

Henry George: The Author

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Henry George: The Author*

By ANNA GEORGE DE MILLE

HENRY GEORGE was fully aware that he had chosen a difficult rôle in offering to the public the appeal for social reform set out in "Progress and Poverty." It shows in two letters he wrote at this time to John Swinton. In one he said:

You are one of the few men I know who have seen the light which I have seen, and who would fight the fight which is hard and bitter and sometimes *very, very* lonely.¹

He wrote in the other:

I value your opinion. Any man who tries to do what I have for a good while tried to do—any man who is in advance of his time, and who is true to his convictions, this is all he can have—the good opinion of some few men. Wealth is not for him, nor power—in his time, nor popular applause. I have long known that.²

After the momentous task of writing the book had been finished, the discouraging one remained of finding some house to publish it. George submitted the manuscript to D. Appleton & Co., which had brought out the works of Herbert Spencer.

Meter inspection, meanwhile, was bringing in increasingly less income. With "Progress and Poverty" off his desk, George found time hanging heavily. The one circumstance added to the other induced him to start a four page "weekly journal of politics and opinion" called *The State*.³ Occasional contributions were made by some of his friends, but in the main George provided the copy. William M. Hinton, his erstwhile partner on *The San Francisco Post*, was the printer.

The new paper had been launched on April 5th, before the letter arrived from the Appleton Company saying of the manuscript:

* Copyright, 1943, by Anna George de Mille. A section of a previously unpublished study, "Citizen of the World"; see *AM. JOUR. ECON. SOCIO.*, 1, 3 (April, 1942), p. 283n.
¹ May 6, 1879. In the Henry George Collection, New York Public Library (hereafter abbreviated as HGC).

² May 8, 1879, HGC.

³ File in the New York Public Library, Economics Division.

It has the merit of being written with great clearness and force, but it is very aggressive. There is very little to encourage the publication of any such work at this time and we feel we must decline it.⁴

After this rejection, Tom George took over the job of finding a publisher. Leaving his home in Philadelphia, the author's brother made the rounds in New York, acting under advisement of Professor William Swinton. Harper's turned it down unequivocally as being too revolutionary. Scribner's and the other publishing houses, although they all conceded the worth of the book, refused to take the full gamble of a work which they felt would have no market. Without having the book plates it seemed impossible to get a publisher and George could not meet the expense of composition and electrotyping.

His friend, William Hinton, who had faith in anything George should do, offered to make the plates in the printing concern he now headed, and bring out an author's edition. Gratefully George accepted the offer.

Although *The State* had paid for itself and won a place in San Francisco journalism, George suspended it after the eleventh issue. He needed time to revise "Progress and Poverty." He wrote a new conclusion. The book had ended with the chapter called "The Central Truth," in which he incorporated the Ode to Liberty from his Fourth of July oration of 1877. He now added one more chapter which he called "The Problem of Individual Life." This done, the author went into Hinton's shop and, as his diary for May 17, 1879, records:

*Commenced to set type on book. Set first two sticks myself.*⁵

His friends were of inestimable help with their faith and encouragement and actual service. Dr. Taylor, chief among them, read proof and even joined at the case those of the old printer friends who were donating their services in their spare time.

Long afterward, some one remarked: "All the bum printers in San Francisco claim the distinction of having set type on the Author's Edition of 'Progress and Poverty'!"

"Well," replied James Barry,⁶ "then I must accept the soft impeachment and be numbered among the 'bum printers,' for I am very proud of the fact that I set type on the first edition." He recounted having overheard one of the journeymen, who was not donating his service, growl, when his own proof was returned, peppered with corrections made by George,

⁴ April 9, 1879, HGC. Henry George Jr., "Life of Henry George", New York, Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, p. 315.

⁵ See Diaries, HGC.

⁶ Editor of *The San Francisco Star*, head of a large publishing house and, during the first World War, Chief Naval Inspector of the Port of San Francisco.

"The little red-headed son of a gun! Who else does he think is going to read his old book but himself, anyway?"⁷

In September, 1879, the "Author's Proof Edition" of five hundred was struck off. Enough copies were sold at \$3.00 each to pay in part for the cost of the plates. To Richard Samuel Henry George, in Philadelphia, went one of the first books, with a note from his son:

It is with a deep feeling of gratitude to Our Father in Heaven that I send you a printed copy of this book. . . . It will not be recognized at first,—maybe not for some time—but it will ultimately be considered a great book, will be published in both hemispheres, and will be translated into different languages. This I know, though neither of us may ever see it here. But the belief that I have expressed in this book—the belief that there is another life for us—makes that of little moment.⁸

Two weeks later, D. Appleton & Co. of New York consented, now that the plates were made, to publish the book. However, it was not until after the new year (1880) that it was issued by that firm. But the sale of the book, at \$2 a copy, was slow. It did not become a "best seller" over night. It was one thing to write it, another for an author, who, having no academic background or support, yet had the temerity to attack the time-honored theory of land ownership, to get his work recognized. "If the professed economists will only refute the truths I have tried to make clear" he wrote jocularly to a friend, "their acceptance will come so much the sooner."⁹

But the disinterest and apathy of the reading public toward his book meant lean days for George, particularly since, at this time, he had to give up his job as State Inspector of Gas Meters to an appointee of the recently elected Republican governor.¹⁰ However slow the sale, his faith did not falter. Subsequently John Russell Young wrote:

I never see "Progress and Poverty" without recalling . . . and honoring the courage of the author. . . . George never for a moment—even when under the grinding heel of bitter conditions—doubted the truth of his mission to mankind and its ultimate success.¹¹

The author's edition of the book had brought some notices from notable figures to whom copies had been sent. Herbert Spencer made no acknowl-

⁷ Told to the writer by Wm. Cleveland McCloskey.

⁸ HGC and Henry George Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 321.

⁹ Letter to Frank Norton, June 29, 1880. Copy in the collection of the writer.

¹⁰ George C. Perkins, succeeding Wm. S. Irwin.

¹¹ *The New York Herald*, Oct. 30, 1897, quoted by Henry George Jr., *op. cit.*, pp. 327, 329 and 330.

edgment but W. E. Gladstone and the Duke of Argyle sent brief notes of thanks. Sir George Grey of New Zealand wrote an enthusiastic encomium, and Joseph Chamberlain a gracious letter in which he said: "It appears to me a very interesting study of a most important subject." This diplomat added cautiously: "At the same time I must not be supposed to agree with all your conclusions."¹² Flattering word came from one scholar, Dr. Montague R. Levenson. He was so impressed by George's doctrines that he recalled his own primer of political economy, declaring that not another copy should be sold until it were re-written.

The Appleton edition carried "Progress and Poverty" a little further. The publishers, however, had not thought it necessary to bother about foreign copyrights: their lack of hope for the book was due, no doubt, to the failure of their London agent to get a single British firm to handle it. "Unless the author could pay all expenses not one would take the book,"¹³ he wrote from London. Indeed one of the English publishers had stated that, if the plates were sent to him free of cost, he would not print it. D. Appleton & Co. continued in their discouraging report to George:

The only plan remaining is to send copies to our own agency, advertise them and thus introduce the book to the English people. English publishers generally would not look with much favor on your book as it overthrows old notions and views of political economy.¹⁴

So little faith in it had the Appletons that they told George they saw no advantage in putting "rights of translation reserved" in their edition.

Others, however, placed a higher value on the work. A request soon came for the privilege of bringing it out in German. The first translation, made by C. D. F. von Gütschow of San Francisco, was followed by two others. All three were eventually circulated in Germany, where the existing land reform movement promptly assimilated George's theory.

That the author had periods of doubt concerning the kind of influence his book might have appears in a letter to Charles Nordhoff:

I wanted so much to see it published, that comparatively I do not care about its further fate. At least I do not fret and worry. My work is done; the rest is not my business. And my faith in it, or rather in the truth which I believe it embodies, is so profound, that I do not think anything that could be said of it could either flatter or abash me. I believe it will be much of a success. The time is certainly propitious.

¹² Birmingham, England, Jan. 5, 1880. In the private collection of the writer.

¹³ Letter to Henry George from D. Appleton and Co., New York, Dec. 1, 1879. HGC.

¹⁴ *Ib.*

I appreciate, as you do, the difficulty of reaching those most deeply concerned in any social reform, and perhaps even more than you, do I appreciate the difficulty of holding them, even when you have reached them—of preventing ideas which you got in, from taking most distorted forms. It is the general fact that those who suffer most are least able to help themselves. Perhaps it is the law of the universe; perhaps this is the deep truth which in the Christian faith is expressed by the incarnation; but it is certain that successful efforts for amelioration of the condition of the lowest class have come from above not below. The most terrible thing about unjust social enactments is not the physical suffering they cause, but the mental and moral degradation they produce. It is this that gives the demagogue his advantage and enables tyranny to turn the rabble against their best friends.

And I am anything but sanguine—sometimes this amounts to utter hopelessness—of carrying any real reform. In a pond one may trace the play of wave and current, and as I see them, there are many things in the drift of the times that are anything but assuring. But who can tell? And as you say, “we are to work away all the same.” *We are, we are.* You know how much there is in that idea of doing a duty in obedience to the higher power. Sometimes I think it must be “the peace which passeth understanding.”¹⁵

Important notice was beginning to be taken of the book. The first criticism to arrive from Europe was in the Parisian *Revue Scientifique* and signed by Emile de Laveleye. It was most complimentary and stated that “the chapter on the Decline of Civilization was worthy of being added to De Tocqueville’s immortal work.”¹⁶ A month later a review, covering the larger part of a page, appeared in *The New York Sun*. Other reviews appeared in important newspapers and magazines and there arose a demand in the trade for a cheaper, paper-covered edition of the book. Concerning this, an enthusiastic letter from a young man named A. J. Steers, in the Appletons’ employ, brought a grateful note from George, in which he said:

Many a man does his work and in his life sees no result. And no matter how much of a success the book may become in my lifetime, I do not think I shall be proud of it, as men are proud of writing a successful novel or history. The feeling is one of deep gratitude that it has been permitted me to do something. And this, already, I know—your kind letter is one of the proofs of it—that every here and there is a man on whom these ideas have taken hold, as they have taken hold of me, and who in his turn will be a fresh center.

¹⁵ From 417 First Street, Jan. 31, 1880. In the private collection of the writer.

¹⁶ Henry George quoted this in a letter to Dr. Taylor, Feb. 17, 1880, HGC. See Henry George Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 331.

You speak of how little you can do. Did you ever think of it, how little we know of what we can do, or what we do? Sometimes a word, a little act, starts a train that, if we could follow it, we should see leads to the widest results. But it is not the result so much as the effort to do what we can, with which we are concerned.¹⁷

The same point about the power of ideas was touched in the letter to Charles Nordhoff:

Have you never when reading, and a spark has been struck in your mind, thought how little the author could know of its influence on you? And so you do not see who is taking your book from a library shelf, or stealing a read from a second-hand book stall, or turning over, it may be some broken pages, in country inn or Indiaman's fore-castle. Still less can you see the influence. It may only show after many days.¹⁸

George was striving to get his debt paid for setting the type and making the plates, and at the same time to support those dependent on him. He wrote John Swinton:

The book has done better than in this time I would have reasonably hoped. Appletons have already published their second edition and contemplate a third and of the obligation which I assumed in bringing it out, I have already paid all but about \$120.¹⁹

Although several articles written by George had been published in *The Popular Science Monthly*, they brought little revenue. The contract he had hoped to obtain from a lecture bureau had failed to materialize. He was keen to go to the Atlantic coast where he believed there would be some opening for him. "If they would reduce the fare a little further—say to \$10.00—I would go myself,"²⁰ he wrote facetiously to a friend. It seemed almost like an answer to his prayer when John Russell Young sent word that there was a chance for a writing position on the *New York Herald*, voluntarily advancing money for the journey. George, availing himself of this splendid opportunity, bade good-bye to his family (which now numbered one more since a baby girl, Anna Angela, had come upon the scene) and departed for the East.

I came third class after all [he wrote back to Taylor] as I found I would have to sit up the whole way second class, and Young thought there was something to be made by writing up the emigrant trip. I am

¹⁷ April 4, 1880, HGC. Henry George Jr., *op. cit.*, pp. 333–4.

¹⁸ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁹ April 27, 1880, HGC.

²⁰ Letter to Dr. Taylor, Feb. 12, 1880, HGC.

enjoying the journey and am full of hope. The spell is broken and I have taken a new start.²¹

When he arrived in New York he found that the position on *The Herald* that Young and Nordhoff had tried to obtain for him had been filled and no other opening was in sight for the time. At loose ends and hoping to further the cause of free trade, he entered the Hancock-Garfield presidential campaign. The Democratic Campaign Committee sent for him and asked him to talk to working men on the question of the tariff. This he was glad to do. He made a straight free-trade speech that was a success with the audience but it so distressed the "tariff reformers" controlling the party policy that they cancelled his other speaking dates.

In Brooklyn there was a group of fearless young Democrats—Charles O'Connor Hennessy among them—who were fighting the party machine. They invited George to speak at one of their rallies, in Jefferson Hall. There he was at liberty to make a plea for unmitigated free trade. Sure of his subject and, once he started to speak, released from self-consciousness, his direct, clear-cut appeal, pregnant with power and conviction, made admirers and friends for him. One of them was Andrew McLean, managing editor of *The Brooklyn Eagle*.

George was sorely pressed for money. But he did not want to go back to California unless some definite opportunity for work offered. He remained in New York, hoping something would open. When a magazine article of his, which had been accepted but which the editor afterward wanted so changed that he could not do it at all, was returned, he wrote Dr. Taylor:

These little stumbles are only to be expected but when a fellow carries the weight I am carrying, every little stumble hurts and it is very hard to recover spirit and elasticity.²²

George's family was still in San Francisco. His older son had a position in a printing office and his wife had taken in boarders. He wrote to her on their wedding anniversary, December 2, 1880:

We have been married nineteen years. Yes, more than half of your life has been that of a married woman, and I have been your husband for very near the half of mine, and that by far the most active part. And here we are with the whole continent between us, and about as poor as when we started. Well that won't be long, my darling. But this little separation amounts to nothing except to make us feel, as we may have

²¹ From Port Winnemacca, Aug. 13, 1880, HGC.

²² Brooklyn, Sept. 27, 1880, HGC.

felt before, the value of each other. I think I love you more truly and more deeply than I did when, nineteen years ago, you trusted yourself to me. I know that I have never regretted and I know that you have not. For I know I have your love and you have mine.²³

While the book was slowly finding readers and strong admirers, the royalties were sparse and George was finding it increasingly difficult to believe that a way would open. Sending brave letters to his wife, wearing a gallant front for the world, he showed occasional glimpses of the real state of his affairs during the winter of '80-'81 only to Dr. Taylor in letters about other matters. "I have been trying to hold on as long as I could in hopes of a chance of some kind. Don't think me a Micawber," he wrote to this friend, "I shall go to work if I have to go to the case."²⁴

But he did not have to return to his old craft; something did open. Abram S. Hewitt, a wealthy man and a member of New York City's delegation in Congress, who had expressed to Mr. Appleton admiration for "Progress and Poverty," engaged its author to do some work which he himself had not time for. George—who through stress of circumstances was now forced to break his resolution never to sell the product of his pen unsigned—wrote confidentially to Taylor about his "ghosting":

I don't think I will get back for manifestly this is the best place for me unless I have something sure there. I say so more on the indications than in the actualities. I have taken the job from Hewitt to get up a report on depression committee to be presented to the next Congress. He agrees to give me \$50 a week for three hours work a day. I have done about three weeks' work so far, and don't know how long it will last. But there is some magazine work I have in mind and there is newspaper work to fall back on, to say nothing of lecturing. I have only delivered one lecture yet, receiving \$50. for it, but will have more if I want to do it.²⁵

After telling Taylor that he had received copies of part of the German translation of "Progress and Poverty," which was scheduled to be published in a few weeks' time, he related some personal experiences:

Last night I dined with Dana of *The Sun*; the company consisting of his family, Hazeltine, the reviewer, John S. Swinton and myself. He lives in magnificent style. I have plenty of chance to go into company, but have hitherto kept out of it for until last week had only my old clothes, and last night felt rather out of place, when seated on the right of the hostess, yet the only man in the room in a business suit. However!

²³ In the private collection of the writer.

²⁴ Oct. 12, 1880, HGC. Quoted in part by Henry George Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 338.

²⁵ Dec. 18, 1880, HGC.

My wife thinks she can get along cheaper at boarding than keeping house, and so I have told her to sell out. . . . So life goes. My pleasant little home—that I was so comfortable in—is gone, and I am afloat at 42, poorer than at 21. I do not complain; but there is some bitterness in it.²⁶

Late in January he wrote to Taylor hopefully that things seemed to be opening for him. He believed if he lived he would do a large work. He continued:

I almost wish you would get frozen out in San Francisco. At any rate don't worry if you are. Sell your pictures and come on here and together we will make a paper that will wield a power. By and by, at any rate, all this may open. You have too much brains and energy and character to be wasted in frippery lawsuits when there are such great causes to plead before such greater courts.²⁷

Early in March he reported to Taylor that the business between him and Hewitt was terminated. He had read the matter he had prepared to Hewitt, who was exceedingly pleased with it and gave George \$100. This was far below the price they had agreed upon but George did not demur. Hewitt went on to indicate what he wanted done in further steps in the investigation. George explained that for this work he would have to charge another \$100—whereupon Hewitt decided it was costing too much and he would have to stop.

George needed the money badly but he did not tell Hewitt. He told Hewitt that he was relieved; that he knew he had been doing the work too cheaply but that he had done the job because he had undertaken to do it. And so that chapter ended.

The \$100 he did receive was a help. He was able to send money home but he could not clear up all the matters that worried him, such as a loan Taylor had made to him some time previously:

I found if I sent you the \$20. it would leave me only \$5. and kept it to help out on this week's board. . . . (It is in just such times as this when one is feeling for foothold that the terrible weight of a family comes in.) . . . There is no one here I can talk to as I can to you—especially when I feel blue and down. What weight I have carried at times no one knows. The worst of it is the terrible mental strain, the waste of energy and time and opportunity it involves. But it is only temporary. If I can only keep my strength.²⁸

The paper edition of "Progress and Poverty" was to be printed and a

²⁶ Sic. Dec. 18, 1880. Quoted by Henry George Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 342.

²⁷ January 23, 1881, HGC.

²⁸ March 6, 1881, HGC.

preface had to be written. It bothered him very much. He wrote and rewrote it. Finally discarding what he had written, he ended up with a simple summary of the book. This preface was used in this and all subsequent editions. Worry was making it difficult to create and as late as March 14th he wrote to his confidant:

I know what is wanted—rest and freedom from anxiety. But that is what I can't get. I see a great work ahead of me—it opens larger and larger, but sometimes I fear that I can't hold out. God knows that I try my best.²⁹

Gradually the black clouds began to lift. During the Garfield-Hancock presidential campaign the book had been selling very slowly, but at the end of December the sale picked up. Every copy of the previous editions and one thousand of the cheap edition had gone. Orders and inquiries were pressing in on Appleton & Co. The German notices were good. Scholars were beginning to discuss the book. W. D. LeSueur of Ontario, E. L. Youmans, who conducted *The Popular Science Monthly*, and Prof. William Ellis, founder of the Birkbeck Schools in England, were all most enthusiastic.

Report had it that Leland Stanford had read the book and had told James McClatchy "that he had become a disciple of Henry George."³⁰ Unfortunately it seemed to prove a false report—the "disciple" part, at least—unless Stanford so completely hid his light under an air-tight bushel that for lack of oxygen it died. But Michael Davitt, the Irish patriot, openly pledged the Irish Land League to push "Progress and Poverty" in Great Britain. Its author was becoming known even in his own country: he received \$50 from *Appleton's Journal* for an article,³¹ and orders came for an encyclopedia article, as well as one for *The North American Review*.³² The strain on his purse was easing a little and by May 12th he was able to pay back the loan of \$20 to his friend in San Francisco and to write:

You do not know and I cannot readily tell you how much this little accommodation has been to me. It is not so much the want of money as the mental effect it produces—the morbid condition. The man who does not understand that, does not know how it is possible for people to

²⁹ March 14, 1881, HGC.

³⁰ Letter to Dr. Taylor, March 6, 1881 (quoting James McClatchy, editor of *The Sacramento Bee*.) HGC. Quoted by Henry George Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 349.

³¹ "The Taxation of Land Values," *Appleton's Journal*, June, 1881.

³² "Common Sense in Taxation," *North American Review*, July, 1881.

commit suicide. This thing has weighed on me very much. Could I have felt free and been relieved of the terrible anxiety, I could have, in the same time, accomplished many times as much. But yet it has seemed as though a Providence helped me through.

When I drew on you for this \$20. it seemed my darkest hour. I was weak and weary in mind and body. I did not like to do it, but I knew you would not have grudged it if you knew.³³

And by the end of May something of his old lightness had returned to his pen when he berated his friend for not mailing the adverse criticisms of "Progress and Poverty." "To be abused and not to know of it is almost as bad as not to be abused at all."³⁴

John Russell Young was the only one of George's intimate friends who never became converted to his social philosophy. But a deep love linked them and they were almost daily companions during those long months of worry and struggle. Young relates:

It was a daring experiment—this unknown gentleman, with no aid but his own high spirit, nothing in his carpet-bag but one book of gospel, coming at 42 to make his way to the heart of mighty Babylon. The more I studied George under heavy conditions, the more I admired him. His ability and his courage, his honesty, independence and intellectual power were those of a leader of men.

We took walks on the Battery, whither we went under the flush of strenuous midnight work, the great city at peace and no companions this side the stars; strolls in the park, in Westchester and the suburbs of Brooklyn—the brave, intrepid soul wrapped up in his book and smiling upon fate. . . . It was the courage which, as has been written, makes one a majority.³⁵

And it was the patience that must be learned before true greatness is achieved.

³³ May 12, 1881, HGC. Henry George Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 349.

³⁴ Letter to Dr. Taylor, May 25, 1881, HGC. Henry George Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 349.

³⁵ *The New York Herald*, Oct. 30, 1897, *loc. cit.*, Henry George Jr., *op. cit.*, pp. 344-5.