



Dreamers of
The American Dream

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Part Four

GOD MADE THE LAND FOR USE

cedure. Few if any of these changes were made without pressure to stop or hamper the Secretary. Demands were made on the President to remove him. Roosevelt refused. Hitchcock, frosty in manner, collected in speech, went ahead, utterly impervious to the influence of men high in government counsels.

Early in 1903 the Secretary suddenly dismissed his commissioner of the General Land Office. Almost simultaneously he instituted a relentless investigation of frauds based on the Homestead Act, and one of the great scandals of the period came in for an airing. More than one thousand persons in twenty states were indicted, among them several United States senators. Stephen A. Douglas Puter, King of the Oregon Timber Fraud Ring, decided to tell all, and unfolded a tale of corruption that is said to have bemused even the veterans of *Crédit Mobilier*. In 1906 alone one hundred twenty-six land sharks went to prison.

Exhausted by almost a decade of defending his actions, and attacking frauds at the same time, Ethan Allen Hitchcock resigned in 1907 from the Cabinet, soon to die at seventy-two. He left a public domain incomparably safer from raid than it had ever been before. It is to be hoped that some obituarist suggested the possibility that, if any reward were to come to Secretary Hitchcock, it must come from the hearts of a grateful people. Possibly it did, though one doubts it; and fifty years after his death, he who "throttled the land-grabbers with the iron hand of government" is so forgotten that most if not all of the many recent books on the history of conservation in the United States fail even to give him so much as a footnote.

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HENRY GEORGE: THE NOBLE FAILURE

IF, after putting the fear of the law if not of God into the hearts of the land grabbers, Secretary of the Interior Ethan Allen Hitchcock is forgotten, this is not true of Henry George, whose herculean efforts of a lifetime were rejected first and last by his countrymen. Perhaps he is remembered chiefly because he was a splendid dreamer and a magnificent failure; and also because a magnificent failure to achieve the impossible strikes a responsive chord of sympathy in men, most of whom come in time to recognize their own failures.

Henry George was the Single-Tax Man. More than half a century after his death his name, and often many pages about him, appear in all

books dealing with reform in the United States, and quite as often in England. Even while he lived, and for decades after, an excellent five-cent cigar bore his name and its handsome band bore his likeness. This was fame to put him with other immortal Americans like Clay and Webster. In spite of which his countrymen could not quite bring themselves to accept the remedy he offered for all their economic and social ills. He called it the single tax. It had nothing in common with communism, socialism, populism, or any form of collectivism no matter its trade-mark.

Henry George's plan was based on the premise that land monopoly was an ancient curse that had laid its blight on every civilization. The expropriation of natural resources was the origin of rent. Rent was a social tax parasitic in nature. It increased in proportion to the rising value of the land. The rising value of the land increased with "progress," or the incoming of people and the upbuilding of civilization. Yet poverty grew hand in hand with progress simply because land monopolists kept the entire rent or gain for themselves. This condition could be righted by a single tax on increments in the value of land. Such a tax, George believed, was equitable because it assigned to the public that part of the value of any given piece of land which the public had created.

The single tax would, in short, reduce all real estate to common property by the imposition of a tax equal to the total rental value of the land. It aroused both horror and admiration. "It was even denounced," Thomas Beer ironically remarked, "by the Duke of Argyll." And denounced also by many American men of property, though the industrialists with factories could see in it no disturbance to their economic operations. Some industrialists went so far as "to patronize Henry George." To the common man, however, the great appeal of George's proposal was, so Merle Curti pointed out, "the argument that the receipts from the social acquisition of the unearned increment . . . would be sufficient for all purposes." Hence "The Single Tax" was a magic phrase. It would relieve the public of all other taxes.

There was something almost magic about Henry George himself. There was nothing of the intense and often sour fanatic about him. The defeats of a quarter of a century left him the same gentle, sympathetic, affable, and even humorous man he had always been. It is doubtful if any other American radical, unless it be Eugene Debs, appealed so warmly to those who knew or only met him. On one occasion Charles Dana, editor of the *New York Sun*, sent a reporter to interview the single-tax advocate but did not print the result. Instead he called the reporter into his sanctum, telling him, "You sound like Wendell Phillips reporting Saint John the Baptist. I told you to see a Mr. Henry George."

He was born in Philadelphia in 1839, one of ten children of first-generation Scottish and English parents. At sixteen, after little schooling, he went to sea; and on a later voyage to California got a job setting type in San Francisco, an occupation he followed off and on for many years.

He married, then drifted from one California paper to another. An attempt with five other printers to found a daily paper quickly failed. Occasionally he sought wealth by the almost standard method of the time and place, which was to put a few dollars into mining stock; and the return were also standard, being assessments "for improvements." He failed as a house-to-house salesman, failed again with a job-printing office; and on at least one occasion was obliged to pawn some small jewelry to get food for his wife and two children. His early years were filled with hardship and failure which he later conjured up to describe a sort of generic House of Want for the many, while the buccaneers of enterprise were "pre-empting the virgin resources of California."

In about 1865 he started contributing, mostly to obscure local periodicals, on various subjects, and joined a debating society. This was the point, he afterward said, at which his career really began. He spoke with ease in what one listener described as a lyrelike voice. His prose, too, was clear, natural, and effective. His mind turned, naturally enough, to the subject of poverty. In George's time poverty existed by divine right, as monarchy did in earlier days. Indeed there were few to question the status of poverty. Charity toward the poor was of course a Christian duty. But to propose a radical interference with the incidence of poverty was both impious and dangerous.

At this period the big subject of discussion in California was the impending completion of the long-awaited transcontinental railroad, which fired the imagination of all Californians. It would put the state "on a par with New York." It would bring a huge population to the West Coast. Land would boom. So would industry. The prosperity would be so great as to bring riches to all. In the *Overland Monthly* for October 1868 appeared an article by Henry George entitled "What the Railroad Will Bring Us." It was a daring thing to write, or to publish. In it the author took an almost sacrilegious view, namely that the increasing population and business activity would bring California "wealth for the few and greater poverty for the many." It was shocking. George followed it with a pamphlet about "Our Land Policy," which, though written in a low key, contained the essentials of the philosophy he was to expand and refine in his major work almost a decade later.

The Central Pacific Railroad knew an enemy when it saw one. Noting that this typesetting tramp opposed the various subsidies the railroad was demanding, its catchpoles were ordered to take steps.

George was defeated for a seat in the California Assembly, and as a delegate to the state constitutional convention. The newspaper he was editing was taken over by its creditors.

This was most unfortunate for a heretical man who doubted that poverty was ordained by divine right and meant to discover the actual reasons for it. There were then no "foundations" to support the work of impecunious scholars; the newly wealthy of the Gilded Age were still busy erecting quite remarkable palaces to indicate their status. But Henry George prevailed on his good friend, Governor Irwin, to appoint him state inspector of gas meters, a post not overly onerous which permitted him to get on with his work on what he called land taxation.

The Moses of single tax started writing *Progress and Poverty* in mid-1877, a year of incomparable riots involving labor and most of the railroads east and west. The violence brought out thousands of regular troops and militia before anything like peace was restored. It was a sullen peace, too, which left neither labor nor capital content. In California appeared Denis Kearney, a labor agitator called the "Sandlot Man," who wanted a large number of reforms put into effect immediately. Out of his vehement oratory came only the anti-Chinese movement, which from San Francisco spread up and down the West Coast and grew into riots.

Henry George wrote on, pausing only to reflect that time was proving even sooner than he had thought the rightness of his theory about the basis of poverty. The manuscript began to pile up, and his teen-age son, Henry, was set to copying it fair for the printer. It was done early in 1878, and it was rejected by the several Eastern publishers to whom it was submitted. A friend and printer, William M. Hinton, offered to make plates for the book. He did so, and brought out a small edition, in San Francisco, in 1879. When a copy was received by Appleton's in New York, that well-established firm changed its mind, and agreed to bring out the book if the author would supply the plates. *Progress and Poverty* appeared early in 1880.

Publication brought no great noise. It fell from the press as "dead as Julius Caesar." A friend wrote from New York to suggest that George come there to stir up interest in the book. He backed his suggestion with cash for railroad fare. Late in the summer the author arrived in the metropolis, while his wife took in boarders in California and his son got a job setting type in a San Francisco shop. But George himself could find no work in New York. The Garfield-Hancock presidential campaign was getting warmer just then. George was an experienced speaker. One of the three friends he had in New York got him a long list of engagements to stump for the Democrats, who were backing General Winfield Scott Hancock. The Republicans had tossed that old favorite, the

tariff issue, into the campaign, and were stigmatizing the Democrats as free-traders. The Democrats wanted speakers to go out and tell labor that the Democrats were every bit as favorable to a tariff as the Republicans. Having thus been briefed by candidate Hancock's managers, Henry George took to the road to enlighten honest workingmen.

What the politicians apparently did not know was that Henry George was an idealist and that a tariff of any kind was not among his ideals. His first talk was his last. At his first appearance he told his audience he had heard of high-tariff Democrats and revenue-tariff Democrats, but that, speaking for himself, he was a no-tariff Democrat. Before anybody could stop him, he went on to call upon the Democrats "to sweep away all custom-houses and custom officers, and have Free Trade." Cheers and cheers, but the professional boys on the platform with him were too shocked to speak at all. "I took my leave of them," George reported at headquarters, "without a man to shake my hand."

Convinced that George was either a dirty traitor to the Democrats or a simple-minded rustic, innocent of all political knowledge, the high command of General Hancock instantly relieved him from duty. Yet his next job was ghost-writing for Democratic Congressman Abram S. Hewitt, for which he was paid the enormous salary of fifty dollars a week. He must have proved competent, for he worked at it more than four months, saving enough money to bring out a small book, *The Irish Land Question*, he had found time to write while on Hewitt's payroll. This pamphlet was the turning point in George's career. It did for *Progress and Poverty* what neither author nor publisher had been able to accomplish; it started the major work on its way toward becoming a world-wide best-seller.

Curiously, as Albert Jay Nock was to point out, "this simple-hearted man wrote the pamphlet on *The Irish Land Question* with no notion whatever of the effect it would have on his personal fortunes." The trouble in Ireland over land and landlords was just then an outstanding subject in the English-speaking world. Everybody was talking about it. New York even then held more native Irish than the City of Cork. And the next thing Henry George knew "a prodigious rabble of charmed and enthusiastic Irish had hoisted him upon their shoulders and borne him to fame." Irish-like, their enthusiasm and loyalty were personal, unreasoning, unquestioning. They might be wholly unimpressed by George the philosopher, or his logic. It was enough that he was against the landlords. From that moment, said Nock, "Henry George, the protagonist," was a made man.

In New York City, George's status went up like a rocket. The bolted doors of opportunity seemed to open of their own accord. Sales of the slowly moving *Progress and Poverty* doubled, and doubled again.

Nothing could stop it now. The influential *Irish World* of New York sent the bemused author on a speaking tour of the British Isles, where he was a hero to the Irish and to the workingmen of London and the provinces. He returned to New York to find himself a hero there, with a gigantic welcome meeting at Cooper Union and a high-toned dinner at Delmonico's. The "Henry George" cigar was selling as fast as *Progress and Poverty* in new and huge paperback editions. Fame could hardly go further.

Fame, however, could not offset the machinations of professional politicians plus an event in Haymarket Square, Chicago. This was in 1886. Henry George was the candidate for mayor of New York sponsored by organized labor in that city. The Democrats, operating as Tammany Hall, as well as the machine Republicans, were dismayed. They saw their comfortable alliance in danger. The Tammany chief, Richard Croker, acted quickly and skillfully. He forced his crowd to agree to the nomination of Abram S. Hewitt, generally described as "an independent Democrat of great wealth." This was the same Hewitt for whom George had done a stretch of ghost-writing. Croker wisely believed that Henry George would scare large numbers of Republicans and independent Democrats; if the single-tax Moses could be made into a fearsome enough menace, their votes would go to Hewitt.

The Republican bosses, had they been interested only in defeating George, would logically have endorsed Hewitt. "But the bosses had more fundamental interests," as Henry Pringle has pointed out. "It did not seem possible, with so honest a man as Hewitt running for Tammany, that the usual division of spoils with Tammany could be made." The Republican bosses figured also that George would draw more heavily from the Democratic side, "which pretended to be the party of the workers." Hence young Theodore Roosevelt, aged twenty-eight, was nominated.

Then, in Chicago, at a street meeting called by a radical labor group, a bomb exploded. Sixty police were wounded, seven fatally. Who heaved the bomb was never known, but the tragedy was believed by most "respectable people" to have been the work of labor, and that, as far as the New York mayoralty campaign was concerned, took care of Henry George. Laborites, in fact reformers of all sorts, were at once seen to be anarchists bent on destroying the American way of life. Though George ran second in the three-cornered election, his former employer, Hewitt, won handily.

The rest was anticlimax. Henry George toured the British Isles again, speaking to larger audiences than before. He took Australia and New Zealand by storm. He talked his way across the United States and back to New York. But nothing resembling a single-tax party was ever

formed. He died in New York City, worn out at fifty-eight, in 1897. His body lay in state in the Grand Central Palace, where more than one hundred thousand persons passed the bier, many of them weeping for the Great Dreamer, who thought ill of no man but merely wanted to destroy the temple of Moloch, out of which issued the corruption of man.

Historians seem agreed that single-tax doctrines had little or no influence on the taxation of land in the United States. Yet none has cared to say Henry George did not make rubble of the stoutly held dogma that poverty was ordained by Almighty God. When he was done, his countrymen could see clearly why the poor were always present; the reason, just as George had said, was because land given to man for his own use had been "prostituted to parasitic gain." Henry George's failure was in no manner due to any imperfections of his single tax, but to the seductive nature of capitalistic society.