

## Seminar Explores Henry George's Wit & Scholarship

- by David Domke

Henry George was more than just an original thinker in the field of political economy. He combined his philosophy and scholarship with a unique literary style, drawing on many aspects of different cultures and traditions, giving his writings an encompassing and multi-faceted scope. His use of metaphor and simile are at times striking, and he often makes his point by alluding to the Bible, or to Shakespeare or some other renowned author. California governor William Irwin once referred to George's "power of statement and clear and brilliant style." His use of a "poetical" figure is never gratuitous but is always used to graphically illustrate his point, to make a clear point more forcefully.

On Friday, March 26, the School gave a seminar on the wide-ranging thought and literary expression in the works of Henry George. Entitled "Henry George: An American Original", the seminar was conducted by George Collins, director of the School, and Vandana Chak, a School faculty member. Beginning with a brief biographical talk on George, Mr. Collins remarked on the early scholarly leanings of Henry George. Although a family financial crisis precipitated his withdrawal from school at an early age, forcing him to work six long days a week at a glass-blowing

phrase that he was to use to great effect in later life. He kept a series of notes on the back of his sea-journal, recording weather conditions and shipboard tasks as well as his observations of the life and culture of India. These jottings, from which Mr. Collins quoted, offer quick, vivid impressions of both local landscape and human custom, and foreshadow his later style. Here he is describing Calcutta and the Ganges river: *"The river, at times very broad and again contracting its stream into a channel hardly large enough for a ship of average size to turn in, was bordered by small native villages, surrounded by large fruit trees, through which little bamboo huts peeped. As we advanced the mists which had hitherto hung over the river cleared away, affording a more extensive prospect... On the banks the natives began to go to their daily toil, some driving cattle along, others loading boats with grain, while the women seemed busy with their domestic tasks... The river here takes a sudden bend, crowded with ships of all nations, and above nothing could be seen but a forest of masts."*

There is in this passage a natural rhythm (perhaps much like the rhythm of the river itself) and (continued on page six)



Vandana Chak and George Collins

factory, George spent much of his spare time at the local library in Philadelphia, attending lectures and devouring whatever books he borrowed. Through his father's influence he was able to sign on board a trading ship as a cabin boy and sail to the Far East. While in India George, at the age of sixteen, showed some of the propensity for keen observation and literary turn of

simplicity of expression that lets the scene reveal itself. George does not strive for "effect" or for the aesthetic distance that many travel writers of the time affected; we get the thoughts and observations of a person who is immersed in what he is experiencing, rather than someone who is stepping back and merely recording points of interest. Furthermore, he does not condescend toward the native citizens of Calcutta, another trait of most writers of that time, but presents them as part of a natural setting - in short he identifies with them and their labour, a point of view much in evidence in his later writings.

After he returned from his sea voyaging Henry George next apprenticed as a printer, a trade which taught him the more formal aspects of spelling, punctuation and sentence construction. During this time he remained, as he would for the rest of his life, an avid reader and skilled debater. As a consequence of both his own restlessness and the general economic depression that prevailed in the country in the 1850s, George, unable to sustain gainful employment in his homeland, signed on again with a trading ship. This second voyage gave him again ample opportunity to hone what he was to make his life's craft: writing. The written passages Mr. Collins quoted from this part show an expanded breadth and maturity of style. Leaving his second voyage and settling in California,

Henry George returned to the trade of typesetter and soon took the risk of surreptitiously printing his own opinion in one of the editions of the newspaper he worked for. Rather than being fired for this impertinence, as he expected, his boss offered to pay for any such subsequent items he cared to write. Thus began his career as a professional writer, leading later to his becoming editor and publisher of the San Francisco Post, "a lively, controversial and successful paper."

Throughout his life George never lost sight of the lot of the common people. He couldn't help it; he was one of them and suffered many of the trials of the most destitute. This lent his writings a strong practical grounding and accounts in large part for his emphasis on the crucial role of land and labour in the creation of wealth, leading ultimately to the question he posed at the beginning of *Progress and Poverty*: Why, in spite of increase of productive power, do wages tend to a minimum which will give but a bare living? Mr. Collins interwove George's trip to the east coast, and his reduction to temporary penury, with quotations from his writings, giving insight into both the man and his times.

Mr. Collins then introduced Ms. Chak who provided a broad historical background to the times in which Henry George lived. Ms. Chak began by saying: "Whenever I read (continued on back page)

## AN AMERICAN ORIGINAL

(Continued from page 6)

*Progress & Poverty* what impresses me most is his grasp of not just the bare facts of history but his grasp of the basic issues of the historical process." Giving as an example George's observations about India, she went on to describe both the history of that country, its domination by various foreign powers and its struggle to free itself from colonization, as well as George's unique insight into the political-economic ramifications of that struggle.

Mr. Collins returned to the podium and continued the intertwining of Henry George's life and writings. He related a story about George's being considered for the Chair of Economics at the University

of California and invited to give a series of lectures. George's first lecture contained this bit of admonition to the students and faculty: "For the study of political economy you need no special knowledge, no extensive library, no costly laboratory, if you will but think for yourselves. All that you need is care in reducing complex phenomena to their elements...applying the simple laws of human action with which you are familiar..." George was not invited back to deliver lectures.

It is this sort of plain speaking that set Henry George apart from most of his contemporaries in the field of political economy. It has been said that Henry George was as popular as two other American originals of his time: Mark Twain and Thomas Edison. With the first, he shared a sense of wit as well as a sympathetic understanding and insight into human nature, coupled with a sagacious literary style that was both poetically expressive and insightful. With the second he perhaps shared the desire to shed some light in dark times.