

# Mark Twain and the Single Tax Movement

by Jim Zwick, Ph.D.

**M**ark Twain's essay "Archimedes," a tract against monopoly in land ownership, is one of the most obscure Twain texts. It was reprinted in *The Twainian* in 1953, but does not seem to have been included in any anthologies of his writings. That is unfortunate because it could be a key text for understanding Twain's views on political economy at the time *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* was written, his relationship with Dan Beard who illustrated that book, and his attitude towards Henry George's single tax movement, one of the most influential social reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In *The Twainian*, Caroline Harnsberger described how she came to locate the article:

*Mr. Noah D. Alper of the Henry George School of Social Science in St. Louis found a paper in the school files titled "The Story of Archimedes." It had been typewritten years ago and by-lined Mark Twain, but no one knew where it came from. Mr. Alper called Wesley DeLaney in St. Louis who referred him to me. The three of us went to work then, to try to discover whether Twain and Henry George were friends. If so, then Twain had undoubtedly written an article or two for his friend's paper, The Standard.*

Harnsberger located an article entitled "Archimedes" in the New York Public Library's microfilm files of *The Standard*. It was twice as long as the typescript, and was published in the paper's July 27, 1889, issue, with the author identified not as "Mark Twain," but as "Twark Main." Although that find went some distance towards explaining the existence of the typewritten manuscript, it did not answer the question she posed about Twain's relationship with Henry George. How did Twain come to write the article for the newspaper of the single tax movement? The doubled length of the published article also raises a possibility of joint authorship that Harnsberger did not address. If Mark Twain wrote the shorter version, did someone else contribute to the longer one attributed to "Twark Main"?



## San Francisco Journalists

Mark Twain and Henry George knew each other through correspondence from at least 1869, and may have met three or four years earlier. Both worked as journalists in San Francisco in the mid-1860s, and their paths may have crossed in 1865 while they were both contributors to the *Californian*. According to his son's biography, the financially strapped George took a temporary job collecting tickets at the door when Twain lectured in Sacramento. That lecture was given in October 1866, and it is possible that they met on that occasion.

As editor of the *Oakland Transcript*, George wrote to Twain in November of 1869 to set up an exchange with the *Buffalo Express*, in which Twain owned an interest. George wanted to publish Twain's writings "first-hand if possible," and offered to send copies of the *Transcript* in exchange for copies of the *Express*. Twain authorized the exchange, but George stayed at the *Transcript* for only a few more months, until February 1870 (Fischer, Frank and Armon 401).

### The Single Tax Movement

George's followers believed that the reform he proposed would end land speculation (which Twain critiqued in *The Gilded Age*), lower rents, and make more land available for housing, farming and industry — and end virtually all of the problems of industrial society in the process. In an 1895 speech before the Universal Peace Union, William Lloyd Garrison, Jr., son of the famous abolitionist, described the single tax as the fundamental reform of his generation:

*The right of mankind to the use of the earth, which can be secured only by the abolition of that privilege which permits individuals to claim as private property what was manifestly intended for the use of all, is the fundamental reform of the present generation, as slavery was of the past. It underlies the question of poverty, of intemperance, of the Indian and Negro problems and others which command attention, but are merely symptoms of the social disease of which land monopoly is the unrecognized cause (p. 3).*



*Labor and Capital support the monopolist in this 1898 illustration by Dan Beard.*

George's book and the single tax movement are credited with inspiring and giving momentum to numerous other reform movements of the period, including the Social Gospel movement, the urban settlement movement (e.g. Jane Addams' Hull House), the movement for municipal ownership of public utilities (including street cars, water, and gas), and others. Twain was associated with at least several organizations in which single taxers played prominent roles: the American Friends of Russian Freedom, the Anti-Imperialist League, and the People's Lobby. In the 1890s and early 1900s, it was a serious rival of the socialist movement in the United States and had even stronger support in England, Australia and New Zealand. Because it pitted both capitalists and workers against landlords, it gained support from many wealthy and middle class reformers as well as workers and farmers.

### **Twain's Democracy of the Golden Rule**

Twain's connection with this movement is interesting because he is usually described as much more conservative in his politics than most advocates of the single tax. But although Twain's personal ties to numerous people affiliated with the movement are easy to document, it is not easy to pin down Twain's thoughts about it.

Shortly after Twain died in 1910, Louis Post, former editor of *The Standard* who was then editing another single tax weekly in Chicago called *The Public*, published an editorial memorial that claimed Twain as an adherent of the single tax. Using language common to both the single tax and Social Gospel movements, he wrote that Twain's writings "have the democratic ring — the ring of the democracy of the Golden Rule." As evidence of Twain's support for the single tax, he quoted a letter from Twain that praised Post's book, *The Ethics of Democracy* (1903), "for its lucidity, its sanity and its moderation, and because I believe its gospel."

Because religious terminology was often used by George's followers, who routinely described themselves as "converts" to the cause, Twain's use of the word "gospel" was probably meant to refer to the single tax. But when Post sent the book to Twain in late 1903, he drew his attention to a quotation from *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* about self-government that appears in a chapter on imperialism entitled "Trampling Upon Patriotic Ideals." Their shared opposition to imperialism might also have been the "gospel" to which Twain was referring.

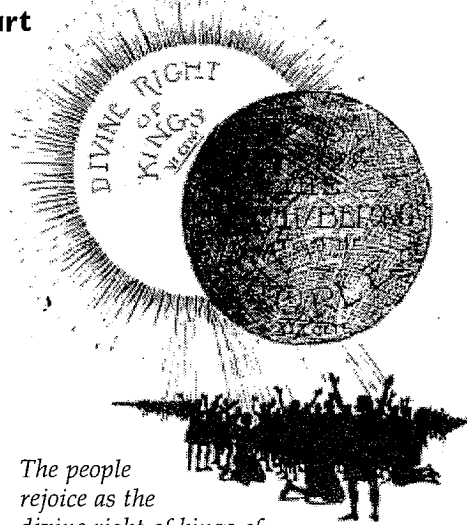
In 1910, *The Public's* list of Advisory and Contributing Editors

included many people with whom Twain was associated through his organizational affiliations. Lincoln Steffens, Frederic C. Howe, and Brand Whitlock were on the governing committee of the People's Lobby. James H. Dillard, L. P. C. Garvin, Herbert S. Bigelow, S. A. Stockwell, C. E. S. Wood, Richard F. Pettigrew, Bolton Hall, Joseph Fels, and both Louis and Alice Thacher Post (managing editor) were officers of the Anti-Imperialist League. Of these, though, Twain is only known to have had a close relationship with C. E. S. Wood. Wood published Twain's "1601 at West Point" in 1882 and their friendship continued long afterward.

### A Single-Taxer in King Arthur's Court

In May 1910, *The Public* published a memorial "To the Memory of Mark Twain" written by Daniel Kiefer, chair of the Joseph Fels Fund for the establishment of the single tax. Besides applauding the courage of Twain's anti-imperialist position during the Philippine-American War of 1899-1902, Kiefer highlighted his expressions of support for free trade and the single tax in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. "The economic truths that he proclaimed in this work," Kiefer wrote, "were made additionally clear by the accompanying illustrations of the artist, Dan Beard, a single taxer who, with Mark Twain's approval, showed the great fundamental wrong to be the private ownership of the earth."

Twain scholar Henry Nash Smith later argued that "there is nothing in the text to support Beard's single tax doctrine about ownership of natural resources" (p. 80), but it is clear that single-taxers of the time interpreted Twain's critique of land ownership by the feudal aristocracy as a critique of land monopoly in general. Smith quotes a review of the book by *The Standard* (New York), the newspaper of the single tax movement, that draws an interesting distinction between Twain's and Beard's roles in the book:



*The people rejoice as the divine right of kings of the sixth century is eclipsed by the nineteenth century when "the earth belongs to the people." One of Dan Beard's illustrations for A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.*

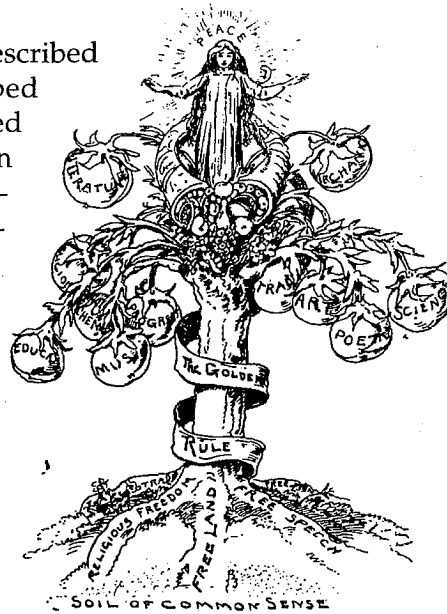
Human equality, natural rights, unjust laws, class snobbery, the power of the rich and the dependence and oppression of the poor, are subjects of frequent allusion in the text; and whatever of definiteness the text may lack in pointing out the fundamental cause and radical cure for wrongs, is admirably supplied by Dan Beard in the illustrations (quoted p. 80).

In *The Standard's* view, Twain described the problems and Beard prescribed the cure. That Twain contributed "Archimedes" to the *Australian Standard* before *A Connecticut Yankee*, with its similar contrast between land owners and their economic "slaves" was published indicates that he also interpreted the novel in that way, at least after it was written.

### "Beard Put It All in That Book"

In their essay on the illustrations in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Beverly R. David and Ray Sapirstein quote numerous statements of appreciation for Beard's illustrations that Twain made both while the work was underway and afterwards. In a 1905 speech, for example, Twain acknowledged that Beard expanded upon the views he expressed in the novel but claimed Beard's interpretation as his own: "Beard got everything that I put into that book and a little more besides.... Beard put it all in that book. I meant it to be there. I put a lot of it there and Beard put the rest."

As early as July 24, 1889, the month Beard was hired to draw the illustrations for the novel, Twain wrote to his publisher to "tell Beard to obey his own inspiration, and when he sees a picture in his mind put that picture on paper, be it humorous or serious. I want his genius to be wholly unhampered, I shan't have fears as to the result." Twain concluded, "Send this note and he'll understand," (Hill 253-254). Three days later the *Australian Standard* published "Archimedes." Did Twain also share the article with Beard, clarifying what "he'll understand" about the free reign given him in creating the illustrations for the novel?



The roots are labeled "Free Trade," "Religious Freedom," "Free Land," "Free Speech," and "Free Men."

## Mark Twain and Henry George

Louis Post was an editor of the New York *Standard* when "Archimedes" was published in 1889, but he did not mention that essay in his 1910 memorial for Mark Twain where it would have strengthened his argument that Twain supported the cause. In a later book, *The Prophet of San Francisco: Personal Memories and Interpretations of Henry George*, Post did mention Twain among the people who sent "appreciative letters" to be read at a farewell dinner organized by the Manhattan Single Tax Club for Henry George before his departure for a lecturing tour through Australia. That dinner took place in January of 1890, six months after the Australian *Standard* published "Archimedes."

Three years later, the list of "Popular New Books from the List of Charles L. Webster & Co.," Twain's publishing company, included four of George's most popular titles, and it was announced that "a complete edition of the works of Henry George is now in preparation." The popularity of George's writings undoubtedly made this an attractive project for a publisher, whether or not there was agreement with his views, but that Twain's publishing company undertook this effort is further evidence that he was familiar with George's writings on political economy and the single tax movement. Charles L. Webster & Co. also published Dan Beard's *Moonblight and Six Feet of Romance* (1892), a novel about a labor strike against a coal monopoly.

### References

- David, Beverly R. and Ray Sapirstein. "Reading the Illustrations in A Connecticut Yankee." In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, The Oxford Mark Twain* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 21-27.
- "Popular New Books from the List of Charles L. Webster & Co." In Mark Twain, *The £1,000,000 Bank-Note and Other New Stories, The Oxford Mark Twain* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 1-9.
- Flower, B. O., "Dan Beard: The Man and His Art", *The Arena* 32 (July 1904)
- Post, Louis F. *The Prophet of San Francisco: Personal Memories and Interpretations of Henry George* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1930).
- Smith, Henry Nash. *Mark Twain's Fable of Progress: Political and Economic Ideas in A Connecticut Yankee* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers U. Press, 1964).
- Twain, Mark. "Archimedes." *The Twainian* 12 (Nov.-Dec. 1953): 2-3.
- . *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, The Oxford Mark Twain* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).

*This feature reprinted with permission from Jim Zwick, a Guide at The Mining Company, which can be found on the Web at <http://www.miningco.com>. Jim's site on Mark Twain can be found at <http://marktwain.miningco.com>. © 1997 Jim Zwick*