

## Lawson Purdy : 1863 - 1959

WHEN Lawson Purdy closed his eyes for the last time on the night of August 30, 1959, he had well earned the right to say: "I have finished my course. I have kept the faith."

Born on September 13, 1863, in Hyde Park, New York, he was the son of James S. and Frances H. Carter Purdy. His father was Rector of St. James Church. His ancestry was English, French and Dutch.

Mr. Purdy was educated at St. Paul's School in Concord, Massachusetts, and at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, where he received three degrees including, in 1908, the degree of Doctor of Laws, conferred for his outstanding service to the City of New York.

He began his business career with the New York Bank Note Company, and there he might have stayed but for his reading of Henry George's book, *Progress and Poverty*, around 1898. It was a turning point in his life, and soon afterwards he deserted the bank note company to enter the field of tax reform. How he distinguished himself in this and eight related fields, becoming President of the City's Board of Taxes and Assessments under three Mayors, from 1906 to 1917, and serving on important commissions, is part of the City's history in one of its most formative periods.

In 1902 and 1906, Mr. Purdy helped push through bills requiring real estate assessments to be separated to show land and total value, and to compel publication of assessment rolls for study by all citizens. These were long steps towards the better valuation of land. He was also, among other things, a member of the committee that gave New York, in 1916, the first comprehensive zoning system in the United States, and, later, as secretary of the state commission that achieved revision of the Old Tenement House Law into the succeeding Multiple Dwelling Law of 1929, he had a large part in providing safer and more sanitary living conditions for millions of people.

It would not have been like Lawson Purdy, captivated though he was by *Progress and Poverty*, to accept the book without question, or fail to have those questions answered. And so we find him writing the author and requesting an interview. That interview was granted, and took place on a winter's afternoon in Mr. George's small, dark office near City Hall. Mr. Purdy liked to tell of it. "I felt immediately," he would say, "that I was in the presence of a really great man. The first thing that struck me was how blue his eyes were." After that, there were other talks with Mr. Henry George, and visits to the George home on Shore Road in Brooklyn, usually on a Sunday afternoon, for "ice cream and, sometimes, a cup of tea."

Lawson Purdy was one of the few who opposed Mr. George's entrance into politics, seeing a more important calling for him in the great crusade. Nevertheless, when Mr. George decided to become a candidate for Mayor in 1897, he entered wholeheartedly into the gruelling work of the campaign, speaking almost nightly on street corners, from the back of trucks, and, "when I was lucky," in

halls throughout the city. On the last evening of Henry George's life, he was given the task of holding the audience at the Central Opera House until George could get there from College Point where he was speaking earlier. "He was late arriving," Mr. Purdy would chuckle, "so I just kept on talking." Later that night, he was one of the small group that sat down to supper with Mr. and Mrs. George in the dining room of the Old Union Square Hotel. In the early hours of the morning, Mr. George died suddenly of apoplexy.

As one of the honour guard that escorted the body of the fallen leader on its way to Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, Mr. Purdy had the privilege of walking beside the open, horse-drawn hearse on which the draped coffin was mounted. He liked to tell about the hushed crowds that lined the streets, of the occasional voice that called a last goodbye, and of an incident — small, it seemed — that impressed him greatly. "We were marching along," he would relate, "when a single white rose, thrown from an upstairs window, landed on the coffin near where I was walking."

Charter member of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, organised in 1925 to promote the economics of Henry George, Lawson Purdy became the Foundation's president in 1937, and thereafter, personally directed its affairs. Under his guidance, the Foundation expanded its activities to include not only publishing, but research into land problems, lecturing, and other forms of educational work. He believed that education must precede political activity, and that the two should never be mixed. He insisted that "the whole doctrine must be kept before the people," but, at the same time, urged that ways be found to apply that doctrine to present-day conditions.

Despite his advanced years, to those who knew him, Lawson Purdy seemed perpetually young. His thirst for knowledge was unquenchable. To a college freshman he wrote in 1958, "I envy you the fun!" To a newspaper reporter, on the eve of his ninetieth birthday, he complained, "My days are too few for all I want to accomplish." His curiosity concerning the world about him, and his enthusiasm, were infectious, as also was his abiding faith in the ultimate triumph of Truth. Early in life he caught a vision — a vision of a just society in which men should be free to reap the rewards of their labour. It never deserted him throughout his long and distinguished career. — V.G. Peterson.

About 50 years ago when he first joined the Georgeist movement, Mr. S. Allan Johnson of Victoria informs us, the article "Archimedes" was being widely circulated in Australia by the various State Leagues. Some attributed it to Mark Twain but others used the pen-name "Twark Main". Mr. Johnson emphatically declares that the author was Henry Stapleton Taylor who was then living in South Australia.