



**HENRY GEORGE AND THE CRISIS OF INEQUALITY:
PROGRESS AND POVERTY IN THE GILDED AGE**

BY EDWARD T. O'DONNELL

Reviewed by Simon McKenna

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This excellent biography provides an insightful survey of the political context in which Henry George's economic genius found fame and his message found its greatest influence. Make no mistake: George lived in a time of deep division between rich and poor, of violent political discord and economic turmoil remarkably similar to the divisions and struggles calling for attention in our own. The similarities of our new Gilded Age and of George's are striking, but will be easily grasped by everyone who reads this biography. This review wishes instead to note three anomalies uncovered in O'Donnell's thoughtful retelling of George's eventful life that raise significant questions for campaigning Georgists today.

Henry George and the Gilded Age describes George as "born between two revolutions". The industrial revolution unfolded before his eyes, with its glittering towers and industrial deprivation subsuming all in the caprice of a corrupt nouveau riche. However, a Golden Age was also present to him. His grandfather was a living representative of a premarket world order. This traditional order aspired to virtue and praised the "common good above private interest". Men of that generation considered themselves the true embodiment of "republican citizenship".

George shared this memory of a utopian "moral economy" with his generation. It stood as the value by which they could measure the claims of the new age. The emerging industrial world order, if it was to have any legitimate claim to justice, would have to be more than merely being entitled to vote and to work, it would mean having an equitable access to non-alienating work, to

be able to enjoy the process and rewards of one's labour. The republic was not won from the clutches of a European aristocracy only to be replaced by an American plutocracy. Today, utopian visions, be they of Little England or of making America 'Great Again', have great political power enough to outweigh prudential economic considerations. What commonly held utopian ideals should Georgists access?

O'Donnell notes how George's success, in person and in print, was in significant measure due to his being able to communicate the moral outrage of systematic economic injustice to "workers who did not possess a formal education". He communicated economic problems in terms anyone could understand because he was fluent in the tongue of an authentic, living Christianity. His "evangelical Millennialism" articulated a God given ethical critique of immoderate wealth, which everyone recognised then but with which we are now less well versed. Such insights remind us of the political significance of Nietzsche's 'death of God': Without the shared experience of an ethical universe such as Christianity once provided an uneducated church going public, how are we to articulate a comprehensive vision of justice?

According to O'Donnell's account, another aspect of George's political success, which differs from our situation today, is how closely he collaborated with the heroic labour movements of his time. In America and in many countries across the Western World, justice movements explicitly recognised the importance of land and infrastructure in the cultivation of inequality. The Land Wars were waged in Ireland and the people of New York were well aware that public funding had financed the construction of a new (and newly privatised) tram network. George was able to capitalise on this awareness and direct a passionate revolt against the unjust rich to extraordinary effect in the mayoral election campaign of 1886.

O'Donnell brings the excitement of the campaign to life. Reading about it is exhilarating despite knowing defeat is inevitable. The spirit and the innovations of the campaign are inspiring but the story of how things fell apart after election night, although heart breaking, are of equal importance. With respectful disinclination but with professional accuracy, O'Donnell reports how George loses the support of the unions. He is accused of being more interested in furthering his "pet project" (implementing a land tax) than in the interests of those who made him famous and who still needed him. George's political decline provides occasion for reflection. Is there a greater good than a Single Tax that will allow Georgists to unite with those who seek to serve the disenfranchised today?

This timely and respectful biography sensitively captures the personal narrative and the political zeitgeist of the times in which George fought for justice. Readers will be impressed anew by George, who was without doubt a true visionary and a good man. Yet we learn he was by no means alone. We are left with the realisation that beyond George's own unique gift to political economy, his success consists in the connections he made to the deeply held principles of the people and the labour movements of his time. O'Donnell implicitly challenges us to learn from George's example so as to learn from history even as its conditions again arise before our eyes. ■