

SINGLE-TAX GEORGE

INTRODUCTION

THE neglect which has overtaken Henry George and his theories is a conspicuous example of the fragility of human fame. In his lifetime his reputation was world-wide. His *Progress and Poverty* ran through innumerable editions and was translated into the leading languages of the globe. His gospel of the Single Tax, preached with passionate conviction on lecture platforms in America, Britain, and Australia, made converts by the thousand and inspired an important political movement. In the social controversies of the last two decades of the nineteenth century there is no name that crops up oftener than that of Henry George. Before the end of his life, it is true, his influence had begun to wane. But this was nothing to the tremendous slump in his reputation which took place after his death. Within a few short years his fame withered like a sickly plant. His followers dwindled to a handful. His Single Tax doctrine was received and ticketed in the economist's museum of exploded fallacies. There is something tragic in this sudden eclipse of a great renown.

To the present generation George is little more than a name. Much of this neglect is the world's natural revenge on a man who unduly and unjustifiably raised its hopes. George claimed to have discovered a simple, easy cure for poverty; time showed this to be a nostrum; and the world avenged itself by consigning the audacious empiricist to obscurity. But while this is true, posterity has been a little less than just to the brilliant land reformer. When all is said and done, he remains, with the possible exception

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of Thorstein Veblen, America's most original economist. He was a trenchant critic of orthodox economic thought. His ideas powerfully influenced social speculation in Europe and America. This is one reason why he should not be forgotten. Another is the romance of his wonderful career—a romance tinged with pathos. The half-educated Philadelphia boy lived to write an economic best-seller, and to start a movement that travelled round the globe. He became a world celebrity. Yet disappointment and disillusionment dogged his footsteps. In his lifetime, the movement he founded failed to conquer success. After his death a swift oblivion overtook the gospel he preached so confidently. The career of this frustrated idealist would make an appropriate theme for a tragic Balzacian novel.

The approach of George's centenary makes it opportune to attempt a fresh survey of his life and work. Not much in the way of full-length biography has been written about him since the appearance, nearly forty years ago, of the official life by his son, Henry George, Junior. That account, though still indispensable, was composed too soon after George's death and by too near a relation to be an impartial survey. The present study aims at being more dispassionate. Its object is to recall a picturesque figure among nineteenth-century reformers, to attempt an estimate of his achievements in thought and action, and to judge them from the standpoint of an age which seems to have repudiated most of his ideals.