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# Henry George's Oxford Speech

By ELWOOD P. LAWRENCE

**N**OWADAYS it is Americans who question political and economic ideas imported from socialistic Great Britain. But in the 1880's the reverse was true. Then the British were viewing with alarm subversive ideas imported from California, and Henry George, disseminator of those ideas in his *Progress and Poverty*, was, and continued for ten years to be, the number-one enemy of British conservatism.

Both George and *Progress and Poverty* were products of California. As Charles A. Barker has stated, the far west was, during the 1860's and 1870's, "at once creative, troubled, divided, and evocative of social thought and economic plan."<sup>1</sup> George came to California in 1859; by 1879 his most famous volume had been brought out in San Francisco, both author and book being expressions of the frontier atmosphere described above by Barker.

George made five visits to Great Britain during the 1880's, chiefly to spread his land views. Three of these visits were extended lecturing-tours, and, though he was generally applauded by socialists, left-wing members of the Liberal party, and the working-class, he was violently attacked by defenders of the *status quo*. Most of these attacks were in the editorial columns of newspapers, but one of them was made publicly by the audience he faced at Oxford University on March 7, 1884.

Late in December 1883, George had sailed for England, having been invited by the Land Reform Union to agitate throughout Britain for changes in the land laws. This was his second visit to Great Britain. He inaugurated the tour with a lecture in London on January 9, 1884. The Oxford meeting was the twenty-fourth engagement on this trip; before coming there he had ranged as far north as the Isle of Skye. He was then forty-five years of age.

The story of the Oxford meeting supplies a background for the debate, begun a month later in the columns of the *Nineteenth Century*, between Henry George and the Duke of Argyll.\* In his article, "The Prophet of San Francisco," Argyll set forth the main lines on which George was opposed in Great Britain by the propertied class. Instead of attempting "to argue" with George, his object was to expose George's "results." The same magazine carried George's answer — "The Reduction to Iniquity" — in the July number. He declared that it was generally a "waste of time to reply to those who do not argue. . . . The Duke declares it has not been his aim to argue. . . . This is clear. I wish it were as clear it had not been his aim to misrepresent." As we shall see, misrepresentation was the key to the Oxford reaction to George's

\*Both articles have been combined into a 77-page booklet entitled *Property in Land—a Passage at Arms between the Duke of Argyll and Henry George* (New York: Charles L. Webster & Co., 1893); the portions quoted here may be found on pages 40 and 43.

views, for his audience seemed to be in substantial agreement with the attitude of the Duke of Argyll.

What really happened at Oxford? Henry George, Jr., said that his father was merely the victim of "a bunch of unruly young aristocrats,"<sup>2</sup> who by their yells and shouts created a disturbance throughout the meeting. His son has also stated that George was prevented from discussing the land issue rationally by the manner in which the discussion was carried on.<sup>3</sup> Instead of putting simple questions, members of the audience made speeches attacking George's point of view.

But the explanation is not as simple as this. The meeting was certainly disorderly. An Exeter College student, in a letter to the London *Daily News*,<sup>4</sup> complained of the "disgraceful uproar" that prevented him from hearing a clear account of George's proposals. A contemporary, almost verbatim, account of the meeting<sup>5</sup> is crowded with parenthetical remarks indicating audience-reaction: not only "hear, hear" and "applause," but "hissing," "By George," "Oh, oh," "great uproar," all indicating something less than enthusiasm for land nationalization.

The Exeter College student, already referred to, added a fact which explains this disorder. It was apparently an audience packed with anti-Georgites; the young man described himself as "one of the few" present with a desire to hear and learn. But to get a true picture of the character of the meeting another fact must be added. The newspaper account shows that George's speech was fairly listened to with no more interruption than is normally met with in addressing a British audience. It was only in the subsequent give and take of the question period that "the meeting assumed a very disorderly character, and was brought to rather an abrupt conclusion about a quarter to eleven o'clock."<sup>6</sup>

As for the complaint that during the question period members of the audience debated with George, instead of asking simple, straightforward questions, this was true only of Alfred Marshall, the economist. But it is true that all the questions were hostile, and this fact may have nettled George.

The disorderly character of the meeting was also due to three factors whose importance George could have foreseen only if he had been gifted with second sight. First, George spoke, by intention, for only twenty minutes, reserving the remaining time for questions from the floor. Since serious interruptions occurred only during the question period, it seems likely that had George given more time to an exposition of his views he would have escaped most of the irritations that upset him.

Second, George seems to have been aiming at the wrong target in his lecture. Instead of a detailed exposition of his views on the land question, the talk was inspirational. George seemed to believe that he could rally the students to him by an appeal to the spirit of *noblesse oblige*, on the assumption that as young people they would respond to an idealistic approach. This

assumption proved to be false. George reminded the students of their privileged position and therefore of their social responsibility. It took, he said, £250 a year to keep each of them at the university, and he wanted to know how many people in England could earn as much by hard, straining work. He described the destitution and suffering of the working class; he said that charity was not a solution to the problem, and appealed to the students themselves to do something positive to improve conditions in England. This "something" was to support George's proposal for the nationalization of the land. The lecture ended with a very brief, one-paragraph summary of what came to be called later the Single Tax Principle.

George's appeal to the students of Oxford was an echo of some remarks he had made seven years earlier, on March 9, 1877, in a speech entitled "The Study of Political Economy," given before the regents, faculty, and students of the University of California.<sup>7</sup> After outlining his views on political economy he appealed directly, as later at Oxford, to the young people before him: "You are of the favored few, for the fact that you are here, students in a university of this character, bespeaks for you the happy accidents that fall only to the lot of the few." Later they might realize "how the hard struggle which is the lot of so many may cramp and bind and distort — how it may . . . grind out of men the joy and poetry of life." And, as later at Oxford, he urged that the spectacle of "want and wretchedness" should "move you to sadness and pity . . . nerve you to high resolve."

Third, George lost his temper during the question period. He was exhausted by his long tour<sup>8</sup> and was plainly upset, not only by the interruptions but by the nature of the opposition to his views, and by the insistence of his opponents that he did not answer the questions. Two examples will show that George's answers were likely not to quiet the boisterous members of the audience.

When Alfred Marshall asked George why, in *Progress and Poverty*, he had only one chapter on thrift, which showed that working men could not benefit their position by thrift and industry, George, instead of answering directly, was inclined to be captious. He declared that he was not there that evening to answer questions on *Progress and Poverty*; that it was some time since he had read the book. And when Marshall asked George to prove that landlordism was responsible for poverty, George merely replied that there was an excessive amount of poverty in England. This was surely *post hoc* reasoning and justified Marshall's contention that his question had not been answered.

An even more obvious example of George's irritation under questioning was his duel with a Rev. Mr. A. H. Johnstone. This gentleman admitted the existence of destitution in England, but he also wanted proof that monopoly of the land by the few was the cause. Whether or not the land was nationalized, he asked, would not an overwhelming population cause competition

and a reduction of wages? The exchange which followed, and the noises of the crowd, speak for themselves:

Mr. George said in a natural state of things they would never have had an overwhelming population. It is not that kind of world.

Mr. Johnstone said he wished to state as Mr. Marshall had done, that Mr. George had not answered his question. He asked him not for sentiment, but to address himself to a theoretical problem, and he would not do it. (Uproar.)

Mr. George — Will the gentleman please state his theoretical problem; and in case his [George's] memory should fail him, will he put it on paper? (Great uproar.)

Mr. Johnstone — I will do what the Chairman suggests. (A Voice, "Sit down.") My problem is given in the land nationalized, and an overwhelming population, would not a competition for wages at once commence, and would not wages fall nearly to the starvation point?

Mr. George — Get a pint pot and pour it into a gallon, and what would happen? If ifs and ans were pots and pans. That is an insult to the intelligence of this audience. (Uproar.)<sup>9</sup>

Shortly after this exchange, the meeting reached its nadir in a word-battle between George and Mr. Conybeare. Conybeare, the son-in-law of Max Müller,<sup>10</sup> George's host at Oxford, rose in the audience and "described this nostrum to confiscate the land as scandalously immoral." George blew up. The altercation is best described in the reporter's own words.

Mr. Conybeare — I said this proposal was, as I believed, scandalously immoral.

Mr. George — You stigmatized it as a nostrum.

Mr. Conybeare — I should like to ask Mr. George if he likes people to be sincere with him?

Mr. George — I do, but I like people to be gentlemen with me if they can. (Uproar.)

Mr. Conybeare — I consider, Sir, I have been so with you. (Great uproar, which lasted several minutes.)

An undergraduate said he thought Mr. George should withdraw his imputations on Mr. Conybeare.

Mr. George — No, I will not withdraw anything. Mr. Conybeare says it was gentlemanly. All I have to say is that he was raised in one school and I in another. (Uproar.)

Mr. Lodge proposed that the meeting decline any longer to listen to Mr. George. (Hear, hear, and No, no.) . . .

Mr. George said this was a University town, and it was the most disorderly meeting he had ever addressed. He would not answer any more questions. . . .

The meeting then broke up with groans for "Land Nationalization" and "Land Robbery."<sup>11</sup>

The key to this altercation was the application of "nostrum" to George's plan for land nationalization. Misunderstanding over the meaning of this word was the source of an apochryphal story, published four years later in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, during George's fourth visit to Great Britain.<sup>12</sup> According to this journal, George arose in a towering passion at the mention of "nostrum" and demanded the retraction of the word. A bitter wrangle followed, during which it was learned that in America "nostrum" had an offensive meaning unknown in England. Mr. Conybeare then retracted. In the

lull which followed, a mild-mannered professor was heard to remark that "he could not hold the gentleman [Conybeare] who had used this word free from blame, for he ought to have reflected that a man who did not understand the difference between *Meum* and *Tuum* was not likely to be acquainted with the meaning of *nostrum*."

Three reasons have already been given to show that the opposition to George at Oxford was due to more than the antics of "a bunch of unruly young aristocrats." To these must be added a fourth reason, that Oxford University reflected strongly the Conservative and Liberal opposition which George had so far encountered in the British press. This attitude at Oxford was set forth in *An Elementary System of Socialism Theoretical and Practical*, an anonymous pamphlet by an Oxford student who called himself "A Disciple of Henry George."<sup>13</sup> The object of the writer was to create the impression that George and socialism were synonymous, and that both were equally ridiculous. He does the first by including, with George's "views," those of socialist and radical contemporaries such as Karl Marx, Henry Labouchere<sup>14</sup> (a Radical member of Parliament), H. M. Hyndman, and William Morris. As he states in the Preface, the material in the book is the result of an earnest effort "to develop into a connected system the fruitful principles enunciated by contemporary Socialists and especially by Mr. Henry George."

He accomplishes the second part of his objective by over-simplification, irony, parody, and sheer distortion. The work is divided into short "books": "The Socialist's Alphabet," "The Socialist's Arithmetic," "The Socialist's Articles of Faith," and so forth. In each of these, so-called facts are presented in a ridiculous fashion. For example, "The Socialist's Alphabet: or A. B. C. for the men of three letters" is footnoted as follows: "The Romans branded a thief with the three letters f, u, r — fur, a thief. Hence 'a man of three letters proverbial for thief.'" We learn from the alphabet a variety of "facts" about George which, perhaps unconsciously, illustrate his popularity and show how his opponents tried to reduce his proposals to an absurdity:

G is for George, the Fifth of the name;<sup>15</sup>  
 H is the Household word which he became. . . .  
 O are the Orphans and Widows whose right  
 P Pounds one hundred will amply requite.  
 Q is the Queen, the first to be pensioned.<sup>16</sup> . . .  
 S is the Soil and our scheme of salvation. . . .  
 X — propriation for stealing's their cant.<sup>17</sup>

The whole pamphlet is on this level of criticism. One of the postulates of "The Socialist's Geometry" is: "Let it be granted that any land can be divided without squaring the landlord." Under "Politics," government is defined as "an institution for expropriating possessors, dissolving contracts, destroying credit, and encouraging disorder and crime," and "Progress is

Poverty." Book X, "The Socialist's Logic," declares that "Property is an accident."

Seen in this new light, George's failure at Oxford was due to more than a breach of good manners. The reason was a mixture of such ingredients as the speaker's physical condition, his irritation, his failure to give the desired answers to questions, his misjudgment of the temper of his listeners, and a prejudicial attitude on the part of the audience. In this reconstructed form, the incident highlights the relationship of George in 1884 to the vested interests he was attacking in his agitation for land reform in Great Britain.

The resemblance of the Oxford reaction to the conservative British opposition to George may be gathered from a typical editorial comment on the Californian's crusade:

In plain English, Mr. Henry George and his followers are simply expounding familiar and exploded doctrines of Communism in a slightly disguised form, and with the sublime disregard for facts and experience by which Communistic theorists are always distinguished. Such persons are the most dangerous enemies of real progress, for they arouse the instincts of Conservatism and self-interest in the community to a combative mood, and prepare the way for an unfavorable reception of reforms which would actually be beneficial.<sup>18</sup>

In "plain English," conservative Britons considered Henry George's scheme uninformed, impractical, and immoral. His reception at Oxford was a virulent expression of this feeling. It is, to say the least, ironical that the English should have been more upset in the 1880's by an expression of Californian individualism than they were by the doctrines of Karl Marx. Henry George could have desired no greater proof of the effectiveness of his campaign.

How effective his campaign had been in the collegiate arena may be judged, indirectly, by excerpts from a lecture given a year later by the new incumbent of the professorship of political economy at Cambridge University. His predecessor had been Arnold Toynbee, a student of social reform, deceased in 1883 at the slim age of thirty — "in whose place," the new incumbent said, "I unworthily stand." The name of the new incumbent was Alfred Marshall, a dozen years Toynbee's senior in point of age. Was the voice of another social reformer, the man he had heard appealing to Oxford men to aid in the relief of destitution, persisting, still, in Marshall's ears when he asked his Cambridge audience:

Why are so many lives dragged on through dirt and squalor and misery? Why are there so many haggard faces and stunted minds? Chiefly because there is not wealth enough; and what there is, is not well distributed, and well used. . . . Why should it be left for impetuous socialists and ignorant orators to cry aloud that none ought to be shut out by want of material means from the opportunity of leading a life that is worthy of man?<sup>19</sup>

Marshall mentioned no *impetuous socialist* in particular. For himself, his ambition was, he said,

. . . to increase the numbers of those, whom Cambridge, the great mother of strong men,

sends out into the world with cool heads but warm hearts, willing to give some at least of their best powers to grappling with the social suffering around them. . . .

A century and three years after a certain American Revolutionary shot began its tour of the ether, the "Prophet of San Francisco" had launched one, which, by 1885, was well on its way toward round-the-world audition—and dissection.

## NOTES

1. Charles A. Barker, "Henry George and the California Background of 'Progress and Poverty,'" this *QUARTERLY*, XXIV (June 1945), 97-115; 188.
2. Henry George, Jr., *The Life of Henry George* (New York, 1930), p. 435.
3. *Loc. cit.*
4. March 10, 1884.
5. "Mr. Henry George at Oxford: Disorderly Meeting," *Jackson's Oxford Journal* (hereafter cited as *Jackson's Oxford Journal*), March 15, 1884, p. 6. It is the only contemporary account of the meeting, known to the present author.
6. *Loc. cit.*
7. Quotations, here, from this speech are taken from a 16-page booklet, issued in London in 1935 by the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values; it was reprinted from the *Popular Science Monthly* of March 1880. Henry George, Jr., *op. cit.*, pp. 275-79, also quotes from his father's remarks on this occasion.
8. Anna George de Mille, *Henry George, Citizen of the World* (Chapel Hill: Univ. North Carolina Press, 1950), p. 130.
9. *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, *loc. cit.*
10. The fact that he was Henry George's host does not mean that he endorsed his views. In a lecture before the Midland Institute, Birmingham, on religion in India, Professor Müller made a passing reference to the English alarm over George. Hysterical protests against the American's land policy, he said, served no purpose: one should apply the historical method to the problem. "Professor Max Müller on Henry George," *London Daily News*, Jan. 23, 1884.
11. *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, *loc. cit.*
12. Nov. 23, 1888.
13. Oxford: A. Shrimington, 1884.
14. The chairman of George's first London speech on this tour, at St. James's Hall, Jan. 9, 1884.
15. Henry George was given this title by Labouchere. See "Mr. George on Property in Land," *London Daily News*, Jan. 10, 1884.
16. An almost literal transcription of a statement made by George in his St. James's speech.
17. At this time, George was using the word "expropriation" in connection with his land policy. By 1888, it had become the "single tax."
18. *Scotsman*, Jan. 11, 1884.
19. *The Present Position of Economics; an Inaugural Lecture*, Senate House, Cambridge, 24 February 1885 (London: Macmillan, 1885), pp. 54-57. Marshall is designated on the title-page as "Late Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford."