

HENRY GEORGE AND HIS MESSAGE

Address by Richard McGhee, Ex-M.P.

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MR. CHAIRMAN, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:—

The year 1897 will ever remain with me as a melancholy memory, for in that year I lost by death two of the most cherished friends of my life: Dr. Frederick Richard Lees and Henry George. They were both men of such outstanding intellect that it may be said they made world wide, in activity and influence, the movement to which they devoted their lives. It is in remembrance of Henry George that we are gathered to-night in this Anniversary Memorial meeting of his disciples. He is dead, just now, a quarter of a century: called away at a comparatively early age while in full working harness, in the very midst of a great campaign in New York doing battle for the poor and the oppressed. But we are not met to shed tears over our loss, for it was a glorious death he died, and in a noble cause. We meet to rejoice that he was given to us for fifty-nine years, equipped with a power of utterance, by pen and tongue, never before or since surpassed, to teach the people the way to justice. He has left us the immortal inheritance of his writings, and they show us that he had lived a full life. On each of his visits to this country I enjoyed much of his personal companionship, and I had the privilege of presiding over the first meeting of Radicals which he addressed in Great Britain. It was held in Glasgow in March, 1882. I joined in the work of organizing his subsequent propaganda campaigns throughout the three kingdoms, and I was present at many of his public meetings: and what a delight it was to listen to his burning eloquence, his calmly reasoned, unanswerable speeches. I have had the pleasure of listening to many of the great orators of the last century, and of the twenty-two years of this century, Gladstone, Bright, Cairns, Caird, Tindal, Duff, Sullivan, Sexton and O'Connor of these Islands, Phillips, McGlynn and Bryan of the United States and Edward Blake of Canada, but for simple, clear and convincing exposition George was, with two exceptions, the greatest platform teacher I have ever heard. The exceptions were Dr. Lees and Bryan.

It may interest you as disciples of Henry George, to learn that *PROGRESS AND POVERTY* was first brought into England in 1880 by Dr. Lees, the great scholar, and philosopher of the Temperance Movement. It was a copy

of the author's edition, printed in San Francisco in 1879. At the time Henry George was quite unknown, yet Lees predicted that the book would be, within ten years, translated into several European languages and the best-known work on political economy ever written. He declared it to be a greater book than Adam Smith's *WEALTH OF NATIONS*. We now know how fully the prediction has been fulfilled, and the book was in less than ten years translated into several European languages, while its circulation in the first twenty years after publication was greater than the circulation of all the books on political economy of the previous eighty years of the last century. Its first effect was to extinguish all public interest in the economic writings of his predecessors, by destroying the foundation on which they were based. Political economy as it was taught by the most popular writers filled the reader's mind with despair, and so we got many schemes—social redemption, socialism, communism, protectionism, trades unionism, and co-operation (in which the members do not co-operate)—all designed to help the poor worker who was being robbed, and all destined to failure. Had *PROGRESS AND POVERTY* been put into circulation half a century earlier I do not think we ever should have had the writings of Karl Marx, as we know them to-day, and it would have saved us the infliction of much chaotic writing that grew out of the rather narrow and feeble doctrines of the British Free-traders.

Henry George destroyed the foundations of the old political economy by his reasoned proofs that the wages of labour was not drawn from capital, but was paid out of the produce of the labourer's own work. Before the advent of *PROGRESS AND POVERTY* every attempt to elevate the worker, or to get him a larger share of the produce of his labour, was laughed at as visionary. George was the first to show us the infinite relations of the worker in the production of wealth, out of which only wages can be drawn. *PROGRESS AND POVERTY* was the first book to awaken the public mind to the knowledge that poverty was an unnatural state for the worker to live in, and it set the social reformers of the world to thinking, and to writing their thoughts. It was written in language so clear, and so simple, that the common people could understand its proposals, and in periods so beautiful, and glowing, that it captured the reader; and yet it was knit in such close logical order that the most learned assailant was unable to detect a flaw in the reasoning, and to this day it remains without successful attack, and impregnable. But while it has itself lived unassailed it has carried the war into the camp of the enemy, and in exposing the teaching of the old political economists it has sent their works to the literary rubbish heap.

Henry George began to write his great work steeped in poverty, and when it was finished he was unable to find in the whole of the American Republic any one who would accept the responsibility of publishing it, and so he had to publish it himself. It was printed by W. Hinton & Co., of San Francisco. To-day it is influencing the public life of millions of men and women, and it is sending out thousands of enthusiastic disciples who are spreading the light which, from its moving pages, has illuminated their own mind. The secret of its success is that it is the only book on political economy that is addressed to the senses, the feelings, and the intellect. It is a singular proof that not only sound reason, but common sense, and real sincerity are all required to secure and to hold the public attention.

Henry George was a man of simple character, free from vanity and all selfish interests in life. No man ever raised the ideal of public duty to a higher level. Intellectual honesty and virtue was a passion with him, and the pursuit of justice was his religion. It was his great moral force, and his unrivalled power of popular exposition that created the world-wide movement which still persists under his name. His personal character was charming

and most lovable. Even in jest he would not speak the words his conviction disproved. His heart was warm for relatives and friends, and his sympathies with the poor and oppressed were keen, intense and genuine. He was of a sanguine temperament and always full of hope and assurance of the success of the cause to which he had devoted his life. I regard him as the most profound and powerful thinker of his century among Americans. His convictions were the fruits of his own thinking, and to his convictions he was under all circumstances ever true. His mental integrity was free from blemish.

To the young student of PROGRESS AND POVERTY I would suggest that its full merit can be best seen after an examination of the two schools of thought represented on one side by Carlyle and on the other by Karl Marx. Carlyle looks to the coming of the Superman, with his cat-o'-nine tails, for social salvation; while Marx looks to the collective wisdom of the Proletariat controlling and directing the whole field of the production and distribution of wealth, in which alone, he thinks, lies the emancipation of humanity. In both schemes I see only human slavery. Henry George takes what is good in both Individualism and Socialism and forges his own plan, which is perfect in its aim and free from the smallest taint of slavery, or even dictation as to how people may exert their labour for a living. Every step he takes is in harmony with natural law, and with full, unfettered freedom.

It is now thirty-eight years since the close of Henry George's first propaganda campaign in this country and it is time we took a reckoning to see what progress, if any, we have made since that time. If we formed our opinion upon the visible evidence, I am afraid we would have to conclude that reaction rather than progress was the record. But such surface evidence is not conclusive. True we have seen our Government enfunding the landlords with millions of pounds sterling out of the public taxation of the people and we know that in the same number of years economic rent has increased by many more millions of pounds sterling, while so far not a single step has been taken to stop the robbery. But while all this is true it is also true that the cause has made great progress. Only forty years ago an obscure unknown man wrote a book that no publisher would publish; he publishes an edition himself, and in the tenth part of a century afterwards it is shaking the very foundations of injustice and wrong throughout the civilized world. The progress made was mainly the work of the author himself, though he was supported by many active and earnest disciples in every corner of the globe. If the work on this side of the Atlantic has not been as successful as it might have been, that can only be because we have not adapted our means to the proper end. If so many years have passed away in the discussion of a question so simple without practical results it can only be because we have not got to the intelligence of the people with our principles.

The most pressing question for us to consider is how and by what means, or methods, are we to bring the question of the Taxation of Land Values into operation. To succeed we must adapt suitable means to the end at which we aim. We must teach the people our doctrines, and to teach them we must get at them in their daily lives, and homes. We must keep up an incessant platform course of teaching on the highways of the land, placing our gospel before the people in plain, simple words which they can understand without much mental effort. Well-sustained work among the people will succeed in arousing the public conscience into activity, and when once the conscience is aroused the victory will not be far off. We must use the election platforms more largely in the future than we have done in the past, for it is on the election platform where the more active minded of the people can be reached with the least effort. One of our great poets has said, "Think well and do well will follow thought." When the people

are got to think seriously on the subject their votes in support will soon follow. I know, indeed, that the British people have been so long living in leading-strings that it is not an easy task to induce them to step out in independence on their own account. To quicken the pace they must have a leader, but if we can only arrest their attention you may be sure the leader will soon announce himself. Conscience is only a standard of knowledge on any question, and you the disciples of Henry George have the knowledge which you must set before the masses of the people, if the cause is to be carried into practical operation.

A gigantic social wrong is destroying humanity, and its mischievous power is constantly increasing. The standard of the wages of labour, which should be the produce of labour, has now fallen below even mere subsistence, until at this moment we see willing workers saved from sheer starvation by doles from public funds. What are we going to do about it? I think Single-taxers everywhere should hold themselves aloof from all political parties, and give their support to only such men in all parties as will honestly include our cause in their programme, and mean to work for its immediate operation, to some extent at least. In our propaganda we should put into circulation only the most attractive and convincing literature, in the shape of pamphlets, printing them in such a form as will influence the people to preserve them for reading, and for re-reading, in their homes. By this way, and, as I think, by this way only can we make steady progress which will bring us, slowly it may be, but surely to the goal. The British movement has done excellent work, but it has much work still to do. Success can only triumph by following fitting methods. "As we sow we reap" is as true now as when it was first proclaimed. It is steady, sustained and wisely-directed work in spreading the light among the people that is required, and there is no other road to the goal. No great moral issue ever was made successful at a single leap—such triumphs are alien to the habits of any people, and to the British people more than to any other people in the whole world. It is now over thirty years since the official Liberal Party first placed the principle of our demand in its programme and platform. The Liberal Party since that time have had sixteen years of office, during which time one would have thought that men in earnest would have found occasion to make a start to carry out an instalment of the policy to which they had pledged themselves. At one time it did look as if they really meant to do so, but the fit did not last, and nothing has been done. If a small portion of the 20/- in the pound which justice demands, had been imposed in the Budget of 1910 on all land value, we would not see, as we do now, thousands of men and women willing to work yet starving in idleness. At many by-elections since 1890 it has been proved beyond doubt that our policy is the one the people would endorse by their votes, but in all the political parties we have the interests fixed as adamant against touching the question in any real fashion, and it is the interests that move the political puppets who direct and control the work of the British Parliament, and before our cause can get its fair chance the public conscience must be so aroused on the subject as to compel the puppets to deal with it seriously, that they may save themselves from political extinction. To carry forward a great economic reform such as the Taxation of Land Values we must have the full force of the whole people; nothing less will be equal to the task of overthrowing the great monopoly.

"The large additions to the wealth of the country have gone neither to profits nor to wages, nor yet to the public at large, but to swell a fund ever growing, even while its proprietors sleep—the rent-rolls of the owners of the soil."—*Professor J. E. Cairnes.*