

HENRY GEORGE

Apostle of Freedom

By

ALLAN J. WILSON

Labor Consultant

HENRY GEORGE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

50 East 69th Street

New York 21, N. Y.

1808

Henry George - Apostle of Freedom

A HALF CENTURY

Wherever in the world freedom of assembly, of speech and press are still the order of the day, men and women will meet to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the passing of Henry George.

Henry George died October 29, 1897, the week preceding the general election for mayor of New York for which he was a candidate, having been nominated for that office by the Knights of Labor, the forebear organization of the present labor forces.

Fifty years have passed since men have heard his voice, looked upon his strong, lithe form, saw the gleam of his honest eyes, and felt the pressure of his hand—a man who wanted nothing and gave everything—a man who gave himself. And in those 50 years the world has experienced, and is now passing through a revolution such as men have never before seen.

SIMPLE REMEDY

The remedy Henry George prescribed for economic ills was simple and simple things are always looked upon as objectionable—dangerous. The universality of conservatism proves that it must have its use. It prevents us from bringing about changes for which mankind are not prepared. Nature's methods are evolutionary, not revolutionary.

Slaves cannot be made free by edict. Moses led his people out of only one kind of captivity and in the wilderness they wandered in bondage still. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation did not free the colored race, because it is the law of nature that he who would be free must free himself. A servile people are slaves by habit, and habit is the only fetter. Freedom like happiness, is a condition of mind. A whining, complaining, pinching, pilfering class that listens for the whistle, watches the clock, that works only under the menacing eye of the boss and stands in eternal fear of the pay envelope here and perdition hereafter, can never be freed by legislative enactment.

Freedom cannot be granted any more than education can be imparted. Both must be achieved. A simple honest people are free. People enslaved by superstition and ruled by the dead have work at filing fetters ahead of them and which only they can do for themselves. Henry George realized this and his strength lay in the fact that he did.

"The truth that I have tried to make clear," says George, "will not find easy acceptance. If that could be, it would have been accepted long ago. If that could be, it would never have been obscured. But it will find friends—those who will toil for it; if need be, die for it.

He knew that when men get the crook out of their backs, the hinges out of their knees, and the cringes out of their souls, then they are free. Slaves place in the hands of tyrants all the power tyrants possess.

INGRATITUDE

Fortunate it was for Henry George and for the world, that he knew that any man who labors to help the working man, will be mobbed by the proletariat for his pains later on. Monarchies may be ungrateful, but their attitude is a sweet perfume compared to the ingratitude of the laborer. He can only be helped by stealth, and his freedom must come from within.

Tyranny is a condition in the hearts of serfs. Tyrants are men who have stolen power, convicts who have wrested guns from their guards. Watch them, and in a little while they will again shift places. Henry George was a very great man: great in his economic, prophetic insight; great in his faith, his hope, his love. He gave his message to the world and passed on scourged but not depressed because his world did not accept the truths he voiced. Yet all for which he strived and struggled will yet come true—his prayer will be answered.

AN HONEST MAN

Henry George was that rare, peculiar and strange thing,—an honest man. Whether he had genius or not no one can say, since genius has never been defined twice alike nor resolved into its component parts. All accounts go to show that George was singularly direct and true. His ancestry was Welsh, Scotch and English in about

equal proportions, and the traits of the middle class were his even to a theological sturdiness that robbed his mind of most of its humor.

Born in Philadelphia in 1839, on 10th Street below Pine, Henry George took on many of the moral traits of his Quaker neighbors. The Georges believed in freedom and took William Lloyd Garrison's paper the *Liberator*, and the mother read it aloud to the family. All of the family had pronounced views on the subject of human rights.

When Henry George was 16, the restlessness of coming manhood found expression and he shipped before the mast, sailing away to the Antipodes. The boy had the small, compact form, the physical activity and daring which makes a first-class sailor, but happily his brain was too full of ideas to transform him into a dog of the sea. At 17 he was at the printer's case, setting type and getting a man's pay because he was able to "rastle the dic," which means that he was on familiar terms with the dictionary and could correct proof.

EDUCATION

Henry George was getting an education in the only way anyone ever can, or has, or does—getting it by doing. But the wanderlust was again at work. California was calling—the land of the miracle—and printer's ink began to pall. He was a sailor; every part of a sailing ship was familiar to him, from the bilge water to pennant, from bowsprit to sternpost. He could swab the main mast, reef the topsail in a squall, preside in the cook's galley, or, if the mate was drunk and the captain ashore, he could take charge of the ship, put for open sea and ride out the storm by scudding before the wind.

He arrived in California penniless. But he had health and a willingness to work. He became a farm hand, a tramp peddler, a laborer shoveling gravel into a sluiceway and standing all day knee-deep in water. It was all good, for it taught him that life was life and wherever you go you carry your mental and spiritual assets, as well as your cares, on the crupper. Then came a job in the composing room of a newspaper, and the life work of Henry George

was really begun, for his employers had discovered that he could "rastle with the dic" and if copy was scarce he could create it.

EVENING JOURNAL

At 21 George was one of six printers who brought out the *Evening Journal*. He was foreman of the composing room but gave a hand elsewhere and everywhere. When fate desires a great success she sends her chosen one to failure, and so at 22, the *Journal* was on the rocks, and Henry George was in debt, hunting a job. Henry George had graduated from the case into the editorial room. He worked on all the newspapers by turn, in San Francisco and Sacramento and had come to be regarded as one of the strongest writers on the coast.

At 37 George was on the mountain-top of thought where he saw to a distance that very few men could. He felt his own dignity and worth. The president of the University of California, recognizing his ability as a thinker and a speaker asked him to give a course of lectures on economics. He gave one—this was all they could digest.

George studied economics at first hand. The dignified frappe which he received in the way of honorarium for his university lecture had its advantages. People in San Francisco wanted to hear what the editor had to say as well as to read his utterances. He was invited to give the Fourth of July oration at the Grand Opera House. There is no doubt that the university lecture and the Fourth of July oration added cubits to the stature of Henry George. In these two addresses we find the kernel of his philosophy—a kernel that was to germinate into a mighty tree which would extend its welcoming shade to travelers for many decades to come.

"PROGRESS AND POVERTY"

"Progress and Poverty," the book with which the name of Henry George is principally associated, like every other great book, was a providential accident. It was 10 years in incubation. It began with a newspaper editorial in 1869 and found form in a volume of 500 pages in 1879. The editorial merely called attention to the fact that Cal-

ifornia in spite of her vast wealth was peopled, for the most part, with people desperately poor; and the ground in the vicinity of any city, town or place of enterprise was held at so exorbitant price that the poor were actually enslaved by the man who owned the land, for man is a land animal, and cannot live apart from the land any more than fish can live at a distance from water.

The article attracted attention, and opened the eyes of one man at least—and that was the man who wrote it. He had written better than he knew; and any writer who does not occasionally surprise himself does not write well.

Henry George had surprised himself and he wrote another editorial to explain the first. These editorials extended themselves into a series, and hand-polished and sandpapered were reprinted in pamphlet form in 1871, under the title "Our Land Policy." The temerity which prompted the printing of this pamphlet was evolved through a letter from John Stuart Mill. Henry George knew he was right in his conclusions, but he felt he needed the corroboration of a great mind that had grappled with abstruse problems; so he sent one of his editorials to Mill, the greatest living intellect of his time.

Mill showed his interest by replying in a long letter, wherein he addressed George as a man with a mind equal to his own, not a sophomore trying his wings. The letter from Mill was to him a white milepost. The corroboration gave him courage, confidence and poise. In 1879 on the publication of "Progress and Poverty," he received the recognition that any thinker and writer could desire. Men might not agree with him in his conclusions, but few dared to meet him in a duel of argument, either by pen or on the public platform.

RECOGNITION

Henry George was right in the class with Spencer, Huxley and Tyndall, none of whom, happily, was a college man, and therefore all were free from the handicap of dead learning and ossified opinion, and saw things as if they were new.

His mind was a flower of slow growth. At 37, he was just reaching mental manhood. According to all reasonable tables of expectancy, he should have rivaled Humboldt and been at his prime at 80. His brain was the brain of a Ricardo, but instead of sticking to his books, he got caught in the swirl of politics, and was matched up with the cheap, the selfish, the grasping. The people who snatched him out of his proper sphere as a thinker, a writer and lecturer and flung him into the turmoil of practical politics, were of the class who would, if they could, have a little later ridden him on a rail.

The logic of "Progress and Poverty" and its literary style are so insistent, that it has been studied closely by economists of note in every country of the world. Its argument has never been answered, and those who combat it, have rested their case on the assertion that Henry George was a theorist and a dreamer, and so far as practical affairs were concerned was a failure. With equal logic we might brand the Christian religion as a failure because its founder was not a personal success, either in his social status or as a political leader.

No eulogy of mine can add to the regard in which he was held by those who knew him best as expressed by the beloved priest of St. Peter's Church in New York, Father Edward McGlynn, who opened George's funeral oration with:

There was a man sent from God and his name was Henry George.

George's greatness is best gauged by his opening words addressed to the delegates of the Knights of Labor at its convention assembled to nominate him for mayor of New York.

I am not for laboring men;

I am for men.

To those who grasp the meaning George tried to make clear, the world appears intelligible and rational even though painful because of man's ignorance, his greed and lust for power.

HIS MESSAGE

No other teacher offers a solution of the distresses of society without in some measure sacrificing individual freedom. George alone shows how utterly necessary individual freedom is for man's healthy growth to his highest stature. As human liberty is being destroyed bit by bit by those who think of her as having no relation to the everyday affairs of life, let us ponder on George's evaluation of freedom. "We speak of liberty as one thing and of virtue, wealth, knowledge, invention, national strength and independence as other things. But of all these, liberty is the source, the mother, the necessary condition. She is to virtue what light is to color; to wealth what sunshine is to grain; to knowledge what eyes are to sight. She is the genius of invention, the brawn of national strength, the spirit of national independence. Where liberty rises, there virtue grows, wealth increases, knowledge expands, invention multiplies human powers, and in strength and spirit the freer nation rises among her neighbors as Saul amid his brethren—taller and fairer. Where liberty sinks, there virtue fades, wealth diminishes, knowledge is forgotten, invention ceases and empires mighty in arts and sciences become a helpless prey to barbarians. Liberty! It is a word to conjure with, not to vex the ear in empty boastings."

Religious intolerance in India; communism in China; falangism in Franco's Spain; revolution in the republics of South America; statism in Stalin's Soviets; pandemonium in Palestine; England's economic erosion and America's anemic individualism are all the fruits of monopoly of natural resources. It is this that Henry George would destroy through land value taxation. It is with this reform that the name of Henry George will be forever associated.

This article is reprinted, with permission, from the CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER, October 24, 25 and 26, 1947. It was written in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Henry George's death on October 29, 1897.