

# III HENRY GEORGE UNORTHODOX AMERICAN

By Albert Jay Nock



## "I Am For Man"



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No one would publish the book, not so much because it was revolutionary (though one firm objected to it emphatically on that ground) but because it was a bad prospect. No work on political economy, aside from textbooks, had ever sold well enough either in the United States or England to make another one attractive. Besides, the unparalleled depression of the 'seventies was making all the publishing houses sail as close to the wind as they could run. Logically, a book on the cause of hard times ought to interest people just then, but book buyers do not buy by logic, and publishers are aware of it.

By hook or crook George and his friends got together enough money to make plates for an author's edition of five hundred copies; George himself set the first few sticks of type. At three dollars a copy he sold enough of these almost to clear the cost; and presently the firm of Appleton, who had rejected the manuscript, wrote him that if he would let them have his plates, they would bring out the book in a two-dollar edition; and this was done.

It fell as dead as Caesar, not even getting a competent press notice in America for months. George sent some complimentary copies abroad, where it did rather better. Emile de Laveleye praised it highly in the "Revue Scientifique"; it was translated into German, and its reviews, as George said, were "way up." Some sort of sale began in March, 1880, with a brilliant review in "The New York Sun," which was followed by more or less serious treatment in the Eastern press generally; but it amounted to almost nothing.

The truth about the subsequent meteoric success of "Progress and Poverty" as a publishing venture is that it was purely adventitious success. The times were not only just right for such a book, but they stayed right for nearly twenty years.

This third installment of Mr. Nock's brilliant portrayal of Henry George gives an insight into the character of the great philosopher that his followers might well take note of. Above all things Henry George was sincere. He was honest, not only with himself, but also with the truth. Personal advantage could, of course, have no weight with him. But far more than that, he realized that, any compromise of the fundamental principle of his philosophy—that is, with justice—was a denial of justice. The very popularity that his ideas attained during his life-time suggests that with the people sincerity and honesty are most attractive, and therefore the best kind of propaganda. The public hates a "pussy-footer."

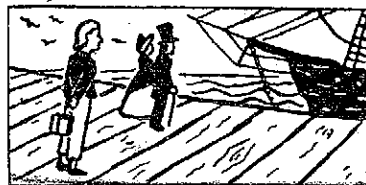
The course of popular interest played directly into its hands, not only in America, but in the whole English-speaking world. It is significant that in countries where the course of interest ran otherwise, as in France, for instance, it had no vogue. In the English-speaking world, its immense vogue was almost wholly that of an instrument of discontent, or in the vernacular of the book trade, a hell-raiser. Even so (to a person who has had any experience at all of the human race), the fact that a solid treatise like "Progress and Poverty" should have had an aggregate sale running well over two million copies is almost incredibly fantastic; yet that is what it had.

From first to last, the history of American civilization is a most depressing study; but that of the decade from which "Progress and Pov-

erty" emerged is probably unmatched in the whole record, unless by the history of our own times. There is no need to dwell on it here; one feels utterly degraded at any reminder of it. George's book nicely caught the tide of turbulent reaction which brought in "the era of reform" under Cleveland in 1884, and ran fairly full throughout the 'nineties. George's death in 1897 marking the approximate point of its complete subsidence.

This tidal wave carried George himself as well as his book; he threw himself on its crest. He expected some good to come of the great general unrest, and he bent all his energies to the task of educating the awakened social forces and giving them what he believed to be a right direction. The temper of the times filled him with hope. A sincere republican, he was a second Jefferson in his naive idealization of the common man's intelligence, disinterestedness, and potential loyalty to a great cause. Therefore hell-raising quite suited him; Peter the Hermit had raised hell, and Savonarola had seen no other way to get the common man properly stirred up. Before George was nominated for the mayoralty of New York in 1886, Tammany sent William M. Ivins to buy him off with the promise of a seat in Congress. Ivins told him he could never be mayor—and in fact there is little room for doubt that he was fraudulently counted out—and George asked why, if that were so, there could be any objection to his running. Ivins told him frankly that it was because his running would raise hell; and George replied with similar frankness that that was precisely what he wanted to do.

With this purpose in mind, George came to New York on the heels of his book, selling out what little he possessed in California. "My pleasant little home that I was so comfortable in is gone," he wrote sadly,



"and I am afloat at forty-two, poorer than at twenty-one. I do not complain, but there is some bitterness in it." During his first year in New York, while his cherished book lay dead, he lived in obscurity, wretchedly poor; and then the time came when he could take advantage of something on which the eyes of the whole English-speaking world were fixed—the Irish rent-war.

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Ireland at that time was front-page news on every paper printed in the English language. Parnell and Dillon crossed the ocean, spoke in sixty-two American cities, addressed the House of Representatives, and took away a great fund of American dollars wherewith to fight the battles of the rack-rented Irish tenant. They were followed by the best man in the movement, Michael Davitt, who came over late in 1880 to tend the fire that Parnell and Dillon had kindled. George met him and got him "under conviction," as the revivalists say, and then wrote a pamphlet entitled "The Irish Land Question; what it involves, and how alone it can be settled."

From that moment Henry George was, in the good sense of the term, a made man. The pamphlet was a masterpiece of polemics, a call to action, and a prophecy, all in one. Published simultaneously in America and England, it had an immense success. George was amazed at the space it got in the Eastern papers. "The astonishing thing," he wrote, "is the goodness of the comments. . . . I am getting famous, if I am not making money." It is hard to see how a man who had ever done a day's work on a newspaper could write in that unimaginative way. With Irish influence as strong as it was on the Eastern seaboard, and with every Irishman sitting up nights to curse the hated Sassenach landlords and their puppet government, how could the newspaper comments not be good? The Eastern papers simply knew which side their bread was buttered on.

A rabble of charmed and vociferous Irish closed around the simple-hearted pamphleteer, probably not troubling themselves much about his philosophy of the Irish land question, but nevertheless all for him. He was against the government and against the landlords, and that was enough. In this they were like the vast majority of readers who were led to peck at "Progress and Poverty" be-

cause they had heard that the book voiced their discontent; probably not five per cent of them read it through, or were able to understand what they did read, but they were all for it nevertheless, and all for glorifying Henry George. The American branch of the Land League immediately put George on the lecture platform, and when the Irish troubles culminated in the imprisonment of Davitt, Dillon, Parnell, and O'Kelly, an Irish newspaper published in New York sent him to the seat of war as a correspondent.

He reached Dublin, dogged by secret-service men, and gave a public lecture with such effect that his audience went fairly wild. He wrote a friend that he had "the hardest work possible" to keep the crowd from unharnessing his cab-horse, and dragging his carriage through the streets to his hotel. His reports to "The Irish World" got wide distribution. When he crossed to England, interest opened many doors to him outside political circles, and curiosity opened many more. He dined with most of the lions of the period, Besant, Herbert Spencer, Tennyson, Justin McCarthy, Wallace, Browning, Chamberlain, John Bright, and made an excellent impression. He wrote his wife that he could easily have become a lion himself if he had liked, but he thought it best to keep clear of all that sort of thing.

He spoke in England, and addressed huge audiences in Scotland. Returning to Ireland, he got still wider publicity out of being locked up twice on suspicion. His notoriety was helped, too, by the humorous character of the proceedings before the examining magistrate, which reminded all England of Mr. Nupkins's examination of the Pickwickians. George took this occasion to write the President a blistering letter about the truckling imbecility of the American Minister, Lowell, and this not only gave him another line of publicity but also had a good practical effect. The Secretary of State sent out a circular letter prodding up the service, and asked George to file a claim for damages, which George refused to do, saying he was not interested in that, but only in

seeing that the rights of American citizens in foreign lands were properly defended.

All this celebrity was a great lift for "Progress and Poverty." The book suddenly became an international best seller. "The London Times" gave it a five-column review which made its fortune in all the British possessions; the review came out in the morning, and by afternoon the publishers had sold out every copy in stock. When a new edition was rushed out, one house in Melbourne ordered 1300 copies, and 300 were sent to New Zealand. George was invited everywhere, banqueted everywhere, asked to speak on all sorts of occasions, reported everywhere; and when he left the British Isles for home, he was perhaps the most widely talked-of man in either hemisphere.

He had intended to stay abroad three months, but remained a year. When he landed in New York he found himself, as he modestly said, "pretty near famous." At once the newspapers blew his horn, the labor unions got up a tremendous mass meeting for him, and, strange as it seems, some of the upper crust of Wall Street gave him a complimentary dinner at Delmonico's, with Justice van Brunt, Henry Ward Beecher, and Francis B. Thurber among the speakers. No one knows why they did this. Possibly it was a more or less perfunctory gesture toward an American who had made a name in England; possibly an inexpensive and non-committal move to please the influential Irish; possibly a gesture of amity toward a man well on his way to becoming a dangerous enemy, but who might be led to see something on their side of social questions. Whatever prompted the occasion, it was a notable affair, and George rose to its measure with easy and affable dignity.

In a sense, this banquet marked the parting of the ways for George, though probably no one was aware of it at the moment, George least of all. A reformer has a choice of three courses. He can carry his doctrine direct to the people, and promote it by methods that are essentially political; he can convert people of power and influence, and promote it largely by indirection; or he can merely formulate it, hang it up in plain sight, and let it win its own way by free acceptance. The first is the course of the evangelist and missionaries; and to a firm believer in eighteenth-century political theory,



like George, it is the only one possible—it is wholly republican, wholly in the American tradition. It is interesting to speculate on what might have happened if, for a while at least, he had followed up his one chance to get at the minds of those who really controlled the country's immediate future, or if he had taken the third or Socratic course; but he did neither. He was a staunch republican, committed to republican method.

For the next two years George lived before the populace, speaking and writing incessantly, and directing the development of his doctrine into a distinctly political character. At that time the press was much more an organ of opinion than it is now, much freer and more forceful, so that his writings were in demand. Even a popular publication like "Leslie's" asked him for a series on the problems of the time, while at the other end of the scale "The North American Review" made him a proposal to start a straight-out political and economic weekly under his editorship.

Yet though his method was that of the evangelist, he did not adopt the tactics of the demagog or the practical politician. He was probably the most effective public speaker of his time—"The London Times" thought he was fully the equal of Cobden or of Bright, if not a little better—but he never took advantage of an audience, or flattered the galleries, or left the smallest doubt of where he stood and what was in his mind. When, for example, somebody introduced him in a maudlin way to a working-class audience as "one who was always for the poor man," George began his speech by saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, I am not for the poor man. I am not for the rich man. I am for man."

In fact, it soon became apparent that his hell-raising was raising as much hell with his supporters and potential friends as with his enemies. Like Strafford of old, he was for "thorough," no matter whose head came off or whose toes smarted. All the Irish leaders, even Davitt, cooled off to the freezing point when they found that he was down on the Kilmainham treaty and dead against any compromise on the issues of the rent-war, or any watering down of the program of restoring one hundred per cent of Ireland's land to one hundred per cent of Ireland's people. The Socialists were not unfriendly at first, and some of George's followers thought a sort of working alli-

ance with them might be vamped up for political effect, but when George attacked their doctrine of collectivism and stateism, they most naturally showed all their teeth. George held with Paine and Thomas Jefferson that government is at best a necessary evil, and the less of it the better. Hence the right thing was to decentralize it as far as possible, and reduce the functions and powers of the state to an absolute minimum, which, he said, the confiscation of rent would do automatically; whereas the collectivist proposal to confiscate and manage natural resources as a state enterprise would have precisely the opposite effect—it would tend to make the state everything and the individual nothing.

George was moreover the terror of the political routinier. When the Republicans suddenly raised the tariff issue in 1880 the Democratic committee asked him to go on the stump. They arranged a long list of engagements for him, but after he made one speech they begged him by telegraph not to make any more. The nub of his speech was that he had heard of high-tariff Democrats and revenue-tariff Democrats, but he was a no-tariff Democrat who wanted real free trade, and he was out for that or nothing; and naturally no good bi-partisan national committee could put up with such talk as that, especially from a man who really meant it.

Yet, on the other hand, when the official free-traders of the Atlantic seaboard, led by Sumner, Godkin, Beecher, Curtis, Lowell, and Hewitt, opened their arms to George, he refused to fall in. His free-trade speeches during Cleveland's second campaign were really devoted to showing by implication that they were a hollow lot, and that their idea of free trade was nothing more or less than a humbug. His speeches hurt Cleveland more than they helped him, and some of George's closest associates split with him at this point. In George's view, freedom of exchange would not benefit the masses of the people a particle unless it were correlated with freedom of production; if it would, how was it that the people of free-trade England, for example, were no better off than the people of protectionist Germany? None of the official free-traders could answer that question, of course, for there was no answer. George had already developed his full doctrine of trade in a book, published in 1886, called "Protection

or Free Trade"—a book which, incidentally, gives a reader the best possible introduction to "Progress and Poverty."

He laid down the law to organized labor in the same style, showing that there was no such thing as a labor-problem, but only a monopoly-problem, and that when natural-resource monopoly disappeared, every question of wages, hours, and conditions of labor would automatically disappear with it. The political liberal got the hardest treatment of all. George seems to have regarded him as the greatest obstruction to social progress—an unsavory compound, half knave, half fool, and favored odiously with "unctuous rectitude." When John Bright, the Moses of liberalism, followed George on the rostrum at Birmingham, calling his proposals "the greatest, the wildest, the most remarkable . . . imported lately by an American inventor," all George could find to say was (in a private letter) that "the old man is utterly ignorant of what he is talking about"—which was strictly true; and of Frederic Harrison's lectures at Edinburgh and Newcastle he said only that "his is the very craziness of opposition, if I can judge by the reports."