

The Impact and the Influence of Henry George: A Final Appraisal

I *Mourning, Appreciation, and Contemporary Assessment*

HENRY GEORGE'S DEATH shocked everyone, except possibly George who had expected it would come soon and so prepared himself. He had made his will the previous May in the presence of his two sons, leaving everything he had—little that it was—to his wife. The reactions of the world to his death indicate very well the impact and influence he had upon the world he so dramatically left behind.

George's body lay in state in Grand Central Palace all day Sunday, October 31st. According to various contemporary estimates, from twenty-five to one hundred thousand people passed the bier: fifty thousand is the figure most often mentioned in the papers in the days and weeks that followed. The *Irish World* estimated that at the peak of this tribute about six thousand people passed each hour. The lowest estimate of those who saw the casket was one hundred and twenty-five thousand, the highest in the hundreds of thousands. The *Irish World* of November 6, 1897, said that "The popular demonstration at his funeral parade was imposing as it was unparalleled in this city, and his name has become a household word in two hemispheres." The *Times* said, "Call it what you will, hero-worship, but its object was truly a hero." The *Herald* said it was "unique." One paper compared the funeral to Lincoln's, another to Grant's. In the *Times*, Hamlin Garland was quoted as that "Not even Lincoln had a more glorious death than this humble man who died fighting for the real interests of his countrymen." The *Financial Post* of the same day (October 30, 1897) said "From a Stock Exchange point of view, his death removes a disturbing

element in American political and industrial life," but even this comment was buried in the publication's recognition of George's accomplishments and personal integrity.

The general reaction of praise and mourning was overpowering. "Never for statesman or soldier," said still another newspaper, "was there so remarkable a demonstration of popular feeling. At least one hundred thousand persons passed before his bier and another hundred thousand were prevented from doing so only by the impossibility of getting near it. Unconsciously they indicated over his dead body the truth of the great idea to which his life was devoted, the brotherhood of man."

In the afternoon the hall was jammed to capacity. Congregationalist, Episcopalian, Catholic, and Jewish groups and clerics were present, including Father McGlynn. It was a solemn, largely spontaneous, and public demonstration of grief and respect as well as an organized tribute to a man who was loved and admired even more than he was listened to or understood. When Father McGlynn reaffirmed his belief in the ideas of Henry George, the awesome but silent excitement of the hour was broken. The cheers of thousands echoed through the hall, releasing pent-up emotions that had reached the breaking point by that late hour. Seemingly out of place, the cheers were the kind of acclaim that George, who never stood on ceremony, would have approved.

Through the late evening and into the night, the long funeral procession passed slowly downtown, leaving Grand Central Palace and moving down Madison and Third avenues to City Hall and over Brooklyn Bridge to Borough Hall where the casket was given over to the family for the private burial service of November 1st in Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn. The garland-covered and open hearse was drawn by sixteen black draped horses while a volunteer band played Chopin's "Funeral March" and "The Marseillaise." A long, winding line of people—the known and the unknown—from all walks of life followed the casket.¹ It was a ceremony of the sort rarely seen at any time. As still another paper put it, "The world yesterday paid the highest tribute, perhaps, it has ever paid to the quality of sincerity." In fact, if one note dominated the countless articles and obituaries following George's death, it was the universal acknowledgment of his honesty and goodness. The New York *Herald's*

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Paris edition of October 31st said wryly in a cabled dispatch from New York, "All the obituaries in the newspapers are most flattering. It reminds one of the famous lines:—

Seven cities claimed Homer dead
Through which, living, Homer begged his bread."

Cities and towns all over the world, in almost every country, and on every continent, paid their respects. On his death and funeral alone, articles numbered well into the hundreds, perhaps well into the thousands. Even separate funeral services were held in London. The personal messages to the family of regret and condolence from friends, rivals, and contemporary people of note came in a steady stream.²

George's influence at home and abroad in the 1880's and 1890's was far-reaching and, perhaps, everlasting. Reminiscing in the early 1920's, Samuel Gompers, the outstanding leader of the American Federation of Labor, wrote in his autobiography, "Political action had no appeal for me, but I appreciated the movement [of 1886] as a demonstration of protest. The campaign was notable in that it united people of unusual abilities from many walks of life." This kind of reaction always was and always has been a characteristic of Henry George's appeal. "It proved," Gompers continued, "a sort of vestibule school for many who later undertook practical work for human betterment."

There are Bernard Shaw's words, among those of many others, for the similar influence George had on the people of the British Isles. "Many leaders in the constructive work of the following years," Gompers went on, "were recruits of the Henry George Campaign." In 1886 Gompers had said, and he quoted himself in spite of his distaste for direct political action, "Now I come out for George as a trade unionist and intend to support him with all my might."³

A week after his death, George's old socialist friend and opponent, Henry Hyndman—after citing all the ways in which he disagreed with George and after summing up the major events in George's career—concluded his obituary article by saying, "He has died in a chivalrous attempt to accomplish the impossible without even organizing his forces for the struggle. In a period when the highest ideals of the United States seem to be swindling at home and braggadocio abroad, Henry George, with all his

mistakes, gave us an example of an honest, modest, self-taught American whose success in catching the ear of the world never turned his head for a moment."⁴

Considering the fact that George was neither a convinced trade unionist nor a socialist, these are remarkable pronouncements. They were unsolicited. Hyndman's was, of course, a personal appreciation of the hour, but it was in a way a part of that response evidenced by one newspaper's coupling of George with Garibaldi, George Fox, Rousseau, Swedenborg, and Peter the Hermit as "prophets in fire and fools in wisdom." Such praise of George said little for his practical program or even for his educative influence, other than as a model of personal integrity. James Bartley represented a more balanced view, a view that was shared by others, and that anticipated Shaw's assessment. "It was 'Progress and Poverty,'" he wrote, "that gave birth to the Fabian Society."⁵ Shaw in his letter to Hamlin Garland is also thankful that, unlike the doctrinaire socialist, he did not lose his perspective on Henry George—a perspective he shared with Sidney Webb—when his Georgist views developed into Marxist ones.

The final words about George's influence in his own time were best and most accurately written by J. A. Hobson in a fine, objective article finished shortly before George's death and published in the same year in which he died:

The influence of George is not, however, to be measured by the number or zeal of the advocates of a wholesome policy of nationalisation of the land. It is rather to be traced in the energy which, during the last fifteen years, has freely flowed into many channels of land reform. . . .

No doubt it is easy to impute excessive influence to the mouthpiece of a rising popular sentiment. George, like other prophets, cooperated with the "spirit of the age." But after this just allowance has been made, Henry George may be considered to have exercised a more directly powerful influence over English radicalism of the last fifteen years than any other man.⁶

George's impact on Tolstoy, his senior by many years, was profound and well-known, even in the 1890's:

I have been acquainted with Henry George since the appearance of his "Social Problems." I read them, and was struck by the correctness of his main idea, and by the unique clearness and

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power of his argument, which is unlike anything in scientific literature, and especially by the Christian Spirit, which also stands alone in the literature of science, which pervades the book. After reading it I turned to his previous work "Progress and Poverty," and with a heightened appreciation of its author's activity.⁷

In a letter written before George's death, Tolstoy said that, "If the Czar were to ask me what I should advise him to do, I would say to him: Use your autocratic power to abolish the landed property in Russia, and to introduce the single-tax system, and then give up your power and give the people a liberal constitution."⁸ Shortly after George's death, Tolstoy outlined in six steps the "advantage" of George's system:

1. That no one will be deprived of the possibility of using land.
2. That idle men, possessing land, and forcing others to work for them, in return for the use of the land, will cease to exist.
3. That the land will be in the hands of those who work it and not of those who do not.
4. That the people, being able to work on the land, will cease to enslave themselves as laborers in factories and manufactories, and as servants in towns, and will disperse themselves about the country.
5. That there will be no longer any overseers and tax collectors in factories, stores, and custom-houses, but only collectors of payment for the land, which it is impossible to steal, and from which taxes may be most easily collected.
- 6 (and chiefly). That those who do not labor will be freed from the sin of profiting by the labors of others (in doing which they are often not to blame, being from childhood educated in idleness, and not knowing how to work); and from the still greater sin of every kind of falsehood and excuse to shift the blame from themselves; and that those who do labor will be delivered from the temptation and sin of envy, condemnation of others, and exasperation against those who do not work; and thus will disappear one of the causes of dissension between man and man.⁹

The affinity between George and Tolstoy can be traced quickly to their religiously oriented view of man. Tolstoy's commitment to the very same things which were most important to George also indicates why he was more fully in harmony with George than Shaw or others of an essentially non-religious turn of mind. The same thing in Tolstoy that drew him to Thoreau or Emerson (as different as these two Americans may be from George as in-

dividual people, thinkers, or writers) drew him to George: the spiritual evolution of man according to "higher laws." In fact, Tolstoy's American consciousness¹⁰—if his affinity for Emerson, Thoreau, William Lloyd Garrison, Edward Bellamy, and George can be so described—should cause one to pause over De Tocqueville's thesis about Russia and the United States in the years that were to come. George's last-ditch capitalism, as Marx called his economic theory, has enough in common with the social philosophies of Tolstoy, Thoreau, and Ruskin to make George—who also read and quoted De Tocqueville—a particularly interesting phenomenon and an important influence upon the growth of social reform in the intellectual and economic life of Russia and the United States, not to mention his incalculable impact on the British Isles and his ever-widening influence in Europe and Oceania. Professor Max Müller, his friend and host of the 1880's in England, even applied his doctrines to India and its land problems, and Müller was in his day a leading scholar in the western world on the subject of the Asian sub-continent.

Henry George's impact on social reform did not cease with his death or even shortly after, nor did recognition of his importance wane. The intensity of his own person was no more, but he had touched people who lived into the decades that began the twentieth century. Georgist or not, they carried with them something of the program and something of the energy of Henry George's remedy for social reform—writers and economists alike.

II The Single Tax, the Fels Fund, and Subsequent Developments

During the 1890's much single tax agitation and organizational activity occurred, especially in certain states, such as Delaware, North Carolina, Colorado, and Massachusetts; it persisted until the beginning of World War I. Single-taxers were active in Washington, Texas, Oregon, and several other western states, including some Canadian provinces, and in Pennsylvania and New York.¹¹

Perhaps the most interesting development at this time was the founding of the Joseph Fels Fund of America. It marked the last large-scale adventures of the single tax in politics and also encouraged the growth of the educative side of Henry

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George's latter-day influence—the major developmental pattern which Georgist activity has followed since the second decade of the twentieth century.

Joseph Fels, the soap manufacturer, promised to contribute \$25,000 a year for a period of five years to promote the single tax in the United States. He also pledged the same sum to support British single tax endeavors, adding pledges of various sums to aid the single-tax movement in other countries. Fels agreed to match every dollar raised by the movement itself up to the stipulated amount. He more than fulfilled his promise by exceeding the contribution of the movement by over \$50,000. Activity was most intense in Oregon in the years just before the war. The Fund helped to organize meetings and conventions, supported the *Single Tax Review*, and aided the continued publication of George's works. Many state campaigns were launched in the hope that a single demonstration of the practicality of the single tax would be more effective than any number of debates over its theoretical worth. Most of the agitation was largely unsuccessful, for direct political victory was not forthcoming although political influence was not without some effect upon subsequent legislation and economic planning.¹²

Ten years after Fels' death, the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation continued the struggle in non-political action by carrying on the educational aspects of George's work. Through inexpensive re-publication of his writings, the Foundation hoped to continue the spread of his ideas. In 1932 the Henry George School of Social Science was founded by Oscar Geiger.¹³ As time has gone on, the Schalkenbach Foundation and the Henry George School have joined forces.¹⁴ George's works are always in print, and the school continues to teach in terms of them. There is a kind of justice in the existence of the Henry George School, for George always wanted to be a professor. It was the one title he once said (about the time of his address at the University of California in 1877) that he would rather have than any other. Instead, he earned the older and more honored title of prophet. Thus generally dismissed by the academies, he used the world for his classroom—finally getting a school of his own, interestingly enough, in the midst of the worst of the recurrent depressions he sought to remedy.

At the twenty-fifth anniversary dinner for *Progress and Poverty* in 1905, Hamlin Garland, the toastmaster, introduced in turn a series of speakers who testified to the already well-established impact of George's work and ideas. They included Edwin Markham, who read poems; Ernest Thompson Seton, who read three fables; Henry George, Jr., who discussed the history of *Progress and Poverty*; Dr. Richard Burton, who discussed the influence of the book on literature; William Lloyd Garrison, Jr., who discussed its plea for justice; Tom Johnson, a follower of George, long in Congress, who discussed its influence toward higher politics; Dr. Albert Shaw, who discussed its influence for humanity; Louis Post, who discussed its economic message; and William Jennings Bryan, who spoke on equal opportunity and referred to Tolstoy. *Progress and Poverty* had already become a classic, but not a dead one. One of Markham's poems deserves quotation because it amplifies the meaning of Bernard Shaw's letter which Garland read to the assembled guests:

THE HAND OF PRIVILEGE

It picks the pockets of the poor,
 To make the Idle Few secure.
 Three evil fingers, knotty and bent,
 Are Profit, Interest, and Rent:
 One, like a thorn upon the hand,
 Is Private Ownership of Land:
 And last the crooked and crafty thumb
 Is pointing the poor to the world to come!¹⁵

Though the man with the hoe had found his public defender, the poem is somewhat left of George, having something in common with an old anonymous poem that philosophical anarchists like to quote:

SURPLUS VALUE

The Merchant calls it Profit and winks the other eye;
 The Banker calls it Interest and heaves a cheerful sigh;
 The Landlord calls it Rent as he tucks it in his bag;
 But the honest old Burglar—he simply calls it Swag.

Further left or not, both poems have a Georgist spirit and remind the reader of George's own comic irony in speeches given around the world.

III *Conclusion: Liberty, A World-View*

Barker concludes his biography of Henry George with what he calls "The Triple Legacy of Georgism," which is, in brief, "three types of belief in his ideas": (1) "the fiscal-reform Georgism of the single tax"; (2) "the political Georgism which entered into many varieties of reform activity"; and (3) "the moral and intellectual Georgism, of which Tolstoy and Hamlin Garland were eloquent early figures."¹⁶ Barker goes on to say that the "quiet influence of Henry George" from 1920 to the present day "is to be discovered on two levels":

On the visible surface of affairs is the persevering work of the fiscal Georgists, who win occasional reforms in city tax policy. Very close to that effort, yet different, is the continuing task of the propagation of ideas, in the line which Henry George and Francis Shaw began in 1882. The work done in America centers in New York, where the Schalkenbach Foundation supplies subsidies, and where George's books and speeches are distributed and journals issued year after year. . . .

The deeper level of Henry George's influence on the modern world is the one . . . often forgotten to be his. The participation of free governments in the processes of social justice is now accepted everywhere as policy to be maintained. A desire for world-wide free trade recurs in our day; and many believe that a greater equality among the peoples of the earth, of access to its resources, would increase mankind's hope for mankind.¹⁷

Barker also quotes Franklin K. Lane, President Wilson's conservationist Secretary of the Interior: "Emerson, Henry George, and William James were a 'singular trio' in history, who in the future would be 'regarded not as literary men but as American social, spiritual, and economic philosophers'; and he [Lane] thought also that William James, Theodore Roosevelt, and Henry George were 'the three greatest forces of the last thirty years.'"¹⁸

Henry George's philosophy is essentially an American world-view, true to the tradition of the American Dream. He saw no reason why the entire world could not become—if men were willing—the promised land of milk and honey, like the fruitful and ever bountiful plains of North America. In fact, it was America's task to show how such promise could be fulfilled, since America had the greatest opportunity that any nation ever had had; it was America's task to lead the rest of the world, like

a colossal Joshua, into the millennial actuality of that dream. George had hinted that he was Moses. Consequently, he continued to be simultaneously left and right of center; but very few people, whether followers of George or not, have the capacity to be politically left and spiritually right. It is the kind of non-conformity for which, as Emerson would say, the world whips men with its displeasure.

There is little for anyone to argue with in the essentials of the appreciations of George, whether by Tolstoy, Shaw, Lane, Dewey, Barker or several others who have recognized his important contribution to the advance of social reform. His message was his own, and many learned enough from it to enable them to go their own ways without the crippling effect discipleship often bestows. Very few, however, have been capable of the religio-economic unity that is George's.

George's style reflects his message. It is biblical in its cadence, thus matching the frequent quotations from the Bible and the way in which his major work, *Progress and Poverty*, has been received and perpetuated. His style is aphoristic, yet ample—natural but eloquent. A prophet cannot fail to be quotable. The simple diction and the simple message must go together; furthermore, they must be capable of expressing complicated and abstract theory in concrete terms. George's rounded style matches his rounded philosophy. The religio-economic nature of his ideas is expressed in the simple and proverbial presentation of involved and logical argument. Clarity is what counts. George's advice to his son is not only the kind of advice which a well-trained newspaperman would give and which most would-be writers would do well to heed, but it also describes his own method: "The fault of most young writers is that they are too stilted. Always prefer the short ordinary words and the simplest phrase. And without being ungrammatical or slangy, try to write about as you would talk—so as to be easy and natural."¹⁹ It is good Shavian advice, and it is modern and American: the kind of method necessary for those who—as Hyndman had said—would catch the ear of the world.

Liberty was George's major theme. The spirit and the substance of his Fourth of July addresses in the decade that marked the centenary of the Declaration of Independence were echoed in the conclusion of *Progress and Poverty* that came at the end

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of that decade. Liberty was what America stood for—the whole world knew that. And Liberty was what he stood for—right to the end with the party of the democracy of Thomas Jefferson. It was only fitting that Emma Lazarus some two years *before* she wrote “The New Colossus,” her celebrated poem, in order to aid the pedestal fund drive to prepare Bedloe’s Island for France’s gift of the Statue of Liberty should have written another sonnet on reading *Progress and Poverty*:

PROGRESS AND POVERTY

[After Reading Mr. Henry George’s Book]

Oh splendid age when Science lights her lamp
At the brief lightning’s momentary flame,
Fixing it steadfast as a star, man’s name
Upon the very brow of heaven to stamp!
Launched on a ship whose iron-cuirassed sides
Mock storm and wave. Humanity sails free;
Gayly upon a vast, untrodden sea,
O’er pathless wastes, to ports undreamed she rides,
Richer than Cleopatra’s barge of gold,
This vessel, manned by demi-gods, with freight
Of priceless marvels. But where yawns the hold
In that deep, reeking hell, what slaves be they,
Who feed the ravenous monster, pant and sweat,
Nor know if overhead reign night or day?²⁰

This sonnet—on unfound freedom and liberty—did not win the poet the fame the later poem did, but the two poems are not unlike. George, it must be remembered, was not interested in commemorating liberty but in establishing it. The pedestal fund drive coincided with the publication of *Social Problems*, just as the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876 coincided ironically with the one-hundredth anniversary year of the famous declaration that brought about the War of Independence. George did not miss the irony of the first, whether or not he may have been aware of the second. Liberty was taking a high price. The ultimate task that George had set himself was to see that we got the genuine article.

In a very important way, Franklin K. Lane was wrong. His error is to be found in the limitation he placed upon “literary” when he said (intending to laud) that Emerson, George, and

William James would not be regarded in the future as literary men. His observation implied that the literary qualities or the art of their work was of slight consequence in comparison with what they had philosophized about. But as Emerson himself says, a man is half himself; the other half is his expression. And if the two halves could be separated, if the way in which Emerson, George, and James express themselves could be separated in actuality from what they say, then one should have to conclude that the success of each—even his lasting fame—is traceable to the way in which each puts his arguments, not in the arguments themselves. Of nobody more than George is this true. Any successful polemist must write well; and George, whose success in his own time was as great as any man's could ever be, was essentially a writer, an artist of the word, as good a proof as any that the old maxim the pen is mightier than the sword is true. With his pen he had re-created the war of independence—the socio-political revolution of modern times. It was George's art that most made him what he was. Of George's work, Emerson is once again the best judge: "Conscious utterance of thought by speech or action to any end is art." George's word certainly went marching on, and his word is his truth. He had consciously uttered it by speech and by act to the very end of his life. Its meaning and its influence are still alive.