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R. H. TAWNEY

PROFESSOR R. H. TAWNEY, WHO DIED ON 16 JANUARY 1962, HAD NO official connection with this Journal. The link is firstly that a number of members of the Editorial Board have been profoundly influenced and inspired by his writings; secondly that the questions to which he devoted himself are ones which we are particularly anxious to explore; and thirdly that we share his general approach to the past, though not necessarily, of course, his political and religious convictions.

Tawney never, so far as I know, expressly summed up his attitude to history, but he came near to it in his lecture on *Social History and Literature*.¹

Whatever else the world may contain, man's relations with nature, his commerce with his fellows, and the convictions, aspirations and emotions composing his inner life, are for us, as for the poet, its capital constituents. No one can be fully at home either with it or with himself until, through the vicarious experience of which the vehicle is books, he has learned enough of the triumphs and tragedies of mankind to catch a glimpse of the heights to which human nature can rise and depths to which it can sink. To such comprehension, which less enlightened ages called wisdom, there is more than one road; but . . . for most of us, only reading can convey [an acquaintance] with the methods by which men of like passions with ourselves have wrestled, in circumstances different from our own, with problems of individual and collective existence — religion, law and government, the conquest of the material environment and the ordering of social life — that are also ours . . . It is part of the process by which we surmount the limitations of our isolated personalities and become partners in a universe of interests which we share with humanity.

Here are to be found Tawney's wide-ranging curiosity, his warm sympathy, his preoccupation with social and economic relationships, his deep concern with the ethical content of history, and his belief in its intimate association with the present — all set out with a characteristically challenging blast on the trumpets of rhetoric. Few historians have brought to their study of history so keen a sense of its "social purpose". In consequence, a discussion of Tawney's historical works apart from his general outlook foreshortens their perspective and lessens their intent. For the passionate social and political convictions so brilliantly advanced in *The Acquisitive Society* (1921) and *Equality* (1929, first published 1931) were not only founded upon his diagnosis of historical developments; they affected and informed the diagnosis itself.

Tawney was not a scholar's scholar, in the sense that scholarship is understood these days. His references were not always accurate,

his grasp of statistical method was imperfect, and in consequence his work has proved deceptively easy meat for those whose view of the historian's function is limited to the castigation of the technical peccadilloes of their colleagues. What the persistence of Tawney's influence proves, however, is that there are even more important qualities than that of scholarly precision in the composition of a great historian. Despite serious weaknesses in the handling of evidence — and it would be less than honest to attempt to deny them — Tawney nevertheless laid his finger on all the vital issues with which every historian of his period is still preoccupied today.

He began, in 1912, by tackling the problem of land use in the under-developed economy of sixteenth-century England, as old social and economic relationships gave way under the impact of a price revolution and a demographic explosion.² Though his ethical presuppositions may have made him too ready to see all landlords as the rapacious predators they often were, this book opened up a new era in historical studies in this country, and has formed the starting point for a huge amount of subsequent research. A year later he switched his attention from the condition of the peasantry to that of the urban worker and hired agricultural labourer, with a close study of the causes and consequences of wage regulation by the landed classes in their role as Justices of the Peace.³ In 1924 came the three volumes of *Tudor Economic Documents* edited in collaboration with Eileen Power, which at once made the sixteenth century the best-documented period in the economic history of this country. This remarkable treasure of source material has been used to train generations of students of economic history, and is thus largely responsible for the extraordinary popularity of the period and the subject at all levels of our educational system today. Shortly afterwards appeared Tawney's least known, but one of his best and most original works, the long introduction to an edition of an Elizabethan tract on usury.⁴ This contains a brilliant analysis of the monetary and credit problems of an under-capitalised economy dependent on precious metals for its circulating medium; an account of the slow crumbling of old attitudes to usury before the growth of capitalism; and a vivid description of the ruthless exploitation of their opportunities by the new monied classes.

In 1926 Tawney published his most popular work, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, in which he used his great knowledge of early seventeenth-century English puritan literature to develop a thesis previously put forward by Max Weber. *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* has introduced an exciting new idea to generations of

young people in the English-speaking world, and has made them think about the relationships between religious ideology and economic behaviour in quite a new way. Tawney's thesis was, and remains, controversial, but the questions he raised are of crucial importance to our understanding of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There followed a long gap⁵ during which Tawney worked on that comprehensive study of the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century social scene, which he was never, in the end, to publish, but the skeleton of which was laid out before the fortunate few who heard his Ford Lectures at Oxford in 1936.

In the meantime he paid a visit to China, the result of which was a remarkable pioneer work on the problems of an under-developed country struggling to leap from the fifteenth to the twentieth century⁶ together with some concrete proposals for their (democratic) solution. Tawney applied to modern China his twenty years of study of pre-industrial European societies, and used this knowledge to illuminate and give depth to his analysis.

The disorders of Chinese agriculture . . . are one species of a genus which has been widely diffused, and which is characteristic, not of this nation or that, but of a particular phase of economic civilisation. The persistence of an empirical technique based on venerable usage and impervious to science; the meagre output of foodstuffs which that technique produced; the waste of time and labour through the fragmentation of holdings; the profits wrung from the cultivator by middleman, usurer and landlord; the absence of means of communication and the intolerable condition of such as existed; the narrow margin separating the mass of the population from actual starvation and the periodic recurrence of local famines — such phenomena, if exception be made of a few favoured regions, were until recently the commonplaces of western economic life since men first reflected on it. Scientists analysed them; philanthropists deplored them; governments legislated for them; common men confronted their results, sometimes with patient acquiescence, sometimes with violent revolt; in England and France a whole literature arose to expose and correct them. From the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century the social problem of most parts of Europe, in spite of natural advantages of soil and climate, was what in China and India it is today. It was the condition, not of the industrial wage-earner, but of the peasant. Its solution, in so far as it has been solved, is a thing of yesterday (pp. 78-9).

Like all good historians, Tawney did not aspire to be a prophet, but he could tell a hawk from a handsaw as well as the next man. He brushed aside the notion that peasant discontent was the artificial product of communist propaganda with the tart remark that: "The theory that agitation is produced by agitators, not agitators by agitation, is among the Western doctrines which certain circles in China have absorbed without difficulty" (p. 69). And in 1932, fifteen years before the débâcle, he issued the Kuomintang with a warning of what was in store:

The revolution of 1911 was a bourgeois affair. The revolution of the peasants has still to come. If their rulers continue to exploit them, or permit them to be exploited, as remorselessly as hitherto, it is likely to be unpleasant. It will not, perhaps, be undeserved (p. 74).

If such reflections are the commonplaces of Western thought today, it is in some measure because Tawney made them so thirty years ago.

War had already broken out when Tawney published, in a couple of famous articles, his view of the relationship between shifts in the English social structure and the political events of the 1640s.⁷ These articles reopened the question of the interpretation of the only violent upheaval in our recent history, and began the most famous historical controversy of the last twenty years. Since the battle still rages, it is too early to pass judgment on the ultimate truth of Tawney's hypothesis of the Rise of the Gentry. But his critics as well as his defenders would do well to remind themselves that he opened up a whole new historical perspective. Whatever the upshot, the seventeenth century will never look quite the same again.

Finally, in 1958, there appeared a study of Lionel Cranfield, the Jacobean cloth exporter and government speculator turned crown economic adviser, and eventually Lord Treasurer of England.⁸ In this work Tawney once again broke new ground by forcing attention away from the Parliamentary opposition, where it had rested for decades, and back to the deficiencies of the central government itself. By exploring "the seductive border region where politics grease the wheels of business and polite society smiles hopefully on both" he exposed the corrosion of an aristocratic society under the acid of London finance capital. As a moralist as well as an economic historian, this was a theme admirably suited to his pen, and he has left an indelible picture of the crumbling of ethical values in government circles. He also dealt firmly with a number of popular myths, among them the view that the financial problems of the Early Stuarts were insoluble. "The monarchy does not fight a losing battle against a remorseless tide of rising prices. Before it can be submerged by the advancing flood, it is well on the way to drown itself". So long as James goes on distributing largess on a gigantic scale,

appeals to the tax-payer to part with his hard-earned cash will inevitably fall on stony ground. They provoke the unanswerable retort that, in such conditions, grants to the ruler benefit, not him, but the leeches who suck him dry, and that, even if the public has a duty to keep the king afloat, it is under no obligation to do the same for whatever mob of greedy undesirables the father of his people may choose to take in tow.

The test of an historian is not so much the final validity of his theories as the originality of his approach, his talent in devising

new and more fruitful ways of looking at the problems of the past. Tawney was only too well aware that historical interpretation is a continuing process of adaptation in the light of new ideas and new evidence. He was therefore not surprised — though naturally irritated — to learn that many of his provisional solutions failed to pass unscathed the searching criticism of those whose enthusiasm and interest he had aroused. Tawney will continue to be read for his vision and penetration, his style and his wit, long after the solutions he put forward have been profoundly modified. Because he first posed the questions in the answers to which lie the key to historical understanding of the period, 1540-1640 will remain “Tawney’s century” for an indefinite time to come. He was a great historian as well as a great man.

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Lawrence Stone

NOTES

¹ *Social History and Literature*, (7th National Book League Annual Lecture, 1950), p. 6.

² *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*, (London, 1912).

³ “The assessment of wages in England by Justices of the Peace”, *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, xi (1913).

⁴ T. Wilson, *A Discourse upon Usury*, (London, 1925), edited with introduction by R. H. Tawney.

⁵ But see A. J. and R. H. Tawney, “An Occupational Census of the Seventeenth Century”, *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, v (1934-5).

⁶ *Land and Labour in China*, (London, 1932).

⁷ “The Rise of the Gentry, 1558-1640”, *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, xi (1941); “Harrington’s Interpretation of his Age”, *Proc. Brit. Acad.*, xxvii (1941). And see “The Rise of the Gentry: a Postscript”, *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., vii (1954).

⁸ *Business and Politics under James I: Lionel Cranfield as Merchant and Minister*, (Cambridge, 1958).