

# Henry George News

Volume 61, Number 3

May - June, 1997

## The Determined Doctor

by Max Panzner

Wishing to smash racism and supporting the struggle for land rights for indigenous peoples around the world is now a fashionable part of American popular culture. Though coming under increasing attack lately, the separation of church and state, and the absence of religious instruction and prayer from our country's public schools is held as the norm, even taken for granted. A Roman Catholic priest assailing hate or threats to the sharing of God's bounty is acceptable as well, at least in word if not action. If that priest then argued for the maintenance of secularism in our public institutions, and went further by protesting the running of private Catholic schools by the Church he would today be considered perhaps overly liberal. If he went on to oppose the temporal power of the pope, question the inerrancy of scripture, the authenticity of the Genesis account of the fall of man, the Immaculate Conception, and the authority of the papal hierarchy in administering its ordained, he would likely be labeled a radical extremist or worse. But in the socially tumultuous, archly conservative late nineteenth century such views from a man of the cloth were considered by many as heretical, blasphemous, and scandalous. Yet just such a controversial man existed, Father Edward McGlynn, who in the face of being dismissed from his parish and excommunicated from the Church in 1887 retained enormous popularity among his parishioners, the impoverished, social and political reformers.

In the newly published book The Determined Doctor, from Vestigium Press, Father Alfred Isaacson writes of the life and trials of Dr. McGlynn, building the tale around a massive body of official and personal correspondences among the reverend, his friends, foes, papal superiors, and followers. Though the book examines a story previously told, as in the expertly written Rebel, Priest and Prophet by Stephen Bell, Isaacson, who is also a Catholic priest, is able to contribute authority to its telling through his extensive research of various archdiocese' archives and Vatican records to which he had exclusive, previously untapped access.

The book is nearly 450 pages, sectioned into twenty-seven chapters, arranged more or less chronologically, each focusing on a set of related events, and it closes with eleven pages of sources and an index. Given that each chapter (continued on page four)

## Social Reform & Catholic Doctrine

by David Domke

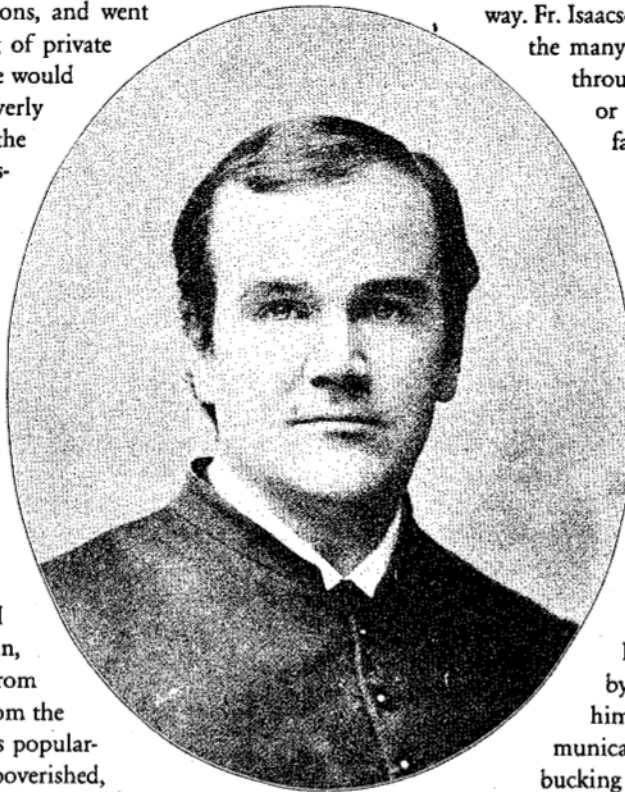
On June 6th the School hosted a seminar entitled The Determined Doctor: Social Reform & Catholic Doctrine with the Reverend Alfred Isaacson, pastor of the Transfiguration Roman Catholic church in Tarrytown, New York, and author of a new biography of Fr. Edward McGlynn. Father McGlynn, was, of course, the American priest excommunicated by Rome for his advocacy of Henry George's ideas. Fr. Isaacson told the familiar story of the controversies surrounding Henry George and Fr.

McGlynn, adding details and occasional insights along the way. Fr. Isaacson began his remarks by enumerating the many documents that have come to light through his researches, documents unknown or inaccessible to previous scholars. The famous biography written by Stephen Bell was written, according to Fr. Isaacson, "mostly from anecdote and contemporary newspaper accounts."

One of the aspects of the McGlynn case Fr. Isaacson emphasized was that McGlynn was already considered a troublemaker by the ecclesiastical brass before he became active promoting the ideas of Henry George. McGlynn had early on involved himself with the Irish Land League. Also, in 1882, McGlynn had spoken at a gathering of the Ladies' Land League and "was taken to task for this by his superiors. His superiors told him that since the league had been excommunicated by the Vatican, McGlynn was bucking authority by speaking at one of their gatherings. McGlynn reminded them that it was the Land League and not the Ladies' Land league which had been excommunicated and

he escaped censure on this semantic technicality." Furthermore, in 1883, a newspaper called the Boston Pilot reported on a speech McGlynn gave expounding land theories to explain Irish Poverty. These clippings somehow made their way to Rome, where Fr. Isaacson found them in the course of his researches. So, before taking up the cause of economic reform espoused in Henry George's Progress and Poverty, McGlynn was held as ideologically suspect by Vatican authority.

Fr. Isaacson went on to say that he thinks that real story of how McGlynn and Henry George got together is much less casual than the scenario related in previously written books. The usual story is that A.J. Speers, the publisher of Progress and Poverty, happened to give McGlynn the trade edition (continued on page five)



Father Edward McGlynn, 1870.

(continued from first page) concludes with copious footnotes, many of which add tellingly to the story, the reader may find the index unexpectedly brief, a minor shortcoming to such a thorough work.

Isacson's intention as stated in the Introduction is to give the full account of the McGlynn controversy, "Knowing how deviation from the truth always infects oral tradition..." As a priest for six years at Our Lady of the Scapular of Mount Carmel, the neighboring and daughter parish of McGlynn's St. Stephen's, Isacson found that although many people knew of the conflict as a personal one between a priest and his archbishop, the more accurate story was not so simple. "It is complicated by the specter of ecclesiastical authority, the personal freedoms guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, the clash of two strong personalities and the foibles of human nature we are all heir to." He adds that careerism and the want to always win, typified as American traits, contributed to the resulting controversy. These points are important, because much of the rest of the book goes on to detail what could only have been an American crisis: a challenge to the Freedom of Expression at a time when people were wary of attempts by the expanding Catholic Church to establish social doctrine and influence the country's politics.

The book begins in the first chapter with Edward McGlynn's birth, his family relations, and his early education. It goes on in the following six chapters to illustrate the events which would shape his character for the coming friction. Though most of the subsequent chapters are devoted in large part to documenting the voluminous flow of written material accounting for the actions of central players, and thus implying their motives, it is the author's interpretations of all of the differing points of view that offers the reader the most revealing information. But he refrains from adding personal comments as much as possible, seeking instead to strive for ultimate objectivity. He is quite successful in allowing the letters to speak for themselves but it is the moving comments of a clergyman, such as, "Having been driven from his parish, the world was made his parish", that make for a compelling read. As he would later quote from the preface McGlynn wrote for *Pictorial Lives of the Saints*, "...such effects are only the consequences of how God made us. He created us to be creatures of imagination moved more by incidents than abstractions. Stories appeal to us more than discussions. Even Christ commended this truth by teaching in parables."

When first coming to McGlynn's exposure to *Progress and Poverty* and Henry George, in chapter seven, "The Land League, Henry George and First Problems," much has been learned about the reverend's confidence, radicalism, and passion. As a member

of the short-lived Accademia, a theological society which met monthly to read and discuss original religious papers (and short-lived by McGlynn's move to dissolve the organization because it was limited to his circle of friends), McGlynn was known to openly and defiantly espouse the earlier mentioned views on the school question, Catholic doctrines and practices. He of course attracted wide critical attention from his immediate superiors and many of his peers. But he was also not without his friends.

Fr. McGlynn was a brilliant and outstanding student at the Propaganda Fide; its purpose was in establishing the Church in non-Christian countries, including missions in territories where there was as yet no hierarchy. This meant that part of the student body came from the United States "...giving him friends and acquaintances throughout the country." Coupled with the fact that his archbishop, Michael Corrigan, who was once a student of McGlynn's at the American College in Rome, also had the support

of many of the more conservative and the less confrontational clergy inside and outside the country, Isacson is faced with the task of assembling the argument from the varied array of contributing parties. There are many moments when this becomes rather complicated, nearly turning parts of the story into lists of correspondences exchanged. In the more successful instances, Isacson manages to keep the narrative alive with colorful, anecdotal examples of McGlynn's character: "He was a refuge to clergy with problems and even gave his bed to a priest in distress. Clothes, even his own, he gave to the poor. One time a body was found floating in the Hudson. The police on retrieving it discovered the coat bore the name Edward McGlynn. After initial fears the doctor had drown, it was learned he had given away his own coat to a needy man."

At another point Isacson offers an example of McGlynn's often offensive forthrightness, as when with his close friend and champion, Rev. Richard Burtzell, he argued against then-Archbishop of New York John McCloskey

over the wasteful expenditures on already existing parishes when dozens more could be built for the estimated half million Catholics in the city. "The archbishop responded could not the money be spent on the poor instead of anointing the Savior's body. McGlynn responded to McCloskey, who was building a cathedral, "Woe to you who build the tombs of the prophets." ...When Father William Starrs told McGlynn he ought not to speak so boldly McGlynn replied, "Do you want me to suppress the truth as you Starrs have done your whole life?"

Isacson does an excellent job of uncovering the truth objectively but sometimes this is done at the expense of reconciling some of the many contradictions in McGlynn's life, as when he describes St. Stephen's as the archdiocese' largest and most



St. Stephen's Church, New York, in 1870

opulent parish, with murals painted (continued on page eight) (continued from page four) by Constantine Brumidi (who was hired away from his half-completed work adorning the capitol in Washington), a \$30,000 altar, and a running debt as high as \$47,000 during the 1870's. There is little or no discussion of how McGlynn could possibly protest the archbishop's expenditure of money while practicing such glaring fiscal irresponsibility himself. The reader is respectfully left to make up his own mind. When it came to his personal and parish finances McGlynn was seemingly indifferent, constantly in debt while large sums in contributions were amassed from his faithful congregation for building additions to the church and constructing an orphanage next door. But with questions of the Church's economic policies Isacson gives clear illustrations of how the doctor relied on principles, as in the case of the funding of Catholic schools.

McGlynn felt that the mission of the Church was to minister to God's children, a labor that required the devoted efforts of many more than the available clergy of that time. He argued that the construction and operating costs of Catholic schools was the costliest and most time consuming function of any parish, and that education was the realm of the state while religion should be taught in Sunday Schools. From Vatican officials down to local deacons McGlynn was roundly condemned for standing against Church policy, especially since much of the argument raged between he and Monsignor Thomas Preston in the New York and national press. Confident and self-righteous, McGlynn would take the opportunity to elaborate his views on the separation of church and state. Isacson writes, "He opposed financial aid for a religious institution since it was a violation of the separation of church and state... McGlynn was incensed by the fact that some clerics had induced Tammany [Hall] to appropriate funds for Catholic schools at the same time the 'Tweed Ring' (a corrupt, Tammany based political machine) was exposed. Seeing the subsidy as an enticement, he feared the establishment of inferior church basement schools by greedy pastors." McGlynn went further by railing against religion being taught in public schools, in Bible classes and school prayer, because he felt that parents had a right to

the absence of such teaching to prevent the indoctrination of their children. "Members of religious orders teaching in schools were 'imperatively demanded' for corporal works of mercy."

Isacson manages to describe Dr. McGlynn's relations with Henry George and Archbishop Corrigan, as well as George's theories, swiftly and efficiently. It's somewhat offsetting considering the scale of the personalities involved. Most of the character's relations in the book depend upon implication, a service to impartiality but perhaps a disservice to readability.

There is also one small wording question

in the first elucidation of Henry George's proposed land value taxation in chapter seven. Isacson states that "George wanted to tax the income from rents and land." This is not entirely mistaken, but a more accurate statement would make clear that George's proposal was for the full taxation of income from the rent of land. Elsewhere in the book George's ideas are elaborated correctly and succinctly.

Wherever he can, Isacson provides a context for the resulting flurry of correspondences which followed most of McGlynn's publications, as when McGlynn went so far as to present to a reporter from The Sun an amendment to the state constitution which would protect liberty of conscience and guard against the union of state and church. Isacson gives full account of its measures: the dispersal of funds only to common or public schools, the prohibition of bible reading, prayers, worship or hymns in schools, the power of magistrates to commit only to public prisons and asylums, the repeal of laws making appropriations to churches and

parochial schools, the removal of charlatans from directing institutions, the prohibition of any prayer or worship in public institutions and, finally, the establishment of a method for people to visit and instruct only those of their own faith. Needless to say Rome was quite perturbed by his position once they received a clipping of the article, his own Propaganda Fide writing on the cover sheet: "United States 1870-71, Erroneous Doctrines Professed by McGlynn." As a result of this, Isacson documents pages of supportive and hostile exchanges over the matter, concluding "all but three of the priests in the archdiocese signed a protest against McGlynn's stated views."

Such extremes were typical of McGlynn, as is evidenced throughout the book. This partly explains why he was such an enigmatic and important figure in his day. What remains elusive is why Edward McGlynn was who he was. What drove him to such extremes, and why were his means so radical? The answers to these questions shall probably remain sketchy, treated through inference from the circumstances of his upbringing, and from the intermittent collection of early documentation. Past works devoted to the subject have relied primarily on newspaper accounts and interviews, all of which offer much more in terms of McGlynn's character and motivations. But they lacked in common all of the material stored away in Catholic archives, scattered around the world, and they suffered dependence on the heavily biased views of the factious newspapers of the time. The larger part of this book is concerned with the great Corrigan - McGlynn controversy, with its properly documented telling, including all who were involved and its exact chronology. In this, The Determined Doctor is successful, but as for the full story this book serves as the necessary, authoritative companion to the previous, better written volumes.

Henry George School of Social Science  
121 East 30th Street  
New York, NY 10016

Address correction requested

Non-profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
New York, NY  
Permit No. 7759