



# Retrospection Two Years After . . .

by

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I AM grateful to be invited by The Henry George News to comment on my biography, *Henry George*, which was published by the Oxford University Press two years ago. Not many authors are granted opportunity to discuss in print their own writings, or to talk back to the reviewers if they please. Next to the banquet, at which the Henry George School celebrated the event of publication, this is the nicest invitation that book has produced.

At that time the suggestion was made that I retrace some of my wanderings as scholar, from one collection of historical materials to the next, as I gathered the data for my Henry George story. Those wanderings occupied my research-time—say one-fourth to one-third of my working-time—over a decade and more, and took me to many of the great libraries. I name the ones which had the most to give; in California, the magnificent Huntington Library, the great collection of California in the Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley, the Stanford University Library, and the libraries in San Francisco and Sacramento; in the Middle West, special collections in the libraries of the

University of Wisconsin and University of Michigan; and, on the East Coast, beside home base at the Johns Hopkins, the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, and most important of all, the Henry George Collection in the Manuscripts and the Economic Divisions of the New York Public Library, where I made repeated and extended visits.

Often a weary traveller and far from home, I was never a bored one on that quest, and I cherish warm memories of discoveries made here, of assistance rendered there, all along the road. But what seemed to me to be worth saying, from the effort of gathering data, is set in the handsome format of the Oxford University Press; and at present I am more interested in my retrospects, to consider how my findings have fared—how they seem to have struck my readers and reviewers, as nearly as I can estimate—than I am to recollect personal wanderings and ventures of the road.

As I wish to be candid, I had better confess that during the first year after publication, when the crest of the reviews came in, I had to relearn a lesson I already knew, a lesson which I think every author in whatever field

is obliged in some degree to learn. The lesson is that a book means not just the words the writer put down as he conceived them, and still less means what he intended to say but may have erred a little in expressing. The meaning which a book achieves depends also on what the readers have the frame of mind to discover.

Some reviewers have spoken favorably of the size of my biography, a stout 635 pages of text; others said it would have been better if shorter. But when I decided to include the background of Henry George's journalism in California, because that was his education and the first proving-ground of his ideas; and when I put in a great deal about his lecture tours in England and Scotland and the American Middle West, because the tours measured his power as a leader of public thought and feeling; I acted upon reasons in which I still believe. I was interested, and expected my readers to be interested, in the processes of democracy. In that early journalism and in those lecture-tours of George's later life I envisaged an especially intimate display of a man of the people affecting the conscience of the people.

#### Henry George in History

Whether a reader might or might not incline toward sympathy with Henry George's main formulas for reform—land-value taxation, free trade, and the Australian ballot—he would, I believed, in either case share my excitement over the hero who, with persuasive logic and passion had blended his economic ideas with his religious and political convictions.

This eloquent act of faith in the capacity of the people, was, I thought, a great assertion of democracy in a critical passage of history. But the hard lesson for me, as the author has been that this phase stirred little or no response. I gathered that readers who consider Whitman, Jackson, Lincoln or Franklin as expressive symbols of

democratic life, do not want to consider George in the same terms.

As for the main line of my interpretation of Henry George, over which reviewers have agreed and disagreed, my labors have not proved unexciting. My belief about Henry George's thought, and the program he offered during his own lifetime, is that he exerted a wider grasp and pull than even his disciples have appreciated. No comment on this point could have pleased me more than the one made by Agnes George de Mille when she said that she was thrilled to learn what a man of ideas and convictions her grandfather had been.

#### More than a Single Taxer

But, finding Henry George to have been a more complex person than he had previously been judged, I myself was brought, as biographer, into what historians call a "revisionist" position; and my book offers revisions both about the hero of the biography and about the reform movements he started. It puts me in the irrevocable record as saying that the single-tax movement came late in Henry George's life, in 1887 and 1888 rather than in 1879 with the publication of *Progress and Poverty*, as is usually said; and I say also that the single-tax movement represents less completely Henry George, his ideals and his effort, than most people, disciples and others, have believed. That Henry George was a single taxer is entirely true; that his ideas inspired that movement among a devoted group of followers I myself have said in agreement with the common belief. But that he personally was altogether wrapped up in that movement, or thought that it completely expressed his message, the facts I gathered seem to me to disprove.

While I was writing I expected that this revision, when published, would probably land me in trouble and disagreement with a good many Georg-

ists. On the other hand my fancy led me to think that, among general readers and critics in America, the hero of my biography would seem more interesting than in the past, because he would appear less as a one-idea man. And, to complete the confession of a prophet whose prophecy failed, insofar as I made any estimations at all about what kind of reception the biography would have in England, I supposed that revisionist ideas would be so familiar there as to excite little interest in the general journals, but that it would please English Georgists better than American Georgists. These anticipations from before publication still seem to me to have been reasonably logical.

In American newspapers and general magazines my interpretation drew such approval as to please an author; but, allowing for wonderful exceptions such as a review by Gerald Johnson, I confess that the newspaper-and-magazine reaction in the United States struck less fire than I had expected. But from American Georgists, the disciples I had supposed to be too orthodox to be pleased, I had the most handsome treatment. I never was told, nor did I believe, that they agreed with me all the way, but the response from readers of HGN was open-minded and friendly.

The English reaction came slower. British Georgists, if Land & Liberty

represents them fairly, regard me as quite unsound. An astonishing amount of their rejection turns on an opinion, which I would reconsider, I admit, were I doing the job again—concerning an act of Parliament half-a-century after Henry George died. But truly great journals of English opinion, especially The Times which Henry George honored more than any other journal, though he never expected to convert it, gave me such reviews as an author dreams of receiving. In endorsing the book as they did, The Times Literary Supplement and The Economist honored the importance of Henry George. During his life, too, the leading British journals estimated him more highly than most Americans and American journals did—as a truly great force in history.

Two years after publication I would like to believe that the historian-reviewer was right who predicted that this book would "win for George a much wider appreciation than he has yet enjoyed." If so, there is a line along which present-day followers of Henry George and present-day scholars do march agreeably in the same direction. Only in the short run are proposers of reform and students of the history of reform opposed to one another. The Georgists' cause and the historian's cause is always a common cause. Henry George knew this as well as anyone needs to know.



#### A PRAYER FOR LANDLORDS

"The Earth O Lord is Thine, and all is contained therein; we heartily pray Thee to send Thy Holy Spirit into the hearts of them that possess the grounds, pastures and dwelling places of the earth, that they, remembering themselves to be Thy tenants, may not rack and stretch out the rents of their houses and lands, nor yet take up unreasonable fines and incomes after the manner of the covetous worldings, but so let them, out to others that the inhabitants thereof may both be able to pay the rents and also honestly to live, to nourish their families and to relieve the poor. And that the landlords may so behave themselves that after this life they may be received into everlasting dwelling places." *Sixteenth century prayer published in Economica, the quarterly of the London School of Economics.*