

## FOREWORD

THE life history of Henry George is typically American even though it has few parallels in this country. There are many instances of rise from poverty and obscurity to wealth or fame or both in the realms of business and politics, and there have been many self-made thinkers in various fields. But Henry George stands almost alone in our history as an example of a man who, without a scholastic background, succeeded by sheer force of observation and thinking that were dictated by human sympathy, and who left an indelible impress on not only his own generation and country but on the world and the future. He is an outstanding example of something of which we hear a good deal, but mainly in the way of unjustified boasting, since the quality in question is more marked in talk than evident in conduct: Practical Idealism. He is an example of what may be accomplished by unswerving devotion and self-sacrifice to a dominating idea. He was, we might say, a man of a single idea, but the statement would be misleading unless we also said that he broadened this one idea until it included a vast range of social phenomena and became a comprehensive social philosophy.

Henry George is typically American not only in his career but in the practical bent of his mind, in his desire to *do* something about the phenomena he studied and not to be content with a theoretic study. Of course he was not unique in this respect. The same desire has been shared by many British economists. John Stuart Mill's theoretical writings were ultimately inspired by interest in social reform. But there is something distinctive in the ardent crusade which

George carried on. His ideas were always of the nature of a challenge to action and a call to action. The "science" of political economy was to him a body of principles to provide the basis of policies to be executed, measures to be carried out, not just ideas to be intellectually entertained, plus a faint hope that they might sometime affect action. His ideas were intrinsically "plans of action."

Unfortunately, in some respects, the American public was practical-minded in a much narrower sense and shorter range than was Henry George himself. It is perfectly true that the culmination and indeed the meaning of his social philosophy is to be found in his proposals regarding taxation. It is also true that many persons accept and are justified in accepting his taxation scheme without having knowledge of or interest in the background of principles and aims with which this scheme was organically associated in the mind of Henry George himself. But nevertheless the connection between the theoretical part and the practical part was vital in the thought of George himself. Something vital in acquaintance with his thought is lost when the connection is broken. One may understand the plan of tax reform by itself but one comes far short in that case of understanding the idea which inspired Henry George.

In spite, therefore, of the immense circulation of George's writings, especially of *Progress and Poverty* (which I suppose has had a wider distribution than almost all other books on political economy put together), the full sweep of George's ideas is not at all adequately grasped by the American public, not even by that part which has experienced what we call a higher education. Henry George is one of a small number of definitely original social philosophers that the world has produced. Hence this lack of knowledge of the wider and deeper aspects of his thinking marks a great intellectual loss. In saying this, I am not speaking of acceptance of his

ideas but of acquaintance with them, the kind of acquaintance that is expected as a matter of course of cultivated persons with other great social thinkers, irrespective of adoption or nonadoption of their policies.

I should hesitate to write in this way, lest I might be thought to depreciate the practical importance of his plan of social action were it not for two things. One of these things is the fact which I have already stated. His theoretical conceptions and his program of social action are so closely united that knowledge of the first will inevitably lead on to a better understanding of the second. The other reason is more immediately applicable. Actual social conditions (like those for example of the present) are bound to raise the problem of reform and revision of methods of taxation and public finance. The practical side of George's program is bound in any case to come forward for increased attention. It is impossible to conceive any scheme of permanent tax reform which does not include at least *some* part of George's appropriation by society for social purposes of rental value of land. For instance, we are just beginning to understand how large a part unregulated speculation has played in bringing about the present crisis. And I cannot imagine any informed student of social economy denying that land speculation is basic in the general wild orgy, or that this speculation would have been averted by social appropriation, through taxation, of rent. To a large extent, then, some knowledge of the directly practical side of George's thought is bound, in the long run, to result from the movement of social forces. A corresponding knowledge of George's theory of the importance of land—in the broad sense in which he uses the word—in social development, of the causes of moral progress and deterioration, cannot be secured, however, without an understanding of his underlying philosophy.

The importance of a knowledge of this underlying philoso-

phy is urged in spite of the fact that the present writer does not believe in the conceptions of nature and natural rights which at first sight seem to be fundamental in the social philosophy of Henry George. For, as I see the matter, these conceptions are symbols, expressed in the temporary vocabulary of a certain stage of human history of a truth which can be stated in other language without any serious injury to the general philosophy implied. It has repeatedly been pointed out that the real issue in the "natural rights" conception is the relation of moral aims and criteria to legal and political phenomena. Personally, I have little difficulty in translating a considerable part of what George says on nature over into an assertion that economic phenomena, as well as legal and political, cannot be understood nor regulated apart from consideration of consequences upon human values, upon human good: that is, apart from moral considerations. The question whether a "science" of industry and finance, of wealth, or of law and the State, can exist in abstraction from ethical aims and principles is a much more fundamental one than is the adequacy of certain historical concepts of "nature" which George adopted as a means of expressing the supremacy of ethical concepts, and on this fundamental question I think George was in the right.

This statement brings me to the connection which exists between the foregoing remarks and the work of Dr. Geiger to which the remarks are introductory. In connection with every topic he discusses, Dr. Geiger makes it clear that a vital connection between ends, human values, and economic means is at the basis of George's distinctive treatment. This fact alone gives a distinctive and timely color to this book. Moreover, the significance of Dr. Geiger's treatment does not stop at this point. There is no phase of the work and the influence of Henry George which is not considered. The account of his life and development forms a personal thread

## FOREWORD

xiii

which binds all the parts together. Dr. Geiger has given us a book which meets the contemporary demand for an adequate interpretation of the thought and activity of Henry George regarded as a vital whole and not as an aggregate of isolated parts. It will enable the reader to obtain a clear and comprehensive view of one of the world's great social philosophers, certainly the greatest which this country has produced.

JOHN DEWEY