Paul Gaston's introduction to The Life of Henry George

INTRODUCTION TO THE
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In 1909, twelve years after his father had died, Henry George, Jr., made a pilgrimage to Russia to meet Count Leo Tolstoy. On the study wall was a photograph of Henry George. "Your father was my friend," his host explained. The old man wore a skullcap and a long peasant blouse and sat in the wheelchair he had used in recent years. "I am quite old—eighty-one. I do not expect to stay much longer," Tolstoy said. "But I am keeping at my work." What, his visitor wanted to know, was the work; did it deal with political economy? "No," Tolstoy replied, "this is not on political economy. It treats of moral questions, which your father put first."

The son would agree. In his father's biography, published in 1900, he had said that "the essence of Henry George's economics is ethical." Now he had special reason to remember that judgment. As the interview drew to a close, Tolstoy looked closely at his visitor. "This is the last time I shall meet you," he said. "I shall see your father soon. Is there any commission you would have me take to him?" Lost for a moment in the meaning of the question, George replied, "Tell my father that I am doing the work."

Henry George, Jr., had been "doing the work" for most of his life; he was not likely to quit. When his father collapsed with a fatal stroke five days before the 1897 New York mayoral election, the son was chosen to stand in for the fallen leader --- a symbol for the bereaved electorate. Three years later he finished a long biography, the work reprinted here, and soon after, he saw through to completion a handsome edition of all the published works of his father. Meanwhile, he wrote magazine and newspaper articles (he was, by this time, a successful journalist) and two more books. *The Menace of Privilege* (1905) was a slashing work that caused one reviewer to say, "The son is more than a pupil of his father; he is his father's heir." Next, he turned to fiction with a novel called *The Romance of John Bainbridge* (1906), which borrowed from both his father's life and his doctrines. "Henry George, Jr.," a friendly critic observed, "is carrying forward the work of social justice by use of his strong and vigorous pen, in a way that would give his father the keenest joy were he still with us." The children had always been a great joy to Henry George, and his way with them inspired their deep devotion. The youngest, Anna, also wrote a biography of her father, published a half-century after her brother's. How many times, one wonders, have two children written biographies to secure their father's place in history? The Georges, apparently, would not have thought that unusual. Agnes de Mille, Anna's daughter, said of her mother that "like all George women she believed

her activities valid only in service to others, but above all in service to her father's cause." The children grew up with this attitude. Thus, Henry George, Jr., gave up school as a teenager to become his father's secretary. He helped him while he wrote *Progress and Poverty* and afterwards committed himself to spread its message. He traveled with his father on speaking tours at home and abroad, edited his newspaper, *The Standard*, and helped to manage his

political campaigns. More successful politically than his father—he served two terms in the House of Representatives, from 1911 to 1915—he saw his role as public servant as advocate of his father's cause. He died in 1916 at the age of fifty-four.

The man who inspired such family devotion also had a galvanizing effect on his generation of Americans. In an age anguished by new forms of poverty and tom by industrial violence, class conflict, and political turmoil, millions were stirred by Henry George's simple statement that "This association of poverty with progress is the greatest enigma of our times." *Progress and Poverty* declared that vice and misery sprang from the unequal distribution of wealth and privilege. Marveling at the industrial and technological genius of the nation—the invention of laborsaving devices and the creation of spiraling amounts of wealth—he described in explosive detail how this genius had thwarted human needs and aspirations. He employed images and examples resonating with the experience of his readers. He counterpointed his analysis of exploitation with a positive, optimistic faith and a program of reform that promised a better social order. Reading *Progress and Poverty* converted newly hopeful men and women to radicalism and protest. None of his contemporaries—even those who were more charismatic, more learned, or more politically astute— equaled his influence in this respect.

With an analysis that ramified in many directions, meshing economic reasoning with moral inquiry, George traced the enigma ultimately to the monopoly of natural resources, to the institution of private property in land. "Poverty deepens as wealth increases, and wages are forced down while productive power grows, because land, which is the source of all wealth and the field of all labor, is monopolized," he wrote in *Progress and Poverty*. The solution was simple: "*We must make land common property*. " How this was to be done was not made entirely clear, but by 1887 the term "single tax" had come into common usage, to describe his favored method: individual ownership of land might remain, but government — which would abolish all taxes on labor and capital — would derive its revenue from a single tax on land values. George, according to the son's biography, "never regarded the term as describing his philosophy, but rather as indicating the method he would take to apply it." There George lost many readers: committed to social action, they often tossed aside the "problem solved" section of his work. Everywhere — in America, in Britain, and on the Continent — he made converts, but relatively few of them became single taxers. George Bernard Shaw, for example, said his life was changed by the American crusader, but instead of becoming a single-taxer he was "swept into the great Socialist revival of 1883," where he found that nearly all of those who were "swept in" with him "had been converted by Henry George." And so it went for other causes and revivals as well. That he was a catalyst in the lives of so many, but the founder of a specific reform movement followed by so few, may be taken as a comment on his shortcomings as a social reformer and economic theorist. On the other hand, it is also an indication of his brilliant articulation of the central problems of his age.

A man of rare achievements, Henry George was in many ways the quintessential American. Born in Philadelphia in 1839, he enjoyed a loving and supportive family. When he dropped out of school at sixteen, he had his parents' blessing to sign on as a foremast boy on a sailing ship bound for Australia and India. He loved the sea and did his job well. A restless youth — every account uses this adjective to describe him — he was lured to California in the fifties. In the rawness and flux of that society he grew to maturity. It was back east, on a trip to New York City,

that the sight of misery and squalor in the midst of plenty made him vow to discover the reason for such injustice. But it was in the West, out of his California experience, that he came to understand the connection between land speculation and social disorder.

As printer, journalist, lecturer, and sometime political candidate, he wrestled intellectually with theoretical questions and materially with his own straitened circumstances. When at twenty-two he proposed to eighteen-year-old Annie Fox, he had one coin in his pocket. Not long after their marriage, "near to starving to death," as he related it, he demanded five dollars of a man in the street because his wife had nothing to eat. In time he was secure enough to put together eighteen relatively interrupted months and write *Progress and Poverty*. The Appleton Company, to whom he sent it, returned the manuscript with the comment that it has the merit of being written with great clearness and force, but is very aggressive. There is very little to encourage publication of any such work." After fellow printers offered credit and the use of his shop, Henry George, Henry George, Jr., and their friends set type themselves, the author revising all the while, to produce a handsome limited edition of five hundred copies. Only then did Appleton, coaxed by the offer of the plates thus struck, agree to a New York edition, which was published early in 1880. "It will not be recognized at first," Henry George wrote to his father in Philadelphia, "but it will ultimately be considered a great book, will be published in both hemispheres, and be translated into different languages." George spent the next eighteen years working to make that prediction come true.

A man so finely tuned to the deepest anxieties and most cherished hopes of his age has naturally appealed to biographers, historians, and philosophers. John Dewey ranked George among the world's top ten social philosophers and he has been the subject of much good writing. Albert Jay Nock's brilliant *Henry George, An Essay* (1931) and George R. Geiger's exhaustive *Philosophy of Henry George* (1933) are two early examples. A generation ago Charles A. Barker's magisterial biography, *Henry George* (1955), and Eric F. Goldman's influential history of modern American reform, *Rendezvous with Destiny* (1952), fully established his historical reputation.

What of the son's biography? It would be too much to claim, as one contemporary reviewer did, that "whoever wishes to know what manner of man Henry George was, can by reading this book satisfy his curiosity as well as he could have done by meeting him face to face." But it is a biography rich in personal details. The author draws freely and effectively upon diaries and family letters, contributing his own observations and recollections skillfully and unobtrusively. One scarcely notices how often the intimate portraits of the father are furnished by the son's firsthand observations, yet this quality of the book is perhaps its greatest strength. For example, the account we have of the composition of *Progress and Poverty* owes everything to the son's presence. We learn that "the eldest son had reached the top grade in the grammar school, which was thought to be enough schooling,

so that he was taken away and became amanuensis to his father." It is from the secretary's observations that we learn how Henry George worked; that "he read mostly reclining, a pile of books drawn up beside him"; or "as he wrote much by inspiration, especially on the more elevated parts of his book, he could not always work at a set time or continuously. When his mind would not act to his suiting he would lie down and read, or go sailing or visit friends."

During these diversions his subconscious was at work, for when he returned to the study "he could write freely on the point that before was confused." There are similarly revealing insights into his lecturing techniques. We learn that he never read a text or spoke from notes, but lay down before speaking to fix the main ideas of the subject in his mind, depending on inspiration from the audience for the development of the details. The book abounds with glimpses of a happy marriage and of family members secure in each other's affections, another debt to the son's personal observations.

The discussion of ideas is restrained, sometimes almost bland, in contrast to the vividness of the personal history. There is neither the exuberance of a proud son nor the pointed comparisons of a loyal disciple. This seems surprising until one remembers that the author wrote of ideas bred in him from childhood, ideas that appeared so natural, understandable, and right as to arouse no special amazement and need no extensive explanation or defense. They are simply presented, clearly, without fanfare. It was part of the author's strategy to keep himself out of the book, for this was to be Henry George's book; the record was enough, the author believed, without any judgments from him. On the other hand, the naturalness with which he accepts his father's ideas, the ease with which he accounts for their spread and development, is a different kind of testament to the father as well as ample evidence that the son, as he told Count Tolstoy, was "doing the work."

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