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## The Silence of the Opposition

By FRANCIS NEILSON

ONE OF THE DISTINGUISHING MARKS of much of the literary work of the well-known essayists of the middle of the last century is the desire to stimulate their readers to adopt a spirit of healthy skepticism in economics, politics and sociology. Even earlier—from Jonathan Swift to William Hazlitt—the essay assumed an importance in English life which undoubtedly helped to clear away many of the fogs that had settled upon the minds of the reading public.

I have recently surveyed some of the critical articles of the nineteenth century, and I have found it a fascinating exercise. The writings of that period are in strange contrast to the indifferent work of today. Searching criticism and virile opposition by our publicists is far to seek. Indeed, our newspapers, weekly reviews, and magazines are filled with compositions which, for the most part, deal with sheer statement and contain scarcely any historical analysis or pertinent comparison. We have no Swift to make a frontal attack upon the bastions of political iniquity; no Hazlitt to shake the very foundations of an Edmund Burke; no Junius to reveal the sordid methods of statesmen and their toadies. The opposition is silent.

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### Healthy Skepticism and Spiritual Integrity

IN WONDERING how this comes about I have reached the conclusion that the radio and the knowledge-in-a-nutshell publications have destroyed the desire of the inquiring mind for reasoned argument concerning the important matters that affect the everyday life of individuals. It is all too easy now to get bits of information on almost any subject, and this goes a long way toward explaining why the sciolist succeeds so well in impressing our people with his sketchy erudition.

The practice of a healthy skepticism is necessary for the man who has some respect for his own character and his spiritual integrity. If he would protect himself from the virus of false reports and deliberate mendacity he must weigh carefully the statements publicized by the governments, their press and radios, and even those which come from the pulpits and lecture halls of the universities. Polybius, in his "Histories," tells us:

. . . We should therefore not shrink from accusing our friends or praising our enemies; nor need we be shy of sometimes praising and sometimes blaming the same people, since it is neither possible that men in the actual business of life should always be in the right, nor is it probable that they should be always mistaken. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Such was the attitude of viewing affairs that he maintained when he wrote what Mahaffy described as "perhaps the greatest *universal history*, or history of the civilized world, attempted in old times."

The mere propaganda that is gathered in the daily round is usually, after test, proved to be without firm basis or historical background. It is serviceable for the smokeroom of the club and the dinner table before bridge, but that it fails to interest is easily seen by the number of subjects that can be touched upon within a few minutes. Friends of mine tell me

<sup>1</sup>In six volumes, trans. by W. R. Paton, London, William Heinemann, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1922, Vol. I, Bk. I, p. 37.

that most important problems are dealt with in a phrase or two and then someone not interested in that particular question goes off at a tangent upon an utterly irrelevant matter within the range covered by the latest headlines. It seems to be wearisome for many people to give more than a minute or two to any of the political or social crises that abound.

The day is gone when men and women would spend hours upon such questions as foreign policy, the condition of labor, taxation, and trade development or depression. When the mind was not abused by the domestic telephone, the radio, and the snippet press, people had leisure to reflect upon the concerns that affected them as citizens and taxpayers. And, yet, in that period, before invention made us slaves of the hour, men found far more enjoyment in reading Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, and John Morley than people get from the multifarious adjuncts of time-wasting devices such as the movie, the sensational novel, and the funnies.

How, then, can it be expected that such a people will cultivate a healthy skepticism and feel proud in the notion that they are not easily taken in by every bureaucratic current that blows the propaganda about? Surely it is expecting far too much from the young people who clutter up our colleges and universities that in the course of fitting themselves for citizenship as intelligent beings, they should show that they are well grounded in history, economics, and what is called political science. If there be any doubt about this, it is a simple matter to make tests as I have done over a period of thirty years or more, by examining the young B.A.'s in the very subjects in which they have majored. Those who have not taken courses in the exact sciences I find lamentably deficient in the very elements of the studies they are supposed to have mastered.

### Dynamic Criticism for Civic Reform

NOW THERE ARE SOCIETIES composed of men and women who devote themselves to discussions of federal and civic affairs; people who undoubtedly reveal at their meetings a desire to understand why grave problems persist generation after generation and why, after such intensive work in the field of municipal politics, so little improvement is achieved. In speaking to one of the leaders of a well-known group about the work that was done, I learned that "it was a heart-breaking business to make any impression at all." This woman, a well-known novelist, has devoted thirty years of her life to a movement for municipal reform.

I told her that one reason why I thought she was disappointed with the work was that there seemed to be no deliberate criticism reaching the officials responsible for the depraved conditions requiring improvement. I had spoken to a large gathering, and after my address answered probably twenty or thirty questions. So I had an idea of the direction in which their minds seemed to run and could conclude that the movement lacked force, persistence, and knowledge of responsibility. There was a timidity in all they were doing that was indicative of their powerlessness to make the opposition realize they meant business. In other words, there was no healthy skepticism, no dynamic criticism, no virile opposition. The vital point they seemed to avoid as if they were afraid of hurting someone's feelings.

But is it any different with the societies in which men bind themselves for the purpose of pointing out abuses and asking that they be remedied? I have not found that they have any more courage than the women. As for a knowledge of the fundamental causes of poverty, bad housing, child delinquency, gangsters, black markets, and crooked politicians, they do not reveal in their debates a scintilla of it.

Yet, when a meeting is over and one talks to the individual members about the subject that has been discussed, some of them indicate that they know the why and wherefore of these affairs, but for some extraordinary reason, they do not expose what is in their minds in open meeting. What is it? Cowardice or a feeling of uncertainty? Again I ask: How can the healthy skepticism, the glowing criticism which amounts almost to a burning indignation, such as was expressed in the "Latter-Day Pamphlets" by Carlyle and in the "Essays" by Matthew Arnold, be fostered so that some positive worth will result from the discussions?

#### Deficiencies in Educational Methods

THERE HAVE BEEN growing indications in recent years that many men have become conscious of the deficiencies in the methods of education and that they have passed from the college and the university into business with only the mere elements sufficient to start work in an office or a factory. This may explain the growth of adult classes in important centers. I have attended some of these gatherings, and they remind me forcibly of the conditions in England before 1870. Then the only opportunity to learn to read and write that was given to the great body of Nonconformists in certain sections of industrial areas was at the adult schools held on Sunday in places of worship. Tens of thousands of men, women, and children learned their letters, how to write, to multiply and add, in the classes that were held at the meeting houses. I have met hundreds of the people who received the elements of their education in this way. I have known scores of parents who, later on, sat down to lessons with their progeny after they came back from school. And all that took place in the period when there was a healthy skepticism abounding in all ranks of society, just as it was in this country sixty years ago, when first I came to this land.

Few seem to have noticed that the adult classes now forming—some of them already in being—are rather a disheartening commentary on the education men have received during the past generation or so. I would not say that it is to be inferred from this desire—to return to the best that has been thought and said—that it indicates utter dissatisfaction with the curricula of the schools and colleges, but I would point out that what we are now doing in this respect was done in England more than a generation ago for all and sundry, without any call to classes.

There were three men who realized that the elementary education of the time was somewhat narrow and gave little or no opportunity for cultural pursuits. Sir John Lubbock (afterwards Lord Avebury), a banker and educator of great achievement, selected one hundred best books for the masses, and these were widely circulated. Then followed Lord Acton's list which differed widely from Lubbock's. Clement Shorter also made a list of his one hundred best books. The controversy that was aroused at the time as to which was the best set is described in Shorter's "Immortal Memories."<sup>2</sup> I would advise those who are interested in the present "Great Books" movement to read what he had to say about it.

Let us contrast that period with this one. Forty years ago in England business men as a rule finished their schooling early, and only a few had the opportunity of a university course. Now our halls of learning are thronged with thousands, and the librarians tell us that those who pass from them are as illiterate as the war statistics prove.

From my point of view the hundred best books of the sets that I have mentioned came at a time when, after the campaigns of Matthew Arnold, there was a wholehearted desire on the part of business men and thousands of their employees to gather a background of information that they could use

<sup>2</sup> London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1907, Ch. VIII, pp. 225-83.

in forming for themselves a way of life, a means of avoiding the pitfalls of ignorance, and with it a knowledge of the past that would give them a better understanding of present affairs and act as a guide for future conduct. This explains to a great extent why a critical spirit was shown by the people in peace time and why economic and political reforms reached the statute book. Literary and debating societies sprang up in most of the towns of the country, and for at least eight months of the year the best-known lecturers addressed interested and enthusiastic audiences thirsting for knowledge.

#### Apathetic Taxpayers

RECENTLY WHEN THE NEWSPAPERS were full of extraordinary and unexpected changes in federal affairs, I took lunch in the company of some six or eight men. I fully expected to hear critical remarks about the resignation of our Secretary of State and the appointment of a general to succeed him. To my amazement, half an hour passed and not a word was said about these matters. Then, provocatively, I ventured to suggest that an unprecedented move had been made, but no one took any notice of it, and the subject was stillborn.

Here was a question that certainly called for healthy skepticism, for an unusual thing had been done and approved without open consideration or debate by the responsible representatives of the people. But this is only one of hundreds of such incidents that pass with almost lightning rapidity and scarcely get a modicum of adverse criticism. Today I saw a headline in the evening paper, which said that the budget for the defense services is to be eleven billion dollars. I spoke to a man about this, and all I got from him was a shrug of his shoulders and—"What can you do with politicians?"

Many of the momentous problems we have to face can be dealt with by the taxpayers alone. These do not concern

the United Nations committees nor the deliberations of the Big Three or Four. For instance: the proposal for compulsory military service; the license that is given in Congress to the shocking waste in the departments and the enormous burden of the bureaucracy. Although there has been some criticism about such problems as these, it has been mainly expressed by the politicians themselves, and it has moved along strictly party lines. The taxpayers who have to foot the bill have scarcely anything to say, and one can search the newspapers from beginning to end, morning or evening, and look in vain for any comment stronger than a mere reference to what is taking place. The government is what the electorate permits it to be.

The taxpayer is now the servant of the State. He toils for a bureaucracy that does not spin. He no longer is in command. During the past ten or fifteen years a grave change has taken place in the attitude of men and women toward the government. It seems almost antiquated now to refer to the President as "the hired man" (to use Abraham Lincoln's phrase about himself). All the warnings expressed by the Founding Fathers and many of their followers are forgotten. Truth to tell, they were extraordinary prophets, for many of their predictions have come true.

The whole idea that lay at the root of this Republic has been turned upside down since 1912. In these thirty-five years (which cover the first World War and its consequences; and now the second World War, the consequences of which are only so far limned that no one can foresee what the collapse of Europe means) changes have taken place which are so thoroughly opposed to the ideas of Washington and Jefferson that thoughtful men despair of the people ever regaining control of their government.

The change is so grave that when, during the war, I read to



a friend some parts of Jefferson's speeches and writings in the way of healthy skepticism, I was told that it was not patriotic to say such things in the midst of the conflict. And the gentleman was amazed when I told him that his venerated Thomas Jefferson had been guilty of making such statements.

#### The Relapse of Political Democracy

PERHAPS IT MIGHT BE WELL to give some instances of the way in which men in the past criticized governments and their work. I shall not burden the reader with examples taken from our own history because he might know them, or at any rate, it is easy for him to turn to books of reference he can get in any library and cull them for himself.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, I shall take a few from the history of England. And I would ask the reader to remember what has taken place in Congress when a dissentient voice has been raised during the past fifteen years. I would suggest that there is a profound difference in the way the skeptic has been received recently and the manner in which the House of Commons took the criticism of Charles Fox, for instance, whose forte was reasoned skepticism plus attack.

The King's speech to Parliament in 1792 called for an increase in the naval and military forces because, it claimed, "a spirit of tumult and disorder had shown itself in acts of riot and insurrection, *which had evidently proceeded from foreign instigators.*"<sup>4</sup>

When Fox rose to speak on his amendment, he said: "There is not one fact asserted in his majesty's speech which is not false—not one assertion or insinuation which is not un-

<sup>3</sup> For instance: Benjamin Fletcher Wright, Jr., "A Source Book of American Political Theory," New York, The Macmillan Company, 1929; Francis W. Coker (ed.), "Democracy, Liberty, and Property," New York, the Macmillan Company, 1942; Joseph Dorfman, "The Economic Mind in American Civilization, 1606-1865" (2 vols.), New York, The Viking Press, 1946.

<sup>4</sup> Charles James Fox, "Speeches During the French Revolutionary War Period," London and Toronto, J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd.; New York, E. P. Dutton and Co., Everyman's Library, p. 1.

founded. Nay, I cannot be so uncandid as to believe that even the ministers themselves think them true.”<sup>5</sup>

In strong terms he not only denounced the speech from the throne but condemned the ministers root and branch. He showed clearly that it was the intention of the government to deprive the people of meeting to discuss their grievances and that protestants were to be silenced.

It is startling to think of what Fox could say in the House of Commons at the end of the eighteenth century, holding the members spellbound by his criticism, and then to recall what has taken place in the halls of Congress here when some one has dared to brook the authority of the commanding power. Political democracy has suffered an extraordinary relapse. It would be a salutary move on the part of the sponsors of the adult classes which are busy reading Plato, Aristotle, Montaigne, Kant, Shakespeare, and Karl Marx, to spend a dollar upon Fox's speeches in the Everyman Series. In them will be found enough material to make an intelligent student wonder what on earth has happened in this Republic—now a mere political democracy—since Fox boasted in the House of Commons that America had the fairest and justest constitution of any State in the world.

These speeches, as examples of what I call healthy skepticism and virile opposition, the criticism which searches for the truth and has no ulterior intention, cannot be beaten. When Fox dealt with a subject, his hearers knew how the crisis arose, what the situation was, and what the future would be. He poured into his examination of the policies of the government and the conduct of its members a wealth of information and incisive analysis. They are models of political wisdom and straightforward methods of parliamentary debate.

#### Slogans as Propaganda Weapons

IT WAS NOT SO EASY in that day to drug the people with a

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

few senseless slogans. There were fearless pamphleteers then who examined closely the words and actions of ministers. Contrast that period with this through which we have passed during two great wars, and let the student, whether he be in a university or in an adult class, judge for himself the political sagacity of the people now and then. Let us take three of the wonder-working phrases that have stimulated men to kill millions and cripple continents. We heard these high-sounding phrases in the last war. The platforms of America and Great Britain rang with them for four years. But by 1939 almost a generation had passed, and those who had lived through the turmoil over twenty years before had forgotten them. When again they appeared in the headlines, in the editorials, in the speeches of crusading visitors, in Parliament and in Congress, and from pulpiteers, they sounded new, as if they had never been used before. People all round me for six long years embellished their dinner chat with these magic-working slogans.

Few knew during 1914–19—fewer still from 1939–45—that many of the greatest American and British statesmen had poured contempt upon them. But no one dared to do so at any time during the last two wars without suffering the consequences of ministerial displeasure; nay, more in some cases, of being incarcerated in prison without charge.<sup>6</sup> What were these slogans? (1) “The balance of power”; (2) “the liberty of Europe”; (3) “a common cause.” Now read the words which Pitt the Elder (Earl of Chatham), friend of America, directed against the powerful Duke of Newcastle who was the political boss of Britain during the middle of the eighteenth century. Pitt said:

We have suffered ourselves to be deceived by names and sounds—“the balance of power,” “the liberty of Europe,” “a common cause,” and many

<sup>6</sup> During World War II there were 1,847 persons interned in Great Britain as political prisoners under Defence Regulation 18-B.

more such expressions, without any other meaning than to exhaust our wealth, consume the profits of our trade and load our posterity with intolerable burdens. None but a nation that had lost all signs of virility would submit to be so treated.<sup>7</sup>

Have we “lost all signs of virility”? It would seem so, but the virility may not have become impotent. It may still be there; perhaps it is that we are ignorant, that our establishments of education have failed signally to teach history as General Marshall himself told the American Historical Association and the American Military Institute it should be taught.<sup>8</sup> Man after man in the House of Commons has shown clearly the hollowness of such phrases as “preserving the liberties of Europe.” In the past it was the excuse of the jingoes to start a war to maintain “the balance of power.” Gladstone, John Bright, and Richard Cobden expressed themselves clearly upon the true meaning of this slogan. Cobden said:

. . . The balance of power, which has for a hundred years been the burden of kings’ speeches, the theme of statesmen, the ground of solemn treaties, and the cause of wars; which has served, down to the very year in which we write [1836], and which will, no doubt, continue to serve for years to come as a pretence for maintaining enormous standing armaments by land and sea, at a cost of many hundreds of millions of treasure—the balance of power is a chimera! It is not a fallacy, a mistake, an imposture, it is an undescribed, indescribable, incomprehensible nothing. . . .<sup>9</sup>

Here, again, I may make another suggestion to be considered by the sponsors of the adult classes, and that is to add Cobden’s speeches and writings, with an introduction by

<sup>7</sup>Speech of December 2, 1755, as quoted in J. C. Long, “Mr. Pitt and America’s Birthright,” New York, Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1940, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup>In addressing these two groups in January, 1940, Gen. Marshall said: “I believe that much of the colossal waste, much of the tragedy of war are due to the ineffective manner in which history is written and taught. . . . War is a deadly disease that today is affecting hundreds of millions of people in all parts of the world. What we must do is to determine the nature of war. We must isolate the germ and then we must destroy the germ. Before we can do that we must have better histories and better teachers. The student must be told what happened and why.”

<sup>9</sup>“The Political Writings of Richard Cobden” (2 vols.), London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1903, Vol. I, p. 197.

Sir Louis Mallet, to their list of books. They might provide mental ammunition more deadly than the atomic bomb itself. For Cobden's munitions could be used before the conflict and no one would be hurt but the warmongers and their policies.

In another respect I should like to remind the student of the auxiliary methods used in these last two wars to stimulate the deluded and to point out that everything of any consequence that was resorted to by the propagandists to fire the imagination of the indifferent has been tried in every war since Marlborough went to the continent. No one has put it quite so clearly and succinctly as Lord Lauderdale. In 1793 he said:

But is there a man in England ignorant that the most wicked arts have been practised to irritate and mislead the multitude? Have not handbills, wretched songs, infamous pamphlets, false and defamatory paragraphs in newspapers been circulated with the greatest assiduity, all tending to rouse the indignation of this country against France, with whom it has been long determined I fear to go to war? To such low artifices are these mercenaries reduced, that they have both the folly and audacity to proclaim that the New River water has been poisoned with arsenic by French emissaries.<sup>10</sup>

It is almost beyond belief that these threadbare slogans and devices can be repaired in a few months whenever a war begins. Nothing I can think of reveals in so clear a light the persistent stupidity of the masses. Without knowledge it is utterly unreasonable to expect the healthy skepticism that is necessary to defeat the purposes of the war-making politicians. We have forgotten that one hundred and seventy years ago it was the fashion of the hour to denounce Washington and every man that was close to him. At the same time there were those in the ministries of England who did not hesitate to libel their fellow members in the House of Commons, traduce them for not supporting their policies, and

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in "The Political Writings of Richard Cobden," *cit.*, Vol. I, p. 314.

denounce them as traitors to their country. Sir James Mackintosh, in the House in 1815, said:

When Mr. Burke and Mr. Fox exhorted Great Britain to be wise in relation to America, and just towards Ireland, they were called Americans and Irishmen. But they considered it as the greatest of all human calamities to be unjust. They thought it worse to inflict than to suffer wrong: and they rightly thought themselves then most really Englishmen, when they most laboured to dissuade England from tyranny.

During the last war I read a fulsome tribute to William Pitt the Younger, Prime Minister of England during the war against Napoleon Bonaparte. The object of the writer was to draw a parallel showing how Great Britain had in the name of justice and liberty overthrown the Corsican upstart. Now this screed was written to delude those who had not been taught history as General Marshall defined it. For the author showed that he knew his period so well that he could easily suppress many of the facts of Pitt's actions that would have revolted his readers. He did not point out that the statesman he had selected to hold up as an example to be followed was the Prime Minister of whom Macaulay said:

And this man, whose name, if he had been so fortunate as to die in 1792, would now have been associated with peace, with freedom, with philanthropy, with temperate reform, with mild and constitutional administration, lived to associate his name with arbitrary government, with harsh laws harshly executed, with alien bills, with gagging bills, with suspensions of the Habeas Corpus Act, with cruel punishments, inflicted on some political agitators, with unjustifiable prosecutions instituted against others, and with the most costly and most sanguinary wars of modern times. He lived to be held up to obloquy as the stern oppressor of England, and the indefatigable disturber of Europe. . . .<sup>11</sup>

#### The Wit of Sydney Smith

WE NEED A SYDNEY SMITH, "the wisest of witty men, and the wittiest of wise men," but where we are to find one I do

<sup>11</sup> "Critical, Historical, and Miscellaneous Essays," New York, A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1860, Vol. VI, p. 271.

not know. That brilliant son of the church, in his articles to the *Edinburgh Review*, in his sermons, in his letters for a period of fifty years gave to the British people a dose of healthy skepticism of such profound wisdom and incisive wit that worked as great wonders as the masterly satires of Swift. We might take one or two examples from that precious book, "Wit and Wisdom,"<sup>12</sup> which was to be found in the libraries of middle-class people a generation ago. He wrote an article for the *Edinburgh Review* at a time when there was much talk about the peace-loving nations and the necessity for conquering some State for the sake of "the liberty of Europe." This was in 1827. He said: "Alas! we have been at war thirty-five minutes out of every hour since the peace of Utrecht."<sup>13</sup>

Think of it! That meant thirty-five minutes out of every hour during a period of 113 consecutive years. Later, when the interventionists in London thought the time had come to start another conflict, he wrote to Lady Grey, the wife of the Prime Minister, saying:

For God's sake, do not drag me into another war! I am worn down, and worn out, with crusading and defending Europe, and protecting mankind; I *must* think a little of myself. I am sorry for the Spaniards—I am sorry for the Greeks—I deplore the fate of the Jews; the people of the Sandwich Islands are groaning under the most detestable tyranny; Bagdad is oppressed; I do not like the present state of the Delta; Thibet is not comfortable. Am I to fight for all these people? The world is bursting with sin and sorrow. Am I to be champion of the Decalogue, and to be eternally raising fleets and armies to make all men good and happy? We have just done saving Europe, and I am afraid the consequence will be, that we shall cut each other's throats. No war, dear Lady Grey!—no eloquence; but apathy, selfishness, common sense, arithmetic! I beseech you, secure Lord Grey's swords and pistols, as the housekeeper did Don Quixote's armour. If there is another war, life will not be worth having.

"May the vengeance of Heaven" overtake all the Legitimates of Verona!

<sup>12</sup> Boston, R. Worthington Co., London, Longmans and Company, 1874.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

but, in the present state of rent and taxes, they must be *left* to the vengeance of Heaven. I allow fighting in such a cause to be a luxury; but the business of a prudent, sensible man, is to guard against luxury.

There is no such thing as a "just war," or, at least, as a *wise* war.<sup>14</sup>

What would have happened to a clergyman who dared to write to the Prime Minister's wife in such a manner in the spring of 1939?

This book, "Wit and Wisdom," might be added to the list of those being studied by the adult classes, for there is nothing else quite like it for healthy skepticism, delicious wit, and love of mankind. The editor who compiled the work says in the introduction: "In this form it is believed that the fragments of Sydney Smith may rank beside the thoughts of Pascal without his mysticism, and eclipse the wit of La Rochefoucauld without his misanthropy."<sup>15</sup>

The taxpayers never learn enough to protect themselves, and never yet, since the days of the Reformation, was there a people that had not sufficient domestic enemies near by to keep them busy at home. Perhaps the work to be done by the adult classes will inaugurate a new race of thinkers—those who will find more wisdom between the covers of ancient works than any radio, movie, or digest can purvey to the folk. It may be that a knowledge of the past will make men conscious of the necessity for healthy skepticism in all things, and in a few generations the blight of ignorance may be eradicated. What is wanted is a spiritual purge to eliminate from the body politic the ideas that have been rampant in men's minds and which have worked for their destruction.

*New York*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii.