

Toward the Single Tax

BY THE SPRING OF 1885 GEORGE'S CRUSADE HAD AROUSED IN THE British worker an acute consciousness of his position and a burning desire for justice, which encouraged the movement toward trades unionism and Socialism. It also made George a kind of god-father of the Labour Party, a distinction he did not aspire to. His cure for the evils he described and condemned would not have led toward State controls and a planned economy.

The manifesto of the Scottish Land Restoration League stated the cure in simple terms. The evils that came from withholding the land from the people could be cured only by "such a full and complete Restoration of the Land of Scotland to the Scottish people as will secure to the humblest and weakest of our number his just share in the land which the Lord our God has given us." To distinguish between George's program and those of other land-reform movements, the manifesto added two qualifying statements: Property was of two kinds—property in land and property resulting from labor. Property in land belonged to the whole community, because the value of land was socially created; property resulting from labor belonged to those who had earned it as individuals. These provisions distinguished Georgites from Socialists who, in their nationalization program, lumped land and capital. The other rival group, Wallace's land nationalizers, urged that owners of land appropriated by the State be compensated. The manifesto of the Scottish Land Restoration League declared boldly that landowners ought in justice to pay the community for its past use but, because such an imposition was impractical, they would be required merely to relinquish their ownership *without compensation*.

Neither George nor his followers stuck to this pure version of his philosophy. In his desire to win converts, George had a tendency, especially in 1884 and 1885, to be all things to all discontented men. Consequently, the British newspaper reader was likely to get a much more confused picture of his remedy than that presented by the Scottish League's circular. This explains why, in the eighties, George the agitator was more successful than George the practical politician. In analyzing the nature of his remedy for British social problems, it is necessary to consider all five of his visits to Great Britain; for, though the formula from first to last was the same, it showed changes in emphasis and in vocabulary.

What he had to say about his remedy can best be understood by observing first what British papers thought he was advocating. These conclusions are indicated by the following representative headlines concerning his lectures:

"The Nationalization of the Land," *London Times*, September 6, 1882.

"Land Nationalization," *London Standard*, September 6, 1882.

"The Redoubtable Prophet of Land Nationalization," *Glasgow Herald*, January 28, 1884.

"Mr. George and his Crusade of Plunder," *Pall Mall Gazette*, March 8, 1884.

"Land Nationalization," *Justice*, October 11, 1884.

"The Georgite Confiscation," *Dunfermline Journal*, December 27, 1884.

"The Single Tax Fraud Again," *Justice*, October 11, 1888.

"Land Tax Only," *London Star*, March 11, 1889.

"Henry George and the Single Tax," *Commonweal*, June 1, 1889.

These headlines reveal a remarkable agreement concerning his program: up to 1888 he was advocating land nationalization and confiscation and/or plunder; after that he was promoting the single tax. During his first three visits not one headline mentioned "tax" or "single tax."

Newspaper comments on his lecture campaigns show the same pattern, along with the belief that his remedy was socialistic. A *Times* editorial on his first London speech and on the principles he set forth in *Progress and Poverty* said: ". . . from whatever side we approach the nationalization of land, it turns out, on examination, to be nothing more than an old Socialist theory, furbished up anew."¹ Another journal pointed out that Herbert Gladstone's method of dealing with the Irish land question by confiscating rent was as "iniquitous as Mr. George's for confiscating land."² G.

Barnet Smith, who signed his letter "A Liberal," wrote that "Mr. George's principles could only lead to socialism and communism of the worst kind."³ A Scottish writer echoed this view: "Mr. Henry George and his followers are simply expounding familiar and exploded doctrines of Communism in a slightly disguised form."⁴ A reviewer of *Social Problems* decided that George was a collectivist and belonged in the same category as Fourier, Saint-Simon, phalansteries, and Brook Farm.⁵ Most editors believed that George was either a land nationalizer or a Socialist, probably both. The most favorable view was that his program was only slightly more dangerous than that of Alfred Russel Wallace. "Nationalization of the land is no newly broached theory, and if Mr. Henry George accentuates it by denying to landlords any right to compensation, he merely states the question on sharper lines than are approved by Mr. Russel Wallace."⁶

Newspaper comments during his first three visits also reveal an awareness that his remedy depended on taxation, though the term *single tax* was not used. Ethnologists may find significance in the fact that Scottish papers alone pointed out the taxation feature of his views. According to the *Edinburgh Evening News*, he was a visionary because he believed poverty could be abolished by taxing the land to its rental value.⁷ And a Scottish editorial writer wrote scornfully of his talk to a Dundee audience on February 3, 1884, that ". . . when the audience was told taxation on land which Mr. George proposes would enable people to run on the railways free, would pension widows, and secure dowries for girls, it laughed. . ."⁸

Up to the end of his third visit, his program was thought to be either out-and-out Socialism or land nationalization and confiscation. That the results aimed at were to be accomplished by taxation was occasionally mentioned only as an afterthought.

By 1888, however, his program began to be associated with the phrase *single tax*. William Jameson, honorary secretary of the Land Nationalization Association, pointed up this new emphasis on taxation in George's propaganda. During George's fourth visit, Jameson wrote to the *London Star*: "I would fain say nothing to suggest a jarring note in the welcome which all sorts and conditions of land-nationalizers greet his return to our shores." But he added the charge that the *Star* seemed to have "definitely adopted Mr. George's plan of taxation of rent in preference to land nationalization."⁹ During the following month, Jameson returned to

this theme. He praised George's exposure of "the inherent evils of landlordism," but dissented from his belief that only through taxation could "we secure salvation from the evils of landlordism."¹⁰

Yet, despite the distinction between the single tax and nationalization, as pointed out by Jameson, and despite the use of *single tax* to identify George's program, the conviction that George was a nationalizer persisted. Although the *Star* supported him and printed many stories on the single tax, it continued to use the term "nationalization" with reference to him. A *Star* report of one of his speeches said: "The nationalization of the land does not mean the division of the land among all people—in fact Mr. George does not call himself a 'land nationalizer' but a single tax man."¹¹ This statement suggests that, to the reporter, *single tax* meant nationalization without a literal division of land.

At the end of George's fifth visit, the *Irish Times* held the same view as the *Star*. George spoke in Dublin in July, 1889, emphasizing the function of taxation in his scheme; yet the newspaper account began, "Mr. George delivered a lecture on Saturday evening last in the Round Room, Rotunda, on 'Land Nationalization.'"¹² The paper commented editorially in the same issue that George had expounded his "single tax principle, or land nationalization." Two days later this paper referred to his "single-tax theory" and argued that, once the principle was applied, the result would be "nationalization" because the State would, in effect, own the land. It would seem, then, that in spite of his adoption of *single tax* as a designation for his remedy, nationalization and therefore Socialism stuck to him throughout his British agitation.

To what extent is this newspaper report a true reflection of what he preached? This can be answered by examining some of his British speeches. It is easy to assume that he must have preached the single-tax doctrine from the beginning, and that the newspaper reports were mere distortions and misrepresentations of what he said. The truth is more complex, and more interesting.

The popular view of George's remedy was partly the result of the company he kept. On his first visit, he spoke on Marxist and Land Nationalization platforms; his arrest in 1882 identified him with Irish violence; his books were pushed by Wallace's organization; his campaign was supported by the Socialist magazine *Justice* from 1883 to 1886; his visit in 1884 was backed by the Land Reform Union, an organization of left-wing reformers. Because he did not explicitly dissociate himself from these groups, it was natural for people to think that he represented either successively, or

at one and the same time, the measures associated with each group.

By the beginning of 1884 the public identified him with the following doctrines: the land belonged by natural right to the people; people could obtain this right by land nationalization; landlords should receive no compensation for their lands. He was also thought mildly socialistic. George continued to maintain these three doctrines in subsequent visits; these views, and not the tax proposal which he later elaborated, account for most of the British newspapers' attacks on his views. The title of one article—"Mr. George and His Crusade of Plunder"—epitomizes the reaction. He was not and never had been a Socialist. But he persisted in viewing with sympathy Socialist efforts to improve the lot of the poor. And he recognized the possibility of the development of some form of Socialism some time in the future. Because Socialism was associated in the public mind with the redistribution of wealth generally, with confiscation, and with nationalization, George continued to carry the name of Socialist.

Not until his second visit did George explicitly link taxation to his land-reform scheme. In his opening London speech, he charged that the ancestors of the present landlords had obtained their land by throwing the taxes on the mass of the people. His plan "was simply to reverse the operation and tax them. (Cheers) That was the best way to raise the public revenue."¹³

There were to be no more taxes on production; taxes would be "confined to the value of the land." His proposal, he claimed, was of great importance "as a mere matter of fiscal change," but it also had advantages beyond this. It embraced social possibilities only dreamed of under the economic system of that time. The national expenses could not only be paid out of the rent of the land, but also an enormous surplus would remain for the use of the nation. To skeptics who did not believe that the rent of the land would amount to the sum then collected by taxation, George answered that they would have to change their definition of rent. "It was necessary to take more than the ground rent in making a calculation; that which the leaseholder got was, economically speaking, as much rent as that which the landlord got. The profit which the tenant got as much belonged to the nation as that which went to the landlord."¹⁴

At the end of his second campaign in England and Scotland, he returned to London. There he was interviewed by a representative of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. This interview gave the first nationwide publicity to the details of his tax program as stated in the Scottish

manifesto; it indicated that George had now progressed from general details about taxation and land reform to practical measures.

He predicted that one result of his agitation in Scotland would be seen in the Glasgow municipal elections in 1884. A candidate in every ward would run on "our" platform. "The object of this is to demand local taxation of the feu duties, or as you would say in England, the rating of the ground rents." He admitted that his followers would not be able to "appropriate the whole of the landlords' income today, tomorrow, or even the day after. What we shall do is to begin by adopting the program of the Financial Reform Association. . . That is to say, we will restore the land tax—4s. in the pound. . . That is all we ask at present. . . When the battle is won we shall march in and conquer." "That is to say, Mr. George," asked the *Pall Mall Gazette* reporter, "after taxing them 20 per cent you will proceed to tax them 100 per cent of their incomes?" "Precisely," said Mr. George, "precisely." ¹⁵

This statement placed George's view on the land question more clearly before his British listeners than had his earlier speeches and also appeased those who would not accept immediate confiscation. This twofold result was apparently his intention. He told a Forfar audience that "the process [taxing land values] must be gradual, because the change would be opposed by the landlords, and by the habits of the people, but he did not think a single living soul would be injured." ¹⁶ On his third visit, he re-emphasized his faith in gradualism, again reminding readers of the *Pall Mall Gazette*: "The propagation of ideas is one thing, the carrying of those ideas into politics is another. . . The resumption of the people's rights to the soil must be a gradual process which will injure no one." ¹⁷

By January, 1885, he had set forth clearly the essentials of his land program. The significant addition since his first visit to London had been the assertion that the land could be secured for its rightful owners, the people, by means of taxation, which would be increased gradually and painlessly from four shillings in the pound to one hundred percent of the land value. The only subsequent change in his land program was made during his third and fourth visits, when he used "single tax" as a designation for his scheme.

"Single tax," he said, represented a change in vocabulary only, not a change in his program. In June, 1889, the *London Star* reported him as finding it "curious" that some people should see in "the idea of a single tax" an indication that he had changed his viewpoint. ¹⁸

Nevertheless, it was true that though he had not mentioned the

single tax before January, 1885, he now consistently applied this term to his views and program. One example, from his address at Toomebridge, Ireland, in July, 1889, shows the final form in which he presented his remedy to British audiences: "That is what we propose by what we call the single tax. We propose to abolish all taxes for revenue. In place of all the taxes which are now levied, to impose one single tax, and that a tax upon the value of the land. Mark me, upon the value of the land alone—not upon the value of the improvements, not upon the value of what the exercise of labour had done to make the land valuable, that belongs to the individual; but upon the value of the land itself, irrespective of the improvements, so that an acre of land that has not been improved will pay as much tax as an acre of land which has been improved."¹⁹

Although his earliest statements on the land question were vague, after January, 1884, he put more and more emphasis on his taxation principle until, by December 1888, he began to speak of it as the single tax. Why, then, had British newspapers so persistently identified his program with nationalization and/or Socialism? First, the distinction between nationalization and George's program was so slight as to be virtually imperceptible. Actually, the distinction was that which exists between dividing the land and dividing the rent among the people. Second, his beliefs on property in land and his opposition to compensating landlords suggested the kind of threat to vested interests which was and is popularly associated with Socialism. By loose thinking, he was therefore a Socialist.

He considered himself a land nationalizer within the legitimate meaning of that term, though he differed with Wallace's group on the means of nationalizing land. Before his first trip to Britain, the word *nationalization* had appeared in *The Irish Land Question*: "To demand the nationalization of the land by the simple means I have proposed makes possible—nay, as the discussion goes on, makes inevitable—an irresistible combination, the combination of labor and capital against landlordism."²⁰ In dispatches to the *New York Irish World* dated February 7, July 23, and July 31, 1882, he had praised land nationalization and had applauded the proposals of Wallace's organization.

Even after George had introduced his tax proposal in British speeches, he continued to speak as though he were a nationalizer. For a Dublin audience in April, 1884, he linked his program to nationalization as follows: "The nationalization of the land—

which by the way is a phrase he never used—it was used by Mill²¹—did not mean making the land the property of the Government; it meant making it the property of the community.”²²

Early in 1885 he said of the Scottish crofters, “My recent visit proved conclusively what I knew and stated before, that the crofters really want land nationalization, not tenant rent tinkering.” A few weeks later he asserted, “Taxation supplies the form for the virtual nationalization of the land.”²³ And a subhead in the *London Star* for March 11, 1889, ran: “He [Henry George] is Satisfied with the Progress of the Principle of Land Nationalization all the World Over.”

George believed, therefore, that taxation of the rental value of the land would result in nationalization, but with a difference. His doctrine was separated from that of nationalization by the distinction implied in “virtual.” The State itself would not take the land, but the rent; in the end the program was called the *single tax*, not nationalization.

The case for the popular designation of George’s British program as Socialism stands on weaker ground. Socialist writers in *Justice* and *Commonweal* indicated they did not believe George was a Socialist. They first tried to convert him to Socialism; then, after 1886, openly attacked him as an anti-Socialist. During his last two visits, Socialists often formed a noisy opposition at his meetings. Whenever asked, George denied that he was a Socialist. Unfortunately, however, he usually qualified the denial; he was not a Socialist “in the strict sense of the term,”²⁴ or, he would say, he approved of the work Socialists were doing to draw attention to “public wrongs.”²⁵

Many of his statements made the distinction between his views and those of Socialists vague indeed. To a reporter who asked him about the nationalization of capital, he replied, not by repudiating Socialism, but by going halfway to meet it. He said: “Insofar as by the nationalization of Capital is meant the undertaking by the State of businesses that are in their nature monopolies—such as the telegraph, railway, etc.,—and assuming functions that are in their nature cooperative, I am in favor of it as fast [*sic*] as practicable.”²⁶

His most explicit acknowledgment of his sympathy for (but not his agreement with) the cause of Socialism occurred in his first debate with Hyndman early in 1885. He said: “I can understand how a society must at some time become possible in which all production and exchange should be carried on under public supervi-

sion and for the public benefit, but I do not think it possible to attain that state at one leap, or to attain it now. . . Destroy this monopoly in land and the present state of things would at the very least be enormously improved. If it were then found expedient to go further on the lines of Socialism, we could do so, but why postpone the most necessary and the most important thing until all that you may think desirable could be accomplished." 27

Both the British interpretation of his program and the program itself show what happens when theories are brought into day-by-day political discussion. His comment to a reporter from the *Pall Mall Gazette* that "The propagation of ideas is one thing, the carrying of these ideas into politics is another," is the motif of the development of his political program in Great Britain. *Progress and Poverty* did not mention nationalization, did not discuss Socialism, and contained no such practical proposal for accomplishing his ends as that of beginning with a moderate tax on land values. But as soon as he began to apply his ideas to a particular British problem, modifications crept in. In Great Britain, he found himself one of a variety of planners and reformers preaching social and economic reform, he spoke on their platforms, and, short of actually compromising his principles, he sought to adjust his program to theirs.

All this demonstrates that George was a gradualist who distinguished between an immediate objective and a distant vision. At one and the same time, he could see a future in which the single tax would prevail, and propose an immediate step in that direction by the imposition of his four-shilling tax. He could strive to bring about the single tax and then admit to Hyndman that Socialism was, possibly, a necessity of the future.

Even his opponents recognized this flexibility, this placing of human welfare above mere doctrine. A testimonial to him in an *Edinburgh Daily News* editorial, for February 28, 1884, was not unique: "He has the courage and the ability to break the chains of conventionalism which hamper alike thought and activity; he is possessed of an ideal which will not let him be satisfied with the shallow optimism which swells the chorus of triumph at modern progress; in short, he recognizes, and makes others recognize, that we are still a long way from social perfection as long as there exists around us a sweltering mass of physical destitution, intellectual degradation, and moral decay. To Mr. George may be conceded the honour of quickening the altruistic sentiment and deepening the feeling of discontent which is the guarantee of all social progress."

He could scarcely have deserved this tribute had he stated his program along narrowly doctrinaire lines. Therefore, it seems evident that, as a result of his experience in Britain, both he and his message developed attributes which enabled him to appeal to a far wider audience than at the beginning of his influence on British political thought.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 5

1. *London Times*, September 6, 1882.
2. *St. James Gazette*, January 19, 1884.
3. *London Times*, January 19, 1884.
4. *Scotsman*, January 11, 1884.
5. "Mr. George's New Book," *London Daily News*, January 24, 1884.
6. "Henry George on Social Problems," *Aberdeen Herald*, February 23, 1884.
7. *Edinburgh Evening News*, January 10, 1884.
8. "Mr. George's Socialism," *Dundee Courier and Argus*, February 4, 1884.
9. "Taxation and Nationalization," *London Star*, November 22, 1888.
10. "Land Taxation and Land Nationalization," *London Star*, December 12, 1888.
11. "George in Lambeth," *London Star*, November 28, 1888.
12. "Lecture by Mr. Henry George," *Irish Times*, July 15, 1889.
13. "Mr. George on Property in Land," *London Daily News*, January 10, 1884.
14. *Ibid.*
15. "Mr. George and His Crusade of Plunder," *Pall Mall Gazette*, March 8, 1884.
16. *Forfar Herald*, December 12, 1884.
17. "Mr. Chamberlain Translated into Plain English," *Pall Mall Gazette*, January 14, 1885.
18. George's remark indicates his recognition of the fact that to apply "single tax" to his views was to oversimplify them.
19. Henry George Foundation of Great Britain, *The Land for the People*.
20. *The Irish Land Question*, p. 64.
21. In 1869 Henry George had read Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*.
22. "Mr. Henry George's Lecture," *Irish Times*, April 10, 1884.
23. Henry George and H. M. Hyndman, "Socialism and Rent Appropriation: A Dialogue," *Nineteenth Century*, February, 1885, p. 378.
24. "Mr. Henry George and the Progress of his Principles," *Pall Mall Gazette*, January 7, 1884.
25. "One Tax Only," *London Star*, March 20, 1889.
26. "Mr. Chamberlain Translated into Plain English," *Pall Mall Gazette*, January 14, 1885.
27. Henry George and H. M. Hyndman, *op. cit.*, pp. 377-78.