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Henry George: "Social Problems" and the Walker Controversy*

By ANNA GEORGE DE MILLE

WHEN HENRY GEORGE RETURNED to the United States after a year's absence, he found himself rapidly acquiring fame. He was very little richer than when he left home, but the publicity given his arrests in Ireland and his success as a speaker and as a writer had made him better known. He was written up voluminously in the newspapers, and interviewers dogged him. The labor unions gave him a formal welcome in Cooper Union.

After this meeting, a ten-dollar-a-plate banquet was tendered[1] by leaders in science, letters, politics and law at what was then the most fashionable restaurant in New York—Delmonico's. The toastmaster was the Hon. Algernon S. Sullivan, and the speakers included Judge Wm. H. Arnoux, Judge Van Brunt, the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, Thomas G. Shearman, Andrew McLean, Francis B. Thurber, Thomas Kinsella and Representative Perry Belmont. Henry George, mistaking the hour, arrived at his party late, and although he was carefully dressed in smartly cut evening clothes, he appeared at this most important event with dusty shoes.

George seized the occasion, the newspaper reports show, to plead for his reform. One reporter wrote:[2]

> In introducing Mr. George, Mr. Sullivan . . . said he had "been to a great many dinners in that room. . . . Never before in all New York had representative men from all the classes of Society been assembled for the single purpose of making an acknowledgement to one whose sole claim to fame was that he was a philosopher and an author." . . . When Mr. George arose he was greeted with three cheers, the whole company rising to deliver them. He began by saying he could hardly express how much he appreciated the compliment tendered him.
>
> "You honor me for my ability and personal worth—so your invitation runs. I have read in the newspapers that I am a communist, a disturber of social order, a dangerous man, and a promoter of all sorts of destructive theories."

According to another reporter present, he continued:[3]

 A section of a previously unpublished study, "Citizen of the World"; see AM. JOUR. ECON. SOCIO., 1, 3 (April, 1942), p. 283n.

[1] On Oct. 21, 1882.

[2] In *The New York Times*, Sunday, October 22, 1882.

[3] *The New York Herald*, Sunday, October 22, 1882.

"What is the terrible thing I want to do? I want in the first place to remove all restrictions upon production of wealth and in doing this I want to secure that fair distribution of wealth which will give every man that which he has fairly earned. What I contend for is that the man who produces, or accumulates, or economizes; the man who plants a tree, or drains a marsh, or grows a crop, or erects a building, or establishes a business, should not be fined for so doing; that it is to the interest of all that he should receive the full benefit of his labor, his foresight, his energy or his talents. In other words, I propose to abolish all taxation which falls upon the exertion of labor or the use of capital or the accumulation of wealth, and to meet all public expenses out of that fund which arises, not from the exertion of any individual, but from the growth of the whole community. . . .

"Consider, Gentlemen, how this city would grow, how enormously, wealth would increase, if all taxes were abolished which now bear on the production and accumulation and exchange of wealth. Consider how quickly the vacant spaces on the island would fill up could land not improved be had by him who wanted to improve it, without the payment of the prices now demanded."

Many of the most distinguished names in New York were listed on the engraved, gold-framed "address" presented to the guest of honor afterward, and although some of their bearers had had no real conception of what Henry George stood for, the function afforded great encouragement to the protagonist.

Months before, while George was still in Europe, Michael Davitt had visited the United States in quest of money for the cause of Ireland. In the opening speech of his campaign, at the Academy of Music, in New York, on June 26th, the Irish leader seemed to feel it incumbent on him to refute the charge that he had "fallen into Mr. George's hands."[4]

On this occasion, the Rev. Dr. Edward McGlynn, rector of one of the largest Catholic churches in the city, St. Stephen's, on East Twenty-ninth Street, was the next speaker. He came out openly for George's solution of the problem of economic injustice. The priest's address made a sensation, as did those he made at three other of Davitt's meetings. In the second of these, Dr. McGlynn rebuked the Irish leader: "Michael Davitt is only a pilot engine that goes before the head of the train. Let him not apologise for the truth that is in him," and stated: "I am entirely of the opinion of Henry George as a matter of political economy . . . the plan of Henry George and Michael Davitt is the true one."[5]

Again, at a huge meeting held in Union Square, on July 5th, he exorted Davitt to

[4] *The Irish World*, July 1, 1882.
[5] *Ibid.*, July 8, 1882.

explain not away one tittle of it, but preach the gospel in its purity! It is a good gospel, not only for Ireland, but for England, for Scotland and for America, too. And if in this country we do not yet feel quite so much the terrible pressure of numbers upon the land, the same terrible struggle between progress and poverty, as is felt in other lands, no thanks are due at all to our political system, but thanks only to the bounties of nature, and to the millions of acres of virgin lands with which God has blessed us. But when these virgin lands shall have been occupied; when the population shall have increased here as it has elsewhere in proportion to our extent of territory, we shall have precisely the same problem to solve, and the sooner we solve it the better. And so I quite agree with Henry George to the full and with Michael Davitt to the full and lest any timid, scrupulous soul might fear that I was falling into the arms of Henry George, I say that I stand on the same platform with Bishop Nulty, of Meath, Ireland.[6]

Such utterances as these, from a man adored by a large congregation, not only for his generosity and goodness, but for his great learning and eloquence, could hardly go unnoticed by the "vested interests" or by those working against the Irish cause. Soon word came from Cardinal Simeoni, Prefect of the Propaganda in Rome, ordering the priest's suspension unless Cardinal McCloskey, in New York, should decide otherwise. An interview followed with Cardinal McCloskey. Dr. McGlynn, although unconvinced that anyone had the right to forbid him, realized that his ecclesiastical superiors had the power to curb his usefulness in the ministry of the church. He promised his ordinary that he would abstain from making Land League speeches.

The priest's acceptance of his teachings meant very much to George, and he had written from Ireland: "Sure as we live the world is moving. A Power infinitely superior to ours is forcing it on!"[7]

Shortly after George returned to New York he called on Dr. McGlynn. He found in the tall, handsome, dark-haired priest, a man of resonant voice and gracious manner, the strength and sympathy that had made him such a power with his huge flock. And the meeting convinced Father McGlynn that "Mr. George's genius and intellectual gifts do not exceed his gifts and graces of heart and character and his profoundly reverent and religious spirit."[8]

But a few weeks after meeting Father McGlynn, George lost a beloved

[6] *Irish World*, July 15, 1882. See Henry George, Jr., "The Life of Henry George," New York, Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1944, p. 385. *Cf.* also, Stephen Bell, "Rebel, Priest and Prophet," The Devin-Adair Co., New York, 1937, pp. 26–7.

[7] To Patrick Ford, Aug. 3, 1882. Letter book no. 4, p. 83, Henry George Collection, New York Public Library (hereafter abbreviated as HGC).

[8] Letter written by McGlynn to Archbishop Corrigan, Sept. 9, 1886, and printed in *The Standard*, New York, Jan. 8, 1887, Vol. I, no. 1, p. 1.

friend and advocate in the death of Francis George Shaw.[9] The loss of this learned co-worker, who had been such a bulwark in time of need, hurt George deeply. As a last reminder of Shaw's faith and generosity came a gift of $1000 in his will, for the younger man, his "proxy." "What a curious life mine is," George told a friend, "literally from hand to mouth; yet always a way seems to open."[10]

The Shaw bequest, he believed, was intended to relieve him from the strain of turning out pot-boilers. Turning down Charles Nordhoff's proposal that he run for Congress, early in the new year he started work on a book dealing with the tariff question. This, however, did not take up his whole time and he wrote an article for *The North American Review*[11] on "Money in Elections." It advocated the Australian secret ballot system, a reform he had urged twelve years earlier.[12]

The cheap English edition of "Progress and Poverty" having been so great a success, the author was able to negotiate an American twenty-cent paper-covered edition through the publishing house of John W. Lovell. "The Irish Land Question," paper-covered, at ten cents a copy, followed. But because this latter did not deal exclusively with Ireland it was called, from then on, "The Land Question." Both books had a large circulation. George received a royalty of ten per cent—the same rate as he did from Appleton for the more expensive edition. But he gave away so many copies and made such large discounts and concessions to those who bought in quantities for propaganda purposes that his own earnings were small.

On both sides of the Atlantic the work was humming. George wrote Taylor:

> In England our ideas are spreading with extreme rapidity. A Birmingham gentleman, Thomas F. Walker, states that he himself has bought and distributed to the active men of the Liberal party two thousand three hundred copies of "Progress and Poverty."[13]

By 1883, the Knights of Labor, an organization which had started in 1869 among the garment workers of Philadelphia, had gained widespread and open power, with local branches all over the country. In New York, T. V. Powderly, Grand Master of the Order, came out enthusiastically for the doctrines of Henry George. In his annual address, delivered on September 6, 1882, he had said:

[9] On Nov. 7, 1882.
[10] Letter to Dr. Taylor, Jan. 17, 1883, HGC. See Henry George, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 403.
[11] *Op. cit.*, March, 1883.
[12] In "Bribery in Elections" in *The Overland Monthly*, December, 1871. See A. G. de Mille, AM. JOUR. ECON. SOCIO., Vol. 2, No. 3, p. 377.
[13] New York, April 28, 1883, HGC.

In my opinion the main, all-absorbing question of the hour is the land question. . . . The eight hour law, the prohibition of child labor and the currency question are all of weighty moment to the toiler. But high above them all stands the land question. . . . You may make the laws and own the currency but give me the land and I will absorb your wealth and render your legislation null and void. . . . Give heed to the land question. . . . It were better to be called a communist than to be a party to the plundering of a people of the inheritance ordained for them by God.[14]

Powderly was instrumental in having copies of "Progress and Poverty" and "The Land Question" placed in the local assemblies of the organization. In this way the American laboring man became acquainted with "Georgism."

About this time Allen Thorndike Rice of *The North American Review* proposed that George edit an economic weekly.[15] After serious consideration, however, George refused the offer and instead made an arrangement with *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* to write thirteen articles for $100 each.

These articles, "Problems of the Time," starting with the April 11th issue, dealt with different aspects of economic questions. The fifth one, discussing "The March of Concentration,"[16] showed that there was an increase in the size of land holdings in the United States, and that the Census reports for 1870 and 1880 contradicted the figures which were given to prove that the average size of farms were decreasing and therefore that they were unreliable and worthless. Both censuses had been superintended by Professor Francis A. Walker, who had held the chair of Political Economy at Yale and had been president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Professor Walker was the author of learned books on history, economics and statistics.

Irate because of the aspersions cast upon his work, Walker wrote to *Leslie's*, offering to send George "a more elementary" study, "illustrated with diagrams, to prove that the average size of farms was decreasing."[17] In the same periodical George replied; Walker rejoined, and George rebutted. *The New York Sun* found the controversy amusing because, while they considered George suave and dignified, "his opponent squirms and sputters as one flagrant blunder after another is brought forward and the spike of logic is driven home through his egregious fallacies."[18] And later the Census Bureau admitted that the 1870 table had been based on

[14] *Loc. cit.*, p. 282.
[15] See Henry George, Jr., *op. cit.*, pp. 408 *ff.*
[16] May 12, 1883.
[17] HGC, Box II.
[18] *Loc. cit.*

improved area, while that of 1880 was on total area, which made Walker's comparison of the two untenable, and proved George's charge of carelessness.

After these thirteen *Leslie's* articles were finished, George, arranging them as chapters and adding eight more chapters and a conclusion, brought the whole out as a book entitled "Social Problems." He dedicated it to the memory of Francis G. Shaw. He sold the English copyright for £400 cash and wrote to Taylor: "This makes nearly $3600 I have had out of the book before the first copy is issued, which is a considerable difference from 'Progress and Poverty' "[19] And some weeks later: "I did let 'Social Problems' go too low; but I wanted the money badly and snapped at the first good offer. But I rely on the United States to give me more."[20] Easy to read, this book was the one the author himelf used to prescribe for beginners in political economy as a preliminary to tackling "Progress and Poverty."

It was before "Social Problems" was published, however, that he had told Dr. Taylor: "I have met with a misfortune. You know I put a considerable work this spring on a free-trade book. I have lost the manuscript. . . . It cannot be found anywhere and has evidently gone into the ash barrel."[21] The family was boarding at the time and the precious work, written in longhand, which would have made about one hundred printed pages, disappeared when his study was "cleaned." He referred to it again to Taylor:

> Writing well on exact subjects is of all work the hardest. Yet I should be delighted if I could see my way clear to keeping at it. How blessed are they for whom the pot boils of itself! I have now just $25 in the world, about half a week's living with economy; no, not that. However, this is no new experience for me. That ms. is a very serious loss even in the financial aspect.[22]

He spent no time ruing his loss, however, but set himself to reading thoroughly Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations," with the idea of abridging and annotating it. He started the work but never was able to finish the annotation.

The widespread attention his own books were receiving, the acclaim he was getting as an authority on world affairs, did not change the simplicity of the man or make him forgetful of the tender things of life. During

[19] From London, Jan. 5, 1884, HGC.
[20] From Inverness, Scotland, Feb. 22, 1884, HGC.
[21] Letter from Brooklyn, July 27, 1883, HGC.
[22] Aug. 1883, HGC. Quoted by Henry George, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 411.

separations from his wife there was a steady stream of letters—almost daily—between them. After they had been married for twenty-three years he could write to her:

> You used sometimes to say that you liked to feel necessary to me. You don't know how thoroughly that wish is gratified. I know it ever when I am with you; but feel it more when I am away. I often think how more and more you have grown into my life, so that in everything that draws a man there is only one woman in the world to me. I not only love you with all the fervor I did when I first clasped you to my heart; but with a deeper love. I have learned to respect your judgment and value your advice: your caresses if they cannot seem more sweet seem more needed, and even when you assume the imperious tone and art of the mistress there is a charm I would not feel from any one else. I think the people who grow tired of each other are never truly married. There is in the perfect confidence—the absolute oneness of the truly married something which far surpasses any fresh charm.[23]

All through the years he had kept in close touch with his people in Philadelphia, sending financial help as often as he could. The bond between him and his father had not weakened with time and the latter's interest in his career had been a continuing comfort, although the elder man, nearly eighty years old when "Progress and Poverty" was published, never completely understood the book nor realized its full import. This lack of intellectual kinship was felt by his mother, although she, like her husband, gloried in the acclaim and appreciation accorded to the son.

His sister, Kate, and her husband, Jerry Chapman, were the members of his generation who most completely comprehended not only his proposed fiscal reform but his philosophy as well—and enthusiastically championed both. However, any mental or spiritual loneliness the economist may have felt because his family failed somewhat to understand his work, was outweighed by their devotion, which deepened with the years.

In thanking Henry for a present received on his eighty-fifth birthday, the father wrote of memories clear—

> as if it was only last week when you came to me saying that you would go to California and that you would try your fortune there. I did not object; and now the result has been all I could have wished.[24]

This was the last letter he was to write to his son: a few days later he was stricken with pneumonia. All his children gathered around the bedside of the patriach in time to receive his blessing before he died. One week later, his wife, made ill by grief, died. And Richard Samuel Henry

[23] London, 1884, undated (private collection of the writer).
[24] Oct. 17, 1883, HGC. Henry George, Jr., *op. cit.* p. 416.

George and Catharine Vallance George, who had been partners through their long life together, were buried in the same grave, in Mt. Moriah Cemetery. Certainly the peace and serenity of the passing of his parents did much to confirm Henry George in his faith in a life hereafter, and in resignation to death.

New York