

How Henry George Helped Win A War

by SYDNEY MAYERS

HENRY GEORGE abhorred war, and devoted his life to urging the eradication of its basic cause. Nevertheless, strange as it may seem, he played a direct part in the waging of a war that lasted almost seven years. It was a somewhat obscure conflict, fought in a limited sphere, but its results were far-reaching and of considerable economic importance. In the history of Scotland it is described as the Crofters' War (1882-1888).

A croft, in Scotland, is a small rented farm. Crofts still exist, but were much more prevalent during the Nineteenth Century, when thousands of "crofters" in the Scottish Highlands earned their livelihood by modest agriculture and animal-husbandry. They were proud, sturdy and frugal, willing to work hard to wrest what they could from the not-too-fertile soil. But increasingly exorbitant demands by the owners of the land made it more and more difficult for the crofters to earn even the meager living they had become accustomed to.

From time immemorial, the Highlanders had lived under a kind of paternal feudalism, befriended and protected by the clan chiefs to whom they gave their fealty. They were close to their "lairds," and if they knew little luxury, at least they were not exploited. When the clan system terminated, about 1845, it was succeeded by landlordism, which unfortunately proved to be of the absentee variety. The distant owners of the land who seldom saw their property or met their tenants, were represented by overseers whose primary function was to exact as much rent as possible. In the exercise

of their duties, the overseers imposed harsh and unjust restrictions on the crofters.

Although passive by nature, the crofters inevitably had to fight back against their oppressors. Actively assisted and financially supported by the famous Irish Land League, the long-suffering Scots organized numerous committees and land leagues, including a Crofters' party,—the first "Labor" party ever formed. In 1882, Henry George addressed a meeting of the Irish Land League held in Glasgow. His speech, which of course expounded his land value taxation proposals, made sense to his audience, and certainly his denunciation of the evils of private land ownership found responsive ears. Who can say what deeper reactions his remarks may have awakened?

In any case, whatever the effect of George's words, the same year saw the first "battle" of the Crofters' War. It took place on the Isle of Skye, where the crofters refused to pay rent until there had been returned to them the common grazing land whose use they had been denied after countless generations of free access to it. When the local sheriff and his deputies came to Skye to serve eviction notices, they were set upon by the outraged farmers, and the legal papers were burned. Ten days later the authorities sent new summonses, the sheriffs being backed up by a large body of police. The crofters were ready for them, armed with rocks, clubs, scythes, pitchforks and the like. Once again the minions of the law were flouted and repulsed.

As the Crofters' War spread through the surrounding Highlands, the vio-

lence made clear to the government the fact that stringent measures would have to be taken, unless some acceptable compromise was found. Accordingly, Prime Minister Gladstone appointed a Royal Commission on Highland Distress to study the problem. The Commission recommended a few reforms aimed at calming the crofters, but these proved to be "too little and too late." The impasse remained, the tension grew, and the skirmishes continued.

Early in 1884, Henry George again visited the Highlands—this time to take a leading role in the crofters' campaign. He was among the organizers of the Scottish Land Restoration League, which demanded the abolition of landlordism and the establishment of peasant proprietorship. That same year the voting franchise was granted to the crofters, who at once became politically active in their struggle for economic and legal reforms.

Political pressure and repeated combat (such as it was) in the Scottish Highlands, plus aroused public opinion throughout Great Britain, finally resulted in the adoption by Parliament of

the Crofters' Act of 1886, which encompassed some of the reforms demanded by the croft tenants. But even these were not effective, thanks to lackadaisical enforcement of the Act. The Crofters' War continued sporadically for two more years, while both London and Edinburgh tried desperately to find a solution satisfactory to all concerned. In 1888, the last "battle" occurred on the Island of Lewis, at about the same time the Crofting Commission, appointed under the provisions of the Crofters' Act, really went to work toward eliminating the injustices which had sparked the whole commotion.

Thus, in the tradition of the embattled American farmers who stood their ground at Concord, the Scottish crofters took their stand in the Highlands and fought for their land. That Henry George boldly joined the doughty Scots in their struggle for economic reform is a credit to him and to his memory, and should be an inspiration to his followers. Perhaps neither George nor the crofters won all they fought for, but their voices were heard and their deeds should be remembered.



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A spate of interesting new periodicals has come our way, among them the following:

The Green Revolution, a paper put out by the School of Living, Brookville, Ohio, devoted to homesteading, organic farming and a natural way of life.

Fragments, with individualism as its theme, is published at 139 Hempstead Turnpike, Elmont, New York. Jack Schwartzman is chairman of an editorial board which includes Sydney Mayers.

Assent and Otherwise, a venture in the field of personal journalism by Laurence Kobak, staff member at the New York Henry George School (editorial address, Box 2752, Grand Central Station, New York 17, N. Y.).

Inside, a magazine for science fiction fans, Stanley Sapiro, Los Angeles teacher, placed an advertisement of the Henry George School in the first issue.

The Journal of Economic Abstracts, an ambitious undertaking by the American Economic Association, giving summaries of articles appearing in leading economic journals.