

CHAPTER 6

The Life of Henry George After Progress and Poverty

George had 18 years of life left after *Progress and Poverty* was completed. They were years of struggle and self-sacrifice, of intense activity, of world fame, of a crusade he never lost faith in.

George's Speaking Tours Abroad

In October, 1881, George sailed to the United Kingdom with his wife and two daughters. He had been engaged for a three months' speaking tour by the newspaper *Irish World*, which was published in New York City. He remained there for a year, returning to New York in October 1882 "pretty near famous."

At this time 500 Irish men and women were incarcerated as political prisoners, including Charles Parnell and two other members of Parliament. George noted that Ireland was a country of only 32,000 square miles (which is smaller than Indiana and only slightly larger than Maine), and with a population of little more than five million. Yet in time of peace it required 15,000 military constables and 40,000 picked troops to govern the country. George denounced British rule in Ireland and the oppressive system of land tenure that robbed the people. Miss Helen Taylor, stepdaughter of John Stuart Mill, became a close friend of the Georges; she too was very much involved in the Irish struggles for land and freedom.

In western Ireland George was arrested as a "suspicious stranger" along with his companion, a master of Eton College. Their luggage was searched and their papers read; after three hours they were released. In a nearby town in the same police district, George noticed that there was

but one hand pump to supply water to the entire village, and no doctor, but there were twenty-six police constables and fifty-six soldiers. The next day George was again arrested, but his companion was not. He was taken before the same magistrate who had released him the day before. That official justified the arrest and then discharged George again.

George and his wife became involved with Michael Davitt, the great Irish rebel leader, during their visit to Ireland and England. Davitt was the son of a peasant farmer who had been evicted in 1852 for nonpayment of rent. Michael was at work in a cotton mill at ten years of age, and at eleven he lost his right arm in an industrial accident. He was then sent to school, and at fifteen he became a newsboy and printer's "devil." In 1870, as a young man of twenty-four, he was arrested for sending firearms into Ireland and sentenced to fifteen years of penal servitude. He was released after serving seven years. Linking the campaign for Irish independence with the nationalization of land, Davitt helped found the Land League in 1879. He was rearrested, released in 1882, and again imprisoned for three months in 1883. He had been elected to Parliament in 1882 but was disqualified because he had been a convict. In 1892 he was elected again but was unseated by petition. After being elected a third time, he had to vacate his seat because of his bankruptcy due to the expenses of previous litigation. In 1895 he was elected to Parliament for the fourth time, and served until he resigned his seat in protest over the Boer War. He died in 1906 in Dublin at 60 years of age, an embittered nationalist, anti-English, anti-clerical, and skeptical of the value of purely parliamentary agitation for Home Rule.

George met Davitt in New York City in the fall of 1880 when the latter had arrived on Land League business. Davitt pledged that his organization would push *Progress and Poverty* in Great Britain.

When the English government suppressed the Land League, the Ladies' Land League was organized to carry on the agitation. While Henry George was in London and his wife and daughters were in Dublin, the secret leaked out from government circles that the Ladies' Land League was about to be proscribed and its leaders arrested. Two of the leaders fled immediately to London after one of them sent her official records of the organization to Annie George for safekeeping. The remaining women invited Mrs. George to preside that day over the

regular business meeting of the Ladies' Land League. She had never before presided over a meeting, and her nervousness was heightened by the presence of men who turned out to be government detectives and correspondents for various publications. But the appearance of an American woman in the chair disconcerted the government officials, and they did not proscribe the League.

When Michael Davitt was released from prison, George hurried from Dublin to London to see him; their meeting lasted late into the night. That same evening of May 6, 1882, the new Chief Secretary and Under Secretary arrived in Dublin and were stabbed to death in Phoenix Park. George was awakened early in the morning with a telegram from a friend in Dublin telling him of the assassinations. George hurried to Davitt's hotel to wake him and tell him the grim news. "My God!" Davitt exclaimed, "have I got out of Portland [prison] for this!" And then he added mournfully, "For the first time in my life I despair. It seems like the curse that has always followed Ireland."

There were fears that the English would rise in violent retaliation against the Irish residents in their midst. Some advised that the Irish leaders should seek safety in France. This was the sentiment at a dinner party Henry and Annie George attended that Sunday night. When he raised the question as to what Davitt should do, she was alone in saying that he "should go to Ireland by the first train, and be a leader to the people in this hour of dismay!" The dinner guests were amazed at this daring thought, and one said that if Davitt went there when fury and bitterness were so tense, he might be killed by a government supporter. Annie George replied, "How could Michael Davitt die better than with his people?" Her husband said little except that she had expressed his own feeling. But he repeated those words to her fifteen years later when his own life-or-death decision had to be made.

Late in 1883 George sailed to the British Isles for a second speaking tour. The highlight of this trip was a section of a speech in London that caused a storm of controversy to erupt around him. He spoke to an overflow audience in St. James's Hall. Every seat was taken and every foot of available standing room was filled. Even the platform was crowded with listeners. George spoke of the poor of London who needed justice rather than charity. Justice required that the land should be returned to the people without cost. But if doing this would work a

hardship on some, like the helpless widows, provision could be made for them. The case of the widow was constantly being brought forward. Statistics showed some 200,000 widows in England of all kinds and ages. Every widow, cried George, from the lady who sat on the throne down to the poorest laborer's widow, could receive, not as a matter of charity but as a matter of justice, a pension of £100 a year. Laughter, cheers and some hissing followed this. The Tory papers the next day denounced George for disrespect to the Queen. George wrote to his wife, "I can't begin to send you the papers in which I am discussed, attacked and commented on, for I would have to send all the English, Scottish and Irish press. I am getting advertised to my heart's content, and I shall have crowds wherever I go."

During George's third trip to the United Kingdom in 1884-85, Helen Taylor wrote to Annie George: "Mr. George's name is in our papers every day for praise or blame, and he has more warm friends here than bitter enemies." British friends urged him to stand for Parliament, assuring him that he could be elected in any one of a number of constituencies. He replied that the accident of birth in the United States would place him at a disadvantage in an election campaign in England. He did not deem such a step prudent "unless there was such a considerable call as made it seem clearly my duty." There the matter was dropped.

In addition to speaking tours in the United Kingdom and Canada, George was invited to go to Australia. This he did with his wife in 1890, and it was his last trip abroad. This was to be their honeymoon, he said. He had sailed to Melbourne at fifteen as a member of the crew. Annie George was born in Sidney, Australia. On their arrival there in 1890, she was presented with a red and gold shoulder ribbon with "Welcome, Australia's Daughter" marked on it in large letters. George complimented his hosts on some states in his own country adopting the Australian or secret ballot. Before that each party published lists of its candidates that supporters asked for and deposited in the ballot boxes. George asked for more return traffic from Australia to the United States in the ideas of democracy. In the three months that George spent on this lecture tour, he spoke almost every day, and sometimes twice a day.

Altogether, between 1881 and 1890, George visited and lectured in

the United Kingdom six times, the last time being on his return trip from Australia.

George's Fight Against Poverty—His Own and the World's

In 1880, a year after *Progress and Poverty* was published, George moved to New York City. He arrived there almost penniless and with debts in California still unpaid; he lived in New York for the rest of his life. George probably was the only author whose books sold by the million in his own lifetime without yielding him so much as a decent living. In December, 1880, he wrote to a friend that "I am afloat at 42, poorer than at 21. I do not complain; but there is some bitterness in it."

In the night of October 12, 1883, George wrote a note to his wife, and left it for her to find the next morning:

It is twenty-three years ago to-night since we first met—I only a month or two older than Harry, and you not much older than our Jen! For twenty-three years we have been closer to each other than to any one else in the world, and I think we esteem each other more and love each other better than when we first began to love. You are now "fat, fair and forty," and to me the mature woman is handsomer and more lovable than the slip of a girl whom twenty-three years ago I met without knowing that my life was to be bound up with hers. We are not rich—so poor just now, in fact, that all I can give you on this anniversary is a little love letter; but there is no one we can afford to envy, and in each other's love we have what no wealth could compensate for. And so let us go on, true and loving, trusting in Him to carry us further who has brought us so far with so little to regret. For twenty-three years you have been mine and I have been yours, and though twenty-three years your husband, I am more than ever your lover.¹

Shortly before this date he wrote to a friend, "I have now just \$25 in the world, about half a week's living with economy; no, not that. However, this is no new experience to me."

Tom L. Johnson and others gave George financial support in his later years, so that he didn't have to lecture and write magazine articles to

1. Henry George, Jr., *The Life of Henry George* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1960), pp. 412-413. [Originally published in 1900.]

earn a living. Johnson also contributed \$80,000 during 1895-96 to the *Recorder* of Cleveland, a paper that supported the single tax idea. In the last year of his life George and his family occupied the only home they ever owned, in Fort Hamilton, New York. Johnson gave them the land, and a legacy from England enabled them to pay for the house.

George was always sensitive to the poverty around him. In the speech George delivered in Glasgow on February 18, 1884 (quoted in Chapter 4), he reiterated his concern about poverty, as he always did:

[I]t is from Glasgow men some of my blood, at least, is drawn. I am not proud of it. If I were a Glasgow man to-day I would not be proud of it. Here you have a great and rich city, and here you have 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. "Let Glasgow Flourish by the Preaching of the Word"—that is the motto of this great, proud city. What sort of a Word is it that here has been preached? Or, let your preaching have been what it may, what is your practice? Are these the fruits of the Word—this poverty, this destitution, this vice and degradation? To call this a Christian community is a slander on Christianity. Low wages, want, vice, degradation—these are not the fruits of Christianity. They come from the ignoring and denial of the vital principles of Christianity. Yet 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 bare-footed, 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!

George described certain parts of Ireland he had seen where the land was good but the human population was sparse. Sheep and cattle had displaced people, and traces of ruined hamlets could be found, for raising livestock was more profitable than tilling the soil. The owners of the land, many of whom lived in London and Paris, drove their tenants away. In the areas of bog and rock, however, in the mountains and at the seashore, the dense population struggled to make a living tilling the soil that was too poor for grazing.

George's description of Ireland can be applied to most of Latin

America today, where the ownership of land is distributed very unequally. The steep hillsides are suitable for grazing; the flat, fertile valley lands are best for tillage. The big landowners, having gained possession of the best valley lands, have found cattle-ranching more profitable than tillage. Consequently the poor peasants have been pushed to the hillsides, where they scratch out a living on steep slopes that are overcrowded and eroding badly. World Bank experts, in a number of studies on Latin American countries, pointed out that the system of land use is wrong; cattle should be on the hillsides for limited grazing, and the tillers of the soil should be on the flat valley lands. What they did not point out was that it was not ignorance that perpetuated destructive land use, but the self-interest of the big land grabbers.² The problems Henry George dealt with are largely unsolved in most of the poor countries.

In addition to writing and lecturing, George's concern about poverty and his remedy for it led him to undertake two spectacular campaigns for mayor of New York City.

George's Two Campaigns for Mayor of New York City

The unions of New York City entered politics in the fall of 1886, and they invited George to be their candidate for mayor. He was eager to promote his views in a political campaign, but he was afraid of a crushing defeat that would do more harm than good. He therefore laid down a condition before accepting the nomination: at least 30,000 voters should sign a pledge to support and vote for him. The unions met this requirement, gathering over 34,000 signatures, for the workers' response to George was enthusiastic. The Democratic politicians were shaken as signatures rolled in from what had been their strongholds.

An incident occurred early in this campaign which was not revealed by George until a few days before his death eleven years later. The Democratic Party sent an emissary to meet privately and secretly with George in a Manhattan restaurant. George was told that he couldn't possibly be elected mayor no matter how many people voted for him. But if he refused the nomination for mayor, Tammany Hall and the

2. See Jacob Oser, *Promoting Economic Development, with Illustrations from Kenya* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), pp. 103-105.

County Democrats would nominate him for a seat in the House of Representatives in Washington. A safe district would be selected, and he would be guaranteed election. There would be no campaign, no expense to George, and he could leave for Europe or anywhere else he wanted to go; when he returned he would receive a certificate of election. George finally asked:

"You tell me I cannot possibly get the office. Why, if I cannot possibly get the office, do you want me to withdraw?" His reply was: "You cannot be elected, but your running will raise hell!" I said: "You have relieved me of embarrassment. I do not want the responsibility and the work of the office of the Mayor of New York, but I do want to raise hell! I am decided and will run."³

Delegates from nearly every union in the city, representing 40,900 workmen, met on September 23, 1886, and nominated Henry George. The *New York Times* reported that "the delegates rose in a body and cheered. Hats, handkerchiefs, and canes were flung in the air, men stamped on the floor until the building shook, and for a time the noise was deafening."

The nominating convention adopted a platform written by George; parts of it read as follows:

IV. We declare the crowding of so many of our people into narrow tenements at enormous rents while half the area of the city is yet unbuilt upon to be a scandalous evil, and that to remedy this state of things all taxes on buildings and improvements should be abolished, so that no fine shall be put upon the employment of labor in increasing living accommodations, and that taxes should be levied on land irrespective of improvements, so that those who are now holding land vacant shall be compelled either to build on it themselves or to give up the land to those who will.

V. We declare furthermore that the enormous value which the presence of a million and a half of people gives to the land of this city belongs properly to the whole community; that it should not go to the enrichment of individuals and corporations, but should be taken in taxation and applied to the improvement and beautifying of the city, to the promotion of the health, comfort, education, and recreation of its people, and to the providing of means of transit commensurate with the needs of a great metropolis. We also declare that the existing means of

3. Henry George, Jr., *The Life of Henry George*, p. 463.

transit should not be left in the hands of corporations, which, while gaining enormous profits from the growth of population, oppress their employees and provoke strikes that interrupt travel and imperil the public peace, but should by lawful process be assumed by the city and operated for public benefit.⁴

The campaign was financed by collections at George's meetings and by some of his close friends, principally Tom L. Johnson. All the daily newspapers of New York City opposed George except a small German-language socialist paper. A new daily paper, *The Leader*, was created during the campaign to support George. Its circulation jumped to 35,000 almost immediately. To make the paper self-supporting, all the work of editors and reporters was contributed without pay. Though the other newspapers all opposed George, their sub-editors and reporters almost unanimously supported him. Many of them worked two shifts each day, one on their regular jobs, and one as unpaid volunteers on *The Leader*.

George campaigned tirelessly, sometimes speaking as frequently as twelve or fourteen times a day. But the difficulties of his third-party movement were insuperable, for the law worked for the benefit of the party machines. There were no representatives of George in the polling places to count the votes. Under the election law each party had to print its own ballots and distribute them to voters to deposit in the ballot boxes; some of the election districts were actually without distributors and ballots.

The Democratic candidate, Abram S. Hewitt, once admired *Progress and Poverty* and when he was in Congress employed George to work on a Congressional report on labor; he won the election with 90,552 votes. George came in second with 68,110. The Republican candidate, Theodore Roosevelt, was third with 60,435 votes. It was widely believed that George had really won the election but was "counted out" at the end.

In 1897 George was again asked to run for mayor. New York had just been enlarged by the absorption of Brooklyn and other adjoining municipalities, and it was now the second city in the world in population. His physician had warned him against the ordeal that such a campaign would entail, especially because he had suffered a stroke

⁴ *The New York Times*, September 24, 1886, p. 2.

seven years earlier. One afternoon George asked another doctor, a neighbor and good friend of his, what the worst might be if he undertook another strenuous campaign. The doctor replied that it would most probably prove fatal. "But I have got to die," said George. "How can I die better than serving humanity? Besides, so dying will do more for the cause than anything I am likely to be able to do in the rest of my life."

Some close friends came to Mrs. George to emphasize the danger and advise her to influence her husband against campaigning. She answered:

When I was a much younger woman I made up my mind to do all in my power to help my husband in his work, and now after many years I may say that I have never once crossed him in what he has seen clearly to be his duty. Should he decide to enter this campaign I shall do nothing to prevent him; but shall, on the contrary, do all I can to strengthen and encourage him. He must live his life in his own way and at whatever sacrifice his sense of duty requires; and I shall give him all I can—devotion.⁵

George called a meeting of his more intimate friends, and thirty people came to advise him on whether to enter the campaign. He listened to all the suggestions, but he cut short every reference to his health and strength. The only question, he said, was one of duty. As a result of this conference, he decided to make the fight.

When he reached home, Mr. George told his wife of the conference with the friends and then said:

"Annie: Remember what you declared Michael Davitt should do at the time of the Phoenix Park murders in 1882—go to Dublin and be with his people, even though it should cost him his life. I told you then that I might some day ask you to remember those words. I ask you now. Will you fail to tell me to go into this campaign? The people want me; they say they have no one else upon whom they can unite. It is more than a question of good government. If I enter the field it will be a question of natural rights, even though as mayor I might not directly be able to do a great deal for natural rights. New York will become the theatre of the world and my success will plunge our cause into world politics."

Mrs. George answered: "You should do your duty at whatever cost." And so it was decided that he should run.⁶

5. Henry George, Jr., *The Life of Henry George*, p. 595.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 597.

On October 5, 1897, Henry George was nominated for Mayor of Greater New York by the representatives of four Democratic factions united as The Democracy of Thomas Jefferson. An overflow meeting was held at Cooper Union, with every seat occupied and men and women filling the aisles and standing twenty deep around the walls. Outside the hall 8,000 people who could not get in met in support of George. The *New York Times* commented on the frenzied response from the crowd when George appeared at the meeting, and it described the scene when he completed his acceptance speech:

Mr. George does not appear in robust health. He seemed exhausted when he had finished speaking. Mrs. George ran to him and wiped his brow with her handkerchief and ex-Congressman Johnson helped him on with his overcoat, and with his arm around him forced a passage for him from the platform, where a crowd thronged around demanding to shake hands with him.⁷

Tom L. Johnson was George's campaign manager. The platform announced at the Cooper Union meeting hailed William Jennings Bryan, presidential candidate on the Democratic ticket the year before. The platform called for municipal ownership of franchises; for lower gas and street car fares; for the extension of parks, libraries, museums and free schools; for wise, equitable and scientific taxation; and against rule by injunction that infringes on the people's right to assemble peacefully, to march in the streets and to speak freely.

Although there was nothing in the platform on the single tax, George said he would run as a single taxer, as an absolute free trader, as an opponent of liquor taxes and as a greenbacker, favoring paper money as against the gold standard.

The campaign aroused great interest in the United Kingdom, where George was well known as the result of his six lecture tours there and the wide circulation of his books. The *New York Times* reported the following reactions from two London newspapers:

LONDON, Oct. 4—The newspapers here generally pay much attention to the New York political campaign, publishing long articles, dispatches, and editorials on the subject.

7. *The New York Times*, October 6, 1897, p. 2.

The Globe says:

"Judging from the Times's dispatch, Henry George will be the next Mayor. The Americans do not exceed a quarter of the whole population, and the European Anarchists, Socialists, Italians, Poles, Hungarians, and Russians, all the very lowest of their race, will support the man whose childish economics and wild theories are derided in every capital in Europe."⁸

THE LONDON TIMES ON GEORGE

It Says that to Win He Must Be Supported by Dangerous Classes

LONDON, Oct. 6.—The Times, commenting editorially this morning on the "increasing seriousness of Henry George's candidature for the Mayoralty of Greater New York," says:

"It is humiliating to think that there is any possibility of his being the first Mayor of the enlarged New York. No doubt in past times there have been worse candidates. Mr. George is honest, but he is the nominee of the Silverites, and, what is worse, can only be returned by his winning the support of the dangerous classes, who will afterward demand their price for their services."⁹

From October 16 to 28 George made thirty speeches, and on five of those days, including the day he died, he spoke four times. His last speech on October 28, the Thursday before election day, was at the Manhattan Opera House. He arrived there after most of the crowd had left, and he rambled on in a way that distressed the audience that remained. Mrs. George, who always accompanied him, got him back to the Union Square Hotel at midnight. "I am very tired," said George as his friends crowded around him. He had a light meal and went to bed, attributing his discomfort to indigestion. At 2:30 A.M. Mrs. George heard her husband walking about the room. "I don't feel well," he said, "but I suppose it does not amount to much." She urged him to go back to bed, but he continued to sit in an arm chair. She called her son, Henry George, Jr., from an adjoining room; together they helped the sick man back to bed, and they called his doctor, who arrived at 4:00 A.M. Within an hour George was dead of a stroke at 58 years of age.

Of the many obituaries, two will be cited here from the closest friends of George.

8. *The New York Times*, October 5, 1897, p. 3.

9. *The New York Times*, October 6, 1897, p. 2.

Tom L. Johnson wrote:

That first meeting with Mr. George was the beginning of a friendship which grew stronger with each passing day and which, it seemed to me, had reached the full flower of perfection when I stood at his bedside in the Union Square Hotel in New York City the night of October 28, 1897, and saw his tired eyes close in their last sleep.¹⁰

The other tribute came from the Reverend Doctor Edward McGlynn, a native New Yorker, once pastor of St. Stephen's Catholic Church, one of the largest in New York City. He was a disciple of George and an activist in the single tax movement. For this he was excommunicated in 1887, but he was reinstated in the Church in 1892, perhaps partly because of George's open letter to Pope Leo XIII the year before. He was summoned to the hotel where George had died. Only a few days earlier, in speaking of his friendship for Dr. McGlynn, George had said, "I would rather have Dr. McGlynn at my dying bedside than any man I know." Dr. McGlynn was greatly grieved at his friend's death, saying, "He died in a struggle for human liberty. His spirit will live in the hearts of his friends. He died like a hero on the field of battle."

There was a great outpouring of grief at the death of Henry George. Two Episcopal ministers and Dr. McGlynn conducted the funeral service. He was buried on Monday, November 1, 1897, in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, beside his daughter Jennie, who had died six months earlier.

The supporters of Henry George nominated his son, Henry George, Jr., to fill the vacant spot in the race for mayor of New York City. The election, held the day after George's funeral, saw Robert A. Van Wyck win with 228,531 votes; he was the candidate of the Tammany Hall faction of the Democratic Party. Seth Low, representing the Democrats opposed to Tammany and the Citizens' Union, ran second with 148,215 votes. Benjamin F. Tracy, Republican, received 101,994 votes. Henry George, Jr., had 19,836 votes.

Henry George's ideas lived on after his death. In the ebb and flow of political and social movements, the single tax idea has suffered a decline in recent decades. But the movement continues, kept alive by disciples of George.

10. Tom L. Johnson, *My Story* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1913), p. 52.