

George and His Times

by CECYLE NEIDLE

HENRY GEORGE was not a "new American," but a second or third generation American of Scotch ancestry. If the immigrant who establishes a home and family in America is to be considered the "first generation American," Henry George was of the third generation; if only natives are counted, he was of the second generation. It was his grandfather who was the "new American," and as it so frequently happens among immigrants, he had to wait for his grandson to make his name famous. But no one will question that Henry George was an outstanding American—for a little more than 70 years after his death his reputation as an American thinker has survived, and his question: "Why poverty in the midst of plenty?" is more pertinent than ever. Obviously Professor Rose thought him an outstanding American or he would not have written a new account of his life and contribution.

The distinction of Henry George lies not only in having been aware of the ills of his society, but also in the fact that he knew they were not temporary. In recognizing this he was a prophet; in offering a solution for the amelioration of economic conditions he was a reformer. Though we have progressed beyond anyone's expectation, poverty is with us in a way that is more than ever an indictment of, and a blight on, our society. Henry George belongs to the 19th century, but in recognizing that the conditions he inveighed against would plague our century too, he was ahead of his times.

The appearance of a new book on Henry George is important because comparatively little has been written about him. Outside of an early biography by his son there are, so far as I know, only two or three which ap-

peared in the 1930's. Professor Rose offers an interpretation from a contemporary point of view. The book is tender and respectful of him and recreates richly the personality of the man and the problems of his time.

I see him as typical of certain aspects of the American tradition perhaps because this was how he was presented by Professor Oscar Cargill, who is himself typical of the best in America, though in a different way from Henry George. Like many of his contemporaries of the middle class Henry George did not go to college, for the spread of colleges, specifically on the state level, belongs to the second half of the 19th century.

Most universities came into existence as land grant colleges through a piece of legislation called the Morrill Act of 1862, which granted to the states as many times 30,000 acres as a state had senators and representatives. These valuable lands were generally sold and the proceeds went into the actual building, and into the creation of large endowments, and land grant colleges were thus established. It is an interesting question whether Henry George would have approved of such gifts and whether he would have advocated a tax on land owned by colleges. But those lands were sold to raise needed funds, and who bought them—hoarders, real estate speculators, railroads, people who shrewdly surmised that somewhere oil or other valuable natural resources had to be found that would come to be worth untold millions. This is what actually happened. Speculators who had bought land for a pittance often found themselves multi-millionaires.

At 16 Henry George went to sea and in this he was following the example of other young Americans. Journalism to which he turned next as

a career had also been popular, and a host of writers began their careers in printing offices. The printing shop was "the poor man's college" where news was circulated and discussed and where one learned to think and to write.

Newspapers in those days were of the "here today and gone tomorrow" variety, particularly in California, a state that had only recently emerged from frontier conditions. While George was making his start his eye was undoubtedly on what was happening around him. It was a time when great monopolies were coming into existence and entrenching themselves with callous disregard for the public and the rights of labor. Labor rebelled with the most savage strikes in our history. It was also the time of feverish railroad building. The Union Pacific and the Central Pacific had just completed the first transcontinental connecting the trans-Appalachian West with California.

Building the railroads was private enterprise, but the most important help had come from the federal government in immense land subsidies. At first the government offered only 10 square miles of land in alternate sections along the right of way for each mile of track laid, as well as a loan of \$16,000, \$32,000 or \$48,000 in government bonds, depending on whether the terrain was flat, hilly or mountainous. But it soon became apparent that that was not enough. In 1864 the government doubled the land grant from 10 to 20 square miles of land for each mile of track and in addition permitted the companies to borrow private capital up to the amount of government loans, accepting a second mortgage on the loans made. What was involved was nearly 30 million acres of land and loans amounting to \$60 million. That's where the land has gone — into the hands of the most shameless profiteers the country has ever known.

All this surrounded Henry George as

Dr. Cecyle Neidle is the author of *The New Americans*. She represented the publishers of the new biography of Henry George, and its author, at the recent HGS banquet. This is a shortened version of her address. She is a former teacher of history.

he observed the terrible labor troubles. He was a startling combination of reformer and conservative. For instance he opposed Chinese immigration for the same reasons that Samuel Gompers did—the need to protect the American workman. He reasoned that the existence of a Chinese labor market would bring down wages, which, in turn, would bring down the economy. He must have seen the riots against Chinese labor and these might have been another reason why he was against importation of Oriental labor. It was also the time of the beginning of our heaviest immigration when labor had no protection from the power of monopolists. Though attempts were being made to form unions on a national scale, none had as yet become strong enough to oppose the business giants. In 1873 speculation in railroad stocks and over-extension in railroad building brought on one of the worst depressions in our history.

In those days when a long depression broke out the working man could expect no help through public works or government interference on behalf of labor. People starved unless private charity helped them out. That was the kind of poverty that surrounded Henry George as he was writing his *Progress and Poverty*.

In 1879, just as the country was coming out of the depression that had lasted six years, George was ready with his prescription for the elimination of poverty in the midst of plenty—a single land tax on rent that would benefit the many instead of the few. In announcing this solution for the economic ills of the country he was acting in the American tradition. There have always been reformers in America and very

few were radical. You know of course that he was not a Marxist—that, in the 19th century and perhaps even today, would have been considered entirely unAmerican. He was in favor of trade unions for skilled laborers because they would increase wages at the expense of rent, but he was opposed to large international unions made up of unskilled labor. He had ambivalent feelings about strikes because, to his way of thinking, strikes were apt to destroy personal

freedom. He was against monopoly, like other liberals of that time, but he was also against abolition of private property. He opposed a personal income tax. Above all he did not want to discourage incentive.

It is fitting to express the hope that America will keep producing men of vision who will not only be able to see the faults in our system but will have the wisdom to try to overcome them. Such a man was Henry George.

George's Prophetic Warning

by EDWARD J. ROSE

I THINK the time has come for a full appreciation of Henry George's ideas and by that I mean more than just straight-forward economic theory. It takes some time for societies to catch up to their prophets. As you well know, George's observation in "How Modern Civilization May Decline" near the end of *Progress and Poverty* has recently been affirmed several times over: "Whence shall come the new barbarians? Go through the squalid quarters of great cities, and you may see, even now, their gathering hordes! How shall learning perish? Men will cease to read, and books will kindle fires and be turned into cartridges!" This passage reminds me of Melville's description of the typhoon in *Moby Dick* as a bomb bursting out of the blue Pacific calm over the Japanese Isles.

Great writers utter prophecy as a matter of course. Well, we have lived through the bomb that burst over Japan and the Nazi book-burnings, now we have the barbarians in our midst. What is the cause? The cause is poverty, not only economic poverty but cultural and spiritual poverty. When I speak of George or of Melville as a prophet I must be understood in the sense in which the prophet is defined by Blake: "Every honest man is a Prophet; he

This was the text of a letter to Robert Clancy by the author of the new biography, *Henry George*. He is a professor of English at the University of Alberta, and did some of his research for the book at the HGS and Robert Schalkenbach Foundation in New York.

utters his opinions both of private & public matters. Thus: If you go on So, the result is So. He never says, such a thing shall happen let you do what you will. A Prophet is a Seer, not an Arbitrary Dictator. It is man's fault if God is not able to do him good, for he gives to the just & to the unjust, but the unjust reject his gift."

Henry George was a just man and interested in seeing that men were justly treated. If our civilization does not rid itself of its chronic corruption it is doomed. George described this development clearly: "As corruption becomes chronic; as public spirit is lost; as traditions of honor, virtue, and patriotism are weakened; as law is brought into contempt and reforms become hopeless; then in the festering mass will be generated volcanic forces, which shatter and rend when seeming accident gives them vent. Strong, unscrupulous men, rising up upon occasion, will become the exponents of blind popular desires or fierce popular passions, and dash aside forms that