

## California Influences on Henry George

*Henry George and the California Background of "Progress and Poverty."*

By Charles A. Barker. *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XXIV, 97-115.

Professor Glenn E. Hoover, in his "Henry George, Reconsidered,"<sup>1</sup> investigated a question which ought, properly, to concern scholars, historians certainly, less: the question of George's fame. It should be noted that this is a different question from that of his permanent influence on the world's affairs. Professor Hoover contrasted George with Mendel and Whitman, who were little known in their own time, but who increase in stature, he maintained, by decades. Has George decreased in genuine stature? This question merits attention. But it is erroneous to conceive him as "forgotten" merely because the Single Tax idea failed to capture governments. Henry George Jr.'s biography and Professor George R. Geiger's study, to say nothing of the work of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, have been distinguished arguments against this view. The same can be said of Rollin A. Sawyer's 90-page catalogue of the writings by and about George in the New York Public Library (1926). Books dealing in whole or in part with George continue to be written under individual or private auspices.<sup>2</sup> There is scarcely a year which does not see articles on George in the periodicals. How many historical figures of George's time and comparable importance are better remembered?

To be sure, George does not stand so prominently in our political consciousness as does Karl Marx, for example. This fact did not disturb the late A. J. Nock, who was inclined to deplore George's reform activities as a waste of philosophic energy. But since there is still general interest in the question of George's reputation, Professor Hoover's analysis of why the reformer's "light went out" has required attention. It is interesting to note that Professor Hoover's argument by no means solved the problem. The whole question was simply reopened again at several points by Lawson Purdy's rebuttal.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> AM. JOUR. ECON. SOCIO., Vol. 4, No. 1 (Oct., 1944), pp. 45-52.

<sup>2</sup> The best catalogues of these are found in the annual book lists of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, New York, and the Henry George Foundation, London, but these are very incomplete. A few recent productions may be mentioned: Albert J. Nock, "Henry George, An Essay," New York, 1939; Arthur Birnie, "Single Tax George," London, 1939; Ernest Teilhac, "Pioneers of American Economic Thought of the Nineteenth Century," New York, 1942; Francis Neilson, "In Quest of Justice," New York, 1944; Jackson H. Ralston, "Confronting the Land Question," Bayside, N. Y., 1945; Alfred N. Chandler, "Land Title Origins," New York, 1946; Gilbert M. Tucker, "The Self-Supporting City," New York, 1946.

<sup>3</sup> AM. JOUR. ECON. SOCIO., Vol. 4, No. 2 (Jan., 1942), pp. 257-8.

The essential vitality of the George saga is amply demonstrated by Professor Barker's article on George and California, which takes a direction the historian can best appreciate. He has sought the sources of George's attitudes and ideas, and his facts and analyses go deep and break new ground. Here, however, it should be recalled that Arthur N. Young<sup>4</sup> pioneered in this field. Professor Barker touches upon the earlier Philadelphia setting. He finds a turn of mind in George which identifies him with the practical Franklin, the economics-minded Careys, and this generally sober and religious community. Professor Barker's remarks are meant to be suggestive rather than definitive, and rightly so: George's Philadelphia deserves additional and more intensive study.

It is Professor Barker's thesis that George, who had little economic training before entering into the life of California, learned his economics in the main by exposure to regional conditions. The possibility that California had a Destiny, that she might become the crossroads of the world, led her promoters to think of her in the large terms of economics, geography, and sociology. Beginning in 1863, the two publishers Bancroft and Roman began separately to issue remarkable works on these themes, notably by John S. Hittell, Titus Fey Conise, Bentham Fabian, Professor Ezra S. Carr, and H. H. Bancroft. Most of these writers aimed at promotion. The failure of the railroads to boom California immigration set these conservative elements, as well as the liberal ones, to searching their souls. Both agreed on the need for small farms and proprietor-farmers, both criticized land monopoly and deplored the insecurity of land-titles as detrimental to the best interests of their state. The California Immigrant Union, the leaders of which were financiers, also subscribed to these tenets. It further urged the desirability of a British-Northern European immigration and the exclusion of the Chinese, an opinion which George, at first, shared. He, too, made all "the grand assumptions of classical, natural-law economics." California was firmly in his mind when he wrote, and his first study, "Land and Land Policy," was "strictly a work on the American west." What *differentiated* George from his fellow Californians, according to Professor Barker, was his attachment to the state, which was that of a romantic rather than a promoter; his class-consciousness; and the fact that although his "Progress and Poverty" was regional in derivation, it was not so in purpose.

The striking point is made that George's theory that wages are a product of labor and are paid after work has been done was "of the very context of regional thought." Even those who declared high wages were ruining the

<sup>4</sup> In "The Single Tax Movement in the United States," Princeton, N. J., 1916.

country demonstrated "the relevance of the wage-fund theory," to which George opposed his own theory of wages. As for the famous proposition that private property in land is wrong, it was in California that George had seen miners, operating under local codes, permit no more land to be monopolized than a miner could himself work. It is recalled that public-ownership was a serious "might-have-been" of San Francisco history, which might thus have become a single-tax city without benefit of "Progress and Poverty!" It was in such an atmosphere of principles and events that George's ideas were formed.

Professor Barker observes that we admire Americans who are idealists, and who achieve results. What, then, did George accomplish? Professor Barker notes that he concretely understood California conditions, that he assimilated theory and fact, Christian ethics, California economics, and democratic politics. It seems to me that this point deserves elaboration. If George were to lose his last disciple, he would still leave too great a heritage for the general student of human thought to permit that he be forgotten. And to say this is to pass by entirely the record of his real and substantial influence upon politics and life, in America and elsewhere.

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