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## *Herne, Garland, and Henry George*

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HENRY GEORGE made few converts among men of letters to his gospel of the Single Tax, and his doctrine exerted little direct influence upon their creative writing, but their devotion to "The Prophet of San Francisco" as a man and as a champion and symbol of social justice is a striking phenomenon in the history of modern literature.

To Tolstoy, George was a modern Moses inspired by God to lead the oppressed millions of the earth to a new Promised Land, and he declared: "On your side are justice, reason, love. On your side is God, and therefore you cannot but be successful."<sup>1</sup> Tolstoy wrote some twenty pamphlets and articles advocating George's plan, which he believed to be eminently practicable, stating in an article in the *London Times* in 1905: "The method of solving the land problem has been elaborated by Henry George to such a degree of perfection that under the existing State organization and compulsory taxation, it is impossible to invent any other better, more just, practical, and peaceful solution."<sup>2</sup> Yet Tolstoy's creative writing shows little specific evidence of the prophet's famous panacea.

George Bernard Shaw credited Henry George with "changing the whole current" of his life by turning him from a music critic and novelist into a student of economic questions, the study of which inspired his first plays.<sup>3</sup> In 1905 he wrote to Hamlin Garland, then chairman of the Progress and Poverty dinner to be given in New York on January 24 of that year, that hearing Henry George speak in London in the early eighties had "swept him into the great Socialist revival of 1883," and that although he had "outgrown" George's ideas, "Nobody has ever got away, or ever will get away, from the truths that were the center of his propaganda."<sup>4</sup> But there

<sup>1</sup> George R. Geiger, *The Philosophy of Henry George* (New York, 1933), p. 459.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 460.

<sup>3</sup> See *Address Delivered to the Academy of Political Science* (New York, April, 1933); and Branche Patch, *Thirty Years With G. B. S.* (New York, 1951), pp. 180-181.

<sup>4</sup> Archibald Henderson, *Bernard Shaw, Playboy and Prophet* (New York, 1932), pp. 149-151.

is little concrete evidence of George's specific for the ills of society in Shaw's plays.

Despite the large number of American writers indirectly influenced by George, Taylor discovered that a very small amount of creative American writing actually dealt with George's ideas of land tenure.<sup>5</sup> Impressive as an inspirational force, he actually converted few American writers and few of the American intelligentsia to his ideas. It seems strange that the most prominent philosopher of social protest that the Gilded Age produced, the great champion of all the massed opponents of laissez faire and social Darwinism, a thinker whom such impartial historians as Morison and Commager call "one of few original economic thinkers which this country has produced,"<sup>6</sup> should have left so few traces of his theory in the imaginative literature of his day. He was a figure of national and international prominence, a dynamic speaker, his *Progress and Poverty* sold in the millions, yet not only were the practical effects of his Single-Tax theory on land tenure in America almost nil; actual embodiment of his theory in any really important creative work of a belletristic nature is also almost nil. If we compare its effect on literature with other theories of similar social impact—Darwin's Evolution, Freud's Psychoanalysis, or even Watson's Behaviorism—we are struck by the difference. Perhaps some writers did not fully understand *Progress and Poverty*; perhaps some perceived its basic fallacy—that land is not the only type of monopoly, nor the only type of surplus that must be taxed. For the book contains a curious anomaly—in its analysis of the causes of poverty it is concrete, logical, and often profound, but in its explication of the Single-Tax cure it is intricate, complex, and superficial. For most American writers of the social protest novel during the Gilded Age, the monopoly and exploitation of the capitalist were more appealing as material for literature than the monopoly and exploitation of the landowner.

## I

Hamlin Garland became a convert to the Single Tax as a young man on the prairie, and did not finally abandon it completely for the practical progressivism of Theodore Roosevelt until well into

<sup>5</sup> Walter Fuller Taylor, *The Economic Novel in America* (Chapel Hill, 1942), p. 105 and *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> Morison and Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (New York, 1942), II, 368.

the first decade of the new century. When he heard Henry George speak in Boston, he tells us in *A Son of the Middle Border*, he not only became an active disciple but soon became a prominent speaker at Anti-Poverty Society meetings. He spoke in and out of season for the Single Tax. He relates how he tried unsuccessfully to convert Howells to the cause, "to worry him into a public acceptance of the Single Tax," but that Howells had replied, "You must go farther, much farther."<sup>7</sup> Later he went West and tried to make converts of the Farmers' Alliance groups. He knew Henry George well, visited at his home in New York, and in 1905 was still so prominent in the movement that he was asked to serve as chairman of a big Progress and Poverty dinner in New York.

Ignoring the basic principle that the temple of the arts may have an altar, but not a pulpit, Garland tried to introduce the Single Tax into his fiction. But the conflicting claims of art and propaganda constituted an almost insuperable difficulty. In those stories and novels in which he introduces the Single Tax by name it is invariably dragged in by the heels and never becomes an integral part of the story. In fact, the most effective of Garland's Single-Tax stories are those in which George's panacea is not specifically introduced, but which dramatically exemplify the evil it sought to remedy, such as "Under the Lion's Paw." Garland's Single-Tax novel, *Jason Edwards, an Average Man*, is less successful, as both propaganda and art, than the short stories. From time to time the Single Tax is introduced into the story but it is not integrated into the action, nor ever dramatically rendered. One must conclude that Garland found the Single Tax barren and unadaptable for the purposes of his creative work, and one is reminded of Whittier, who wasted his best creative years on the abolition of slavery, a cause which inspired little of his really good work. In fact, Taylor believes that Garland's best social protest stories were "precipitated by personal motives"<sup>8</sup> rather than by Henry George, and Bledsoe says that they were inspired by "guilt of a very personal kind, guilt over the plight of his family, and especially of his mother."<sup>9</sup> Spiller had earlier mentioned "a sense of guilt at his heart."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *A Son of the Middle Border*, pp. 389-390.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas A. Bledsoe, Introduction to the Rinehart edition of *Main-Travelled Roads* (New York, 1954), p. xxiii.

<sup>10</sup> Robert E. Spiller in *Literary History of the United States* (New York, 1948), II, 1018.

## II

In 1889, through Charles Hurd, the literary editor of the Boston *Transcript*, Garland met James A. Herne, whose home was in Ashmont, a modest Boston suburb, and whose unsuccessful play, *Drifting Apart*, was then playing at an obscure theater in the South End. The two men soon became close friends. Garland converted Herne to the Single Tax, and it was not long before Herne too was speaking at public meetings for the cause. Like Tolstoy, Herne's devotion to the cause was to be life-long.

Shortly after Herne's death in 1901, Henry George, Jr. paid tribute to Herne's devotion to the cause in *The Single Tax Review* for July of that year. He wrote:

It seems but yesterday, so brightly painted is it in my mind, that James A. Herne came climbing up the three flights of creaking stairs of *The Standard* office in Union Square. That was in 1888, I believe; thirteen years ago.<sup>11</sup> He came to see my father. He had become an ardent Single Taxer, largely through the intelligent propaganda work of a struggling young writer in Boston, who at that time sent little gems of verse and prose to *The Standard*, and who was pushing his way into the recognition of the magazines. This young man was Hamlin Garland. The poet and novelist found ready listeners in Mr. and Mrs. Herne and he was a constant visitor and a constant expounder of his Single-Tax religion, until the great tender hearted actor felt the conviction of the new faith, and its hope and enthusiasm. Mr. Herne was in the happiest mood when he came to *The Standard* office that day to meet my father. That sweet kindness was in his smile, and shining light in his eyes which beamed from the face of his Uncle Dan'l [Nat] in *Shore Acres* soon afterwards. He said that this philosophy explained what before was to him inexplicable, and that he would hereafter do all in his power to preach it. To that vow he was true to the last. He gave much time and effort and was liberal with his purse to the new anti-slavery cause, and there are probably few large cities in the United States where on some Sunday afternoon or evening, in church or theatre, he has not discoursed on the great theme with that exquisite blending of the actor's art and the propagandist's intensity which gave a singular fascination to his eloquence.

Some years later, in an article on the Hernes in the *Century*, Hamlin Garland wrote: "At this time I was an active, I fear pestif-

<sup>11</sup> The date was actually 1889. Garland did not meet the Hernes until the summer of 1889, according to Julie A. Herne.

erous advocate of Henry George's land theories, and at our next meeting, after we had discussed the drama and the newer forms of acting to the dregs, I switched the conversation to the single tax. In the end, I converted them both."<sup>12</sup>

Julie A. Herne relates that

Hamlin Garland swept into that quiet household like a cyclone from his own prairies. He was about thirty years old, strong and broad shouldered, and though of medium height, he seemed to fill Herne's study. He threw himself into the armchair beside Herne's desk, and began to talk—magnificently—while the family listened spellbound as the words poured out, vivid, polished, perfectly phrased. He had a directness and forthrightness that amounted almost to brusqueness. He had no small talk and abhorred trivialities. When the conversation did not interest him, he would get up and walk away. He was very much in earnest, with the deadly, terrible earnestness of a youth who has been face to face with nature at her cruelest, and who had asked, and been offered no quarter by life. His humor was grim and ironic rather than genial. The hardships of his boyhood had left their mark on him in a certain harshness of manner, a somewhat defiant attitude towards life. At the same time, he had an almost feminine tenderness and sympathy for suffering of any kind.<sup>13</sup>

But despite Garland's earnestness and persuasiveness, his conversion of Mrs. Herne to the theories of Henry George was more apparent than real, for she was a speculator in land values at the time of her "conversion"—and, like most human beings, always remained one, in a small way. In the summer of 1888 when Herne was working on a new play (then called *The Hawthornes*, but later *Shore Acres*) Katharine and the children spent their vacation at Lamoine, a small fishing village on the coast of Maine, directly across the bay from Bar Harbor. At the time, Bar Harbor was at the height of its popularity as a summer resort for millionaires, and the rise in land values there had been fabulous. But Lamoine, across the bay, was still a place of primitive simplicity, seldom visited by "summer people." At the time of Katharine's visit, however, a Boston real estate speculator had conceived the idea of making a second Bar Harbor out of Lamoine, and had started a tremendous land boom. At the Galt House, a rambling old farmhouse con-

<sup>12</sup> "On the Road With James A. Herne," *Century*, LXXXVIII, 574 (Aug., 1914).

<sup>13</sup> Communication to the present writer.

verted into a summer hotel, the excitement was intense. Katharine, never able to resist a “bargain,” impulsively bought a choice parcel of shore-front property, a rolling meadow overlooking the bay, at what later proved to be a ridiculously inflated price. Triumphantly she returned to Ashmont, and presented her husband with the deed—and the mortgage. The land boom at Lamoine quickly collapsed, and today only the ruins of several hastily erected summer hotels remain of the dreams of sudden wealth once rife along this beautiful stretch of Maine coast.

Actually, Herne was able to profit considerably from Katharine’s venture, but not in the way she anticipated. Previous to her visit to Lamoine, Herne’s unfinished play, *The Hawthornes*, had had only a vague setting somewhere along the New England coast. Now, as a result of Katharine’s enthusiastic descriptions of Lamoine and its picturesque fishermen, Herne decided to make the locale of the play a Maine fishing village like Lamoine, and he likewise decided to make the central situation in the play a land boom. Before the play was finished and had been renamed *Shore Acres*, Herne knew that he had lost a considerable sum of money on the property at Lamoine, and the intense moral indignation with which he views land speculation in *Shore Acres* probably derives more from his own personal losses than from the ideas of Henry George.

The following summer, the play still unfinished, Herne decided to accompany Katharine and the children to Lamoine to acquire first-hand information about the locale and the people. This decision was partly influenced by Garland, who, with his brother Franklin, had recently returned from a trip to the Maine coast. “I tell you, Herne,” he said [he always prefaced his statements with this phrase], “that’s the country for you. There’s where you should finish your play. You should see those people, especially the old fishermen with beards under their chins looking as though they had sprouted from their chests.”<sup>14</sup> The Hernes stayed at the Galt House, now preserved as a part of Lamoine State Park, and Herne took long walks and drives along the coast during which he talked to many of the fishermen and farmers. One day he spent in a lighthouse, making notes of what he saw and heard for what later became a third-act scene in *Shore Acres*.

*Shore Acres* proved to be a substantial success, and during the

<sup>14</sup> As related by Julie A. Herne.

next few years it made Herne a wealthy man. He bought an estate on Long Island, became the owner of a yacht with a uniformed crew, and had about ten servants in his employ. But he remained an ardent disciple of Henry George. On September 29, 1890, he had written to George from Colorado:

The more I read, the more I see, the more I investigate other proposed remedies for our social injustices, the more I am convinced that the Single Tax is the one and only absolute cure. At last I got a chance to talk to the actors in New York. I got the use of the Bijou Theatre, managed to get about three hundred and fifty actors together and talked to them for about two hours. I gave them the Single Tax pure and simple, and I believe I've set them to thinking. . . . I addressed the delegates of the Labor Assembly at the Knights of Pythias Hall, Denver, yesterday afternoon before leaving the city. I talked about an hour, gave them Single Tax, and told them some very radical truths.

On November 17, 1891, he had written to George from Chicago: "Hamlin Garland passed through the city today, en route to a Farmers Alliance convention at Indianapolis. He has been presenting our side of the question to the Alliance throughout the Northwest, and says they are ready to accept it, willing to waive all other questions and fight under a banner proclaiming Equal Rights To All—Privileges To None." On November 2, 1896, he wrote: "My fealty to you and my allegiance to our common cause for now and for all time."<sup>15</sup> This statement proved to be literally true; Herne's sudden acquisition of wealth in no way diminished his loyalty to the cause.

In fact, he made even greater sacrifices for the cause. His family always believed that the reason he was blackballed for membership in the Players Club was his reputation as a "Single Tax crank." Managers and theater owners protested that his attempt to mix politics with his profession was bad for business. In an article in Horace Traubel's *Conservator* that appeared shortly after Herne's death, Hamlin Garland wrote: "Some of his friends considered him a crank, and his managers croaked dismally over the effect of his 'sermons' and lectures for the single tax, but he kept on with his work."<sup>16</sup> As Herne was leaving the office of Abraham Erlanger,

<sup>15</sup> Quotations are from letters from Herne to Henry George in the Henry George Collection in the New York Public Library.

<sup>16</sup> *Conservator*, XI, 54 (June, 1901).



head of the then powerful "Theatrical Trust," after the two had quarreled over whether Herne or Joe Jefferson was to star in *Shore Acres*, Erlanger shouted after him, "And you're the last damned anarchist that ever enters this office!"<sup>17</sup> Letters to Garland as early as 1889 reveal his difficulties with the managers and their refusals to allow him the use of their theaters for his Sunday night lectures. But he continued to deliver the lectures, in halls, and sometimes in churches. In an interview with Herne during the last summer of his life, E. F. C. Boddington, drama critic of the Brooklyn *Eagle*, wrote: "So the afternoon slipped by as the grand old man of the American stage—he is now 63 years old—talked of his art, of his belief in the social future which is to come as surely as the sun shall rise on a new day, of his friendship for Henry George and his share in the advocacy of Henry George's doctrines which he preached every Sunday evening for years after acting every night and two afternoons during the week."<sup>18</sup>

In halls, before secular groups, Herne usually ended his lectures with a dramatic reading of Garland's "Under the Lion's Paw." Later he varied this with a reading of Lanier's "Symphony," but the public preference was for Garland's short story, as typical letters show: "The lecture committee of the Boston Typographical Union No. 33 wish to invite you to deliver 'Under the Lion's Paw' under the auspices of our union when you come to Boston." Or the Kansas City Single Tax Club hoped that "we might be favored with your rendition of 'Under the Lion's Paw?'" In churches, Herne used some such appropriate subject as "Religion and the Drama" or "The Drama and Society," and he dressed for these occasions in a long Prince Albert coat and wore a white linen tie. But whatever his ostensible subject, he managed to introduce a plea for the Single Tax. Typical of such addresses was the one he delivered at St. Paul's Universalist Church in Chicago one Sunday in 1897. The title of the address was "The Theater as It is," and Herne developed the thesis that the theater reflects the society of its time, but he concluded:

I am, as everybody who knows me is aware, what is termed a Single Tax Man, and while I have too much good judgment to infringe on my privileges here by introducing my doctrines and talking of the Single

<sup>17</sup> As related by Julie A. Herne.

<sup>18</sup> Brooklyn *Eagle*, July 29, 1900.

Tax, I will ask your permission to say in brief that we believe that in order to elevate men's minds you must first free their bodies. In order to bring men to a realization of the benignity of God you must restore to them the right to share in God's natural blessings, which right we claim is now withheld from them by men through an unjust system of taxation. . . . We say, abolish that tax and place in its stead one single tax upon land values as fast as they are created by the needs and growth of the community. Thus you will elevate mankind, will destroy involuntary poverty by abolishing involuntary idleness; you will exalt man and dignify labor, purify the theatre, free the church, and bring about the true religious spirit, the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God.<sup>19</sup>

Herne was on tour when Henry George, against the advice of his physician, ran for the office of mayor of New York a second time in 1897. So weak he could hardly walk, George addressed five meetings on the Thursday before election. That night he died of a stroke. On Friday morning in Buffalo, Herne, with his daughter Julie, came down to breakfast at their hotel and stopped at the newsstand for a morning paper. On the front page was the notice of the death of Henry George. Thrusting the paper into Julie's hands, Herne went to the desk and sent two telegrams—one to Mrs. George and one to Katharine. Then, followed by the alarmed Julie, he rushed from the hotel and walked the streets for hours, never uttering a word.<sup>20</sup>

Four years later Herne himself was dead. Whether, had he lived longer, he, like Shaw and Garland, would have "outgrown" his belief in the Single Tax, we do not know. But Herne, like Tolstoy, remained a devoted disciple until his death. George, as we have seen, had little direct influence on his dramas, none at all on his most important play, *Margaret Fleming* (1890), the play with which he "brought realism to the American theatre."<sup>21</sup> In this respect he was like the other creative writers who were disciples of "The Prophet of San Francisco."

<sup>19</sup> As reported in the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, May 17, 1897.

<sup>20</sup> As related by Julie A. Herne.

<sup>21</sup> Sculley Bradley in *Literary History of the United States*, II, 1005.