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contents

Liberal Education for Victory and Peace	289
By ROBERT M. HUTCHINS	
The Roots of the Tree of Learning	305
By FRANCIS NEILSON	
War Aims as Aids to Victory	325
By F. A. HERMENS	
Increment and 'Decrement' in Land Values	343
By HARRY GUNNISON BROWN	
An Equitable Wage Policy for War Labor	359
By CHARLES JOHNSON POST	
A Post-Mortem on Cambridge Economics, I	369
By FRANZ OPPENHEIMER	
Henry George, the Editor	377
By ANNA GEORGE DE MILLE	
In Memoriam: Jens P. Jensen, 1883-1942	391
By JOHN ISE	
The California Irrigation Districts Case	393
By J. RUPERT MASON	
Economic Factors in the Breakdown of 1939	403
By the INTER-AMERICAN JURIDICAL COMMITTEE	
Comment 387	Reviews 414
Contributors 430	

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Henry George, the Editor*

By ANNA GEORGE DE MILLE

DURING THE YEAR 1871 Henry George was busy at freelancing. Besides "Our Land and Land Policy," he made two contributions to *The Overland Monthly*. One was a story, "How Jack Breeze Missed Being a Pasha."¹ The other, an article on "Bribery in Elections,"² was the first plea for the adoption of the Australian secret ballot system to be printed in the United States.³

Having nothing to anchor him in California, he thought seriously of going to New York or Philadelphia to try to establish himself as a man of letters. But he had worked in one capacity or another on nearly every newspaper in San Francisco and Sacramento, and daily journalism had a strong attraction for him. He saw an opening for a new venture, a small daily. With a printer friend, William Hinton, he proceeded to establish one. On what would now be termed a "shoestring," consisting of \$1800 cash, plus an additional sum realized from the advance sale of delivery routes, he, Hinton and A. H. Rapp⁴ launched *The San Francisco Evening Post*, edited by Henry George and published by Hinton, Rapp & Co.

There were no pennies in circulation on the Pacific coast then; the nickel was the smallest coin in use. But the young enterprisers decided to set the price of their journal at one cent, following the example of successful penny papers in the East. They contrived to get the Bank of California to import one thousand dollars' worth of shiny new coppers from the Philadelphia Mint. When four of these coins were handed back in change to the amazed residents of San Francisco who had offered nickels for *The Evening Post*, the novelty served as an advertisement. The new daily, which was free of political affiliation and was bold and fearless in its

* Copyright, 1943, by Anna George de Mille. A section of a previously unpublished study, "Citizen of the World"; see "Henry George: Childhood and Early Youth," *AM. JOUR. ECON. SOCIO.*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (April, 1942), p. 283n.

¹ Published in the issue of February, 1871.

² Published in the issue of December, 1871.

³ See Eldon Cobb Evans, "History of Australian Ballot System in the United States," Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1917, (a Ph.D. thesis): "At first this new reform in Australia and England does not appear to have created much of an impression in this country. According to Mr. John S. Wigmore, it was first advocated by a member of the Philadelphia Civil Reform Association in 1882, in a pamphlet called 'English Elections.' The following year Henry George, in the 'North American Review' advocated the adoption of the English system as a cure for the vice arising from the use of money in elections" (p. 18).

⁴ Cf. Henry George, Jr., "Life of Henry George." New York, Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, pp. 237-8.

policy, "caught on" and was much respected by an increasing number of thoughtful readers. The influence of the paper, which was only four pages of 11 by 14 inches, far outbalanced its size. When it was little more than four months old, another newspaper man wanted to buy it. As A. H. Rapp wanted to sell, his two partners consented to part with their interests, for which they each received \$2,700. But, under the new management, and without Henry George's pen to give it vigor, *The Post* declined and almost died. After sixty days' struggle the new purchaser offered it to George and Hinton for a nominal sum. They bought it back and promptly it recovered its strength.⁵ Less than nine months from its birth the paper had to be increased in size and its price advanced to two cents; and subsequently, as it expanded further, to five cents.

The Post was nearly two years old when John P. Jones, Senator from Nevada, came to Henry George and, declaring himself interested in the paper, offered to furnish the editors, on their notes, money enough to buy the best press that could be obtained. With the growth of circulation, facilities for more rapid and efficient printing had become almost a necessity. Four years before, when George was in New York, he had seen a Bullock perfecting press in *The Sun* office. Senator Jones' generous offer was accepted. William Hinton, representing *The Post*, went East and for \$30,000 bought one of the machines. Sent to San Francisco, it was set up in the basement of the new office at 402 Montgomery Street, the first perfecting press on the Pacific coast.

A party was held to celebrate the occasion. The new press was shown in operation, and, for those who did not mind climbing three flights of stairs, since there was no elevator, delectable food was served in the reportorial quarters, along with plenty of California champagne and California tobacco.

The editor's office was on the top floor of the building. In a small room, containing the paper-littered desk, a crowded book case, a clutter of newspapers and magazines, a stack of Congressional Records and a small green baize sofa,⁶ Henry George did his work. Usually smoking a cigar, he would dictate to Stephen Potter, the youth who was his secretary. When the secretary had taken enough notes to keep him busy, George would continue writing his article in longhand. Thus time was saved although the printer's devil was a frequent and demanding visitor. The typewriter

⁵ Ralph Meeker notes, typed pages in private collection of writer. Quoted by Henry George Jr., *op. cit.*, pp. 238-9.

⁶ For these descriptions and anecdotes pertaining to *The Post* and its editor I am indebted to Mr. Stephen Potter; his typed "Reminiscences" and personal letters to me containing this data are in my private collection.

had just been invented. Henry George wanted one. But the business department decided against paying the price and the typewriter company refused to give one in exchange for advertising.

Of nervous temperament and naturally quick temper, George was nevertheless as patient in training the high school lad in his secretarial duties as he was in correcting typographical errors overlooked by printer and foreman. A characteristic exception occurred once when the last news form crashed from the composing-room, on the third floor, and was pied on the floor of the press-room, in the basement, because the dumbwaiter rope broke. The weakness of this rope having been noted far in advance of the accident, the business department came in for a few pithy and well-chosen editorial remarks on "spigot-bunghole economy."⁷ Fortunately, George's irritation, even after the scrambled edition came out, did not last long.

George was inclined to absent-mindedness. Several times young Potter met him on the street, standing on the edge of the side-walk, buried in thought and oblivious to his surroundings. On such occasions it was necessary to speak to him repeatedly before he heard.⁸ In money matters he was not only liberal but careless. His banking methods as well as those of his secretary were crude. However, the two hit upon the happy idea of using one of Potter's pockets for George's money, to have it convenient for petty cash transactions. If money, the origin of which neither could recall, were found in this pocket, it was tacitly considered to be the editor's. Their financial relationship was most satisfactory.⁹

In *The Post*, throughout its existence, editorials appeared frequently advocating the taxation of land values in lieu of all other taxes. This proposal was ridiculed by rival dailies as "George's fad"; one of them printed a cartoon of the editor of *The Post* as a boy astride a stick, with whip in hand, galloping across a newspaper sheet in pursuit of airy phantoms. The sketch bore the caption, "Harry George riding his hobby."¹⁰

Editorially *The Post* was opposed to Grant and carpetbag reconstruction, and advocated the nomination of Horace Greeley, who was trying to reunite North and South. George went as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in Baltimore, Maryland, in June, 1872. After serving there, he hastened back to his desk in San Francisco and fought with his pen for Greeley's cause. "Grant," he wrote in an editorial on

⁷ *Ib.*

⁸ *Ib.*

⁹ *Ib.*

¹⁰ *Ib.*

Nov. 2, "represents the hatreds growing out of the war. . . . Greeley represents the spirit of reconciliation and magnanimity."¹¹

His candidate was beaten. George was sorely disappointed but turned his attention to other matters of moment. Relentlessly he kept hammering at the California "octopus," the Union Pacific Railroad:

The interests of individuals, towns, cities, counties, and the State and Federal Governments have all been trampled upon and sacrificed to swell the gains of Stanford, Huntington, the Crockers, and some half dozen others belonging to the ring.¹²

Although his editorials were chiefly concerned with the affairs of San Francisco and California, he kept himself closely informed on what was happening in the East. For instance, when attacking a local graft, he wrote: "Can the records of Tammany, or any other thieving ring, show a more outrageous case of jobbery! Boss Tweed and even the cormorants of Grant's Washington Ring might come out here to take a lesson!"¹³ The rumor that Vanderbilt might buy the Central Pacific Railroad caused him to write:

Vanderbilt is even more grasping and tyrannical than Stanford ever was. . . . Has it [*The Call*] never heard of the wars of Vanderbilt with Fisk and Drew and with rival corporations in which conventions were systematically packed, legislatures bought by wholesale, companies of bullies hired and even the Bench retained? Does it [*The Call*] not know that the great State of Pennsylvania is Tom Scott's pocket borough and that its legislature is so notoriously owned by the railroad king, that a member once got up and said: "If Tom Scott has no further business with this House, I move that it now adjourn"? If we do get Vanderbilt instead of Stanford, we are afraid that we shall look back to the latter as the frogs in the fable looked back to their King Log, after Jupiter, in answer to their prayer, had sent them a stork.¹⁴

His alarm over the wanton manner in which public lands were being deeded away caused him to report: "Tom Scott and his Railroad crowd are likely to get eight million acres of land in Texas under decision of the U. S. Supreme Court confirming the grants of the Memphis, El Paso and Trans-Continental Railroad."¹⁵ And again in despair over the corruption of public honor he blazed:

Jay Gould, the railroad king and millionaire, furnishes a good illustration of the unprincipled selfishness which dictates and governs the political

¹¹ Files of *The San Francisco Evening Post* in the Henry George Collection, New York Public Library (hereafter abbreviated as HGC).

¹² *Ib.*, June 24, 1872.

¹³ *Ib.*, Oct. 26, 1872.

¹⁴ *Ib.*, February 1, 1873.

¹⁵ *Ib.*, April 21, 1873.

actions of our corporation magnates. . . . Love of country is regarded by them as a sickly sentiment. Individual honesty and national honor in the public service are scoffed at and despised. They worship Mammon, and in the mad pursuit of wealth and power are guilty of acts which should call the flush of shame to the cheek of the humblest citizen in the land. Only a few days since Jay Gould was examined before the Erie Investigating Committee at Albany. Calmly, and as if talking on ordinary matters of business, he admitted having used large sums of money to carry elections; told how he had advanced \$70,000 at one time to Boss Tweed, and how he had systematically bought legislative candidates in every part of the State. . . . It made no difference to him which party succeeded so long as his purchased tools were elected. . . . He reviewed the political field from a business standpoint, and bought candidates on the same principle that men buy horses and cattle. And after all these shameful admissions which mark Jay Gould as a public enemy far more to be dreaded than any thief or murderer, he will be permitted to return to his home and to his traffic in men and measures. Jay Gould does not stand singly and alone. His counterpart is found in every state of the Union. . . . California unfortunately, is no exception to the rule.¹⁶

But the editorials of *The Post* were not all iconoclastic. George urged self-improvement for mechanics and laborers, fought for shorter working days and reporting the success of the eight-hour law in Australia, urged its adoption in the United States. He explained: "It is to political action that working men must look for the remedy for all their real grievances, for these are grievances which spring from bad laws."¹⁷ He took up the cudgels for abused seamen and *The Post* became established as a champion of sailors' rights. In it was exposed the unbelievable cruelty of the captain and mate of the ship *Crusader*, and later, of the officers of the *Sunrise*.

The *Sunrise* arrived at the port of San Francisco without three seamen who had been aboard. These three—two men and a boy of seventeen, all of foreign origin—had been shanghaied. Green and untutored to ways of the sea, they had been so tortured, so goaded by first mate and captain that each, in turn, had jumped overboard rather than remain on the hell ship. When the boat reached San Francisco, some of the remaining members of the persecuted crew were able to talk. But for three days, in spite of long news accounts in *The Post*, in spite of George's appeals to the authorities and of his flaming editorials, no legal action was taken. "Then Editor Henry George of *The Post* went before District Attorney Latimer and made affidavit upon information and belief, charging Captain Clarke and his two mates with maliciously beating and wounding Charles B.

¹⁶ *Ib.*, April 24, 1873.

¹⁷ *Ib.*, March 11, 1873.

Brown, on the high seas."¹⁸ During the three days' delay the First Mate had run away. Now *The Post* offered \$400 for his capture. Eventually he was caught. Followed an exciting, revolting trial, but the officers of the *Sunrise* were eventually punished.

The public was at last made aware of the hideous injustices meted out to sailors—their scurvy-producing food, their wretched pay, their slavery to the officers in command. As long as he held an editorial pen, Henry George fought for their rights.

He fought for womens' rights too:

We have long been a warm sympathizer with female school teachers in their contest to secure an equality of rights and compensation in pursuit of their noble calling. No arguments have yet been presented sufficient to convince us that women have not the capacity to fill the very highest positions in educational institutions, nor have we been able to see by what rule of right or principle of justice women should receive less pay than men for performing the same duties equally well. . . . The true rule is to open the ranks of competition without regard to sex. Let those who are best qualified be chosen, whether male or female.¹⁹

His convictions on feminism affected his behavior as well as his public opinions. One day, as he went home, he saw his wife approaching from another direction. Noticing him, she quickened her pace.

"I was delayed shopping," she panted. "I'm sorry; I always like to be home waiting for you—"

"Annie, don't you ever talk that way again!" His tone was almost severe. "Just why must you get home at a certain time? I don't possess you! Never put me in the position, even in your thought, of being your master, to whom you need give an accounting of your actions! I'm free to come and go as I see fit—and so must you be!"²⁰

Women's rights was a fighting issue in San Francisco. Women who solicited votes at local option elections were treated disrespectfully. *The Post* attacked the ungallant blackguards, and the venom of the saloon was turned upon George—unwisely. For he retaliated. Under his direction an investigation was made and samples of liquor from different sections of the city were analyzed. The startling result, proof that large quantities of fusel oil were being sold to the drinkers of San Francisco, was disclosed in *The Post*. This made every saloonkeeper his enemy.

As an editorial champion of the unfortunate and oppressed, George required physical, as well as moral courage to maintain his stand for justice.

¹⁸ *Ib.*, Oct. 1, 1873.

¹⁹ *Ib.*, July 2, 1872.

²⁰ Told by Mrs. George to Mrs. Edith M. Hibbard, who recounted it to the writer.

He kept up his strength by swimming, rowing and horseback riding. "When the George family was living out in the Mission, a suburban part of town, he concluded to buy a horse and ride to *The Post* office daily," recounts William Cleveland McCloskey.²¹ "It was the most extraordinary piece of horse flesh imaginable. Small, bony, angular, a veritable old plug. Henry George certainly was a picture astride of that beast, and many a jibe and joke was had at his expense over the old nag."

He had always been strong and fearless. One night, years before, when he had come home late, he had found his wife quivering with fear. She explained: on that afternoon when the Chinese laundryman had come for his pay, he had tried to kiss her. He was the biggest Chinese she had ever seen—a tall North-of-China man, probably—but somehow she had succeeded in shutting the door. Her husband quieted her fears. Not until long afterward did he reveal that, alone, he had gone to Chinatown and sought out the man who washed for Mrs. George. Delivering a blow powerful enough to knock the surprised giant flat, the enraged husband flung the pay on the sidewalk beside the prone figure, and stalked out of the quarter unmolested.²²

Now, as editor of *The Post*, he needed this same courage as he droye steadily against the powers of graft and corruption—"the ring." Month after month he fought for prison reform; for better food in prison, city hospital and almshouse. He pleaded the cause of two small boys sent to the "Industrial School." They had stolen a valuable watch and sold it for \$2, buying candy with the money. "It is a sin and a shame," George wrote, "that we have no public institution to which children who fall into crime from want of parental control can be sent with any hope of reforming them."²³ Repeatedly he exposed the wicked administration of this so-called reform school, the House of Correction, where boys were under-fed, inhumanly punished and herded together in a way to make criminals even of those who were not so inclined. He attacked the cruelty of the superintendent, a brute named George F. Harris, and expressed his feeling of disgrace that San Francisco should permit "the ring to re-elect their friend the boy-torturer."²⁴ Finally an investigation took place. The ferocious-looking Harris, his hand on his pistol, stood at the gate, but, Henry George,

²¹ Son of Mrs. George's uncle, Matthew McCloskey. Letter, dated May 14, 1927, to the writer.

²² Told to the writer by her mother.

²³ *The San Francisco Evening Post*, Feb. 22, 1876.

²⁴ *Ib.*, Jan. 7, 1876.

without the least hesitation, walked right up to him, looked the burly ruffian straight in the eyes and passed into the yard without a word. All through that investigation Harris avoided the steady, indignant gaze of the brave little man who pressed his charges of brutality and drove him from his position and out of the city.²⁵

Indignant at the harsh way alcoholics were treated in San Francisco prisons, George directed the attention of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to them! Once, when he remonstrated with a policeman who was treating a drunkard with brutality, the patrolman threatened to arrest him. Whereupon George said he would save him the trouble, and, exercising a citizens' prerogative, arrested the policeman. Leaving the intoxicated man to his own devices, they marched to the station house and entered charges against each other.²⁶

Working at his desk one day, he was disturbed by a turmoil in the street below. From his window he saw the cause of the commotion, a sailor who, much the worse for wear and clad only in the sketchiest of garments, was hanging perilously by one hand from the floor of the small iron balcony outside his lodginghouse window. The sailor, in the throes of delirium tremens, had been chased out of his room by a green devil! The onlookers watched frantically, fearing the man would crash at any moment to the street. The sailor's balcony and that of the editor were fairly close together in adjacent buildings and almost on the same level. George rushed to aid the unfortunate fellow. Bending over his own balcony and across, he contrived to clutch the seaman's wrist and to draw him up slowly, until one of *The Post* printers, managing to seize the crazed man by a waving leg, helped lift him over the railing to safety.²⁷

The policy of *The San Francisco Evening Post* of defending the "under-dog" and of fighting corrupt power made it a hard struggle to finance the paper during its first two years. The acquisition of the new perfecting press changed the situation by lowering the cost of publication. In spite of the financial depression that crushed many business ventures in '73, the paper grew in circulation and power, thanks to George's vigorous editorship, and after another year and a half, the publishers felt it would be a mistake not to expand further. So, on August 20th, 1875, they established a small morning daily, *The Morning Ledger*,²⁸ with "a mammoth eight page

²⁵ Henry George Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 241, who quotes former Judge Robert Ferral. Mr. Ferral, as a reporter on *The Post*, had attended the investigation with Henry George.

²⁶ Meeker Notes, N. Y. Journal, Sunday, Oct. 10, 1897, HGC. Cf. also Stephen Potter's "Reminiscences" and letter (Dec. 29, 1935) to writer.

²⁷ Stephen Potter, *op. cit.*

²⁸ File in HGC.

paper"²⁹ on Sundays. The Sunday edition, beginning with the issue of September 19th, carried pictures. Here for the first time in journalism, was an illustrated Sunday paper.³⁰ The editors refrained from soliciting advertisements, preferring to wait until advertisers should seek the paper. They filled the Sunday edition with news, editorials, theatrical criticisms and book reviews.

Editing a morning as well as an evening paper entailed such intensive work that on many nights Henry George could not go home. He slept, when he could spare the time to sleep, on the little green couch in his office. Eventually he got a tonic from his doctor; but before that, to keep himself going, he would send his secretary to the saloon at the corner for a bottle of "Cutter Whiskey."³¹ Not being a drinking man, a little liquor quickly affected him. One night, when he had promised to speak for Father Matthew, the temperance crusader, on the virtue of abstaining from strong drink, and had braced himself for the ordeal, he arrived at the meeting slightly under the influence of his stimulant. He started his speech definitely on the subject of temperance; but somehow it veered off to the subject of economics and turned into an oration as he pleaded for his plan to abolish one tax after another until there should be only one thing left to tax—land values. He made a really big hit; even Father Matthew was pleased, although his meeting had taken on a different tone than that which he had planned.³²

Shortly after *The Ledger* was launched there was a great fire in Virginia City, Nevada. Many San Franciscans were involved and this caused a sharp decline in mining stock and the suspension of payment by the Bank of California. A business panic in San Francisco followed. Early in November, when it was impossible to collect money, George had to suspend *The Ledger*. At this embarrassing point, Senator John P. Jones demanded the return of the money lent for the purchase of the Bullock press. His alternative was that *The Evening Post* should be surrendered to him. George felt like fighting. He knew that a statement of the situation from his pen, in the paper, could kill its future with another editor. But, considering the employees who would thereby lose their jobs, he refrained

²⁹ Announcement in the issue of Aug. 21, 1875.

³⁰ It is the opinion of Louis H. Fox, director of the Newspaper Division of the New York Public Library that *The Sunday Ledger* of San Francisco, edited by Henry George, in 1875, was the first illustrated Sunday newspaper ever published. No predecessor can be found.

³¹ Letter from Stephen Potter, April 5, 1938, to the writer.

³² Told by George B. Wilbur to his daughter, Mrs. Wilbur Barr, who related it to writer in San Francisco, Dec. 9, 1935.

from writing the statement. Without a cent of compensation, on November 27th, 1875, he gave over the paper to the representatives of Jones.³³

Henry George had loved *The Post*. It was the fruit of his labor and had been the instrument with which he had been able to fight injustice and corruption and privilege—as well as the means of a comfortable livelihood, after years of bitter struggle. Now, for him, it was no more. After his many and tireless attempts to climb to something akin to security, he was again flat broke.

³³ Henry George dictated an account of his withdrawal from *The Post* to Ralph Meeker in the autumn of 1897. This was quoted in part only in *The New York Sunday Journal* of Oct. 10, 1897, cited by Henry George Jr., *op. cit.*, pp. 247-9. For the source of Henry George Jr.'s quotations, see the typed pages of Meeker notes in the collection of the present writer.