

PROGRESS AND POVERTY

IN THE WINTER of 1877-78 when Henry George began *Progress and Poverty* the whole country seemed to be passing through a period of hard times. Railroad strikes resulted in riots and the calling of troops in several of the Eastern states. In California drought had injured the crops, the output of the mines was reduced, and at this low ebb in the state's resources the Central Pacific Railroad proposed a wage cut.

Hard times did not spare the family of the inspector of gas meters, whose income had dwindled. George began lecturing to eke out a living. A group of his friends had organized what they called the Land Reform League of California, the pioneer organization devoted to the propagation of his teachings, which stemmed from a meeting at the law office of James G. Maguire on Clay Street, above Montgomery. There, in late 1877, the group began meeting to discuss "Our Land and Land Policy."

Early the following year these meetings resulted in the formal launching of the Land Reform League. One of its first projects was the sponsorship of a George lecture, "Why Work Is Scarce, Wages Low and Labor Restless."¹ The author stopped work on his book to prepare it. Speaking on the night of March 26, 1877, in Metropolitan Temple before a small audience, George prophesied, "The standard that I have tried to raise tonight may be torn by prejudice and blackened by calumny; it may now move forward, and again be forced back. But once loosed, it can never again be furled!"²

The small crowd disappointed him. But while his lecture reached few ears and caused little stir in San Francisco, the results were somewhat better when he repeated it in other parts of California. It was an ambitious undertaking and, as he wrote John Swinton, it was "an attempt to put into popular form a great truth which marries political economy with com-

mon sense, and which once appreciated is the key to all the social problems of our time. . . . The seed that I have for years been sowing is springing up on every hand. I have made to principle, sacrifices that were very bitter, but in my own time, I can see what at first I never expected to see, the result of my work. Where I stood alone thousands now stand with me. The leaven is at work. And there can be but one result. But the struggle will be long and fierce. It is now only opening.”³

Less than three months after the Metropolitan Temple meeting George was asked by the Young Men’s Hebrew Association to address them at their first meeting. He wrote and delivered before this group a lecture which he called simply, “Moses.” In general, it redeveloped his economic theories. “Moses,” he said, “saw that the real cause of enslavement of the masses of Egypt was what has everywhere produced enslavement, the possession by a class of the land upon which and from which the whole people must live.⁴ He saw that to permit in the land the same unqualified private ownership that by natural right attaches to things produced by labor, would be inevitably to separate the people into the very rich and the very poor, inevitably to enslave labor—to make the few the masters of the many, no matter what the political forms: to bring vice and degradation, no matter what the religion.”

The audience was deeply moved. Some of George’s friends who heard the address considered it to be the finest he ever gave. One, Dr. Taylor, was thrilled but insisted that there be no more interruptions in the work on the book which George had begun.

But some further interruptions were inevitable. George put aside his pen to help organize the Free Public Library of San Francisco which later, with its branches, was to become the most complete library west of the Rockies.⁵ He was the first secretary of the original board of trustees and the early minutes are in his handwriting, inscribed with the same blue ink which he was using in the neatly written manuscript of the book.

The chief interruption came when George ran for delegate to the convention to be held for the general amendment of the state constitution. Knowing that if he were chosen delegate he might succeed in having written into the laws of California his plans for the taxation of land values, he issued an appeal “to the voters of California,” advising them that, since “justice is the only firm foundation of the state, I shall endeavor, as I

have power, to so amend the constitution that the weight of taxation may be shifted from those who . . . produce wealth to those who merely appropriate it, so that the monopoly of land and water may be destroyed . . . and an end be put to the shameful state of things which compels men to beg who are willing to work." ⁶

The Land Reform League worked vigorously in his behalf. The Democratic party and the new Workingmen's party both nominated him. With these groups pledged to him, election seemed assured. At the Workingmen's ratification meeting, however, he was asked to acknowledge the leadership of the political boss, Dennis Kearney, and to accept his platform. But George did not like several planks of the platform and he refused to have any man his master. His independence was stated so emphatically that the crowd began to hiss. Of course, the nomination was revoked. George was left with only Democratic support, and at the polls the Democratic ticket was beaten soundly. But he had the satisfaction of receiving more votes than any other candidate of the party.

The George family had now moved to First Street near Harrison, the exact spot where the Oakland Bridge now begins. Reduced circumstances forced them to live simply. Though there were debts and difficulties to be met and sacrifices to be made, these things did not touch the happiness which the Georges found in one another.

The author's work room, though cluttered with books and papers, was cozy and cheery.⁷ Three large windows looked out on the San Francisco hills and the blue bay and on boats of all kinds and on swirling sea gulls. A large table in the center served as Henry George's writing desk. Most of his reading or planning was done as he stretched out on the lounge, although often, when he was pondering some point, he would pace the floor or else stand by a window, humming a tune and beating the rhythm on the pane with his fingers.

The eldest child, Henry Jr., having finished grammar school, became secretary to his father. Mrs. George helped by checking the "fair" with the marked copy of the manuscript. His friends were in frequent consultation and gave him their encouragement.

At last, in March, 1879, nearly eighteen months after he had begun it, the book was finished. He had thought to call it "Must

Progress Bring Poverty," or "Wealth and Want." But these titles were cast aside in favor of the one entered in his diary. He felt that "Progress and Poverty" "covered too wide a scope for one volume"⁸ and that the part relating to the development of civilization was but a skeleton of what he wanted to present. "But at least an outline seemed to me essential, and I did not know, even if I lived, if I should ever find opportunity to write again."⁹

The work had not been easy. He had been striving for clarity and simplicity. For, as he once said, "What makes easy reading is hard writing." And on the night when he finished the final chapter, as he later recalled, he "felt that the talent entrusted to me had been accounted for—felt more fully satisfied, more deeply grateful than if all the kingdoms of the earth had been laid at my feet."¹⁰

This was no mere sentiment or a flush of satisfaction at a job finally done. Four years later, in a letter revealed only after his death, he wrote Father Thomas Dawson of Glencree, Ireland:

Because you are not only my friend, but a priest and a religious, I shall say something that I don't like to speak of—that I never before have told to anyone. Once, in daylight, and in a city street, there came to me a thought, a vision, a call—give it what name you please. But every nerve quivered. And then and there I made a vow. Through evil and through good, whatever I had done and whatever I have left undone, to that I have been true. It was that that impelled me to write *Progress and Poverty* and that sustained me when else I should have failed. And when I had finished the last page, in the dead of night, when I was entirely alone, 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. It has made me a better and purer man. It has been to me a religion of which I never like to speak, or make any outward manifestation, but yet that I try to follow. . . .

The prodigious task of writing the book was now behind him. Getting it published was quite another matter. He had written his friend John Swinton, "Any man who tries to do what I have for a good while tried to do—any man who is in advance of his time, and who is true to his convictions, this is all he can have—the good opinion of some few men. Wealth is not for

him, nor power—in his time, nor popular applause. I have long known that.”¹¹

Since D. Appleton & Co. had published the works of Herbert Spencer and “The International Scientific Series,” George submitted his manuscript to this firm as his first choice.

Meanwhile, meter inspection was bringing in less and less money. Time hung heavy after the manuscript was off his desk and shipped East. This combination of circumstances led him to start *The State*,¹² a four-page “weekly journal of politics and opinion,” with faithful William Hinton’s plant doing the printing. Occasionally contributions were made by some of George’s friends, but for the most part it was a one-man periodical.

The little paper was launched on April 6, 1879, shortly before news came from the East that Appleton had rejected his book. Other rejections followed. Then came an offer from Hinton to bring out the author’s edition. Accepting his friend’s generosity, George stopped *The State*, which however was paying for itself, after the eleventh issue. He needed time to revise *Progress and Poverty* and to write a new conclusion.

The manuscript had ended with the chapter “The Central Truth,” in which he incorporated the apotheosis to Liberty from the Fourth of July oration which he had delivered in the California Theater. He now added one more chapter, which he called “The Problem of Individual Life.”

The rejection from Appleton had brought a note: “We have read your MS. on political economy. It has the merit of being written with great clearness and force, but it is very aggressive. There is very little to encourage the publication of any such work at this time and we feel we must decline it.”¹³

Hinton’s offer to make the plates followed other rejections. Thomas George, the author’s brother, had taken over the task of finding a publisher. Leaving his home in Philadelphia he made the rounds in New York, acting on the advice of Professor William Swinton who had moved East from California. “I have just telegraphed you that ‘it seems impossible to get a publisher without plates,’” Thomas George wrote at one juncture. He had tried Harper’s and also Scribner’s, writing that “Harper considered it [the book] revolutionary and all that sort of thing.” The publishing field seemed exhausted, for in truth no work of economics up to that time had been a profitable publisher’s venture.

Making the plates involved an expenditure of one thousand

to fifteen hundred dollars. George wrote the new conclusion, then turned his own hand to setting type at Hinton's shop. The entry in his diary for May 17, 1879, reads: "Commenced to set type on book. Set first two sticks myself."¹⁴

Thus, standing on a board, as he always had to do to bring himself to the proper level of the case, George turned back to the trade which he had followed for years. His son, Henry, now sixteen, joined in with George's old printer friends to produce the plates. Dr. Taylor read proof and even joined those at the case who were donating their services in their spare time.

Long afterward, someone remarked, "All the bum printers in San Francisco claim the distinction of having set type on the author's edition of *Progress and Poverty!*"

"Well," replied James Barry,¹⁵ "then I must accept the soft impeachment and be numbered among the 'bum printers,' for I am very proud of the fact that I set type on the first edition." He recounted having overheard one of the journeymen, who as it happened was not donating his services, growl when his own proof was returned peppered with corrections by George's practiced hand, "The little red-headed son of a gun! Who does he think is going to read his old book but himself, anyway?"¹⁶

"Little" George was now growing bald, but he retained much of his red hair and a rich, red beard. By September the "author's proof edition" of five hundred copies was struck off. One of the first finished copies went to Richard S. H. George, now eighty-one, in Philadelphia with a note from his son: "It is with a deep feeling of gratitude to Our Father in Heaven that I send you a printed copy of this book. . . . It will not be recognized at first,—maybe not for some time—but it will ultimately be considered a great book, will be published in both hemispheres, and will be translated into different languages. This I know, though neither of us may ever see it here. But the belief that there is another life for us—makes that of little moment."¹⁷