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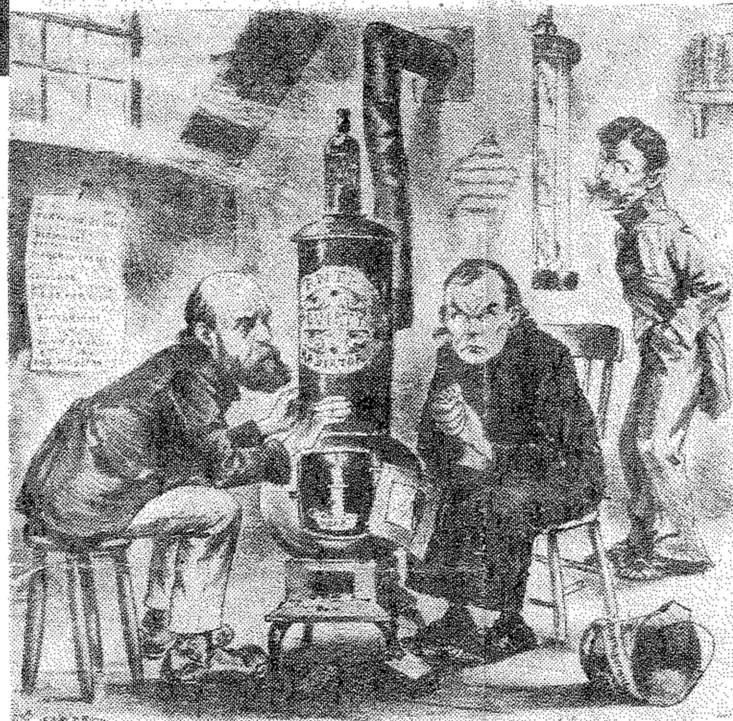
He Never Met a Payroll, but His Idea Made Him World Famous

Henry George's Daughter Paints an Affectionate Portrait of His Youth, His Hardships, His Happy Family Life

Henry George with his two daughters, Jennie and Anna, in 1886



"Cold, bitter cold!" An anti-McGlynn cartoon in Puck, 1888
Illustrations from "Henry George, Citizen of the World"

HENRY GEORGE: Citizen of the World. By Anna George De Mille. Illustrated. *276 pp. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. $3.50.*

Reviewed by
GERALD W. JOHNSON

"NEVER," a wise and weary old editor told me in my youthful days, "have I known any human being to win an argument with a single taxer."

Mrs. De Mille's biography of her father goes far to explain what he meant. A person whose mind is thoroughly imbued with the doctrines of Henry George is a person rapt. For it is a beautiful body of doctrine—generous, high-minded, lucid and impeccably logical. It has never been confuted by any process of ratiocination, but only by two factors quite irrelevant to the field of logic, to wit, history and humanity. Were the world not what it is, and the people who inhabit it not what they are, there is no apparent reason why the rent of land should not be applied to the provision of whatever public services a race stripped of greed and rapacity might require.

There are always among us a handful of energetic souls profoundly convinced that the world is not what it is and people not what they are, and the presence of this handful accounts at once for the progress of civilization and the multiplication of lunatic asylums. Henry George was a singularly fine specimen of the type. There were many who thought his proper place was in a lunatic asylum, but he actually contributed to the progress of civilization about as effectively as any American thinker in any field.

The volume under consideration is not the best introduction to the Georgian economics. It is a work of filial piety, and the author not only eschews all criticism of her father's philosophy but obviously considers effective criticism unthinkable. But take it merely as an intimate portrayal of an extraordinary man and you will find it splendid. It is entirely sympathetic, but the sympathy is so blandly innocent as to be inoffensive, indeed, rather charming. Whatever else may be said of her, Anna George De Mille was not mawkish; her devotion to her father, for all its strength, was healthy and kept within the bounds of sanity by a penetrating intelligence and a saving spark of humor.

Henry George, born in Philadelphia in 1839, was the son of a publisher of church and Sunday-school books whose business, never too prosperous, eventually went to the wall when the boy was thirteen. But the atmosphere of the home was good—a little on the austere side in its piety, but a place where ideas were respected and where some interest in the printed work was taken for granted. The assumption that a man must use his mind and cultivate it was never questioned in that house.

But the pinch of poverty drove him out before he had much formal schooling, and through a friend of his father he secured a berth as ship's boy on a merchantman that made a voyage around the world, lasting well over a year. It was highly educational, but too rough a life to suit his father, who got him a job ashore at the end of the voyage, and from that he went into a printing office, where his familiarity with the

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printed word was vastly increased. But he was never a tractable type and he seemed to have a fatal tendency, whenever he picked a row, to pick it with the boss. So he drifted from job to job until the panic of 1857 came near abolishing jobs altogether in the East. Then his seafaring knowledge enabled him to ship aboard a lighthouse tender going out to the Pacific Coast. In San Francisco he ended his maritime career with an informality somewhat embarrassing to his biographer—it seems to be pretty clear that he jumped ship—and he spent many years in California as a printer and newspaper man, always unprosperous and largely unknown until he wrote "Progress and Poverty" and published it, first at his own expense and later by furnishing plates to the commercial publishers. Thereafter he made a fair living as a lecturer and writer. In 1886 he ran for Mayor of New York and very nearly upset the applecart. In 1897 he ran again, but died suddenly four days before the election.

It was a career strikingly bare of what is usually regarded as accomplishment and this was seized upon by all George's opponents. The kind of people who consider the statement, "He never met a pay roll" as proof of a man's incompetence had a field day with Henry George, for if knowing how to meet a pay roll is the summation of all knowledge, then he did not qualify. But wise men all over the earth read his book and were interested by its originality and its excellent logic. Characters as divergent as Tolstoy and George Bernard Shaw regarded it as one of the best things that ever came out of America, and the scholarly Duke of Argyll thought it so dangerous that he wrote a long pamphlet denouncing it. George became and has since remained a figure of international importance.

All this is mentioned more or less in passing by his daughter, who takes it for granted that the reader knows that Henry George was important. What she endeavors to show is what it cost the man to pursue an idea; and it is an impressive showing indeed that she makes. Nor did he pay the price alone; he put his family through the wringer, too. Yet if one may judge by this daughter's account, nothing untoward happened to any of them. Not a single psychopathic personality developed among them, and not even a seriously warped mind, unless one regards as warping the children's unanimous belief that it was a privilege to have had such a father. It sets up a doubt that being a good provider is the highest possible function of a *paterfamilias;* perhaps teaching children to think and giving them something to think about is also a good defense against neuroses.

A letter accepting the book for publication came to Anna De Mille five hours before she died; but she was conscious and able to understand it; the letter lay under her hand at the end. She deserved that satisfaction, for no one who reads her book can fail to develop a different sort of respect for Henry George, and something more than respect. For this woman has worked a minor miracle: she has created in her readers genuine affection for—of all things—an economist!