

# Henry George

By Clarence Darrow

Address at the Henry George Anniversary Dinner of the Single Tax Club,  
Chicago, September 19th, 1913  
*Everyman*, Sept.-Oct., 1913, p. 17

HENRY GEORGE was born in Philadelphia 75 years ago. His father lived near Independence Hall. That was not the reason he was a great man or that he believed in liberty. A great many little men have been born around Independence Hall, and a great many big men have been born in almshouses and slums. Nature somehow, does not seem to know much about eugenics, or, if she does, then the latest faddists don't understand the subject, and as between the two, I would prefer to take my stand with Nature. For some mysterious reason, contrary to the doctors and the faddists, Nature never seems to give you much indication of what the child will be from what its father or mother has been. There are more small people born of great parents than there are large people born of great parents, and there are more great people born of small parents than there are great people born of great parents, and if the people who are standing for all the fads as they come along, especially eugenics, could have their way and have a political convention determine the fathers and mothers of the human race, then it is pretty sure that few of the great would be born. If this had been so determined in the past the great could never have been born, because all that the political conventions do is to decide that things as they are today shall remain forever.

Henry George was born of poor parents. He did not come from one of the old families. In one way, every family is the same length; there are just as many generations between the hod carrier and Adam as there are between the king and Adam, but the king comes from an old family and the hod carrier from a new family. The way you can tell whether a family is an old family is to find out how long it has been separated from work. The family that has been separated the longest from work is the oldest and, when, along down in the generations there comes some degenerate son who works, then you have to begin the line of succession all over again. Henry George's family was not old; his father worked; his grandfather worked; his mother work; he worked. He began as a sailor, altho this trade he followed but a short time. Before that, even, he had learned to be a printer. He made his way to the west but, unlike most of the workers of the world, while he was printing he was dreaming. He was thinking of something beyond work, and higher than work and, more to the point, easier than work. He was a printer, a newspaper writer, an editor – not much of a success in a financial way. In all his life he never could make a success of finances, altho he started early with a strong determination and a brave heart to get rich, encouraged by his father, who lived in Philadelphia and had read Poor Richard's Almanack. They all thought it was a great thing to make money, but this Henry George soon abandoned. He became a writer; he had a vision; he had dreams; he saw things, real or unreal, it does not matter much so long as you see them; it gives us something to live for, and we need it.

While he was a printer, and while he was a writer, Henry George learned something of political

economy. He did it in a very simple way. He never went to school; he knew little of books in his early years, and was never a great reader of books. He never went further than the third or fourth grade of the public school, but he saw the things around him. He did read political economy and he found that it had been laid down by all the profound political economists in the world that there was such a thing as a wage fund. You have all heard of the wage fund. All the political economists knew it. They knew it as well as the scientists today know many facts in science, that is, that wages are paid from a certain fund that has been accumulated in the past and the greater the fund that has been accumulated the bigger the wage. Nobody doubted it because the books had said so and the political economists believed it.

Henry George knew nothing about political economy, but he went west and when he got to Oregon and to California he saw with his own eyes that the less money there was in the country the higher the wages were; that the smaller the wage fund the greater the wages; that the fewer the number of rich the more there was to divide with the poor or for the poor to divide among themselves, because the rich were not there to get it. And he found out in that simple way that the wage fund was a lie, altho all the political economists had taught it and believed it – I suppose it is fair to assume they believed it, so long as they taught it. He pondered these subjects, interested in politics, interested in life, and sought to find the time and the opportunity to do something of real value for the world. It was hard to do it while he was setting type; it was hard to do it while he was writing editorials; it was hard to do it as a reporter on a daily paper. He needed money and he took a rather common way to get it. He got a political job. He was appointed inspector of gas meters for the State of California, whatever that was. He went into that office with a high and noble purpose – not to inspect gas meters, but to get a living out of the job. What the gas meters might show was not important, he wanted to get a living out of the job – but he wanted to get the living so he could be released from work long enough to do a work of real service to the human race. He wanted leisure to exercise his genius; he wanted time to write a great book and do a great work. and so he took the job of inspecting gas meters and wrote his book instead of inspecting the meters, and I think – probably any one, excepting a Civil Service Reform man, would say he acted wisely and rightly. He laid the foundation for his book and wrote it while he had a public job. Now he was one of a million. He is pretty nearly the only example I know, of a man that a public job did not denaturize. If it ever stood any chance of hurting him – well, they had a change of administration and he was fired about the time he got thru with his book, and so he was saved.

Henry George held the office of gas inspector and did do some good. He wrote a good book, a profound book, the first book on political economy – and I think I am safe in saying the last book on political economy – that people may ever read. The first, and perhaps the last, that was readable to plain, ordinary men.

As to many things George taught there may be a difference of opinion in this Single Tax club tonight, but I take it that pretty much everybody in this audience believes in the fundamental idea of Henry George, that there can be no great civilization, no civilization worth the name, where there is private monopoly of land; that this earth was created by no man, was here before the first man came and will be here when the last man is gone; that every human being, born and to be

born, must live from it and on it and if a few people have the right to own it they control their fellowmen.

How many of us may believe absolutely in all the details of what is called the Single Tax philosophy, is to my mind a matter of small consequence. I do think, in spite of what my friend White has said, that the great movement, that in some form or other, is sweeping around the earth today – the great movement that is influencing the thought of all the world, influencing the thought of America and England and Germany and Spain, and even faroff China; the great movement of the poor and the weak and the disinherited of the world to take and own the earth – I do think that this is a revolutionary movement and I would not be interested in it if it were not. It is revolutionary to say in any age or any land that the poor shall inherit the earth. It is revolutionary to say that those who have borne the burdens of the world for all these long and painful ages shall sometime come to their own, and those who have lived upon them for all these ages must either work or starve. Words count for nothing. One word or another makes very little difference with the march of events or with what moves man, but if I know anything of history or of men, it seems to me that all over the world today is a revolutionary spirit which threatens to destroy many of the old, time-honored, decrepit institutions of the world.

Henry George told the world simpler and plainer and stronger than any other man had told it, that the right of private monopoly of land was bad, eternally bad; that it tended, in the end, to destroy the civilization that it first built up; that until the people owned the earth, until each person born upon the earth, was equal heir to every other, there could be nothing which the human mind calls justice in the affairs of men. Other men had said it; philosophers had said it since the human reason was born; scientists had said it; dreamers had said it, but no one before had ever said it with the force and clearness and vigor and power of Henry George.

I believe I am safe in saying that no other book can be found which lays down this doctrine with the same power and force and clearness as *Progress and Poverty*, and I shall always be glad that my first introduction to what I believe are revolutionary ideas, because they are against the ideas of the mob that controls and that is revolutionary – came from a reading of that great book, and wherever I may wander in all the fields of intellectual thought and discussion in which I am prone to wander, I believe that what I learned here will remain with me as a fundamental guide to the end.

Without seeking in the least to discuss any of the statements made by my able and logical and studious friend, Mr. White, I want to say in justice to a large class of people that the great mass of the work and thought of *Progress and Poverty* is not based on the doctrine of the ‘natural rights’ of man. Henry George did believe in ‘natural rights,’ but his great arguments were based on the great law which permeates all life – expediency. He taught that there could be no high civilization “where a few were permitted to own the land; that such is contrary to the best development of society; that the demands of human growth and social development would show men the inexpediency of it. To my mind this is much the stronger line of reasoning. I care not what road you travel provided you get to the right point in the end.

I believe that on the doctrine of natural rights, Henry George has logically and clearly built up the right of every human being to ownership in the earth. I believe just the same that under the great law of expediency, of what is good for the human race; assuming that man is what man is, that Nature is what Nature is – knowing no rights, but dealing with the fang and the claw and the tooth, killing the weak to save the strong, the bird pouncing upon the worm to live himself, and the strong man living upon the weak; even under this theory which I believe permeates all Nature, human, inanimate, animal, even under this, I believe that the poor and the weak should some day be wise enough to combine against the powerful and the strong and take the rights they can get in no other way except by asserting and maintaining them. I believe in this world a man, or any other animal, has a natural right to what he gets, and if he doesn't get it he has no natural right to it. He may have an idealistic, theoretical, theosophical right to it. I think of course we are all fond of our own philosophy and the only way we can tell whether another philosopher is quite sound is to see whether he agrees with us – that is the only way I can tell; that is the reason I think that sometimes, altho my friend White's conclusions are right, some of the premises are not correct, and that is the way I suppose he thinks all of mine are not. But there is a great mass of people who are color-blind on the question of natural rights and it is a mistake to say that Henry George did not write for them. You can eliminate every word of "natural rights" from all George said and wrote and you will find there the most magnificent and splendid and lucid reasons why the human beings of the earth should claim the earth for all its people and why civilization can't endure and progress go on without it, and it is the side I especially wish to emphasize tonight in reference to Henry George.

His was a wonderful mind; he saw a question from every side; his philosophy appealed to every school. It is true when tested by any rule of philosophy that I know. It can never be the property of any particular sect or any particular class; it is broad and I believe fundamental to all men, whatever their creed may be. Henry George, as I have said, never went to school to speak of, not enough to hurt him. If he had, he would have written a political economy like Adam Smith, which was very good but hard reading; like John Stuart Mill which was very good for college people, but there are some people who can't go to college – they have to work. He might have written one like Professor Sumner of Yale, he might have written any kind of a dull book that only educated people could understand. You know there is an old superstition in the world that if a man is interesting he is shallow, and if he is dull he is deep. You can't rely on this alone. I have seen dull people who were shallow.

Henry George had not studied rhetoric. I presume he never studied grammar, at least, not much; he never studied composition; he knew nothing of Latin, poor fellow, nor of Greek, nor of the modern languages. He knew nothing about the style of writing, but he had something to say. The stylists tell you how to write and to speak, teach you how to use the most beautiful, the choicest and most fitting language that can be found to express nothing – and you need it. There is another class of which Henry George is perhaps as clear and bright and shining an example as there is in literature, a man who had a clear idea, who thought something, and used the simplest language he could command to express that thought. It seems almost revolutionary in literature to say that the first thing necessary for a writer or a speaker is to have something to say. That is generally supposed to be the last thing; whether one could write or speak, was the main thing, not whether

he had anything to say. But before Henry George learned to write or to speak he had something to say, and he had that something clearly in his own mind so he could make himself understand it before he tried to make anyone else understand it and, I think, as a general rule, when you find another person's language can't be understood by you, it is pretty safe to say that he does not know himself what he is driving at, and that is the reason he can't make himself understood. But Henry George was a master of English; one of the greatest that ever used a pen. Almost immediately after his work was published, it challenged the attention of the learned and the unlearned world alike. Even aristocrats and scholars thought it was a wonderful book. Of course, they took it all back when they found that he meant it. College professors dined him and praised him; Chauncey Depew wrote a letter of testimony as to what a wonderful work it was. Everybody thought it was a wonderful work until a handful of poor and ragged and hungry men and women in New York city organized a religious society and showed the world they meant what Henry George said, and then they turned their backs on Henry George.

Henry George was a great writer. I think Henry George made a mistake in going into politics; that is not the game for a man, it is for a politician; and Henry George was a man while he was in politics and, of course, he could not win. And more than that, he stood for something and again, of course, he could not win and, more than that, if he had won he could have done nothing. All these thoughts are in the realm of ideas, of discussion. The world is not ready to be remodeled.

I have heard more or less – this evening, about the wisdom of the people. I am a truthful man. I don't believe in it. They are not wise. Men grow by a long process of development and evolution. It has taken ages and ages to raise the forehead of man a couple of inches above his eye brows – and what of it? They get very little by passing resolutions in Congress or in the State Legislatures.

Henry George's work was the work of the philosopher, of the dreamer, of the author, of the prophet, and those men never are and never can be politicians, and I think no one knew it better than he. Most of you perhaps do not remember the early history of the movement for the land.

I remember well the days when Father McGlynn, who was forced from his church, and Hugh Pentecost, who came from another church, and other ministers and men of religious thought and religious impulse, took up this great work. I remember when it stirred a people, stirred them as logic never can stir. Don't make any mistake; you can't convert the world with facts. You can't convert people with logic, they will die while you are doing it. The great waves that have moved the world onward and upward, the great waves that have moved man have been like the waves of the sea, wild, unthinking, surging, resistless; they have come without cause so far as human judgment can tell; they have sped on without mission; they have been governed by no rules of logic; they have been based on no facts, but back of them were the great human emotions and sentiments that from the primitive man have moved humanity onward and upward – and he needed no logic and he needed no facts; he simply needed to feel the great surge around him. If I thought that you must wait for facts to change the world, I would lie down and die as quickly as I could; at least, I would stop talking about it. I learned long, long ago, that men care nothing about logic. Men are moved by feeling and impulse more strongly than by logic, and I remember when

Father McGlynn used to gather about him in the great temples of New York great masses of men who had not read *Progress and Poverty*, who had not read Karl Marx, who did not even distinguish between the two or care between the two; I remember when they spoke to their thousands and thousands, and they followed these men as holy men; I remember the great enthusiasm and righteous feeling that welled up from the mass of men, because here were people, people who lived. men who were devoting their genius to the human race, were giving them hope and courage and inspiration and they were willing to follow no matter what logic might do. And every great movement of the world has been along the same line, and I, for one, would be glad to welcome back the same old emotions, the same religious, intuitive, idealistic, sentiment which welded together the great mass of men going in the same direction, forgetting petty differences but marching onward toward a higher goal for the human race.

I would like, if I can find the words to express it, to say a few things which some might think foreign to the subject of Henry George and the Single Tax, but which to me are fundamental to it as well as to all other great reforms. Henry George was one of the real prophets of the world; one of the seers of the world: he was not moved by his intellect. Do you know that a boy who goes to school and is carefully trained and has an average mind, a boy who can't be raised so as to make a perfectly logical argument on any side of any question, is not worth raising at all? That is what education is for; that is what intellect is for; that is what reason is for. As Ben Franklin said, "Logic is to give a man a reason for doing what he wants to do." This may seem foolish, but it is not and there is not I may say, a mental philosopher, or almost none, of modern times who does not recognize it and show it. Men can be made to believe anything when they act upon their reason. We can go down thru the ages and find a few great prophets – I won't mention them all – Moses, Jesus, Goethe, Henry George – a few great prophets –. These were not the wisest men of the age, but they were the devoted men of the age; they were men with an ideal and with a purpose: they were men filled with the divine spark which alone can illumine the world; they were men who might have been born in a palace, in a manger, in a prison, but somewhere the infinite material which lay all about them touched them with the divine fire and they were the prophets and the seers of the age and generation in which they lived. Not that they were wiser, but they were filled with the eternal spirit which has moved the prophets of the world and moved the world with the prophets.

"Man cannot live by bread alone," and I think perhaps I, as much as any person here, have made the mistake, of thinking that man can live by bread alone and that the eternal questions which move all men can be settled by giving man enough to eat. If the scheme of the Singletaxer, or the scheme of the Socialist or the scheme of any other idealist shall be worked out and become a part of life and if the world shall be housed and fed and clothed, and plenty shall reign, the man fed and clothed and housed will turn back upon himself and ask what is the meaning of it all? I eat, I drink, I sleep, I live; what of it? There will ever come back to him the old, old question which has come to the savage, the civilized, the rich, the poor, the seer and the prophet – What is the meaning of life? – and no matter how well he be clothed and fed, his life will be empty and barren and he will die of boredom unless he keeps seeking for some solution to the eternal riddle which has forever plagued the human race.

Primitive man, looking at all the mysteries of Nature and feeling the smallness of his own life, built gods of wood and stone and knelt down and worshiped these. Later, man, somewhat more advanced, and getting away from the rude wood and stone, created from his mind images of a deity which ruled the world and held man's destinies in the hollow of his hand. It was left for civilized man in this day and generation to make a new god. They pictured man with a high, broad forehead, with a furrowed face, with a stooped frame, with a thoughtful mein, and said, "Here is reason and intellect and we will kneel down and worship these," and the god of reason and judgment and intellect is just as false and as unsafe a guide as the rude god that the rude savage fashioned of his stone and wood. It leads him nowhere; it leaves man with nothing in his inward being to give him the reason to live and to carry life forward to generations yet unborn. It leaves him with no activity; it leaves him to die, because there is nothing else to do. This god must go. It has no place in the modern world and in modern thought. The intellect is something, but it is a blind leader of the blind. Man, from the time he was evolved, has been moved, not by intellect, but by instinct and by will, by those unseen forces of the universe which make up the urge of his own being, moving him here and there and making him feel that his life is worth the living and urging him to live it out the best he can. Man has been moved by this and by this alone, and, while he may use his reason and his judgment to weigh and sort his instincts, still, back of it all, as the basis of the movements of man, is the will and the instinct which were born with him, which are in all matter and in all life, and which ever press him on to some goal that he knows not of.

And so I understand what the writer said long ago in speaking of war and believing in it and slurring "these piping times of peace." I have always believed in peace, in a way, but there is something worse than war – peace without purpose is worse than war, for it releases the petty and the small and the insignificant in man. It releases the small politician and the small person who make their thousand laws a year in every State in the Union, meddling with other men's affairs. Peace releases all that is little and contemptible and mean in man, while the inspiration for war, even tho the cause may be wrong and the reason may be wrong, tends to unite into one common brotherhood great masses of men and to make them forget the little in the great. The wars have not all been bad. From the smoke and the cannon and the blood and the devastation of war has grown grand civilizations and the human race has gone forward where it could not have gone in peace. Something better than war will come; but this is what I want to say; That man, whether as an individual or as a race, must have a motive for life. Inherent in all matter is the power of its unfoldment and its development. It needs life and experience to unfold and develop. Men and nations must have an inspiration to live. Henry George had it. Was it an inspiration to do an intellectual act? As well might he have been a juggler with an inspiration to juggle half a dozen balls in the air at once. He had an inspiration and a vision to do something for man. He had the feeling that was in him that would lead him thru any hardship or privation or danger on account of his devoted soul. The inspiration to accomplish something in the world; that it was which gave zest to life and which gives zest to the life of every man whose life is worth the living, and when this zest is gone it is time to die, and when it goes from the human race, the race will die.

Henry George and other men like him were moved by the ideal. It possessed them. They did not stop to ask the question, "Will it bring us pleasure or pain?" No man who has a work to do ever

cares or thinks whether the work will bring him pleasure or pain. He does it. He is moved by all the forces of the universe: he is moved by the instinct of his being; he is moved by life. It is the urge of his life and he will follow out the law of his being. We must learn from the prophets and the race the meaning of life. It may mean this to me and that to you, but we can learn from Henry George as well as from any prophet whom I have read that one must have a meaning, one must devote himself to something, or he cannot live; he must have the purpose that gives zest to life. If it is not in war it may be the devotion to humanity, it may be the devotion to science, it must be some great cause to move the soul. All the prophets of the world have had it. They have not cared for pain or suffering; they have not cared for rack or dungeon or fire. They have lived because this life was in them, and the tortures of the body were forgotten in the fine frenzy of the soul.