

III HENRY GEORGE UNORTHODOX AMERICAN



By Albert Jay Nock



The Prophet

VII

Thus intellectually he was out with every organized force in the whole area of discontent; out with the Socialists, out with the professional Irish, the professional laborites, professional progressivism, liberalism, and mugwumpery. His sympathies and affections however were always with the rank and file of revolt against the existing economic order; his heart was with all the disaffected, though his mind might not be entirely with them. This being so, the two years following his first visit to England fastened upon him the stigma of a mere proletarian class-leader whose principles and intentions were purely predatory. As Abram S. Hewitt most unscrupulously put it, his purpose was no more than "to array working men against millionaires."

Then at the end of these two years there happened the one thing needful to copper-rivet this reputation and make it permanent. When the labor unions of New York City decided to enter the mayoralty campaign of 1886, they looked to George as the best vote-getter in sight, and gave him their nomination. With this, whatever credit he may have had in America as an economist and philosopher vanished forever, leaving him only the uncertain and momentary prestige of a political demagog, an agitator, and a crank.

George had misgivings, not of defeat but of discredit in his role of candidate, but they came too late. The course he had chosen years before led straight to the quicksand of practical politics, and now his feet were in it. He temporized with the nomination, demanding a petition signed by thirty thousand citizens pledged to vote for him, which was immediately forthcoming—and there he was!

The campaign was uncommonly bitter. The other candidates were Hewitt and Theodore Roosevelt, and

This instalment completes the portrait of Henry George by Albert Jay Nock. So much is revealed of the character and mind of the great thinker in this essay, as well as of the momentous times in which his life was spent, that the publishers have decided to reprint it in pamphlet form. Orders are now being accepted at 5c per copy.

their methods bore hard on George in ways that Hewitt, at any rate, must somewhat have gagged at, for he was a man of breeding—still, he lent himself to them. It was easy to vilify George, because the allegation that he was a sheer proletarian leader was true enough, as far as this campaign went; he was, officially and by nomination, a labor candidate. Some among his supporters, of course, understood his ideas and purposes and believed in them, but these were relatively few; the majority were mere Adullamites. Hewitt won the election nominally—in all reasonable likelihood he was counted in—but George's vote was so large that "The New York Times" saw in it "an event demanding the most serious attention and study"; while "The St. James Gazette," of London, in a strong grandmotherly vein, advised "all respectable Americans to forget the trumpery of party fights and political differentism, and face the new danger threatening the commonwealth."

As far as George was concerned, there was no need of this warning, for his day in politics was done. This one campaign was the end of him.

He was no longer a man to be feared or even reckoned with. To those on the inside of practical politics, he was henceforth hopelessly in the discard as the worst of all liabilities, a defeated candidate. To America at large, he was only another in the innumerable array of bogus prophets and busted spellbinders. Then, too, the temper of the times changed. Disaffection broke up into sects, and popular attention was soon addled by a kaleidoscopic succession of men and issues, cleverly manipulated on the public stage—Cleveland and "reform," Hanna and the full dinner-pail, Peffer and populism, McKinley and imperialism, Bryan and free silver, Roosevelt and progressivism; foreign embarrassments, jingoism, the Spanish War, Mrs. Mary Ellen Lease, Mrs. Eddy, Carry Nation, Jerry Simpson, La Follette and the Wisconsin idea, organized charity, "foundations" for this-or-that, the rise of the higher learning, woman's suffrage, the Anti-Saloon League, "commission government" for cities, the initiative and referendum—was ever such a welter of nostrums and nostrum-peddlers turned loose anywhere on earth in the same length of time? No wonder that Mr. Jefferson, mournfully surveying America's prospects, said, "What a Bedlamite is man!" Before a year was over, George had dropped into a historical place amidst all this ruck, from which he has never emerged, as just one more exploded demagog. He ran for a state office in 1887, but got little more than half the votes in New York City, his stronghold, that he had got in the mayoralty campaign only a year before.

The last ten years of his life were devoted largely to a weekly paper, "The Standard," in which he continued to press his economic doctrine, but it amounted to very little. He revisited England, where he found his former popularity still holding good. He also made a trip around



the world, and was received magnificently in his former home, California, and in the British colonies. His main work during this period, however, was writing his "Science of Political Economy," which his death interrupted; fortunately not until it was so nearly finished that the rest of his design for it could be easily filled in.

In this period, too, his circumstances, for the first time in his life, were fairly easy. He had received some small gifts and legacies, and latterly a couple of well-to-do friends saw to it that he should finish his work without anxiety. It is an interesting fact that George stands alone in American history as a writer whose books sold by the million, and as an orator whose speech attracted thousands, yet who never made a dollar out of either.

His death had a setting of great drama or of great pathos, according to the view that one chooses to take of it. The municipal monstrosity called the Greater New York was put together in the late 'nineties, and some of George's friends and associates, still incorrigibly politically minded, urged on him the forlorn hope of running as an independent candidate for the mayoralty in 1897. Seth Low, then president of Columbia University, and Robert van Wyck, who was the impregnable Tammany's candidate, were in the field—the outcome was clear—yet George acceded. It is incredible that he could have had the faintest hope of winning; most probably he thought it would be one more chance, almost certainly his last, to bear testimony before the people of his adopted city with the living voice.

He had had a touch of aphasia in 1890, revealing a weakness of the blood vessels in his brain, and his condition now was such that every physician he consulted told him he could not possibly stand the strain of a campaign; and so it proved. He opened his campaign at a rapid pace, speaking at one or more meetings every night, nearly always with all his old clearness and force. Three weeks before election he spoke at four meetings in one evening, and went to bed at the Union Square Hotel, much exhausted. Early next morning his wife awoke to find him in an adjoining room, standing in the attitude of an orator, his hand on the back of a chair, his head erect and his eyes open. He repeated the one word "yes" many times, with varying inflections, but on becoming silent he never spoke again. Mrs.

George put her arm about him, led him back to his bed with some difficulty, and there he died.

VIII

"Progress and Poverty" is the first and only thorough, complete, scientific inquiry ever made into the fundamental cause of industrial depressions and involuntary poverty. The ablest minds of the century attacked and condemned it—Professor Huxley, the Duke of Argyll, Goldwin Smith, Leo XIII, Frederic Harrison, John Bright, Joseph Chamberlain. Nevertheless, in a preface to the definite edition, George said what very few authors of a technical work have ever been able to say, that he had not met with a single criticism or objection that was not fully anticipated and answered in the book itself. For years he debated its basic positions with any one who cared to try, and was never worsted.

Yet, curiously, though there have been a number of industrial depressions since George's death in 1897, some of them very severe, the book has been so completely obscured by the reputation which George's propagandist enterprises fastened on him, that one would not know it had been written. In the whole course of the recent depression, for instance, no utterance of any man at all prominent in our public life, with one exception, would show that he had ever heard of it. The president of Columbia University resurrected George in a commencement address two years ago, and praised him warmly, but from what he said he seems not to have read him.

It is interesting, too, now that successive depressions are bearing harder and harder on the capitalist, precisely as George predicted, to observe that George and his associate anti-monopolists of forty years ago are turning out to be the best friends that the capitalist ever had. Standing staunchly for the rights of capital, as against collectivist proposals to confiscate interest as well as rent, George formulated a defense of those rights that is irrefragable. All those who have tried to bite that file have merely broken their teeth. There is a certain irony in the fact that the

class which has now begun to suffer acutely from the recurring prostrations of industry and the ever-growing cost of stateism, is the very one which assailed George most furiously as an "apostle of anarchy and revolution." Yet the rapid progress of collectivism and stateism could have been foreseen; there was every sign of it, and the capitalist class should have been the one to heed those signs devoutly and interpret them intelligently. Bismarck saw what was coming, and even Herbert Spencer predicted terrible times ahead for England, and still more terrible times for America—a long run of stateism and collectivism, then "civil war, immense bloodshed, ending in a military despotism of the severest type."

IX

Like John Bright, nearly every one credited the "American inventor" with a brand-new discovery in his idea of confiscating economic rent. George did, in fact come by the idea independently, but others whom he had never heard of came by it long before him. Precisely the same proposal had been made in the eighteenth century by men whom Mr. Bright might have thought twice about snubbing—the French school known as the Economists, which included Quesnay, Turgot, du Pont de Nemours, Mirabeau, le Trosne, Gournay. They even used the term *l'impôt unique*, "the single tax," which George's American disciples arrived at independently, and which George accepted. The idea of confiscating rent also occurred to Patrick Edward Dove at almost the same time that it occurred to George. It had been broached in England almost a century earlier by Thomas Spence, and again in Scotland by William Ogilvie, a professor at Aberdeen. George's doctrine of the confiscation of social values was also explicitly anticipated by Thomas Paine, in his pamphlet called "Agrarian Justice."

George's especial merit is not that of original discovery, though his discovery was original—as much so as those of Darwin and Wallace. It was simply not new; Turgot had even set forth the principle on which George formulated the law of wages, though George did not know that any one had done so. George's great merit is that of having worked out his discovery to its full logical length in a complete system, which none of his predecessors did; not only establishing fundamental economics as a true science, but also discerning and



clearly marking out its natural relations with history, politics, and ethics.

The key to an understanding of George's career may be found in the story that Lincoln Steffens tells about an afternoon ride with the devil on the top of a Fifth Avenue bus. The devil was in uncommonly good spirits that day, and entertained Steffens with a fine salty line of reminiscences half way up the avenue, when Steffens suddenly caught sight of a man on the sidewalk who was carefully carrying a small parcel of truth. Steffens nudged the devil, who gave the man a casual glance, but kept on talking, apparently not interested. When Steffens could get a word in, he said, "See here, didn't you notice that that man back there had got hold of a little bit of truth?"

"Yes, of course I noticed it," replied the devil. "Why?"

"But surely that's a very dangerous thing," Steffens said. "Aren't you going to do something about it?"

"No hurry, my dear fellow," the devil answered indulgently. "It's a simple matter. I'll be running across him again one of these days, and I'll get him to organize it!"

It is impossible, of course, to guess what George's historical position would now be if he had had less of the Covenanter spirit and more of the experienced and penetrating humor of a Socrates, with a corresponding distrust of republican meth-

od in the propagation of doctrine. The question is an idle one, yet to a student of civilization the great interest of George's career is that at every step he makes one ask it. Perhaps in any case the Gadarene rout would have trampled him to the same depth of obscurity. Probably—almost certainly—his doctrine would have been picked up and wrested to the same service of a sectarian class-politics that would have left it unrecognizable. Experience, humor, and reason go for very little when they collide with what Ernest Renan so finely called *la matérialisme vulgaire, la bassesse de l'homme intéressé*. Yet one can hardly doubt that George would emerge from obscurity sooner, and his doctrine stand in a clearer and more favorable light if he had taken another course.

Much more important, however, is the question whether George's faith in the common man's collective judgment was justified; whether such faith is ever justified. Does the common man possess the force of intellect to apprehend the processes of reason correctly, or the force of character to follow them disinterestedly? The whole future of eighteenth-century political doctrine, the doctrine on which our republic was nominally established, hangs on this question—the question, in short, whether republicanism has not put a burden on the common man which is greater than he can bear.

George never had a moment's doubt

of the answer. Yet, seeing what sort of political leadership the common man invariably chose to follow, and the kind of issue that invariably attracted him, he ended the argument of "Progress and Poverty" with a clear warning, too long to be quoted here, against the wholesale corruption of the common man by the government which the common man himself sets up. It is well worth reading now, whether one finds the root of this corruption in the common man's weakness of mind and character, or whether one finds it, as George did, in the unequal distribution of wealth. Whatever one may think about that, there is no possible doubt that George's warning has the interest of absolutely accurate prophecy.

It is rather remarkable, finally, since the reading public's whim for biography has set writers to pawing over so many American worthies, that no one has written a competent full-length biography of Henry George, who was not only one of America's very greatest men, but also was in so many respects typically American, and whose spectacular career was also so typical. His disabilities were precisely those of the civilization that produced him, and his life was sacrificed on the altar of those disabilities, precisely where the life of that civilization is being sacrificed. What more by way of interest could an able and honest biographer ask?