

Henry George Lives On!

The 75th Anniversary of Book, 'Progress and Poverty,' by the Famous Economist, Creator of 'Single Tax' Theory, Is Observed

WHILE resting his horse on a ride through the hills around San Francisco, a young California newspaper editor fell into conversation with a passing teamster one day in 1871. For want of something better to say, the editor asked what the price of land was in those lonely parts.

"I don't know exactly," replied the teamster. He pointed to a group of cattle grazing in the distance. "But there is a man over there," he added, "who will sell some land for \$1,000 an acre."

This idle conversation could be compared to Newton's famous falling apple and Galileo's swinging lantern. It started a train of thought which developed into Henry George's "single tax" theory, one of the sensations of the late 19th century. Eight years later, in 1879, the world saw the first timid edition of George's "Progress and Poverty," which now holds the title of the most successful book on economics ever written. The still thriving Henry George School of Social Science in New York city is observing the 75th anniversary of the book's publication this month.

George recalled later that the teamster's casual remark about the price of land struck him "like a flash." Here was the reason, he figured, for advancing poverty with advancing wealth. "With the growth in population, land grows in value, and the men who work it must pay more for the privilege."

He was just 32 years old at the time, and he had the disadvantage of little scholastic training. Born in Philadelphia, he went to sea at 16 and turned up in San Francisco two years later to make his fortune. He turned to printing and reporting there, proposed to his wife with only 50c in his pocket, and came within an ace of starving several times in his early married life.

Soon after the birth of his second child, he was so desperate for money that he walked up to a stranger in San Francisco and demanded \$5.

"What for?" the man asked. "My wife has just been confined and I have nothing to give her to eat," said George.

The stranger gave him the money, either from pity or fear that George might assault him. Long afterward, George recalled that he was, indeed, desperate enough to have killed the man for his money.

'Land Belongs to All the People'

Out of this long struggle against poverty came George's great book, which stunned the intellectual world. The theory advanced in "Progress and Poverty" went like this:

The land belongs of right to all the people. Private ownership of land has no more basis than private ownership of sunlight or air. One generation cannot give away this fundamental right any more than a man can sell his unborn children into slavery.

But this does not mean that the government should confiscate all the land and divide it up equally. Rather, let the individuals who will pay the highest rent for the land keep undisputed possession, paying a tax on the rent to the government. This land tax, argued

Henry George, should be sufficient to run the government; no other taxes would be needed.

This would do away with tariffs, excise taxes, duties, improvement taxes—in fact, any taxes at all on man made goods. Landlords would be allowed a sufficient margin over the tax to induce them to do the rent collecting. One result would be a construction boom, since building improvements would not be taxed.

Henry George was not the first man to voice the single tax theory, but the vigor and clarity of his presentation made it seem

day of publication and focused attention on his master work. Eventually, "Progress and Poverty" sold more than two million copies—the largest sale of any book on political economics.

George began to hit the lecture trail, both in America and abroad. One of his listeners in England was George Bernard Shaw, who paid tribute to the "prophet of San Francisco" when he made his only visit to the United States in 1933.

Said Shaw: "My attention was first drawn to political economy as a science of social salvation by Henry George's eloquence and his 'Progress and Poverty,' which had

would stretch out on a sofa smoking a cigar and preparing his thoughts. On the lecture platform, he could be eloquent and inspirational. Some English reviewers called him the best orator of the times. And he knew how to handle hecklers.

At a meeting in Texas, someone asked from the floor: "Suppose, for argument's sake, Mr. George, that you owned all the



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

new. Eighteen years after publication, the author claimed he had not seen a single objection to any position in the book which had not been anticipated and answered in the book itself.

Writing the book took 18 months, and finding a publisher for it was a task in itself. After various houses turned it down, George had a private edition of 500 copies published at his own expense, setting the first two lines of type himself. A New York publisher then agreed to bring out an edition, using the original plates.

At this time, George was a short, balding man with a full red beard. While writing the book, he had earned some money as state inspector of gas meters, a political appointment from the governor of California.

Sales went poorly for the first two years, until George produced a pamphlet on the Irish land question, proposing his single tax as a remedy for the economic woes of that country. The small book sold out its first edition on the

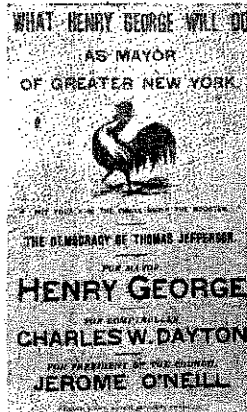
enormous circulation in the early 1880's, and beyond all question had more to do with the Socialist revival of that period in England than any other book. When I was swept into the great Socialist revival of 1883, I found that five-sixths of those who were swept in with me had been converted by Henry George."

George Did Not Like Karl Marx

That was ironic, for Henry George was anything but a socialist. In his lectures, he declared war on the followers of Karl Marx and collectivism. With Thomas Jefferson, he believed that the best governed people were the least governed, and he figured that the single tax would reduce bureaucracy.

Karl Marx spoke of "Progress and Poverty" with contempt as "the capitalist's last ditch." George returned the compliment, calling Marx the "prince of maddheads."

Before his lectures, George



Election poster in 1897

land and I owned all the capital. What in that case would you say?"

George's answer came back immediately: "Move!"

Although "Progress and Poverty" and his other books had a tremendous sale, George made no fortune from writing. He was more interested in spreading the idea of the single tax than getting money, so he cut his royalties to a minimum.

One time a reporter asked him: "Mr. George, I want you to tell me all about the single tax."

George reached into his pocket, drew out 20c and gave it to the young reporter. "I've told all about it in a book," he said. "Buy it—paper edition."

An almost inevitable development was that Henry George would be drawn into politics. A committee representing 165 labor unions asked him to run for mayor of New York city in 1886. George accepted the challenge, primarily as a means of spreading the gospel of his political and economic theories.

He ran surprisingly well in the race against a Tammany politician, Abram Hewitt, and the Republican candidate, 28 year old Theodore Roosevelt. He finished 22,000 votes behind Hewitt and 8,000 ahead of Roosevelt.

Another attempt to become mayor of New York, in 1897, resulted in a heavy schedule of campaigning which brought on his death five days before the election. He spent his last night speaking at four rallies around New York. At one of the meetings, someone cried out: "Hail, Henry George, friend of the laboring man!"

George corrected the salutation: "I am for men!"

It was, in a sense, his final utterance, characteristic of a man whose writings sprang from the heart as well as the mind.

GERALD KLOSS.