CHAPTER 7

ASPECTS OF GEORGE'S PERSONAL INFLUENCE

The influence of Henry George on those who believed in him is legendary. For better or worse, his effect on his followers was such that they were frequently called "disciples," with all the connotations the word implies. Some general causes of this personal impact are clear: his single-minded ardor and independence, the inspired tone of his teachings, the eloquence of his written and oratorical word. It remains to be seen why his followers, though there were many fine and reasonable people among them, tended also to number so many of the dull, the unenlightened, the sentimental and even the fanatic. Three relatively complex aspects of his character and life shed some light on this subject, and will now be considered. They are: his intellectual democracy, his relation to the literary world, and his attitude toward religion.

George was a self-educated man whose culture came from very extensive reading, and a highly independent assimilation of what he read to his own journalistic and personal observations. He was intellectually demanding of himself but not of others, nor was he keenly conscious of the gap between his own mentality and that of the average man. He was, of course, too intelligent to be unaware of obvious differences in cultural levels, and in public life was adept at fitting his explanations

to the backgrounds of persons to whom he was talking. Yet in his habit of looking at the world he maintained a sanguine confidence in the intellectual potentialities of his fellow men.

Addressing some students at the University of California, he once said: "All that you need (to study economics) is care in reducing complex phenomena to their elements, in distinguishing the essential from the accidental, and in applying the simple laws of human action with which you are familiar"—as if to do this were in itself quite easy. Sometimes he read his editorials to his office-boys, to find out from their reaction if he had expressed himself clearly.

"There was nothing of the pompous consciousness of greatness about Henry George," observed the *New York Journal* in an editorial after his death. "His mind was of such pellucid clearness that no false modesty could obscure it. But while he felt a serene confidence that he had possession of a truth of vast importance to mankind, that consciousness never betrayed him into the faintest touch of vanity. He retained throughout a simplicity, a modest, almost diffident bearing, and an approachability that knew no distinction of persons."[1]

People of all strata responded to this open simplicity.

"I have for some time been of a desire to write you," declared a Vermont admirer, "but hardly dared to intrude upon your valuable time. . . . I have studied political economy considerable since you was here. . . . I have come to believe—aside from Nature's production—that he who obtains the production of mankind without in some way—either mentally or physically—having done his part is a 'liar and a thief, and the truth is not in him.' Am I not right?"

Equally trusting is the letter from a cultured, self-absorbed British clergyman, who wrote that no one could have "felt more enraptured than I did, when sent by you to my knees in a flood of tears. Since then I have made converts or enquirers into the land question every week—for I pass outwardly as at once a shrewd man of the world, and one who has charity and patience towards all men. . . . Your own sympathies must be my apology for addressing you with a naiveté I could not have thought of indulging towards anyone else."

The other side of George's intellectual democracy was a disregard for the outward marks of achievement. In his book *Social Problems,* lawyers, civil servants, professors and clergymen are done scant honor: his friend Thomas Shearman regretted that he should have so little liking for professional men.[2] This was notwithstanding the fact that George himself had a following in such categories, and in later years held an informal salon that included famous visitors.

Yet professional and especially academic seals of success, he regarded with dubiety. The memory of his disliked Philadelphia schooling, the far greater impetus he had obtained from his solitary reading, and his observance of what seemed to him erroneous thinking on the part of prominent, well-educated men, combined to make him consider a formal education of doubtful value. To obtain work was the main thing, and after that to develop one's own nature.

"You should learn to make a living for yourself," he wrote his son, "for this is by far the most important part of education. . . . 'Never too old to mend' is a maxim I want you to have in mind all through life. Education never ceases. There is always something to learn and something to try for."[3]

For his unbelief in the worth of professional reputation, the background of his youth was partly responsible. His formal training had ceased when he was thirteen; he belonged to no alumni associations, no professional societies. This curtailed his opportunities to meet the cream of professional men on any continuing basis. His contacts with people of achievement came predominantly through their appreciation of him; he did not seek them.

Self-confident as he was in his ideas, he set little store on opportunities for face-to-face persuasion of those who opposed or were indifferent to him. He had no desire to argue personally with authorities in his own field. This was partly the natural reluctance of a reserved man to proffer of himself to skeptics. It was also a certain propensity, born of his own temperament and of his life experience, to resign himself rather readily to being misunderstood by the well-established. There was nothing brooding about this resignation, since his energies were always absorbedly directed elsewhere.

When sounded out on the possibility of his meeting Francis Walker and Edward Atkinson, two famous economists who opposed him, he replied that while he should like to meet them before an audience, to discuss "privately with gentlemen of their stamp" would be labor wasted. And when he did finally, at Saratoga in 1890, hold a debate with leading economists, he did not think it worth an editorial in his own paper, *The Standard,* reserving his comment that week for some single-tax meeting he evidently considered more important

Yet his impact on all kinds of people was tremendous.

"The most astonishing aspect of the Henry George legend," wrote his granddaughter Agnes de Mille, "was his effect on all people with whom he came into personal contact. Without exception everyone, man or woman, was overwhelmed. He seemed to command a power, particularly in later years, that was almost mystic. Men did not merely admire; they worshipped."[4]

In one respect George did have in mind the importance of winning the attention of the professional intellectual world. This is shown by his much interrupted but never relinquished drive to write *The Science of Political Economy.* The last six years of his life read like a recital of polemic and political activity on the one hand, accompanied by a counterpoint of cessations and resumings of the book. Henry George, Jr. recounts that his father meant this work, which more than any other was directed at an intellectual public, to be the supreme effort of his life. Originally planned as an "economic primer", it was changed by its author into a treatise which should not only weld together all the principles of political economy, but should relate that science comprehensively to human civilization.

Unfortunately, George didn't live to complete the book and incorporate in it, as he probably intended to do, the land-theme that was his cardinal interest. Posthumously published, it was little more than half finished. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that George didn't choose to complete it in the short remaining time that he sensed was allotted to him. When in 1897 against the advice of his physicians he embarked on

the second mayoralty campaign he was, consciously or otherwise, deciding to put political activity above the work of intellectual exposition.

His most ambitious book for the winning of intellectual attention was thus never really written: *The Science of Political Economy* as it would have been had he lived to include in it the main idea of *Progress and Poverty*. Even if he had done this, the book would not have answered the specific objections which trouble doubters of his doctrine today. (The work which comes closest to doing that is *Social Problems*.) But it would have added to his stature as an economic philosopher.

An original thinker in the social sciences sometimes exerts an influence through literary circles, and since George himself was a distinguished writer, it is especially pertinent to examine his relation to the authors of his time.

He was a scholar rather than a man of letters. He read prodigiously in history, economics, philosophy, seizing instantly out of a page the ideas which were serviceable to him. All the classic economists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Greek and Roman law and philosophy, histories by Herodotus, Carlyle, Macaulay, Buckle, Guizot, the works of scientists, statesmen, Orientalists, martyrs, of Voltaire, Bacon, Montesquieu, Kant, Jefferson, and many more, were absorbed by him to nourish, by acceptance or disagreement, his own thought.

For his pleasure he read much poetry, especially the high-minded, lyrical kind of that Victorian era: Tennyson, Browning, Arnold; in his own country, Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, and probably many others whose names do not happen to be found among his papers. A contemporary noted that he cared more for nobility of feeling than for poetic merit, and if one peruses the scrapbooks he pasted up for his own edification, this seems all too true.[5] Along with rousing ballads by Bret Harte and Eugene Field, verses of faith by Rossetti, Bulwer-Lytton, Whitman, and such reputable bracers as *Paul Revere's Ride* and *God Give Us Men,* there is a lot of doggerel replete with homely sentiment. The titles give the idea: *The Poor Man's*

Song, How Mama Plays, Loneliness, The Orphan's New Year, That Baby from Tuscaloo.[6]

If one excepts Shakespeare, he did not read extensively in fiction or drama. As a youth he enjoyed novels and counselled his sister Jennie not to despise them, though he himself, he said, had little time for them. He even thought of writing one; perhaps it would have been in the vein of some adventure sketches he did write. There is no record of his having cared for psychological fiction, except for George Eliot.[7] He favored fine narrative prose of external action and color; when he was ill, Defoe, Robert Louis Stevenson, and the *Arabian Nights* were read to him.

Yet if his response to literature apparently had its limitations, the excellence of his own style and the range of his philosophic thought were enough to entitle him to interested recognition in literary circles. What, actually, was the quality of this recognition?

"I have no hope at all here of the literary classes," he once wrote from England—a truth which, George Bernard Shaw notwithstanding, was only moderately impaired by modesty. In the United States he had a circle of literary disciples, most of them from the Middle West, all minor figures on the American scene. The best known were Hamlin Garland who wrote *Tales of the Middle Border,* and the poet, Edwin Markham, who wrote *The Man with a Hoe.* There were also some liberal political writers including Frederic Howe and Lincoln Steffens.

Potentialities for a following of major literary figures were there, but they didn't "take." Mark Twain and William Dean Howells, though personally friendly, were in no sense disciples. Robertson James came to call, but there was no rapport between George and his famous brothers William and Henry. Henry Adams called too; there was no further contact even though his brother Charles Francis Adams was a staunch George supporter.[8]

Yet personal connections cannot be expected to go very far towards winning intellectual interest. Much more significant was the fact that among the social-minded school of writers just arising, there were no major ones who cared about the land

question. This was true even when the themes of their books were exactly illustrative of conditions the economist had cited.

In *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets,* Stephen Crane sketched the sordid tenement world with its temptations to prostitution that George dwelled on in the 1886 campaign. Later on, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* reeked with the miseries of the workers in the Chicago stockyards, whose owners, holding the terminal locations and conniving with the railway men, really constituted a "landed" monopoly. As for the privately owned railroad itself, one of George's arch-targets, there has never been a novel which so branded it as a monster sucking the life out of the land as Frank Norris' *The Octopus.*

None of these writers expressed any recorded interest in George; nor was there any attention to his main idea from the other authors of the naturalistic school, such as Dreiser who had just begun to publish before George's death.

All this is not meant to imply that George's intangible influence on American literature was negligible. In so far as he publicized resistance to monopoly he contributed to the literature which sprang from that revolt. But it is his direct influence, such as would be indicated by adherence to land-reform ideas, which is being studied here, and this was obviously very limited.

The works of those who did follow him suggest one of the reasons for this limitation. Garland, Markham, the poet Bliss Carman, and others, were writers with a feeling for the open spaces, where "land" has significance in its most pictorial sense of farm, forest and prairie.[9] Writers and artists love the concrete, and George's insistence on land appealed to those for whom the transference from the economic word to the background in which they were rooted was most easily made. Otherwise "land" as a factor in human destiny held little conviction for creative minds. Since landowners in America (unlike those surrounding George's greatest literary convert, Tolstoi) were in the main not a recognizable class, but could be city-dwellers, business magnates, anyone;—it was easier for writers to envisage rich capitalists, or the new machines, as forces in the drama of industrial oppression, than to believe in an abstract problem of land-ownership.

George's direct literary following was thus slender and peripheral, tending to die out not long after his lifetime. His ties with the only first-class publications that since his death have proffered his ideas came about fortuitously. These publications are the original *Freeman* magazine (1920—1924) and the *Christian Science Monitor.*

The *Freeman* was published by Francis Neilson, a British actor-playwright, one of a coterie of theatre people (including the de Mille family into which George's daughter Anna married) who frequented George's home. Neilson was also a political philosopher who was much attracted to George's ideas on freedom, and in this he found a bond with Albert Jay Nock.

Nock, the distinguished essayist and critic, became the *Freeman's* co-editor. With others he gave this excellent "little magazine" a strong Georgist tinge, sprinkling it with pieces that favored the land tax or praised George as a great social thinker. In 1939 he wrote a brief book, *Henry George,* in which he set out to explain why the economist had been ignored. He found this answer:

George had the mind of a philosopher, but the temperament of a propagandist. Various circumstances, above all poverty, conspired to repress his inborn philosophic instinct, so that it asserted itself only when he was writing his books. The rest of the time he engaged in publicist and polemic activities which sadly resulted in the misinterpretation of his doctrine.

All this has the ring of truth. But then Nock went off at a tangent, projecting onto George's philosophy his own drastic bias—as shown in his book *Our Enemy the State*—against all forms of political organization. He painted George as an arch individualist, "the best friend capitalism ever had," who had somehow been misled into accepting candidacies which made him looked upon as "a cheap labor-skate," and whose belief in "the educability of the masses" had been utter waste. George's soundly balanced view of the need for both individual and social spheres of action became, in Nock's mind, warped onto the side of sheer anti-collectivism.[10]

Nock never met George and wrote that he "did not follow his campaign attentively." But he did know many of the liberal

Georgist followers: Louis Post, Frederic Howe, Newton Baker, Joseph Fels; and he wrote that "their acceptance of the State as a social institution amazed me." It may have been in all sincerity that he gave his own anti-state twist to the ideas of George himself, but in any case it was a real distortion.

With its brilliant insights and savorous style, Nock's writing, had it embodied a truer interpretation, could have been the missing link between literary people and Henry George. Instead, it strengthened the voice of those within the movement who chose to look upon George as a definite foe of government interference.[11]

Quite different in its approach is the *Christian Science Monitor,* which down the years since its founding has given space to George's ideas. The depression of 1929 revived a faded interest in land value taxation, and in the twenty years to follow there were over fifty pieces on the subject. Besides explanation of the economic proposal itself, and comments on the persistence of the movement, there have been varied sidelights: an interview with George's daughter; an account of what Marx and George thought of each other (not much); an account of what Samuel Seabury thought of George (a great deal). A financial writer analyzed the reasons for the neglect of the movement, with the opposition of real estate interests and the aggressive manners of his Georgist correspondents put to the fore. The over-all tone of the commentary has been open-minded, and the interpretation accurate.

A News Editor has explained the *Monitor*'s attention to the topic on two levels. A tradition of interest was begun by Willis Abbot, editor of the paper from 1921 to 1927 and some 25 years earlier, campaign manager for George. Also the *Monitor* tries to give its readers ideas from the past which may prove constructive for the present, and so the subject has survived on its own merits.

It has been shown that the center of George's following did not lie in any professional group. While politicians, economists and writers certainly noticed, often admired, and sometimes

even agreed with him, the core of his supporters consisted of people who, first and foremost, had faith in his personality. The inspirational, magnetic quality of his character was in turn bound up with his own religious feelings and attitudes, which must be studied if one is to understand what drew his followers.

This side of his life is quite complex.

His innermost, personal response to religion is perhaps best shown in a long letter he wrote Father Dawson, a priest who wanted him to become a Catholic:

"My dear Father,

"Don't be disturbed because I am not a Catholic. In some things your church is very attractive to me; in others it is repellent. But I care nothing for creeds. It seems to me that in any church or out of them, one may serve the Master. Because you are not only my friend, but a priest and a religious, I will say something to you that I don't like to speak of—that I have never before told to anyone. Once in daylight and in a city street there came to me a thought, a vision, a call. . . . And then and there I made a vow. Through evil and through good, whatever I have done and whatever I have left undone, to that I have been true. It was that that impelled me to write *Progress and Poverty,* and that sustained me when else I would have failed. . . . That is a feeling that has never left me, that is constantly with me. And it has led me up and up. It has made me a better and a purer man. It has been to me a religion, strong and deep though vague—a religion of which I never like to speak or make any outward manifestation but yet that I try to follow. . . . And when you remember me in your prayers, which I trust you sometimes will, do not ask that I shall be this or that, but only grace and guidance and strength to the end."[12]

Yet a few years later the writer of this beautiful letter was to be called "an utter cheap reformer" by no less a person than Theodore Roosevelt.[13] That he had been far surpassed by George in the mayoralty vote may have made Roosevelt a bit edgy; still, he was too honest to have said such a thing unless he really thought it. The remark shows to what extent well-

educated, intelligent people of George's day could misconstrue his personality. Not a little of this reaction is traceable to a kind of variance between George's inward and outward attitude to religion.

A deeply reserved, individualistic spiritual feeling shines out of the letter to Father Dawson, but this did not always appear in George's public words. In both books and speeches he often seemed to wear his religion on his sleeve as he spoke of God in the exhortatory, personalized terms of orthodox creeds.

Take this passage from *Progress and Poverty:*

"Though it may take the language of prayer, it is blasphemy that attributes to the inscrutable decrees of Providence the suffering and brutishness that come of poverty; that turns with folded hands to the All-Father and lays on Him the responsibility for the want and crime of our great cities. We degrade the Everlasting. We slander the Just One."[14]

Or this from *The Condition of Labor*:

"Nor do we hesitate to say that this way of securing the equal right to the bounty of the Creator and the exclusive right to the products of labor is the way intended by God for raising Public revenues."[15]

When one considers such passages, one sees why many cultivated people looked on George's religious fervor with misgiving. It is not that intellectuals distrust the religious impulse in itself, for they well know how often it is the mainspring of the most valuable realistic action. Albert Schweitzer, for instance, has been revered the world over for just a combination.

But religion as the inner, unspoken impetus to outward endeavor is quite different from the identifying of practical proposals with the intention of God. That kind of union of religion and action, mentally sophisticated people distrust, for it suggests to them that the ideas being advanced may be the products of ethical wishful thinking rather than of the truth.

How is it that George, who was at heart both rather introverted, and uncommitted to any institutional creed, presented himself so often in the guise of an evangelist? Apart from the churchly influence of his childhood, the answer seems to lie in two directions.

The main reason was that he was undertaking the novel, difficult task of depicting political economy as ruled by spiritual law. In doing this he was running athwart of much vague but profound public assumption; for many believed that economic laws were those of the jungle, that the poor must always be with us, and that wars and famine were the answer to an expanding population. To counteract this, George kept driving away at his insight—to him fortified by strict economic analysis—that a beneficent purpose underlay the economic structure of the world. In trying to instill this perception into others, it was natural for him to emphasize the all-powerful, merciful character of the Deity.

The other answer lies in his contact with organized religion, specifically with the Catholic Church. This came about accidentally. Because the Irish happened to be having an acute land problem, George wrote in sympathy with them early in his career; then since the Irish are predominantly Catholic, many Catholics became his supporters. When Dr. McGlynn's excommunication for endorsing George's mayoralty candidacy turned the latter's thinking toward the policies of the Church, he not only belabored its political tendencies but also the failure of this church, and of others, to concern themselves with economic misery.

George's connection with Irish Catholics thus combined with his innate feeling for the spiritual basis of economics to preoccupy him more than would else have been the case with institutionalized religion. The irony of it was that churchgoing religion did not interest him, and he dwelt on it mainly for its lacks. But this orientation brought under his aegis many quasi-religious, sentimental or fanatical people, such as graced the antic meetings of the Anti-Poverty Society. Here could be found that combination of religious with over-simplified economic thinking, which an historian of the Georgist movement has rightly said was to the detriment of both.[16]

The spirit of discipleship which sprang up around George was not fostered by him. He once wrote a poetess who had too fulsomely praised him that if he should ever think of himself as better than others, he would lose what strength he had.[17]

His letters and diaries, compared to the outpourings of friends and relatives, are plain, unpretentious, almost laconic in tone, while in his books he was capable of a succinct, casual wit not usually found in the idol of "devotees."

Nevertheless, there was something in his personality that laid him open to the discipleship of the foolish as well as of the wise. His sense of humour was probably in abeyance when he was in a crusading mood; it was not, at any rate, the constant, automatic safeguard of, say, a Lincoln against sentimental supporters. And modest as he was in his own right, he did at the end of his life develop a kind of martyr complex for his beloved cause.

This is shown in the attitude he displayed in accepting his second mayoralty candidacy. A high-minded killing of two birds with one stone is not amiss in political life, and if a man wishes to combine promoting a cause with a genuine desire to win office, the educational results of his campaign may be very good. But what is one to make of George's approach? It shows a quaint disregard for the actual responsibilities of mayorship to be perfectly prepared, as he was, to die in obtaining them.

Yet this selfless opportunism generated a strange power.

"Oh, Doctor, you should have been here to see 'politics' as they were conducted in the 'Union Lyman Hotel' for these three weeks," wrote Annie George to Dr. Taylor after her husband's death. "I will never forget it. It was a beautiful experience to see him surrounded by his friends and followers all ready to sacrifice anything for a principle laid down by their beloved leader. What a heavenly look would come into his face as some old friend would appear to offer his allegiance. He grew Christ-like within the last year. Everyone spoke of it."[18]

In conclusion, it would seem that while George was alive the inspiration of his character won him the devotion and partial intellectual assent of many enlightened men and women. However, while various liberal-minded people who stood high in their professions greatly admired him, there was no tradition of support for him in academic or literary fields, and his political followers among the progressives were not fused into a really effective force in his behalf.

As his lifetime receded into the distance, the close personal influence on those who had known him rarified and thinned out. Its place was outweighed in the public mind by the impression the hortatory expression of his ideas had made on numbers of followers, including the uneducated and the dogmatic, to whom his doctrine's chief appeal was the simple idea that Land, the gift of God, should belong to the people, while they should reap the "fruits of their labor."

This mental legacy did not correspond with any great accuracy to the actual quality of George's thought. To be sure, he did think that land values should belong to society, and often spoke of it in a preaching vein. But what he was fundamentally trying to convey was that economic law, as confirmed to him by strict economic reasoning, was really part of universal spiritual law.

Though his whole life was conditioned by the desire to give the land question its rightful significance, the means whereby he chose to do this were manifold. His abstract, theoretic mentality enabled him to see the land problem as enmeshed with many others, and his hopeful temperament led him to believe that opportunity lay first with this activity, then with that, for bringing it to public attention.

That the agreement of professors, economists and other established intellectuals was essential to the acceptance of his ideas, was a truth which he underestimated. A combination of sensitivity and dislike of the airs of success kept him from pressing his contacts with the influential persons who crossed his path. Too magnanimous and too absorbed in the drive of his own work to carry a chip on his shoulder, he nevertheless almost leaned backwards in avoiding involvement with professors who had even partly opposed him.

Therefore, he never developed with any economists the close ties which might have inspired them to analyse his proposal with concerned care, and advise him of any errors within it of proportion or presentation.