

## His Social Analysis

GEORGE'S TWO OBJECTIVES IN HIS CAMPAIGNS OF 1884 AND 1885 had been: first, to describe the evil living conditions of the workers of England and Scotland; and second, to prescribe the remedy. This twofold purpose was stated clearly in February 1884, in a circular addressed to the people of Scotland by the Scottish Land Restoration League. This circular contained the following argument: The Earth was created by God and therefore belonged to no one class or generation but to each generation; God intended the earth to be shared by his children, and every man, woman, and child derived from the Creator an equal right to the earth. (George, like Jefferson, assumed that there was a natural and divine law higher than the civil law.)

Having established a basis for its authority, the circular proceeded to analyze conditions in Scotland. A denial of the equal right of all to the land was the primary cause of the current poverty and misery, and of their consequences: vice, crime, and degradation. The land of Scotland had been made the private property of a few persons; more than two thirds of the population were compelled to live in hovels, to work for starvation wages, and to subsist on insufficient food. George's speeches in 1884 and 1885 were, in part, a detailed elaboration of this theme.

His analysis of British social problems was effective because it was simple, direct, and unprofessional. He described what he had seen—conditions with which his audiences were familiar; he named names and cited cases. His audiences were moved as much by his sincerity as by the facts he disclosed. British workers knew by bit-

ter experience what their own conditions were; what they needed to know—and what George told them—was that poverty was *not* part of the natural order of things, that luxuries as well as necessities were due them by virtue of their labor, and that they must act to secure their just rewards.

George endeared himself to audiences by refusing to be drawn into a battle of statistics, whereby his opponents sought to prove that because of increasing grain imports, higher income tax returns, declining death rate, diminishing crime convictions, and declining pauperism, the conditions of the poor were improving and drastic reforms were unnecessary.<sup>1</sup> He inquired scornfully how a man could “get up and say that because he believed there had been a little improvement, nothing more should be done. . . . The great fact was that in all the years of this century the power of producing wealth had been enormously increased, and the fact that stared them in the face today was that in this great and rich England people actually wanted food (hear, hear), shelter, and clothing, and proper housing, that they were worse off, indeed than the veriest savages (hear, hear). It was true, as Professor Huxley said a month ago in London, that the condition of large numbers of the civilized English people today was worse than that of any savage tribe upon the face of the globe. (Shame.)”<sup>2</sup> As England was in the depths of a severe depression, his listeners could supply, from personal observation, the details.

George’s cavalier treatment of statisticians was the master stroke of his campaign: The jobless and needy worker could neither satisfy his hunger nor pay his rent with proof that he was better off than the worker of the preceding generation. An absurd confidence that George could be refuted by mere statistics was shared by all opponents of social reform, even by Prime Minister Gladstone. When Robert Giffen’s statistical analysis, *The Progress of the Working Class in the Last Half Century*, appeared in 1883, its preface contained a laudatory letter from Gladstone: “I have read with great pleasure your masterly paper. It is probably in form and substance the best answer to George, and I hope it may be practicable to give it a wide circulation.”

In his diagnosis of British social problems, George cast the landlord as the villain. “Landlord,” to him, was the owner of a large area of land who had absolute control over the use of this land, and who lived off the returns without any exertion on his part. The landlord had, in effect, a monopoly in the land: He could forbid fishing in its streams, though people were starving; could charge all

that the traffic would bear for the use of land; and could evict his tenants for failure to pay rent, no matter what the cause.<sup>3</sup> George even cited instances of land being refused for a church site, in his eyes a crowning injustice.<sup>4</sup>

The position of the landlord was a decidedly artificial one, for which the people themselves were to blame, because of their inaction. To stir workers from their lethargy, he ironically defended the Duke of Argyll, his own archenemy and the enemy of all radical Scotsmen. The *North British Daily Mail* paraphrased the attack as follows: "Why, see the Duke of Argyll! (Hisses.) Oh, do not hiss him; they ought to pity him. (Laughter and applause.) The Duke of Argyll was a man of natural ability, a man of parts and powers. If he had been born in an ordinary walk of life (laughter) he would have made a useful member of society, and Mr. George doubted not would have made his name. (Hear, hear, and 'Question.') But, right from his birth, people had been bowing to him and telling him he was a great Duke. When they reared a man in that way, what could they expect? In an article the Duke had written about him, he said that in one estate he had invested £40,000 in a few years. Where did he get his £40,000? (Laughter.) He never made one penny of it. He got it from the labour of others, but the Duke himself was utterly unconscious of that. He took it as the Divine order of things, and as a duck took to water."<sup>5</sup>

The landlord's position in society was not natural, he contended. Though every male member of his audience was liable to be summoned to defend his native land with his very life, "the great majority of them had no right to a square inch of English soil,"<sup>6</sup> so great was the power of the landlord. What, he asked, would happen to the Duke of Sutherland and the Duke of Argyll if there were no people to work their land?<sup>7</sup> Or "why should these men of Skye work for Major Fraser? Why should they stint their families for the sake of a man who lives in Inverness? (Hear, hear, and cheers.) The only answer is that Major Fraser purchased from somebody else the privilege of making them do so."<sup>8</sup>

Evidence of the landlord's power was not difficult to find. In 1884, the British Government had sent ships and soldiers to the north of Scotland to enforce law and order among the crofters; George mentioned this incident at every opportunity, in his Scottish as well as English speeches. "They saw in the little bays of the north the warships of this great empire of Great Britain. For what? Simply to compel these people to continue to pay the black-mail that had made them poor. There were many men—honest,

industrious, and God-fearing—living on potatoes and meal. Why? Because of the poverty of the country? Not at all. The country was rich enough, and the proof of that was that it could do far more than support the people that lived upon it—that it *did* support a whole lot of very expensive gentlemen called landlords . . . The difficulty was that the men who were born upon the island . . . had been driven off the good land to give place to the sheep and deer.”<sup>9</sup>

The landlords had created a monopoly in land, a monopoly so openly unfair that they were compelled to use the power of the State to defend it. Confronted by the compact forces of the landlord and the State, what could the workers do? George never suggested that the poor simply wait and pray for better days; he urged them to act. He ridiculed workmen who always looked to the landlord for guidance, who always asked “Lord Fiddledidee” to chair their meetings.<sup>10</sup> He advised them to rise instead, to destroy private property in land, and in so doing to “see how you put these dogs off your vacant ground, and how much easier and cheaper it is certainly, when you have not houses enough—and according to statistics a great proportion of the people in Scotland are [*sic*] living in houses of one or two rooms. What an absurd thing it is to tax those who put up houses, without taxing the dogs-in-the-manger who are compelling those who put up houses to pay heavy black-mail for them, and this is so all over the country.”<sup>11</sup>

He did not mean, of course, that the workers should overthrow their oppressors by force. In the back of his mind was the possibility of a redistribution of seats in Parliament and a widening of the franchise. His revolution was to take place at the polls, not at the barricades. He believed that the worker with a vote would cast it for the restoration of land to the people.

With obstinate tenacity he preached that the only obstacle barring the road to peace and plenty was the landlord. Asked why he did not leave the landlords alone and attack the capitalists, he was quoted as saying: “Well, bye and bye, when they got rid of the landlords, then, if it was necessary, they would go for the capitalists.”<sup>12</sup>

Landlordism spawned all other social ills, according to him. The first of these ills was the prevailing low wage. He scoffed at “evidence” set forth by apologists for the existing order to show that workmen were better off than in former years. “Wages,” he declared, “were as low as they could possibly be. Labourers were working for just enough to barely live, and the next step was out

of existence, and there were many who could not make a bare animal existence." <sup>13</sup>

He was not inclined to condone complacency on the part of laborers. Told by a member of the Artisans' Society of Dunfermline that twenty shillings a week was considered "pretty fair pay," he said, "it seemed to him disgraceful that in a civilized country, in this year of Christ, 1884, twenty shillings a week, with its present purchasing power, could be considered pretty fair pay. (Applause.)" <sup>14</sup> The landlords were to blame for low wages in industry; they had driven the men off the land, had forced them to compete for work in the cities. Workers should demand fair wages, not be content with mere subsistence.

After a life of work, the laborer came to the workhouse door. George therefore advocated economic security for the laborer in his old age—in addition to "a decent living" for him in his productive years. Here is how a provincial paper reported this philosophy: "He had visited their workhouse. It was a large, and seemingly to him, a splendidly-constructed institution. Everything was clean and neat; but in it there were hundreds of old men and hundreds of old women—people who had worked all their lives and could now work no longer. There were in it little children growing up in that atmosphere . . . Even with the rudest appliances, a man ought to be able to make for himself, during the natural working time of life, enough to maintain himself in comfort in his old age. That was not the case with a very large class of people." To say that such a state of things was "natural," as did so many defenders of the status quo, was blasphemous. "No good man, had he a world to create, would create it in such a way that any portion of the people would be compelled to live as large numbers of people in every civilized country were compelled to live." <sup>15</sup> The economic plight of the British worker resulted from the selfishness and greed of landlords and from the worker's ignorance of the facts of his own bondage.

Migration of unemployed agricultural workers to the cities increased competition for jobs, and production soared. As a result, warehouses were "glutted with goods, factories shut up because their produce cannot be sold." <sup>16</sup> Britain really possessed enough wealth to ensure prosperity for all. George said: "You have utilized forces that amount to more than the power of the whole human race, forces that can only be represented by millions and millions of horsepower. You have machinery of the utmost delicacy that will do what a while ago seemed incredible to do with

machinery—machinery that almost seems to think and does the work of human fingers, and yet you find in these factories women and children at work, and glad to be at work. Now enquire what is the reason of that fierce competition between men who want employment that they have to compete with one another so as to keep down wages to starvation point? What is the reason there are so many men anxious to get employment at any price? Here, today, in this rich country, there are thousands and thousands of men out of work who would deem it the very highest joy and privilege if they would get work even at lowest wages, for being out of work means for them starvation.”<sup>17</sup> The reason for job-hunger and low wages was, of course, private property in land. Strive for the abolition of private property in land, he advised, rather than for a less radical solution of the unemployment problem.<sup>18</sup> The Government would try to beguile the people by appointing Royal Commissions to investigate unemployment, but he “had little faith in Royal Commissions on this subject. It was like a committee of wolves asking the reason for the scarcity of mutton. (Laughter.) The function of these Royal Commissions seemed to be how not to see it.”<sup>19</sup> (He was referring to the Royal Commission appointed in March, 1883, to investigate the condition of Scottish crofters. According to the *Christian Socialist*, the Royal Commission’s finding showed “the timid and tentative way in which the commissioners have dealt with the questions.”)

Low wages and unemployment were the immediate specific evils. More shocking, however, were the poverty and the moral degradation which resulted from poverty, partly caused by low wages and unemployment, but also inherent in a social system traditionally designed for the ease and comfort of the few at the expense of the many. George’s most effective way of arousing the workman to a realization of the injustice of his condition was to tell how others lived.

As in *Progress and Poverty*, his speeches bristled with general statements showing his indignation at the existence of abject poverty in a civilized state. He told a Liverpool audience: “If he were standing that night on the threshold of another life, and were given the chance to come back into the world as a Tierra del Fuegian, or black fellow of Australia, or any of that class to be found in the London or Liverpool slums, he would choose the lot of the savage in preference to hunger, cold, and starvation. (Applause.)”<sup>20</sup> In the “great and rich city” of Glasgow he found “poverty and destitution that would appal a heathen. Right on these streets of yours

the very stranger can see sights that he could not see in any tribe of savages in anything like normal conditions." In the Midlands he asked: "What complaint could poor people make from whom went up that 'bitter cry of outcast London'? (Applause) What complaint could agricultural labourers make—men who must live the life of a slave and die the death of a pauper? (Applause, and a Voice: 'None.') Well might they ask with Herbert Spencer 'at what rate per annum does wrong become right?' (Applause.)" <sup>21</sup>

He then discussed the theme of class struggle, the contrast between the rich and the poor: "Who is it who comes from the prisons, and are [*sic*] brought up for the penitentiaries and for the brothels?" And he answered, "Not the children of the well-to-do, but the children of the poor." <sup>22</sup> He contrasted "the luxury, the very ostentation of wealth" with "bare-footed, ill-clad women . . . men and women with their bodies stunted and minds distorted . . . little children growing up in such conditions that only a miracle keeps them." <sup>23</sup>

When John Bright deplored George's attack on private property because confiscation of land would bring ruin to the great houses, George recoiled from such a sentimental attachment. "If any feeling was excited in his mind by these great houses, it was one of disgust and horror—when he saw thousands and thousands of families living in single rooms, when the great mass of agricultural labourers were [living] in what were little better than hovels, and some in dens that a decent man would not put his foot in." <sup>24</sup>

He was more scornful of the wealthy landlord than the most radical of individuals might be. His denunciation of wealth seemed to come from the moral superiority with which the citizens of the New World viewed the habits and attitudes of the landed aristocracy of the Old. He was constantly asking:

*When Adam delved and Eve span,  
Who was then the gentleman?*

He always had time to spare for a specific recital of the woes of the poor. He charged "sheer, cold-blooded barbarity" and invited "dukes, earls, and countesses" to try living in an almshouse for a while. <sup>25</sup> Some Scottish parishes allotted two shillings per person a month to feed their paupers. In others the pauper's ration for two weeks was fourteen pounds of meal. The dogs of rich landlords were, he declared, better fed than the human beings who attended them. He also said that when a workman died his widow and chil-

dren became paupers, though justice demanded that they receive a pension from a land-value tax.<sup>26</sup>

The Scottish crofters were so "bitterly poor . . . that sometimes it is only with extreme difficulty they can get enough to eat. A gentleman told me of a case that had recently occurred within his own knowledge, of a hard-working, industrious, God-fearing man who had come to him compelled to ask the loan of a little money because he had been feeding his family for two months on potatoes and now they were out. The man also said that day by day he had sent his little children to school, fearing they were so weak for want of sufficient nourishment that they would not be able to get home. (Shame!)"<sup>27</sup> Such details lent point to the charge that "all this progress and civilization has ground these people down; . . . they were better off hundreds of years ago when their fathers were half-naked savages."<sup>28</sup>

Finally, he pointed out that poverty was not merely lack of money, the poorhouse, and possible starvation; it was also the cause of the moral degradation of the poor, especially in large cities. Here he confronted many of the middle class who preached temperance and subscribed to the doctrine of self-help as a means of getting on in the world. He spurned these attitudes contemptuously: "I have seen women in the gin mill with little children in their arms. I have seen older children walking along with drunken mothers. I have seen men and women reeling back to their homes. Who are these people? Not of the comfortable classes. Not of the well-to-do classes. I never saw or heard of a rich duke or capitalist, or even a comfortable man, whose wife was carrying her child around to the gin mill. Where do you find the worst intemperance? You find it always the world over in the poorer quarters. . . . These people are compelled to live in poor and squalid surroundings, people who really don't get enough to eat, who are overworked and overstrained, and have temptations to drink that the well-fed, well-clothed, comfortably-housed man or woman has not."<sup>29</sup> Charity and almsgiving were not enough; this "horrible degradation sprang from insufficient nutriment and from over-toil," and could be cured only by abolishing private property in land.<sup>30</sup>

He castigated the "unholy alliance" between the church and the upper classes. Christianity was being used to perpetuate and justify the sufferings of millions of poor: "The people had not merely been kept in ignorance, but they had been taught by their masters and pastors that this was a natural state of things; and the very



name of the Deity—the name of religion itself—had been called on to compel men and induce men to submit quietly to this injustice. The name of God has been called in to show that it was His will that some should be rich and some should be poor—that the man who did nothing should have an income of £100,000 a year, and the man who was working for his living could not get enough to maintain him in his old age.”<sup>31</sup>

Established religion, according to him, was indeed the opiate of the people. In Glasgow, he quoted ironically the motto of the town, “Let Glasgow flourish by the Preaching of the Word”; describing the poverty, destitution, vice, and degradation, he declared flatly that “to call this a Christian community is a slander on Christianity.”<sup>32</sup> He was gratified that the discussion of theological questions had been discontinued on the Glasgow green, and that the land question and the labor question were taking theology’s place. “What was the use of them, worms of the dust, discussing the attributes of God when there was before them His work to do—(Hear, hear.)—when there was [*sic*] with them the poor and the starving and degraded? (Applause.)”<sup>33</sup> In Portree he attacked the Reverend McPhail, Minister of the Free Church of Kilmuir, for advising the people to obey the law and trust to Providence for reform. This attitude was “only fit for slaves, holding that there was a higher law—the moral—to be observed.”<sup>34</sup>

On another occasion he stated: “I am convinced that the attainment of pure government is merely a matter of conforming social institutions to moral law,” and his analysis of British social conditions was simply an attempt to reveal how little of this conformity to moral law there was in practice. The efforts to “smear” him by charging that he advocated theft and plunder reveal the desperation of those who felt how unanswerable his charges really were.

He set before his listeners a highly attractive alternative to their poverty: “If it were known that a man had come to town who could tell men how they might all get a good, comfortable separate house for themselves, how they might live well while working easily; how they might give their wives and children, not merely all the comforts, but the prime luxuries of life, he should be a pretty popular man, and they ought to listen to him at least with attention. That was what he [George] proposed to do.”<sup>35</sup> It was all very well for opponents to sneer and call his program Utopian. It was what the workman wanted to hear, and he soon showed that he was unwilling to accept any less attractive objective.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

1. "Mr. Henry George in Bolton," *Bolton Guardian*, January 29, 1884.
2. *Ibid.*
3. "Mr. Henry George in the Town Hall," *Greenock Telegraph*, December 17, 1884.
4. "Mr. Henry George in Inverness," *Inverness Daily Free Press*, and "Mr. Henry George on the Crofters' Wrongs," *Liverpool Daily Post*, January 20, 1885.
5. "Mr. Henry George in Glasgow," *North British Daily Mail*, December 22, 1884.
6. "The Nationalization of the Land," *Leeds Mercury*, March 3, 1884.
7. "Mr. Henry George in Montrose," *Montrose, Arbroath, and Brechin Review*, December 19, 1884.
8. "Mr. Henry George on the Crofters," *North British Daily Mail*, November 22, 1884.
9. "Mr. Henry George on the Crofters' Wrongs," *Liverpool Daily Post*, January 20, 1885.
10. "Mr. Henry George in Glasgow," *North British Daily Mail*, December 22, 1884.
11. "Mr. Henry George in the Town Hall," *Greenock Telegraph*, March 14, 1884.
12. "The Abolition of Landlordism," *Midland Echo*, January 24, 1884.
13. "Mr. Henry George in the Town Hall," *Greenock Telegraph*, December 17, 1884.
14. "Mr. Henry George in Dunfermline," *Dunfermline Saturday Press*, December 6, 1884.
15. "The Nationalization of the Land," *Leeds Mercury*, March 3, 1884.
16. "The Land For the People," *Forfar Herald*, December 12, 1884.
17. "Mr. Henry George in the Town Hall," *Greenock Telegraph*, March 14, 1884.
18. Peasant ownership was the most popular solution proposed for the land problem; Parnell for one endorsed it for Ireland; Davitt followed George's more drastic lead, short of "no compensation."
19. "Mr. Henry George in Dundee," *Dundee Advertiser*, December 5, 1884.
20. "Mr. Henry George in Liverpool," *Liverpool Post*, January 26, 1884.
21. "Mr. Henry George in Glasgow," *North British Daily Mail*, February 23, 1884.
22. "Mr. George in the Town Hall," *Greenock Telegraph*, March 14, 1884.
23. "Mr. Henry George in Glasgow," *North British Daily Mail*, February 23, 1884.
24. "Mr. Henry George in Birmingham," *Birmingham Post*, March 20, 1884.
25. "Mr. Henry George in Glasgow," *North British Daily Mail*, February 23, 1884.
26. "Mr. Henry George in Wick," *Wick Northern Ensign*, February 14, 1884.
27. "Mr. Henry George on the Crofters," *North British Daily Mail*, November 22, 1884.

28. "Mr. Henry George in Glasgow," *North British Daily Mail*, February 23, 1884.
29. "Mr. Henry George in the Town Hall," *Greenock Telegraph*, March 14, 1884.
30. "Mr. Henry George in Glasgow," *North British Daily Mail*, December 22, 1884.
31. "Mr. Henry George in Liverpool," *Liverpool Post*, January 26, 1884.
32. "Mr. Henry George in Glasgow," *North British Daily Mail*, February 23, 1884.
33. *Ibid.*, December 22, 1884.
34. "Mr. Henry George at Portree," *North British Daily Mail*, January 6, 1885.
35. "Mr. Henry George in Glasgow," *North British Daily Mail*, December 22, 1884.