

# 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

have lost their vitality. The sword will again be mightier than the pen, and in carnivals of destruction brute force and wild frenzy will alternate with the lethargy of a declining civilization." The twenty-fifth anniversary of The Henry George News is the finest of occasions, since the *News* is the monthly paper of the Henry George School, on which to recall George's warning.

You will have to forgive me for introducing George as a spokesman for the "non-Marxist left," since "left" means "radical" to me. If the government is a government of *all* the people, then it is the duty and responsibility of all the people to care for any portion

of its members. If we are to avoid state socialism in any guise, Marxist or otherwise, then we must remove the causes that encourage the monolithic state. To do this successfully, we cannot abandon the poor and the downtrodden to the vicissitudes of a fundamentally unjust society that dehumanizes its members by condemning them to live in a spiritual as well as an economic morass. If we are to "help the people to help themselves," as George said the night he died, then we must sweep out of the way all (not some) of that which prevents them from helping themselves—and that means private as well as governmental obstacles.



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