

*Henry George*. By Charles Albro Barker. New York: Oxford University Press, 1955. Pp. xii, 696. \$9.50.

Albert Einstein, so the story goes, once replied to a critic who complained of not understanding the exposition of relativity: "Why should you expect to comprehend in a few hours what has taken me a life-time to grasp?" Charles Barker might similarly rebuke reviewers of *Henry George* who remark on the too sparing use of the blue pencil in much of this intensive study. The analogy is of course inexact, if only because Barker is not an originating genius, and his analysis deals with another man's thought. Nevertheless, Henry George's ideas as they took form and developed merit the attention this biography demands of both author and reader. The book, particularly the first of its two parts, is indeed hard reading, calling for intellectual effort and unremitting concentration. Convinced that later generations as well as many contemporaries labeled George a crank without having sufficiently scrutinized his writings, the biographer undertakes to right the balance by placing the self-taught economic theorist in his troubled "unreformed" nineteenth-century world. If today thoughtful people are doubtful of progress, few deny that poverty is still with us, and though, as Barker points out, George's remedy of land nationalization or land-value taxation no longer offers an answer to social needs in an age of billion dollar budgets for national defense, we cannot for that reason dismiss the significance of his work.

In Part I, chronology divides the text into chapters but, after the rather swift-moving narrative of George's early life and meager education, the thought of each section ties so closely to what goes before and what follows that the reader, to perceive the logic of the whole, finds himself virtually forced to consume the entire 250 pages at a sitting, a difficult chore in any time or place. Yet here is the most compelling part of the book. It is the story of a man's inner growth. From his arrival in San Francisco to the appearance of *Progress and Poverty*, the California of the 1860's and 1870's opens out to explain the social forces that worked upon George. Bringing his intellect and his deep religious feeling to bear upon these problems, he seems in Barker's pages to produce before the very eyes of the twentieth-century reader the analysis of the cause of the evils and his solution of how human goodness can wipe them out. From start to finish, the biography is a history of the power of ideas conceived and preached through America and Europe by an observant, socially conscious, self-abnegating idealist.

Part II, covering the years from 1880 till George's death in 1897, is easier going, since here the theme shifts from exploration of a man's heart and mind largely to exposition of the reception accorded his thought. To anyone who has regarded Henry George as a minor figure of reform in the great movement of the last decades of the nineteenth century, a figure less shadowy than the Bellamy of *Looking Backward*, but less dramatic than Eugene Debs and less effective than Henry Demarest Lloyd and Washington Gladden, the stir George created in Britain, the impact of his lectures, and his exchange with the Duke of Argyll must come as a revelation. After reflecting upon this evidence, it becomes easy to accept Barker's otherwise startling statement: "Henry George's British mission signifies an American impulse behind the Scottish labor movement, which became historic in making the modern Labour party, and in forging the character of twentieth-century Britain" (p. 402).

Today, as the stock market climbs higher and higher and the Teamsters' Union, for one, takes its place as a capitalistic, stockowning organization, George's basic belief in an economy of abundance seems perfectly natural. But in his own time, faith in the precepts of Social Darwinism, which Big Business adopted as its own justification, gave a twist to the dominant social philosophy, a philosophy related, but possibly only lightly, to the thesis: "What's good for General Motors is good for the United States." To an academic audience perhaps the most interesting feature of George's rejection in America is the attitude of university

professors of economics, William Graham Sumner, Francis Amasa Walker, John Bates Clark, Edwin R. A. Seligman, and later Richard T. Ely. At first ignoring him, as if, like the legendary Brown University alumnus, he were really a "Professor of Psycho-ceramics (crackpot to you)," his scholarly contemporaries had eventually to pay him attention. He did not, it is true, employ statistics to shore up his arguments, a weakness his professorial critics pounced upon, but he was able to point to the misleading data in Walker's statistical summary of landholding in the Compendium of the 1880 Census and to induce a reluctant Walker to correct and reinterpret the figures. Of all the academic group, Edmund J. James, E. Benjamin Andrews, and Arthur Twining Hadley gave George the most serious consideration, while younger men like John R. Commons and Thorstein Veblen felt his influence strongly. General Walker himself made obeisance to his opponent as a man who stimulated the public to thought.

No more than Britain could the United States discount him during his lifetime. In the face of fierce attack, not only did Henry George clubs spring up in New York City during the mayoralty campaign of 1886, but later Single Tax Associations appeared the country over. George was a man of paradoxes: "a radical land theorist, but one who denied the homestead farm as a safety valve for working men; a spokesman for labor, but one who protested more strongly than anyone else the national policy commonly believed to protect American working men; a local-government Jeffersonian, but one who spoke for government's playing a strong role in economic affairs, and sometimes for the federal government's doing so" (p. 451). The man himself, impassioned, selfless, and intellectually vigorous, lent force to his teachings. "Although," wrote Thomas Walker from Birmingham, "I by no means accept slavishly all his conclusions, I recognize with deep gratitude that he has struck the keynote of the future universal harmony. For me, he has absolutely drawn aside the veil that hid the next stride in human progress, and has given to life a meaning and brightness which previously it lacked" (p. 570).

One excellence not to be overlooked in this volume is the method of documentation. To have given exact references for every source used would have meant a book considerably longer and bulkier than this 700-page publication. Hence Professor Barker has resorted to a scheme he calls "documentation in depth," confining himself to a general discussion of bibliographical sources and a chapter by chapter summary of the location and nature of the most significant materials upon each topic in turn. Anyone dissatisfied with this form of citation may consult the author's detailed annotated typescript. This plan removes the book from the ranks of the defensive and, relying upon the reader to have faith in the author's honesty and judgment, permits him to make his presentation uncluttered by the paraphernalia of timid scholarship.

However grateful for the reassessment of George's place in American history, the reader nevertheless cannot fail to be irked at the book's literary shortcomings. Literary, to be sure, not historical, these weaknesses still mar the work. Infelicitous wording, sentences so clumsy as to require rereading to be sure of the sense and, above all, frequent exposure to the mechanics of exposition slow the pace of the story and reduce the force of the argument. A skillful writer should not have to explain why he backtracks or anticipates; in doing so he forces his audience to sweat with him over problems of presentation which are his alone to resolve.

Yet to overstress the drawbacks of style would be unjust and unappreciative. For *Henry George* is an important book that every student of modern America would do well to read and ponder.

CONSTANCE McL. GREEN, *American University*