

ALBERT JAY NOCK

Back in the dark days of 1932, when a despairing world and its culture were being torn asunder by a major catastrophe, the worst economic depression ever known, a man who is foremost among America's few living exponents of belles-lettres wrote in his diary under the date of Oct. 27; "Now that Roosevelt has dug up W.G. Sumner and the Yale Press shows signs of life enough to republish his writings, I should think someone might soon be rediscovering Henry George. If so, he will find that George was one of the first half-dozen minds of the nineteenth century, in all the world."

The man who set that down in his characteristically small, fine hand, an essayist and historian who is one of the chief catalyzers of the intellectual ferment of our time, was noting no passing fancy. The idea returned to him and on Oct. 31 he recorded: "I have been looking over the biography of Henry George, by his son Harry, a painstaking sort of book. The best one can say for it is that it is competent. There should be a better one, for George was undeniably a great man."

Not only was Albert Jay Nock, the chronicler just quoted, thinking of these things. In New York the editors of Scribner's Magazine had the same notion and they commissioned Mr. Nock to do the job. The essayist went abroad the following February and through the Spring lived in his beloved low countries, breaking his stay at last for a junket through France and Spain into Portugal. With his papers full of commissions, some of which he would not do, some he might do and a few he would do if time, and the business of living fully, permitted, the assignment from Scribner's caused him no preoccupation. But the personality of George kept popping up: at Port Cros, watching a schooner put off ten tons of coal on March 31, he mused: "All by hand labor, with the help of one donkey. I wonder whether most of our labor-saving devices have really saved anything worth saving.... Henry George attacked this problem, in 'Progress and Poverty', and solved it, but his solution, being valid, will not be accepted in a hurry."

Through his friends he was keeping in close touch with hectic America. Henry L. Mencken wrote him, after the fiasco of the World Economic Conference: "The republic proceeds towards hell at a rapidly accelerating tempo."

Nock was not profoundly stirred; he spent the next day at the Lisbon museum. But the idea of re-creating Henry George was still rankling him. On June 9 he wrote in the diary: "Overnight at Porto, on the way to Vidago, where I hope to find a pleasant place to stop awhile and write an overdue paper for Scribner's on Henry George."

Soon he was in Vidago where "one sees miserable dwellings, occupied by people absolutely lost in poverty and filth, built of magnificent huge granite blocks after the Roman fashion"; in Vidago among a Portuguese people whom he found, nevertheless "without a single exception, the kindest people I have ever seen." On June 15 he noted. "Working steadily at quite high pressure on my article for Scribner's on Henry George, so the days pass very quickly. I hope it will call attention to him, though I suppose nothing will do so effectively as long as Americans are what they are, or until tremendous hardship puts an end to their being drugged and doped by nostrums dealt out to them by demagogues and scoundrels." In his idyllic refuge—"what a superb climate and what grand scenery" he remarked of Vidago—America became remote to him; "one can hardly convince oneself, while here, that it exists." But George, along of all his environment, persisted and on June 26 Mr. Nock recorded: "I am done with Henry George, and shall leave here tomorrow. What a great man he was, and how well he managed to get himself misjudged and forgotten! I suppose Scribner's people will pull a long face over getting a really serious piece of work—I often think of that dreadful person, Bok, writing to Lyman Abbott for 'a short, snappy life of Christ.' The aftermath was typical of the man; on July 29 he noted: "Scribner's people seem satisfied with my piece on Henry George, and say it will come out in November, so I suppose all the single-taxers in the country will curse me afresh."

That is how "Henry George, Unorthodox American" came to be written, as anyone can see for himself in Mr. Nock's "A Journal of These Days: June 1932-December 1933" (Morrow, 1934.) But to understand how this tabloid biography came to be the unique study it is, even when one compares it with the admirable similar studies by Broadus Mitchell and Rexford G. Tugwell, one must recall Mr. Nock's career. He took his

bachelor's degree at St. Stephen's College, where he steeped himself in the classical languages and their literatures. With Francis Neilson he wrote "How Diplomats Make War" (1915; 2d Ed., 1916). From 1920 to 1924, he edited the old Freeman in company with Neilson, Suzanne LaFollette and others equally notable, setting unexcelled standards in periodical journalism. During that period he wrote "The Myth of a Guilty Nation" under the pseudonym of Historicus (1922) and edited "The Selected Works of Charles F. Browne (Artemus Ward)" (1924), in the latter work establishing the native humorist as the social satirist he was.

A scholar's life-time job found fruit in his "Jefferson" (1926). He followed this with a collection, "On Doing the Right Thing and Other Essays" (1928). Then, with Catherine Rose Wilson, he wrote "Francis Rabelais, the Man and His Work" (1929), first fruit of another life-time interest. With Miss Wilson, he edited the Urquhart-Le Mattheux translation of the works of "Francis Rabelais" (2 vols., 1931), concluding a monumental work of scholarship with his book, "A Journey Into Rabelais's France" (1934). Meanwhile he had served as visiting professor of American history and government at Saint Stephen's and had published, under the pseudonym of Journeyman, "The Book of Journeyman" (1932) together with a noteworthy structure on an institution close to him, "The Theory of Education" (1932).

The contradiction between state and society, in which Ludwig Gumplowicz and Franz Oppenheimer had interested him long before, resulted in a work as significant in a social sense as "Rabelais" and "Jefferson" had been in literary and historical senses, "Our Enemy the State" (1935). He followed this with "Free Speech and Plain Language" (1937). Throughout all these dates a stream of essays on contemporary themes poured from his pen, to find critical and keenly appreciative hearings among the readers of The New Republic, The Atlantic Monthly, The American Mercury and similar literary papers.

What we have then, in "Henry George, Unorthodox American", is a living portrait of one unusual citizen of the world by another.

WILL LISSNER