

## Preface

WAS Henry George the most important and most influential spokesman we have had for the non-Marxist left? Did he proclaim a pragmatic program in order to realize the American Dream? Was he a world-famous writer in his own time? We should be wrong if we said no to any of these questions. There was a time, not long ago, when Henry George's name was a household word. Once known to men in every walk of life, Henry George has now passed into relative obscurity, despite the school founded in his name and dedicated to the teaching of his ideas. Since he is largely unknown to many whose liberal and general education should have made them at least superficially aware of his extremely important role in the literature and social or political economics of the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, it may be difficult for many people to accept the late President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's statement that George was "one of the really great thinkers produced by our country."

The popularity of George's major work, *Progress and Poverty*, has been unrivaled in the whole of the literature of economics. First published late in 1879, after the post-Civil War depression of the 1870's had struck even the booming state of California, it captured almost immediately the imagination of countless people throughout the world. It is not often in any age that a book on political economy becomes a best-seller and its author an international hero, but that is exactly what *Progress and Poverty* and its author became. In contrast to the depression-ridden 1930's, our present affluence has made many of us—if not all of us—forget the problems to which Henry George addressed himself, problems perhaps more complicated and pressing than ever. The war on poverty has been reopened recently, and the irony of starvation and poverty amidst apparent world-wide progress and plenty has been recognized once again. Nearly a century ago, Henry George said he had the needed remedy.

The purpose of the following study is to reacquaint the reader with the man whom Bernard Shaw said converted him and five-

sixths of his fellow British socialists to socialism—a San Francisco newspaper editor who at different stages in his career corresponded with such nineteenth-century greats as John Stuart Mill and Leo Tolstoy. In order to do justice to George, it is necessary to trace his development as a man and a writer. Like most American men of letters, George was not simply a writer of books; he was a personality, and those who touch *Progress and Poverty* touch not only a book but a man. However, he must be seen as the celebrity he was without obscuring his importance and influence as a thinker and a writer. George's place in the literature of America is his alone.

In 1927, John Dewey said that "It would require less than the fingers of the two hands to enumerate those who, from Plato down, rank with Henry George among the world's social philosophers. . . . No man, no graduate of a higher educational institution, has a right to regard himself as an educated man in social thought unless he has some first-hand acquaintance with the theoretical contribution of this great American thinker." What exactly is Henry George's "theoretical contribution" to social thought, and why did men so dissimilar as Shaw, Tolstoy, and Dewey think of him as they did? What made his theories influential and convincing? Needless to say, these questions are worthy of attention.

The plan of the present discussion is straightforward: the first chapter discusses George's origins, his early training and experience as an explorer or observer of the world and as a young newspaperman; the second examines his work and activity before the publication of *Progress and Poverty*; the third is devoted to his masterwork, its publication, form, and content, and the reaction it caused; the fourth and fifth chapters discuss his writings and political activity, after the publication of *Progress and Poverty*, until his death; and the sixth chapter attempts a short review of the legacy left behind by his person and his works.

This book is intended for the general reader and also for the specialist in American literature whose knowledge of Henry George may be slight. I attempt an explanation and evaluation of George's ideas and theories while also demonstrating that he was a writer of considerable gifts. For these reasons and because George's work is largely unread today, I have quoted frequently from both his published and unpublished writings. Like most

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students, scholars, and adherents of George, I realized long ago that it is almost impossible to explain George more incisively and effectively than he does himself. One characteristic that most books on George have in common is the liberality with which they quote the spoken and written words of their subject. Since George understood himself, his ability to express his economic theories with simple evangelical force was essentially his greatest gift.

While preparing this book for publication, I discovered that not only is George no longer generally known to the average man in the street or to the general reader, he is relatively unknown to graduates of higher educational institutions—John Dewey notwithstanding. After surveying several large departments of English and American literature, I learned that only a few of my colleagues had even heard of Henry George. While this may not be surprising to anyone constantly confronted with the growth and departmentalization of knowledge today, even within the same discipline, it does not explain my experience with an American teacher of American literature at an American university, whose master's essay and doctoral thesis were each devoted to American writers, who asked me in all innocence: "Who is Henry George?"

Though hostile to George in his lifetime and still apt to view him as a kind of prolix amateur, the professional social philosophers, political scientists, and economists are not, however, unaware of George. This fact has caused me to wonder continually at the ironies forever part of the Henry George saga; for George's success—as I have already implied and as I try to demonstrate in this book—was traceable to the way in which he expressed his theory as much as to the concept itself. For this reason, it is an unforgivable error to equate the whole of George's philosophy with the idea of the single tax. George was a gifted writer and a powerful speaker who was endeavoring to express a vision of man—not simply a fiscal policy. Had *Progress and Poverty* been an ordinary Victorian document, it would have scarcely outlived the year of its publication. Very few subjects are more difficult to write about entertainingly and convincingly than economic theory, and George did not use fiction as a vehicle for his ideas as did many of his contemporaries.

While I do not expect to please all Georgists by discussing

George mainly as a successful propagandist and as a writer with economic ideas rather than only as an economic theorist, I may convince students of American literature or, for that matter, students of nineteenth-century English literature to read George as they read Emerson. It is time students of literature, as well as Georgists, appreciated George the poet as much as George the prophet. Without recognizing the effectiveness of the poetry of George's prose, it is impossible to appreciate his personal vision of "The Great Society." In a nation already proud in the nineteenth century of its affluence and abundance yet unaware of, if not unconcerned with, its poverty, Henry George did his best to alert America and much of the world to the strange anomaly of poverty amidst plenty, a fact more blatantly obvious today than in George's time. In this way, his words are as timely as ever. To Georgists, as it would be to George, the latest war on poverty is only another phase in a continuing struggle.

As others have done, I should like to acknowledge my debt to Henry George's first biographer, his son and former United States congressman, Henry George, Jr. I should like to thank the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation for its help and for its permission to quote from its editions of George's work and its other publications. I am grateful, too, for the courtesy shown me by the directors of the Henry George Schools in New York and London. My thanks are due also to the New York Public Library and its staff in the Library's manuscript and economics divisions for making available to me the very fine Henry George Collection. Anyone who has ever had the opportunity of using this collection must express his appreciation of the wisdom and kindness of its principal donor, the late Anna George de Mille, Henry George's daughter. In addition, I wish to express my gratitude to the Canada Council and to the General Staff Research Fund of the University of Alberta for summer grants which materially aided my labors.

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