CHAPTER 2

The Life and Economics of Henry George

Introduction

Academic economists usually pursue studies in the field after encountering as a student a university economics class that appealed to them. From there they develop a more specialized interest in one of the formal “fields” of economics, which ultimately becomes their chosen specialty for research and publication.

Because Henry George was not an academic economist, he came to economics as one seeking answers to questions about things that he had seen and experienced. The pursuit of economics was for him no simple process of doing what titillates; rather, he felt compelled to determine why his travels caused him to witness increasing poverty and hardship among the majority of the people at a time when there was significant growth and development going on in America and other industrializing countries. This chapter looks at some of Henry George’s experiences¹ and considers how those experiences influenced his intellectual curiosity and ideas, but more importantly the development of the economic theory that made him famous.

The next section will look rather closely at Henry George’s fundamental nature and values, revealing the importance of his family and of his religious values. How
these values extended into his professional life and efforts will be addressed in the following section. Thereafter, we will inquire as to the life work of George, which he conceived as fighting poverty and elevating the laboring classes, of which he considered himself a part. To some extent, this is an inquiry into George’s personal poverty. The chapter’s final section addresses George’s personal progress, reviewing the course of his becoming a political economist and a self-trained scholar.

George’s Family and Religious Values

George’s father was an Episcopal vestryman, given to faithful Sunday devotions with Church services morning, afternoon, and frequently, evening. A Catholic bishop recalled Henry George going to Church every Sunday, “walking between his two elder sisters, followed by his father and mother—all of them so neat, trim and reserved” (George, Jr., 1900, p. 6). After George left home at an early age, his parents corresponded with him, encouraging him to remember his heritage and his prayers. His mother described in some detail a religious revival that had sparked interest at home and his father assured him that he prayed that God would watch over him until he “brings all at last to his eternal kingdom” (p. 86).

As a father in his 50s, Henry George in the company of his son and daughter once saw in New York an undertaker’s wagon stop before a residence to deliver armfuls of black drapery. “None of that when I am dead,” he told his children. “Death is as natural as life; it means a passage into another life. If a man has lived well—if he has kept the faith—it should be a time for rejoicing, not for repining, that the struggle here is over” (p. 546).

George’s belief in immortality, according to his son, was “staunch as a rock.” When a friend asked him what he regarded as the strongest evidence of the soul’s immortality,