

HENRY GEORGE; THE MAN AND THE BOOK.

By Alexander Mackendrick.

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“ He was a man, take him for all in all—I shall not look upon his like again.”—Shakespeare

It may be an interesting question for the consideration of reflective minds, as to how far it is possible to separate between a book and Its author. There are books in which the personality of the writer is the real force which carries conviction. There are others which convey their lesson by sheer force of appeal to the intelligence, and with little aid from the spirit of the author. It may be difficult Indeed to name any book of which either affirmation can be made In a categorical manner, but very many in which the influence upon the reader can be attributed with more or less emphasis to one or the other source. Few books perhaps have had a deeper Influence in shaping the character of the British nation, and in giving a definite direction to the moral enthusiasms of the people than those of John Ruskin; yet his economics have been repudiated by most thoughtful sociologists, while his art criticism has been disparaged by the most keenly sensitive art lovers; though all have agreed in highly estimating his value as a moral force. In his case the man has certainly been of greater weight and Influence than his books. John Stuart Mill, Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and others who might be named, have given us books which have delivered their message with little reflection of their author's personality, or which have owed none of their force to the character of the writer. In general we may say that the books which owe their power to the author come from the heart, while those which carry their own conviction emanate from, and are addressed to, the understanding.

If genius is akin to madness in respect that it implies an over-development of faculty in one direction, with a corresponding deficit in another; and if perfect sanity consist in an equal and harmonious development of all the faculties, the reason and the

imagination, the mathematical and the aesthetic senses; then we should have to deny to Henry George the title of genius. We believe, however, that the highest kind of genius is not akin to madness. We believe the purest genius breathes the spirit of the most perfect sanity. We believe that only where we find the equal and harmonious development of the head, the heart, and the hand, the sense of proportion and order, the love of beauty, the hunger for righteousness, and the creative Impulse; only when these are discovered together in a state of high development and in their natural proportions, are we in the presence of genius of the truest form.

In this latter sense we regard Henry George as one of the greatest geniuses the English-speaking peoples have produced during the Nineteenth Century. Just because of his singular sanity, however, it may be difficult to hazard an opinion as to whether the man or the book with which we are dealing has been the greater Influence in moulding the thoughts of the present generation, and in directing the social movements of the time. His appeal has been in equal proportions to all the many sides of the human mind. To the reader whose main spiritual equipment is a strong sensitiveness to beauty, and an abhorrence of all that is unlovely, he has presented in lurid colours the intense ugliness of the spectacle which society at this moment exhibits. To the man possessed of that strongly-developed instinct for Justice and fair-play which is supposed to be the leading characteristic of the British people, he has laid bare the atrocious unfairness with which economic law under present conditions, distributes the awards and penalties attaching to industry and idleness. To the man endowed with the intellectual passion for the study of economic forces in society, he has let light into dark places and solved problems which had previously baffled all efforts to understand. It is to this many-sidedness of his character, to his perfect sanity, and to the universality of his appeal, that we base his claim to be regarded as a genius of the purest form.

Who that has come under the mysterious influence of "Progress and Poverty" has not felt beneath the closely-reasoned argument and inexorable logic, the fervid spirit of the man rebelling against the dismal prevailing theories in economics, and striving at a white heat of passion "that to the height of the great argument, he may assert Eternal providence and justify the ways of God to

man." The science of Political Economy in the hands of Henry George is not (like that of the chemist or physicist) one of which the subject-matter is composed of insensate atoms, but of living, palpitating, human souls, towards which his spirit goes out with passionate affection. Through all the close reasoning and abundant illustration which All the book, one feels the heart-beats of the strong man, striving to clear natural law from the odium of responsibility for the suffering and poverty he sees around, and to defend much-maligned human nature from the charge it had hitherto lain under of being by its innate corruptness, the author and producer of its own misery. Even had the logic of "Progress and Poverty" been discredited by the passing of the years, the moral force of the author would have served to preserve it as a book which has given a new direction to the aspirations and enthusiasms of his fellow-men. Apart from the unanswerable argument with which the book is filled from beginning to end, it has oriented the souls of its readers more than any such work on social science before or since. It has altered the spiritual attitude of each reader who has been caught by its strange magnetism. It has turned men's eyes to the East of first principles. It has initiated a movement of return to ideal standards of justice; it has broken up the hard crust of our heritage from a barbarous past, over which the wheels of convention and selfish prejudice have rolled for ages. And all this the book has accomplished not only by its appeal to logic and sound reason, but by virtue of the character of the writer, which breathes in every line and syllable.

"Progress and Poverty" then we describe as the work of a genius. Like all works of real genius it consists in the discovery of a simple principle. This perhaps has been its chief cause of offence to the world of orthodox sociological beliefs. Men have an instinctive intolerance for simple beliefs (those men at all events who, intellectually, are assumed to be above the common people). The Heathen of old did not more fiercely resent the dethronement of their hierarchy of gods and demons, than does the modern political economist resist the blowing into air of his cherished systems of syllogisms and logical deductions. And when Theology, or Sociology, or indeed any of the speculative sciences become specialized and fall into the hands of a professional class, this tendency to greater and still greater complexity, with the naturally engendered self-preservative instinct to resist simplification, inevitably results in the crucifixion of the innovator who recalls

the world of common-sense to the view that a simple principle lies at the base of every natural law. Those who realize the value of the work of Henry George in creating for us a much-needed science of society, and in releasing us from the nightmare of complicated and depressing theories which formerly stood for that science, should thank God he was born into the world as a man of the people, and escaped the blighting influence of the professional vision.

What then was the simple principle with which Henry George replaced the complex concatenation of theories in which the minds of men had got entangled? It was, that as there is a right and a wrong way of doing all things, so there is a right and a wrong way of collecting public revenue; that the wrong way results in creating an artificial centre of economic gravity which produces the most violent contrasts of monstrous wealth and frightful poverty, while the right way tends towards a natural distribution of wealth in exact proportion to the contribution each has made to its production. A poet has said that "A hair perhaps divides the false and true." Henry George has shown the world that the line which divides the right from the wrong way of collecting public revenue is a very narrow one indeed. On the one side is the present method of taxing industry and the products of industry; of penalizing him who uses the raw material of the earth wisely and well, and of leaving untaxed him who fences in a portion of the earth and will neither use it himself nor allow others to do so. On the other side is the method of adopting as the sole standard of contribution to the public revenue the economic value of that portion of the earth which one man occupies to the exclusion of all the rest of the race.

Was ever so simple a remedy offered to a sick world? Cease imposing taxation on anything that is the result of human effort, and collect your public revenue by taxing the only element of value that remains, the unimproved value of the land and all that is in and under it; then expect to see poverty disappear and the stubborn thistle of human nature bursting into the glossy purples of high and noble life. Such in brief, is the message of him in whom the force of a powerful intellect was joined to fervid passions, and all of whose passions were transmuted by a spiritual chemistry we may well call Divine, into compassion.