



Henry George

NOTHING had worked out right for Henry George. Schooled in the belief that success would come to any young American who toiled faithfully, George had applied that principle to type-setting, gold-prospecting, clerking and selling, seamanship and news reporting. Still he remained poor. When in addition the depression of 1873 swept San Francisco, Henry George brooded and evolved a theory. Six years later *Progress and Poverty* appeared. Conservatism in America had, intellectually, experienced an atomic explosion.

With invention, education, industrial expansion, George wrote, it had been natural to expect poverty to disappear. Instead: "... as liveried carriages appear, so do barefooted children." Why? The loss of the public domain, the surrender of land to settlement and speculators, George argued, had concentrated wealth, created a heartless ruling class, and shackled the masses. Today the name of Henry George is identified with the single tax, an economic doctrine that in essence would have the government tax all unearned increment from the rent of land and use the money for the public good, but the influence of *Progress and Poverty* spread far beyond this thesis.

Few works of nonfiction have been read as earnestly or as widely as the fine print of George's book, and none certainly has so moved America—vitalizing a political movement like Populism, spurring a Clarence Darrow to a Reform Darwinism that blasted conservatism in religion and democracy, leading an Edward Ross to the contemplation of morality and environment so that his *Sin and Society* would in turn quake the pillars of American complacency, producing a J. Allen Smith and *The Spirit of American Government* that defied the sacred invulnerability of the Constitution.

No one can say where the influence of Henry George began and ended, or whether it has ended.

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