Henry George, The Scholar

By FRANCIS NEILSON

The accompanying paper was read by the author at the New York HGSSS Commencement exercises and is here reprinted in response to many requests.

Henry George was thirty-two years old when he wrote his little book, **Our Land and Land Policy.** His son tells us that his Alma Mater was the forecastle and the printing office. He was poor, unheralded, unknown. What advantages of education were at hand in the western country when he was a youth must have been meagre. There was no Carnegie in that day, to endow libraries where the poor man might find food for his mind and refreshment for his soul; nor, in that day, were there any short-cuts to information, such as **The Family Book of Knowledge** and Bartlett's **Familiar Quotations.** The pursuit of knowledge in that time, to a man like Henry George, meant toiling to the heart of the subject, along the rough way of thorny problems; the best way in the end for a man to equip himself with the thought of his worthy predecessors.

He must have been an unusual man—one possessed of intellectual courage—to set to work to write **Our Land and Land Policy.** I have often wondered what Henry George was doing, during the six years after he wrote that short book, to gather the material for the work which he began in 1877 and published three years later under the title of **Progress and Poverty.** The reason I have pondered this question so often, for a period of at least forty years, is that no matter how often I return to the book, I am more and more impressed with the fact that George reveals in it not only a tenacity of purpose, but a thoroughness of review which covers the known works of the chief economists who wrote in English during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, **Progress and Poverty** reveals a familiarity with works which lie on the fringe of the science of political economy. There are innumerable references to authors who are not mentioned by writers on economic subjects, even so late as John Stuart Mill. The skill manifested by George in selecting his quotations from these authors indicates clearly that the more facets of reference and substantiation he could gather to prove his point, the surer would be the literary effect to be produced.

Many men have asked me: where did he get his learning? I remember years ago spending some time with Dr. Hodgkin at Barmore Castle in Northumberland. I had gone down

to the constituency of Berwick, for which Sir Edward Grey sat in the House of Commons, to speak—not in support of Grey, but solely on the question of Land Values and Free Trade. One night after we returned from meeting, we were gathered at the supper table. There were several of the doctor's friends at the board, and he suddenly said to me, "Neilson, I have heard all this before. Now where? It wasn't Grey when he was a young man." Then his daughter rose from the table and, in a few moments, returned with a book and placed it before her father. He picked it up, looked at it for a moment, gave it a slap of affection and said: "Here you are, Neilson, Henry George's **Progress and Poverty.** Bless my life, I had forgotten all about it!"

It was one of the early editions—many parts of it inter-leaved; nearly every margin had a note. He said, "It must be over twenty years since I read this book, and let me tell you, Neilson, I was never so impressed with a secular work as I was with this." Then the famous old doctor opened out and, for many minutes, treated the men at the board with a perfectly beautiful dissertation on what was revealed in George's work. Numbers of similar instances have occurred in my life.

The point I want to get home is this: that George had no educational advantages; he was poor, but he had youth and health, and these two boons enabled him to do an intellectual giant's work. If George could do that sixty years ago, what can the poor man of natural ability do now, when every educational avenue, closed to George, lies wide open to a youth today in any village in the land; for it would be a very unusual country town that could not boast a library.

What was the secret of George's endeavor? First, he was a unique observer. The old saying, "he kept his wits about him," is here directly applicable. He viewed the conditions in the drama of life as it passed before him; and, to use another homely phrase, "he put two and two together." He witnessed every day the game of the land monopolists grabbing the land for a rise, and quickly he discerned what brought that rise about. The patch of land might be bare—not an improvement on it; not a man putting in a spade. Nearby, someone builds a little house, a shop or a chapel. Round the patch of bare land the people gather and make their improvements and, just as the improvements increase, so does the value of the bare patch increase. That had been going on for centuries and centuries. But no one saw in it the whole problem of the labor question as George saw it.

Then came the idea. That was

sufficient; for, when an idea starts in the mind of a man like George, it begs to be clothed. It demands education. It is unceasing in its beseechings to be put into fine intellectual raiment. That is the wonderful thing about an idea. A poor man, almost uninstructed, once an idea takes root in his mind and thrills his spirit, can, in a few years, make of himself a scholar.

The short introductory chapter to **Progress and Poverty** prepares us for the literary treat which is to follow. There is a reference on the first page to a great man, which stimulates our curiosity. He mentions Priestley. What brought Priestley to George's notice? Who was Priestley? Joseph Priestley was a parson and a chemist who lived in England. He wrote a history of electricity. Late in life he emigrated to Pennsylvania and died there in 1804. He discovered nitric oxide, and was the first to use carbon dioxide in the preparation of mineral waters.

We read on a few pages and a prophecy of Macaulay is brought to our notice. Further on, in one paragraph we are reminded of the gulf between Dives and Lazarus. At the end of that same paragraph, he tells us: "The fruits of the tree of knowledge turn as we grasp them to apples of Sodom that crumble at the touch." A perfect sentence. These names taken from the Bible indicate to me that George was a profound student of the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, **Progress and Poverty** shows on every page that its author moulded his style to conform to Biblical standards.

The time expended on a thorough survey of the economists of his day must have been great. Perhaps he had become acquainted with several of them before he wrote **Our Land and Land Policy.** Even so, it was a great task he set himself, for we must remember that he had to make his living and care for his family while he educated himself and prepared the material for his work. It is no easy task to read **The Wealth of Nations,** for that is a work which grew as Smith proceeded from chapter to chapter, but George read it with understanding. No one before had attempted to examine closely the terms Smith employed.

To pass from Adam Smith to Sir Henry Maine increases our estimation of the width of the range of the intellectual journey George set upon. I doubt whether there are many economists in the universities of today who are familiar with Maine's **Ancient Society** and his other excellent works. The geographical knowledge of George was wide. Within a few pages we have references to the pyramids and the Nile valley, the St. Gothard Tunnel, the Suez Canal and many other distant places. He read William Godwin's **Inquiry Concerning Political Justice.** Then, in dealing with the Malthusian theory, George writes:

> "Agassiz, who, to the day of his death, was a strenuous opponent of the new philosophy, spoke of Darwinianism as 'Malthus all over,' and Darwin himself says the struggle for existence 'is the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the animal world and vegetable kingdom.'"

Here is a striking illustration of George's thoroughness in pursuing an idea to its source. I doubt whether there were many authors at the time George was writing, who were familiar with Montesquieu. The author of the **Spirit of the Laws** was not popular, and I doubt whether his book at any time was catalogued as a best seller. George says:

> "Since Montesquieu, in the early part of the last century, asserted, what was then probably the prevailing impression, that the population of the earth had, since the Christian era, greatly declined, opinion has run the other way. But the tendency of recent investigation and exploration has been to give greater credit to what have been deemed the exaggerated accounts of ancient historians and travelers, and to reveal indications of denser populations and more advanced civilizations than had before been suspected, as well as of a higher antiquity in the human race."

Yes, investigation and exploration have now given to us the Peking Man, which reveals to the anthropologist and the archaeologist a civilization half a million years old, and that man was a land animal then; his profession was agriculture; he was a capitalist, and he saved his surplus for a rainy day.

In **Progress and Poverty** evidence comes before us time and again that George knew his English history. For example, he says:

> "The just principles of English law have been extended by an elaborate system of codes and law officers designed to secure to the humblest of these abject (Indian) peoples the rights of Anglo-Saxon freemen."

I doubt whether either Maitland or Sir Frederick Pollock would have stated the condition in different terms.

In quoting from Macaulay's **Essay on Lord Clive,** George makes it clear how the terror of conquest affected the people of India. And he says:

> "These famines, which have been, and are now, sweeping away their millions, are no more due to the pressure of population upon the natural limits of subsistence than was the desolation of the Carnatic when Hyder Ali's horsemen burst upon it in a whirlwind of destruction."

George saw to the very heart of the problem which both Macaulay and Edmund Burke failed to touch. Read that chapter again, and read it carefully—the one in which George deals with the Malthusian doctrine in connection with the conditions in India which harrowed the mind of Macaulay.

George was not only a scholar; he was a prophet. In his book there are many passages which describe vividly the condition we have reached in this country. It was written seventy years ago when, to many in Europe, this country seemed to be a bright dawn breaking; its rosy flush beckoning to the millions in Europe to cast off their shackles and enter the land of opportunity. But George saw clearly the evils taking root in society, and he warned us, while there was time, to attack these evils and rid the body politic of them. Alas, we took no heed. The result he describes vividly in the following passage:

> "The type of modern growth is the great city. Here are to be found the greatest wealth and the deepest poverty. And it is here that popular government has most clearly broken down. In all the great American cities there is today as clearly defined a ruling class as in the most aristocratic countries of the world. Its members carry wards in their pockets, make up the slates for nominating conventions, distribute offices as they bargain together, and—though they toil not, neither do they spin—wear the best of raiment and spend money

lavishly. They are men of power, whose favor the ambitious must court and whose vengeance he must avoid. Who are these men? The wise, the good, the learned—men who have earned the confidence of their fellow-citizens by the purity of their lives, the splendor of their talents, their probity in public trusts, their deep study of the problems of government? No; they are gamblers, saloon keepers, pugilists, or worse, who have made a trade of controlling votes and of buying and selling offices and official acts. They stand to the government of these cities as the Praetorian Guards did to that of declining Rome. He who would wear the purple, fill the curule chair, or have the fasces carried before him, must go or send his messengers to their camps, give them donatives and make them promises. It is through these men that the rich corporations and powerful pecuniary interests can pack the Senate and the bench with their creatures. It is these men who make School Directors, Supervisors, Assessors, members of the Legislature, Congressmen. Why, there are many election districts in the United States in which a George Washington, a Benjamin Franklin or a Thomas Jefferson could no more go to the lower house of a State Legislature than under the Ancient Regime a base born peasant could become a Marshal of France. Their very character would be an insuperable disqualification."

There is a passage to which I wish particularly to draw your attention because it not only reveals the quality of George's knowledge, but to a great extent, the depth of his thought. He is dealing with two fascinating problems: first, the physical improvement in the race; and second, the mental improvement in it. These are questions with which the greatest thinkers from age to age have grappled in an attempt to reach a decision. This is the way that George presents it to us:

"The assumption of physical improvement in the race within any time of which we have knowledge is utterly without warrant, and within the time of which Mr. Bagehot speaks, it is absolutely disproved. We know from classic statues, from the burdens carried and the marches made by ancient soldiers, from the records of runners and the feats of gymnasts, that neither in proportions nor strength has the race improved within two thousand years. But the assumption of mental improvement, which is even more confidently and generally made, is still more preposterous. As poets, artists, architects, philosophers, rhetoricians, statesmen, or soldiers, can modern civilization show individuals of greater mental power than can the ancient? There is no use in recalling names—every schoolboy knows them. For our models and personifications of mental power we go back to the ancients, and if we can for a moment imagine the possibility of what is held by that oldest and most widespread of all beliefs—that belief which Lessing declared on this account the most probably true, though he accepted it on metaphysical grounds—and suppose Homer or Virgil, Demosthenes or Cicero, Alexander, Hannibal or Caesar, Plato or Lucretius, Euclid or Aristotle, as re-entering this life again in the Nineteenth Century, can we suppose that they would show any inferiority to the men of to-day? . . . We of modern civilization are raised far above those who have preceded us and those of the less advanced races who are our contemporaries. But it is because we stand on a pyramid, not that we are taller. What the centuries have done for us is not to increase our stature, but to build up a structure on which we may plant our feet."

Because of space restrictions The Freeman is unable to print Mr. Neilson's paper in full in this issue. The concluding section of "Henry George, The Scholar" will be printed here next month.