The California dream seemed to have spent itself, and, not surprisingly, the state began to lose some of its most talented literary men. One by one they deserted: Mark Twain, Clarence King, Bret Harte, Ambrose Bierce, Prentice Mulford, Charles Warren Stoddard, Joaquin Miller, Henry George. Death claimed J. Ross Browne, Alonzo Delano, and Benjamin Parke Avery. In 1875 *The Overland Monthly* folded (it would be revived in 1883) and the literary vein in such surviving journals as *The Golden Era* ran very, very thin. Some who left—Bierce, Stoddard, Miller—would someday return, but to an impoverished literary California which had never recovered from the mass exodus of talent. New writers—only children in the 1870's—Jack London, Frank Norris, and Mary Austin, among others, would restore California's lost literary luster; but in the meanwhile that miraculous time when San Francisco was the literary capital of the nation, that brilliant bohemian time preserved so charmingly in Franklin Walker's *San Francisco's Literary Frontier* (1939), vanished like a decade's dream. The Civil War had partly accounted for the congregating of talent in a remote frontier city. Mark Twain and many others had been content to wait out the conflict. Now an East once again at peace—and marvelous Europe—called them away from their Pacific bohemia. To be frank, there was little to stay for, and they knew it. The basis of San Francisco's literary culture had been a temporary expatriation. During the 1860's outsiders with other places and other commitments on their minds

culled the state's romance as a miner dug for gold. For writers, California's gifts were not serious thought or high art, but the evanescent gifts of sentiment, charm, and humor. Now, in the 1870's, California had become a very grim place indeed. Even at its best, in the 1860's, there had been times when the vein of romance threatened to run thin before facts of violence, mismanagement, and seedy defeat. The affirming humor of Harte, Twain, and Mulford always operated on the edge of perjury. There was so much that even they could not make funny, and by the 1870's they were tired of trying. Their charming sketches and stories were part of California's fable. Now their departure became part of the counter-fable.

IV

Commentators and historians advanced fable and counter-fable alike. As historians and cultural critics, Californians rarely indulged in pure jeremiads. The promotional impulse natural to a new region ran too strong. Henry George, a San Francisco journalist, came to intellectual maturity during this era of promotional writing, first a time of hope and then, by the mid-1870's, a time of bitter disillusionment. The shattering of George's hopes resulted in no mere qualification of official fable, but in a searching scrutiny into the socio-economic processes that had fenced off the garden of California. If, in the 1860's, Thomas Starr King had been California's Moses, pointing the way to the Promised Land, then George, in the 1870's, played Jeremiah, rebuking Californians for the havoc they had wrought in the land of milk and honey God had given them. Like King, George was self-taught, religious, and filled with love for California. In 1868 he expressed his fears and enthusiasms in an essay in *The Overland Monthly* entitled "What the Railroad Will Bring Us." Many were asking that same question. A sense that California stood on the threshold of a new era pervaded the state as two bands of track crept closer to their Utah connection.

George opened his essay with a contribution to the California fable. The state, he said, had a charm difficult to analyze. Life in California possessed "a certain cosmopolitanism, a certain freedom and breadth of common thought and feeling, natural to a community made up from so many different sources . . . a feeling of personal independence and equality, a certain hopefulness and self-reliance, and a certain large-heartedness and open-handedness." Equality, enthusiasm, and hope—that had been

the message of California's frontier. George feared the frontier's passing when the railroad brought an industrial order. "There was something in the great possibilities of the country," he wrote, using the past tense as if those possibilities had already slipped away, "in the feeling that it was one of immense latent wealth; which furnished a background of which a better filled and more thoroughly developed country is destitute, and which contributed not a little to the active, generous, independent social tone." Industrialism, George warned, might turn out more curse than blessing. Already he saw signs of dangerous land speculation, speculators consolidating huge holdings in an effort to push up prices for the wave of immigrants expected to arrive on the railroad. Let Californians beware the dangers of the coming era. "A great State is forming; let us see to it that its foundations are laid firm and true."[33]

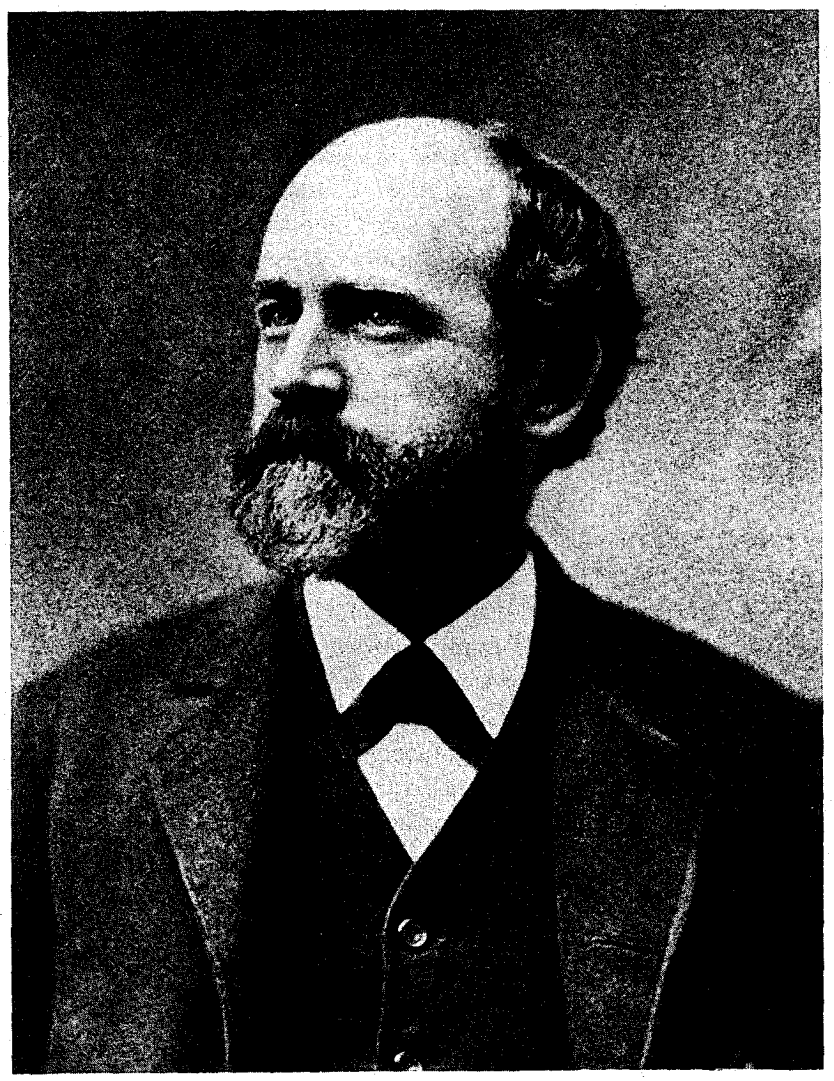
The fact was, California's foundations were already fatally shaky in the area George specified: land ownership. On 3 March 1851 Congress passed "An Act to Ascertain and Settle the Private Land Claims in the State of California," introduced by California's Senator William Gwin. Articles VIII and IX of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had guaranteed property rights of Mexicans who lived in territory acquired by the United States. But Gwin's bill made it mandatory that every holder of a Mexican title appear before a Land Commission and prove the validity of his claim. In other words, the burden of proof—and the cost of proceedings—rested with native Californians. Appealed up the judicial ladder, the average case remained in litigation for about seventeen years, an eighth of them reaching the Supreme Court. By the early 1860's it was clear to John S. Hittell that the instability of land titles in California was retarding the growth of a sound social order. Immigrants refused to come to the state, at least the thrifty, hard-working sort of immigrant who would want to make certain that the land he sweated over really belonged to him. A million citizens, Hittell believed, should have been on the California land by 1863, conferring "all those blessings of inestimable value which come only with numerous fixed and happy homes, and the best regulated social order." As it was, "fifty years of peace and justice cannot place California where she now would have been had justice and sound policy been adopted twelve years ago."[34]

In place of Hittell's vision of American yeomen on the California soil, a plantation-like pattern developed, huge acreages worked by gangs of paid laborers. Many landowners were of Southern birth or sympathies, and the baronial style of California ranch life, supported by crews of Chinese or

Mexican employees, had antebellum overtones. By the early 1870's, one five-hundredth of the California population held half of California's land, or, as Professor E. S. Carr of the University of California dramatically put it, 516 Californians owned 8,685,439 acres, an area nearly twice the size of Massachusetts. Another twelve million or so acres were tied up in grants to railroads. California had been carved into a series of feudal domains.

American settlers refused to become contented peasants. Throughout the 1850's, 1860's, and 1870's, squatter violence was commonplace. The era opened in 1850 with squatter riots in Sacramento and closed in 1880 with the famous shoot-out at Mussel Slough depicted in Frank Norris' *The Octopus* (1901). Surely, the immigrants' promised land had an ironic reality. The dream of owning land came true for few Californians. San Francisco filled up with unemployed migrant workers, poverty-stricken and disaffected. "The rule is that success attends merit," said Bancroft in 1890 of the California experience; "the unsuccesful is pretty sure to be faulty. No one has a right to be poor in California. Unaccompanied by ill health or other misfortunes, poverty is a sin."[35] Henry George knew that poverty in California was no sin, but an unavoidable condition. In 1864, broke, out of work in one of San Francisco's seasonal depressions, he had begged on the city streets in order to feed his wife and child. His experiences as a working man had made him fear the coming of an industrial economy to California. "She will have more people," he wrote of the railroad era; "but among those people will there be so large a proportion of full, true men? She will have more wealth; but will it be so evenly distributed? She will have more luxury and refinement and culture; but will she have such general comfort, so little squalor and misery; so little of the grinding, hopeless poverty that chills and cramps the souls of men, and converts them into brutes?"[36]

The question was not rhetorical, but prophetic. Conditions grew worse with the arrival of the railroad. Riding in the Oakland foothills on New Year's Day 1870, George realized with the clarity of a revelation that land monopoly was the cause of California's polarization into tight sectors of poverty and wealth. The long-range effect of George's insight was publication of *Progress and Poverty* in 1879. More immediately, George diagnosed California's dilemma in a brilliant pamphlet, *Our Land and Land Policy, National and State,* published in San Francisco in 1871. In terms of the counter-fable of California, the pamphlet provided one of the most eloquent expressions of the reverse side of the California myth. California



Henry George (1839–1897)

King played Moses, pointing the way to the Promised Land; George played Jeremiah, rebuking Californians for the havoc they had wrought in Canaan. Riding in the Oakland foothills on New Year's Day 1870, George realized with the force of a religious revelation that land monopoly was the cause of California's polarization into sectors of poverty and wealth. A specifically Californian anger was at the core of his Progress and Poverty.

had begun with so many possibilities, George lamented, especially the opportunity of ensuring a good life on the land for greater numbers of people than possible anywhere else in the nation. Had the United States honored the Mexican land grants as it was morally obliged to do, the government could have easily bought up the land and placed it in the public domain. As it was, California's history began with a fatal curse, a legacy of "greed, of perjury, of corruption, of spoliation and high-handed robbery, for which it will be difficult to find a parallel." An alien way of life, supposedly destroyed in the Civil War, reigned supreme in the valleys of California, a plantation economy supported by coolie labor. "What the barbarians enslaved by foreign wars were to the great land lords of Ancient Italy," George believed, "what the blacks of the African coast were to the great land lords of the Southern States, the Chinese coolies may be, in fact are already beginning to be, to the great land lords of our Pacific slope." The beauty and the richness of the California landscape, he lamented, mocked the rotten foundations of California society. Instead of a humanized landscape, dotted with farms and farmhouses, showing the care of resident families, California yawned open with empty wheat fields, dotted by occasional shacks—"unpainted frame shanties, without garden or flower or tree"—housing hirelings who worked for a landlord living luxuriously in San Francisco. Larger than Great Britain, Holland, Belgium, Denmark, and Greece combined, California, George complained, "does not contain the population of a third-class modern city." Such was "the blight that has fallen upon California, stunting her growth and mocking her golden promise."

The state's one significant urban opportunity had been mismanaged. When San Francisco obtained title to its public land, it had "an opportunity to build up a great city, in which tenement houses and blind alleys would be unknown; in which there would be less poverty, suffering, crime, and social and political corruption than in any city of our time, of equal numbers." Instead of building this Western City or a Hill, instead of realizing a paradigm of urban possibilities flung dramatically on the edge of the continent, San Francisco had sold the bulk of its public lands to speculators, who, in turn, subdivided them into dreary gridiron patterns—patterns of maximum profit and minimum social responsibility. Mocking the grandeur of the Golden Gate, stood just another ugly American city. Roaming its streets, just another urban proletariat. The most pernicious effect of all this hopelessness was upon the character of Californians, "the gradual decadence of that independent personal habit both of thought

and action which gave to California life its greatest charm." Instead of sturdy farmers and mechanics, depressions and landlessness had reduced California's population to a debased condition "more shiftless, perhaps, than that of any State in the Union where slavery has not reigned."[37]

Progress and Poverty, which appeared in the last year of George's residence in California, reached beyond the limits of the state, examining the premises of the entire industrial order. Yet the processes George unraveled on an international scale were first observed on the immediate stage of California during his career as a journeyman and a journalist, processes exceptionally discernible because they had been compressed into a brief thirty years of history. The roots of *Progress and Poverty* in George's California experience were evident in the examples he used and the allusions he made. But it was more than as a stock of images that California figured in *Progress and Poverty*. A specifically Californian anger that the land had been denied the people stood at the psychological core of the book. The image of empty California landscape, so present in *Our Land and Land Policy*, still haunted George. "And on uncultivated tracts of land in the new State of California," he noted, "may be seen the blackened chimneys of homes from which settlers have been driven by force of laws which ignore natural right, and great stretches of land which might be populous are desolate, because the recognition of exclusive ownership has put it in the power of one human creature to forbid his fellows from using it." George's pivotal assertion, that "the ownership of land is the great fundamental fact which ultimately determines the social, the political, and consequently the intellectual and moral condition of a people," can easily be construed as a California cry. For had not George seen the vigor of Californians drained away as land conditions destroyed the social fabric?

There was for George an opposing analogue in California's own past. In the Gold Rush, for the first time in Anglo-Saxon history George believed, land had been held in common. The government owned all mining claims. Each miner had right to title as long as he worked his claim. Abandoned, a claim reverted to common ownership until assigned to another miner willing to make use of the property. In no case could land be held by non-occupants for purposes of speculation. California provided a model of free use of the land, just as it provided a model of the disastrous effects of land monopoly: in the image of the miner, the pattern of hope; in California's empty wheat fields, the fearsome image of "the final goal towards which the whole civilized world is hastening." George's approximation of

frontier—and frontier virtues—with free land anticipated Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis by more than a decade. "To see human beings in the most abject, the most helpless and hopeless condition," George wrote, "you must go, not to the unfenced prairies and the log cabins of new clearings in the backwoods, where man single-handed is commencing the struggle with nature, and land is yet worth nothing, but to the great cities, where the ownership of a little patch of ground is a fortune."[38] The nostalgia and the ideality of this statement, like many of Turner's, betrayed a very Western viewpoint.

For if California brought George to the brink of despair, it also provided the wellsprings of hope. "The promised land flies before us like the mirage," he lamented in *Progress and Poverty*. True, as any Californian caught in the turmoil of the 1870's would admit. But even a mirage can offer hope. California was the measure of failure because it had promised so much. Surveying the state's history three years after the publication of *Progress and Poverty*, Alfred Wheeler would not be completely deluded when he described the "dominant idea" of California history as "a revelation of the possibilities of man released from despair and stimulated by hope."[39] George himself believed that such could still be, and a message of hope pervaded *Progress and Poverty*. Like another product of California's frontier, Josiah Royce, George felt the significance of the truism that "civilization is co-operation." George's notion of progress, as something to be fought for anew with each generation, had also a Roycean ring. "Men tend to progress just as they come closer together," believed George, "and by cooperation with each other increase the mental power that may be devoted to improvement. . . ."[40] With this mental power men could free themselves from history, restructure and reform their societies, slough off the mistakes of the past: such was the hope of George in *Progress and Poverty* and would be the hope, six years later, of Royce in *California*. There was nothing exclusively Californian in these beliefs, except that each man had felt the hope for a better life, the chance for a new start, that was part of the heritage of his state. Forget for a moment, implied George, that the dream seemed to be an elusive mirage. It was also a call to action. Redeem the dream—"substitute for the tenement house, surrounded by gardens"—but do not deny both dream and garden because of their present elusiveness.

Thus George struggled to realize the ideality implicit in California. In mental power, imagination, vision, and moral fervor, he stood like a giant above the other California commentators. Only a young instructor on the

University of California faculty, Josiah Royce, in rebellion against his native state because of its hostility to philosophy, would ever rise to similar heights. With varying degrees of power, historians, social commentators, and promotional writers had detected a pattern of hope in the California experience. It was, to be sure, a dual design, a divided fable, because California's experience had been a rhythm of expectation and disappointment, ideality and harsh fact. Certain related issues loomed paramount throughout the entire effort. What had been California's past, in both ideality and reality? What patterns of the present did that past illuminate and what imperatives were there for the future? The authors of *The Annals of San Francisco*, for all their prejudices, had asked such questions, and so had Franklin Tuthill, John S. Hittell, and Hubert Howe Bancroft.

A final answer never came to them, nor would it come at the turn of the century. California would always have an atmosphere of lingering promise, even when its inhabitants were most sure that they had captured its dream, fully lived out its fable. There would be a variety of efforts in the next quarter-century to give expression to a specifically Californian sense of things: in education, literature, art, architecture, and city planning, in individual lives. No one attempt ever fully expressed the regional culture of the state, but each demonstrated the vitality of California as a regional ideal.