

HENRY GEORGE: THE REBEL WITH A CAUSE WHO CHALLENGED INEQUALITY

At certain points in history, there arise exceptional individuals who fearlessly defy the established norms and standards. Henry George, the maverick economist who formulated the concept of Land Value Taxation, was and continues to be one such standout figure. He sparked a revolutionary fervour in a society of compliance and apathy. His unwavering courage and determination are an enduring source of inspiration for us even today. Rooted in Christian principles and moral integrity, his concepts exerted a powerful and captivating influence on those lucky enough to have met him. Here we will explore Henry George's often-overlooked life experiences.

Henry George was a creative thinker and a visionary. He drew inspiration from diverse sources, including scripture, Greek mythology, folklore, literature, history, art, music, and cultural traditions worldwide. This broad spectrum of influences is a testament to his intellectual curiosity and the depth of his ideas, leaving readers of his books impressed by the breadth of his knowledge and the richness of his thought.

George's concept of economic fairness was not just a theoretical construct. It was a practical, living, breathing entity rooted in compassion, responsible resource management, and love for one's neighbour. He considered these principles to be the moral foundation of economic thought, challenging his readers to reconsider their own economic beliefs. More importantly, he provided a practical roadmap for a fairer economic system, offering hope for a better future.

A MORAL SCIENCE, NOT JUST AN ANALYTICAL ONE

His journey is a powerful testament to how our beliefs and experiences impact the world. During his formative years, he was influenced by a unique combination of Evangelical Anglican Christianity and exposure to Catholicism. His upbringing unquestionably shaped his distinct outlook on life and enriched his economic theories. Later on, his beliefs were further influenced by the Methodist movement.

But what drove this maverick economist to become such a beacon of justice? To unravel this enigma, we must first journey back to his early days, to the bustling streets of Philadelphia, where young Henry was exposed to the stark contrasting realities of poverty and privilege. It was here, amidst the hustle and bustle of urban life, that the seeds of discontent were sown, igniting a fire within George to confront societal injustices. His difficult upbringing was pivotal in shaping his unyielding dedication to advocating for comprehensive economic change and speaking up for the marginalised.

FAMILY AND EARLY YEARS

This champion of the oppressed and revolutionary economist wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He wasn't some ivory tower intellectual. Financial struggles and hardships marked his early years.

1839—On September 2nd of that year, he was born in a two-story attic-built house in the fiery crucible of working-class Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Attic houses, as they were called, were popular at the time. They included windowless loft space accessible via fragile staircases and utilised for storage or cramped additional bedrooms. Remember, most families had many children. Henry was the second of 10 children: six girls and four boys. He was the eldest boy. John Stuart Mill was 34 then, and Adam Smith had died 49 years earlier.

His father, Richard Samuel Henry George, a second-generation English immigrant, was a strict Episcopalian church vestryman. By trade, R.S.H. George was a printer who published Protestant Episcopal church and Sunday School books with his contemporary George S. Appleton, whose firm, much later, via a complicated process, eventually became the publisher of *Progress and Poverty*. This book business enterprise enabled R.S.H. George to keep his family in reasonable comfort.

Henry George's father emphasised values such as social justice and community engagement. These elements shaped his eldest son's early convictions and principles and deeply influenced his aspiration to build a more just and equitable society.

Henry's mother, Catherine Pratt George, a Catholic of Irish descent, was significant in Henry's life. One of her seven sisters became a Catholic nun. R.S.H. George's first wife had died, and Catherine Pratt Vallance became his second wife. After her father's death, she received a small house and had enjoyed a boarding school education from which young George benefited.

During his early years, his mother provided Henry with home-schooling, emphasising fundamental skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, commonly referred to as the three 'R's'.

Throughout Henry's upbringing, his mother exposed him to a wide range of classical literature and philosophy. She instilled within Henry a strong sense of social justice and moral values. He often expressed deep gratitude for his mother's teachings, acknowledging that they greatly shaped his perspective on important societal issues such as poverty, inequality, and the role of government.

Despite her deep love for the works of Scott and Shakespeare, Catherine Pratt George was never permitted to attend plays due to strict Christian principles. She was also forbidden from reading romance and adventure novels. So, Henry defiantly read adventure books under his bedclothes, defying the religious restrictions that the children were also expected to abide by. One of the books he had smuggled in was Jane Porter's *The Scottish Chiefs*. Many years later, in a speech in Liverpool (1888), Henry George said, "I was educated in a very strict faith...people who went to our church had a notion that the theatre was a very bad place." An entrepreneurial friend of young George's was aware of the Episcopal church's ban on theatre due to its perceived ungodliness. So, he enterprisingly started a 'lecture room' with 'theatrical representations' for religious people to attend. It was packed every night, had two matinees, and was very profitable.

The Franklin Institute played an important part in young Henry's early life. It was named after Benjamin Franklin and had been incorporated in 1824 for 'the Promotion and Encouragement of Manufacturers and the Mechanics and Useful Arts' It also provided public libraries, museums, etc. These facilities were a rarity at that time. Henry George's uncle, Thomas Latimer, was a member of the institute. This gave young Henry unusual access to lectures revealing the wonders of the physical sciences and even the delight of magic lantern pictures. Henry's overwhelming curiosity and the privilege of accessing The Franklin Institute's resources allowed him to further explore his family's past, with a special interest in his illustrious grandfather, a celebrated Yorkshire shipmaster. The vivid stories of his grandfather's maritime adventures and long-standing naval traditions fascinated Henry, sparking his own deep desire to experience exciting voyages at sea.

Although a strict and austere churchman, his father never forgot his own challenging early years and the perilous sea voyage that had brought his father from England to America. As a child, Henry, with his father, would frequently take leisurely walks along the bustling river piers, discussing the mysteries of the sea, distant lands, the powerful forces of the wind, and the experiences of tumultuous weather that the sailors had endured. Strange tales of missionaries in foreign lands fed young Henry's imagination and desire to experience adventures on the sea.

He was fascinated with the docks and wharves where sturdy iron ships were berthed. He questioned how iron ships ever floated! His young friend saw they were lined with wood and said that was why they floated. Naturally, as we are beginning to appreciate, young Henry wasn't satisfied with this answer. Through astute observation, logical reasoning, exceptional analysis and an understanding of practical maritime knowledge, not yet 10 years of age, he realised that it was the hollowness, not the wood itself, that enables a ship to float. This is formulated in Archimedes principle referred to as 'displacement'.

The Episcopal Church, rooted in the Anglican tradition, was committed to advancing social justice and fostering active community engagement. This strong Protestant religious influence ensured a disciplined and somewhat austere upbringing. During these early years, his family was comfortable but not wealthy.

Henry was a very bright student. He was sent to the Episcopal Academy in his ninth year of schooling, which was unusually

young. As the son of a clergyman, he had been granted a reduced tuition rate, which irked the other boys. However, he didn't stay long. One reason was that the decline of the printed book business in America during the 1840s significantly affected his father's business and financial circumstances. Technological innovations had made alternative printed materials more accessible and affordable. Customers became more budget-conscious. Entertainment industries were also emerging. These factors collectively contributed to a significant transformation in the landscape of the printed word.

Upon leaving the Academy, Henry was guided by Mr Lauderbach, whose teaching style was to draw out and stimulate his pupils' individuality. This 'education' (the true sense of the word) suited Henry and enabled him to enter high school at only 13 years of age. This school produced many remarkable men.

His father had now returned to work at the Custom House as a lowly clerk. He had little income and struggled to provide for the family. The combination of economic instability and the lack of social and welfare safety nets forced Henry to leave school to help support his large family. At just 14 years old, he left high school after less than five months to find a job. It is interesting that Adam Smith commenced attending the University of Glasgow at 14. John Stuart Mill was learning Greek at 3, Latin at 8, logic at 12 and political economy at thirteen!

The 1850s were a challenging time for many American families.

- 1) *Economic Instability* – included the Panic of 1857. Job losses and financial distress were widespread.
- 2) *Limited Social Safety Nets* – no welfare or unemployment benefits. All able-bodied family members, including children, had to generate income. Large families were the norm.
- 3) *Limited access to education* – the cost of books and supplies needed to attend school was prohibitive. Children who did not work lost income for the family.
- 4) *Social Expectations* – boys, especially in those families facing economic hardship, were expected to start work at a young age, some as early as 8 or 9.
- 5) *Low wages* – children were paid much less than adults. This made them attractive to employers looking to minimise labour costs.
- 6) *Lax Regulations* – Child labour laws were simply non-existent or poorly enforced until the twentieth century.

Typical jobs for Children in the 1850s:

- *Factories and Mills*: Children worked extremely long hours in textile mills, garment factories and manufacturing plants, often in very hazardous conditions.
- *Mines*: Children as young as 8 or 9 were employed as 'breaker boys' sorting coal and other dangerous tasks underground for many hours a day.
- *Agriculture*: Children worked on farms in back-breaking activities 14 hours a day.
- *Street Traders*: Newsboys, bootblacks, etc. Their only income was a 'tip' if they were lucky.
- *Chimney Sweeps*: Children as young as 5 sent up chimneys to scrape them.
- *Domestic Service*: Young girls performed menial household chores, cared for younger children and were available to the master for other 'services'.



1853—At age 14, Henry George's first job was as a printer's apprentice. The printing industry was a common occupation for young men at the time and offered opportunities for learning and advancement. Here, he learned the trade of setting type for printing presses and performing various tasks associated with printing newspapers, books, and pamphlets. This exposure to a wide array of written works and ideas played a crucial role in furthering his self-education and intellectual development. Through his work in the printing trade, George developed an appreciation for the power of the written word.

He then began working as an errand boy and clerk in a china and glass importing house. Here, he learned administrative skills such as bookkeeping, inventory management, and transaction handling, contributing to his overall development and understanding of business operations. After a while, he entered the marine adjuster's office, where his ever-present desire for sea adventures increased.

During his early years, he skated, swam, and played on the city's wharves and enjoyed exploring the river piers. It was in this setting that, remembering his father's captivating sea tales and those of his Yorkshire grandfather, his strong fascination with the sea further grew.

At the tender age of 16 he embarked on a daunting and arduous year-long expedition aboard the *Hindoo*, a ship bound for the bustling ports of Melbourne and Calcutta. Despite being a small and ill-equipped vessel for such a challenging voyage, the *Hindoo* set sail on a journey that presented immense difficulties for the entire crew, even more so for young Henry.

As a foremast boy, George was thrust into the unforgiving realities of life at sea, braving the treacherous waters and the gruelling journey. Despite his father telling Captain Miller not to make the boy's berth comfortable and to make the journey as rigorous as possible in an attempt to ensure that his desire for sea adventures was destroyed, the experience did not deter Henry. This was not the only nautical venture the protagonist undertook while still in his teenage years.

In Calcutta, young Henry bought a monkey. On the journey home, she never left him and slept with her head nestled beside his, keeping the cockroaches at bay by catching them in her paws. When he returned home with his new 'friend', she was so jealous of his little brother that she was given to a lady who had no children. So "All's Well That Ends Well."

Upon his return, he worked as a printer for nine months but struggled with his family's strict religious rules and disciplines. Card playing was considered evil, and riding in a public conveyance on a Sunday was a desecration of the Lord's Day. Remember, he was still a teenager! He eventually broke free to pursue his dreams and set sail once again.

GOLD RUSH ADVENTURES

With news of gold discoveries emerging from the north of the Frazer River in the British possessions, he once more set sail, this time in pursuit of gold aboard the *Shubrick*. However, his mother was not thrilled about his decision to embark on such a risky adventure at such a young age.

She wrote:

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I think this money-making process is attended to with too many sacrifices. I wished it all in the bottom of the sea when I heard of you going to Victoria... This haste to grow rich is attended by snares, temptations, and a great weariness of the flesh. It is not the whole of life, this getting of gold!

FRASER RIVER GOLD RUSH

1858—A determined and optimistic George eagerly set out to forge his destiny in the rolling hills and majestic forests of British Columbia, Canada. Fuelled by the allure of striking it rich, he joined the throngs, possibly as many as 50,000 of gold prospectors traversing the rugged landscapes in search of glittering treasure. Many of the Shubrick crew deserted to join 'The Rush.' Henry George continued to pursue his dreams amidst the backdrop of the stunning Canadian wilderness.

The Frazer River experience proved to be a turning point for young Henry. He arrived as chill winds whipped down the Frazer canyon, clawing at his threadbare coat. Hundreds of rough and desperate men swarmed the river bank like ants, their figures dwarfed by the towering evergreens.

He sifted gravel in icy water with a borrowed pan; each scoop was fruitless. The promised nuggets remained elusive, replaced by a growing sense of injustice. So-called 'Landowners' who had arrived earlier, illegitimately claiming the land, profited handsomely by charging immense fees for a sliver of the riverbank.

Henry George saw first-hand how men toiled for scraps while a select few grew rich on the unearned bounty of the land. One evening, huddled around a sputtering fire, Henry listened as a grizzled old prospector grumbled about the unfairness. A spark ignited in Henry's mind. Weren't these men, like him, creating the real value? Weren't they the ones who made the land valuable by their labour? The seed of an idea, the foundation of his future economic philosophy, began to take root.

He had begun to see a pattern. Land, the foundation of all production, was monopolised by landlords who reaped enormous profits simply by claiming ownership. Those who worked the land or lived on it had little opportunity to share in the wealth they had created.

The looming financial crisis, which came to be known as "The Panic," had not yet fully materialized to significantly impact the day-to-day lives of many people.

Despite the lack of gold, the Fraser River experience proved to be a turning point for Henry George. The backbreaking labour, the unequal distribution of wealth, and the exploitation of the land would become the cornerstones of his critique of capitalism and his advocacy for a Land Value Tax. He left the Fraser a poorer man but a far richer thinker, forever marked by the harsh realities of the gold rush.

Amazingly, he refused to let this crushing failure break his spirit. He was still only 19. Returning to San Francisco penniless but with a heart full of determination, ignoring the naysayers, he set his sights again north of the Fraser River. Here, new gold discoveries had been made. Undeterred by the risks involved, fuelled by his unrelenting ambition to make it big. Ignoring his mother's continuing concerns, he was determined to pursue his dreams at any cost. Once again, he was disappointed. However,



his time in California greatly expanded his perspective. While there, he observed widespread land speculation and experienced profound economic disparities. These provided valuable insights that deepened his understanding of resource allocation and prosperity. During these times, the words of an old gold prospector often came to his mind.

“As the country grows, as people come in, wages will go down.”

He eventually gave up all ideas of going to the mines and resolved to keep to typesetting until he came of age. Years later, the little *Shubrick* lay rotting and unused at anchor in the harbour. Pointing to it, Henry George would tell his children of his early sea adventures. Domestic life was of great importance to him.

THE PANIC – THE FIRST GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS

1857—The Panic of 1857 resulted from various factors, including international trade dynamics, speculative bubbles in railroads and land, banking vulnerabilities, key financial failures, inflationary pressures, agricultural distress, and global financial conditions. The panic revealed the weaknesses in the American financial system and had significant economic and social impacts. These contributed to the tensions that would eventually lead to the Civil War.

The Panic of 1857 was a stark reminder of the risks and rewards of a globalised economy. It exposed the fragility of financial systems built on speculation and overconfidence. The crisis underscored the need for greater regulation and oversight to prevent future panics. The Panic, whose effects continued well beyond 1861, was one of the many events that shaped the economic and social landscapes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Lessons still have yet to be learned! George was only 18 during the ‘Panic.’

PENILESS AND UNEMPLOYED

1858—Before he was even 20, he had been a sailor, gold prospector, printer, and journalist and, still a teenager, had formed the Lawrence Literary Society. Two original essays by “Hen” George from those days are still preserved. Literary societies like the Lawrence Literary Society were prominent in 19th-century America when public libraries and formal educational institutions were yet to be established. They were a platform for thinkers, writers, and activists to discuss and promote ideas across various fields, including literature, economics, politics, and social justice. Members often became influential public figures.

Henry George was a prominent figure in the Society. Even at only 19 years of age, he was already known for his progressive views on land reform and economic justice. His ideas gained widespread support among members who saw him as a social justice and equality champion, much needed at that time. Despite its name, it promoted more than literary ability. Cigars were smoked, Red-eye was drunk, boxing, fencing, recounting ghost stories and such activities were much enjoyed. Of course, his strict Episcopalian family were never told of these activities.

Although he continued to face financial hardship, George possessed an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. He devoured books on everything from the Bible to history, poetry, and travel, educating himself while in the shadows of poverty.

We are now beginning to see how his struggles, intellectual curiosity, and deeply ingrained Christian values birthed the

economist who dared to challenge the status quo, the champion who fought for the oppressed, and the visionary who envisioned a world where everyone had a fair shot at prosperity.

This was a time when *laissez-faire* capitalism was dominant. The term *laissez-faire* has its roots in 18th-century France and is often attributed to the Physiocrats, a group of economists who advocated for free trade and deregulation. It is believed to have emerged from conversations between Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the French finance minister, and a group of merchants who responded to his question about how the government could help them by saying “*laissez-nous faire*” (leave us alone!).

Henry George had reluctantly shifted from fully embracing the Episcopal scriptures he had been taught as a child. Indeed, he had inclined towards ‘materialism’. His evolving beliefs and experiences made him question traditional religious doctrines and practices. Here are some key reasons for his divergence:

- He witnessed the stark contrast between Christianity’s teachings, which espoused love, compassion, and justice, and the harsh realities of economic inequality and suffering.
- George was an intellectually curious individual who valued critical thinking. His studies led him to question established norms and doctrines, including those of organised religion.
- His primary concern was addressing social and economic inequalities. He found that traditional religious institutions often failed to tackle these issues effectively. They were even complicit in maintaining the status quo. This disconnect between religious teachings and societal realities contributed to his scepticism.
- His progressive ideas, particularly his advocacy for land reform and the Single Tax theory, put him at odds with established religious authorities, which he often actively questioned and opposed.
- George embraced a more expansive spiritual outlook rather than limiting himself to a rigid religious dogma. He believed in the moral principles of justice, equity, and compassion, which he felt transcended any single religious tradition.
- His ideas were being shaped by modern thinkers and movements that prioritised human reason and ethics over the traditional unquestioning acceptance of religious beliefs and conformity.

However, urged on by his mother, he started to make social acquaintances. Two of these were ardent Methodists. Their enthusiasm was contagious, and Henry started to have new thoughts about religion. His relatives mistakenly assumed that his new church associates belonged to the Episcopalian denomination. He chose not to enlighten them.

In September 1860, at age 21, Henry George came of age and briefly joined the Eureka Typographical Union before returning to *The Home Journal* as the foreman. It was during this moment in his life that, through an old friend, he encountered Miss Annie Corsina Fox, a young woman celebrating her seventeenth birthday. Little did he know that this chance meeting would profoundly shape his career trajectory. Together, they embarked on a journey to see George through all the pressures, and there were many of wants and fame.

In Part Two, we will explore the next stage in the remarkable life of Henry George. 