

Hamlin Garland and Henry George

The effects of the Georgist movement in literature during the late nineteenth century have never been adequately charted, though it clearly was of importance. The writers of what Mark Twain aptly called "the Gilded Age" were becoming socially and economically conscious, and the principles of Henry George found more than one adherent among the so-called "radical" set of younger men who published their stories in the small new magazines in New York and Chicago, and who, almost alone among the writers of their time, gave realistic treatment to the problems of their era. Hamlin Garland, who died in 1940 at the age of eighty, was the sole survivor of this pioneer group, and the most significant artist of those who knew and believed in Henry George. The author, RUSSEL B. NYE, a member of the English department of Michigan State College, is interested in the literary manifestations of political and economic thought in the nineteenth century.

★ THE IMPACT OF HENRY GEORGE'S thought upon his times was very great, and many literary men, interested in finding a way out of the tangle of social and economic problems which beset the late nineteenth century, took up George's ideas with enthusiasm. Unfortunately, most of those writers who adopted Georgist themes were not among the best qualified to exemplify them in fiction; though certainly deserving of consideration by the best literary minds of the period, the single tax movement found expression primarily in minor novels such as Henry Oelrich's *A Cityless and Countryless World*, Costello Holford's *Aristopia*, Arnold Clark's *Beneath the Dome*, Samuel Crocher's *That Island*, and others, novels which, though often interesting and uniformly ingenious, lack the vital spark of literary skill. The single exception was Hamlin Garland, who contributed the only artistically significant body of creative writing immediately devoted to the Georgist philosophy.

Garland was singularly well fitted to his task. Born in Wisconsin of a farming family, familiar with the related questions of land and poverty through actual experience on Iowa and Dakota farms, he was ready, when he picked up by chance a copy of the Lovell edition of *Progress and Poverty* on a Dakota homestead, to accept the truth of George's ideas. "Up to this time," he wrote later in his autobiography, *A Son of the Middle Border*, "I had never read any book or essay in which our land system had been questioned. . . . I caught some glimpse of the radiant plenty of George's ideal Commonwealth. The trumpet call of the closing

pages filled me with a desire to battle for the right. . . ." For some time he had been searching for the cause of the misery and poverty which he saw about him in the lives of the homesteaders, and with Henry George as his guide he discovered the answers for which he searched. In Boston a few years later he heard George address a meeting in Faneuil Hall (an experience he described in detail in *A Son of the Middle Border*), and he came away convinced that he now knew the cause of poverty. He shortly joined the Anti-Poverty League which had sprung up under George's influence, spoke from the platform in defense of the movement, and did his best to convince his friends, among them William Dean Howells, of the need for economic and social reform. He had not yet turned his mind to literature, but when Joseph Kirkland, the author of *Zury*, a grimly realistic novel of farm life, encouraged him to "write the truth" about what he saw, he began in 1887 to write stories of the life he had known in the Midwest, drawing upon his own experiences for the background of his work and upon Henry George for its controlling philosophy.

Garland was too finished an artist to write stories of pure propaganda, knowing that grinding an axe too obviously destroyed its effectiveness. Unlike most of those who attempted, as he did, to translate into concrete terms the principles of Georgist philosophy, Garland made his stories primarily works of creative skill, with the theme of social and economic justice implicit rather than apparent. He was concerned first of all with presenting, as Kirkland and Harold Frederic had done, a realistic picture of the farmer's life, its labor, poverty, bleakness, and ugliness, but unlike the local-color realists, he probed further, making the reason for it clear—that is, the monopoly of the land by speculators. "With William Morris and Henry George, I exclaimed," he wrote in *A Son of the Middle Border*, "'Nature is not to blame. Man's laws are to blame!'"

Garland's most significant Georgist work appeared in the stories collected in *Main Travelled Roads* (1891), *Prairie Folks* (1892), and in his novel *Jason Edwards* (1892). His thesis was simple and compelling—as a result of economic maladjustment the lives of many farmers were filled with drabness, suffering, and want; the cause lay in monopolistic landholding; the cure lay in the abolition of such monopoly. Garland went to the heart of the Georgist body of thought, seized upon the basic principle, and gave it external embodiment in his sharply-etched stories of real life. "Up the Coolly," "Under the Lion's Paw," "Sim Burns' Wife," "A Branch Road," "A Day's Pleasure," "Among the Corn Rows," and other stories were, to varying degrees of emphasis, stirring indictments of the economics of land. Of these, "Under the Lion's Paw" is the most directly associated to his consistent denunciation of land monopoly and speculation; it is, said Garland in *Roadside Meetings*, "a single tax story," and it remains probably the finest

literary product of the Georgist movement during the times. The story concerns an industrious farmer, Haskins, who falls into the hands of Butler, a man who "believed in land speculation as the surest way of getting rich." Haskins and his family toil like slaves for three years on one of Butler's farms, paying interest at ten per cent, turning the rented, rundown land into a prosperous farm, only to find that, when he wishes to purchase the land, all his work has simply resulted in adding to the value of Butler's land—the rent is doubled, the price is doubled, and Butler has done nothing. The law affords no escape; Haskins, bitter and broken, is "under the lion's paw" of the speculator and landlord. Not only is the story a dramatic translation into human terms of Henry George's principle of rent and unearned increment, but it is as well Garland's finest piece of work, a nearly perfect balance of thesis with literary skill, of propaganda with the realist's art.

Though Garland never again reached the perfection of "Under the Lion's Paw," he gave the same theme a more complete treatment in *Jason Edwards*, which he adapted from an earlier play and published as a novel in 1891. Jason, a Boston workingman, flees from Boston and the poverty that low wages and high rents have forced upon him, to take a homestead in Minnesota and to become his own master. He finds, however, that the fertile land has been bought up in advance by speculators, and in order to settle, he must mortgage his farm. Payments of interest and principal, storms, drouth, and crop failures force him to the wall, and he ends a dispossessed man. Actually the novel is simply a larger view of the problem of Haskins, a continuation of George's principle that poverty is the entail of land rent, and, like the earlier short story, the book, in its picture of the life of the farmer who is at the mercy of the system, is a vigorous arraignment of the monopolists. A following novel, *A Spoil of Office* (1892), traced

the rise of the Grange movement and the Farmer's Alliance, and though its emphasis is political rather than economic, the same theme is still evident, the cause of poverty is still monopoly.

After the publication of his first two novels Garland's career divided sharply, and with the exception of *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (1895), a realistic but generalized picture of farm life, he gradually abandoned his crusade against economic injustice. Though he wrote two single-tax articles for B. O. Flower's *Arena* in 1894, the Georgist element disappeared from his literary work. From *The Captain of the Gray Horse Troop*, a novel about Indian affairs, and *Hesper*, a labor novel of Colorado, he turned more and more from his quest for social and economic betterment to criticism, local color stories, biography, and finally to autobiography. Whether his sense of social justice atrophied, whether the local colorist triumphed over the realist in his literary makeup, whether financial success softened his spirit, or whether he simply wrote himself out, Garland became finally a literary raconteur, drawing upon his reminiscences of his acquaintance with nearly every important figure of his day for the body of his later work.

In some ways Hamlin Garland's career ended in disappointment, for he had the equipment necessary to both a reformer and an artist, equipment of which he never made full use. He possessed a burning sense of the injustice of the economic system, a wealth of experience from which to draw, a keen and intelligent mind, a realist's clear vision, and an undoubted literary genius. He seemed from the first destined to become the artist of the single-tax movement, the man best qualified to carry Henry George's ideas into literature of a high order; but Garland could never fix his purpose, uncertain whether he was a reformer, a local colorist, a critic, or a biographer. The promise of "Under the Lion's Paw" was never fulfilled.