that had suffered the long depression of 1873 and 1877, had witnessed the violence of the great railroad strike of the latter year, and saw in the struggles of organized labor and its opponents the signs of a far-reaching industrial upheaval.

Professor Geiger examines at much length the question of George's originality and his indebtedness to others. With the exception of the wages fund theory and the Malthusian doctrine, both of

which he rejected as explanations of poverty, George was for the most part at one with the fundamentals of classical economics. But while he defined capital as "wealth used in the production of more wealth," he nevertheless insisted that wealth itself was the value that resulted from present labor applied to production, and hence "never included goods which had nothing to recommend them for economic consideration except obligatory value." In other words, "wealth depends upon labor expenditure; value, upon labor saving."

The value of land, accordingly, is "social" value only, rising as population increases and society expands, vanishing if population is removed or social advantage declines. Rent is not earned, but results from a monopoly whose worth society created, and the more the monopoly is enhanced the more will wages fall. What the landholder calls progress is advance at the expense of the wage earner. The only remedy, according to George, is to make land "common property"—not common in the sense of publicly owned or nationalized, but in the sense that its rent is appropriated by taxation; and with the taxation of land values all other taxes would be abolished. The "single tax" is, indeed, only a part of George's economic system, but it is the foundation part, and without that apparently simple cure for falling wages and social injustice generally, nothing else of his economic theorizing would probably have impressed his generation or be particularly remembered today.

The economic justification of the proposed abolition of private property in rent was, of course, in George's view, the assumption that the public appropriation of rent would "defray all the legitimate expenses of social organization" and thereby "permit all of wages and interest to remain in the possession of labor and capital." George was not content, however, as Professor Geiger points out, to justify his

theory solely by "any such essentially pragmatic test." The ultimate justification must be moral. According to his interpretation of

natural rights, the individual has a natural right to the ownership of himself and of the products of his labor. Under this labor theory of property, not only could land not be an individual possession, but "by the very fact of man's presence he acquires certain privileges and demands that are violated by the individual appropriation of land. The ownership of land meant the ownership of men," and both were alike unethical.

It remained for George to justify the social appropriation of rent. He found that justification in the theory that land values represent a social privilege whose value is precisely measured by rent, and since the only ethical basis of taxation is the need of defraying community charges, it was consummately fitting that such charges should be met by appropriating a value which society alone has created. He had no difficulty, once the notion of privilege had become fixed in his mind, in seeing in the single tax not only "the most just and equal of all taxes," but also one (to quote his own statements) which would "bear as lightly as possible upon production," "be easily and cheaply collected," "fall as directly as may be upon the ultimate payers" and "give the least opportunity for tyranny or corruption on the part of officials and the least temptation to law-breaking and evasion on the part of the taxpayers."

It would be a waste of time to attempt a refutation, on economic grounds, of a theory which no longer finds defense save among a dwindling remnant of single-taxers, and which for practical purposes has long since been dead. It may be pointed out, however, that the temporary vogue of the single-tax idea was due not only to the tempting simplicity of the panacea which it offered, but also to its apparent accord with the leveling doctrine of socialism, the refuge which it seemed to afford to the perplexed minds of tired liberals and reformers who had found the way of perfection difficult, and the support which it lent to radicals

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and dissenters whose campaign slogans were "Down with privilege," and "Soak the rich." That George himself shared the extreme views of many who enthusiastically embraced his teachings it would be wrong to affirm, but the very fervor with which his economic gospel was proclaimed made inevitable its utilization by less serious thinkers and advocates who saw in it a tool which they could use.

For all his opposition to privilege, however, George was not a Socialist, and Socialists themselves professed to regard him with scorn. In the New York Mayoralty campaign of 1886 he did, indeed, have the support of the labor unions and Socialist organizations, and Professor Geiger adduces evidence to show that it was George, rather than Karl Marx, who gave the "initial stimulus" to the founders of the Fabian Society and the Social Democratic Federation, but his greater influence, it would seem, was with the English radicals. Most Socialists, especially those who believed firmly in the inspiration of "Das Kapital," regarded George as at bottom a supporter of capital, which of course he was, and the most that a straight-out Socialist like Hyndman could offer him was a not too good-natured tolerance.

If the traditional unwillingness of the Socialists to cooperate with any one who does not go the whole length of their program made it unlikely that they would speak well of George, George's preoccupation with his one important theory made him impatient with any departure from it. The most glaring example of his combative intolerance is afforded by his bitter attack on what he regarded as Herbert Spencer's "apostasy" on the land question. Professor Geiger, who reviews the controversy at length and is able to throw some additional light upon Spencer's attitude in the matter, sees George attacking what he regarded as "a deliberate attempt * * * to compromise with a truth that had been recognized and accepted." Spencer, it must be said, did not shine in the controversy, and it is Professor

Geiger's conclusion that while George's "ardent sincerity and militant enthusiasm robbed him of good judgment," Spencer's "cautiousness and the smallness of his personal resentment clouded his view of the fundamental issue in question."

The Spencer episode leads naturally to some consideration of George's attitude toward religion. In extending his attack to include the whole of Spencer's synthetic philosophy George ran foul of evolution, and in his belief that he "could distinguish between evolution as a method of development and evolution as a cause of development" he not only showed that he was "some decades behind the advanced if not the popular thought of his time in the matter of evolution," but ranged himself, as Professor Geiger says, with those whose desire it is to "reconcile" science and religion. George regarded himself as a Christian, but he rejected the institutions of the Christian Church.

The elaborate inquiry which Professor Geiger makes into the nature and extent of George's economic influence is an impressive presentation of the rise, decline and virtual collapse of a movement which for a time, and in certain places, seemed destined for importance and permanence. George was "part of a great liberal tradition," but his personal contribution to the history of land value taxation is not easy to determine with precision. His influence, or perhaps one should say the influence of his single-tax doctrine, appears to have been greatest in Australia, considerably less in Canada, a recognized force in England down to the days of Lloyd George and Philip Snowden, and hopelessly disappointing in the United States. "While there has been the most strenuous sort

of activity," Professor Geiger declares, "political, educational, propaganda, opportunistic, theoretical, on the part of American single-taxers, there has not been, with two or three exceptions, any legislation embodying the significant demands of their program." The ten little "enclaves of economic rent," feeble though picturesque protests against

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the exploitation of land values, together with a handful of belated liberals who, if not single-taxers, at least recognize the validity and significance of George's economic program," are about all that is left to testify to the influence of an economist whose most important book sold millions of copies, was translated into eleven languages and ran serially in several newspapers, and was pronounced by Alfred Russell Wallace, the biologist, as "undoubtedly the most remarkable and important work" of the nineteenth century.

Henry George is an outstanding example, in the economic field, of the eclipse that is likely to await the single-track mind. In his insistence that moral and social progress is (to quote Professor Geiger) "inevitably conditioned by an economic background," as in his contention that the highest satisfactions of life are spiritual and not material, George stood on a solid foundation, but when he proclaimed that the social instability that made for poverty was due to the private appropriation of land value in the form of rent he showed, to all save those who turn naturally to panaceas and value remedies in proportion as they appear simple, the essential superficiality of his diagnosis. He spoke with power, and common people heard him gladly, but he could not meet the test of facts. He shot across his generation like a flaming meteor, only to be relegated to the museum of transitory things and re-interested by the few brilliant passage and by the light that his philosophy needs no agent than Professor Geiger directed to it, nor is any likely soon to attempt