

## FRANCIS NEILSON'S WINSTON CHURCHILL EXAMINED – Why the author of the 1915 anti-war tract "How Diplomats Make War" came to hold Winston Churchill in such low esteem

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It has been nearly eighteen years ago that I began to compile a Biographical History of the Geogist Movement. The contributions of thousands of individuals have surfaced from the many published articles and conference papers to which I have had access.

In every generation that has come and gone since the decades of Henry George's campaign for societal justice leading figures have emerged to carry on. A rare few are remembered beyond those of us who continue to embrace the principles and mission embraced by Henry George.

Francis Neilson deserves to be among this group.

If Francis Neilson had written nothing else, historians of the First World War would recognize him for his 1915 book, *How Diplomats Make War*.

Even as the fighting was underway on the battlefields of Europe and the seas surrounding Britain, Neilson warned that the outcome would change nothing. The intrigues and manipulations that had pulled country after country into the war were certain to be repeated. As Neilson wrote:

"Governments will look after their own interests; but with people it is different, for no Government will do anything really worth while for them unless they keep clearly in view all those factors which have caused so much suffering and death, and firmly decide to rid themselves of pernicious systems which ferment wars." (Neilson, 1915, pp.36-367)

How did Francis Neilson come to know what he knew about the workings of diplomats and governments?

Already by 1915 he had come a long way from his quite humble beginnings in the town of Birkenhead, across the River Mersey from the city of Liverpool. For someone who developed into a writer of significant talent and energy, he was a poor student and felt confined by formal schooling. He left school in 1881 at age 14 to spend five years apprenticed to an engineering firm. During this time he developed a love of reading and the theatre.

His interest in the political realm was nurtured by his father. Will Lissner explains:

"Uneducated though he had been, the father was a cultured man, a Liberal of the old school. His library had practically all the speeches and pamphlets of Cobden and Bright that were the product of the campaigns for the repeal of the corn laws, the campaigns that helped to end the 'Hungry Forties'." (Lissner, 1947, p.144)

Another important influence on him was an uncle, who read to Francis and his siblings from the works of John Stuart Mill and other major contributors to English literature.

By the time he reached age 18 he was hungry for new experiences. And so, he left for the United States and New York City where, among other things, he learned a good deal

about the racism that prevented people of color from achieving their true potential living in the United States.

His own economic circumstances were not much better, and a year later he moved to Boston where, as he later wrote, he: "... spent the free time that unemployment afforded him in the Boylston Street Library, reading every work it contained on socialism." (Lissner, 1947, p.144) However, the writings of socialists failed to satisfy him either intellectually or morally.

Returning to New York City, he continued to study and attend lectures. At Cooper Union he heard Henry George speak. After that lecture, Henry George gifted him a copy of his book, *Progress and Poverty*, which pulled Francis into the growing number of Henry George supporters.

Yet, his immediate interests had become the theatre and writing. The second play he wrote was enormously successful, taken by a road company on a tour in 1895. Hired as stage manager to take another play to London, Francis returned to England in 1897. His career in the theatre now took off

In London he soon joined forces with others who were voicing opposition to what they saw as British imperialism.

Then, by 1902 he had become a vocal supporter of Henry George's arguments in favor of the public collection of the rent of land described by fellow Liberals as *land value taxation*.

Francis was now at the center of the "great Liberal revival" and was elected to the House of Commons in 1909, where he headed the group of Liberals championing the taxation of land values. Their efforts were undermined by landed interests and failed to gain widespread public support for reasons still debated by historians and those in Britain who continue to work for this reform.

In any event, efforts on behalf of societal reforms were about to take a back seat to the war effort. Disgusted with the political situation, Neilson, says Will Lissner:

"... resigned his seat in Parliament, retired from his position in his party, and quitted England for the United States, where he swore his allegiance to the Crown and became an American citizen. He was through with politics." (Lissner, 1947, p.154)

Neilson's long-time friend back in Britain, Ashley Mitchell years later lamented over what they had concluded was the abandonment by Britain's political leaders of any serious effort to solve the real problems of their society:

"Up to 1914, up to the outbreak of the first world war, British politics were based on something like principle. At any rate, the issues were plain and the ordinary man could understand them. The conflict was between reform and privilege. The progressive party stood for reform and the other party stood in defense of privilege, and even worse, in favor of reaction." (Mitchell, 1947, p.295)

Although Neilson turned away from politics, he was far from through with the struggles for social justice. In an essay written in 1921 titled "Duty to Civilization," he took the opportunity to explain why he had left Britain:

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## FRANCIS NEILSON'S CHURCHILL (from page 4)

"I know not any statesman monarchial or republican, in Europe who has my sympathy; and, for the past twenty-five years, I have been remarkably consistent in my impartiality in this matter. ..."

"I have found but one, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, who was worth saying a good word for." (Neilson, 1921, p.2)

Keeping the above expressed sentiment in mind, Neilson recalled his first introduction to Winston Churchill:

"Shortly after the Boer War, he was pointed out to me in a Manchester hotel; I think it must have been after he crossed the floor of the House -- about the time he deserted the Tories and joined the Liberal party." (Neilson, 1953, p.252)

In his autobiography, Francis reprinted the assessment of Churchill made by Frederick S. Oliver in *The Mirrors of Downing Street*, an assessment with which he obviously concurred:

"From his youth up Mr. Churchill has loved with all his heart, with all his mind, with all his soul, and will all his strength, three things -- war, politics, and himself. ..."

"He loved war for its dangers, he loves politics for the same reason, and himself he has always loved for the knowledge that his mind is dangerous - dangerous to his enemies, dangerous to his friends, dangerous to himself. ..."

I can think of no man I have ever met who would so quickly and so bitterly eat his heart out in Paradise." (Neilson, 1953, p.254)

Winston Churchill provided plenty of ammunition for those, such as Neilson, who challenged Churchill's description of world events and the roles he played in those events.

For Neilson, an important personal loss may have triggered his quest to get to the truth. One of his sisters was a passenger on the *Lusitania*, torpedoed by a German submarine in 1917 under the strangest of circumstances. Much has been written about this sinking and the roles of those in charge at the Admiralty, Churchill included.

The *Lusitania* carried not only passengers but a huge shipment of arms and ammunition. And yet, when the ship entered British-controlled waters no destroyer escort was provided, even though British naval intelligence knew that at least one German submarine was patrolling in the immediate area. Thus was raised the question of whether the *Lusitania* was sacrificed because the death of its American passengers would sufficiently anger the Americans to bring them into the war on the side of Britain. Two days before the sinking, Churchill left for France to participate in a Naval conference.

At the Admiralty, the intelligence group was closely tracking a German submarine. Records for this submarine, U20, confirm that the British Admiralty had intercepted and decoded every message sent from U20, right up to the sinking of the *Lusitania*.

Prior to his departure, Churchill and other Admiralty officials decided to recall the escort vessel because the ship was older and therefore a potential victim of submarine attack. However, no warning was sent to the captain of *Lusitania* that he would have no escort. Left behind at the Admiralty

and in charge was a 75-year old First Sea Lord named Jacky Fisher, described in several accounts as showing signs of senility. Reports continued to arrive of attacks and sinkings made by U20 but still nothing was done to alert *Lusitania*.

Years later, in 1935, historian Thomas A. Bailey at the University of Nebraska examined all of the evidence and interviewed both survivors and key officials. He notes:

"There was great confidence in the remarkable speed of the vessel, and a general feeling approaching boastfulness among the ship's officers, Cunard officials and others that the *Lusitania* could run away from any possible assailant." (Bailey, 1935, pp.65-66)

Some naval experts also thought the ship was unsinkable. This was probably true of the ship if its hull had not been filled with ammunition. Biley also writes that the *Lusitania's* captain stated in testimony that he had slowed his ship in order to time his arrival in Liverpool with the tide. Clearly, errors in judgment rather than a decision to sacrifice *Lusitania* for the greater need of American support resulted in the sinking. Yet, the stage was set for future charges of conspiracy.

At the time, Neilson offered no published criticism of Churchill or the Admiralty. That would come from other quarters. Decades later, Neilson described Churchill's reaction to criticism this way:

"His dolor when the shafts of criticism are aimed at him is really pathetic. For one who never had any mercy upon a political opponent, he reveals a tenderness that quails at reproach." (Neilson, 1955, p.347) And, further:

"What a champion of the tactics of recrimination he was when he was out of office; but what a sensitive, tender skin he has when shafts of recrimination are aimed at him." (Neilson, 1955, p.351)

This was made quite clear as Winston's war memoirs were published and reviewed. What troubled Neilson most, it seemed, was what he saw as Winston's opportunistic shifts in that which he championed or attacked.

As one who never abandoned the struggle to solve "the land question," Neilson could not be faulted for looking upon Churchill as a man with no strong moral convictions. As Neilson observes:

"Not even Gladstone excelled Churchill in delivering homilies upon naughty politicians and their nations. But students of the past wars in this century should be able to conclude by now that moral sentiments expressed by politicians are slippery things. Still, it is possible to form a judgment as to why they change so frequently and adapt their morals to fit the circumstances that arise from time to time." (Neilson, 1949, p.201)

Churchill was getting ahead of the historians by presenting his rationale for decisions he took that were certain to attract criticism in the cooler post-war atmosphere. Neilson jumped in right away:

"There are so many passages in this work to which the industrious and well-informed student will take exception that it is difficult to know which one or two should be considered in a critique. But it is essential for the reader to remember that Churchill is not only a protagonist, but one who shows in his work that it was necessary for him to defend his actions. ..."

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## FRANCIS NEILSON'S CHURCHILL (from page 5)

"Therefore, many of his recordings should not be accepted as history but as the opinions of a man who has a personal case to present." (Neilson, 1949, p.202)

Neilson adds in his review of the third of Churchill's volumes that:

"As autobiography, the volumes are of great value, for they reveal a unique personality who is not afraid to expose many of his defects, and seems to glory in his Jesuitical career." (Neilson, 1950, pp.96-97)

At bottom, concludes Neilson, Winston Churchill exhibits all of the traits of the politician and few of the statesman:

"Foresight, consistency, and logic are not political attributes, and if any one should doubt this statement, all he has to do to confirm it is to read Churchill's book, 'While England Slept', and 'Step by Step'." (Neilson, 1950, p.108)

Francis Neilson may have revealed to his close friends why he felt compelled to respond so extensively and for so many years to Churchill's autobiographical memoirs. He surely understood that future historians would closely examine the record and provide dispassionate analysis. In 1954, Neilson produced a stern portrait of the British leader, *The Churchill Legend*, which remains worth repeating despite the passage of years:

"Churchill had but one aim; only one desire. In *The Grand Alliance* he states, 'I have only one purpose, the destruction of Hitler, and my life is much simplified thereby'. It is his life that is to be satisfied. England? Europe? Are they merely the arenas that provide the accessories of the conflict? ..."

"His life is to be 'simplified' by throwing the world into chaos again. His purpose is the destruction of one man; and the last chance to maintain the culture of a thousand years must be abandoned because a politician's life is to be 'simplified'." (Neilson, 1954, p.444)

Neilson took the long view of history. He saw the rise of fascism and the Hitler regime as the inevitable consequence of vengeance rather than shared responsibility for the First World War. He never came to terms with the making of war against noncombatants, to the wholesale destruction of great cities and the physical, artistic and cultural accomplishments of earlier generations.

When the second global conflict erupted, Neilson committed himself to a daily recording of the events as reported and as his remaining sources in Britain conveyed to him. The first volume of this epic journal (Neilson, 1940) was published in 1940, with an introduction by University of Chicago President, Robert M. Hutchins.

One reviewer, a Professor of History at the University of Nebraska, offered this assessment of Neilson's effort:

"Mr. Neilson's diary from September 1, 1939, to October 31, 1940, gives the reader no new information on the events of the last two years. The book's importance, if any, lies, therefore, in the reflections of the author on these events. ..."

"The reflections are those of a disillusioned pacifist who sees nothing but the utter futility of war. They are those of a revisionist publicist (*How Diplomats make War*, 1915) who

holds Churchill, France, and Russia responsible for the last war and who is eager to start a revisionist movement for the War of 1939. ..."

"They seem to be those of a crusader who loves to utter unpopular opinions, but who leaves the reader with the feeling that he would argue with the same fervor on the other side if only it were unpopular." (Winnaker, 1942, pp.340-341)

The world Francis Neilson hoped would emerge following the end of the Second World War was not to be. He put a good deal of the blame on Winston Churchill for making a deal with the devil Joseph Stalin in a desperate effort to save the British empire. Churchill, he knew, could not plead ignorance:

"He not only knew of the secret treaty made during the First World War with Russia, in which her aims to the west of the Vistula were set down in clear sentences but, as Minister of War, after the Revolution of 1917, he had aided and abetted the counter-revolution..."

"If there were one man outside the borders of Russia during World War II, who knew what Russia desired and intended to obtain, if Germany was conquered, it was Churchill." (Neilson, 1955, p.348)

Could Russia's westward advance into the heart of Europe have been prevented by mere diplomacy? Neilson in a later passage from the same writing is pragmatic:

"It was a trick of fate, and she -- the merciless jade -- made it impossible for him to play other than an ignominious part in every transaction that was to ensue. For our modern historians and editors to labor under the delusion that, at any time after the retreat of the German armies from Russia, he could have changed the course of events is a notion that vanishes after a moment's consideration." (Neilson, 1955, p.353)

Nevertheless, Neilson joined with those who felt for the people whose expectation of liberation was betrayed. Germany's capacity to wage war was destroyed, the fascist regime brought down.

The French and Dutch were liberated with much destruction of their cities. The Italians were purged of their fascist aspirations and then liberated from German occupation. But, what about the future of the people of Poland, of Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, Rumania, Albania, Bulgaria, or the Baltic states? The future looked bleak to Neilson:

"The Europe of twenty years ago no longer exists; even the Europe of Clemenceau, Lloyd George, and Woodrow Wilson is gone. And instead of peace and disarmament, we have crushing burdens of taxation, and a foreboding future with the prospect of the hydrogen bomb. ..."

"Is it any wonder that some of the experts are now devising plans for us to live like rats in cellars and underground shelters?" (Neilson, 1955, p.354)

Winston Churchill outlived Francis Neilson by four years. His life and the times in which he lived have been the subject of countless books, conferences, documentaries, and feature films. (concluded on page 13)

**FRANCIS NEILSON'S CHURCHILL (from page 14)**

As Neilson's contemporaries died off, the memory of his challenging intellect and his passion for justice died off as well.

There is irony in the fact that the ongoing struggle to solve "the land question" finds stronger support from the 1909 words spoken by Winston Churchill than in the many writings and lifelong efforts of Francis Neilson. Neilson would not be surprised by this. He understood the fleeting nature of fame and notoriety.

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