

# FRAGMENTS

Vol. 39

April - December 2001

No. 1

## *The Personality of Henry George*

By LOUIS F. POST

(From: *The Prophet of San Francisco: Personal Memories & Interpretations of Henry George*,  
by Louis F. Post (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1930)

(Editorial Note: "*The Prophet of San Francisco*" is Henry George.)

The Prophet's personality was reflected in his philosophy. Though the story of his life be interesting and useful as a sketch of the external processes of his career, his personality is to be better inferred from the spirit and the substance of his writings than from recollections of friendly intercourse however intimate, or considerations of personal conduct however picturesque. (p. 313)

He [George] believed in prayer. No one believed in it more than he did. Not mere piety petitions, nor hollow forms of worship, nor empty denunciations of wrong; but by deed as well as word; and by trusting an Intelligent and Beneficent Creator for results. (p. 314)

[Concerning human immortality], our Prophet... gave expression to it in *Progress and Poverty* while discussing the problem of individual life; and on an occasion five years or so before he died he declared it to me in response to a question inspired by a recent death. "Do you believe in immortality?" I asked. "Yes," he answered with solemn emphasis. "Why?" "Because this a rational universe, and the existence of men born only to die would be irrational." (p. 315)

Mr. Verinder recalled an instance of Henry George's readiness at repartee — not repartee of the merely humorous type, but of the kind which, enlivened by wit, is loaded with philosophical truth. "In our great meeting at Lambeth Baths," relates Mr. Verinder, "a social democrat asked: 'But what about capital?'" The question alluded evidently to George's having in his speech laid no stress upon monopoly of capital, but all stress upon monopoly of land. "Quick as lightning," Mr. Verinder continues, "came the perfect reply: 'My friend, when you've got the cow, you've got the milk!'" (p. 321)

In nothing were our Prophet's

intellectual powers exemplified more impressively than in the practical climax he gave to his elucidation of the enigma of poverty as the companion of progress. He had risen to the heights of observation and penetrated the depths, he had brought all his powers to bear in describing conditions and picturing possibilities, he had appealed to the moral law for condemnation of the most destructive of social sins — monopolization by the few of the birthright of all, — he had advocated unreserved restoration of that birthright as the only remedy for impoverishment in the midst of plenty; yet the same prophetic powers that enabled him to perceive the gigantic sin of civilization, forced him to realize that the practical remedy lay in the domain of the statesman. (p. 321)

As a statesman, . . . he knew that a social custom so firmly rooted as land monopoly could not be uprooted over night . . . With statesmanlike forethought and skill, he thereby made of himself a pathfinder through our social wilderness to the social Eden he saw beyond. "It is a maxim of statesmanship . . . that the great changes can best be brought about under old forms. We, who would free men, should heed the same truth. It is the natural method. When Nature would make a higher type, she makes a lower one and develops it. This, also, is the law of social growth. Let us work by it. With the current we may glide fast and far. Against it, it is hard pulling and slow progress." (pp. 322-323)

[He was a person of great integrity.] An instance was his refusal as a juror to obey the judge who ordered an entry by the clerk of the court of a verdict for the defendant, a distillery company, in an accident case. When the court clerk, upon receiving this instruction from the judge, repeated the usual formula to the jury, saying, "By direction of the court you find the defendant," etc., Henry George, who was the foreman of the jury, arose and succinctly said: "I don't." The clerk

repeated the formula. George replied, "No, I don't." "Yes, you do," said the judge severely; "I take the responsibility in this matter." He gave George no opportunity to reply or explain, but struck his name from the jury for the term. (pp. 323-324)

In an interview with a New York World reporter immediately afterwards, Mr. George made this explanation. "I was utterly astounded when, after the testimony had been closed, Judge Freedman instructed the jury to find a verdict for the defendant, for it seemed to me that a negligence had unquestionably been proved. I make no reflection on Judge Freedman. He is the guardian of his own conscience. But I am also the guardian of mine." (p. 324)

Though a serious-minded person, Henry George was nevertheless not lacking in appreciation of the humorous. He was moreover affectionate, tolerant, at times absent-minded, always courageous, ambitious within the limits of the rational and the moral, never destructive in purpose or policy, but always considerate. (p. 324)

Could any words be more fitting and inspiring than his own, when in *Social Problems*, he wrote of spiritual rewards for earthly service? "What, when our time comes, does it matter," he asked, "whether we have lived daintily or not, whether we have worn soft raiment or not, whether we leave a great fortune or nothing at all, whether we shall have reaped honors or been despised, have been accounted learned or ignorant-as compared with how we may have used that talent which has been entrusted to us for the Master's service? What does it matter, when eyeballs glaze and ears grow dull, if out of the darkness may stretch a hand and into the silence may come a voice, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things. I will make thee ruler over many things. Enter thou into the joy of the Lord.'" (pp. 327-328)