

1964

## Henry George in England

Milton A. Ochsner

*Mankato State College, Mankato*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas>



Part of the [Life Sciences Commons](#), and the [Physical Sciences and Mathematics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ochsner, M. A. (1964). Henry George in England. *Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science, Vol. 31 No.2*, 164-166.

Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas/vol31/iss2/18>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science by an authorized editor of University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. For more information, please contact [skulann@morris.umn.edu](mailto:skulann@morris.umn.edu).

## Henry George in England

MILTON A. OCHSNER

*Mankato State College, Mankato*

The forward rush of the Industrial Revolution had already by the turn of the 19th century silenced the hand looms in England and sent their operators to the city and its factories. Once there, the masses and their government fell prey to all the problems attendant to rapid and disorderly industrialization of which high rent, periodic unemployment, and labor unrest were just a few. The fundamental homogeneous outlook which the British had always somehow maintained in the face of other crises was now threatened anew. This was a new misery that gripped the land. It struck hardest at those who had bread enough but, because of extended suffrage, a free press, and better education, had developed wants that had grown faster than their incomes. Taking note of the situation in 1883, Arnold Toynbee was to write "It is this very improvement in the material condition of the people that constitutes the problem . . . for until people have raised themselves a little they cannot be really discontented."<sup>1</sup> The ideals of the French enlightenment which consumed all of Europe had, of course, found audience in England, and of these it was "Equality" that was especially in the minds of the artisan group. Strangely enough, it was an American, Henry George, who seemed to provide the answer.

In 1879, George published a book entitled, *Progress and Poverty*. It was really a compilation and expansion of the ideas he had previously expressed in lectures, newspaper articles, and pamphlets over the years. The inspiration of the book was the seemingly paradoxical union of progress with poverty. When only eighteen years of age the question had been aroused in his mind in conversation with an old miner who had suggested that as the country grew in population and material prosperity, the condition of those who had to work for a living would grow, not better, but worse. Carrying the theme into *Progress and Poverty* George wrote: "It is this fact — that want appears where productive power is greatest and the production of wealth is largest — that constitutes the enigma which perplexes the civilized world, and which we are trying to unravel."<sup>2</sup> The main point of his thesis was that rent was responsible for poverty by allowing the landowner to absorb the wealth and progress produced by the laboring classes. "The increase of productive power does not increase wages — because it does increase the value of land. Rent swallows up the whole gain and pauperism accompanies progress."<sup>3</sup>

If George had correctly judged the symptoms then the

prescription was easy, a one hundred percent tax on rent. "What I therefore propose," he said, "as the simple yet sovereign remedy, which will raise wages, increase the earnings of capital, extirpate pauperism, abolish poverty, (and) give remunerative employment to whoever wishes it, is to appropriate rent by taxation."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps somewhat carried away by his own eloquence he also maintained that his tax system would "afford free scope to human powers, lessen crime, elevate morals, and taste, and intelligence, purify government and carry civilization to yet nobler heights."<sup>5</sup>

In the reality of a universal solution his beliefs were much too simple. Yet it can be argued that their simplicity is what made them so appealing. For most people, the establishment of social justice is an almost impossible task. George made it a mere matter of taxational reform.

Few men in history have been able to put down in writing a handful of ideas which have materially changed the current of thought of the whole world. Yet within a decade, *Progress and Poverty* had been printed, reprinted and then printed some more. Copies were translated and sold in Germany, France, Belgium, Sweden and Japan as well as editions in Gaelic, Yiddish, and Chinese. Charles Barker, in his biography of Henry George states that "no book except the Bible has been so widely and devotedly distributed as *Progress and Poverty* had been."<sup>6</sup>

Some of the success of the book must be traced to the fact that it was extremely well written and highly readable as economic works go. While self-taught, George had gained considerable literary background as a printer, newspaper reporter, editor, and contributor to periodicals. Long term dabbling in California politics had given him access to important personages and valuable background experiences. It was a hard education and a hard life marked by periods of extreme privation and embarrassing indebtedness, but it can truly be said that Henry George was a man of the masses he wanted to help. Most of his readers felt the sincerity of his concern for human misery and social injustice. George himself felt that writing this book was a sort of religious mission; he had been set to his task by a Divine Call. Arthur Birnie gives a sense of this evangelism in his work on George. "He felt he had a truth to reveal, a gospel to preach, a way of salvation to make plain. It had been reserved for him to lead his fellow men out of economic bondage, and in *Progress and Poverty* he was tracing the route to the promised land."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Toynbee, Arnold, *Progress and Poverty, a Criticism of Mr. Henry George*. (1883) p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> George, Henry, *Progress and Poverty*. (1879) p. 150.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403.

<sup>5</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Barker, Charles Albro, *Henry George*. (1955):635.

<sup>7</sup> Birnie, Arthur, *Single Tax George*. (1939) p. 68.

Nowhere, not even in his native America, was George's influence felt so deeply and over such a long period of time as in Great Britain. Hundreds of thousands of copies of his books were sold there and while visiting those islands he was much in demand as a lecturer. The emphasis Henry George placed on rent alone would certainly have found a response in the "little middle" men in his audience. Rent, particularly for those living in London, was one of the central struggles of their existence. It is also obvious that his plan to place the total taxation burden on the landowners would have appeal to those who owned no land. The way the plan was stated must have delighted his admirers and brought sheer exasperation to his detractors. "I do not propose to either purchase or to confiscate private property in land. The first would be unjust; the second, needless. Let the individuals who now hold it still retain, if they want to, possession of what they are pleased to call *their* land. Let them continue to call it *their* land. Let them buy it, and sell it, and bequeath and devise it. We may safely leave them the shell, if we take the kernel. *It is not necessary to confiscate land; it is only necessary to confiscate rent.*"<sup>8</sup> England had suffered a series of minor economic depressions just prior to George's arrival so this too heightened his reception. None of these depressions were serious in themselves, but they served to create a milieu of uneasiness in which his ideas could find favorable treatment. Moreover, from a philosophical standpoint, George was speaking in some of the same terms as John Stuart Mill, Patrick Edward Dove, and Herbert Spencer, which to many Englishmen was tantamount to invoking the Gods. It is interesting to note however that upon the first occasion for a meeting between Spencer and George they immediately fell into a rather animated argument over Irish land reform proposals. George came out of this meeting somewhat shaken and thereafter tended to quote Spencer far less in his lectures than had formerly been his practice. For his part, Spencer probably never quoted George at all.

While his performance as a platform speaker in the United States can be generally classified as only average with occasional flashes of brilliance, Henry George delivered some truly remarkable orations to his English and Irish listeners. That this was true is evidenced in the newspaper reviews he received at the time. One paper was moved to say "As he warmed to his subject and began to feel his audience and as his chain of consequences slowly developed, one could feel no hesitation in classing him among the most powerful speakers of the time."<sup>9</sup> *The London Times* pronounced his "as great an orator as Cobden or Bright,"<sup>10</sup> and a "gentleman whose opinions on economic and social questions are well worthy of attention."<sup>11</sup> At least part of the enthusiastic response to his speeches can be attributed to the fact that George had rapidly acquired a certain degree of notoriety. Before crossing to England he had spent some

time in Ireland bolstering the anti-British land reform movements there. Understandably annoyed, the British police had clapped him in jail for a few hours on the grounds that he was a suspicious stranger. The subsequent diplomatic involvements received much space in the British press and added greatly to George's reputation. Then too, he became embroiled in a polemic discussion with the Duke of Argyll and won for himself the title of "The Prophet of San Francisco" and more publicity. All of this seemed to rouse George to ever greater activity and certainly enhanced the reach of his influence.

It is rather ironic that Henry George had so much affect on British Socialists and the British Labour Party because he was not a socialist, being much too individualistic for that, and he stoutly denied having ever been a friend of labor. Yet the fact remains that he made his greatest contribution to society by his influence on these two groups. In particular, George is rightfully credited with furnishing real impetus to the Fabian Society, and it in turn gave ideological foundation to the Labour Party. No less a personage than George Bernard Shaw was to write "that five-sixths of those who were swept in with me had been converted by Henry George."<sup>12</sup> The Fabians, such as Shaw, were an intellectual group that had been formed to spread socialistic ideals among the educated. This was not a doctrinaire society and George's writings on land reform, free trade, and the single tax appeared much more pragmatic than the ideas of Marx. George never had a chance to meet Karl Marx but they had studied each other's works and were in serious disagreement. The father of communism was willing to admit that George was a "talented writer," but he also maintained that "Theoretically the man is utterly backward!" "He also has the repulsive presumption and arrogance which is displayed by all panacea mongers without exception."<sup>13</sup> This is probably a case of the pot calling the kettle black. George responded by saying that Marx was unscientific and "a most superficial thinker, entangled in an inexact and vicious terminology."<sup>14</sup> Later on he summed up his feelings by calling Marx "The Prince of Muddleheads."<sup>15</sup>

George's first visit to England in 1881-1882 had been successful in the sense that his book was established there, and, of course, his lectures and exploits in Ireland had brought him much attention. Yet although he left the country with many warm feelings and many invitations to return, he had received no commitments from anyone seriously to carry on his work. It is all the more striking then that during the succeeding fourteen months his book sold extremely well, and he was gradually becoming a man of importance in absentia. Indeed, by 1884 he received urgent letters from his few English acquaintances to return there immediately in order to ride a new wave of interest in his ideas that was rapidly approaching a crest. George did return to England during the period 1884-1885, and this time a real organ-

<sup>8</sup> George, p. 403.

<sup>9</sup> Post, Louis, *The Prophet of San Francisco*. (1930), p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> Birnie, p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> Coker, Francis W., *Recent Political Thought*. (934) p. 98.

<sup>13</sup> Barker, p. 356.

<sup>14</sup> de Mille, Anna George, *Henry George*. (1950) p. 127.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.



ized movement got underway. It still has descendants today. This organization was the Land Reform Union. The Land Reform Union was not so important nor influential in itself, although it did count at least a few Members of Parliament among its numbers, but it gave rise to all sorts of like organization. Altogether these groups, encompassing all manner of individuals—Irish, Scots, English, M.P.'s, Oxford Dons, trade unionists, etc., reached into practically every corner of British life and thought. Not all of them espoused the same Georgian ideas. In fact, some of them would hardly admit they had sprung from such a base, but they all, to some degree, advanced his theories. One such satellite group was the Scottish Land Restoration League which a few years later launched the pilot career of Keir Hardie. Keir Hardie will be remembered as one of the founders of the Independent Labour Party that was to be a significant forerunner to today's Labour Party. Other English greats who played important roles in the consuming liberal movement of the late 1890's and early 1900's were Sidney Webb, Joseph Chamberlain, and Clement Attlee. All of these men had either read *Progress and Poverty*, or had correspondence with Henry George, or (in Chamberlain's case, at least) had talked to George in person. Generally speaking they discarded his ideas as impractical or economically untrue, but each admitted to being tremendously impressed with George's clarity and sentiment. It would be reasonable, certainly, to assume that their own thinking and actions must have been reinforced or slightly altered by their contact with George's mind. The old Land Reform Union itself was merged

into the English Land Restoration League, and that later into the English League for the Taxation of Land Values, then finally into today's International League for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade.

Like many of the late 19th century economists, George had the bad luck to be writing in a period of great social and economic change. Moreover, the power struggles of the European states were already in motion and were to lead to World War I before George had been dead twenty years. Now, of course, George's ideas are either blurred or forgotten. Arthur Birnie perhaps stated it best when he concluded, "to the present generation George is little more than a name. Much of this neglect is the world's natural revenge on a man who unduly and unjustifiably raised its hopes. George claimed to have discovered a single easy cure for poverty; time showed this to be a nostrum; and the world avenged itself by consigning the audacious empiricist to obscurity . . . for his single tax doctrine was received and ticketed in the economists' museum of exploded fallacies."<sup>16</sup>

It is unfortunate that Birnie's evaluation is so true because it is so tragic. Henry George was a prophet among men. Much of what he advocated has come to pass, but the accomplishments do not bear his name. Some of his goals—such as democratic government playing a role in establishing social justice, greater equality among people, and a fairer distribution of the earth's resources—are now being attained. He had asked for as much over 80 years ago. Henry George didn't flood mankind with sunlight, but at least he lit a candle.

<sup>16</sup> Birnie, p. 9.