

# *I Was A Watcher for Henry George*

by ANDREW OLIVER

**I**N the fall of 1897 I went to New York City to put in a year of graduate work for an advanced degree having received two degrees from Harvard before that. In the house where I lived on 22nd Street there was a man connected with the Henry George campaign. He knew I was slightly interested in the single tax movement so he said, "How would you like to watch in the election campaign?" Each voting district was entitled to two watchers for each candidate. There were four candidates for the mayoralty that fall. One was Benjamin F. Tracy, Republican, Judge Van Wyck, of Tammany Hall and Henry George who represented the Thomas Jefferson party. The fourth, Seth Low, ran on the Citizens' Union ticket. Judge Van Wyck was elected over all the candidates.

When I went to the hotel where the Henry George headquarters were, to have my credentials made out, as luck would have it, Henry George was there and I met him. I heard him speak on several occasions during the campaign, and though I later came to know his son better than I knew him, my impression of Henry George was that he was one of the most kindly and lovable men I have ever met. His earnestness also impressed me. He was very quiet but very forceful and utterly sincere.

As most readers of this magazine know, Henry George died on election night in that campaign of 1897. His funeral was very impressive. A magnificent cavalcade rode up 5th Avenue with the bier. The catafalque was on a high platform and Grieg's "Death of Aase" was played with Walter Damrosch conducting.

Some years later, in 1911, Henry George Jr., who had been in the campaign in place of his father as a candidate for the mayor's office, came to Seattle where I was living. A year or two later he was elected to Congress and went to Washington, D. C.

Another visitor who came to speak in Seattle was Joseph Fels, the soap manufacturer. A man of short stature, his words shot out as from a catapult; he was a very forceful speaker. He said he had only one subject, and that he never spoke on anything but the single tax or Henry George. "I suppose you people think that I am a wealthy man," he said. "I suppose you think I made my money in Fels-Naphtha soap. I did not make my fortune that way. I made it in land speculation in Philadelphia. I am going to continue doing it just as long as you people are foolish enough to let me."

He used two examples to illustrate the land question, one was Great Britain and the other Mexico. Since retiring from his business he had spent one-half of each year in England and studied the land question there.

When Lloyd George was Chancellor of the Exchequer, the land question was very acute. It was his business to raise funds for the Navy. While he was a radical man he decided it was the best way to have all the land of Great Britain revalued, owners to have the privilege of giving their own price on the land. This seemed fair enough, since no proper tax value had been placed on the land since the days of Queen Elizabeth. He recommended in his now famous budget that one-fifth of

one percent be applied to the value that the owners were to give. The second provision was that whenever that land should be sold at any future time 20 percent of the difference between the selling price and the price on the books, was going into the public treasury. What did that mean? If they gave the initial price too high, they would be taxed too high. If they gave it too low, they would be caught when they came to sell. In other words, he forced them to tell the truth. That seemed fair enough. The House of Lords held up its hands in horror. It thought this was the rankest type of socialism, and the Peers were up in arms; but as the King had been friendly towards the Lloyd George budget he (George the 5th) said he would threaten to appoint a sufficient number of Peers to make a majority. It was almost a year after that before the Lloyd George budget was passed. There is only so much land in Great Britain or anywhere else. You cannot increase it nor diminish it.

Fels had a good deal to say about Mexico, too. The Hearst ranch in Mexico, for instance, was owned by three men, William R. Hearst, Charles P. Taft, and Harrison Gray Otis. Their land consisted of 125,000 acres in the best part of Mexico. 20,000 farmers were induced by various means to relinquish their land. These farmers were very ignorant and many could not read or write. Many devices were used to make them sell their land. Some sold for 50 cents an acre. What became of those 20,000 farmers? After they were driven off the land they had their choice of starvation, brigandage or peonage. Nature rebels

against the first; a great many did not like to take the second step; therefore a great majority became peons which means that they were everlastingly in debt. The owners of the land who employed them always gave the peons a little less than they could live on. Occasionally one would get his head above water and would be persuaded to spend all his money on some holiday and would fall deeper into debt to the new owner. So that was the situation in Mexico.

Another case which was interesting was that of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Years ago the latter was granted by the government alternate sections of 160 acres on both sides of the railroad. Much of this turned out to be oil land, in other words, mineral land.

In Seattle where I lived for eleven years single tax became a political issue and the State of Washington had the single tax provision on the state ballot. Of course it was defeated but they carried about 25,000 votes in the election. This was not large considering the number of votes, but it made a significant impact. At that time the single tax question was a vital issue in both New York and Seattle.

As I have inferred above, Henry George was a man of force and power, and he had a strong influence on his day and generation. It was impossible to escape from his logic. He was acclaimed not only in this country but by many of the great minds abroad. On one occasion Henry George Jr. told me that he had visited Tolstoy in Russia and it was quite a thrill to see the painting of his father hanging in a prominent place in Tolstoy's home.

**Dr. Andrew Oliver of Brookline, Massachusetts is 88 but in excellent health. He freely consented to speak to a group of Georgists in Boston in November and the above notes were taken on his address by Mrs. Sanford Farkas. Dr. Oliver is the author of four books and many articles and is at present vice president of the Boston Authors Club. After receiving (with honors) an A.B. degree from Harvard in 1891 he made education his life work.**