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Henry George: Stimulator of Thought

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HENRY GEORGE, CITIZEN OF THE WORLD, by Anna George de Mille. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, \$3.50.)

In the last quarter of the 19th century, a period when great American fortunes were made amidst poverty and social unrest, when labor unions were striving to gain an organized foothold, when housing conditions were probably at their worst and that moderate reformer Jacob A. Riis was yet to attack the slum, a man arose in the United States with a panacea.

He was not an attacker of Rockefellers or Morgans with nothing constructive to offer; he was not a symbol of anarchy such as Eugene V. Debs became; he cared nothing for money or great power; he did not intend to be a radical. He simply propounded an economic reform that he hoped would erase poverty, raise the living standards of men, eliminate slums, and by improving the lot of society, make the economic base of the moderate capitalist more stable. For this he was criticized as an "utterly cheap reformer" by Theodore Roosevelt from one side, and as a partisan of "capitalism's last ditch" by Karl Marx from the other.

The man was Henry George and his idea was the single tax.

One doesn't hear much about George or his program these days, but his idea is not lost nor is he entirely forgotten. What he stood for still inspires liberal thought; it was in the background of the New Deal; it will impel new ideas in another time of economic stress.

Henry George believed that if all rent, which he defined as the unearned increment from land, could be taken by government for taxation, no other taxes, direct or indirect, would be necessary. The land, he proclaimed, belongs to all the people; its value, he taught, was raised far more by the growth and needs of the community than by man-made improvements; and consequently, he advocated, the community should reap the benefits accruing from land use rather than favored individuals who were able either to speculate for quick profits or to make careful investments for rent.

George expounded his plan in a remarkably lucid book, "Progress and Poverty." He developed his ideas and wrote while living in San Francisco, against the background of a frontier economy where land values were rising on every side to the benefit of some but to the detriment, George was sure, of most individuals. From the day of the book's publication, Henry George's life work was established.

His chronological story is now retold by Mrs. de Mille, George's youngest daughter who fervently believes her father to have been the greatest man she has ever known, and that his idea was the best hope ever offered to solve the social incongruities of this age. Written from such a perspective, this is not a critical biography. Mrs. de Mille makes no attempt to answer the chief criticism of the Single Tax, that it was solely concerned with land reform and that this was not enough to cope with the monopolistic problems raised by big finance and big industry. The book's chief asset is

perhaps its brevity. Mrs. de Mille has combined the factual story, told in an earlier two volume work by Henry George, Jr., with the essence of George's beliefs discussed, at much greater length by George R. Geiger in his book "The Philosophy of Henry George."

Mrs. de Mille lived through great emotional years with her father; she remembers the early struggles, which included poverty; then the years of prolific writing and incessant lecturing; numerous trips abroad, on

some of which she was included; the influential part that Henry George played in the revolt against land ownership in Ireland; the impact of the Single Tax idea upon the Fabian Socialists in England; George's pronounced differences with the economic and social doctrines of both communism and Roman Catholicism; the highly spectacular series of speeches in Australia, late in George's life; and his two unsuccessful campaigns for mayor of New York City—the closest he came to crossing the bridge from advocacy to action.

She recalls how deeply Henry George believed, how he was sure that Divine Power had given him his idea and had ordained his life and work. There was nothing charlatanesque in George, any more than in his totally different contemporary, John D. Rockefeller, who also believed deeply and once said "God gave me my money." In these two opposites, who lived and worked in the same era, was dramatized the issue that, by one definition or another, has divided the American people from the days of Hamilton and Jefferson.

If the radicalism of Henry George has not come to pass in the United States, neither has the rampant individualism of Morgan and Rockefeller remained. If Henry George accomplished nothing else, he made men think. So, in another way, did Rockefeller. But Mrs. de Mille's biography is not the story of an accumulator; it is an intimate portrayal of as original a social philosopher as the North American continent has contributed to the world.

ROLAND SAWYER

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