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George Wiielded Great Influence

By Charles K. Robinson

HENRY GEORGE, CITIZEN OF THE WORLD. By Anna George de Mille. Edited by Don C. Shoemaker, with an Introduction by Agnes de Mille. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 276 pages, \$3.50.

Those unacquainted with the life and writings of Henry George may have wondered over the enormous circulation of his famous book, "Progress and Poverty," and his influence throughout many nations which persists to this day. For economics is not exactly easy or exciting reading, and George's theory of one tax (the single tax) on land, but not on the improvements on the land, is not more easily understood and applied than some other economic theories. By the year 1900 George's book had, in all forms and in translations, passed the 2,000,000 mark.

The explanation is that Henry George was not only an original thinker and an extraordinarily clear writer on political economy. He was also a social philosopher seeking the answer to an ancient problem—a more equitable economic system. And he was in part a mystic with something of the sense of mission possessed by the prophets of old.

Readers of this biography by Henry George's daughter, Anna George de Mille, will have for the first time the sufficient backgrounds for understanding the man as a man in all his relationships. There will then no longer be any wonder why the people, the masses of the people everywhere, instinctively accepted him as a leader come to take them out of a wilderness of things they felt ought not to exist in an advancing civilization. Nor will it be strange that George also had business and professional men in his following. He was no emotional radical. By nature an ardent individualist, he rejected socialism and even mild regimentation, having thus exerted a moderating influence on the British Socialists of his day.

George's balance and reasonableness are admirably manifested in his argument about land owners and compensation for them under his tax system. He concludes his demonstration that the owners are entitled to nothing ("Progress and Poverty," Book VII, chapter 3) by saying that, although they should forfeit all property derived from the land in any way, he did not propose to go that far. "Let the land owners retain their improvements and personal property in secure possession," he wrote.

Only too intimately conversant with poverty in his early life George's sensitive mind was deeply stirred by the contrast between what he called "monstrous wealth and debasing want." These things he saw in India and Australia,

where he went as a youthful sailor in the 1850's; and in California where he arrived in 1861 to cast his lot for a time; in New York City, too, in 1869 when he was more impressed by the sight of able-bodied workers begging for bread than by the monopoly powers of the Associated Press which thwarted George's plans for telegraphic service to the San Francisco newspaper on which he was employed.

The land speculation of pioneer California started George on the social thinker's road where he made what was for him an original discovery—for he had not yet read

John Stuart Mill or any of the other classical economists. He saw that the land owners possessed a monopoly on land values created, not by them, but by the growth of the community. Thus deprived of value belonging to the community, to the people, the community was forced to levy on labor, and industry in all its forms, and this indirect oppression by government conferred an unearned subsidy on the land owner. The remedy, to George as to others before him whose labors were then unknown to him, was a tax to eliminate the unearned land values.

In practice, the single tax and the capture of the unearned increment have been difficult of application. Sometimes the unearned value seems to be only interest on invested capital, and the single tax must then be expanded. Yet this point emphasizes the truth that Henry George has made it less difficult for legislators everywhere to seek out excess or unearned profits of many sorts and levy on them.

Even so, however, in Australia, Denmark and in some of the Canadian provinces the single tax has been adopted with some success. In Sydney, the municipal government finds all its revenue from the tax on land values, as do some of the smaller Australian communities.

George's influence on tariff reform, abroad as well as in this country, is worthy of extended discussion not possible here. Tom L. Johnson of Cleveland, Brand Whitlock and other liberals gave wide currency to George's discussions of freer trade and its collateral wholesome effects on general international conditions, thus preparing the way for later successful efforts in razing tariff barriers.

Mrs. de Mille's living portrait of her father reveals him as the attractive opposite of a sour-faced reformer. He lived a robust, well-rounded life. He was the kind of father who found recreation in reading good poetry to his children. He was the kind of sympathizer with the oppressed anywhere who went to Ireland as a friend when the country was a British garrison. He was the ready and outspoken reformer whom the historians still incline to believe to have been elected mayor of New York in 1836, only to be counted out by Tammany.

Editing the manuscript and writing the copious notes, Mr. Shoemaker had an excellent background for his task, being a grand nephew of Henry George and familiar with much of the original material Mrs. de Mille used in her writing.

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