

Opposition and Acceptance

THE MOST RELIABLE EVIDENCE OF THE SUCCESS OF GEORGE'S agitation for land reform may be found in British newspapers. These comments and analyses are supplemented by letters to the press and by individual testimonials. Such records show George's effect on the British social consciousness.

Reaction to George's message had three phases: a period of discovery in September, 1882, when George and his book first won attention; a period of shock, tintured with hope for left-wing reformers, when it seemed possible that his radical views on the nature of land might be put into practice; and a third period, that of his visits in 1888 and 1889. By that time his agitation had lost its sharpness, the support earlier given to him by Socialists had been withdrawn, and he was identified with a recognized political group, the Parliamentary Radical Party.

The first reaction to him in 1882, as noted, was a mixture of curiosity and dissent. A few sharp attacks were printed, the attitude of the *Times* wavered between amiability and reproof, Toynbee sounded a warning note, and the Liberty and Property Defense League was formed. Radicals, land nationalizers, and Socialists, however, hailed him as their Moses.

Between 1882 and 1884 this reaction to George came to an end. Public pressure for an alleviation of poverty increased, and because George was regarded as the leading advocate of a radical remedy for the problem, the opposition closed ranks against him. Throughout 1884 and 1885 he was the target for newspaper attack and abuse. Opposition to him included a minority which accepted his description of social conditions and which demanded a fair hearing,

and a majority which attacked everything he said. Both groups recoiled from the same two items in his program: That private property in land should be abolished and that no compensation should be paid to landowners.

The *Manchester Guardian* was one of the newspapers which called for fair play for George. It argued that England was the most civilized country in the world, and could risk a free discussion of its social problems, even from a man whose aims were "pure robbery."¹ This attitude compelled admission of the truth of George's descriptions of social conditions, and admission of the need for immediate sweeping reforms in land tenure as the best defense against George's "subversive" remedy.

Accordingly, the London *Daily News* said editorially that George's "unreasonable demands have taken hold of the imaginations of large numbers of our people, and the best way of combating them is by reasonable reforms."² Jesse Collings declared in the House of Commons that George's criticisms "must be answered by a just system of land reform, or there will soon be a demand so formidable that the land owners will be too few to protect themselves."³

After George addressed a meeting at Plymouth in January, 1884, Admiral Maxse urged the Liberal Club there to work for "the cause of sensible land tenure reform" lest the "plunder of an honorable class in the community" become a reality.⁴ When George lectured in Aberdeen on "The Cause of Commercial Depression," the Aberdeen *Herald and Weekly Free Press* found "a lesson" in the audience's reaction. The fact that George's attacks on landlords were "cheered to the echo" showed that "the masses in Aberdeen seemed ripe for a land movement on radical lines."⁵ George was now accused of doing real harm to the cause of land reform because his doctrines "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."⁶

Clearly, he was not an unmixed evil in Liberal eyes; the merit the Liberals saw in him encouraged their eventual adoption of his land-values tax. Advanced Liberals, especially, were seriously considering land reform, and George therefore was useful to them. As a member of the Harrow Liberal Union put it: "He [the Union member] was not a confiscator, but he had no fear of Mr. Henry George's agitation. What moderate men could not reason out of the landlords, Henry George would frighten out of them."⁷

The same attitude was expressed by eminent and influential

individuals, of whom Auberon Herbert, Frederic Harrison, and Cardinal Manning were distinguished examples.

Herbert argued for some plan whereby the benefits of private ownership of land could be extended to large numbers who had hitherto been excluded from this privilege by the "custom of large estates" and the "wretched intricacies of title." His proposal for accomplishing this was nothing more than an extension of the theory of peasant proprietorship: a company was to be formed to buy estates, subdivide them into four-, eight-, and twelve-acre plots, and sell them at reasonable prices on a time-payment basis. He argued that George could best be answered by making private ownership of land work more fairly and efficiently than in the past. Like most opponents, he believed that George's proposals would lead either to Socialism or Communism; he admitted that George was successful in preaching class war because "We have done our best for generations past to disgust the mass of English people with private property in land, and now we have no right to wonder that there are many who turn to Mr. George as their prophet and accept at a gulp both his moral, and economical revelations. . . . If the English people are not to accept the new Saint George who is offered to them and to treat all who stand in their way as the dragon that has to be got rid of by horse-hoof and spear-thrust, they must be shown ahead of them an honest and honorable way of acquiring land." ⁸

Frederic Harrison also recognized George as the greatest influence for promoting radical land reform. Early in 1884 he delivered two lectures on *Progress and Poverty* to the Philosophical Institute of Edinburgh. He also devoted considerable time to George in a speech at the Industrial Remuneration Conference. He agreed that the evils of the industrial system were direct products of the system itself. George's criticism of the distribution of wealth was "right in principle"; his arguments for the social use of land were beyond question. Yet his remedy was "chimerical and futile"; his appeal to the will of God and the rights of man was "more fitting to a negro camp-meeting than to an industrial enquiry." As for his confiscation proposal, "Mr. George might as well claim the coats off our backs, on the ground that God made the sheep, as the farms which have been made by human capital and skill";⁹ and Harrison pointed out in a letter to Lord Bramwell that "the key to George's influence lies in the truth that proprietary rights in the soil need some other social justification than such as applied to moveables."¹⁰

Cardinal Manning, as befitting a churchman, was impressed by

George's humanitarian impulses but could not go along with his principle of confiscation. The Cardinal met George in London early in 1885, and aware that George was reputed to have rejected the doctrine of private property in land, he questioned him closely on this point and received what he considered a satisfactory answer: "I understood him to reply that he did not deny this principle [of private property in land]: that his contention was mainly, if not only, on the intolerable evils resulting from an exaggeration of the law of property, meaning, in fact, the old dictum *Summum jus summa injuria*. He [George] added that the present separation and opposition of the rich and the poor were perilous to society, and that he saw no remedy for them but in the example and teachings of Christ. He spoke fully and reverently on this subject."¹¹ Perhaps the Cardinal misunderstood George's rhetoric; on the other hand, George may have been saying what he thought the Cardinal would like to hear.

This acceptance of George's analysis of British social conditions by persons who rejected his remedy was a much more significant success than the support he received from the Land Nationalization Society and Socialists. All this showed that the Liberal center and right was vulnerable and would be forced to give way to pressure for social reforms in the years to come. George deserves credit for having helped to cause this, though the reforms were not precisely those he anticipated.

The majority of George's opponents attempted to refute him with a mixture of logic and ridicule. The argument used was a heritage from Bentham and the philosophical radicals. The ideal society was one which gave the greatest amount of liberty because then each individual was free to make the greatest use of his talents and to advance as far as his industry, intelligence, and character permitted. George's opponents argued that allowing full scope to individual enterprise brought about a society in which everyone got exactly what he deserved. It was but a step from this assumption to claim that the "have-nots" were the victims of their own shortcomings, not of social conditions. The popular expression of this theory was Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859), a volume which rivaled *Progress and Poverty* as a best seller in Great Britain.

The London *Times*, which in 1882 had previously shown tolerance toward George, treated him with contempt in 1884. He was generous "at other people's expense"; his whole program and his popularity with the masses were founded on the belief that something could be got for nothing. Conditions in which the few were

wealthy and the many were poor were to be deplored, but poverty and wealth, like the law of gravity, were in the nature of things. "Landlords or no landlords, human nature would be much the same as it is now, and the general laws of poverty and of well-being would continue in full force. . . . Men suffering from their own idleness, vice, folly, or incompetence, or from those of their parents, would be no more contented than they are now to put up with the consequences of their defects."¹²

There were echoes of this argument in many places. The Edinburgh *Evening News* thought that "poverty has some connection with an imperfect humanity which under any system of legislation will assert itself." George was attempting the impossible feat of driving out Nature with a fork.¹³ From Dundee came the cynical observation that his lecture was well received there because it was "pleasant to many persons to hear anything at all like plausible reasons for a proposal that they, as citizens of the country, should be endowed with the property of other persons."¹⁴ The Aberdeen *Journal* was even more explicit in its characterization of his following: he appealed to the "uneducated and the superficial," to the "lazy, improvident, and worthless."¹⁵

Appeals to immutable law, and ridicule of all who believed that any different and better social state was possible, were matched, on a higher level, by a more constructive defense of individualism and of free enterprise. Appeals to history were considered sufficient answers to George. England had grown rich "by letting things alone, by leaving individual energy and enterprise to assert themselves, by scrupulously respecting private property, and by giving the freest play to contrast."¹⁶ Private ownership of land, like the playing fields of Eton, cultivated noble qualities and virtues. Private ownership of land was "the only system capable of producing at their best the industrial virtues—prudence, frugality, and perseverance, wise application of means to ends, independence of character, and honest regard for the rights of others—virtues which must form the backbone of any nation which desires to be great."¹⁷

Finally, the virtues of private enterprise appeared over and over again in the more formal logic of the economic textbook. According to A. B. Cooke, in his *"Progress and Poverty": A Reply to Mr. George*, George's arguments could be demolished easily by "tracing the natural history of wealth," which demonstrates that poverty is due merely to human weaknesses. Cooke created an allegory in which bees and flies (the workers) were drawn to the source of sweetness in society, industrial activity. "The association of direc-

tors and workers is invariable, natural, and mutually beneficial, giving efficient service to the one side, and alleviation of hardship to the other. Those who, like the bees, store up a portion of their gains for future use, add to the general prosperity of the hive. Those who, like the flies, devote the whole to immediate consumption, furnish the painful contrast which has attracted Mr. George's philanthropic attention. He blunderingly attributes the palpable evils to the conduct of the careful and industrious, whose example, on the contrary, indicates the true remedy, and the reproductive expenditure of whose capitalized savings provides the constant alleviation."¹⁸

This picture of the harmony produced by free enterprise and the corollary that the poor had only themselves to blame was rather feeble. It was also unwise, for it was an attack on those who believed in George's remedy, and also on a vast number of workers who accepted George's diagnosis of social conditions but not his cure. Conservative appeals to Benthamite individualism therefore contributed to the very effect of George's agitation—and drove the British worker toward the left.

The ridicule of George's opponents was less devious. Bramwell described *Progress and Poverty* as "mischievous," "foolish," "perverse," "arrogant," and "self-sufficient";¹⁹ Bramwell's biographer, taking his cue from his subject, compared the success of *Progress and Poverty* with the success of "a new American lemon-squeezer, can-opener, or religion."²⁰ Bright, speaking to a Birmingham audience in January, 1884, called George "an American inventor," and his land theories "the wildest . . . ever known."²¹ A. J. Balfour told the delegates of the Industrial Remuneration Conference that George's statement of the coincidence of progress and poverty was not even a "caricature of the truth"; his arguments were "riddled with nonsense," and his theory was at all points "inconsistent with facts."²²

In as many different editorials, George was spoken of as an "international busybody," exuding "pulpy piety, persuasiveness, and benevolence," the "latest Yankee adventurer and trader on popular ignorance and cupidity," a "thief instead of agrarian philosopher," a "quack" like William Morris, Alfred Russel Wallace, and Michael Davitt; a "hack agitator," one who should be classed with "rogues and vagabonds, . . . thieves, garroters, and impostors." When George called his Peterhead audience "buffoons and inebriates," the *Aberdeen Journal* asked triumphantly, "Is that the language of a . . . gentleman addressing people who have done

him the honour to listen to his nonsense?"²³ A few weeks later the same paper regretted that George was permitted to pursue "his cheerful and profitable occupation undisturbed by fear of arrest, while the dupes who have given his counsel a practical interpretation are fined or imprisoned."²⁴

An Anglican clergyman ridiculed him as "some lecturer who perhaps tells us in so many words that it is a sacred duty to propagate discontent among the poor. He has a notion that, in virtue of some original right, the land of the country ought to be equally divided among all the human beings who live in it, and that a large estate in land is a theft consecrated by time and law. Of course a doctrine like this may be welcome to some of us who do not possess a foot of land, and who would like to have some; but for all that it is in opposition to the facts of nature and the laws of God."²⁵

Epithets culled from references to George's theories would include "Yankee clap-trap," "madly dishonest," "nonsense," "the most glaring and shameless public fraud ever suggested by a sane mind," "simple wholesale robbery plus cant," "extravagant . . . amusing." *Progress and Poverty* was the "bloodiest treatise" since the Chartist movement; it prescribed arsenic instead of castor oil for the ills of society.

Certain events in 1884 and 1885 showed how strong the conservative opposition was. One was the withdrawal, under pressure, of *Progress and Poverty* as a textbook in political economy at the City of London College. One of the courses listed in the college calendar for 1883-84 was "Definition of Political Economy, its history, and the new theories of Henry George and others . . . on the nationalization of land, etc." George's book was listed among the three texts required. When Lord Fortesque read this announcement, he wrote in protest to the *Times*. It was "monstrous to treat such writings as deserving serious study along with the works of illustrious thinkers and writers on political economy."²⁶

The plan to use George's book as a text was doomed. Soon after this, the Reverend Richard Whittington, principal of the College, publicly admitted that *Progress and Poverty* had been included as a text only "with a view to the exposure of the fallacies of the arguments contained therein, and to warn students of the dangerous tendencies of its teachings."²⁷ He promised that the book would be withdrawn.

Another event also had an educational setting. George spoke at Oxford University. A newspaper headline—"Mr. Henry George at

Oxford: Disorderly Meeting" ²⁸—indicates how George's theories were received. According to Henry George, Jr., his father was the victim of "a bunch of unruly young aristocrats." The meeting was certainly disorderly; the verbatim report in *Jackson's Oxford Journal* was crowded with parenthetical remarks indicating trouble: "hissing," "By George," "Oh, oh," "great uproar"; and the meeting broke up in confusion with "groans for Land Nationalization and Land Robbery."

George's speech itself was fairly listened to, with no more interruption than might be met normally in addressing a British audience. Only in the subsequent question period, when all the queries were hostile, did the meeting become disorderly. The antagonism of the questions clearly showed conservative opposition to George's theories; his refusal to answer them satisfactorily only increased the hostility of the audience. Two examples will show what the questioners were trying to find out, and how George thwarted them.

When Alfred Marshall,²⁹ the economist, asked George why, in *Progress and Poverty*, he had only one chapter on thrift, which showed that workmen could not benefit their position by thrift and industry, George, instead of answering, was inclined to be captious. He asserted he was not there to answer questions on *Progress and Poverty*, that it was some time since he had read the book. When Marshall then asked him to prove that landlordism was responsible for poverty, he merely gave the reply that there was poverty in the country. How he dodged the issue may also be seen in an exchange with the Reverend A. H. Johnstone, who, admitting the existence of destitution in England, wanted proof that monopoly in land 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 clash which followed, and the noises of the crowd, were reported as follows:

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 ands were pots and pans. That is an insult to the intelligence of this audience. (Uproar.)

The meeting ended in disorder when George lost his temper over the application of the word *nostrum* to his remedy and refused to answer further questions. A wag in the audience was reported to have said that "a man who did not understand the difference between *meum* and *tuum* was not likely to be acquainted with the meaning of *nostrum*."³⁰

The Oxford reaction to George's agitation was given point soon afterward by *An Elementary System of Socialism Theoretical and Practical*, an anonymous pamphlet by an Oxford student who called himself "A Disciple of Henry George."

The writer's object was to create the impression that George and Socialism were synonymous, and that both were equally ridiculous. He included, with George's "views," those of Socialist and Radical contemporaries such as Karl Marx, Henry Labouchère (a Radical M. P.), H. M. Hyndman, and William Morris. As the pamphleteer stated in the Preface, the material in the book was 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."

In the main part of his work, the writer used oversimplification, irony, parody, and sheer distortion. The work was divided into short "books": "The Socialist's Alphabet," "The Socialist's Arithmetic," "The Socialist's Articles of Faith," etc. In each of these, so-called facts were presented for the amusement of the reader. For example, "The Socialist's Alphabet: or A. B. C. for the men of three letters, proverbial for thief." The Alphabet presented a thief with the three letters f, u, r—fur, a thief.³¹ Hence, 'a man of three letters [is] proverbial for thief.' The Alphabet presented a variety of "facts" about George, which show his popularity and how his opponents tried to reduce his proposals to absurdity:

G is for George, the Fifth of the name;
 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 . . .
 S is the Soil and our scheme of salvation . . .
 X—propriation for stealing's their cant.

One of the postulates of "The Socialist's Geometry" was: "Let it be granted that any land can be divided without squaring the landlord." Under "Politics," government was defined as "an institution for expropriating possessors, dissolving contracts, destroying credit, and encouraging disorder and crime." Book X, "The Socialist's Logic," declared that "Property is an accident."

One may take yet another example to show the hardening of conservative opposition to George. This was an attack on *Progress and Poverty* by the Duke of Argyll, entitled "The Prophet of San Francisco."³² A notice that this article would appear in the April, 1884, number of the *Nineteenth Century* brought a run on the magazine, and the issue was oversubscribed before it reached the stands. Argyll set forth his opinion in some detail, but his views can be summarized in a brief quotation: ". . . the world has never seen such a Preacher of Unrighteousness as Mr. Henry George . . . Here is a man who probably sincerely believes he is a Christian, and who sets up as a philosopher, but who is not the least shocked by consequences which abolish the Decalogue and deny the primary obligations both of public and of private honour." Since Argyll wrote the article more than three years after first seeing *Progress and Poverty*, George's success as an agitator in England, not merely his theories as stated in the book, presumably inspired the attack.

Yet, despite the increased disapproval of conservatives and reactionaries, George did not stand alone. His audiences were generally large and enthusiastic. Even British newspapers which denounced his views could not always conceal their admiration for his idealism and his effectiveness as a speaker. They would have been happy to have reported a substantial popular rejection of him, but could record only two instances of hostile audiences. He was actively supported by his own creation, the Land Restoration League, by land nationalizers, by crofter organizations like the Highland Land Law Reform League, by Socialists and by their publications, and by Christian Socialists. Even the *Pall Mall Gazette* gave him grudging support, having been converted to the view that "social Radicals like Mr. George will make the running and force the pace in the immediate future just as the political Radicals forced it fifty years ago."³³

The last period of George's personal agitation was 1888-89. When he returned to Britain in November, 1888, after an absence of more than three years, the British reaction had changed remarkably. This was unquestionably the result of his defeat as a candidate for the mayoralty of New York City, his break with the Socialists who had supported him in this campaign, and his public refusal to condemn the death penalty for the Chicago anarchists arrested in the Haymarket bombing of 1886. He was still opposed by the center and extreme right, but even this opposition had cooled when it became apparent that his agitation was not to bring the immediate overturn of society either in New York or Great Britain. The Tory victory at the British polls in 1886 had been a comforting encouragement to this belief.

The marked decrease in opposition to George in 1888 and 1889 came also from his affiliation with Liberalism. One sign of his new alignment and of the increasing respectability of his position in Great Britain was his induction into the National Liberal Club, as a temporary member.³⁴ Then, too, the fact that the London *Star* supported him during his 1889 tour indicated that he was no longer considered a revolutionist. Finally, his new standing was exemplified by the fact that his extended visit of 1889 was made with financial support of the Radicals for the express purpose of speaking from their platforms.

In 1889 the National Liberal Federation passed a resolution in favor of the land tax. George's British followers even urged him to take up residence in Britain and stand for a Scottish constituency in the extreme Radical interest. He was no longer a heroic figure, standing virtually alone, rallying all the elements in the working class. He had acquired an aura of bourgeois respectability. He was now allied to a recognized political party with a program that included the taxation of land values, a far cry from immediate confiscation. Moreover, the split between Gladstone and Chamberlain over Irish Home Rule had so weakened the Liberal Party that land-tax legislation seemed to be a dead issue. But, as events after 1906 were to prove, the radical child which George had spawned was indeed very much alive.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 6

1. *Manchester Guardian*, January 11, 1884.
2. *London Daily News*, January 10, 1884.
3. *Christian Socialist*, August, 1883.

4. *Pall Mall Gazette*, January 19, 1884.
5. *Aberdeen Herald and Weekly Press*, February 23, 1884.
6. *Scotsman*, January 11, 1884.
7. *London Daily News*, January 23, 1884.
8. Letter reprinted in *London Times*, February 5, 1884.
9. Harrison's attitude toward George is summarized in *The Report of the Proceedings and Papers of the Industrial Remuneration Conference*. London: Cassell and Company, 1885.
10. Charles Fairchild, *Some Account of George William Wilshere, etc.* London: Macmillan and Company, 1898, p. 244.
11. Arthur W. Hutton, *Cardinal Manning*. London: Methuen and Company, 1892, pp. 201-2.
12. *London Times*, January 10, 1884.
13. *Edinburgh Evening News*, January 24, 1884.
14. *Dundee Courier and Argus*, February 4, 1884.
15. *Aberdeen Journal*, February 21, 1884.
16. *St. James Gazette*, September 27, 1882.
17. *London Times*, February 5, 1884.
18. A. B. Cooke, "Progress and Poverty": *A Reply to Mr. George*. Liverpool: Henry Young, 1884, p. 24.
19. *Nationalization of the Land*. London: Liberty and Property Defense League, 1884, pp. 15-16.
20. Fairchild, *op. cit.*, pp. 227-28.
21. *Edinburgh Courant*, January 31, 1884.
22. Industrial Remuneration Conference, *op. cit.*, p. 358.
23. *Aberdeen Journal*, December 15, 1884.
24. *Aberdeen Journal*, January 2, 1885.
25. *Christian Socialist*, June, 1884.
26. *London Times*, January 29, 1884.
27. *London Times*, February 12, 1884.
28. *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, March 15, 1884.
29. Early in 1883 Marshall had delivered three lectures on *Progress and Poverty*, in which he praised George's sincerity but disagreed with his economic thinking.
30. *Pall Mall Gazette*, November 23, 1888.
31. The "man of three letters" is undoubtedly a reference to the "three F's," so called from Gladstone's Irish Land Bill of 1881, which among other features provided for fixity of land tenure, free rents, and free sale.
32. *Nineteenth Century*, pp. 537-58.
33. *Pall Mall Gazette*, November 20, 1884.
34. *London Star*, June 24, 1889.