

Henry George's Influence — By RANSOM E. NOBLE, JR.



NO BRIEF talk can hope to do justice to the manifold effects of George's life and teachings—effects in the fields of economics, of politics, of ethics; profound effects felt here in America and in England, Canada, Australasia, and other parts of the globe...

George's impact upon the study of economics was of course enormous; here again a volume rather than essay would be necessary to do the subject justice. I have recently been reading Joseph Dorfman's monumental work, *The Economic Mind in America*, and was struck by the number of leading American economists who owed much to Henry George. These include men of varied opinions, men such as John R. Commons, John Bates Clark, E. R. A. Seligman, and Frank A. Fetter. None of these men could be described as a Henry George man, and some of them were determined opponents of his views. But the influence of a man can be gauged not merely by the number of followers he attracts; another significant measure is the opposition he arouses, the extent to which opponents are forced to take account of his ideas, and either refute them or incorporate them (often in diluted or distorted form) in the body of their own thought. The professional economists were disturbed by *Progress and Poverty*; after all, the discoveries of their own classical economics as to the nature of rent lie at the base of George's single tax plan. The difference between George and his professional contemporaries was largely on the question of justice; as Dorfman put it, "George's emphasis on the ethical basis of any economic system brought a broader outlook to the study of that subject." His great contribution was perhaps "his vivid presentation of his belief that the material progress of society was the outcome of the growth of society, that the greatest gains had come to the possessors of strategic resources, rendered valuable by the progress of society, not by the contributions of the possessors."

George stood squarely in the great American tradition of humanitarian betterment. Although his solutions were his own, in aim and spirit he was akin to the anti-monopoly movement of the '70's and '80's, to George Henry Evans and the land reformers of the 1840's, to the Unitarian-Transcendentalist conception of the abolition movement, and to the anti-monopoly wing of Jacksonian Democracy. He was a spiritual heir of Thomas Jefferson, who declared that land belongs in usufruct to the living, of Tom Paine, whose *Agrarian Justice*, in the words of one critic, reads "like a chapter out of *Progress and Poverty*", and of the great natural-rights philosophers of eighteenth-century Europe. The need for such an authentic reform voice was particularly acute in the America of the 1880's. The northern victory in the Civil War had brought many things including preservation of the Union and personal freedom to the Negro, but it had also brought the triumph of industrial capitalism in both the economic and political spheres. Business control of government was the order of the day.

The reasons for George's tremendous appeal in his own day and up at least through the days

of the Progressive Movement are not far to seek. There was abroad in the land not only a fear of the lessening of opportunity through the growth of privilege, but, as Louis Filler has recently emphasized, a spiritual unrest flowing from the impact of Darwinism and social Darwinism upon American thought. On both these scores George met a deep-felt need: for the age-old scourge of poverty he offered a simple but complete remedy which was in accord with Christian ethics and infused with profound religious feeling. Furthermore, as noted above, his program was in keeping with the American tradition: it promised fulfillment of the American dream of achieving equality of opportunity without sacrificing individual liberty. It offered a clear-cut alternative to Marxian socialism, an alternative that promised social justice while preserving the old individualism, that fused economic radicalism with Jefferson's concept of the limited state. And it did all this in language whose brilliance was matched only by its author's passionate sincerity. His influence upon the American labor movement was perhaps unprecedented, and went far beyond his own campaigns on a labor ticket for mayor of New York City. Out in Illinois, for example, a powerful single-tax bloc in the state Federation of Labor was an important factor in the election and progressive administration of Governor John P. Altgeld.

George's relations with the contemporary Populist movement are also significant. Needless to say, he was not a Populist... Yet single tax agitation did much to increase agrarian interest in the land question, while at least one outstanding Populist—"Sockless Jerry" Simpson, Congressman from Kansas—was an earnest disciple of George. Hamlin Garland, writing many years later in *The Libertarian*, declared that Populist ideas concerning the leasing of coal lands and the control of transportation and telegraph systems, came from Henry George. "Jerry Simpson and I helped General Weaver insert those planks in the People's Party platform at St. Louis in 1894," he writes. "Jerry Simpson took those planks from a book called '*Progress and Poverty*.'"

Not only the reform movements but the reform literature of the period bears the stamp of Henry George's ideas. For example, Colonel E. M. House, who played such an influential part in the Wilson administration, published anonymously in 1912 his novel, *Philip Dru: Administrator*. It tells how Dru, soldier and dreamer, administers the government during an interim period after revolutionists have seized it from its corrupt politico-economic bosses. His first step is a new tax structure: low rates on improved property, very high rates on unimproved. This, wrote House, would keep the wealthy from piling up unearned increment, open up land now lying idle, and cheapen the cost of living to all.

The period immediately following Henry George's death—that is, from the late 1890's to the first World War—has by common consent been designated the "Progressive Era." It was an era when political and social reform struck the dominant note in American life, when the reform spirit permeated all levels of government, all sections of the country, all political parties. When the student of history examines the Progressive Movement, he is at once struck by the powerful influence of Henry

George. Certain examples of his influence upon Progressivism are so well known that it would be superfluous for me to describe them in any detail. The story of Tom Johnson, the millionaire monopolist who was converted to the single tax and spent the rest of his life in a fight for municipal ownership, is a familiar and inspiring one. So, too, is the story of his able fellow-workers, convinced single taxers Frederic C. Howe, Newton D. Baker and Peter Witt, who gave him such invaluable support in his Cleveland battles. Brand Whitlock, Progressive mayor of Toledo, is another case in point, while the signal contributions of Louis Post need no explanation to this audience.

Of all the Progressive experiments with more democratic political machinery, the most thorough-going was made, under William Simon U'Ren's leadership in Oregon. Between 1890 and 1910 a series of laws was placed on the statute books providing for the Australian ballot, registration of voters, penalties for corrupt election practices, the direct primary including the popular choice of United States Senators, Presidential preference primaries, the initiative and referendum, and the recall. This "Oregon System" of direct government, designed to restore political control to the people, arrested the attention of the nation, and was widely copied—at least in part—by other states of the Union. The fascinating point is the motivation of U'Ren, its moving spirit. U'Ren wanted popular control of government for a purpose—to make possible the passage of laws establishing the single tax. In other words, the most famous Progressive experiment with direct government in the country was put through by a Henry George man.

What of the post-Progressive period, the years from World War I to the present? With the growing world trend toward collectivism stimulated by Karl Marx, the Russian Revolution, and the economic chaos of depression and war, it is not surprising that American liberalism has also become more collectivist, and that Henry George's individualistic emphasis and faith in the competitive system have correspondingly lost ground. But his importance cannot therefore be discounted... The American liberal tradition is perhaps more important to the world today than at any time in our history. Our whole western civilization is grappling with the problem of mastering our economic environment without smothering individual liberty in the process. The American tradition insists that it can be done, that reasonable economic security need not be bought at the price of political and intellectual freedom. It is as part of that tradition and that insistence that Henry George is important today. Apart even from his specific proposals, Americans can learn from his acute analysis of privilege, his glowing humanitarianism, and his passionate conviction that social justice in a free society can yet be attained.

[Condensed from an address given on July 24 at the Commodore Hotel, with Charles J. Post presiding. Professor Noble is Head of the Department of Social Studies at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn. An article by this author appearing in the April issue of the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* should be referred to by any student wishing to make use of this historic material. The complete text of the conference address may be obtained by writing to 50 East 69th Street, New York.]