

THE SWITCH-BACK DECADE (1925-1935)

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THE last decade of the reign of George V., completed by the Jubilee in 1935, was a period of extraordinary political events; the rise of Hitler, the Italo-Abysinian crisis, the imperial adventures of Japan (particularly in China), the General Strike in 1926, the formation of the National Government in Great Britain, and the gigantic Roosevelt experiments in United States. Prosperity succeeded by depression; democracy replaced by dictatorship; gold knocked from its high pedestal; and the continued march of economic nationalism, with ingenuity devoted to the building of barriers—tariffs, quotas—exchange blocked, immigration restrictions; these happenings are so familiar to us that we can hardly get them in proper historical perspective. The mechanical changes in the period just concluded are themselves striking: the radio, the talkie, the stream-lined automobile, the air-conditioned railway car, the four and one-half day Atlantic ocean service, the long distance aeroplane flights and regular air service, and in Canada the use of the aeroplane in northern mining areas.

What date in these years is the significant one for historians? Some suggest 1931, during which England was forced off the Gold Standard and the *Statute of Westminster* was passed. Whatever date is chosen, it can be said that the historians of the future will regard this decade as not less important than the years between 1776 and 1789. Bruce Lockhart, in his book of reminiscences of these years, uses as his title "Retreat from Glory", perhaps intending it in a personal way, but it is singularly apt as a description of the years of the yellow leaf, when "the worm, the canker, and the grief" are ours alone.

Looking backward, one sees some support for the view that the scientific impulse of discovery and occupation by which Europe girdled the world shows signs of slowing down. There is a retreat from Europe, in evidence of which the *Statute of Westminster* and the *India Bill* are instances. Has Europe completed its mission? Are Europeans to become (in the phrase of Senor Madariaga) citizens of nations which are "Empire builders retired from busi-

ness?" The note of despair in Streseman's interview with Bruce Lockhart is poignant:

Nothing remains now except brute force. The future is in the hands of the new generation; and the youth of Germany, which we might have won for peace and for the new Europe, we both have lost. That is my tragedy and your crime.

What is the answer to economic nationalism, incipient imperialism, and the obstinate character of the disease of unemployment? Is it *science*?

Our industrial system depends on the application of scientific thought to our physical environment. Science ever seeks the power of prophecy,—the ability to arrange the data and generalize the conclusions so that it can predict the path of a comet or the direction of chemical action, the result from the cause, and thus "*understand all mysteries and all knowledge.*" This depends on a reasonable consistency in cause and effect. The physicist is now, however, beginning to suspect that things are not determined so surely and ineluctably. But nowhere else is the risk of error so great as in the so-called social sciences. Here the data deal with human beings. The field of action of life is not a plane where there is a simple parallelogram of forces, nor even a four or three dimensional field. There is an infinite number of possible actions and re-actions. Life, with its power growth, is in vivid contrast to the machine; discipline, achievement, loyalty, faith, are outside the category of Frankenstein.

The tendency to treat men as digits in statistical analysis, as effectives in national economy and power, is a subtle and dangerous mistake which colours much of our modern thought. Sir Arthur Eddington in his recent book on "The New Pathways of Science" strikes a characteristic scientific note in a reference to the origin of man illustrative of this tendency. "By a trifling hitch of machinery—not of any serious consequence in the development of the universe—some lumps of matter of the wrong size have been occasionally formed. These lack the purifying process of intense heat or the equally efficacious absolute cold of space. Man is one of the gruesome results of this occasional failure of antiseptic processes."

The most startling exhibit of this predilection for treating men not as individuals sharing a universal human destiny, but as units, is to be seen in the increasing authority being exercised by the new nation state over its citizens. Tribalism and Industrialism have been combined to form Economic Nationalism, and

the idea of growth, of life as opposed to the cold logic of science and the relentless drive of enterprise. The family is the shock absorber of *laissez-faire* individualism. It is a communistic institution, taking from each according to ability and distributing to each according to need. In its rural frame it accepted responsibility for the care of the aged, the unemployed, the sick, the feeble-minded, the young. The emphasis is on the growing of souls and spiritual capacity, as against the idea of the convulsive regeneration of Calvinistic tradition. Often, however, though lip service is paid to the evangelical idea, the other basis of growth is still inherent in the mode of living. This antithesis in religious doctrine has its counterpart in the economic sphere. Perhaps Tawney lays too much stress on the Puritan origins of modern industrialism, but the emphasis on the individual and his economic salvation in Utopian economic theory can be contrasted with a view of growth within a framework of duties, responsibilities, privileges, set against a background of association between soil season and family group. It would give a distorted picture if the contrast were thrown into sharp relief, since ideas, traditions and institutions have a habit of combining contrary concepts in a somewhat illogical way. The economist with his eye on the representative firm, international trade, and monetary phenomena often assumes the self-interest of the individual. Stephen Leacock argues that this doctrine of the invisible hand of self-interest is about all that is left of Adam Smith. This is arguable, since Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* lays strong emphasis on altruism. But there is no doubt that much of economic effort is for the support of families, and much of economic reward is distributed for the upkeep of homes. The school is really the extension of the education in the home, but the modern State has gradually assumed paternal and even maternal functions, and by individualizing the population in its social policies has built up a whole network of responsibilities which it has taken over from the family.

Legislation multiplies, and a "calculus of legal expediency" and a ready reckoner by way of administrative red-tape take the place of the moral and psychic directives of family responsibilities, order, and affection. The pay envelope has too often only individual rather than family significance, the authority of the wage-earning father showing signs of decline.

But it will be objected that the family under our urban *mores* cannot resume its functions. Urban life is the expression of science and enterprise, but it has a way of injuring human personality and sometimes human institutions. It has dissipated the duties and

satisfactions of the alliance between the miracle of growth outside and family tasks, diminished the sense of wonder, and increased the artificiality of human society. The enfeeblement of human character, the lack of understanding between generations, the insufficiency of the culture of the elementary schools, and the loss of traditional sanctions can be traced to the invasion of much urbanized mass psychology that sharpens the acquisitive, introduces a cacophony of noise and nervous explosions, and confuses ideals. Typical consequences are the postponement of marriage because of the difficulty or the risk of meeting modern acquisitive standards of living; alleged progress in the increase of the period of preparation of the young for life's tasks resulting in restless demands for sexual freedom, dissatisfaction because of too remote objectives when youth needs the discipline of nearer destinations and intelligible tasks. This often leads to the dreaming of Utopias for the reformation of the whole of society, when the immediate need of the young is the acquiring of some special aptitude or skill in the near-by.

Another distinctively human factor is that of the *heritage*—those intangible intuitive responses to the challenge of environment which are characteristic of a race or a people. These psychological momenta are the imponderables of history. Who could have predicted queues of income-tax payers in England in the crisis of 1931? Is there any yardstick by which we can measure the family feeling engendered throughout the British Commonwealth of Nations by the King's jubilee? Free autonomous communities carrying on a tradition, the Imperial aspect disappearing, and the Empire becoming less a political organization and more of a Church with a creed of political freedom and parliamentary government!

Another example of the way in which a tradition may prove powerful is the way in which feudalism in England has operated to maintain rural life against the encroachment of industrialism. The King is a country gentleman. A man may make his money in trade, but he seeks to establish himself in a country seat, exhibits his livestock at the country fair, is obliged to spend certain periods of the year in residence in the country, and is expected to share in the support of rural institutions.

In Canada how rare it is for men of wealth to live for some months on the land, or to take any real interest in rural life, or even in the agricultural shows! There is no revivifying flow of money into rural life, with the result that those on the land cannot claim, as neighbors or as patrons, the possessors of great wealth. The Experimental Farms of the Department of Agriculture perhaps constitute a substitute.

One need only reflect on the number of breeds of livestock developed by the landed gentry of Great Britain to discern a little of their great contribution to agriculture in a country supposedly industrial—a contribution, it must be noted, that was not State-aided, but was due to a social tradition. It is significant that the leader of this element in the country must qualify as a country gentleman. It reveals how difficult it is for a Beaverbrook to unseat a Baldwin who breeds pigs.

Then there is the heritage of *chivalry*. The standard of the gentleman, of honor, of the Happy Warrior,—the unquestioning obedience of the soldier, not far removed from the consecration of the saint in its psychology! The Corinthian prose of Burke reveals the features of the chivalry which, despite Burke's pessimism, lives on, as the story of Lawrence shows:

The age of chivalry is gone... The unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honor, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil by losing all its grossness.

The *êthos* of our society, with its traditional *moral standards*, emphasizing the responsibility of the individual, is another human cement of the community that does not derive from scientific analysis or discovery or present exigency. The proverbs of a people enshrine a series of directions with which literate and illiterate have met their life problems. Decisions have been made on the basis of this folk-lore of the past, and peoples have lived by this accumulated wisdom. But how easy to find excuse for evading the copy-book maxims! No excuse has been so meretricious as the modern one of externalising our evils. This generation has mislaid the devil, and we tend to find the cause of our troubles outside. Our forefathers were quite right when they found him inside. A whole literature is now being built up to show that honesty, thrift, industry, perseverance, punctuality, are not a match for debt adjustment, easy or rubber money, or some political contrivance to "make selective Peter pay for collective Paul."

There was a genuine self-respect of the artisan which despised riches, and made indecent greed easily recognizable and reprehensible. But we now tend to consider all wages as honestly earned and all profits as dishonest. Mob blackmail, collective "ca-canny," the use of political power to evade obligation weaken the fibre of a people and are forms of greed as much as the monopolising

of directorates or of profits, political expediency which seeks or keeps the emoluments of office by a false prospectus, or alleged business efficiency which sacrifices humanity to the god of costs. The task of holding the scales evenly is that of our democracies.

Closely allied with this ethical heritage there is the need for establishing the *unity of life*. The purpose of life is sacred. The dichotomy between secular and sacred, between work and leisure, must give place to a unitary conception. This decade in particular has come to emphasize leisure, and somehow regards work as slavery and leisure as freedom. Certainly there is much work that seems to be of the blind alley variety; but leisure without meaning is as bad as work without purpose. Then there is the sanctity of personality and the question of freedom. As never before, the Western World has a duty to perform in maintaining the idea of freedom.

The State finds it difficult to assimilate its policies to these concepts of human brotherhood, family solidarity, rural environment, and the traditional heritage of chivalry, tradition, freedom, moral sense and integrated personality. Religion has another kind of authority by which it should seek to make these things prevail. We are much concerned now about pacifism, but there is much that needs to be done to re-create the Non-conformist Conscience. Many groups in the west, such as the Mennonite, Hutterite, Doukhobor and Mormon, have sought the frontier in order to be free from civil interference. There is a need for re-affirmation of the tolerance of the frontier for those who look for the Inner Light.

We tend to evade any form of martyrdom for a cause, nationally and individually. Crusades leave our cynic minds cold. The decade has seen the crushing of individual conscience. Sir Edward Grey referred to the lights going out over Europe in 1914, and the unlikelihood of their being lit in this generation. The darkness seems to be illumined by flashes from the funeral pyre of many things we have held dear, and many post-war hopes.

I recall during the war a poignant occasion at Cambrai, when we buried our dead in a night lit by the fire of burning villages and the gun-flashes. It may have been some kind of atavistic intuition—a racial memory of the Catacombs, or the Cave of Plato, or some dim allegory—but as the chaplain recited from memory words of hope of immortality, there dropped from us the

fatalism, the bitter scepticism of hard war years, and we realized that "the spirit of man is the candle of the Lord."

In the darkness and disillusion of repudiated obligations—personal and national—shirked collective responsibilities, threats to personal freedom and personality, we must hold firmly if at times somewhat intuitively to the eternal verities, and to a confidence in the power of what the older metaphysicians called benevolence.