

## GREAT BRITAIN IN '84

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HENRY GEORGE met the death of his parents with a serenity which expressed his faith in a life hereafter and in whatever might be in store for him. One day, while walking on Broadway with his son Richard, he stopped suddenly, threw back his head, and, gazing upward, exclaimed, "Yes, I could die now!"

"Why do you say that?" the boy asked in some surprise.

The father, who had been musing aloud, was jerked back to reality. "I was thinking," he explained, "that I could die now and the work would go on. It no longer depends upon one man. It is no longer a 'Henry George movement'—a one-man movement. It is the work of many men in many lands. I can help it while I live; but my death could not stop it."<sup>1</sup>

However, his followers did not share this opinion. Those in England who were members of the Land Reform Union importuned him to return for a speaking campaign and guaranteed his expenses.

Taking his elder son, Henry, as secretary, he left in December, 1883, just before Christmas.

The two Americans were met at Liverpool by Michael Davitt and Richard McGhee, M.P. George found that discussion of his "theory" was widespread. The sale of the Kegan Paul, Trench and Company editions of *Progress and Poverty*, together with 40,000 copies of the sixpenny editions, had taken the book into all quarters. It had been discussed and "answered" by a number of English economists, including the Right Honorable Henry Fawcett, Postmaster General and professor of political economy at Cambridge, and the brilliant young Oxford lecturer on economic history, Arnold Toynbee, who had died only a few months before at the age of thirty-one.

Arriving in London on January 6, 1884, George was greeted

by a large delegation from labor organizations. He delivered an address from the roof of a "four-wheeler," thanking them for their welcome and explaining his purpose in coming to England.

Although the campaign was being financed by members of the Land Reform Union, including Helen Taylor, William Saunders, Richard McGhee, J. L. Joyce, H. H. Champion, and R. P. B. Frost, the last two mentioned, the one treasurer and the other secretary of the Union, strangely enough leaned toward the doctrines of Karl Marx.<sup>2</sup> George promptly had to make clear to these and a few other Socialists, who threatened to obstruct his campaign if he did not adopt their program, that he not only opposed the nationalization of capital, including machinery, but that he stood firmly for the principles enunciated in his own books.<sup>3</sup>

Let us make these principles clear.

George's philosophy was one of freedom as against regimentation; individual liberty as against collectivist restriction. He believed with Jefferson that the best governed people were those the least bound by governmental restrictions. When the state stepped in to regulate capital or labor, it thereby interfered with the rights of the individual. Instead of regulation of wages, George wanted the release of natural opportunity ("land") which determines wages. For since all wealth, and therefore all capital, comes from the application of labor to land, he argued that land would afford for labor a just return if freed from private speculation and monopoly.

Finally, Henry George put it in these words: "An equitable principle already exists in natural laws, which if left unobstructed, will, with a certainty that no human adjustment could rival, give to each who takes part in the work of production that which is justly his due."

The Marxists Champion and Frost, realizing that their American guest could not be swayed, quietly acquiesced in his plans for the speaking campaign.

Karl Marx himself conceded that George was a "writer of talent" but believed him to have "however the repugnant arrogance and presumption which inevitably mark all such panacea breeds." According to Henry M. Hyndman, who was an unshakable Marxist, Marx looked through *Progress and Poverty* and "spoke of it with a sort of friendly contempt; 'the capitalist's last ditch' he said." The contempt was evidently reciprocated,

for George wrote Hyndman that he considered Marx unscientific and "a most superficial thinker, entangled in an inexact and vicious terminology." Years later he summed up his feelings in a letter to Thomas F. Walker, "As for Karl Marx, he is the prince of muddleheads."

George had to clarify his principles for another group besides the Socialists.<sup>4</sup> He had to reaffirm that he did not believe in compensating landlords in the application of the taxation of land values. If the land belonged "in usufruct" to the people, there was no justice in making the people buy back what was by right their own. "Because I was robbed yesterday and the day before, and the day before that, is it any reason that I should suffer myself to be robbed today and tomorrow, any reason that I should conclude that the robber has acquired a vested right to rob me?"<sup>5</sup> he had asked in *Progress and Poverty*. He did not believe in buying out the land profiteer, but rather in taxing him out.

These things settled, Henry George's second English tour began. He spoke first at a meeting in St. James's Hall, London.<sup>6</sup>

Ordinarily he did not prepare for a speech except to meditate on its subject beforehand in his favorite posture—stretched out on a sofa and smoking. But this event was of such overriding importance that he spent most of two days and two nights dictating to his son and another stenographer alternately, continuing until time to dress and hasten to the lecture hall.

Even though the London correspondent of the *New York Tribune* reported that "people of the better sort find a difficulty in taking Mr. George seriously,"<sup>7</sup> every one of the four thousand seats in the great hall was occupied and scores of his listeners stood in the back aisles and along the walls. John Ruskin was to have presided, but he was detained by ill health and his place was taken by Henry Labouchere, M.P., editor of *Truth* (London). To quote briefly from the long account of January 10, 1884, in the *London Daily News*:

The Chairman, in introducing the lecturer, said that like Byron, Mr. George had written a book, and had awaked to find himself famous. In all parts of Great Britain Mr. George's name was a household word. . . . In *Progress and Poverty* Mr. George did two things, he pointed out lucidly and eloquently the evils of our system of land tenure and he suggested a remedy for them. With the denunciations of the present system he thought they must all agree.

It was a matter of wonder that a nation pretending to some degree of intelligence should have assented so long to allow the landlords of this country to legislate in their own exclusive interests.

Only the synopsis of the written speech was delivered, for George had put aside the manuscript which had been prepared so laboriously. Despite his fears that he would talk too long, the talk—and it *was* long—seemed a magnificent success. The *Daily News* reported that he closed with the question, “How could they defend the right of a few in England to own the land on which they all must live?” And he exhorted his audience, “Let English people make England truly the free home of free men—men equal in their rights, men who knew their duties and would perform them; and in doing what they could for that end they would be doing it, not for their country alone, but for the whole civilized world.”

An ovation followed. It produced such an effect that all the English, Scottish, and Irish papers commented upon it. Some of the Tory papers, however, took offense at the part of the speech where George said that if the unearned increment were collected for public needs, among those benefited would be orphans and also there would be enough to “give every widow, from the lady who sat upon the throne to the poorest laborer’s widow, a pension.” Long afterward George explained, “At my remark ‘that every widow from the Queen down ought to have a pension, not as a matter of charity, but as a matter of justice’ I meant no disrespect to Her Majesty, but it was misinterpreted by part of the audience.”<sup>8</sup>

After this great meeting in London, addresses followed in many towns of the United Kingdom, north as far as Wick and Keiss and in the west. George wrote to Taylor that “I have been riding all day and far into the night over hills of Skye and speaking on hillsides to gathered crofters. . . . I have been working hard this trip, speaking every night but have stood it well though I am very tired. I have been sowing good seed and it would not be long in germinating.”<sup>9</sup>

He spoke twice in Glasgow, both times in the City Hall. On the first occasion he made his “Scotland and Scotsman” speech which became famous.<sup>10</sup> In it he pictured the hideous poverty of the crofters and the colliers as well as the laboring class in the cities. He did not mince words:

You people in Glasgow not merely erect church after church, you have the cheek to subscribe money to send missionaries to the heathen. I wish the heathen were a little richer, that they might subscribe money and send missionaries to such so-called Christian communities as this—to point to the luxury, the very ostentation of wealth, on the one hand, and to the barefooted, ill-clad women on the other; to your men and women with bodies stunted and minds distorted; to your little children growing up in such conditions that only a miracle can keep them pure! . . . In this great, rich city of yours there are today numbers of men who cannot get employment. Such a state of things is but typical of that which exists everywhere throughout the world. There is just the same state of things in America. It is due merely to the selfishness and ignorance of men. And when you come to ask the reason of this state of things, if you seek it out, you will come at last, I believe, to the great fact, that the land on which and from which it was ordained that all mankind must live has been made the private property of a few of their number. This is the only adequate explanation. Man is a land animal. All his substance must be drawn from the land. . . . And as land is absolutely necessary to the life of man, the man who commands the land on which and from which other men live, commands those men. . . . Proclaim the grand truth that every human being born in Scotland has an inalienable and equal right to the soil of Scotland. . . . It is not necessary to divide the land. You can easily take the revenue that comes from the land for public purposes. There is nothing very radical in this; it is a highly conservative proposition.<sup>11</sup>

When George had finished speaking some five hundred persons remained to organize what Richard McGhee<sup>12</sup> named the "Scottish Land Restoration League." At a second and overflow meeting held a week later in City Hall nearly two thousand names were enrolled. Similar societies sprang up in Dundee, Aberdeen, Inverness, Edinburgh, Greenock, and other communities. Still, there were those who thought George a crank. Frederic Harrison, the Positivist, delivered lectures against him in Edinburgh and New Castle. And John Bright, in Birmingham, inveighed against the "wildest" reform "imported lately by an American inventor."<sup>13</sup>

George had set out on his speaking tour braced for opposition from special privilege, vested interests and from entrenched intolerance, but the most difficult experience he had to face came when he spoke at the University of Oxford. True, he did

not share Michael Davitt's experience of being locked in a hotel room by students so that he could not get out to speak; but nevertheless the American's experience was an unhappy one. And all this despite the fact that, during his two days' stay at the ancient center of learning, he was the guest of that rare gentleman and distinguished Oriental scholar, F. Max Müller.

From 7 Norham Gardens, George wrote to his wife, "Here we are at Max Müller's: a beautiful place, splendid man, nice family, everything charming only I am suffering from my old enemy, sleeplessness. I hardly got any sleep last night; have been like a drowned rat all today and now tonight it is as bad as ever until in desperation I have got up and started to write. . . . I am to lecture before a magnificent audience of University people tomorrow night. The only thing I fear is my condition."<sup>14</sup>

Thus he may have been ill-prepared for what happened.

The lecture, delivered in Clarendon assembly room, was attended by men and women prominent in the University. But in the audience, which consisted chiefly of undergraduates, sat a group of ill-mannered young Conservatives who kept up a disturbance throughout the proceedings. While George was always prepared for heckling, this activity made a smooth discourse almost impossible. So he cut short his address and invited questions.

Instead of questions, he got harangues, statements of private, biased opinions, and a chain of argument which lacked even the dignity of debate.

Alfred Marshall, lecturer on political economy at Balliol, announced that he had "read Mr. George's book from one end to the other; there was nothing in it both new and true; what is true is not new, and what is new is not true." To which the American replied quietly, "I accept your statement. It is a correct criticism; social truth never is, never can be new; and the truth for which we stand is an old truth; a truth seen by men everywhere, recognized by the first perception of all men; only overclouded, only obscured in our modern times by force and fraud."<sup>15</sup>

The speaker won over a large part of the audience but disorder flared up again when one of the prime disturbers denounced Henry George's proposal as a "nostrum" that was "scandalously immoral," and delivered his condemnation in a tone that, although it produced cries of disapproval as well as those of assent, cut George to the quick. He retorted that he

would have to withdraw the compliment he had paid the University earlier in the evening when he spoke of its learning and good manners. The uproar was only stilled when the chief attacker arose and said that he had meant only to criticize Mr. George's ideas, not his character.

It was not until the disagreeable performance was over that the American realized that his tormentor was the son-in-law of Max Müller. George apologized to his host for having permitted the young man to arouse him. Müller was much moved and apologized to his guest for having been subjected to a public insult by a member of his family. For it also developed that the young man had not even read *Progress and Poverty* and therefore did not know what he was talking about.

The incident, ugly as it was (George later told his wife that it reminded him of the hoodlums of San Francisco), resulted, however, in tightening the bonds of friendship between the Oxford professor and the American economist.

The lecture which George delivered later to a large audience at Cambridge went off with dignity and order. A sidelight on this experience comes from the diaries of Mary Gladstone, daughter of the then Prime Minister. She had read *Progress and Poverty*, "supposed to be the most upsetting and revolutionary book of the age."<sup>16</sup> She had "finished *Progress and Poverty* with feelings of deep admiration—felt desperately impressed, and he is a Christian."<sup>17</sup> At the time of the Cambridge lecture she met George at the home of Professor James Stuart and wrote of his "earnestness, conviction and singleness and height of aim."<sup>18</sup> Her diary criticism of his lecture says, "Certainly he had a good deal of the genius of oratory about him, and sometimes the divine spark—he is also the man possessed, and he often carried one away. Questions were asked him of all kinds at the end. He did not flinch, and had a wonderful way of leaping to his feet and answering with great spirit and manliness."<sup>19</sup>

After the Cambridge lecture she wrote to her cousin Lavina, wife of Bishop Talbot, "Alfred Lyttleton and Prof. Stuart went with me. They both were struck. We mean to tackle him [George] once more."<sup>20</sup>

And "tackle" him they did, some days later, in London, at the home of Lady Stepney. "There," continues Miss Gladstone, "we had over tea and muffins a conference with Mr. George—Herbert [Herbert Gladstone, M.P., later created Viscount on being

appointed governor-general of the Union of South Africa] and Prof. Stuart chief questioners and examiners, Alfred Lyttleton listening and putting in much sympathizing with Mr. George. A great success, for they liked and softened toward the good little man, and as for Maggie [Lady Stepney] she was converted." <sup>21</sup>

The good little man realized that he had made a good little impression for he wrote to his wife, "They are at least three quarters with me." <sup>22</sup>

George made four more speeches in London, and then his three and a half months' of continuous lecturing in Great Britain was brought to a close at a farewell banquet given by the Land Restoration League. Crossing over to Ireland, he spoke to a large audience in Dublin before he sailed, on April 13, for New York.

The visit had been strenuous but George drew from it so much encouragement and inspiration that he counted the work light. During his journeyings there had been the usual lapses into absent-mindedness and the frequent forgetfulness about his belongings. On one railroad train he mixed his luggage with that of another passenger and found to his dismay, and too late, that he was carrying a bag which resembled his own but which contained a much worn pair of woman's shoes instead of his precious manuscripts. Wiring back along the line for information, he received a complaint against the man who had "stolen a valuable pair of lady's shoes and stuffed in their place a bunch of waste paper!" <sup>23</sup>

Always and everywhere he asked questions. Frequently they seemed to the questioner to be abrupt, but that was because he made straight for the point without wasting time on preliminaries. Not a diplomat in the narrow sense of the word, he could win through the wall of reserve to a man's heart by his understanding and sympathy. He often joked with a serious face, only the corners of his eyes laughing. He rarely indulged his power for sarcasm. His manner was genial; he was kindly, especially to the little people, the lowly, the defenseless. Certainly he measured up to Robert E. Lee's definition of a gentleman as "one who never willingly reminds another of inferiority." A great respecter of persons, he had no feeling for caste or worldly position. ("Don't you ever let me hear you use the expression 'our class' again," he said years later to his youngest child. "There are no 'classes.'") It was typical of him, also,



that to try to get the other man's point of view he would eliminate himself in conversation.

He delighted, while in England, in hearing unbiased criticisms of Henry George when sometimes talk with strangers would turn upon the "American inventor." Often their reactions were amusing, for occasionally he found himself described as "a Yankee with a Yankee's money-making scheme," a "pestilential agitator," or such.<sup>24</sup> By keeping his identity unknown he was sometimes able to argue so skillfully against his own ideas, using the *reductio ad absurdum*, that he had the erstwhile antagonists finally defending the stand they had at first condemned. He was attacked constantly by the unsympathetic press and sometimes by anonymous letter. "An Indignant Briton" asked angrily why he "did not before coming over here, endeavor to convert his own nation to his most immoral and dishonest doctrines?"<sup>25</sup>

During his second English trip, old friendships were cemented and new ones formed. Wilfred Maynell, editor of a Catholic paper, *The Weekly Register*, tells the story:

It was my great privilege to introduce Henry George to Cardinal Manning. I have a vision of the two profiles facing each other in the dim light of the growing dusk, and I recall the emotion of tone in which each man made frankly to the other a sort of profession of faith. They had travelled to the same goal from opposite directions. "I loved the people," said Henry George, "and that love brought me to Christ as their best friend and teacher." "And I," said the Cardinal, "loved Christ, and so learned to love the people for whom he died."<sup>26</sup>