

Chapter 8: Thomas Gaskell Shearman

The Contributions of Thomas Gaskell Shearman to the Single-Tax Movement

By Jerome Heavey¹

Thomas Shearman might be called the "godfather" of the single tax movement that Henry George fathered, for Shearman christened it, provided it with financial support, and became its leader after George's death. A sketch of Shearman's life reveals the interests and achievements that brought him into close association with George, and that made him so valuable in the furtherance of their mutual work.

Thomas Shearman was born in Birmingham, England in 1834 and migrated to New York with his parents when he was nine years old. Like George, Shearman left school at the age of thirteen and was thereafter largely self-educated, though he did have the benefit for several years of continued tutoring from his mother; unlike the youthful George, Shearman was not a traveler, and continued to reside with his parents.

In his twenties Shearman became dissatisfied with his employment in a dry goods store, and he accepted the invitation to study law in the office of Dr. Lyman Abbott.² In 1857, he moved to Brooklyn, and two years later he was admitted to the practice of law in Kings County, New York. Even before entering the bar he worked as the editor of a legal journal. Later, with A. A. Hatfield [handwritten: Resfield], he authored a textbook on the law of negligence. It was first published in 1869 and several other editions were to follow. At the time of Shearman's death in 1900 this text was still considered one of the leading authorities on the subject. He was also the author of a textbook on legal practice, and, as Secretary of the Code Commission of the State of New York, in 1861 he prepared the entire "Book of Forms," and four years later much of the Civil Code relating to obligations.

Shearman was a prominent lawyer. In 1868, he formed a partnership with David Dudley Field,³ later joined by John Sterling, and their firm was retained by the Erie Railway Company to take charge of all of its legal business. Shearman and Sterling were also retained to defend Jay Gould in more than 100 damage suits following the Gold Panic of 1869,⁴ and were successful in every case. In 1873, the three of them formed a new firm. Perhaps the most famous case that Shearman undertook was the defense of the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher against Theodore Tilton.⁵ Shearman had long been friends with Beecher, had worked with him in the anti-slavery movement, and was a prominent member of the Plymouth Church, of which Reverend Beecher had been pastor for quite a while. For many years Shearman was a trustee of the Plymouth Church, and for the last ten years of his life he was the Superintendent of its Sunday School.

Throughout his adult years Shearman had a strong interest in tax reform. He was the founder of the Brooklyn Revenue Reform Club and held membership in the Revenue Reform Club of New York. During most of his life, of course, New York and Brooklyn were separate municipalities, and it was only in 1883, that the completion of the Great East River Bridge, now called the Brooklyn Bridge, provided the first link, other than ferries, between the two cities. In the following decade the five boroughs would consolidate to form the modern New York City.⁶

It was Shearman's interest in tax reform that introduced him to Henry George, but there is some confusion about when the two men first met. In the biography of his father, Henry George, Jr. states that the two men met for the first time in May, 1881, when the senior George lectured in Historical Hall, Brooklyn.⁷ However, in a letter dated March 28, 1881, written on the stationery of his law office, Shearman extended an invitation to George to address the Brooklyn Revenue Reform Club at its meeting ten days later.

It is quite possible that Shearman had at least seen George earlier than this; since the early winter of 1881, George had been engaged in some public speaking in the New York area. Shearman might have been referring to one of these occasions when he later said that perhaps the greatest disappointment he had experienced was when George made his first appearance as an orator. After speaking for fifteen minutes George repeated himself and seemed to lose the thread of his argument. George then, according to Shearman, gave no promise of the great power he afterward displayed.⁸ If the two men did meet at one of George's speaking engagements, then Shearman's hand might have been but one of many that George shook that evening. The March 28 invitation does indicate that there had been at least some prior communication:

Dear Sir:

Your favor of 25 inst. is just received. I have long been much interested in your "Progress and Poverty," and have distributed a number of copies among friends, besides recommending every one to read it. The larger part of your book commands my entire assent, especially that part which disposed of the Malthusian theory and other errors of political economists. The land question is too large for me to form an absolute conclusion upon even yet: for although the question was not quite new to me, yet the difficulties in the way of its solution seem so many, that I must have time to consider them. I am thoroughly in favor of the system of taxation which you advocate, as right and advantageous, so far as it goes; but I doubt whether it can be made to accomplish all that you hope."⁹

Charles Barker describes the March 28 invitation in the following passage. "Occasionally he [George] was offered discipleship or assistance generous in the extreme. For an example which counted, late in March he received a letter from a stranger, Thomas G. Shearman, a Nassau Street lawyer, a member of a famous firm."¹⁰

Shearman did become a disciple, as well as a close friend. The intellectual powers and analytical ability that Joseph Miller, a proponent of the single tax, described were thus enlisted to the cause of the land tax. He was important, as well, in helping to extend George's audience by introducing George to influential people in the New York area and by arranging opportunities for him to speak. He was one of the moving spirits behind the October 21, 1882, banquet at Delmonico's welcoming George back from his first trip to Ireland and England.

Shearman had been an advocate of free trade and an opponent of the protection doctrine before he met Henry George. In the *Single Tax Yearbook* of 1917, Miller describes Shearman as "endowed with extraordinary powers of analysis, great intellectual ability, and a prodigious memory. These helped to make him the foremost exponent of free trade in this country, and he could overwhelm the defenders of protection by the use he was able to make of their own figures and statistics."¹¹ Another biographer of George singles out Shearman's work a few years later:

"The single tax movement began gradually to gather force through 1887, mainly as a result of the work of a New York lawyer named Thomas Shearman."¹²

The prominence that Shearman had gained in the legal profession had also brought him considerable financial success, which he used to support George's work. By late 1890, "the contributions which Tom Johnson, August Lewis, and Thomas Shearman were making to the paper [*The Standard*] now amounted, it seems, to \$7000 or \$8000 a year."¹³ In 1892, Shearman was one of the major contributors to defraying the expenses of printing *Protection or Free Trade*.¹⁴

In September of 1890, George reprinted in *The Standard* an article that Shearman had earlier written in the *Forum*.¹⁵ It was entitled "Henry George's Mistakes." The "mistakes" were ideas of George's that were disputed by some of his opponents. Shearman's article was a counterattack against the Duke of Argyll, William Mallock, Abram Hewitt, Edward Atkinson, and William T. Harris.¹⁶

Shearman's most important writing was probably *Natural Taxation*, published in 1895.¹⁷ This work can be likened to a single-tax textbook, and it was reissued for a number of years. It is an indictment of "crooked taxation," that is, indirect taxation, as well as of the evil features of the general property tax. The argument of the book is an attempt to make land-value taxation acceptable to the business sector and to present the single tax as the appropriate and adequate solution to the government's fiscal needs.

The phrase "the single tax" is usually attributed to Shearman. Certainly the words had been placed side by side on many occasions, but it seems that he was the one who caused it to be generally adopted. His January, 1887, address to the Constitution Club is sometimes referred to as "The Single Tax Speech." Use of the phrase spread slowly at first, and *The Standard* did not print the speech until May 28, 1887.¹⁸ In the final issue of that year, George wrote an editorial, "Socialism vs. the Single Tax," and it is at this time that he seems to have definitely adopted the term. Later, in the March 2, 1889, issue of *The Standard* he discussed the phrase in terms that showed both its advantages and its limitations.

The term single tax does not really express all that a perfect term would convey. It only suggests the fiscal side of our aims Before we adopted this name, people, even intelligent people, insisted on believing that we meant to divide land up Since we have used the term single tax this kind of misrepresentation seems to have almost entirely disappeared. . . . [I]t is on establishing liberty, on removing restrictions, on giving natural order full play, and not on mere fiscal change that we base our hopes of social reconstruction This idea is more fully expressed in the term single tax than it would be in land rent tax or any other such phrase.¹⁹

Shearman saw the single tax as a program and a fiscal reform as an end in itself; George saw it as a means to an end. That the two men could have a difference of opinion on a matter so central to their work, and yet continue to be collaborators and close friends, says a great deal for the strength of their friendship and for the intellectual openness and democracy of the movement that George led.

Shearman advocated that only so much of rent should be collected as tax revenue as was

necessary to fund the proper activities of government. George considered the single tax to be a means to an end, and taught that the entire rent should be collected as tax. Shearman was a powerful writer and speaker, and despite their difference of opinion over the meaning of "the single tax," Shearman was an effective defender of George's philosophy.

Shearman's fiscal reform approach came to be referred to as "single tax limited." The "limited" referred to the modest goal of fiscal reform and to the proposition that only as much rent should be taxes as would be required to fund the necessary expenses of government. The contrasting term "single tax unlimited" was used to describe the broader goals that Henry George attached to the land tax, the establishment of justice not only in the state's fiscal activities but throughout society, and the taxing away of the full rent. The earlier quotation from George indicates the difference between the limited and unlimited versions of the single tax, and this distinction continued to be made by George's followers, as an editorial in the *Single Tax Review* of 1914 indicates:

The single tax is an instrument for effecting the resumption of social wealth for social needs -- not merely for the needs of government as now administered, but going beyond it, if necessary, in order to take all the land value. It therefore has nothing in common with "the single tax limited" save as political steps to the ultimate goal."²⁰

As this passage indicates, even those Georgists who disagreed with Shearman used the phrase that he had made popular.

When Henry George died in 1897, he left behind three distinct though overlapping kinds of Georgism; the political reform Georgism, the moral-intellectual Georgism, and the fiscal-reform/single-tax Georgism. Shearman was the central figure in the third group. Though the single tax movement diminished after George's death, in New York City it remained powerful and aggressive, thanks in no small part to Shearman. Unfortunately, he survived George by only three years, and his death in 1900 deprived the single-tax movement of one of its original contributors to its ideology and promulgation.