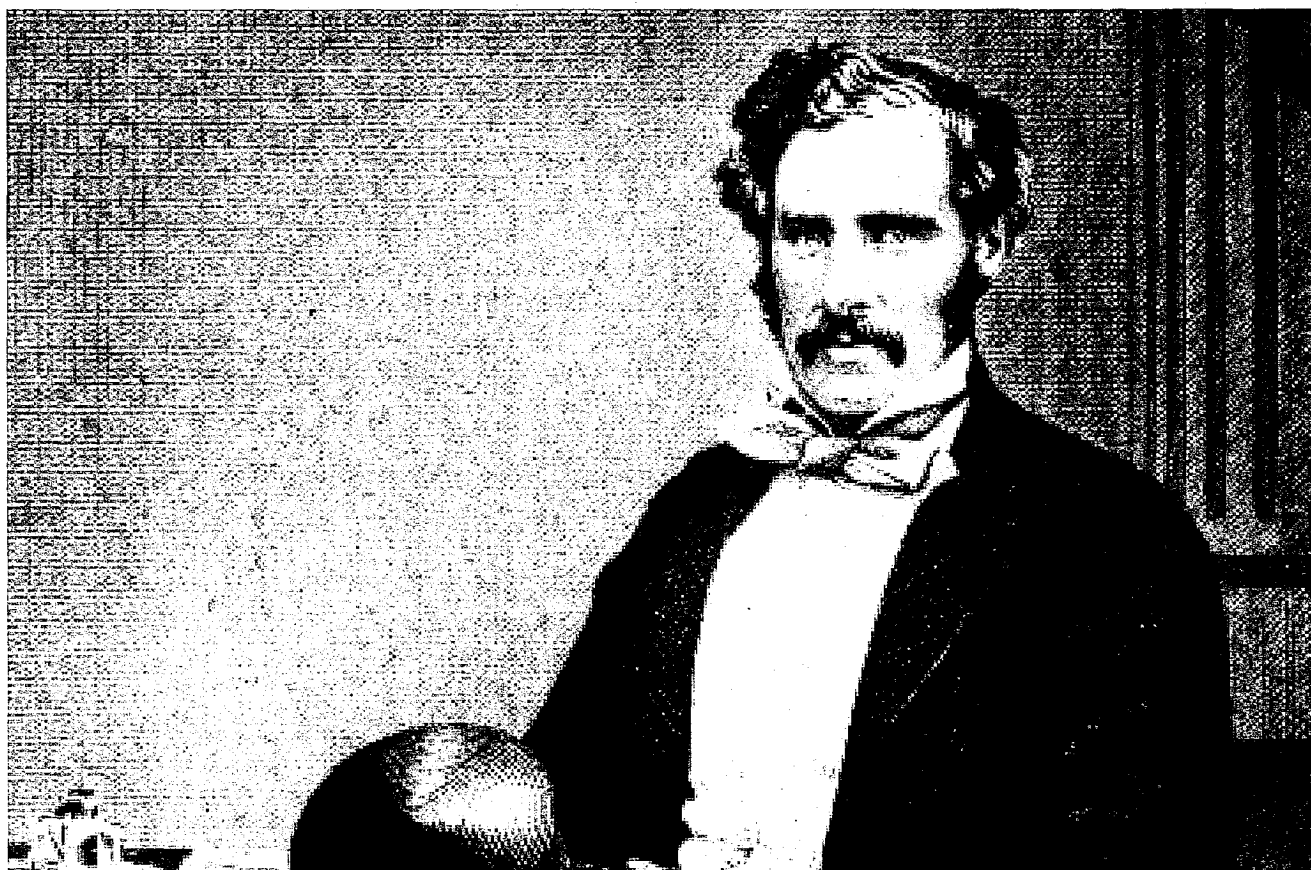


Geoists in History

George Grey (1812 - 1898) *by Karl Williams*



It is written in the stars that only a few souls are destined to change the course of history. In a multitude of wildly-diverse fields, George Grey impacted the world for his whole adult life and, as so often is the case, made almost as many enemies as friends. How shall we label George Grey – soldier, explorer, governor, politician, orator, scholar or philanthropist? Or perhaps the most fitting label is that he was New Zealand's most commanding historical figure, framing its constitution and in great measure shaping its future.

Grey was born in Lisbon, Portugal, the only son of English Lieutenant-Colonel George Grey, who was killed fighting Napoleon's army in Spain just a few days before his son was born. His mother remarried well 5 years later and so there was enough money in the family to send him to board at Royal Grammar School in Surrey. But it soon became evident that Grey was his own person, cut from a very different cloth. He ran away from the

confines of standard aristocratic schooling and, as Fate would have it, was instead given private tutoring by a notable liberal idealist, Rev. Richard Whately. An important geoist seed was planted.

But when a young English aristocrat was not meeting the expectations of his family in those days, he would be sent to military college, which is what occurred to Grey at age 14. Four years later, serving as a junior officer in brutally-colonised Ireland, it became evident to his peers that this strategy was not working for here he developed much sympathy with the Irish peasantry. Grey saw that their misery was inflicted upon them by their landlords and it made a deep impression and would sow another geoist seed in his heart that would later burst into full expression. This sympathy for Irish peasants led to his interest in systematic colonization as a cure for their distress, where land had not been confiscated and monopolized by a class of landlords. Before Henry George had even been born, Grey was de-

terminated to make it his life's work to prevent land monopolization from occurring in newly-settled countries.

The course of his life turned dramatically when his attention was drawn to the Australian discoveries arising from Charles Sturt's bold explorations. In 1836 he left Ireland and wrote to the Colonial Office offering to lead an expedition to seek a site for settlement in north-western Australia where it was thought (wrongly, as it turned out) that a great permanent river might make the area suitable for agriculture and settlement. With support from the Royal Geographical Society, Grey's plan was approved and he sailed in a schooner with 13 men and in late 1837 reached Hanover Bay in the unexplored north west of the Australian continent. A month later, ill-equipped and inexperienced, they undertook an adventurous and calamitous 3-month expedition of discovery in which Grey was speared and almost killed by local aborigines. The following year he made another 3-month expedition with 10 men further south that was just as bold and chaotic.

These exploits led Grey in 1839 to be promoted to captain and to be appointed resident magistrate at Albany in South West Australia. Here his knowledge of and affection for local aborigines deepened, and his remarkable ability to learn languages resulted in him publishing a book on aboriginal dialects.

His courage and mounting achievements were noted in London and in 1841, while Grey was still only 29, he was offered and accepted the governorship of South Australia, and so he resigned from the army. In South Australia he walked into a financial crisis but, maintaining the strictest economy, he managed to balance the S.A. budget in three years. Grey's successful policies of encouraging wheat cultivation and mixed farming made the colony self-sufficient in food and the pastoral industry developed rapidly. By 1845 the government had ceased to be dependent on British grants.

Grey's inherent sympathy for the oppressed turned to the local aborigines. By today's standards his attitude would be considered patronising, but it was light years ahead of his time in the way he tried to stop the settlers

from retaliating against aboriginal reactions to white invasion. Despite the appointment of special police and protectors of aborigines, the murders continued on both sides. He helped to provide schools for aboriginal children, but they generally rejoined their own people after a time, and refused to work for Europeans.

When war broke out in New Zealand (also on the brink of financial ruin) between the Maoris and British settlers over land rights, London appealed to their troubleshooter and so Grey was named New Zealand governor in 1845. In his first term he established peace by balancing the rights of natives with the demands of land-hungry settlers. After defeating rebellious Maori chiefs, Grey embarked on a policy of assimilation and controlled land sales. His successes earned him a knighthood three years into his posting. He was the chief author of the 1852 constitution which set up provincial and national representative assemblies. Just for good measure, he became a pioneer scholar of Maori culture, writing a study of their mythology and oral history.

"What I am resolved to maintain is this, that there shall be equal justice in representation and in the distribution of land and revenue to every class in New Zealand ... equal rights to all — equal rights in education, equal rights in taxation, equal rights in representation ... equal rights in every respect."

In 1854 the situation in New Zealand had been turned around, and one could be forgiven for assuming that Grey might want to retire to a comfy estate in rural England to write his lengthy memoirs. Wrong. From 1854 to 1861 Grey was governor of the deeply-troubled Cape Colony as well as being made high commissioner for South Africa. In addition to preventing a Kaffir rebellion, he acted as arbitrator between the Free State Boers, who wanted more land, and their Basuto neighbours. His achievements were much more limited in South Africa, as he found himself caught in the middle of a growing rivalry between the eastern and western halves of the Cape Colony as well as a movement for greater independence from British rule.

In 1861, in the midst of much unfinished business in South Africa, there was a Maori uprising



sailed back to New Zealand as a private citizen in 1870. From 1874 to 1894 he was a member of the House of Representatives and, as premier in 1877-1879, he introduced a radical program of reform. This was too much too soon, and Grey was driven from office by the landocracy. He was a man ahead of his times but some of his key objectives—manhood suffrage, triennial parliaments, and government purchase of large estates—were later realized.

His remarkable personal virtues and sweeping life experiences led Grey to edge closer and closer to geoist reforms. At the age of 30 he had given two-fifths of his salary to private charities. He had a deep appreciation of and interest in nature, ceaselessly collecting geological and biological specimens for the Kensington Museum, Kew Gardens and elsewhere. His African collection was unique and he gained scholarly repute for his studies of native languages and customs, and for his published collections of

and so London once again turned to their man down under and reappointed Grey governor of New Zealand. This time Maori nationalism undermined Grey's efforts at conciliation, and he failed to pacify the natives. Having to resort to a period of open warfare from 1863 to 1866, Grey assumed personal command of the armed forces and launched an invasion to take control of the heartland of the conflict zone. The war brought thousands of British troops to New Zealand with 18,000 men serving in the British forces at some point during the campaign, peaking at about 14,000.

Because of their Eurocentric land policies, Grey could not work harmoniously with local politicians and he was dismissed in 1868 for defying British military orders and so he returned to England. Restless to return to the action, he

Maori and Polynesian legends. An ardent book collector, he gave valuable libraries to both Cape Town and Auckland. A patron of education, he founded and developed many schools and colleges in South Africa and New Zealand. He was a devout Anglican, and helped to form the New Zealand Church Constitution. He pondered all the great questions with some leading thinkers, which included a personal friendship with Robert Louis Stevenson. Not surprisingly, British authorities marked him as a "dangerous man".

Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* wasn't published until 1879, but there were other geoist thinkers that guided Grey before then. In the 1840s in South Australia, Grey was already keenly aware of land grabbing and did his best to either prevent it or impose charges on the landholders. In New Zealand he taxed the unimproved

value of land (1878) and later supported bills for breaking up large estates in the interests of the smallholders. As a progressive liberal Grey was no doubt familiar with the new reformist ideas being discussed in the early 19th century. David Ricardo had published his *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* in 1817, and expounded his theory of economic rent, an idea that Grey no doubt took with him to New Zealand. Prior to his term of office as New Zealand premier he met up with the great geoist John Stuart Mill.

Attempts to introduce a national property tax based on land values was a protracted affair which began in 1878 with the Land Tax Act introduced when Grey was Premier. In 1879 his finance minister John Balance, also an advocate of land value taxation, introduced a General Property Tax based on the selling value of land only, but this was soon repealed by the succeeding National (Conservative) government.

When *Progress and Poverty* exploded in the intellectual world like a supernova, Grey's efforts had already come to the attention of Henry George who sent Grey an author's edition in late 1879. On January 27, 1880. Grey wrote back to Henry George:

"I have already read a large part of the book. I regard it as one of the ablest works on the great questions of the time, which has come under my notice. It will be of great use to me... It has cheered me much to find that there is so able a man working in California, upon subjects on which I believe the whole future of mankind now mainly hangs."

The two men carried on a correspondence for the next decade until Fate determined that, if only for a few short hours one day in February 1890, these two great souls would meet in person. Henry George was sailing to Australia for his barnstorming lecture tour of 1890, and his ship docked in Auckland for barely an afternoon. Oh, to be a fly on the wall that day to witness that meeting!

On setting foot ashore, a party of geoists took Henry to George Grey's nearby residence to receive a hearty welcome and to be told that he had prepared a public gathering that day to hear Henry. Let's hear what happened straight from Henry's pen,

"I was especially glad to meet him [George Grey] and to find his eightieth year sitting on him so lightly. It is worth going far to meet such a man, soldier, scholar, statesman and political leader – an aristocrat by birth, who when hardly thirty wielded the powers of a dictator; who has been four times governor of important colonies in the most important crises of their affairs, and then premier of the colony in which he made his home; who is yet an intense democrat, and who, unsoured by disappointments and undaunted by defeats, retains in the evening of life all the faith and hope that are commonly associated with youth.... What struck me particularly in his conversation was not merely his wealth of information of European as well as colonial history and politics, but his earnest, religious tone, his calm, firm conviction that this life is but a part of the larger life beyond, and his deep interest in the well-being of those who are yet to come."

After the public gathering (which of course dwelt on the subject of land value taxation), George Grey and Henry George conversed until the very last moment of Henry's stay, walking on the wharf together while the captain considerably held the ship somewhat beyond her scheduled departure time. Henry was to later say that nothing had given him greater satisfaction than meeting George Grey.

After a meeting like that everything might seem an anti-climax, yet the old warhorse Grey battled on in various ways. In 1891, as a New Zealand delegate to the Australian Federal Convention in Sydney, he advocated a "one man, one vote" policy. After the convention he toured the east coast of Australia giving lectures and was, by all accounts, given a tumultuous reception.

He finally returned to England in 1894 and, not yet done, became a privy councillor and fought the good fight almost to his last breath. He continued his long and affectionate correspondence with Henry George but, while he was Henry George's senior by 27 years, he outlived him by a single year and died in 1898. He was given the honour of a burial in St. Paul's Cathedral.

Next issue: No. 70, the German sociologist, physician and political economist, Franz Oppenheimer