

Book Reviews

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Nature's Gifts: The Australian Lectures of Henry George on the Ownership of Land and Other Natural Resources. By John Pullen (Sydney: Federation Press, 2014), pp.240. AU\$34.95 (pb).

Pullen's day-by-day chronicle and thoughtful appraisal of Henry George's fourteen-week Australian tour in 1890 provides much-needed further insight into a formative period in Australian political history. In his 1879 classic, *Progress and Poverty*, George argued: "The ownership of land is the great fundamental fact which ultimately determines the social, the political and consequently the intellectual and moral condition of a people". While George's messianic crusade in support of shared equity in land via a tax on its incremental value may have been misplaced, his writings were highly influential over several decades.

Pullen argues that George's visit was unparalleled in Australian history. It occupies 120 pages of the 200-page text, covering a succession of public welcomes, testimonials and presentations given by premiers, parliamentarians, mayors, clergymen and other dignitaries, together with the (not quite unanimous) enthusiastic responses of receptive audiences.

The triumphalism of George's Australian tour can be attributed to a fortuitous conjunction of time and place. While Georgist-style doctrines on the centrality of land taxes have been an ongoing theme, also advocated by Adam Smith and J. S. Mill and recognised by contemporary economists such as Stigler and Friedman as the "least bad tax", the historical evidence shows that George's revolutionary doctrine briefly gained exceptional prominence in an era of unprecedented intellectual and doctrinal contention on politico-social systems, with emergent doctrines such as communism, socialism and syndicalism contending against mercantilism, protectionism and free-market capitalism. George's ideology can be crudely described as egalitarian "capitalism", based on private property, free trade and limited welfarism, with its distinctive proposition being public revenue to be primarily derived from taxing the entire unearned incremental value of land, given that this increment was derived from external sources.

As still-evolving settler societies, the Australian colonies were receptive to reformist doctrines, notably those involving the award of land titles and the rights, duties and revenues attached to these titles. Closer settlement programmes were a type of social engineering. It is not surprising that land settlement was a major preoccupation of a generation of historians and historical geographers. Yet few mentioned George's tour. This lacuna may perhaps be excused given that, notwithstanding its remarkable initial impact, George's ideas have had scarcely any discernible influence on Australian polity. Surprisingly, and possibly in ignorance of the distinctive attributes of Australia's innovative lease tenures and their unique role as policy instruments, George did not favour leases.

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Pullen observes that his tour was actively supported by nonconformist ministers but hardly ever by Anglican or Catholic clergy. George's revivalist crusade was one episode in an ongoing tradition of economic theorists seeking "heaven on earth". George saw his efforts as being in the service of a deeply religious cause.

Of particular value is Pullen's informed scrutiny of the foundational principles and of the common misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Georgism, presented in Part 2 of this book.

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