Albert Jay Nock

Back in the dark days of 1832, when a despairing world and its culture were being ruined by a major catastrophe, the worst economic depression ever known, a man who had forecast among America's few living exponents of belles-lettres wrote in his diary under the date of Oct. 27: "Now that Roosevelt has dug up M.G. Sumner amidst the Yule logs in my signs of life enough to republish his writings, I should think someone might soon be rediscovering Henry George. If so, he will find that George was one of the first half-dozen minds of the nineteenth century, in all the world."

The men who sat that down in his characteristically small, fine hand, an essayist and Victorian who is one of the chief catalysts of the intellectual ferment of our time, was nothing to pass over lightly. The idea returned to him and on Oct. 31 he recorded: "I have been looking over the biography of Henry George, by his son Harry, a paragraph-taking sort of book. The best one can say for it is that it is competent. There should be a better one on Henry George. It was unimpressively a great man."

Not only was Albert Jay Nock, the chronicler just quoted, thinking about Henry George's work, he was also thinking about Henry George's life. The essayist went abroad for the first time in 1880 because he found the Spring lived in his beloved countries, breaking its stay at last in 1882. In the South of France and Spain into Portugal. With these papers full of commissio- nes, some of which he would not do, some he might do and a row he would do it twice, and the busi- ness of living fully, permitted, the displacement from Scranton caused him no severe occupation. But the portmanteau of George kept popping up at Port cress, watch- ing a schooner put off ten tons of coal on March 31, he adds "all by hand labor, with the help of one donkey. I wonder whether most of our nation-saving devils have really saved anything worth seeing....Henry George attached this problem, in 'Progress and Poverty', and solved it, but his colophons, being toll, will not be accepted in a hurry."

Through his friends he was keeping in close touch with hysteric America. Henry L. Mencken wrote him, after the close of the Fifth World Economic Conference: 'The republic proceeds towards hell at a rapidly accelerating tempo.' "

Nock was not profoundly stirred; he spent the next day at the library, and the idea of revising the manuscript of the biography, creating Henry George was still rankling him. On June 9 he wrote a new diary: "Government at Porto, on the way to Vidago where I hope to find a pleasant place to stop awhile and write an over- due paper for Scribner's on Henry George."

Soon he was in Vidago where one's gets miserable dwellings, occupied by people absolutely destitute and filth; built of magnificent huge granite blocks after the Roman fashion; in Vidago among a Portuguese people whom he found, nevertheless, "with- out a single exception, proud- est people I have ever seen." On June 10 he goes on: "Working steady- ly at quite high pressure on my article for Scribner's on Henry George, so the days pass very quietly. I hope it will call attention to him, though I sup- pose nothing will do so effect- ively as long as Americans are what they are, or until tremendous hardship puts an end to their being dragged and doped by now- truths dealt out to them by domes- tics and academicians."

In his idyllic refuge "what a superb climate and what grand scenery!" "Vidago—so called because remote to him; one can be almost but not too far away, while here, that it exists. But George, along of all his environ- ments, he wrote on June 26 to Mr. Nock recorded: "I am done with Henry George, and shall leave here tomorrow. What a great man he was, and how well he managed to stand himself and pretend and forgotten! I suppose the people will pull the long face over getting a really serious piece of work—I often think, that the chief strength of the English is Bok, writing to Lyman Abbott for 'Long Island,' something of country."

"The aftermath was typical of the man: on July 29 he noted: 'Scribner's people seems satisfied with my piece on Henry George, and say it will come out in November, so I suppose all the single-tacks in the country will curse me next summer.'"

That is how 'Henry George', an 'Orthodox American' came to be written, as anyone can see for himself in Mr. Nock's 'A Review of These Days' June 1882—December 1883 (Morrow, 1924). You understand how this tallow biog- raphy came to be the unique study it is, even when one compares it with the admirable similar studies by Groseclose Mitchell and Re- ged G. Tugwell, one may recall Mr. Nock's career. He took his bachelor's degree at St. Stephen's College, where he stepped himself in athletics, and his master's and their literatures. With Francis Neilson he wrote "How Diplomats Make War" (1920) in 1924. From 1920 to 1924, he edited the old Freeman in company with Neil- son, Suzanne Vallolette and others equally notable, setting exact- izing standards of periodical journalism. During that period he published "The Myth of a Guilty Nation" under the pseudonym of Historicus (1922) and edited "The Selected Works of Charles F. Brown (Artemus Ward)" (1924), in the latter work establishing a national critic as the social satirist he was.

A scholar's life-time job found fruit in his "Aftermath" (1925). He followed this with a collection, "On Doing the Right Thing and Other Essays" (1925). Then, with Catherine Rose Wilson, he wrote "Francis Bachelard, the Man and His Work" (1929), first fruit of another life-time interest. With Miss Wilson, he edited the Virginius-La Nietzsche translation of the works of "Francis Bachelard" (2 vols., 1931), concluding a monumental work of scholarship with a book, "A Journey Into Bachelard's France" (1931), as visiting professor of American history and government at Saint Stephen's and had published, under the pseudonym of Journey- man, "The Results of 1928" (1929) together with a noteworthy structure on an institution close to the 'The Theory of Education' (1929).

The contradiction between stage and society, in which quite William Cullom and Franz Oppen-heimer had interested his long hand, resulted in a work as significant in a social sense as "Bachelard" and "Jefferson" has been in literary and historical senses. "Our Enemy the State" (1925), he followed this with "Free Speech and Plain Language" (1927). Throughout all these dates a stream of essays on con- temporary themes poured from his pen, to find critical acclaim. Appreciative hearings among the readers of the New Republic, Atlantic Monthly, The American Mercury and similar literary reviews.

What we have then, in 'Henry George', in 'Orthodox American', is a living portrait of the un- usual citizen of the world by another. WILL LITSCNNK