

# The Story of the Georgist Movement

by ROBERT CLANCY

HENRY GEORGE did not claim to be original. Almost everything he said had been said before. There were several social thinkers who even anticipated his Single Tax idea. But none developed it into such a complete and coordinated system as he did, and there was really no Single Tax movement before George (unless we count the Physiocrats, whose movement was confined to a small group of intellectuals).

It was the compelling logic *cum* inspiration of George's *Progress and Poverty*, plus the author's personal magnetism, plus ripe social conditions that launched the Single Tax movement. It took several years, however, for this movement to take shape.

Soon after *Progress and Poverty* was published, George visited Ireland and Great Britain and stirred up quite a storm, the land question being a hot issue there at the time. His fame reverberated back to his own country, and in 1886 he ran as an independent reform mayor of New York—something unheard of before then. During this period (1879-1886), George did not emphasize Single Tax, but rather the land question and reform in general—and he welcomed the alliance and support of land nationalizers, free traders, labor organizers, reformers, even socialists. The main job, he felt was to arouse public opinion, and he was sure that, once aroused, the public would find its way to the truths he taught.

George lost the 1886 election (although there is some evidence that there was an improper count of ballots), and thereafter his followers began to differentiate themselves. There was a break with the socialists, who thought they were using George for



their purposes, just as he thought he was using them for his! George and his more loyal followers found they could not travel for long with the adepts of conflicting philosophies.

Thenceforth the *Single Tax Movement* emerged, dedicated to the furtherance of the specific reform proposed by Henry George: *To abolish all taxation save that upon land values.* The term "Single Tax" was suggested by Thomas Shearman, and George accepted it. He welcomed the change from what had previously been a "Henry George movement." Another feature of the trend in 1887 and after was that business men and forward-looking men of wealth were attracted to the movement, whereas thitherto George had been associated with mass labor movements.

During George's lifetime, he was unquestionably the central figure of the world wide Single Tax movement. He wrote, campaigned, traveled and lectured incessantly. But there were

also many others who began to take the initiative and to carry forward the Single Tax idea through writing, lecturing and campaigning.

When George died in 1897 (in the midst of another campaign for mayor of New York), the movement continued unabated. Nevertheless, it may be said that the first period of the movement closes with the death of Henry George. We may subdivide this period into two: 1879-1886 and 1887-1897.

The next period may be considered to be 1898-1931; that is, from the death of Henry George to the founding of the Henry George School of Social Science. (I am thinking primarily of the United States. Other countries would have somewhat different "periods.") This period may also be subdivided into two: from 1898 to the first World War (1914 for Europe, 1917 for the U.S.); and from after the war to 1931.

### **Boom Period for Georgism**

The first part of this second period was the high-water mark for the Single Tax movement. During these years (1898-1914/1917), the Single Tax acquired its most illustrious followers, made significant political progress, and engaged in a widely varied program of activities. There were numerous books, pamphlets, periodicals, lectures, organizations, conferences, campaigns.

In the U.S., Tom L. Johnson became Cleveland's most famous Mayor, and sought to introduce Georgist reforms. Joseph Fels, the soap manufacturer, gave large sums of money for the express purpose of trying to get the Single Tax adopted in some state of the U.S. Exciting campaigns were conducted in several states, but all were defeated.

Generals Goethals and Gorgas, the engineer and physician of the Panama Canal, were Single Tax converts, and so was Admiral Sims, "father of the American Navy." Woodrow Wilson

was influenced by George's ideas and his cabinet was filled with Georgist-minded people, including Louis F. Post, Newton D. Baker, Franklin Lane and others. There was a regular Single Tax bloc in Congress.

Pittsburgh and Scranton, in Pennsylvania, adopted the graded tax law whereby land was taxed at a higher rate than buildings. New York, through the efforts of Lawson Purdy and others, introduced the separate assessment of land and buildings, and many other cities followed suit. The California irrigation districts were started, with a program of collecting land rent to pay for the irrigation. Single Tax "enclaves" sprang up around the country—small communities which tried, within their limitations, to practice Single Tax.

In England, this was the period of great Liberal effort to put through land value taxation, culminating in the Lloyd George budget of 1909 calling for a national land valuation. Besides Lloyd George, there was a brilliant assemblage of statesmen connected with this effort, including Winston Churchill, Lord Asquith, Campbell-Bannerman, James Bryce and others. But the effort was, alas, doomed by an implacable House of Lords, by shifting sands of party politics and by the oncoming World War.

Throughout the British Commonwealth—in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada—advances toward land value taxation were made. This was the period, too, when legislation was passed which is now bringing such rich oil revenues to the province of Alberta in Canada.

### **Russia, Denmark, Germany**

In Russia, Leo Tolstoy was willing to call himself a disciple of Henry George; and many Russian liberals espoused the Georgist philosophy, the only serious rival of Marxism. We know only too well how things turned out in Russia, as Tolstoy warned they

would, if land value taxation were not adopted.

In Denmark, great progress was made, educationally and politically. One significant event was the Koge resolution of the smallholders in 1902 supporting the *grundskyld* program.

In Germany there was an active *Bodenreform* movement under Adolf Damaschke. And the pre-war German colony of Kiauchau, in China, was a model colony, complete with Single Tax! A story of progress during this period could be told for many other countries, too. Argentina deserves mention.

And now we must take a look at the second part of our second period—after World War I. Alas! After such an inspiring start, we find the tide receding. The legislative advances that had been made held firm, with some exceptions. But there was a sad decline in the fortunes of the Single Tax movement.

The numbers of adherents were diminishing year by year. The aging Single Taxers were dying off and there were not enough new converts to replace them. In England, the Liberal party was too shattered to take up the fight. A Single Tax movement in Bolshevik Russia was unthinkable. Germany was trying to recover from the war, and other "isms" filled the air. In Denmark, at least, progress continued.

### **The Movement Nearly Died**

And in the U.S. there was scarcely any movement left. There were a couple of brave but futile attempts at forming a national Single Tax party. But the atmosphere of the raucous twenties—the jazz age, the Harding-Coolidge prosperity, the Florida land boom, the era of prohibition and fantastic nonsense—was not conducive to the spread of Single Tax!

The problems encountered by any movement (or any organism) are always twofold. There are obstacles

which the world presents, and there is the internal condition of the movement or organism. It either successfully meets the new challenge or it dies. Well, the Single Tax movement came pretty close to dying!

But it didn't die! Two new developments in the U.S. in the twenties were the formation of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation and the Henry George Foundation of America. The International Union for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade was formed during this period, and the international conferences were started. The Danish Justice party also was launched, and there were new developments in other countries. But in spite of all this, we still have to say that the movement was on the wane.

The most serious internal trouble with the movement was that it had not developed any technique for increasing the number of adherents, or even holding steady.

There was one man within the movement who saw this condition and concerned himself about it. He was Oscar H. Geiger of New York, who had been with the Single Tax movement since the days of Henry George and had participated in many of its activities. He had lectured constantly at meetings, dinners, conferences, even on street corners. He took part in the political campaigns. He listened to numerous plans for promoting the Single Tax. But he realized that no plan could succeed unless there were more faithful workers. The agonizing problem of declining numbers had to be met first.

Geiger felt that there was a need for a methodical educational program. Only by reaching the hearts and minds of people, only by awakening in them the full depth of the Georgist philosophy, could further progress be made. The propagandizing efforts thus far undertaken were too superficial to do the job. With some exceptions they did not evoke the necessary response

to make dedicated converts. The legislation already won in several places was not understood by most of the people, and so often neglected, poorly administered or bypassed. More understanding and voluntary acceptance were needed, especially on the part of the influential minority.

For years, Geiger had cherished the dream of an institution where his educational ideas could be realized. The opportunity finally came to him under sad circumstances.

The nineteen-twenties ended with the well-known stock market crash, and the thirties were ushered in with the Great Depression. Geiger was affected (as who was not?) and presently he found himself facing an extended period of unemployment. Never was there greater need for the Georgist philosophy! Would people listen now?

### A Seed Was Sown

The idea grew firmer in Geiger's mind, and he resolved to devote the rest of his life, and what meager resources he had left, to founding the institution of which he had long dreamed. And so on January 1st, 1932, the Henry George School of Social Science was founded in New York.

The fledgling organization grew slowly but surely, and attracted younger people, which was Geiger's special aim. He developed a course in *Progress and Poverty*, secured a charter, solicited contributions, and rented a headquarters.

Overburdened with work, Oscar Geiger died in June 1934, but the school was continued by his loyal band of students. It grew, enrolled greater numbers of students and spread from city to city; then from country to country, including Canada, England, Denmark, Australia, and later Spain, New Zealand, Formosa and the Philippines. A correspondence course was developed to reach students the world over. The work continues to grow, and

correspondence work has begun in other languages. Besides Danish and Spanish, the course is offered in French; and German and Italian work is being planned.

Now, twenty-seven years after the founding of the Henry George School, it can look back on considerable progress and forward to continued growth. At least one hundred thousand people have completed the basic course throughout the world, and more than twice that number have taken part of the course. The school's graduates tell others about it, and so the influence spreads in concentric circles.

One hundred thousand is a woeful fraction of the world's population. But an influential minority can produce results far in excess of its numbers. After all, how many first-rate statesmen and intellectuals are there in the world today?

In the U.S., the movement is at present predominantly educational. (Note that most Georgists today would rather talk of the "Georgist movement" than the "Single Tax movement." They feel that what they are dedicated to is not merely a fiscal matter but a thorough-going philosophy of freedom. Thus it has come full cycle—first the "Henry George movement" then the "Single Tax movement" and now the "Georgist movement.") Most Georgist effort is marshalled around the Henry George School. The Robert Schalkenbach Foundation (mentioned above) and the Lincoln Foundation (formed in 1946) have undertaken special programs in order to increase the attention paid to Henry George in colleges and universities. The Henry George Foundation is seeking to awaken interest in Pennsylvania. There is also an incalculable amount of individual effort going on. Georgists write letters to the press, send literature to legislators, speak up at public meetings, exert influence in their organizations. Several

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have embarked upon political careers and are exercising visible effects upon legislation.

I will not presume to survey the movement in other countries, but I believe it is true that the educational work forms a substantial part of the program in countries where there is a Georgist movement. To this must of course be added the important political work of the Justice party in Denmark, the work of young English Georgists in the revived Liberal party, the gratifying spread of land value rating in cities of Australia and New Zealand—to get a total world picture of the movement.

Speaking for the U.S., I think it is

fair to say that Oscar Geiger and his Henry George School saved the Georgist movement from extinction. The "third period" started in 1932 with the founding of the school, and I would say that we are still in this "period." (If we were to again subdivide into two, World War II would form a line of demarcation.)

What now? Much remains to be done. The school has had its ups and downs and is continually meeting new problems which it has to solve. The educational work does, however, deserve the concentrated effort and support of Georgists for some time to come. As the ideas spread and take root, we look forward to the day when an enlightened electorate will take hold of the Georgist philosophy and apply it intelligently.

(For more conference papers see August and September issues of *Land & Liberty*).