Grasp your thistle...

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• John D. Wood

ON THE 6th of January 1884, a short, middle-aged American dismounted from the Liverpool train at Euston station to a tumultuous welcome from a 3,000 strong crowd. Hoisted onto the roof of a four wheel cab the American proclaimed the coming of "a great revolution", then drove off to the hotel where he had been a guest for the past three days. Henry George, soon dubbed the Prophet of San Francisco by the Duke of Argyll, had well and truly "arrived".

Of the steady stream of American social reformers who stumped Britain in the 19th century few occasioned so much controversy as Henry George. Almost completely forgotten now he was for a time next to Gladstone the most talked about man in Britain. To his supporters he was a modern Wesley, the "new St. Paul of the political world".

The established press dismissed him as a communist, a "yankee adventurer", and a "half-mad demagogue". The debate centred on George's book *Progress and Poverty* held by Alfred Russell Wallace the land nationaliser to be "undoubtedly the most remarkable and important work of the century" and reviled in other quarters as the "bloodiest treatise since the Chartist movement".

Progress and Poverty was certainly that rare type of book – a best selling work of political economy. With sales of over 100,000 copies in Britain alone it replaced *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a trans-Atlantic classic. It represented a skilful fusion of the orthodox economic theories of Ricardo and Mills with the more radical notion of natural rights.

The book's starting point was man's God-given right to the land. Private property in land was unjust as it restricted access to the land. As technological progress increased industrial production, the benefits, George argued, went not to the labourers or even to the capitalists but to the landlords in the form of increased rent.

The remedy proposed in *Progress and Poverty* was the raising by the state of a tax equivalent to the rental value of the land. Not only would this "single" tax compensate the poor labourer for his lost birth right to the land, but it would obviate the need for other forms of taxation and be politically more acceptable than full land nationalisation.

In a Britain shaken by economic depression and pre-occupied with the so-called "land question", *Progress and Poverty* was a literary bombshell. For George the book was the culmination of a life of struggle and soul searching. It reflected his teenage rejection in Philadelphia of the formal religion of his parents which condoned slavery and his gradual commitment to a personal religion of social reform. It drew also on his precarious early career as a journeyman printer and on his crusade in the 1870s as editor of the San Franciscan Post against land speculation and monopoly – evils he believed retarded the settlement of California and brought the eastern disease of unemployment to the streets of San Francisco.

George's notoriety in Britain was due also to his close association with the quasi revolutionary Irish Land League. He had spent much of 1882 in London and Ireland reporting the Irish Land War for the New York Irish World. The Kilmainham Pact of May 1882 between the Irish leader Parnell and Gladstone's Liberal government dashed any hopes George entertained that the largely nationalist movement might provide a vehicle for radical land reform in Ireland. George remained friendly however with Michael Davitt the ex-Fenian founder of the Land League who continued to urge land nationalisation.

On a jaunting car trip through the West of Ireland just prior to his return home in October 1882 George was arrested and detained twice by a nervous constabulary as "a stranger and a dangerous character." The publicity surrounding the arrests, which raised a storm in the House of Commons and led to an official apology by Earl Granville the foreign minister to the United States government, brought George into the political limelight as a vaguely menacing figure and heightened interest in *Progress and Poverty*.

With his star rising George gained easy access to liberal and radical circles in London. Helen Taylor the rather eccentric step-daughter of John Stuart Mill, embraced his teachings whole-heartedly. He struck up an uneasy friendship with the Marxist Henry Hyndman who attempted over a number of years to convert George to Socialism. Herbert Spencer, the philosopher, George dismissed as "most horribly conceited", but he found Joseph Chamberlain stimulating. The latter, "electrified" by *Progress and Poverty*, was shortly to introduce advanced land reform measures into his Radical Programme.

The land campaign George mounted between

HENRY GEORGE'S MESSAGE TO THE SCOTS

January and April 1884 was loosely organised by the London based Land Reform Union. It entailed visiting over sixty towns including most major cities, and the delivery of seventy-five lengthy speeches. Of all parts of Britain, Scotland, which George reached in early February, proved the most receptive to his message. It was here after all with the Crofters' Revolt raging and the cities crowded with Highland and Irish exiles that the unacceptable face of landlordism was most apparent and keenly resented. The Presbyterian Scots moreover responded to the religious strain in Georgism just as they had to the evangelising of Moody and Sankey the decade before.

"Preaching" first for the Rev. David Macrae in Dundee, George travelled north to Wick and thence to Skye where he "bearded landlordism in its den." George's LRU contact at this stage was Dr. Gavin Brown Clark a founding member of the Highland Land Law Reform Association (the leading pro-crofter organization) and later Crofter MP for Caithness. Clark believed that George's presence in the Highlands would advance the cause of land reform in that region. Local HLLRA leaders disagreed, arguing that moderates would be put off by the "drastic dose" proposed by George, and in vain urged the latter to "mind his own business."

Landlord opposition reared its head in Skye where George, refused the use of school and church halls, was forced to conduct his meetings on the open hillside. The crofters welcomed him warmly, flattered perhaps by American interest in their plight. At Glendale they removed the horses from George's "machine" and dragged him forward to the sound of their famous horns. At Kilmuir a cairn was erected in his honour.

With John Macpherson the Glendale Martyr as interpreter, George recommended passive resistance "on the Irish model" to counter factor tyranny, and counselled against acceptance of all "half-way measures." No matter how tenaciously the crofters asserted their belief in the communal nature of land ownership, George reasoned privately, they were too few in number to exert much political pressure. The revolt, however, deserved encouragement as a reminder to lowland city dwellers of "the iniquities of landlordism".

George was at his most prophetic in Glasgow, the birthplace of his maternal grandfather John Vallance. What kind of "word" was being preached in Glasgow, he demanded of a crowd in the City Halls, which allowed such extremes of wealth and want to rub shoulders? How could expensive church building and lavish spending on overseas missions be reconciled with the fact that 41 out of every 100 citizens of Glasgow were forced to live in single roomed tenement slums "that would appal a heathen"? Low wages, want, vice, degradation were not George asserted "the fruits of Christianity" but came rather from "the ignoring and denial of the vital principle of Christianity."

While in Ireland they did some "kicking against this infernal system", George taunted, the devout Scots acted as though the lairds had created the heavens and the earth. As a result the Highlanders were being steadily pushed off the land to swell an already overcrowded labour market. The single tax remedy, however, would get at the landlord "dogs in the manger" and provide free education, parks and pensions for all. "Moderation" George declared in a rousing finale, "is not what is needed; it is righteous indignation. Grasp your thistle. Take this wild beast by the throat. Proclaim the grand truth that every human being born in Scotland has an inalienable and equal right to the soil of Scotland!"

This severe tongue-lashing had the desired effect. Led by Richard McGhee, an Irish-born Glasgow MP, William Forsythe, a lawyer, and the veteran land reformer, John Murdoch, the Scottish Land Restoration League, a purely Georgite body was established with branches in Edinburgh and Aberdeen.

George welcomed the League's manifesto as a "lark's note in the dawn." The Scottish reputation for logic and intelligence, he declared to a Greenock audience, would help the world wide spread of the movement. He intended the SLRL as a cross party pressure group, "a nucleus where information could be gathered", and a mechanism for articulating working men's grievances.

In the event the organization took a more direct political role and although it failed to make a significant impact at municipal and general elections it attracted a new generation of radicals such as Keir Hardie and Shaw Maxwell, and provided an institutional stepping stone to the establishment of the SLP in 1888.

Criticism of George had by this time reached fever pitch. The *Glasgow Herald* piqued that an American should berate the Empire's second city warned that "underlying the pulpy piety, persuasiveness, and benevolence of Mr. George the hard shell of the revolutionist appears." He was accused in the *Greenock Herald* of lining his own pockets in the cause of reform.

Potential allies were put off by George's unwillingness to "buy out" the landlords and the growing band of socialists were puzzled by his reluctance to extend nationalisation from land to capital. Indeed

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Marx dismissed him as a "panacea monger" and his programme as "the capitalist's last ditch."

Most harmful to his historical reputation in Britain was the handling George received by academic economists. Alfred Marshall of Cambridge declared there was "nothing new" in his theories. James Mavor, professor of political economy at St. Mungo's College was shocked on meeting the American in 1882 to find him ignorant of both Scots and French Physiocrats. George, to his credit, made no claim to originality. It delighted him that his theory was "no mere yankee invention." Wherever possible he referred to earlier land tax writings to bolster his case freely recommending Patrick Dove's *Theory of Human Progression* to an Aberdeen audience and cooperating with Hyndman on the republication of Spence's *The Real Rights of Man.*

Razor-sharp with hecklers, George ruled never to counter critics in writing, maintaining throughout his life that *Progress and Poverty* answered all their points. The continuing success of the book with the less literate vindicated this policy. To refine his theory in response to criticism would weaken its propaganda force divorcing economics once again from the man in the street.

At the bequest of his Scottish followers George broke this ruling once to reply to an attack by the Duke of Argyll in the Nineteenth Century Magazine. Argyll who had resigned from Gladstone's government in protest over the 1881 Irish Land Act, was the leading Whig landowner in Scotland and too grand a target to ignore. By subtly confronting him with "the sins of his ancestors" and contrasting Argyll's anti-slavery record with his attitude to the crofters, George, in the eyes of his supporters at least, got the better of the exchange.

George returned to New York in April 1884 well pleased at having "started the fire in Scotland." He counselled the SLRL leadership by letter vetoing their plans for a publicity tour of America but encouraging them in a mysterious "Skye expedition". Perhaps because it entailed "some risk of arrest" the scheme was abandoned leaving George bemoaning the absence of strong leadership in Scotland. This vacuum was filled in October 1884 when George, cabled by the SLRL that a general election was imminent, crossed the Atlantic once more.

Apart from an opening meeting in London, George devoted the whole of his second tour to Scotland. It was an organizational disaster. Edward McHugh, the Irish-born secretary of the SLRL, neglected pre-tour fund raising and advanced publicity. This led to poor audiences and press neglect.

But George persevered with a gruelling tour schedule to score some notable successes. By fraternizing on Skye with some marines of the "occupation" force who had read *Progress and Poverty* George helped highlight the futility of the governmen's coercive policy. His reputation amongst the crofters as "Henry Seoras" who "caused the great men to tremble throughout Europe and America" was growing. In the smaller lowland towns by-passed in the Spring he was also well received. "The land question", he wrote to an English friend, "will never go to sleep in Auchtermuchty." Above all the hearty welcome for Michael Davitt amongst the Anglo-Scots at George's London meeting augured well for a future Celtic land reform alliance.

Without the hoped for general election to give political focus to his campaign, George intensified the religious element in his message. His famous Sunday sermon on "Moses" helped reinforce his weekday speeches without offending sabbatarian sentiment. Moses provided an inspiring example George believed of an individual's ability to transform society. The Mosaic Codes, moreover, while clearly divinely inspired, were concerned not merely with access to the afterworld, but with the daily life and condition of the Israelites.

The Jubilee for instance by allowing for periodic land redistribution prevented monopoly. This contrasted markedly George observed with the Scottish Calvinist outlook which regarded suffering as the unchangeable dispensation of Providence and had resulted in clerical inaction during the Clearances.

This scriptural approach while easily grasped by Scottish audiences proved something of a double edged sword. A heckler in Greenock cited Abraham's purchase of land for forty sheckels as justifying private property in land. The Tory Northern Chronicle deemed it irreverent for George to "teach the most high a lesson in political economy" and criticised his making capital out of the "religious instincts" of the Highland people.

Parodying his close identification with Moses, the Scotsman urged George to lead the "indigent crofters ... to the promised land at Winnipeg." Despite such mocking, George's Social Gospel was well received amongst the more socially conscious of Scottish clergy including the crofter's champion the Rev. Donald MacCallum of Waternish and it motivated the Rev. Duncan Macgregor of Chicago to establish his Scottish Land League of America.

George's British success was due in no small measure to his speech-making ability. He was, according to George Bernard Shaw, "deliberately and intentionally oratorical" holding his audiences with "a killing gaze in the manner of Athenian orators of old." At the same time his sentences were short and incisive. Consideration of political economy was limited to a few simple principles illustrated with local examples.

Edinburgh citizens were made aware of the £25,000 annual ground rent drawn by the Heriot's Trust and of the financial burdens imposed on them by the grant of parkland to former Lord Provost Warrender. Similarly George urged a Greenock audience to contemplate the municipal problems which could be solved with the £100,000 rent paid to Sir Michael Robert Shaw Stewart. Even opponents paid tribute to George's sincerity on the platform.

Added to this was the apocalyptic strain permeating George's writings and public utterances. In

STARTLING LOSSES

By Robert Miller

MANY YEARS ago, while working in a West End estate agency, I discussed with my employer the insurance of his house in Hampstead. I suggested that there was no need to cover it for the full purchase price of £50,000 (equal to about a quarter of a million today), because at least half of that must be the site value. Why waste money insuring something which could never be destroyed?

He said I had a point. I then said, having just read *Progress and Poverty*, that if Henry George's system of land value taxation were in operation he would not have had to fork out anything like £50,000 in the first place.

He said: 'Yes, that is an old one!' — and then instructed me to send off the premium. Well, it certainly is an old idea, dating back at least a thousand years, and as Oliver Smedley reminds us in his latest little book *Land, it is high time those who ought to know, but choose not to, were again prodded into realising the truth contained in his sub-title 'Privately Appropriated Public Property'.**

Chapters include the historical background, Henry George's analysis of the problem, the principles of site value taxation, its practice in other countries, and the numerous attempts to get something done about it here.

Being a chartered accountant, the author has obviously found less difficulty than some in producing what he calls a "hypothetical exercise ... for the experts to get their teeth into the meat of the proposition".

The figures, though startling, are valid enough to illustrate beyond reasonable doubt the astronomical amount of income the State continually loses to the private absolute owner of land.

If the Inland Revenue should want to confirm or disprove Mr. Smedley's figures, they have readily at hand the well oiled machinery which can tell the Chancellor in double quick time how much he could raise by imposing a tax on, e.g. cats or candy floss.

In his chapter on the 1986 Green Paper *Paying for Local Government*, which recommends the introduction of the Poll Tax, he shoots that idea down in flames in his own sizzling way, and ends by saying it is "well worth reading if only as the strongest possible argument in support of site value rating". Imagine that as a press comment on the jacket of a book!

An interesting point occurs to me in his letter to the Pope which he quotes as an appendix. In the passage concerning "natural resources", the term appears the second time as "national resources". Is this a misprint, a fortuitous reminder that, in the context, the two words are syonymous?

Except for a little piece on immigration, I found the book entertaining, instructive and convincing.

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Progress and Poverty he had warned of a time when "the sword will again be mightier than the pen and in carnivals of destruction brute force and wild frenzy will alternate with the lethargy of a declining civilization." Immediate land reform was imperative George argued if such a catastrophe was to be avoided. This sense of urgency and expectation was given substance in the Scotland of 1884 by the Third Reform Act. By enfranchising the crofters amongst others the Act threatened a political revolution in the Highlands with a real possibility of radical land reform to follow.

George's reputation peaked in Britain by the end of 1884 and two years later in America with his Labor candidacy in the New York mayoralty election. His condemnation of the Chicago Anarchists in 1887 lost him considerable socialist support on both sides of the Atlantic. His influence on the radical wing of the Liberal Party, however, proved more enduring. In 1889 he returned briefly to Britain as an informal adviser and field general of the Liberal land reform strategy. The taxation of land values remained high on the Liberal legislative agenda and fueled the Lloyd George People's Budget controversy of 1909.

George was an important transitional figure in the history of transatlantic social reform. His assault on the stagnating science of political economy helped to break down deap-seated antagonism to economic action by the state. Although the single tax was essentially a piecemeal programme it attracted a wide spectrum of radicals and encouraged the nascent British socialist movement. By shattering working-class illusions about American democracy George also helped initiate a fruitful and often overlooked period of cooperation between American and Scottish labour.

At the same time, George represented the culmination of the mid-nineteenth century humanitarian reform tradition. He drew his inspiration and his insistence on immediate reform from the principles of radical abolitionism. Indeed his campaign was an attempt to extend the moral logic of Garrisonian anti-slavery to the problem of private property in land. His skill in arousing British working-class consciousness was due partly to his membership of the fourth estate and partly to his own struggle for self-education. He was as William Morris noted "a man rising from among the workers." His modesty, sincerity and almost mystical religious conviction impressed all who met him.

Late in life he was interviewed by a reporter from the New York Sun. Charles Dana, the paper's editor refused to print the result. Instead he summoned the reporter to his sanctum telling him, "you sound like Wendell Phillips reporting Saint John the Baptist. I told you to see a Mr. Henry George."