HENRY GEORGE THE MAN

The Early Struggle of the Author of "Progress and Poverty" and the First Reception of the Book

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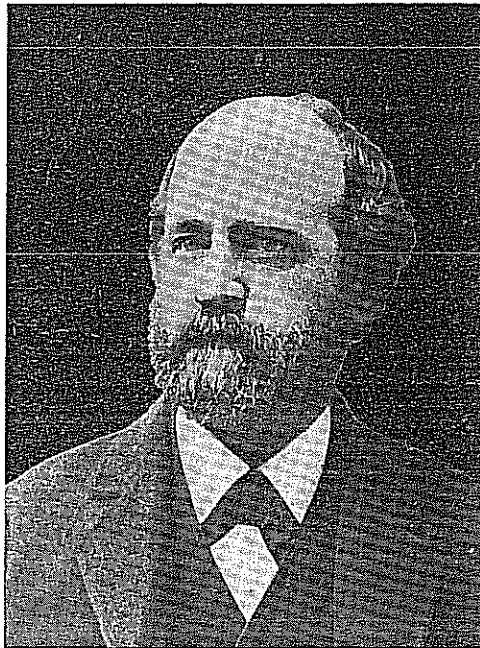
By EDWARD ROBESON TAYLOR

In appearance he was a little below the medium height, of stocky build, but erect and dignified in deportment, and alert and quick in all his movements. He had a large dome-shaped head, sandy hair and whiskers, including moustache, and bright blue eyes set in a frank and open countenance. He was somewhat careless in his dress, but possessed an extraordinary capacity for meeting others upon his own level and interesting them and being interested by them. He had reached San Francisco, May 27, 1853—after a voyage of 155 days from Philadelphia—on the little steamer "Shubrick" of the United States navy which was to undertake lighthouse duty on the Pacific coast, and on which George had shipped as steward. He had received but little schooling, and had always felt a strong yearning for the sea, as was evidenced by his having sailed as foremast boy to Australia and India, and as ordinary seaman on a coal schooner to Boston. At the time of his arrival in San Francisco he had not reached twenty years of age by four months, and between that time and the time we first met he, like so many other thousands, had gone to Frazer River—borne thither on the wings of an excitement which led to nothing but irremediable disappointment—had learned to set type, had found employment as weigher in a rice mill, and tried to mine and to farm, had got married, had peddled clothes-wringers, had worked on newspapers as a compositor, had secured an interest in a newspaper which almost died a-borning, and had suffered poverty to such an extreme that on the day of the birth of his second child he begged money on I think I was desperate enough to have killed him."

"I walked along the street and made up my mind to get money from the first man whose appearance might indicate that he had it to give. I stopped a man —a stranger—and told him I wanted $5. He asked what I wanted it for. I told him that my wife was confined and that I had nothing to give her to eat. He gave me the money. If he had not, I think I was desperate enough to have killed him."

George seldom had more than enough money for his needs, while many times throughout his life he was greatly distressed for lack of it. He seems to have had little practical business ability, and not the slightest desire for money beyond sufficient for the immediate moment. Yet there was no man with a higher sense of pecuniary obligation. He was wholly insensible to falsehood in the matter of procuring money to meet his necessities, and he repaid his loans with the most scrupulous exactitude; but business *as* business had no

attractions for him. He seemed to be incapable of bringing himself into sympathetic relation with anything connected with it. He was rather singularly constituted; for while he was essentially of a contemplative nature, yet he was fond of action and was remarkably energetic therein. He was ever ready to respond to any call for money if the money were in his pocket;



Henry George

and to such generosities, together with his occasional, unremunerative employments, and his indifference to business methods were due most of his pecuniary troubles.

It will be asked why he did not profit greatly by the large circulation of "Progress and Poverty," as he certainly did not. This was mainly due to the cheap editions which he promoted in the interest of propaganda, and from which he derived but little. In all this he was but like himself. He never dreamed of coining the book into money. What he primarily cared for was to have the seed of his doctrine sown far and wide; all else was secondary.

During the above-mentioned period, George became managing editor of the San Francisco *Times*, in which capacity he waged an unsuccessful but courageous war against the press and telegraph monopolies of the day. After the *Times* breathed its last, he was made the first managing editor of the San Francisco *Chronicle*, which position, however, he held but a short time. All his life he had been an omnivorous reader. He was gifted by nature with intellectual powers of a high order, and with the faculty of expressing his thoughts in a style that was both engaging and lucid; hence he had done more or less writing which had promise at the heart of it. He was among the first to point out the dangers of oriental immigration, and had written convincingly thereon. It will be remembered that he had some interesting correspondence with John Stuart Mill on this subject. He had also written for the fourth number of the *Overland Monthly*, then edited by Bret Harte, his noted article on "What the Railroad will Bring Us"—the first trans-continental railroad being then near completion. It is interesting to record that the article was seven thousand words in length, and that George was paid forty dollars for it. It contained these pregnant words:

The truth is that the completion of the railroad and the consequent great increase in business and population will not be a benefit to all of us, but only to a portion. As a rule (liable of course to exceptions) those *who have*, it will make wealthier; for those *who have not*, it will make it more difficult to get. Those who have lands, mines, established businesses, special abilities of certain kinds will become richer for it and find increased opportunities; those who have only their own labor will become poorer and find it harder to get ahead—first because it will take more capital to buy

land or to get into business; and second because as competition reduces the wages of labor this capital will be harder for them to obtain.

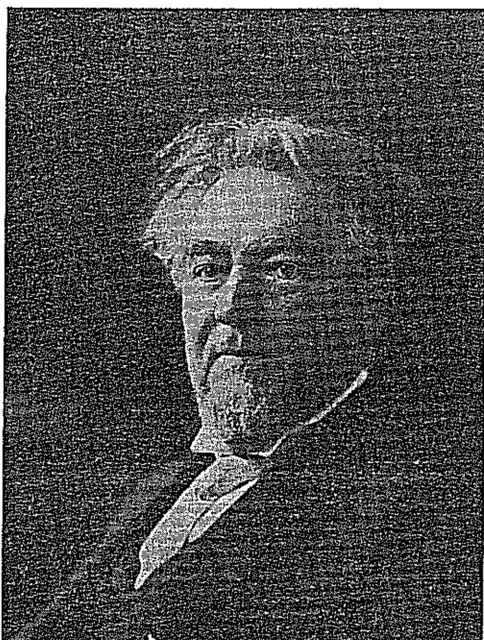
And as California becomes populous and rich, let us not forget that the character of a people counts for more than their numbers; that the distribution of wealth is even a more important matter than its production. Let us not imagine ourselves in a fool's paradise where the golden apples will drop into our mouths; let us not think that after the stormy seas and head gales of all the ages, *our* ship has at last struck the trade winds of time. The future of our State, of our Nation, of our Race, looks fair and bright; perhaps the future looked so to the philosophers who once sat in the porches of Athens, to the unremembered men who raised the cities whose ruins lie south of us. Our modern civilization strikes broad and deep and looks high. So did the tower which men once built almost unto the heavens.

Governor Haight had initiated a campaign against railroad subsidies which up to his time had maintained an unobstructed course in the legislatures of California. Having become interested in George as a writer, he offered him inducements to become the managing editor of the *Reporter*, a democratic paper then published at Sacramento. Haight had started in politics as a Republican, just as George had, but each one of them had been moved by reasons satisfactory to himself to join his political fortunes with those of the Democratic party. George entered with ardor upon the editorial management of the *Reporter*, and continued therein until Haight was retired to private life at the end of his term by reason of his defeat at the hands of Newton Booth. It might be well to note here how little adapted George seems to have been to make himself successful in the newspaper field. In addition to the papers we have already mentioned, he started the *Evening Post* (which was his most successful newspaper venture) and managed to keep it going until it was sold, the *State*, a weekly paper published in San Francisco, and the New York *Standard*, which did indeed keep its light burning for a few years.

George apparently liked politics as well as he liked the sea. He was secretary of several political conventions, among them the Democratic State Convention of 1871, and was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention at Baltimore in 1872—that convention which performed the preposterous feat (preposterous from almost any viewpoint) of nominating Horace Greeley for the presidency. He also unsuccessfully ran for the legislature in 1871, and was twice a candidate for mayor of New York, at his first candidacy running ahead of Roosevelt but behind Hewitt, who was elected. His second candidacy was cut short by his death a few days before the election. I never shall forget the great interest he took in the Tilden presidential campaign, and with what boyish glee and hurrahing he and two others, on the night of the election, marched arm-in-arm through the streets of San Francisco in the assumed certainty of Tilden's election. Nor is it easy to forget our sickening depression on reading, the following morning, Zach Chandler's official statement to the country (Chandler then being the chairman of the Republican National Committee) that Hayes had 185 votes and was elected. This depression was in nowise lessened when ex-Governor Haight, on learning of the bulletin-board announcement, quietly said: "They will put him in"—as they certainly did.

As George had been a very strong supporter of William Irwin for governor, and as his thoughts on the things nearest his heart were demanding study and expression, he desired, if possible, to secure from Governor Irwin some public office that might give him the leisure he so much desired and so much needed. Governor Irwin responded by appointing him state inspector of gas

meters. As his income from this was sufficient for his simple mode of life, and as the duties of the office did not consume the whole of his time, he was thus furnished with a degree of leisure he never before had enjoyed. This is not to intimate that he was not faithful in the discharge of the duties of his office, for in truth he was both diligent and faithful.



Edward Robeson Taylor

While he was in Sacramento, during Governor Haight's administration, he entertained the idea of making himself a lawyer. To that end, on the advice of a friend whom he asked which book he should first read, he went through the four volumes of Kent's Commentaries. Fortunately that cured him of all desire for the law; for never was there a man so little cut out by nature for the practical duties of a law practice. He was wise to stop where he did. He was essentially a thinker and a writer; and although he did well as a lecturer, yet he spent much time on the platform that might better have been devoted to the practical use of his native genius. Still, his pecuniary necessities were at times so great as to drive him to the platform in order to secure the lucre without which bread cannot be procured, even by thinkers. George was, in reality, an uneven speaker, sometimes being tame even for a lecturer, and then again rising to the height of real oratory. In fact, after his first speech in London he was spoken of there as a great orator.

The land and man's relation to it had engaged George's attention to a far greater extent than had any other subject, and in 1871 he published a pamphlet of considerable size which he entitled, "Our Land and Land Policy, National and State." In this he very graphically showed the almost criminal prodigality with which land grants had been made to railroads; it contained, indeed, the germ of his great book, for in it he called attention to the fact, as it appeared to him, that a tax on the value of land is the most equal of all taxes. Soon after this he started the *Evening Post* as a penny paper, and conducted it as such with more or less success for a period of about four years. He was an ardent advocate of Mr. Tilden for the presidency, as has already been mentioned, and made many speeches throughout the state on his behalf. But whatever it was that filled his thoughts, or in whatever work he was engaged, the land question was ever present with him; to him it was the greatest of all questions. The first light that shone through the darkness of that subject flashed suddenly upon him, as a light of another kind flashed upon Paul under circumstances quite different. This experience came to George while he was riding on horseback in the hills back of Oakland. He described it thus:

"Absorbed in my own thoughts, I had driven the horse into the hills until he panted. Stopping for breath, I asked a passing teamster, for want of something better to say, what land was worth there. He pointed to some cows grazing off so far that they looked like mice: 'I don't know exactly, but there is a man over there who will sell some land for $1,000 an acre.' Like a flash it came upon me that there was the reason of advancing poverty with advancing wealth. With the growth of population land grows in value, and the men who work it must pay for the privilege of working it. I turned back, amidst quiet thought, to the perception that then came to me and has been with me ever since."

We have seen how he utilized this intuitional suggestion in his "Land and Land Policy"; but it only came to full development in his famous book, "Progress and Poverty." The collected works of Henry George published after his death consist of nine volumes; but the two volumes making up "Progress and Poverty" are those alone which will keep his name forever on the tongues of men.

The genesis of that book and the writing of it will always be among the most interesting of the memories of my life. Our friendship and intimacy had never ceased, and at George's request I had written articles for the *Post.* I remember well what a literary debauch we had in the editorial office on the evening of the overwhelming defeat of Newton Booth's Dolly Varden party, each one of four or five of us sitting down to write on the subject—my own contribution was some half dozen pieces of verse—and all in the midst of the greatest hilarity. It was therefore quite consonant with our relations for George to invite me to his house on a Sunday in the autumn of 1877, for the purpose of asking my judgment of something he had just written. He was then living in a small frame cottage on the west side of Second Street, some little distance north of Harrison.

When I arrived at the house I found him and Mrs. George sitting alone in the front room. Without any ado George produced a number of loose sheets of manuscript, at the same time telling me in substance that it was a magazine article on the cause of industrial depression and of increase of want with increase of wealth, and was to indicate a remedy. He said he wished to read it to me and thereafter hear my judgment of it. He thereupon read the article aloud very deliberately, and at its close asked me what I thought of it. I responded that it was something beyond the ordinary, but that it would be a great mistake to publish it in that form; that the thoughts in it needed very much more expansion and elaboration than could be given in a magazine article, and that he should expand what he had written into a book. What I said had such immediate impression upon him that he resolved to cast aside the article and to do as I had suggested.

With little delay he began the composition of the book. After some small amount of work had been done on it, he moved with his family to the top of Rincon Hill, into a house known as the Cutler-McAllister House, at Number 417 First Street, where the work was continuously carried on until its completion, two years and a month from the time of its commencement. It will not be thought remarkable that George was able to rent this large house in such a neighborhood when it is remembered that the Second Street Cut had pretty nearly destroyed real property values on the hill, and that one of the supposedly choicest places for residence purposes in San Francisco had lost both character and reputation as

a fashionable residential district. The selection of this house was of the greatest benefit to George, for it had a delightful outlook on the bay, and it gave him opportunities for boating, which he embraced eagerly when his work permitted.

George carried on the work of composition upon the book with the greatest care; he wrote, and rewrote, and rewrote again, revised and re-revised proofs until he felt himself satisfied. I myself went over his manuscript as he prepared it, and over the proofs. He wrote all the book on sermon paper, using deep blue ink; and although he was always disorderly in the use of his tools, and generally worked in the midst of a litter of papers and books, yet his manuscript looked very neat. The book was completed in October, 1879—completed after an agony of thought and labor and under difficulties that were simply enormous, not the least of which were pecuniary ones. But the author never flagged; he would not permit himself to grow weary, but toiled on and on, often late into the night, with hope singing in his heart, till the great travail was over. The book having been born, the next thing to do was to find someone who would give it to the world; and this George fancied was easy enough. Imagine therefore his great disappointment when Appleton rejected the book, and also the Harpers and Scribners in turn.

He then determined to be his own publisher, and to have his old friend, William Hinton, do the printing. Before, however, putting the manuscript into Mr. Hinton's hands, he went over the whole of it with great care, not only making some changes, but rearranging the chapters and somewhat altering the sub-title. He himself set the first two stickfuls of type on the book; and one day, when it was about half set up, upon our meeting on the street, he insisted that I likewise should contribute. Yielding to his insistence, I went at once to Hinton's printing office and set up a stickful of type of the manuscript. As soon as the book was printed he sent a copy of it to his father in Philadelphia, who was then eighty-one years of age, and who wrote him a very affectionate letter of acknowledgment. A copy was then sent to Appleton, who on renewed examination agreed to undertake its publication, which accordingly he did after some months of delay.

In response to copies sent to important persons George received some encouragement from abroad—particularly from Sir George Grey, of New Zealand, and Emile de Laveleye—but none whatsoever at home. On the contrary, the newspapers spoke of the work either with contempt or hostility. How, some suggested, could an inspector of gas meters be able to write a great book on any subject, much less on one involving questions of political economy? In fact, even after George had become a great celebrity, some of our newspapers persisted in speaking contemptuously of him. It is difficult for the man in the street to understand how it can be possible for the person whom he has frequently met in common salutation to be of larger dimensions than himself. The residents of Nazareth found the same difficulty in recognizing the superhuman proportions of the son of Joseph the carpenter. However, important reviews in the East soon began to appear, and thereupon George deemed it well to go to New York. In some way he raised money sufficient to travel thither on a third-class ticket, but he had to leave his family behind him.

It was in August, 1880, that he severed the ties that bound him to California; and for the remainder of his life he was a resident of the city of New York, making from there numerous

trips to Europe and to different parts of his own country. Soon after he left the West his library of something less than a thousand volumes was sold at auction. The books fetched but little, as they were all commercial and many of them in poor condition. On some there were no bids at all, and these were knocked down to friends at any price the auctioneer saw fit.

Appleton soon got out a cheap edition of "Progress and Poverty," and in this and other ways it began to circulate. Before long it was translated into every language of Europe; and it has had in all an enormous circulation.

It has been said that there is nothing essential in George's book, as to remedy at least, that was not derived from the physiocrats. His answer to this is to be found in his last book—"The Science of Political Economy." The following extract is sufficient here:

> In what is most important I have been closer to the views of Quesnay and his followers than was Adam Smith, who knew the men personally. But in my case there was certainly no derivation from them. I well recall the day when, checking my horse on a rise that overlooks San Francisco Bay, the commonplace reply of a passing teamster to a commonplace question crystallized, as by lightning-flash, my brooding thoughts into coherency, and I there and then recognized the natural order—one of those experiences that make those who have had them feel thereafter that they can vaguely appreciate what mystics and poets call the "ecstatic vision." Yet at that time I had never heard of the Physiocrats, or even read a line of Adam Smith.
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> Afterwards, with the great idea of the natural order in my head, I printed a little book, "Our Land and Land Policy," in which I urged that all taxes should be laid on the value of land, irrespective of improvements. Casually meeting, on a San Francisco street, a scholarly lawyer, A. B. Douthitt, we stopped to chat, and he told me that what I had in my little book proposed was what the French Economists a hundred years before had proposed.
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> I forget many things, but the place where I heard this, and the tones and attitude of the man who told me of it, are photographed on my memory. For, when you have seen a truth that those around you do not see, it is one of the deepest of pleasures to hear of others who had seen it. This is true, even though these others were dead years before you were born. For the stars that we of today see when we look were here to be seen hundreds and thousands of years ago. They shine on, men come and go in their generations like the generations of the ants.

But after all, George's book is his own, notwithstanding anything contained in the work of the physiocrats. Their ideas in regard to the question of land and the true basis of land taxation are widely different from those of George. Besides, nothing came as a result of their doctrine. Their recommendation of the *impôt unique* faded away as though it had never existed. The same can be said of the "unearned increment" of John Stuart Mill, so far as it exerted any influence upon methods of taxation. But far otherwise is the case of Henry George and his single tax doctrine, with the solid foundations on which it is based. His book arrested the attention of the world; humanitarians saw in it a new Star of Bethlehem; and already it has been put into successful operation. It was, indeed, an arrow of logic which, feathered by love, went direct to the heart of humanity. Quesnay, Mill, and others somewhat resemble the Norsemen whose keels touched the American shores centuries before those of Columbus. Nothing followed upon the event; they might just as well have stayed at home. But George is like the immortal Genoese on whose discovery the fortunes of mankind were changed.