

March 31, 1960

A Labor Paper to Serv

Book Reviews

1785

HENRY GEORGE—Citizen of the World, by Anna George de Mille, University of North Carolina Press, 275 pp., \$3.50.

This life of Henry George encompasses whatever of the great social struggles of his time touched upon his life, and the crusade that has become identical with it. It is written by his youngest daughter, recently deceased, with some rather puckish flashes by the granddaughter in a foreword and footnotes. The hope of the author seems to have been somewhat more than plain biography, to get Single Tax back into the limelight it once enjoyed.

The book records the extensive financial support the movement received in Henry George's day, and the similar aid given in these days by the Schalkenbach Foundation, and yet the movement does not move. The book discloses some of the sources of this transformation of a driving crusade against social injustice into the present tranquil reverence for a body of theory that steadily grows less relevant to the world's problems. The book is probably not intended as such, but it is important case material for the study of what goes into a social crusade and how it peters out. (For a warm and clear delineation of Henry George, this reviewer still thinks Charles Madison's chapter in his "Critics and Crusaders" remains unequalled even after this full length biography in the modern style.)

College of Hard Knocks

Henry George was pre-eminently a man with an idea, and the idea grew out of working class experience in the era of western expansion long before he read any economics or thought of himself as an economist. As a lad of 15 years he had sailed, glimpsed Australia's vast expanse, India's palaces and famished millions, seen the captain's unlimited powers while conditions aboard ship were such that he was lucky to have a pet monkey to keep the cockroaches off his food and face as he ate. Before he had made his niche in the world he had known hunger and poverty often; when his second child was

born, the doctor told him that more important than washing the baby was to get some food for the mother, and the broke typesetter went out, demanded and got five dollars from the first stranger he met so his wife could eat.

In Philadelphia an old printer had pointed out to him that wages were higher in the new countries than in the old; an old miner in San Francisco had told him "As the country grows, as the people come in, wages will go down." That was 1858. In 1869, as he asked some teamsters near Oakland about the price of land, and was told the land on which cattle were grazing was being held for a thousand dollars an acre, he got the idea of how, without a stroke of work, the land speculator was able to grasp from the community the values that the community gave to it by settling on it. In 1871, when he was 31 years old, he put his program before the public in a brochure "Our Land and Land Policy." There he wrote:

"The value of land is something which belongs to all, and in taxing land values we are merely taking for the use of the community something which belongs to the community. . . . Land prices would fall; land speculation would receive its death blow. . . . The whole weight of taxation would be lifted from productive industry. . . . Would there be many industrious men walking our streets in the vain search of employment?"

What Sets Wages?

Such was the source of his crusade, its motive force—the probings of a thoughtful victim of the system into why wages were low and jobs hard to get. He evolved a theory of wages that the worker had the choice of working for wages or for himself either on land that was rent-free, or, what according to the Ricardian law of rent would give him the same net income, by renting land; and that the wage thus came approximately

to the earnings a worker could make by exercising this alternative. To this reviewer (who in his boyhood found a gleaming light in the writings of Henry George) this approach to the determination of wages appears to be the actual fulcrum from which George, California job-seeker, actually went to work on all his economic problems.

(So we don't get our economics twisted too, two things should be noted; 1) since even where no such choice really exists, wages do not become zero—for the worker must live and according to an historical-

ly determined standard of living—thus this alternative is not the "cause" of wages; 2) where the choice does actually exist, it is reciprocally true that the marginal land thus put and kept in use must yield a net income approximately equal to the wages that are the alternative, and thus the expansion of population on this land is determined by techniques of production, prices, net income and the historically developed concept of what constitutes "a living" at the time. Thus this Georgian approach to wage determination tells us less than it seems to.)

No One-idea Man

Henry George was more than a Single Taxer. In fact his crusade did not take that name until after Single Tax was used as the title for a speech by one of his followers in 1887, and as the author writes: "The label came into wide use although Henry George and many of his followers knew it did not describe their philosophy of freedom but indicated only the fiscal means for applying that philosophy." The label had been selected from George's phrase in *Progress and Poverty*, "substituting for the manifold taxes now imposed a single tax on the value of land." He was an opponent of all monopoly and privilege, a crusader for the underdog, a hater of tyranny, and it was thus that he headed a movement. He championed legislation for seamen, bawled out Cleveland for sending the Federal troops against Deb's ARU in the Pullman strike, went to jail in his campaign for the Irish tenants of English lords of Irish lands, challenged the Pope's excommunication of Father McGlynn (1887) with his "Conditions of Labor," in answer to the encyclical of May 1890, evidently with the result that Leo XIII reinstated the Single Tax Father with specific blessing to his teachings in 1893. He was a battler in such matters with the same courage that it had required to get married in debt, his toes sticking out of his shoes and with 50 cents in his pocket.

Rise of a Crusade

It is worthwhile to look at the rise and decline of that crusade. Henry George found no ready acceptance for his theories. To get *Progress and Poverty* published at all, he had to provide the plates; his type-setting friends in San Francisco set to work on it mostly for free with the result that "All the bum printers in San Francisco claim the distinction of having set type on the author's edition of *Progress and Poverty*." (It soon acquired a circulation of over three million copies, a best seller of all time; though this record was beat for his *Protection or Free Trade* when Tom Johnson and five other Congressmen, got it run off as their extended remarks in the Congressional Record, circulated over three million copies of it.) It developed into the sort of movement that must have inspired Oscar Ameringer's definition of politics: "The art of getting funds from the rich and votes from the poor on the promise of protecting each against the other."

Labor ran him for Mayor of New York and viewed him as "labor's man" despite his repeated insistence that he was not for the laboring man but for all men, a view most forcefully put in his *Perplexed Philosopher* an attack on Herbert Spencer's apostasy: "I have opposed every proposition to help the poor at the expense of the rich." This came from a man who had often insisted that no reform, even his, could be accomplished without hurting some.

His theory of course was that no confiscation of land was needed, only the taxation of land to the amount of its "economic rent," and that all other monopolies and injustices were the children of land monopoly, to be crushed by restoring to the community the values its growth had given to land. (That historically land monopoly is the basis of other means of exploitation drew various support to George, even from those who realized that crushing the old wolf did not necessarily dispose of the mighty cubs it had suckled.) In his tours of England, where anti-capitalism was more in a socialist mold, he avoided expressing his distaste for socialism at the urging of the silk-hat Marxist Hyndman who rejected his theories but saw use in his propaganda.

The Ebbing Tide

Here was a crusade against "social injustice," its drive coming necessarily from the victim class,