

GLADSTONE: "THE POLEMIC AGAINST MR GEORGE"

Henry George's analysis is accorded near Natural Law status by thousands who read his best-selling economics text and for many *Progress and Poverty* was a personal epiphany. Why then, it is often asked, have his ideas not been implemented?

The question can of course be dismissed by observing that, yes, Land Value Tax has been implemented partially in some places and credible attempts made even in Britain in 1909 and 1931, defeated only by circumstance perhaps. But where the question is addressed head-on the *cognoscenti* provide a three-fold answer:

- 1) those who saw the light did not achieve the position to implement.
- 2) those with political influence have not heard of Henry George or fail to appreciate the importance of his message.
- 3) or they saw it but were dissuaded from implementing by vested interests or fear of the electoral consequences.

There are variations on these themes but none include a fourth possibility, that there might have been someone who:

- 4) did have the position and opportunity, did read *Progress and Poverty*, did understand it and was neither venally in the pocket of vested interests nor fearful of radical or controversial reform.

Demanding criteria perhaps to coexist in one person, but on the other hand if the thesis was so compelling to so many educated laymen why should it not have persuaded a senior politician or two? It is a pessimistic view of human nature that supposes all politicians to be either uneducated, stupid or corrupt. And untrue. In Britain there were of course Liberals Herbert Henry Asquith with David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill and later for Labour Philip Snowden and Andrew MacLaren all of whom attempted land reform.

As the title suggests, however, there was another, contemporary with George, who fits all the criteria and did not, and that fact should be of considerable interest to land reform enthusiasts and sceptics alike.

We know that William Gladstone owned a copy of *Progress and Poverty*. We are fortunate to know too that he read it and we also know what were some of his views on it. Evidence is available on these points because he left to posterity two invaluable resources: his library, and his detailed private diaries maintained religiously throughout his 60-year career in politics. At his death in 1898 (Henry George died the year before) Gladstone's library included 33,000 books of which he is reckoned to have read at least 20,000, an almost superhuman feat given the scope of his political achievements in the same period. We know he read them because he noted what he was reading at any time in the diaries and he was also in the habit of classifying each book, adding topics to its index and annotating remarks in the margins. 12,000 are annotated in this way and *Progress and Poverty* is one of those. What follows derives from the work of Mr Michael Hawes, enthusiastic Georgist and a founder member of the Gladstone Club, the political debating society that continues to meet in his name. In 2008 Mike Hawes took up the project to explore St Deiniols Library, which houses Gladstone's books (and has since been renamed *Gladstone's Library*), in search of connections with George. His findings were published in a paper entitled 'The Home Ruler and the Heretic' which he delivered at the 2009 Gladstone Bicentenary Conference at the University of Chester.

Mike Hawes discovered a number of relevant works including the 1879 proof copy of *Progress and Poverty* inscribed 'Rt. Hon. W. E. Gladstone with the compliments of Henry George' and with annotations in Gladstone's hand. Gladstone accepted the gift with a gracious note dated November 11th 1879 saying "Accept my best thanks for the copy of your interesting work, which reached me to-day, and which I have begun to examine. There is no question which requires a more careful examination than the land question in this and other countries, and I shall set great store on whatever information you may furnish under this head." To have started on it in earnest on the day of receipt is persuasive evidence of the sincerity of these words.

Land Reform was a matter of pressing interest to Gladstone during at least the preceding decade. He was first elected Prime Minister in 1868 and on receiving the news famously declaimed, "My mission is to pacify Ireland". And he was well aware that the leading Irish protesters called themselves the 'Land League'. Charles Stuart Parnell and Michael Davitt were demanding "three F's": fair rents, fixed tenancies (against arbitrary eviction) and free sale (of tenancies) and Gladstone was inclined to allow them. Early in his prime ministerial term his 1870 Irish Land Act empowered courts in Ireland to intervene if a rent was "excessive".

From a Georgist perspective this would be treating symptoms rather than causes but it was a decade before the publication of *Progress and Poverty* and had the Act achieved its ends, the worst excesses in Ireland would have been palliated and in all probability, Gladstone's express aim, peace, have been achieved.

It was never properly tested. Its passage through the House of Lords saw the word "excessive" replaced with "exorbitant" wrecking the intended effect as landlords could set an excessive (but not exorbitant) rent, then evict the tenant for falling behind on payments. The troubles were not solved. But neither was Gladstone's determination diminished. In the spirit of his great mentor Robert Peel, when he knew something needed to be done he would not be deterred though it should cost him the ministry and split his liberal coalition.

Progress and Poverty could hardly have arrived on Gladstone's desk at a more auspicious time. In December 1879, in opposition, destined to embark upon a second prime ministerial term the following April 1880. Shortly upon being elected Gladstone would publish his second Irish Land Act 1881. Time enough therefore to digest George's proposition and to frame a working policy.

Instead, in 1881 he gave the Irish what they had demanded, the Three F's. It met their request but it is unlikely that 'obedience to the will of the people' was uppermost in Gladstone's mind. One scholarly biographer, Dr Eugenio Biagini describes his approach as 'episcopal', like a bishop at the pulpit seeing his role to lead his flock and educate public opinion. Never known to shy from challenge, had he strongly believed in George's prescription he would have attempted both to implement it and to explain why it was right. William Gladstone had the perfect opportunity to implement the ideas of Henry George. But he did not. Because he concluded that George was wrong.

Gladstone read widely on land matters and his collection includes several books on the subject. Mike Hawes found his conclusions on George most explicitly recorded in his annotation on a pamphlet



entitled, *Nationalisation of Land: a Review of Mr. George's Progress & Poverty* by Lord Bramwell, printed in 1883 by *The Liberty and Property Defence League*.

The pamphlet was meant as a counter argument to George. Inside the cover of his copy Gladstone has summarised:

"The Polemic against Mr George. The question of private property in land is too superficially dealt with by Lord Bramwell."

But the note continues:

"George's book is only of importance because it reveals mischievous intentions, which could do as well, with numbers and organisations, with no reasons as with Mr George's bad ones. The book is only valuable as a mischiefmaker."

Gladstone detects in *Progress and Poverty* the spectre of a revolutionary movement, which if numerous and organised would threaten actual revolution for which 'mischief' here is a euphemism. Gladstone was the most radical prime minister of the 19th century but, a disciple of Edmund Burke, he shared the 18th century political philosopher's implacable opposition to violent ideological change.

So much for his misgivings about George's intentions. In some respects the more damning phrase is 'bad reasons'. Henry George works hard to form his argument in cast iron reasoning and if it is regarded by enthusiasts as Natural Law that is in no small part because he presents it as such. But it would be impossible to presume that Gladstone, who won a double-first from Oxford and who translated Homer for recreation, simply failed to comprehend George's reasoning. No, he thought George was wrong both in intent and reasons. Those are the facts.

He did not specify how the reasons were bad or write a refutation that we know of but there are clues. Among the significant annotations in his copy of *Progress and Poverty* is this key paragraph from Book VII Chapter 3 against which Gladstone has marked in the margin 'NB' and a double line:

"The truth is, and from this truth there can be no escape, that there is and can be no just title to an exclusive possession of the soil, and that private property in land is a bold, bare, enormous wrong, like that of chattel slavery."

'NB' of course can be used to signify approval but in context of the foregoing it must here be inferred to convey a warning tenor. It can be assumed with some confidence that this passage was in the fore of those in which Gladstone perceived 'mischievous intent'.

How so? Well, apart from the obvious point that to vilify exclusive possession of any plot was to condemn the average householder, it appears also to deny the legitimacy of the nation state itself. Insofar as other peoples of the earth are precluded by our border controls, we assert a claim of exclusive possession. Indeed it is difficult to think of a state whose mandate is not territorially defined.

Land and government then are inseparable. Hence though Gladstone may have approved George's prescription for economic freedom (the evidence does not suggest that he did or not) yet he could not have served as first minister and endorsed a thesis that, in one paragraph at least, denied the legitimacy of the government. ■