

Global Reformers

(A review of "Planet Champions: Adventures in Saving the World: New Paths to Peace, Prosperity, and Human Rights", by Jack Yost (Portland: Bridge City Books, 1999; 196 pages; \$20; to order copies call Independent Publishers Group at 800-888-4741.)

By Matteo G. Luccio, Portland, OR

In the face of corporate greed, governmental inertia, and public cynicism, a small, dedicated, and intelligent cadre has been working steadfastly to make national and global institutions more responsive to environmental and human needs. Jack Yost was one of them. In *Planet Champions*, he intertwines snippets of autobiographical narrative, political analysis, and profiles of twenty people he had met "who were devoting their lives to the good of the planet".

Yost's commitment began when he left home to join a seminary at age 14 and was cut short by his sudden death in October, shortly after publishing this book. In the intervening four decades he edited a student paper, attempted in vain to start a business to finance his activism, founded the Oregon Peace Studies Consortium, and directed the World Association for World Federation. This last job was in New York City, where Yost, a life-long Oregonian, insisted on riding his bicycle. In his twenties, he lost his religious faith and replaced it with an intelligent, abiding optimism and "the notion that life is about finding meaning and purpose in some great cause."

Profiling his champions' ideas, often by quoting them, Yost describes a sophisticated vision of radical reforms — including the abolition of war and poverty — consciously designed to parallel the abolition of slavery.

As a dual antidote to poverty and environmental degradation, Yost turns to Henry George's proposal to heavily tax land — that common heritage of all humanity which has been appropriated by a few. A graduate of the Manhattan Henry George School, he devotes a chapter to George's ideas, career, and late-19th century popularity — and to the establishment's reaction: the birth of "neo-classical" economics. Yost cites Jeffery Smith, president of the Geonomy Society, who calls the land-tax development model "a little-known secret that has worked every time it has been tried".

Yost, like his champions, acknowledges that this century has been bathed in blood, that much of the world is in disastrous conditions, and that global reformers face enormous obstacles. He notes that while the end of the Cold War engendered a "palpable sense of relief", this "obscures the continuing threat of nuclear holocaust and the urgent need to take further action" to eliminate it. On the continued failure of the world community to prevent genocide, Yost cites Sir Brian Urquhart's conclusion that "because 18 U.S. Rangers died in Mogadishu [in 1994] over a half million people in Rwanda lost their lives".

Still, to Yost this century has gradually eroded "the traditional sovereignty of nation states while building up something radically new: the sovereignty of human rights." As evidence, he details the campaigns that led to the creation

of the permanent International Criminal Court in 1998 and the treaty to ban land mines, signed by 125 countries in 1997. In each case, he stresses, the key actors were non-governmental organizations. Their growing prominence and sophistication was first displayed at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, where "citizens tracked every decision, every procedure, every paragraph in the development of this global agenda. ... People from all over the planet were designing the future." Ultimately, that is the challenge. Where to begin? "Use international organizations and agencies ... as building blocks for a new world order. Global conferences — on the environment, women's rights, and poverty — can light the way forward. Get everybody involved."

Quotes from "Planet Champions"

ACTIVISTS. "They go to conferences and sit in long, tedious meetings. They scramble for funds to keep their projects afloat. They write, brainstorm and struggle to find innovative ways to work together. They carry on through years and decades, even when they know they may never achieve their goals in their lifetime. In a culture obsessed with the new, the fast, and the fashionable, they rarely make the headlines. But sometimes the tedious meetings convene at great global conferences, where all the world's nations and all the world's peoples — citizens from every country, culture and race — have gathered. Sometimes the citizens at these meetings win and governments make history: ban land mines or set up a new world court to punish crimes against humanity." (p. 11-12)

QUOTES FROM HENRY GEORGE. "The widespread social evils which everywhere oppress men amid an advancing civilization spring from a great primary wrong — the appropriation, as the exclusive property of some men, of the land on which and from which all must live." (p. 163) "The simple yet sovereign remedy which will raise wages, increase the earnings of capital, extirpate pauperism, abolish poverty, give remunerative employment to whoever wishes it, afford free scope to human power, lessen crime, elevate morals, and taste, and intelligence, purify government and carry civilization to yet noble heights, is — to appropriate rent by taxation." (p. 165)

CHOOSING OUR FUTURE. "So whose future should we buy — fantasies of doom or 'technotopias'? In the struggle to find a way forward, can we do little more than tack our course to current trends? Stand impotent before impersonal, all-powerful forces shaping the world?" (p. 86)

"In a democracy, we ought to devise long-range goals, based on such overriding common values as economic justice and a sustainable environment ..." (p. 87) -----

(editor's note: Permission to print this review was granted by Matteo Luccio, Portland, OR, managing editor of the public affairs quarterly Oregon's Future, and he reserves rights to the article. Georgists who attended the 1997 conference in Portland will remember Jack Yost as presiding over the session, "Repackaging Henry George for the 21st Century.")