

Henry George — By George!

By SYDNEY A. MAYERS

There is a delightfully zestful old spiritual (I believe titled "Golden Slippers"), in which occurs the profound comment: "Everyone who talks about Heaven ain't goin' there!" I oftentimes consider this all-too-true admonition, particularly when it is applicable to what I sometimes read or heard said by self-proclaimed devotees of Henry George's social and economic principles. On such occasions, I am astonished by statements allegedly relating to George's philosophy which are either vastly distant from, or bear an extremely dubious connection with anything he actually proposed.

My point, to borrow a bit of the "Golden Slippers" theme, is that everyone who talks about Henry George ain't necessarily quoting him. To "put words in his mouth," so to speak, or to mis-state or mis-quote the ideas George did in fact posit, to my mind borders on *lèse majesté*! I believe it is incumbent on those who profess respect for George's teachings to be meticulously accurate when ascribing any concept to him. Henry George needs no spokesman or interpreter; he speaks quite ably for himself - loud and clear.

I entreat you, dear reader, to note carefully that the policy I urge refers solely to George's words, *per se* and as written, delivered, or published, and not what one may think he should or could or might have said, or "really meant to say." Happily, all of his books, and many of his speeches and articles, are in print, readily available to whoever may be interested in his pronouncements. Even a modest amount of research will soon reveal precisely what George meant and intended to say.

Having (perhaps somewhat pedantically) set forth the foregoing caveat, I hasten to make known my

conviction that, as far as any individual is concerned, nothing need be sacrosanct, not even the words of Henry George, however gospel-like they may appear to the True Believer. It is undoubtedly the prerogative of every one of us to assess Georgist thought, and to form our singular reaction and opinion as to its validity, in whole or in part. I freely concede that no one is obliged to agree with Henry George, and that those who may disagree have every right to loudly proclaim their discontent with his philosophy. However, as a concomitant, I just as loudly assert that no one can rightfully mis-state, mis-quote, mis-apply, mis-interpret, or otherwise mis-use what George wrote or said.

In a nutshell, while I will patiently and respectfully listen to anyone's thoughts on the subject of political economy or sociology, I will not voluntarily let go by without response any statement attributed to Henry George if such attribution is demonstrably incorrect. As Sergeant Friday constantly explained, all I want are the facts.

I have read Henry George's literary works from cover to cover, most more than once, and as a teacher I have been required to refer to them dozens, maybe hundreds, of times. It took some effort to attune myself to the author's characteristic style, but since doing so I have relished every reading, and my admiration for his keen intellect increases with each perusal. If, as Francis Bacon observed a few centuries ago, "some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested," George's writings surely belong in the third category. In any case, he who seeks to learn the quintessence of Georgist knowledge will most speedily find it,

pure, simple, and clear, in George's own words.

Do you cotton to the so-called Malthusian Doctrine? By all means do so with my blessing, if it appeals to you. But do not at the same time aver adherence to Georgist thought, as if the two concepts were compatible - which, of course, they are not. Do you differ with George on the subject of rent, wages, interest, or any other aspect of his economic positions? Again, you are entitled, and it is your undeniable privilege, to do so. Yet here too you must in all honesty clearly distinguish your conclusions from those of George, and not endeavor to use his material to bolster your personal beliefs. Speak for yourself, if you will, but render unto George the things that are George's!

I frequently wonder why, every once-in-a-while, there arises in someone the urge to re-write, re-interpret, re-do, or otherwise re-produce an acknowledged classic. Great films are "up-dated" by ambitious movie-makers; new "adaptations" of Shakespeare's plays are hopefully offered; even the universally revered King James version of the Holy Bible is almost periodically challenged by a more "contemporaneous" translation. Seldom is the new an improvement on the old.

In short, then, I suggest that we who imbibe at the fount of Georgist thought, and find the draught rewarding, cannot justly alter George's limpid phrases to suit our particular purposes, however noble they may be. If ever a classic deserved to be preserved and protected, that classic is the output of the Sage of San Francisco. Let us follow Henry George in his quest for liberty, but let us *not* take liberties with his thoughtful and eloquent utterances.