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G.B.S. and Henry George

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# G.B.S. and Henry George

*Joseph Ricciardi*

Shaw's writings are as studded with praiseworthy figures as Caxton's *Golden Legends* is studded with saints. Once having burnished the gilt nimbus around some philosophic head, he rarely let it tarnish. Henry George, though superseded in the Shavian chair of economics by Karl Marx and Sidney Webb, never fell entirely from favor. It was, after all, George's *Progress and Poverty*, one hundred years old in 1979, which converted Shaw to an economic view of things. In honoring the centenary, the *New York Times* reported that the distinguished dancer and choreographer, Agnes de Mille, George's granddaughter, treasures a letter that Shaw sent to her mother, in which the English Fabian paid tribute to the American thinker, saying that it was George who had "turned an intellectual snob into a man." There are, in fact, numerous references by Shaw to his St. Paul-like conversion, while on the road to uncertain fame as a novelist.

Shaw was living in his mother's house on Osnaburgh Street in London, most probably between chapters of *Cashel Byron's Profession*, when Henry George appeared and gave a lecture at Memorial Hall on September 5, 1882. *Progress and Poverty* had already won adherents in England with the unique suggestion that land speculators be taxed for driving the price of land out of the reach of men who wished to work on it, instead of hoard it as an investment. George swept into London like an Atlantic storm and set many an intellectual barometer dropping wildly, toward Socialism. Shaw, who had unerring instinct for crucial books, even at twenty-six, attended the lecture and was so impressed by the speaker that he bought a copy of *Progress and Poverty* for sixpence as he left the hall.

Shaw would write later: "Until I heard George that night I had been chiefly interested, as an atheist, in the conflict between science and religion. George switched me over to economics. I became very excited over his *Progress and Poverty*." Exactly two years after that lecture and purchase, on

September 5, 1884, the Fabians would elect Shaw into membership. Seven years after the lecture, in 1889, the *Fabian Essays in Socialism* would appear. George had no idea that the young fellow with the beard who dashed out with the sixpence copy would himself speak in Memorial Hall in days to come.

As Shaw grew as a political thinker, he saw George's contribution to economics more clearly. In *Everybody's Political What's What?* of 1944, he wrote that it was the father of Mirabeau who first suggested "the substitution of a single tax on land as a means of nationalizing the rent." Voltaire, he went on to say, laughed heartily at the idea, pointing out "that it would leave the rent of capital untouched, and that whilst the landlord would starve the banker would be richer than ever." He mentioned the revival of the idea by "the American Henry George" and cited his "extraordinary eloquence." However, a new idea was shaping in the air of England, and George would have to be passed by. Shaw wrote: "It was evident that if the State confiscated rent without being prepared to employ it instantly as capital industry, production would cease and the country be starved. Consequently a movement had begun, called Socialism."

Open a copy of *Progress and Poverty* at random and you'll notice the "extraordinary eloquence." There is something of the rolling cadences and heightened oratory of the nineteenth-century American pulpit about the work. Openly moralistic and hortatory, the book demands action in a world suffering because of economic realities.

George asked prophetically, before the Fascist era: "Whence shall come the new barbarians? Go through the squalid quarters of great cities, and you may see, even now, their gathering hordes! How shall learning perish? Men will cease to read, and books will kindle fires and be turned into cartridges!"

John Dewey was to write of Henry George: "Were he a native of some European country, it is safe to assert that he would long ago have taken the place upon the roll of the world's thinkers which belongs to him, irrespective, moreover, of adherence to his practical plan." *Progress and Poverty* simply, movingly lays bare the roots of the economic



**Henry George**

tangle which would soon bring devastation and upheavals worldwide. The picture left in mind could not be more vivid, even if the Single Tax is found wanting.

To read further in the influential book is to find a tone familiar to Shavians: “Lo! here, now, in our civilized society, the old allegories yet have a meaning, the old myths are still true. Into the Valley of the Shadow of Death yet often leads the path of duty, through the success of Vanity Fair walk Christian and Faithful, and on Greatheart’s armor ring the clanging blows. Ormazd still fights with Ahriman—the Prince of Light with the Powers of Darkness. He who will hear, to him the clarions of the battle call.” If the lecture at Memorial Hall was in this tone, one can understand why Shaw strapped on his armor at that time. Ormazd and Ahriman, incidentally, are the supreme deities of Zoroastrianism, the eternal force of light and darkness forever struggling. The other figures in that passage are from *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Shaw read the John Bunyan work as a child, threw it at people’s heads occasionally, and would naturally feel right at home with those figures of speech.

On the Second Floor of the New York Public Library, Fifth Avenue Branch, outside the Economics Division, a display of materials recently commemorated the 100th year of *Progress and Poverty*. A bronze bust of George dominated the exhibit, which succinctly summarized the economist’s variegated career as a seaman, gold miner, journalist, and editor, offering letters from different stages of his life.

Born in Philadelphia in 1838, George went to sea at seventeen, shipped to frontier San Francisco, where he was appalled that land-rich America had so many poor and so few jobs. He worked as a journeyman printer for years, when he could find work. His journalistic pieces soon were published there, and at last he took over the editorship of the *Oakland-Transcript*.

On display was the original handwritten manuscript of *Progress and Poverty*, from the Henry George Papers of the library. Note is also made of at least one lecture and book by George on the Irish Land Question—an eternal topic, it seems, since it attracted the notice of Shaw, Marx, and Engels as well.