

William Marion Reedy of St. Louis "Eloquent Apostle" of Single Tax

by CAROLINE G. NATIONS

WILLIAM Marion Reedy was born on December 11, 1862. It is a little late to pay tribute to the hundredth anniversary of the birth of this big man, but an appreciative reappraisal of him is very much in order. He became famous as the editor of Reedy's Mirror, published in St. Louis, and was so closely identified with his paper that it expired five weeks after his death in 1920. Would that we had a William Marion Reedy writing at the present time! Especially would the Henry George movement profit by facing up to the enormous fact of the land question as Reedy did in his day.

It is too little known that the Mirror was an ardent supporter of the theories of Henry George. Since Reedy's death governmental slum clearance has been regarded as the only possible solution for the decay and blight which infects the heart of St. Louis and other large cities. Reedy like Henry George would see this method as a step in the wrong direction. He would not hesitate to speak against it as forthrightly as did Henry George himself.

Henry George opposed the proposals of the Tenement House Commission of New York as quackery. Anna George de Mille, in her biography of her father, *Henry George, Citizen of the World*, explained his position in terms that are just as sound today as when first expressed: "Doubtless it seemed strange to many at the meeting, that Henry George, who dedicated himself to improving the condition of the poor, should denounce proposals for tenement house reform and vehemently oppose the plan to use public

money to buy condemned tenements and build better ones. He had made it clear that taxing land would make it too expensive to lose it to slums and that "untaxing" improvements would automatically produce good buildings instead of human rookeries. He had proved definitely that these were the quickest, the most just, and the most fundamental means of slum clearance, so it was not difficult for him to be patient."

The decay so much in evidence at the heart of St. Louis and many other large cities, demonstrates the very problem Henry George clearly defined; he defined also its solution, the total appropriation of the land value by the single tax. William Marion Reedy not only understood this but he took frequent opportunities to point it out. In "A Knock On Henry George" in the Mirror on December 30, 1910, he observed: "The idea that the land was a common heritage was not new. But entirely new was the argument that the way to get the land back into the possession of all was to tax away its unearned increment of value."

Frederick Wilhelm Wolf in "William Marion Reedy, A Critical Biography," prepared at Vanderbilt University as a thesis (1951) said of Reedy, "he devoured the contents of George's credo and made it a part of himself from 1895 when he first mentioned Single Tax to his death in 1920. When he promised his friends in San Francisco and Los Angeles that he would return in order to help them with the fight regarding the adoption of the Single Tax Amendment to the Consti-

tution. (It was in this same year that Reedy was nominated as Missouri Senator for his party—but declined—and he also received an honorary vote from the Missouri delegates as Presidential Candidate on the Single Tax ticket). Between these years the editor's advocacy of this program through his editorials in the *Mirror* added many interesting friends and incidentally increased the sales of the paper."

He also noted in this thesis that there was little doubt that *Progress and Poverty* had a marked effect on Reedy. "Hardly an issue of the *Mirror* appeared without some pertinent remarks regarding the Single Tax question. Oftimes important personages who were Single Taxers wrote for the weekly."

When William de Mille, son-in-law of Henry George, wrote a children's play called "Dreams," Reedy published it as "The First Single Tax Play."

He was referred to as one of the most informed men in politics in the midwest and his friend Theodore Roosevelt, during his second term, called him to Washington on several occasions, "where in private conference, he described the political and economic conditions of Missouri to the Executive." He was also the confidant of many members of the cabinet.

Max Putzel gives Reedy credit for playing a significant part in encouraging pivotal authors who established new trends in literature in "The Man in the Mirror" which was published by Harvard University Press last year, and reprinted by permission in *Focus/Midwest* in December, 1962. He points out that "the broadening and liberalizing effect of the resulting naturalistic trend redirected our letters, and in so doing changed our lives. The trend is now well known. Reedy's part in it is not. In the standard reference works where his name is mentioned at all, the account is invariably inadequate and ill-informed."

Mr. Putzel mentions Reedy's support of Henry George only in passing. Yet in embracing and vigorously promoting Henry George's philosophy of social science, Reedy also showed a keen discernment of the value of another important trend, and one which greatly increased the circulation of his paper. The *Mirror* enjoyed a national circulation of 32,000 copies at its peak. At that time the *Atlantic's* circulation was seven thousand and the *Nation's* twelve. There can be little doubt that the space Reedy gave to the Henry George movement had much to do with the popularity of his journal, for at that time the single tax was a hotly debated national political issue.

Reedy's article, "Light on the Path," in the *Mirror* of March 28, 1912, is humorously instructive on this point:

"The best, because the clearest book ever written upon *Protection or Free Trade* on the Free Trade side, is that so entitled by Henry George. It is the most reliable book on the subject, and interesting as a novel. Twenty years ago this book was printed in the *Congressional Record*. Six members of the House divided the book among them, and each, under the 'leave to print' privilege, introduced a section in the *Record* as part of his remarks during a debate on wool. These members were Hon. Tom L. Johnson of Ohio; Hon. William J. Stone of Kentucky; Hon. Joseph E. Washington of Tennessee; Hon. John W. Fithian of Illinois; Hon. Thomas Bowman of Iowa; and Hon. Jerry Simpson of Kansas. By an old rule of the House, whatever appears in the *Record* is privileged to be sent through the mails free under a Congressional frank. *Protection or Free Trade* had therefore become frankable.

"Funds were raised by popular subscription to meet the expense of printing and in the form of a sixty-four page pamphlet, one million and sixty-two thousand copies were printed and

(Continued on page 15)

Professor Hall said, "preferably the titles should be left in private hands as they are now, to give people a greater sense of security in their improvements. The rental value is paid to the community in lieu of a tax on improvements."

Miss de Mille emphasized, among the benefits George claimed for this method, the fact that it would do away with all land speculation. Around 1911, she said, single taxers in Alberta, Canada had written into the constitution the guarantee that if any mineral deposits were found they would belong to the government. Much later oil was discovered, and now Alberta is extremely rich—they have all the highways, schools and hospitals they need—and for two successive years have declared a bonus of \$20 to every living Albertan.

As a conjecture as to why George hasn't been heard of much, Miss de Mille recalled that "during his lifetime he was apparently one of the most

persuasive speakers alive, and because of his personal magnetism he drew a great deal of attention to himself. Some followers understood him thoroughly and some didn't. He was also a highly controversial political figure. His death occurring a few days before the election night in New York was one of the most dramatic episodes in the end of the century. The general public remembered that he'd been defeated—and the impression was that his theory had been tried and failed—it never *had* been. Where it's been tried partially—in Denmark, New Zealand, Australia and certain of the Canadian territories—it has succeeded to the extent that it's been tried, and with beneficial results, always.

In introducing this program, John Dewey was quoted as saying that "Henry George stands almost alone in our history as a man who . . . left an indelible impression on not only his own generation, but on the world and the future."

William Marion Reedy, "Apostle" of Single Tax

(Continued from page 1)

circulated in the second Presidential struggle between Grover Cleveland and Benjamin Harrison, when the tariff question was the main issue."

Reedy then stated that the Fels Fund Commission would print a new edition of *Protection or Free Trade* charging 2½ cents a copy to cover the cost of printing. It hoped to sell a million copies. Each book would be enclosed in a sealed franked envelope. "If you're 'agin the Tariff' here's a way to make converts to your side. Circulate this book," urged Reedy.

Since the tariff was the main issue in the Presidential election, Reedy was no doubt boosting the sales of his literary journal throughout the country. That

he was himself a thoroughgoing Georgist there can be no question. He has said, "Henry George is the last word on economics."

Mr. Putzel tells us that Reedy "ridiculed Henry George even as the old campaigner lay on his death bed, then turned suddenly into an eloquent apostle of the single tax." How greatly is this "eloquent apostle" needed today!

[Anna George de Mille, daughter of Henry George, once told of William Marion Reedy's visits to her home in California. Her endurance on the subject of single tax was greater than that of her husband, who retired for the night and left the two to go on discussing it enthusiastically.]