

The Early Years

ONLY THOSE ENGLISHMEN WITH LONG MEMORIES OR THE SMALL band still devoted to the single tax would greet the name of Henry George or his book, *Progress and Poverty*, with more than a blank stare.

Yet in the mid-1880's George and his doctrines swept excitedly through Great Britain. Even if his influence were limited to the 1880's when, on five separate visits, he carried his message from Plymouth to the Isle of Skye, George would deserve a place of honor in British political history. But more than that, from 1889 on, his land-tax proposals were an essential part of practical British politics, and became major planks in the Liberal and Labour parties' platforms. It was not until 1934, when Snowden's land tax was repealed, that George's doctrines ceased to trouble conservative landowners.

Henry George, not Karl Marx, was the true catalyst of Britain's insurgent proletariat. The Webbs handsomely acknowledged his influence. They credited the rise of the Socialist Party to supremacy in the Trades Union Congress of 1893 to "the wide circulation in Britain of Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*." The "optimistic and aggressive tone" of *Progress and Poverty*, according to the Webbs, and the popularization of George's theory of rent, "sounded the dominant note alike of the new unionism and of the British Socialist movement."¹ The British working-class movement ceased to be quietistic and took on vigorous life with the coming of George and the recognition of him as someone with something vital to say.

Little in George's early career forecast his ultimate role in British thought. He was born in Philadelphia, September 2, 1839,

of a poor but respectable religious family. He had little formal education, leaving school before he was fourteen. At sixteen he shipped as foremast boy on an East Indiaman bound for Melbourne and Calcutta; and at nineteen, a member of the crew of the lighthouse steamer *Shubrick*, he jumped ship at San Francisco.

During the next twenty years in California, he lived, worked, starved, married, and produced children. After a short, unproductive spell of gold prospecting on the Fraser River in Canada, he was successively printer, typesetter, newspaper reporter, newspaper proprietor, stump speaker for the Democratic Party, unsuccessful political candidate, lecturer, and State Inspector of Gas Meters. As the years passed, he became increasingly preoccupied with thoughts about society and the social problem, thoughts which eventually resulted in *Progress and Poverty*.

The thinking-out of *Progress and Poverty* began in 1868,² when he published "What the Railroad Will Bring Us" in the *Overland Monthly*. For the first time, he expressed the principle that was to be the foundation of his book: that under modern industrial conditions progress and poverty march together. He recognized that the juxtaposition of wealth and want was not merely a local or national phenomenon, but was world-wide.

His recognition, in the *Overland Monthly* article, of the principle which he spent the remainder of his life preaching was more than intellectual; more than that was necessary to produce the prophetic tones of *Progress and Poverty* and the inspiring effect of his message to British audiences in the 1880's.

George's transformation from economic thinker to social messiah occurred in 1869, when he visited New York City and saw the dramatic contrast between wealth and social misery. He later said he was struck as if by a divine command from heaven:

Years ago I came to this city from the West, unknown, knowing nobody, and I saw and recognized for the first time the shocking contrast between monstrous wealth and debasing want, and here I made a vow from which I have never faltered, to seek out and remedy, if I could, the cause that condemned little children to lead such a life as you know them to lead in the squalid districts.³

Soon after his return from New York in 1869, he had another insight which led him to take a further step toward the formulation of his final program. While traveling through a land-boom area in California, he stopped to ask a passing teamster what land was worth in the neighborhood.

The teamster "pointed to some cows grazing off so far that they

looked like mice, and said: 'I don't know exactly, but there is a man over there who will sell some land for a thousand dollars an acre.' Like a flash it came upon me that there was the reason of advancing poverty with advancing wealth. With the growth of population, land grows in value, and the men who must work it must pay more for the privilege. I turned back, amidst quiet thought, to the perception that then came to me and has been with me ever since."⁴

By this experience, George had acquired three of the ideas upon which his book, and his mission in Great Britain, were to be based: the interrelation of progress and poverty, the world-wide nature of the problem, and land monopoly as the cause of the problem. To complete his program, he now needed to formulate his remedy for poverty in the midst of plenty; he supplied this remedy in 1871, in the fifth chapter of *Our Land and Land Policy, National and State*. The cure for the contrast between wealth and poverty was simply that "When our 40,000,000 people have to raise \$800,000,000 per year for public purposes, we cannot have any difficulty in discovering the remedy in the adjustment of taxation," that is, a "tax upon the value of land."⁵ Later, as the "single tax" and "the taxation of land values," this remedy was to be the battle cry of British Liberals. Only the writing of *Progress and Poverty* was needed to bring George's view before the public in a clear context.

The book was begun in September, 1877, and completed in March, 1879. George was true to his convictions, and *Progress and Poverty* was therefore more than a marshaling of facts, theories, and conclusions—it was, in sober fact, a confession of faith and a pious dedication to a cause.

He admitted later, in the preface to *The Science of Political Economy*, that he felt "that the talent intrusted to me had been accounted for." And in a letter to the Reverend Thomas Dawson of Glencree, Ireland, in 1883, he showed even more clearly that social reform, as embodied in *Progress and Poverty*, was for him a religion, not merely an intellectual concept. Father Dawson had written to Mrs. George to express the hope that her husband might become a Roman Catholic. George replied in effect that his own religion, the religion of humanity, had prior claims; and then he added an intimate account of the religious emotion which overcame him when he had finished the last page of *Progress and Poverty*:

I flung myself on my knees and wept like a child. The rest, was in the Master's hands. That is a feeling that has never left me; that is constantly with me. And it has led me up and up. It has made me a better and purer man. It has been to me a religion,

strong and deep, though vague—a religion of which I never like to speak, or make any outward manifestation, but yet that I try to follow.⁶

This attitude explains the fervor with which he preached in Great Britain in the 1880's, and the enthusiasm of the British response to his message. One observer, not wholly sympathetic, compared the atmosphere of his meetings to that of a "Little Bethel."⁷ Henry M. Hyndman spoke of his "bump of reverence" as of "cathedral proportions."⁸ In his British crusade, George was in fact a modern Wesley, using, in a social context, the same methods as the great evangelist to arouse in his listeners an awareness of their condition and to lay the foundation of hope.

In *Progress and Poverty*, he set forth clearly and forcefully the generalizations of wealth and want revealed to him during the preceding years. He showed that, in the modern world, the depths of poverty were to be found side by side with the greatest commercial and industrial progress. He said that the source of all wealth was land, and that the inequalities in wealth which "progress" fostered were caused by a monopoly of the land by the few. Such a condition was more than unfortunate; it was unjust, for the land belonged to the people by natural right. The people should reassert their title, taken from them in the past by the robber ancestors of the present landlords. They should recover their natural title, not by dividing up the land physically, but by the imposition of a tax equivalent to the total value of the land. Landlords were to receive no compensation for the virtual expropriation of their property, for you do not reimburse a thief when the police recover the swag.

In its simplest form, this was the message in *Progress and Poverty*; but the problem of delivering this message to the world remained. Henry George, Jr., has told, in his life of his father, how the manuscript of *Progress and Poverty* was rejected at first by D. Appleton and Company, the American publishers of Herbert Spencer, because it was "very aggressive" and because such a book would not sell; how it was refused more peremptorily by other publishers; and how George determined to make the plates himself and to print a small "Author's Edition" of 500 copies. The device succeeded: Appleton agreed to print the book from the author's plates, and brought it out in January, 1880.

After *Progress and Poverty* was published, George and his book gradually established themselves as an organic part of reform movements in Great Britain. George worked hard to secure a British audience for his book. Events abroad aided him. When *Progress*

and Poverty was published in the United States, Charles Parnell and Michael Davitt were dramatizing the land problem in Ireland. In his book George had already seen a possible testing ground for his theories in the Irish land problem. In the chapter "References from Facts," he said he had been "looking over the literature of Irish misery," and that he had used it in particular to attack "the complacent attribution of Irish want and suffering to overpopulation which is to be found even in the works of such high-minded men as Mill and Buckle."⁹

He sent copies of the "Author's Edition" to prominent Britishers he knew to be interested in social and land problems—William E. Gladstone, George Grey in New Zealand, Herbert Spencer, and the Duke of Argyll. Only Grey proved sympathetic. Gladstone never considered George as anything but a revolutionist, and Spencer and the Duke of Argyll both ultimately attacked him and his theories.¹⁰

In 1880, at George's request, John Russell Young, a New York newspaper editor, carried a number of copies of *Progress and Poverty* to England and placed them in a London bookstore. When the books remained unsold, he presented copies with personal letters from the author to: W. F. Rae, L. H. Courtney, M. P., Dean Stanley, Thomas Hughes, Henry Labouchère, M. P., Henry Fawcett, M. P., A. M. Sullivan, M. P., and J. O'Conner Power, M. P.

George's eagerness to have an active influence in British affairs appears in his disappointed comment to Grey: "Though I have sent a few copies [of *Progress and Poverty*] to England, it does not yet seem to have attracted any attention there. Should it be in your power to bring it to the notice of any there whom it might interest, it would be to me a great service."¹¹

Later in 1880 his interest in going to Great Britain became stronger. He was full of hope for an English edition of *Progress and Poverty*, and evidently had been following the course of the Irish rebellion closely, for he announced jubilantly to Grey, "I believe a movement has commenced there of which neither side can see the importance," a prophecy more than justified by later events. Now, for the first time, he thought not merely of circulating his ideas abroad by his book, but also by his own efforts, "I would very much like to go to England, but that at present is out of my power," he wrote.¹²

In 1880 two events were to bring him into the middle of British affairs. One was the acceptance of *Progress and Poverty* by a British publisher. On December 14, 1880, George wrote to his

friend, Edward R. Taylor, a California lawyer, that Kegan Paul of London "have ordered an edition of the book printed here for them, and will bring it out in January [1881]." ¹³ His first English edition was for 1,000 copies. Subsequent reprints succeeded in selling well over 100,000 copies. The second event was the invasion of the United States by the Irish Land League.

In 1879, after sanctioning Michael Davitt's Irish Land League as the official organization of the Irish Nationalists and after approving Davitt's plan for aggressive tactics against the landlords, Charles Parnell came to the United States on behalf of the Irish Land League. Speaking in sixty-two cities, he won the support of the Clan-na-Gael, an Irish-American revolutionary organization, for the Irish Nationalist cause. The American Land League, an auxiliary of the Irish Land League, came into being; Irish-Americans flocked to join it and to contribute money to the Irish cause. Patrick Ford, editor of the New York *Irish World*, pledged his paper to the cause.

George profited from this agitation. Davitt met him and promised the support of the Irish Land League for *Progress and Poverty*, and George seized the opportunity to join forces. He had already indicated his interest in Irish affairs by publishing in the California *Bee* in 1879 an article called "The Irish Land Question." Now using the same title, he expanded this article into a booklet of some 100 pages, hoping thereby to involve himself in British land problems and to influence their solution. He was not disappointed. He admitted that in *The Irish Land Question* the case of Ireland was used as a "stalking horse," ¹⁴ that his real concern was not especially with local conditions in Ireland, but with those in the English-speaking world at large, the United States included. However, he was eager to use Great Britain as a test area for his theories.

The Irish Land Question was no mere rehash of *Progress and Poverty*. It presented ideas by which George hoped to influence the course of land reform in Great Britain. It summarized, of course, the main doctrines of *Progress and Poverty*, but a large part was concerned with Ireland itself, with a criticism of Parnell's land theories, and with a merging of the Irish social problem with that of Great Britain. Consequently, it was a preview and a synopsis of material which George later used in his speeches in Britain.

First, he outlined the Irish situation: food was plentiful in Ireland, but the Irish did not have the money to buy it; the cause of this condition was the institution of private ownership of land; the principle which would solve the problem was the recognition

that the land of Ireland belonged to the people by natural right; the solution was to "sweep away all private ownership of land and convert all occupants into tenants of the State, by appropriating rent." Landlords were not to be compensated, for their title to the land rested on an original act of plunder.¹⁵

George then advanced toward participation in British social reform—by criticizing the objective of the Land League. He charged that the Irish movement under Parnell was "merely in the interest of a class," that it "promises nothing to the laboring and artisan classes."¹⁶ Parnell advocated peasant proprietorship as a solution for Irish problems: the creation by the State of a new class of small landowners, and compensation to the original landlords for the loss of their property. This would be class legislation, said George, because it would merely set up a larger landowning class than already existed without changing the system of private ownership.

George wished a mass movement which included the proletariat. Therefore, he advised the "earnest men among the Irish leaders [to] abandon their present halfhearted, illogical position, and take their stand frankly and firmly upon the principle that the youngest child of the poorest peasant has as good a right to tread the soil and breathe the air of Ireland as the eldest son of the proudest duke."¹⁷

He was not so impractical as to believe that such a revolution could be accomplished immediately. To "work out such a problem in the closet" was one thing; to solve it in the field of action, where "ignorance, prejudice, and powerful interest must be met" was another.¹⁸ The principle of "the land for the people" would have to be carried into practical politics; George therefore advocated a piecemeal realization of the ideal, for "to demand a little at first is often the surest way to obtain much at last."¹⁹

The idea of a practical political program for promoting the single tax had not been broached in *Progress and Poverty*; it was a direct consequence of the problem posed by the Land League. It foreshadowed the four-shillings-in-a-pound tax on land values put forward with George's approval by single taxers during the Glasgow municipal election of 1885, and the penny-in-a-pound tax in Lloyd George's Budget of 1909-10, and years later in Snowden's Budget. British single taxers approved of these two measures to establish a principle of land taxation; later Parliaments, they reasoned, could exploit it up to twenty shillings in the pound.

Even more prophetic was the proposal of *The Irish Land Ques-*

tion for carrying the fight to Great Britain. George criticized Parnell's objectives as class legislation which excluded artisans and laborers from its benefits; he also attacked peasant proprietorship because of its nationalism. He proposed nothing less than a union of Irish, Scottish, and English workers to drive landlordism out of the British Isles. He called the Irish to a "higher love than mere love of country." He implored them to be Land Leaguers first and Irishmen afterward. The Irish must stop abusing England and everything English, for vituperation alienated their true allies, the "English radicals" and the English working classes. The real enemy was the system which oppressed both the Irish and the English. George argued that the Irish cause could be advanced most effectively by carrying the land agitation to Great Britain. "Both England and Scotland are ripe for such an agitation, and, once fairly begun, it can have but one result—the victory of the popular cause." ²⁰

Parnell paid no attention to this advice. He fought the English until circumstances broke him. George never did make his peace with Parnell. Instead, he had the satisfaction of gaining the partial support of Parnell's lieutenant, Davitt, for his land-tax program, and, through Davitt's influence, the added satisfaction of planting active branches of single taxers in Ireland.

The clearest proof in *The Irish Land Question* that George hoped to preach land reform in Great Britain was his estimate of the social tensions there. "Davitt," he wrote, "is snatched to prison, a 'Liberal' government carries coercion by a tremendous majority, and the most despotic powers are invoked to make possible the eviction of Irish peasants." ²¹ To him, these signs meant that England was rushing toward revolution, and that the only salvation was to strip the landlords of their power. His conviction that the British people were ready for his message increased his longing to enter the conflict in person.

He was not kept waiting. His pamphlet, *The Irish Land Question*, was published in New York, London, Manchester, and Glasgow, in March and April, 1881. Beginning in March, George aroused public interest in the Irish land question by his lectures in a dozen towns in the eastern United States and Canada. Soon afterward Patrick Ford, of the *Irish World*, decided to send a special correspondent to Ireland to write regular dispatches on the progress of the revolt. George, by virtue of his beliefs and his newspaper experience, was the logical candidate for the job; in September the offer was made and accepted. George wrote to

George Grey: "I may be able to help on the cause [in Great Britain] more than I could here." ²²

He sailed for Ireland in October, ¹⁸⁸¹ jubilant because of the success of *Progress and Poverty*; as he said, "a book which gets itself translated so quickly . . . which philanthropists buy by the thousand and a daily newspaper published like a serial novel and which moreover gets poetry written to it, is after all, something of a book." ²³

The Irish revolt prepared the way ideologically for George's British crusade. By 1880 the outbreaks of violence in the Irish countryside, the severe countermeasures which these called forth, and the defiant attitude in Parliament toward Parnell and his supporters dramatized the land question, and caused an immediate and widespread discussion of the problem in England just before George and his book arrived there. Thus, when George landed in Ireland, he did so in the most favorable of circumstances; all the land was ready for his gospel. ^{10/25/81}

In 1879 and 1880 British magazines such as the *Nineteenth Century* printed at least one article each month on the Irish question, social problems, and land tenure. The authors of these articles were nationally known economists, reformers, or politicians. They met on one common ground; that social conditions were bad and called for an immediate remedy, and that what was happening in Ireland today might happen in England tomorrow. George's prophecies in *The Irish Land Question* read like an echo of this British diagnosis.

So favorable a climate of opinion guaranteed an eager audience for George when he began his campaign. His specific proposals were to meet with shocked resistance in many quarters, but the British were prepared to agree, on the whole, with his analysis of social conditions.

Seldom has a mission such as George's begun so auspiciously.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*. London: Longmans Green and Company, 1950, pp. 374-76.
2. For a detailed account of the connection between George's newspaper experience in California and the beginning of his thinking about the land question, see Charles A. Barker's *Henry George*, 1955.
3. From his acceptance of the New York mayoralty nomination in 1886.

4. Henry George, Jr., *The Life of Henry George*. New York: The Schalkenbach Foundation, 1943, p. 210.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 311-12.
7. *London Star*, November 22, 1888.
8. Henry M. Hyndman, *The Record of an Adventurous Life*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911, p. 291.
9. Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*. New York: The Schalkenbach Foundation, 1949, pp. 126-27.
10. See Argyll's "The Prophet of San Francisco," *Nineteenth Century*, April, 1884; and Henry George's *A Perplexed Philosopher* (1892), which contains details of the Spencer controversy.
11. Henry George Collection, New York Public Library, July 3, 1880.
12. *Ibid.*, November 30, 1880.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Henry George, *The Land Question*. New York: The Schalkenbach Foundation, 1941, p. 72. Throughout the book this work is referred to as *The Irish Land Question*, since it was originally published under that title.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
20. Henry George, *The Land Question*, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
22. Henry George Collection, *op. cit.*, September 26, 1881.
23. *Ibid.* A letter to James McClatchy of Sacramento, California, October 9, 1881.