

HOW I BECAME A FOLLOWER OF HENRY GEORGE

By Charles H. Smithson

(In the "Halifax Courier," 29th September)

Nearly 40 years ago one of our warp-dressers asked me if I knew of any agency in Australia which would undertake a commission to trace a relative who had not been heard of for some months. He gave me full particulars, and I communicated with a friend of mine in Melbourne requesting him to put the inquiry into the right channel. He wrote back that he did not know of any special agency but would undertake the inquiry himself. For nine months he tracked the elusive individual from place to place, finally discovered him, and saw him safely on board of a boat returning to this country.

I naturally felt under a considerable obligation to my friend for all the trouble he had taken, and asked him what I might do in return. He replied that if I would read, study and inwardly digest Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, he would call it quits.

It happened that I had a cheap edition of the book in the house and had already read it, without its having made much impression on my mind—the experience of many people who read the book for the first time. But I now felt, in duty bound, to give it very careful study. Consequently I read it line by line, making marginal notes against points which did not seem perfectly clear. However, as I proceeded with subsequent chapters, these points, which had appeared questionable, were cleared up; and when I reached the last chapter I was fully convinced that Henry George had made out a complete case in his explanation of the fundamental cause of the persistence of poverty in spite of the enormously increased productivity of labour, due to labour-saving inventions and improvements in the arts of production.

I must confess that I felt somewhat ashamed that such a remarkable book had not arrested my attention when I read it for the first time. Undoubtedly it is a book which does require careful reading, but it amply repays the most careful study which can be given to it. For it makes it perfectly plain that social evils are not due to the complexity of modern industrial conditions nor to any "inscrutable will of Divine providence," but that they are clearly traceable to a fundamental social injustice, which can be removed and for which there is a simple and practical remedy, and for the continuance of which every member of a democratically constituted society is equally responsible.

Progress and Poverty (the lesson of which is more needed to-day than when it was written) is a book which starts with the postulate that all men are born with an equal right to life and liberty; and the conclusion arrived at is—that, as a necessary corollary, "all men should be put on an equality in reference to the bounty of nature." Henry George's practical proposal is that a complete valuation of the land should be made, after which, all who occupy the more advantageous land, should pay into a common fund the measure of any advantage they command. This payment would exclude any value due to private improvements of property.

It is a common mistake to suppose that Henry George claims that the accomplishment of this act of justice would provide a panacea for all social ills. He claims only that it is essentially the first reform to be undertaken, in order to make all other efforts at social reform really effective.