

P R E F A C E

T O E D W A R D E P S T E A N

MY DEAR FRIEND: Eight years ago, when I was trifling with a literary project which you did not think was worth much, you told me rather brusquely that I had better drop it and do something with Henry George. Other friends made a similar suggestion afterwards; and I have accordingly written this little book for publication on the hundredth anniversary of George's birth. The credit of it, if there be any, would seem to belong to you by right of priority, so I cordially offer it to you, trusting that if it does not interest you on that account, you will still accept it as a reminder of my profound esteem and respect.

If the title leads you to expect a biography of George, you will be disappointed; my work is only a critical essay. I think that probably most of the significant incidents in his life come in for some sort of mention, but they are not developed beyond their bearing on the book's purpose. The official

biography of George, written by his son, is still in print and easily available. In some respects it is one of the best works of its kind; in others, one of the worst. Its completeness, its superb accuracy, its apposite citations, its unfailing attention to the minutiae of date, place and intimate circumstance, leave nothing to be desired; while its spirit is so devout as to make it almost more a memoir than a biography. On the other hand, the work is so poorly organized, so poorly edited, showing so little of the invaluable editorial sense of where an author should be content to rest lightly and where he should come down with his full weight, that it presents unnecessary difficulties to the reader. Its excellences are so far in excess of its defects, however, that it effectively discourages competition, especially on the part of one like myself, whose abilities run as little that way as his inclinations do, or even less.

No more should you expect to find here any exposition of George's philosophy. This can be got in the very best way at first hand from George's own works. Moreover, Mr. G. R. Geiger has lately published an excellent exposition of it in a volume which is also a guide to the whole literature of the subject. Nothing of the sort is within the scope of this essay. You will notice that I have carried exclusiveness so far as occasionally to use technical economic terms and phrases without pausing to define or explain them, even in a footnote. I have also once or twice criticized by bare statement

some matter which might seem to demand that I should show cause; as, for instance, where I criticize George's proposals for a national confiscation of rent. If one were ever so little intent on converting one's readers, or prepossessing them towards George's economic doctrine, one would perhaps not do this; but this essay has no such ulterior motive.

My purpose is the humbler one of trying to answer certain questions concerning George and his career, which have never been satisfactorily answered; questions which seem not only striking enough to pique disinterested curiosity, but also important enough, especially in their implications, to make a competent answer desirable. Here you have a man who is one of the first half-dozen of the world's creative geniuses in social philosophy. The professor of philosophy in Columbia University puts it with simple truth of fact that "it would require less than the fingers of the two hands to enumerate those who, from Plato down, rank with Henry George among the world's social philosophers." Yet in this capacity he is today pre-eminently the Forgotten Man of Anglo-American civilization; he is almost wholly unknown, unremembered, save as a minor figure, more or less eccentric, in the public life of the last century.

How does this come about? I think it is without precedent. Holland remembers Spinoza for something more than his notoriety as an excommunicate Jew who in 1656 was troubling the Portu-

guese synagogue in Amsterdam. But Holland is Holland, one might say. Yes, but even in taking account of a society essentially barbarous, one would hardly go so far as to ascribe George's fate to natural causes alone—does not this same America today remember Emerson for something more than his associations with vegetarians and the communism of Brook Farm? Does not England remember Bentham for something more than his bizarre notions about the architecture of factories and prisons? George antagonized vested interests which were extremely powerful and influential—no doubt he did, but could any vested interests be *that* powerful? One must doubt it.

This essay, then, is nothing more than a review of George's career, in an attempt to lay a finger on the causes, both original and contributory, of an interesting social phenomenon. I hope you will find it reasonably successful, and in that hope I remain always, my dear friend, most affectionately yours,

ALBERT JAY NOCK.

*Canaan, Conn.,
13 March, 1939.*