

Life and Work of Henry George

ADDRESS OF G. H. GODFREY, AT THE HENRY GEORGE COMMEMORATION DINNER,
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“UNIVERSAL history,” says Thomas Carlyle, “the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the history of the great men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones, the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense the creators of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment of thoughts that dwell in the great men sent into the world—the soul of the whole world’s history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these.”

Carlyle, we know, was a hero-worshipper, but so, indeed, are the vast majority of mankind, and I have no hesitation in saying that most of the men and women gathered here tonight must confess to a fair measure of hero-worship in connection with the grand, heroic personality whose birth we are now commemorating—Henry George, the prophet of San Francisco—as he had been called, and rightly so, for to thousands of men and women his philosophy is a religion, and he himself its prophet, prophet in a more literal sense, for the years but add emphasis to the truth of his teaching and justification to his warnings. “Civilization,” he warns us, “that is not based on justice cannot continue. The eternal laws of the universe forbid it, ruins of dead empires testify, and the witness that is in every soul answers that it cannot be.”

And the injustice of modern civilization—what is it? It is nothing less than the disinheritance of the great mass of humanity. It is the preposterous convention that allows one man to own land upon which others must live and work. How can there be justice when some can command the services of others without rendering a service in return? How can there be justice when the so-called owners of the Earth are able to compel the rest to render tribute to them for permission to live in the world. What justice is there for the citizens of tomorrow when their birthright has been disposed of in advance?

THE EXTRAORDINARY INIQUITY

The Scriptures tell us that the meek shall inherit the Earth, but in modern society it passes to the heirs of the privileged few. Here in Australia, for instance, where the democratic spirit is supposed to be more in the ascendant than elsewhere, 86 per cent. of the inhabitants are trespassers, unless they pay toll to the landlord. Think upon the extraordinary iniquity, nay absurdity of a system that permits a favored few to monopolize nature, this Mother Nature upon whose favors we are so dependent, whose

winty frown sends us shivering, whose life-giving forces dominate our existence. For to own the land is to command these powers. The sun shines, the rain falls, the earth brings forth her verdant pastures and delivers up her treasures, primarily, it would seem, for the landlord.

What is the one great essential—the *sine qua non*—indispensable to every activity carried on upon this globe? It is access to land. And yet, for us this is not a right, but a privilege. It would seem that the gross injustice and absurdity of such a condition of affairs would be apparent to the least observant men, and not require a Henry George to discover it. But the obvious is never apparent. If men would but trust the evidence of their own senses, rather than the voice of authority and the teachings of tradition, the march of real progress would indeed be rapid.

GALILEO

About the year 1632, the young Galileo mounted the leaning tower of Pisa and there before the assembled university dropped two weights, a ball weighing one pound, and another weighing 100 pounds. The multitude saw them fall together, and heard them strike the ground together; some were convinced, but many returned to their rooms, consulted Aristotle, and reading there that the heavier ball should reach the ground first, declared their continued adherence to that doctrine. Even the most spectacular and dramatic demonstration of a great truth is wasted upon people if it conflicts with the accepted belief of their times. No doubt many another before Galileo has seen the truth which he sought to prove, but none had seen it as clearly as he or proclaimed it so fearlessly.

We know that the truth which Henry George demonstrated so convincingly had been seen by others, but who had seen its consequences so clearly, or so eloquently and courageously declared war on this great iniquity? It is the divine courage of the man that most of all evokes our admiration. It was enough to have attacked the most powerful and wealthy institution in society—the very stronghold of privilege itself—for in every country of the civilized world the claims of the landlord have the church to bless them, the law to uphold them, and the army to defend them, and all with a ready acquiescence of the people. To have successfully challenged these claims and denounced this institution under the most favorable conditions would seem to require the heart of a lion and the genius of an intellectual giant. But to have done it under the conditions Henry George had to contend with and well knowing the magnitude of his task was a feat almost incredible.

HE WAS 450 DOLLARS IN DEBT

In September 1877 Henry George at the age of 38 commenced "Progress and Poverty," the work that was afterwards to make him famous throughout the world. At the end of the year he was 450 dollars in debt. The writing of a great book would at least seem to require leisure and freedom from anxiety, but this period was one of grave industrial depression and George had a struggle to keep the wolf from the door. And yet, in spite of this, the work was completed, and the family provided for. But the writing of a book is one thing, its publication another. No publisher could be found for "Progress and Poverty," unless he provided also the plates for it. It is characteristic of the man that he immediately went to work to set the type for it. And so throughout his life whenever a difficulty was encountered it was overcome.

The story of his life as, doubtless, most of you know, is indeed a fascinating and romantic one, and should be read by all who have not done so, for it is as great a source of inspiration as his writings. A friend who knew him well has epitomized it thus: "A Philadelphia boy whose books were men and college the printer's case—a graduate of the university of hard knocks—this printer dipped his pen in life, his words throbbed with sympathy for suffering and thrilled with the logic of truth. Universality is the outstanding characteristic of his genius; breadth of thought and depth of sympathy." As of Shakespeare, so it may be said of Henry George: "He wrote, not for an age, but for all time." His works written from 30 to 50 years ago are as fresh and topical today as when they were first published.

IF THE LAW OF GRAVITATION

Why, then, do his teachings not attract greater attention today? The answer is simple—they are antagonistic to the most powerful interest in every land. As Macaulay says, "If the law of gravitation were opposed to any pecuniary interest there would not be wanting arguments against it." And the most powerful argument used by opponents against the teachings of George is, as Tolstoy remarks, "that which has been used with greatest success against every other irrefutable and self-evident truth," that of hushing it up. "Society," says Tolstoy, "treats ideas that creep in upon its privacy—and such are the ideas of Henry George—as the bee treats noxious grubs; being unable to exterminate them, the bee coats their nest with lime, thus the grub, though not exterminated, is unable to spread further." Indeed, considering the difficulties to be encountered, it is wonderful that the ideas of George should have achieved the substantial practical success that they have.

But if we are not quite satisfied with the rate of progress there is one tendency we must be most careful to avoid, and that is the far too prevalent tendency to blame human nature. Henry George's whole life-work is a protest

against such an idea. Human nature is good enough for him—all it wants is a chance, and for that chance he gave his life. Nor is his beautiful faith in human nature the result of inexperience. Few men had greater opportunities for observing mankind than he. At the age of 18, when he shipped as a boy before the mast on a 500-ton brig on a voyage to Australia and the East, he learned more of human nature on its dingy side than most of us see in a lifetime. That this man, who had no illusions about life, who had mixed with the very dregs of society, as well as with the cream, who tasted much more of life's bitters than its sweets, should yet dedicate his life to improve the material condition of his fellows is a fact that should confound the most crusty cynic.

THE FOUNDATION OF JUSTICE

Surely the fight must be worth while? Surely that confidence is not misplaced? If his appeal, if our appeal fails it will not be on the score of human imperfection: For under whatsoever conditions you find a human being there are certain qualities you may depend upon to turn the scale in favor of justice. In the roughest elements of society there is a sense of justice—there is honor, even among thieves. Play the game, be a sport, as we Australians put it—that is the spirit which will yet save mankind though Empires crumble to the dust. And it is because the philosophy of Henry George is built upon the foundation of justice that it ultimately will win through. To whatsoever the human being produces, to that he hath inalienable right; but to the earth itself, the common heritage of us all, or any portion of it, none can lay individual claim. Until this principle is enshrined in the hearts of men and embodied in human statutes, justice is but a phantom—a myth. But it will win through, and at no very distant date, if sufficient energy is put into the fight.

Henry George has blazed the trail, it is for those that believe in him to broaden it out to a mighty highway, along which mankind may safely march to even more lofty heights. No movement was ever blessed with a greater leader. We have no need to be ashamed of our hero. Few of the so-called great men of the past, or of the present, too, for that matter, but possess some quality, some element of weakness that mars an otherwise great character. We have cases of wonderfully sympathetic poetical natures, who could touch the heart of millions, but whose judgment is not reliable.

A PERFECTLY BALANCED PERSONALITY

We have instances of men whose intellectual greatness is unquestionable, but their sympathies are very narrow, and a selfish personal ambition is the secret of their success. But in George we have that rare combination of great intellectual power and profound depth of feeling—a perfectly balanced personality. The sympathetic qualities of his mind may clearly be seen from the extract

read to you tonight. "Progress and Poverty" is more than a work on political economy, it is a philosophy of society, couched in almost poetical language, with a strong human appeal. But everywhere throughout his work he makes us aware of the keen analytical mind that probes every question to its root. At the beginning of his great work he has placed that beautiful quotation from Marcus Aurelius: "Make for thyself a definition of the thing that is presented to thee, so as to see what kind of a thing it is, in its substance, in its nudity, in its complete entirety, and tell thyself its proper name, and the names of the things of which it has been compounded, and into which it will be resolved." And this behest, which breathes the very spirit of scientific enquiry, he earnestly obeys. It is typical of the practical commonsense of the man that, in order to secure the equal rights of all to the use of the earth, he does not propose that the Government should take over the land and administer it. All that is necessary, he assures us, is to collect the rent in the form of a tax and use it for public purposes, abolishing all other taxes entirely.

HIS VIVID USE OF SIMILE

Nor is George lacking in a sense of humor. His vivid use of simile and metaphor shows this, though often in a somewhat caustic form. Referring to the educated fools that Universities sometimes turn out, he likens them to a monkey with a microscope, or a mule packing a library. Criticising the protectionists' argument that a tariff should be used to encourage infant industry, he says, "All experience shows that the policy of encouragement once begun leads to a scramble in which it is the strong, not the weak, the unscrupulous, not the deserving, that succeed. What are really infant industries have no more chance for governmental encouragement than infant pigs have with full-grown swine about a meal tub." Pointing out that the great public debts have often been incurred by profligate tyrants and unscrupulous Governments, for the very purpose of waging war on the liberties of their own subjects, and emphasising the unreasonableness of expecting the present generation to honor those debts, he says, "It is not the case of asking a man to pay for the debts incurred by his great-grandfather, it is asking him to pay for the rope with which his great-grandfather was hanged, or the faggots with which he was burned." His work abounds in similar vivid passages.

To Henry George's personal charm and power of making friends, all who came in contact with him bear testimony. Dr. Edward McGlynn, one of his closest friends, tells us that he loved the man, and revered him on this side idolatry as much as it was possible; and the large band of earnest friends and supporters express themselves in similar terms. And now, to sum up in a single passage the noble qualities of the life and work of this serene personality, I beg leave to quote the words which George himself used in relation to the Hebrew prophet, Moses: "From first to

last this character is consistent with itself and with the mighty work which is its monument. . . . To dispute about the inspiration of such a man is to dispute about words: from the depths of the unseen such characters draw their strength, from fountains that flow only from the pure in heart must come their wisdom; of something more real than matter, of something higher than the stars, of a light that will endure when suns are dead and gone, such lives tell."

THE FIGHT WILL GO ON

But before concluding, I should like to make a reference to the noble band of workers here and elsewhere who have so staunchly carried the banner which Henry George unfurled some 45 years ago. Most of those present, no doubt, have never met the great leader, but next to this privilege may be placed the good fortune to have associated with some of those who either knew Henry George in the flesh, or can remember the days when his message was first sent throughout the world. For they reflect to us in no small degree the inspiration and influence which they have carried throughout their lives. And I sometimes wonder whether they may not feel on an occasion like this, that after they have gone that influence and inspiration will have departed also, and the movement for social justice perhaps languished. If such a thought should cross their minds, I should like to assure them as a humble representative of a younger generation that the fight will go on as far as we are concerned, till the end.

With superb courage and self-sacrifice have these veterans in the cause fulfilled the trust which the master-mind bequeathed to them, and though they have not sought any reward, it is here,—even here. As the late Lord Morley once said: "A man will be already in no mean paradise, if at the hour of life's sunset, a bright hope can fall upon him, like harmonies of music, that the earth shall still be fair, and the happiness of every breathing creature receive a constant augmentation, when the memory of his poor name and personality has long been blotted out of the brief recollection of men for ever."

ALDERMAN J. R. FIRTH, of Sydney, Australia, spent a day in Cleveland recently, and met E. W. Doty, Peter Witt, and others. He was told: "With you in Australia, the problem is to reduce the number of taxes; in Ohio, the problem is to prevent the real estate boards from imposing several new taxes on the people. The realtors, well organized and confident, are out for blood."

"I DROPPED the worry on the way," says John D. Rockefeller in his birthday poem. Which may mean that Uncle Sam will not get much in the way of inheritance tax.

IN July and August, 55 English Single Taxers succeeded in getting 132 letters or articles published in 18 daily and 13 weekly papers.