

# AN ANTIDOTE TO "TOTAL" WAR

CHARLES CLAY

Dreams, books, are each a world; and books, we know,  
Are a substantial world, both pure and good.  
Round them, with tendrils strong as flesh and blood,  
Our pastime and our happiness will grow.

—WORDSWORTH.

IN "total" war there is always the problem arising from too complete an immersion in its widespread activities. The individual citizen, far from being over willing to leave everything without question to others, involves himself deeply, in a psychological manner. We brood over most of the war issues in our minds during practically all of our waking hours. Each of us becomes his own strategist; we note the blunders of the Allies, as we see them; we outline the counterstroke that would change the tide of war; we watch the flow of battle, as it is recorded fragmentarily in the press despatches and in the radio guesses. In other words, the war is ever with us, not only to the unsettlement of our routines but also to the unsettlement of our spirits. Acute and dangerous psychological tensions are consequently set up.

Is there no antidote to this serious and far-reaching threat to the adequate prosecution of our struggle? There is; and it is near at hand, inexpensive, and available to all.

In the reading of books we can escape momentarily from the stresses of "total" war. In books—whether wise books, witty books, books of imagination, books which unroll the past or make a pathway through the stars or delve into the mysteries of matter or elucidate the record of the rocks—in books we have the required antidote. In high or intimate converse with books we can refresh our mind and steady our outlook.

Tributes to these qualities of books are not difficult to find. Nearly everyone is familiar with Gibbon's declaration that he would not have exchanged his early and invincible love of reading for all the treasures of India; almost as many are familiar with Fenelon's refusal to accept all the crowns of all the kingdoms of the Europe of his day for his books. Reading is, indeed, the ever-open door to the great riches of the past and the great life of the present, and he that loves reading has everything

within his reach. Late in life Sir W. Robertson Nicoll confessed that reading had been his chief pleasure—

It has given me so much pleasure that I feel that I am in danger of falling into extravagance when I speak of it. The pleasure has gone on increasing, and is stronger now than ever. Of many things we grow weary in the course of years, but nowadays I have a greater happiness in reading than ever I had before, and I am thankful that this is so. For reading is not an expensive nor an unreasonable pleasure. It is within the power of all to get the joy of reading, and the independence of reading, for it means a great deal of independence and separation from care. Besides, it is an elevating pleasure if the books are rightly chosen, and ought to brighten and elevate and purify the character.

As Carlyle truly said, "of all the things which man can make here below, by far the most momentous, wonderful, and worthy are the things we call books." The tributes fly thick and fast. "Books are lighthouses erected in the great sea of time" (Whipple); "books are the ever-burning lamps of accumulated wisdom" (Curtis); "books are legacies great genius leaves to mankind" (Addison); "books bulge back the horizon of life for human beings" (Stidger); "books are hoards of wealth you can unlock at will" (Wordsworth).

Almost from the beginning of World War II, the people of Britain made the re-discovery of books. At first, books were employed to break the tedium of blackouts and petrol rationing which kept civilians close to firesides; now, books are employed for a higher end—for the benison they give to bruised, strained, overwrought, minds. The British appreciate Jesse Lee Bennett's appraisal of books: "Books are the compasses and telescopes and sextants and charts which other men have prepared to help us navigate the dangerous seas of human life." When the war began, the British publishers were in a panic; now they find sales of new books holding, even increasing in certain lines. And the secondhand stalls along Charing Cross Road were never so crowded. Their stocks go like the proverbial hot cakes. It's hard to say who buys the collected sermons of the Rev. Melchizedek Gleeck, or the poems of Felicia Hemens, or a report of the drainage problems of Cardiff (1902), or *My Ten Years As Missionary in Uganda*, but the stalls sell even those!

We of the Canadian home front might well emulate the British people's wise and insatiable desire for books at this trying time in our national history. We are involved in perhaps the most gigantic enterprise the world has ever seen—the dis-

aster of totalitarian war. We need every single aid to prosecute our share of it with vigor, with efficiency, and with a minimum of spiritual expense. Books and reading are indisputably one such aid. Let us examine further what books can do for Canadians in wartime.

\* \* \* \*

There is scarcely a mood, hardly ever a fear, certainly never a sorrow, which has not been explored in words by some exceptional mind. The entire range of those human experiences has been expressed in beautiful or striking, in truly memorable, language in books. And if we, in the throes of personal contact with such experiences, turn to what genius has felt and known, surely we must profit thereby! The danger of our being wounded or destroyed by unavoidable wartime emotional explosions is immeasurably lessened by sagacious familiarity with the benison of books.

Nor does the matter stop there. This important contribution of books to our lives is enhanced because of the power of books to increase our delight in every other outlet for our energies; inclination will carry us to books which whet our enthusiasms for nature or science or history or art, or whatever else may capture our interest. The books which are made for us—when we find them—are magic tokens which eliminate age from our mind, roll back the years to Homer, open the veils of the future for a vision of the sociological wonders to come. This vast influence of books may have been stated many times, but hardly anywhere as well as in W. E. Gladstone's famous dictum—

Books are a living protest on behalf of mental force and mental life. I am far from saying that literary culture ought to be made an idol. I am far from saying that any intellectual processes whatever will satisfy all the needs and all the wants of the human spirit. But I say that they are full of noble guidance, and that they are necessary conditions of every wholesome struggle to resist the invasions of the merely worldly mind and habit of life, and to enable us to hold our ground against the necessary and constantly growing hurry and excitement around us, which carry us into a vortex from which we cannot escape. We cannot escape from it, but we may to a great extent fortify ourselves by a resort to the highest influence against becoming the slaves of the exterior circumstances in which we live.

Here, indeed, is a marvellous source of strength, delight, satisfaction for us during wartime. On every hand can we find books that will help us to understand not only human experiences but also the elaborate organization of life. There are

able-minded books, strength-giving books, purifying books, courage-producing books; there are books that evoke eagerness for living, resolution for service, conviction for pressing onward. And most of all there are vast armies of books peopled with imaginary men and women "who never trod the earth but are the children of their creators." Listen to Mr. Charles J. Finger's estimate<sup>1</sup> of this brave company:

They are, for all their lack of flesh and blood, sometimes more real to us than those we meet in daily life. They have helped, sustained, cheered, invigorated us; and we know we should have been immeasurably the poorer had we not known Corporal Trim, and Tom Jones, and Sir Roger de Coverley, and John Falstaff, and Herve Riel, and Brant, and Red Jacket, and Judge Pyneheon, and Puritan Priseilla.

The reasons for turning to books are thus clearly demonstrable; they are many, varied, irrefutable reasons. We can turn to poetry for aspects of universal and infinite truth; to fiction for character study, Homeric adventure, affectionate humor; to biographies and histories for precepts and examples; to Nature studies for lessons in the curious combination of change and immutability that is in all existence. We can read old books, sitting studiously and holding high converse with the mighty dead; we can read new books and discover the diastole and systole of contemporary life. We can find consolation, inspiration, perspective, in books. At one end of the scale, we can employ books to attain a sense of values; at the other end, we can use them as a deliberate but dignified and salutary antidote to "war fatigue".

As Carlyle assures us, "all that mankind has done, thought, been, is lying as in magic preservation in the pages of books." In good books we do find inlook, outlook, uplook. As we grow ready for it, we will always discover what is needful for us in a book. And those of us who neglect to dip into this fabulous reservoir of comfort and tranquillity, of inspiration and excitation, of guidance and benediction, well deserve Shakespeare's castigation<sup>2</sup>—

He hath not fed of the dainties that are bred in a book; he hath not eat paper, as it were; he hath not drunk ink; his intellect is not replenished; he is only an animal, only sensible in the duller parts.

<sup>1</sup> See *After The Great Companions*. New York: Dutton.

<sup>2</sup> In *Lose's Labour's Lost*.

If we read books discerningly, we will never lack faithful friends, cheerful companions, effective consolers; we will have support in solitude, beguilement in *ennui*, strength in crises. Books help us to bear the crassness of men and the crudeness of things; they reduce our cares to objective proportions and compose our passions; they soothe the sting of our disappointments. The consistent, intelligent, absorptive reading of books not only helps us to endure living; it also aids us in discovering what we think and what we are, it enables us to do more and better work in whatever may be our particular field.

\* \* \* \*

But note the adjectives—"consistent, intelligent, absorptive" reading. There are many kinds of readers. Frank Sullivan once made a list<sup>1</sup> of them according to his experience: "casual, average, gentle, constant". Coleridge, investigating the reading public of his day, drew some interesting conclusions:

One class of readers may be compared to an hour-glass, their reading being as the sand; it runs in and runs out, and leaves not a vestige behind. A second class resembles a sponge, which imbibes everything, and returns it in nearly the same state, only a little dirtier. A third class is like a jelly-bag, which allows all that is pure to pass away, and retains only the refuse and dregs. The fourth class may be compared to the slave of Golconda, who, casting aside all that is worthless, preserves only the pure gems.

Foolish reading of books may upon occasion be as bad as, or worse than, no book reading at all. To choose books indiscriminately is like buying shoes without looking at their sizes; books should be selected with definite purposes in view. To persist in reading a kind of book that adds nothing to one's experience is like trying to wear one's childhood clothing: the wise cling to books that continue capable of helping them; but the sensible periodically weed out and discard those they have outgrown. To read without reflecting is abusing books: it is, as Burke said, like eating without digesting. John Milton warns<sup>2</sup> us against such parrot-reading, against reading without sagacity:

Who...to his reading brings not  
A spirit and judgment equal or superior  
(And what he brings, what needs he elsewhere seek?)

<sup>1</sup> *The New Yorker*, July 24, 1937.

<sup>2</sup> *Paradise Regained*, 1671.

Uncertain and unsettl'd still remains,  
Deep vers't in books and shallow in himself,  
Crude or intoxicate, collecting toys,  
And trifles for choice matters, worth a sponge;  
As children gathering pebbles on the shore.

Let us, therefore, if we want our book reading to contribute to our individual personalities, and thus to contribute indirectly to the prosecution of our struggle—let us therefore avoid foolish reading. It is not wide reading that tends to excellence so much as it is the reading of those books which make us think most.

However, this is advice that needs qualification. As bipeds, we must learn to crawl and toddle before we can walk and run. This applies to reading. It is not possible for all of us, at all stages of our reading experiences, to read the finest books. We may not have the mental equipment or the desire or the opportunity: we may have to improve the first, cherish the second, cultivate the third. Johnson declared: "A man ought to read just as his inclination leads him; for what he reads as a task will do him little good." A year or two ago Mr. E. M. Forster, noted British novelist, gave his ideas for a reading-pattern. He said: "Read what you enjoy; don't be ashamed of it; but if you enjoy both good stuff and bad, give the good stuff the preference." In truth, if we can get anything that is invigorating and self-improving out of a book, the reading of that book has not been foolish. And as our insight into the life-processes develops, so will our reading tastes and demands; we will want books on an advancing scale of quality.

Wise reading is, however, intelligent and well-directed reading. Let us not scatter our reading: we will go furthest in our reading if we start on some subject of intense interest; then we will not be satisfied until we have a thorough understanding of a considerable number of interrelated subjects. In that way will we become actively interested in performing to the best of our ability each wartime task we undertake, and in making our own particular contribution to the prosecution of our struggle.

\* \* \* \*

Such is the conclusion of this important matter, though there is a great temptation to propose lists of famous or compelling or appealing books. But the whole book world is so vast, and the number of books that excite or inspire, that assuage or comfort, as the case may be, is so great that the choice would be fantastic. Or, at least, it is slightly beyond the com-

pass of these pages. But the inexperienced will easily get willing help from any book publisher, bookseller, literary editor. They can readily suggest books whose humor will beguile melancholy, whose strength will bolster faint-heartedness, whose courage will prick fear, whose guidance will banish hesitation.

If we have not been able individually to carry over from peacetime into wartime the habit of friendly converse with books, let us set about at once learning that habit. A book is a bank from which we can always draw cheques of entertainment, instruction, inspiration—without ever having it report "N.S.F.!" Furthermore, as H. G. Wells, says: "Nothing can pull our minds together as powerfully as books." They are, in short, the ideal antidote to "total" war, as well as a thoroughly important aid in the prosecution of such war. If the first Prometheus brought fire from heaven in a fennel-stalk, the last will take it back—in a book! So declares John Cowper Powys in *The Enjoyment of Literature*, and who dare refute him?