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Transcriber's note

Minor punctuation errors have been changed without notice. Printer errors have been changed, and they are indicated with a mouse-hover and listed at the [end of this book](#). All other inconsistencies are as in the original.

WORKS BY HILAIRE BELLOC.

PARIS
MARIE ANTOINETTE
EMMANUEL BURDEN, MERCHANT
[HILLS AND THE SEA](#)
[ON NOTHING](#)
ON EVERYTHING
[ON SOMETHING](#)
FIRST AND LAST
THIS AND THAT AND THE OTHER
A PICKED COMPANY



HILAIRE BELLOC

THE MAN AND HIS WORK

BY

C. CREIGHTON MANDELL

and

EDWARD SHANKS

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

G. K. CHESTERTON

METHUEN & CO. LTD.

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TO

H. L. HUTTON

OF MERCHANT TAYLORS' SCHOOL

INTRODUCTION

BY

G. K. CHESTERTON

When I first met Belloc he remarked to the friend who introduced us that he was in low spirits. His low spirits were and are much more uproarious and enlivening than anybody else's high spirits. He talked into the night; and left behind in it a glowing track of good things. When I have said that I mean things that are good, and certainly not merely *bons mots*, I have said all that can be said in the most serious aspect about the man who has made the greatest fight for good things of all the men of my time.

We met between a little Soho paper shop and a little Soho restaurant; his arms and pockets were stuffed with French Nationalist and French Atheist newspapers. He wore a straw hat shading his eyes, which are like a sailor's, and emphasizing his Napoleonic chin. He was talking about King John, who, he positively assured me, was *not* (as was often asserted) the best king that ever reigned in England. Still, there were allowances to be made for him; I mean King John, not Belloc. "He had been Regent," said Belloc with forbearance, "and in all the Middle Ages there is no example of a successful Regent." I, for one, had not come provided with any successful Regents with whom to counter this generalization; and when I came to think of it, it was quite true. I have noticed the same thing about many other sweeping remarks coming from the same source. [viii]

The little restaurant to which we went had already become a haunt for three or four of us who held strong but unfashionable views about the South African War, which was then in its earliest prestige. Most of us were writing on the *Speaker*, edited by Mr. J. L. Hammond with an independence of idealism to which I shall always think that we owe much of the cleaner political criticism of to-day; and Belloc himself was writing in it studies of what proved to be the most baffling irony. To understand how his Latin mastery, especially of historic and foreign things, made him a leader, it is necessary to appreciate something of the peculiar position of that isolated group of "Pro-Boers." We were a minority in a minority. Those who honestly disapproved of the Transvaal adventure were few in England; but even of these few a great number, probably the majority, opposed it for reasons not only different but almost contrary to ours. Many were Pacifists, most were Cobdenites; the wisest were healthy but hazy Liberals who rightly felt the tradition of Gladstone to be a safer thing than the opportunism of the Liberal Imperialist. But we might, in one very real sense, be more strictly described as Pro-Boers. That is, we were much more insistent that the Boers were right in fighting than that the English were wrong in fighting. We disliked cosmopolitan peace almost as much as cosmopolitan war; and it was hard to say whether we more despised those who praised war for the gain of money, or those who blamed war for the loss of it. Not a few men then young were already predisposed to this attitude; Mr. F. Y. Eccles, a French scholar and critic of an authority perhaps too fine for fame, was in possession of the whole classical case against such piratical Prussianism; Mr. Hammond himself, with a careful magnanimity, always attacked Imperialism as a false religion and not merely as a conscious fraud; and I myself had my own hobby of the romance of small things, including small commonwealths. But to all these Belloc entered like a man armed, and as with a clang of iron. He brought with him news from the fronts of history; that French arts could again be rescued by French arms; that cynical Imperialism not only should be fought, but could be fought and was being fought; that the street fighting which was for me a fairytale of the future was for him a fact of the past. There were many other uses of his genius, but I am speaking of this first effect of it upon our instinctive and sometimes groping ideals. What he brought into our dream was this Roman appetite for reality and for reason in action, and when he came into the door there entered with him the smell of danger. [ix]

There was in him another element of importance which clarified itself in this crisis. It was no small part of the irony in the man that different things strove against each other in him; and these not merely in the common human sense of good against evil, but one good thing against another. The unique attitude of the little group was summed up in him supremely in this; that he did and does humanly and heartily love England, not as a duty but as a pleasure and almost an indulgence; but that he hated as heartily what England seemed trying to become. Out of this appeared in his poetry a sort of fierce doubt or double-mindedness which cannot exist in vague and homogeneous Englishmen; something that occasionally amounted to a mixture of loving and loathing. It is marked, for instance, in the fine break in the middle of the happy song of *cameraderie* called "To the Balliol Men Still in South Africa." [x]

"I have said it before, and I say it again,
There was treason done and a false word spoken,
And England under the dregs of men,
And bribes about and a treaty broken."

It is supremely characteristic of the time that a weighty and respectable weekly gravely offered to publish the poem if that central verse was omitted. This conflict of emotions has an even higher embodiment in that grand and mysterious poem called "The Leader," in which the ghost of

the nobler militarism passes by to rebuke the baser—

"And where had been the rout obscene
Was an army straight with pride,
A hundred thousand marching men,
Of squadrons twenty score,
And after them all the guns, the guns,
But She went on before."

Since that small riot of ours he may be said without exaggeration to have worked three revolutions: the first in all that was represented by the *Eyewitness*, now the *New Witness*, the repudiation of both Parliamentary parties for common and detailed corrupt practices; second, the alarum against the huge and silent approach of the Servile State, using Socialists and Anti-Socialists alike as its tools; and third, his recent campaign of public education in military affairs. In all these he played the part which he had played for our little party of patriotic Pro-Boers. He was a man of action in abstract things. There was supporting his audacity a great sobriety. It is in this sobriety, and perhaps in this only, that he is essentially French; that he belongs to the most individually prudent and the most collectively reckless of peoples. There is indeed a part of him that is romantic and, in the literal sense, erratic; but that is the English part. But the French people take care of the pence that the pounds may be careless of themselves. And Belloc is almost materialist in his details, that he may be what most Englishmen would call mystical, not to say monstrous, in his aim. In this he is quite in the tradition of the only country of quite successful revolutions. Precisely because France wishes to do wild things, the things must not be too wild. A wild Englishman like Blake or Shelley is content with dreaming them. How Latin is this combination between intellectual economy and energy can be seen by comparing Belloc with his great forerunner Cobbett, who made war on the same Whiggish wealth and secrecy and in defence of the same human dignity and domesticity. But Cobbett, being solely English, was extravagant in his language even about serious public things, and was wildly romantic even when he was merely right. But with Belloc the style is often restrained; it is the substance that is violent. There is many a paragraph of accusation he has written which might almost be called dull but for the dynamite of its meaning.

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It is probable that I have dealt too much with this phase of him, for it is the one in which he appears to me as something different, and therefore dramatic. I have not spoken of those glorious and fantastic guide-books which are, as it were, the textbooks of a whole science of Erratics. In these he is borne beyond the world with those poets whom Keats conceived as supping at a celestial "Mermaid." But the "Mermaid" was English—and so was Keats. And though Hilaire Belloc may have a French name, I think that Peter Wanderwide is an Englishman.

I have said nothing of the most real thing about Belloc, the religion, because it is above this purpose, and nothing of the later attacks on him by the chief Newspaper Trust, because they are much below it. There are, of course, many other reasons for passing such matters over here, including the argument of space; but there is also a small reason of my own, which if not exactly a secret is at least a very natural ground of silence. It is that I entertain a very intimate confidence that in a very little time humanity will be saying, "Who was this So-and-So with whom Belloc seems to have debated?"

G. K. CHESTERTON

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HILAIRE BELLOC

[1]

THE MAN AND HIS WORK

CHAPTER I

MR. BELLOC AND THE PUBLIC

A CASE FOR LEGISLATION *AD HOC*

We stand upon the brink of a superb adventure. To rummage about in the lumber-room of a bygone period: to wipe away the dust from long-neglected annals: to burnish up old facts and fancies: to piece together the life-story of some loved hero long dead: that is a work of reverent thought to be undertaken in peace and seclusion. But to plunge boldly into the study of a living personality: to strive to measure the greatness of a man just entering the fullness of his powers: to attempt to grasp the nature of that greatness: this is to go out along the road of true adventure, the road which is hard to travel, the road which has no end.

Naturally we cannot hope in this little study to escape those innumerable pitfalls into which contemporary criticism always stumbles. It is impossible to-day to view Mr. Belloc and his work in that due perspective so beloved of the don. No doubt we shall crash headlong into the most shocking errors of judgement, exaggerating this feature and belittling that in a way that will horrify the critic of a decade or two hence. Mr. Belloc himself may turn and rend us: deny our premises: scatter our syllogisms: pulverize our theories.

[2]

This only makes our freedom the greater. Scientific analysis being beyond attainment, we are tied down by no rules. When we have examined Mr. Belloc's work and Mr. Belloc's personality, we are free to put forward (provided we do not mind them being refuted) what theories we choose. Nothing could be more alluring.

In a book about Mr. Belloc the reader may have expected to make Mr. Belloc's acquaintance on the first page. But Mr. Belloc is a difficult man to meet. Even if you have a definite appointment with him (as you have in this book) you cannot be certain that you will not be obliged to wait. Every day of Mr. Belloc's life is so full of engagements that he is inevitably late for some of them. But his courtesy is invariable: and he will often make himself a little later by stopping to ring you up in order to apologize for his lateness and to assure you that he will be with you in a quarter of an hour.

We may imagine him, then, hastening to meet us in one of those taxicabs of which he is so bountiful a patron, and, in the interval, before we make his personal acquaintance, try to recall what we already know of him.

At the present time Mr. Hilaire Belloc to his largest public is quite simply and solely the war expert. To those people, thousands in number, who have become acquainted with Mr. Belloc through the columns of *Land and Water*, the *Illustrated Sunday Herald*, and other journals and periodicals, or have swelled the audiences at his lectures in London and the various provincial centres, his name promises escape from the bewilderment engendered by an irritated Press and an approximation, at least, to a clear conception of the progress of the war. Those who realize, as Mr. Belloc himself points out somewhere, that there has never been a great public occasion in regard to which it is more necessary that men should have a sound judgment than it is in regard to this war, gladly turn to him for guidance. His *General Sketch of the European War* is read by the educated man who finds himself hampered in forming an opinion of the progress of events by an ignorance of military science, while the mass of public opinion, which is less well-informed and less able to distinguish between the essential and the non-essential, finds in the series of articles, reprinted in book-form under the title *The Two Maps*, a rock-basis of general principles on which it may rest secure from the hurling waves of sensationalism, ignorance, misrepresentation and foolishness which are striving perpetually to engulf it.

[3]

So intense and so widespread, indeed, is the vogue of Mr. Belloc to-day as a writer on the war, that one is almost compelled into forgetfulness of his earlier work and of the reputation he had established for himself in many provinces of literature and thought before, in the eyes of the world, he made this new province his own. The colossal monument of unstinted public approbation, which records his work since the outbreak of the great war, overshadows, as it were, the temples of less magnitude, though of equally solid foundation and often of more precious design, in which his former achievements in art and thought were enshrined.

That there existed, however, before the war, a large and increasing public, which was gradually awakening to a realization of Mr. Belloc's importance, there can be no question.

There can be equally little question, that only a very small percentage of his readers were in a position even to attempt an appreciation of Mr. Belloc's full importance.

This was due, chiefly, to the diversity of Mr. Belloc's writings.

For example, many thinking men, who saw no reason why the common sense, which served them so well in their business affairs, should be banished from their consideration of matters political, felt themselves in sympathy with his analysis and denunciation of the evils of our parliamentary machinery, thoroughly enjoying the vigorous lucidity of *The Party System* and applauding the clear historical reasoning of *The Servile State*. [4]

Other men, repelled, perhaps, by such logical grouping of cold facts, but attracted by the satirical delights of *Emmanuel Burden* or *Mr. Clutterbuck*, of *Pongo and the Bull* or *A Change in the Cabinet*, were led to like conclusions, and came to consider themselves adherents of Mr. Belloc's political views.

Take another instance. Bloodless students of history, absorbing the past for the sake of the past and not for the sake of the present, who knew little of Mr. Belloc's attitude toward the politics of the day and strongly disapproved of what little they did know, yet concerned themselves with his historical method as applied in *Danton*, *Robespierre* or *Marie Antoinette*, and were mildly excited by *The French Revolution* into a discussion of what (to Mr. Belloc's horror) they considered his *Weltanschauung*.

There are but one or two examples of cases in which men of different types came to a partial knowledge of Mr. Belloc and his work through their sympathy with the views he expressed. But far beyond and above the appeal which Mr. Belloc has made on occasion to the political and historical sense of his readers is the appeal which he has made consistently to their literary sense in *The Path to Rome*, in *The Four Men*, in *Avril*, in *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts*, in *Esto Perpetua*—in his novels, his essays, his poems. If many have been attracted by his views, how many more have been influenced by his expression of them?

"A man desiring to influence his fellowmen," says Mr. Belloc, in *The French Revolution*, "has two co-related instruments at his disposal.... These two instruments are his idea and his style. However powerful, native, sympathetic to his hearers' mood or cogently provable by reference to new things may be a man's idea, he cannot persuade his fellowmen to it if he have not words that express it. And he will persuade them more and more in proportion as his words are well-chosen and in the right order, such order being determined by the genius of the language from which they are drawn." [5]

These words fitly emphasize the importance of style: and when a distinction is drawn, as is done above, between the appeal which Mr. Belloc has made to the political and historical sense of his readers and the appeal he has made to their literary sense, it is, naturally, not intended to suggest that an appeal to his readers' literary sense is in any way lacking in Mr. Belloc's political and historical writings. The appeal to our literary sense is as strong in *The Servile State* or *Danton* as in *The Four Men* or *Mr. Clutterbuck*. But in the one case, in the case of the two last-named books, the appeal Mr. Belloc makes is chiefly to our literary sense: in the other case, in the case of the two first-named books, there is added to the appeal to our literary sense an appeal to our political and historical sense.

The nature of Mr. Belloc's own style is dealt with in a later chapter: here it is merely asserted that, before the war, at any rate, Mr. Belloc's style was accorded more general recognition than were his ideas. Many who decried his matter extolled his manner. Many men of talent, some men of genius, such as the late Rupert Brooke, regarded him as a very great writer of English prose. Literary *dilettanti* envied him the refrains of his *ballades*. His essays, many of which were manner without matter, were thoroughly popular. What he said might be nonsense, but the way he said it was irresistible.

Since the beginning of the war Mr. Belloc has had that to say which everybody desired to hear. He has known how to say that which everybody desired to hear in the way it might best be said. He has been in a position to express ideas with which every one wished to become familiar: he has known how to express those ideas so that they might be readily grasped. And he has become famous. [6]

To those who were acquainted with but a part of his work before the war Mr. Belloc's sudden leap into prominence as the most noteworthy writer on military affairs in England must have come as somewhat of a shock. To those whose knowledge of Mr. Belloc's writings was confined to *The Path to Rome* or the *Cautionary Tales*, who thought of him as essayist or poet, this must have

seemed a strange metamorphosis indeed. Even those who were conversant with his study of the military aspects of the Revolution and had noticed the careful attention paid by Mr. Belloc to military matters in various books could scarcely have been prepared for such an avalanche of highly-specialized knowledge. For we are all prone to the mistake of confusing a man with his books.

With regard to some writers this error does not necessarily lead to very evil results. There are some writers who express themselves as much in one part of their work as in another. Take Mr. H. G. Wells as an example. His writings, it is true, are varied in character, ranging from phantasy to philosophy, from sociology to science. But through all his writings there runs a thin thread which binds all of them together. That thread is the personality of Mr. Wells finding expression. In such a case as this personal knowledge of the man merely amplifies the idea of him which we have been able to gather from his work.

But with Mr. Belloc the case is different. Can any full idea of Mr. Belloc, the man, be formed by reading his books? It is to be doubted. Were you to consult a reader of Mr. Wells' phantasies and a reader of Mr. Wells' sociological novels with regard to the ideas of the writer they had gleaned, you would find that the mental pictures they had painted had many characteristics in common. Were you to make the same experiment with a reader of Mr. Belloc's political writings and, say, a subscriber to the *Morning Post*, who knew him by his essays alone, the pictures would be entirely dissimilar.

[7]

And if it be admitted that this is so, the question arises: why is it so? If, in the case of Mr. Wells, the writer is dimly visible through the veil of his writings, why does Mr. Belloc remain hidden? This must not be understood as meaning that Mr. Belloc's personality is not expressed in his writings. To offer such an explanation would be merely absurd. But it means that his personality is not expressed, as is that of Mr. Wells, completely though cloudily, in any one book. To offer as a reason that the one is subjective, the other objective is nonsense. Every writer is necessarily both.

There are two answers to the question: the one partially, the other wholly true. To attempt to find the answer which is wholly true is one of the reasons why this book was written.

For the moment, however, let us be content with the answer which is partially true. Let us accept the charge of a contemporary and friend of Mr. Belloc who has long loomed large in the world of literature:—

"Mr. Hilaire Belloc
Is a case for legislation *ad hoc*:
He seems to think nobody minds
His books being all of different kinds."

That is the charge. A plea of guilty and, at the same time, a defence based on justification might be found in Mr. Belloc's words (which occur at the end of one of his essays): "What a wonderful world it is and how many things there are in it!"

Thus might we bolster up the answer which is but partially true until it seemed wholly true. We might make Mr. Belloc's diversity his disguise. We might hoodwink the public.

[8]

But that is a dangerous game. The public has a habit of finding out. Mr. Belloc himself is always on the watch to expose impostors (especially the Parliamentary kind) and he has described most graphically the fate awaiting them:—

"For every time She shouted 'Fire!'
The people answered 'Little Liar!'"

So let us view the matter squarely.

The aim of this little study, if so ambitious a phrase may be used of what is purely a piece of self-indulgence, is to present the public with as complete an idea as possible of Mr. Belloc and his work. Up to the present, the relations between Mr. Belloc and the public have been, to say the least, peculiar. If we regard the public as a mass subject to attack and the author as the attacker, we may say that, whereas most contemporary authors have attacked at one spot only and used their gradually increasing strength to drive on straight into the heart of the mass, Mr. Belloc has attacked at various points. It is obvious, however, that these various separate attacks, if they are to achieve their object, which is the subjection of the mass, must be thoroughly co-ordinated and have large reserve forces upon which to draw.

Some slight outline of the nature of the various attacks on the public made by Mr. Belloc has already been given. We stand amazed to-day by the unqualified success which has attended the attack carried into effect by his writings on the war. But if we are to form even an approximation to a complete idea of Mr. Belloc, it is necessary to examine these various attacks, not merely separately and in detail, but in their relation to each other and as a co-ordinated plan. And before we can hope to measure the strength of that plan, we must examine the mind which ordains its co-ordination and the forces which render possible its execution: in other words, the personality of Mr. Belloc.

[9]

Any rigid distinction, then, drawn between Mr. Belloc's political, historical and other writings is ultimately arbitrary. In the ensuing pages of this book it will be seen how essentially interwoven

and interdependent are the various aspects of Mr. Belloc's work and how they have developed, not the one out of the other, but alongside and in co-relation with each other. For the sake of clearness, however, some basis of classification must be adopted, and that of *subject*, though rough and inadequate, will be understood, perhaps, most readily.

With a jerk a taxicab stops in the street outside. We hear the sound of quick footsteps along the stone-flagged passage, with a rattle of the handle the door swings wide open and Mr. Belloc is in the middle of the room.

CHAPTER II

MR. BELLOC THE MAN

Short of stature, he yet dominates those in the room by virtue of the force within him. So abundant is his vitality, that less forceful natures receive from him an access of energy. This vigour appears, in his person, in the massive breadth of his shoulders and the solidity of his neck. With the exception of his marked breadth, he is well-proportioned in build, though somewhat stout. His head is rather Roman in shape, and his face, with its wide, calm brow, piercing eyes, aquiline nose, straight mouth and square jaw, expresses a power of deep reflection combined with a very lively interest in the things of the moment, but, above all, tremendous determination. He holds himself erect, with square shoulders; but the appearance of a stoop is given to his figure by the habit, acquired by continual writing and public speaking, of moving with his head thrust forward. [10]

In his movements, he is as rapid and decided as, in the giving of instructions, he is clear and terse. In debate or argument his speech is often loud and accompanied by vigorous and decided gestures; but in conversation his manner is constrained and his voice quiet and clear with a strong power of appeal which is enhanced by a slight French lisp. At times he is violent in his language and movements, but he is never restless or vague. In everything he says and does he is orderly. This orderliness of speech and action is the outcome of an orderliness of mind which is as complete as it is rare, and endows Mr. Belloc with a power of detaching his attention from one subject and transferring it, not partially but entirely, to another. As a result, whatever he is doing, however small or however great the piece of work in hand, upon that for the time being is his whole vigour concentrated.

This almost unlimited, but, at the same time, thoroughly controlled and well-directed energy, is Mr. Belloc's most prominent characteristic. He is always busy, yet always with more to do than he can possibly accomplish. He has never a moment to waste. As a consequence, he often gives the impression of being brusque and domineering. His manner to those he does not know is uninviting. This is because the meeting of strangers to so busy a man can never be anything but an interruption, signifying a loss of valuable time. He is anxious to bring you to your point at once and to express his own opinion as shortly and plainly as possible. The temperamentally nervous who meet him but casually find him harsh and think him a bully.

He is nothing of the sort. He is a man of acute perceptions and fine feelings; and with those whom he knows well he is scrupulous to make due allowance for temperamental peculiarities. When you have learnt to know him well, when you have seen him in his rare moments of leisure and repose, you realize how abundantly he is possessed of those qualities which go to form what is called depth of character. His humour and good-fellowship attract men to him: his power of understanding and sympathy tie them to him. He is the very antithesis of a self-centred man. His first question, when he meets you, is of yourself and your doings; he never speaks of himself. He is always more interested in the activities of others than in what he himself is doing. He is engrossed in his work; but he is interested in it as in something outside himself, not as in something which is a very vital part of himself. It is this characteristic which leads one to consider the whole of his work up to the present time as the expression of but a part of the man. Great and valuable as is that work—it has been said of him that he has had more influence on his generation than any other one man—Mr. Belloc's personality inspires the belief that he is capable of yet greater achievements. [11]

This belief is supported by the undeniable fact that Mr. Belloc is an idealist. He has ideals both for individual and communal life. But ideals to him are not, as to so many men, a delight of the imagination or a means of consoling themselves for being obliged to live in the world as it is. They are guides to conduct and inspirations to action: a goal which is reached in the striving.

Most of us go about this world imagining ourselves to be not as we are, but as we should like ourselves to be. No man who is not wholly unimaginative can escape this form of self-consciousness. Certainly no man who has in him anything of the artist can escape it: less still a man who is so much of an artist as Mr. Belloc. It has been remarked of Mr. Belloc time and again that he would make an extraordinarily fine revolutionary leader, and it is interesting to find in Mr. Belloc's work a description of one of the greatest revolutionary leaders which might in many respects be a description of Mr. Belloc himself. We refer to Mr. Belloc's description of the [12]

appearance and character of Danton. Though it would be absurd to suggest that Mr. Belloc has deliberately modelled his life on that of Danton, yet the resemblance between Mr. Belloc's own personality and the personality (as Mr. Belloc describes it) of Danton is so striking, that we cannot avoid quoting the passage at considerable length. It is interesting, too, to recall that this monograph, which is obviously based on very careful and deep research, was written by Mr. Belloc shortly after he came down from Oxford, and was the first work of importance he published. Mr. Belloc describes Danton thus:—

He was tall and stout, with the forward bearing of the orator, full of gesture and of animation. He carried a round French head upon the thick neck of energy. His face was generous, ugly, and determined. With wide eyes and calm brows, he yet had the quick glance which betrays the habit of appealing to an audience.... In his dress he had something of the negligence which goes with extreme vivacity and with a constant interest in things outside oneself; but it was invariably that of his rank. Indeed, to the minor conventions Danton always bowed, because he was a man, and because he was eminently sane. More than did the run of men at that time, he understood that you cut down no tree by lopping at the leaves, nor break up a society by throwing away a wig. The decent self-respect which goes with conscious power was never absent from his costume, though it often left his language in moments of crisis, or even of irritation. I will not insist too much upon his great character of energy, because it has been so over-emphasized as to give a false impression of him. He was admirably sustained in his action, and his political arguments were as direct as his physical efforts were continuous, but the banal picture of fury which is given you by so many writers is false. For fury is empty, whereas Danton was full, and his energy was at first the force at work upon a great mass of mind, and later its momentum. Save when he had the direct purpose of convincing a crowd, his speech had no violence, and even no metaphor; in the courts he was a close reasoner, and one who put his points with ability and with eloquence rather than with thunder. But in whatever he undertook, vigour appeared as the taste of salt in a dish. He could not quite hide this vigour: his convictions, his determination, his vision all concentrate upon whatsoever thing he has in hand. He possessed a singularly wide view of the Europe in which France stood. In this he was like Mirabeau, and peculiarly unlike the men with whom revolutionary government threw him into contact. He read and spoke English, he was acquainted with Italian. He knew that the kings were dilettanti, that the theory of the aristocracies was liberal. He had no little sympathy with the philosophy which a leisurely oligarchy had framed in England; it is one of the tragedies of the Revolution that he desired to the last an alliance, or at least peace, with this country. Where Robespierre was a maniac in foreign policy, Danton was more than a sane—he was a just, and even a diplomatic man. He was fond of wide reading, and his reading was of the philosophers; it ranged from Rabelais to the physiocrats in his own tongue, from Adam Smith to the *Essay on Civil Government* in that of strangers; and of the Encyclopædia he possessed all the numbers steadily accumulated. When we consider the time, his fortune, and the obvious personal interest in so small and individual a collection, few shelves will be found more interesting than those which Danton delighted to fill. In his politics he desired above all actual, practical, and apparent reforms; changes for the better expressed in material results. He differed from many of his countrymen at that time, and from most of his political countrymen now, in thus adopting the tangible. It was a part of something in his character which was nearly allied to the stock of the race, something which made him save and invest in land as does the French peasant, and love, as the French peasant loves, good government, order, security, and well-being. There is to be discovered in all the fragments which remain to us of his conversation before the bursting of the storm, and still more clearly in his demand for a *centre* when the invasion and the rebellion threatened the Republic, a certain conviction that the revolutionary thing rather than the revolutionary idea should be produced: not an inspiring creed, but a goal to be reached, sustained him. Like all active minds, his mission was rather to realize than to plan, and his energies were determined upon seeing the result of theories which he unconsciously admitted, but which he was too impatient to analyse. His voice was loud even when his expressions were subdued. He talked no man down, but he made many opponents sound weak and piping after his utterance. It was of the kind that fills great halls, and whose deep note suggests hard phrases. There was with all this a carelessness as to what his words might be made to mean when partially repeated by others, and such carelessness has caused historians still more careless to lend a false aspect of Bohemianism to his character. A Bohemian he was not; he was a successful and an orderly man; but energy he had, and if there are writers who cannot conceive of energy without chaos, it is probably because in the studious leisure of vast endowments they have never felt the former in themselves, nor have been compelled to control the latter in their surroundings.... His friends also he loved, and above all, from the bottom of his soul, he loved France. His faults—and they were many—his vices (and a severe critic would have discovered these also) flowed from two sources: first, he was too little of an idealist, too much absorbed in the immediate thing; secondly, he suffered from all the evil effects that abundant energy may produce—the habit of

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oaths, the rhetoric of sudden diatribes, violent and overstrained action, with its subsequent demand for repose.

This is neither the place nor the time to enter into details of Mr. Belloc's life. Nevertheless, it is necessary to remember a few points in his career when tracing the development of his work. The first important point to remember is that Mr. Belloc, for a man who has achieved so much, is still comparatively young. He was born at La Celle, St. Cloud, near Paris, in 1870, the son of Louis Swanton Belloc, a French barrister. His mother was English, the daughter of Joseph Parkes, a man of some considerable importance in his own time, a politician of the Reform Bill period, and the historian of the Chancery Bar. His book on this subject is still considered the best authority.

Mr. Belloc was educated at the Oratory School, Edgbaston. On leaving school he served as a driver in the 8th Regiment of French Artillery. He left the service for Balliol in 1892, and in the following year became a Brackenbury History Scholar of that college and took First Class honours in his final history schools in 1895. In the same year he published *Verses and Sonnets*, which was followed in 1896 by *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts*. This was followed the next year by *More Beasts for Worse Children*. In 1898 *The Modern Traveller* appeared, and in 1899 he published his first work of outstanding importance—the study of *Danton. Robespierre* was published in 1901, and *The Path to Rome* in 1902; *Emmanuel Burden* was published in 1904, and *Esto Perpetua* in 1906. By this time Mr. Belloc's literary reputation was so firmly established that he was offered, and accepted, the post of chief reviewer on the staff of the *Morning Post*. During the time he was connected with this paper he not only attracted attention to it by his own essays, but undoubtedly rendered it solid service by introducing to its somewhat conservative columns a new group of writing men. It was in 1906, too, that Mr. Belloc was elected "Liberal member" for South Salford. His independent mind was at variance with the "tone of the House," and he distinguished himself by demanding an audit of the Secret Party Funds, which he considered to be the chief source of political corruption. At the next election in 1910 the Party Funds were not forthcoming in his support, but he stood as an independent candidate and was returned in the face of the caucus. On the occasion of the second election of 1910, he refused to repeat his candidature, having declared, in his last speech in the House, his opinion that a seat there under the existing machine was valueless. In 1910 he resigned his appointment on the *Morning Post*, and in 1911 became Head of the English Literature Department at the East London College, a post he lost (for political reasons) in 1913.

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CHAPTER III

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PERSONALITY IN STYLE

In the foregoing chapters we have seen something of Mr. Belloc's career and caught a glimpse of the man as he is to-day. But in common with every other writer of note Mr. Belloc expresses his personality in his writings. And the lighter the subject with which he is dealing, the more he is writing, as it were, out of himself, the clearer is the picture we get of him. If we turn, then, to his essays, collected from here and there, on this and that, on everything and on nothing, we may see Mr. Belloc reflected in the clear stream of his own writing: and in proportion as the reflection is vivid or blurred we may rank him as a stylist and writer of English prose.

Style in prose or verse has never existed and cannot exist of itself alone. Style is not the art of writing melodious words or the craft or cunning of finding a way round the split infinitive. It is the ability so to choose forms of expression as completely to convey to a reader all the twists and turns and outlines of a character.

It is not even necessarily confined to the handling of words: there is nothing more characteristic in the style of Mr. H. G. Wells than the use of the three dots ... which journalism has recently invented. There may be style—that is, the expression of a temperament—in the position of a dash or of a semicolon: Heaven knows, a modern German poet enters the confessional when he uses marks of exclamation.

Style, it must be repeated, is the exact and faithful representation of a man's spirit in poetry or prose. The precise value of that spirit does not matter for the moment. James Boswell, Dr. Johnson and Porteous, Bishop of Chester, investigated the matter with some acumen and some fruitfulness in one of their terrifying conversations:

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What I wanted to know [Boswell says] was, whether there was really a peculiar style to every man whatever, as there is certainly a peculiar hand-writing, a peculiar countenance, not widely different in many, yet always enough to be distinctive:

"—facies non omnibus una
nec diversa tamen"—

The Bishop thought not; and said, he supposed that many pieces in Dodsley's collection of poems, though all very pretty, had nothing appropriated in their style, and in that particular could not be at all distinguished. JOHNSON. "Why, sir, I think every man whatever has a peculiar style, which may be discerned by nice

examination and comparison with others: but a man must write a great deal to make his style obviously discernible. As logicians say, this appropriation of style is infinite *in potestate*, limited *in actu*."

It would appear at first sight sufficient, to confute Johnson, to refer to the four hundred volumes of verse, which are published (so it is said in the newspapers of this trade) in every year. But he overlooked only one thing: namely the tendency of literary men to be insincere. It is the habit of writing in phrases, very much like building up a picture out of blocks that have on them already portions of a picture, which comes between the spirit of the writer and its true expression in a native style.

Even this is no barrier to a sensitive ear. An experienced reporter once told the present writer that he could distinguish, by internal evidence alone, the authorship of almost every paragraph in the detestable halfpenny newspaper to which he then contributed.

Mr. Belloc, at least, has covered a sufficient quantity of pages to make it easy, if Johnson's notion be correct, for any critic who honestly undertakes the task, to discern the characteristics of his style. To convey his impression thereof in a convincing way to the reader is not so easy for the critic: and the wealth and breadth of his subject may hamper him here. [18]

Before we begin an exposition of Mr. Belloc's style, an exposition which is meant to be in the true sense a criticism and in the full sense an appreciation, let us recapitulate the points we have already established in our inquiry into the nature of style as an abstract quality, and let us essay to add to them such points as may assist us in our difficult task of estimating the worth of a very good style indeed.

Style, we have said, results from the exact and accurate expression of a temperament or a character—as you please, for it is true that the word "temperament" is dangerous. We have also observed that, in viewing style from this angle of sight, it does not matter to the inquiry whether the character in question is desirable or hateful. That man has a style who does sincerely and exactly express his true spirit in any medium, words or music or little dots. Such a style has the worth of genuineness and, to the curious in psychology, it has a certain positive value. A man who achieves so much deserves almost the title of poet: he certainly is of a kind rare in its appearances.

But when we begin seriously to speak of excellence in prose, or verse, we must add yet another test, to pass which a man must not only express his spirit with sincerity, but must also have a strong and original spirit. It will be our business now to search out, delimit and define, not only Mr. Belloc's nicety and felicity of expression, but also the value of the thing which he expresses.

Enough will be said up and down this book and going about in the chapters of it of that lucidity which is our author's peculiar merit and the quality which most effectively permits him to play his part as a spreader of ideas and of information. It is a French virtue, we are told, and Mr. Belloc is of the French blood: it is the essence of the Latin spirit, he tells us, and he has never wearied of praising the glories of the race which carefully and logically made all fast and secure about it with a chain of irrefragable reasoning. [19]

This lucidity, this patient passion for exactness, have added to what might have been expected of Mr. Belloc's sincerity and unlimited capacity for enthusiasm. In that admirable phrase of Buffon, too often quoted and too little applied, the style is the man. This is a fine writer, because he has the craft truly to represent a fine spirit in words.

It is a style which is strongly individual and which is on the whole rather restful than provocative. The reader's mind reposes on the security of these strongly moulded sentences, these solid paragraphs and periods. It is a considered style in which word after word falls admirably into its appointed place. It is not quite of the eighteenth century, for it is stronger than that prose. It certainly has not the undisciplined aspect of Elizabethan writing. It has the exactitude without the occasional finickingness of the best French work, and it has the breadth of English, but never falls into confusion, clumsiness or extravagance. Mr. Belloc does not experience difficulties with his relative pronouns or bog himself in a mess of parentheses. The habit of exposition has taught him to disentangle his sentences and disengage his qualifying clauses.

It is pre-eminently and especially an instrument. It has been evolved by a man whose passion it is to communicate his reflections, to make himself understood. He has learnt the practice of good writing through this desire and not by any sick languishing to construct beautiful mosaics or melodious descriptions.

The English are not a nation of prose-writers. Arnold reminded us often enough that we lacked the balance, the sense of the centre, the facility in the use of right reason; and Mr. Belloc has continued his arguments. But Mr. Belloc has in his blood that touch of the Latin and in his mind that sense of the centre, of a European life which corrects the English waywardness. It is with no hesitation that we call him—subject to the correction of time, wherefrom no critic is exempt—the best writer of English prose since Dryden. [20]

Some one said once that were Shakespeare living now he would be writing articles for the leader-page of the *Daily Mail*. As Shakespeare is not living now, his place, of course, is filled by Mr. Charles Whibley. But there is some sense in the apparently silly remark. The column of the morning paper has, without doubt, provoked the creation of a new form and has brought forth a renaissance of the essay. If Shakespeare would not have written for the daily papers, Bacon

unquestionably would have done so.

In a band of essayists who have been made or influenced by this opportunity, Mr. G. K. Chesterton, Mr. G. S. Street, Mr. E. V. Lucas, and a host of others, Mr. Hilaire Belloc is unchallengeably supreme. It is stupid to suppose, as some still do, that art and literature are not thus conditioned by the almost mechanical needs of the day. To protest that our writers should not be influenced by the special features of the newspaper would be to condemn Shakespeare for his conformity with the needs of the apron-stage or Dickens for publishing his novels in parts.

A mind of a character so actual as Mr. Belloc's is inevitably attracted by such an opportunity. The discerning reader will find the crown and best achievement of all his varied work in the seven volumes of essays which he has published.

These volumes contain no fewer than 256 separate and distinct essays. (The essay *On the Traveller* which was included in *On Anything* appears again, for some reason, as *The Old Things* in *First and Last*, and is not here counted twice.) One is reduced to jealousy of the mere physical energy which could sit down so often to a new beginning: the variety and power of the essays command our utmost admiration. [21]

Descriptions of travel and of country make up a great part of them: for this is our author's own subject, if it be possible to select one from the rest. But the rest of them range from the study of history and the habits of the don, to the habits of the rich and the strange advertisements that come, through the post, even to the least considered of us. You can only take his own words, the central point of his experience, a very comforting and happy philosophy:

The world is not quite infinite—but it is astonishingly full. All sorts of things happen in it. There are all sorts of men and different ways of action and different goals to which life may be directed. Why, in a little wood near home, not a hundred yards long, there will soon burst, in the spring (I wish I were there!), hundreds of thousands of leaves and no one leaf exactly like another. At least, so the parish priest used to say, and though I have never had the leisure to put the thing to the proof, I am willing to believe that he was right, for he spoke with authority.

That is the impression given by these essays, the impression of the man's character. He seems to have a boundless curiosity, a range of observation, which, if not infinite, is at least astonishingly full. He does not write from the mere desire of covering paper, though sometimes he flourishes in one's face almost insolently the necessity he is in of setting down so many words as will fill a column in tomorrow's paper. But this insolence is rendered harmless by the fertility of his imagination and his inexhaustible invention.

The patch of purple is not rare in his writings. He says in *The Path to Rome*:

... But for my part, I think the best way of ending a book is to rummage about among one's manuscripts till one has found a bit of Fine Writing (no matter upon what subject), to lead up the last paragraphs by no matter what violent shocks to the thing it deals with, to introduce a row of asterisks, and then to paste on to the paper below these the piece of Fine Writing one has found. [22]

This reads like a frank confession of the way in which the last page of *Danton* came to have its place. But who dare say that Mr. Belloc is not justified of his Fine Writing?

It does not come like the purple patches (or lumps) in Pater and the "poetry" in the prose and verse of Mr. Masfield: as though the author said to himself, "God bless my soul, this is getting dull. I must positively do something and that at once." Mr. Belloc's fine writing seems to spring from an almost physical zest in the use of words and images, to be the result of a bodily exaltation, the symbol of an enthusiastic mind and an energetic pen. No matter by what violent shocks the author proceeds from Danton to Napoleon, that concluding passage, ending with the shining and magniloquent phrase, "the most splendid of human swords," is a glorious piece of writing.

From time to time (and more frequently than the inexperienced would dare to suppose) this zest in the world and its contents, in the normal and insoluble problems of life, breaks into passages of sheer beauty. One may be quoted from an essay called *The Absence of the Past*:

There was a woman of charming vivacity, whose eyes were ever ready for laughter, and whose tone of address of itself provoked the noblest of replies. Many loved her: all admired. She passed (I will suppose) by this street or by that; she sat at table in such and such a house, Gainsborough painted her; and all that time ago there were men who had the luck to meet her and to answer her laughter with their own. And the house where she moved is there and the street in which she walked, and the very furniture she used and touched with her hands you may touch with your hands. You shall come into the rooms that she inhabited, and there you shall see her portrait, all light and movement and grace and beatitude. [23]

She is gone altogether, the voice will never return, the gestures will never be seen again. She was under a law, she changed, she suffered, she grew old, she died; and there was her place left empty. The not living things remain; but what counted, what gave rise to them, what made them all that they are, has pitifully disappeared, and the greater, the infinitely greater, thing was subject to a doom

perpetually of change and at last of vanishing. The dead surroundings are not subject to such a doom. Why?

That passage is like a piece of music, like a movement in a sonata by Beethoven. The chords, the volume of sound are gravely added to, till that solemn close on a single note. It is emotion, perfectly rendered, so grave, so sincere, so restrained as to be almost inimitable. And alike in the music of the words and sentences and in the mood which they convey it is unique in English. Not one of our authors has just that frame of mind, just that method of expressing it.

We do not know whether Mr. Belloc wrote down those two paragraphs in hot haste or considered their periods with delicate cunning. In the end it is all the same: it is a reasonable prose, it is the expression of a thought which is common in the human mind. Consider in relation to it that notorious piece of Pater, that reflection of the essential don upon a picture which is possibly a copy and certainly not very pleasant to look upon, the *Mona Lisa*. Pater builds up his words with as grave a care, with as solemn an emotion, but how different is the result. Pater sought for an effect of strangeness and cracked his prose in reaching at it: his rhythm is false, his images are blurred. But Mr. Belloc, translating into words a deep and tender mood, has had no care save faithfully to render a thought so common and so hard to imprison in language. His writing here rings true as a bell, it is as sweet and normal as bread or wine. [24]

An even better example is the essay called *Mowing a Field* which is printed in *Hills and the Sea*. The centre of this essay (which has also decorations in the way of anecdotes and reflections) is a true and faithful account of the procedure to be observed in the mowing of a field of grass. Here you can see a most extraordinary power of conveying information in a pleasing manner. It would not be a bad thing to read this essay first if one had the intention of engaging in such exercise, for the instruction seems to be sound. Mr. Belloc touches hands very easily with the old Teachers who wrote their precepts in rhyme: such teachers, that is, as had good doctrine to teach, not such as the sophisticated Vergil, whose very naïf *Georgics* are said to lead to agricultural depression wherever men follow the advice they contain.

Take this passage from that delicate and noble essay:

There is an art also in the sharpening of a scythe and it is worth describing carefully. Your blade must be dry, and that is why you will see men rubbing the scythe-blade with grass before they whet it. Then also your rubber must be quite dry, and on this account it is a good thing to lay it on your coat and keep it there during all your day's mowing. The scythe you stand upright, with the blade pointing away from you, and you put your left hand firmly on the back of the blade, grasping it: then you pass the rubber first down one side of the blade edge and then down the other, beginning near the handle and going on to the point and working quickly and hard. When you first do this you will, perhaps, cut your hand; but it is only at first that such an accident will happen to you.

To tell when the scythe is sharp enough this is the rule. First the stone clangs and grinds against the iron harshly; then it rings musically to one note; then, at last, it purrs as though the iron and the stone were exactly suited. When you hear this, your scythe is sharp enough; and I, when I heard it that June dawn, with everything quite silent except the birds, let down the scythe and bent myself to mow.

That is a piece of prose which is at once practical and beautiful. It is sound advice to a man who would mow a meadow, and the soundness of it is in no way hurt by the last sentence, which delights the ear and which need not be read by the truly earnest. [25]

It is a style which conveys emotion and it is also a style which can be used perfectly to describe. We may refer, at least, as an example, to the careful and exact account of the appearance and utility of the Mediterranean lateen-sail which occurs at the beginning of *Esto Perpetua*, a piece of writing which enchants the reader with its beauty and its practical sense.

Consider, too, that light and graceful composition of a different character, equally perfect in beauty, the dialogue *On the Departure of a Guest*, in the book called *On Nothing and Kindred Subjects*. Youth leaves the house of his Host and apologizes for removing certain property of his, which the Host may have thought, from its long continuance in the house, to have been his very own: included in this property are carelessness and the love of women. But, says Youth, he is permitted to make a gift to his Host of some things, among them the clout Ambition, the perfume Pride, Health, and a trinket which is the Sense of Form and Colour (most delicate and lovely of gifts!) And, he continues, "there is something else ... no less a thing than a promise ... signed and sealed, to give you back all I take and more in Immortality!" Then occurs this passage which closes the piece:

HOST. Oh! Youth.

YOUTH (*still feeling*). Do not thank me! It is my Master you should thank. (*Frowns.*) Dear me! I hope I have not lost it! (*Feels in his trouser pockets.*)

HOST (*loudly*). Lost it?

YOUTH (*pettishly*). I did not say I had lost it! I said I hoped I had not.... (*Feels in his great coat pocket, and pulls out an envelope.*) Ah! Here it is! (*His face clouds*

over.) No, that is the message to Mrs. George, telling her the time has come to get a wig ... (*Hopelessly.*) Do you know I am afraid I have lost it! I am really very sorry —I cannot wait. (*He goes off.*)

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That passage would appear to confute a quite common notion to the effect that Mr. Belloc, who can and does write nearly everything else, does not write a play because he cannot. It is not for the purpose of arguing such a highly abstract point that we must call attention to the exact way in which it conforms to the necessities of this kind of expression without losing its character, its vividness, or its rhythm.

It is admirably moulded in its expression of a feeling or a sensation, and, in this way, Mr. Belloc's style comes very nearly as close to perfection as can be expected of a human instrument. He renders his moods, the fine shades of a transitory emotion, the solid convictions that make up a man's life with spirit, with humour, with beauty, but, above all, with *accuracy*.

He builds up his sentences and paragraphs with the beauty and permanency of the old barns that one may see in his own country. He does this through his sincerity. He does not exaggerate an emotion to catch a public for the space of half an hour: he does not, in the more subtle way, affect a cynical or conventional disregard of the noble feelings and fine motives which do exist in man. It has been his business with patience and fidelity to seize, with skill to make enduring and comprehensible in words, the things which do exist.

His style is a weapon or an instrument like one of those primitive but exquisitely adapted instruments which are the foundations of man's work in the world. With his use of words, he knows how to expose the technicalities of a battle or the transformations of the human heart.

CHAPTER IV

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THE POET

So much for Mr. Belloc's most copious revelation of his personality. But this is true—that the most personal expression of all for any man is in verse: even though it be small in quantity and uneven in quality. It is as though, here, in a more rarefied and more complex form of composition—we will not say "more difficult"—some kind of effort or struggle called out all of a man's characteristics in their intensest shape. Such emotions as a man has to express will be, perhaps not more perfectly, but at any rate more keenly, set out in verse. It gives you his characteristics in a smaller space. This is true of nearly all writers who have used both forms of expression. It applies—to quote only a few—to Arnold, to Meredith, and to Mr. Hardy.

Now we must admit at the outset that Mr. Belloc's verse does not satisfy the reader, in the same sense that his prose satisfies. It is fragmentary, unequal, very small in bulk, apparently the outcome of a scanty leisure. But it is an ingredient in the mass of his writing that cannot be dismissed without discussion.

Mr. Belloc realizes to the full the position of poetry in life. He gives it the importance of an element which builds up and broadens the understanding and the spirit. He has written some, but not very much, literary criticism; and, of a piece with the rest of thinking, he thinks of poetry as a factor in, and a symptom of, the growth and maintenance of the European mind. He would not understand the facile critics who only yesterday dismissed this necessary element of literature as something which the modern world has outgrown.

But, curiously, he is a disappointing critic of Literature. His essays in this regard are, like his essays on anything else, obviously in touch with some substratum of connected thinking, a growth which springs from a settled and confident attitude towards man and the world. But they are, as it were, less in touch with it; they are more on the surface, more accidental, less continuous.

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His little—very little—essays on the verse of the French Renaissance are extremely unsatisfactory. His criticism of Ronsard's *Mignonne, allons voir si la rose* is a little masterpiece of delicate discrimination:

If it be asked why this should have become the most famous of Ronsard's poems, no answer can be given save the "flavour of language." It is the perfection of his tongue. Its rhythm reaches the exact limit of change which a simple metre will tolerate: where it saddens, a lengthy hesitation at the opening of the seventh line introduces a new cadence, a lengthy lingering upon the last syllables of the tenth, eleventh and twelfth closes a grave complaint. So, also by an effect of quantities, the last six lines rise out of melancholy into their proper character of appeal and vivacity: an exhortation.

This passage, which, as a demonstration of method, is not altogether meaningless, even without the text beside it, shows the accuracy and nicety of his criticism. And *Avril* contains a number of similar observations which are valuable in the extreme as aids to judgement and pleasure. But the book has written all over it a confession, that this is a department of writing which the author is content, comparatively, to neglect. The essays are short and, again comparatively, they are

detached: they examine each poem by itself, not in its general aspect. And it is, too, a singular example of book-making: there are more blank pages, in proportion to its total bulk, than one could have believed possible.

The rare studies dealing with poetry which one finds among his general essays also bear witness to his discrimination and determined judgement. The essay on José-Maria de Hérédia in *First and Last* is a remarkable example of these, a remarkable analysis of a poet who is, if not obscure, at least reticent and difficult to like, and in whom Mr. Belloc sees the recapturer of "the secure tradition of an older time." And this essay relates the spirit of a poet to the general conception of Europe and its destiny. [29]

Such a relation is rare. Poetry seems to lie, to an extent, apart from Mr. Belloc's definite and consistent view of life. He takes other pleasures, beer, walking, singing and what not, with the utmost seriousness: this he treats, at bottom, casually and disconnectedly. We can just perceive how he links it up with his general conception of life, but we can only just see it. The link is there, but he has never strengthened it.

And when we turn from his opinions on other men's poetry to his own compositions, we find the same broad effect of casualness varied with passages of singular achievement. His verse is very small in bulk: between two and three thousand lines would cover as much of it as he has yet published. Within this restricted space there are numerous variations of type, but these, in verse, are so subtle and so fluid that we are forbidden to attempt a rigid classification.

What, then, is our impression on surveying this collection of poetry? It includes a number of small amusing books for children, a volume called *Verses* and a few more verses scattered in the prose, most notably (as being not yet collected) in *The Four Men*. The general impression is, as we have said, one of confusion and lack of order: verse, the revealing instrument, seems to be to Mr. Belloc a pastime for moments of dispersion, and most of these poems seem to point to intervals of refreshment, periods of a light use of the powers, rather than to the seconds of intense feeling whereof verse, either at the time or later, is the proper expression. [30]

It goes without saying that little enough of this verse is dull: it nearly all has character, a distinct personal flavour in phrasing and motive. Yet this flavour is best known to the public in its development by the first of brilliant young men to be influenced by Mr. Belloc's style, as apart from his ideas. We may pause a moment to examine this point, for its own special interest and for the guide it will give us to Mr. Belloc's poetry.

Rupert Brooke has been called too often the disciple of Dr. Donne: no critic, so far as we are aware, has called attention to his debt to Mr. Belloc. This debt was neither complete nor immediately obvious, but it existed. Brooke knew it, spoke of Mr. Belloc with admiration, and quoted his poems with surprising memory. Some of these were—necessarily—unpublished and may be apocryphal: they cannot be repeated here. The resemblance between the styles of the two men was most noticeable in Brooke's prose: his letters from America show a touch in working and a point of view singularly close to those of Mr. Belloc. But it is also to be discovered in his poetry. Put a few lines from *Grantchester* beside a few lines from one of Mr. Belloc's poems of Oxford and you will realize how curiously the younger man was fascinated by the older. We will quote the passages we have in mind. The first is by Brooke:

"In Grantchester, their skins are white,
They bathe by day, they bathe by night;
The women there do all they ought;
The men observe the Rules of Thought.
They love the Good; they worship Truth;
They laugh uproariously in youth."

And the second is from Mr. Belloc's *Dedicatory Ode*:

"Where on their banks of light they lie,
The happy hills of Heaven between,
The Gods that rule the morning sky
Are not more young, nor more serene....

... We kept the Rabelaisian plan:
We dignified the dainty cloisters
With Natural Law, the Rights of Man,
Song, Stoicism, Wine and Oysters."

There is a difference, for two men of different character are speaking: but there is more than the accidental resemblance that comes from two men making the same sort of joke. [31]

But Brooke was, in his own desire and in the estimation of others, first a poet: and Mr. Belloc has written his verses, as it would seem, at intervals. The common level of them is that of excellent workmanship, the very best are simply glorious accidents.

Now the common level, if we put away the books for children which will be more conveniently dealt with in another chapter, is represented by such poems as *The Birds*, *The Night*, *A Bivouac*, and a Song of which we may quote one verse, as follows:

"You wear the morning like your dress
 And are with mastery crowned;
 When as you walk your loveliness
 Goes shining all around.
 Upon your secret, smiling way
 Such new contents were found,
 The Dancing Loves made holiday
 On that delightful ground."

That is to say, these poems are of a certain grace and charm, neither false nor exalted, pleasant indeed to say over, but without that intensity of feeling which even in a small and light verse transfigures the written words. The carols and Catholic poems are of this delightful character, curiously one in feeling with such old folk-carols as are still preserved. One of these compositions rises to a much higher plane by a truly extraordinary felicity of phrase, one of those inspired quaintnesses which move the reader so powerfully as the nakedest pathos or the most ornate grandeur. We mean the poem *Courtesy*, where the poet finds this grace in three pictures:

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"The third it was our Little Lord,
 Whom all the Kings in arms adored;
 He was so small you could not see
 His large intent of Courtesy."

These verses are certainly, as we have said, charming. They are really mediaeval, for Mr. Belloc admires the spirit of that age from within, which makes truth, not from without, which makes affectation.

There is another class of poem which is jolly—it is the best term—to read and better to sing. The *West Sussex Drinking Song*, a rather obvious reminiscence of Still's famous song, is perhaps the best known but by no means the best. (It is, however, an excellent guide to the beers of West Sussex.) We would give this distinction to a song in *The Four Men*, which begins:

"On Sussex hills where I was bred,
 When lanes in autumn rains are red,
 When Arun tumbles in his bed
 And busy great gusts go by;
 When branch is bare in Burton Glen
 And Bury Hill is a whitening, then
 I drink strong ale with gentlemen;
 Which nobody can deny, deny,
 Deny, deny, deny, deny,
 Which nobody can deny."

We must speak here, however, since our space is limited, not of these sporadic and inessential excellences, but of the isolated and admirable accidents—for so they seem—which make Mr. Belloc truly a poet.

One of these is the well-known, anthologized *The South Country*; another is a passage in the mainly humorous poem called *Dedicatory Ode* which we have quoted in another connexion; two occur in *The Four Men*. All of them deal with places and country, they are all by way of being melancholy and express the quite human sadness that goes normally with the joy in friends and in one's own home.

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Such a verse as this in praise of Sussex is inspired, sad and gracious:

"But the men that live in the South Country
 Are the kindest and most wise.
 They get their laughter from the loud surf,
 And the faith in their happy eyes
 Comes surely from our Sister the Spring
 When over the sea she flies;
 The violets suddenly bloom at her feet,
 She blesses us with surprise."

The rhythm, apparently wavering, but in reality very exact, alone reflects in this stanza the sadness which elsewhere in the poem is put more directly. It is a delicate, ingenuous rhythm, suited most admirably to (or rather, perhaps, dictating) the unstrained and easy words.

The same mood, the same rhythm, are repeated in a poem in *The Four Men*:

"The trees that grow in my own country
 Are the beech-tree and the yew;
 Many stand together,
 And some stand few.
 In the month of May in my own country
 All the woods are new."

But the summit of these poems is reached in another composition in the same book. He has set it

cunningly in a description of the way in which it was written, so as to be able to strew the approaches to it with single lines and fragments which he could not use, but which were too good to be lost. The poem itself runs like this:

"He does not die that can bequeath
Some influence to the land he knows,
Or dares, persistent, interwreath
Love permanent with the wild hedgerows;
He does not die but still remains
Substantiate with his darling plains.

The spring's superb adventure calls
His dust athwart the woods to flame;
His boundary river's secret falls
Perpetuate and repeat his name.

He rides his loud October sky:
He does not die. He does not die.

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The beeches know the accustomed head
Which loved them, and a peopled air
Beneath their benediction spread
Comforts the silence everywhere;
For native ghosts return and these
Perfect the mystery in the trees.

So, therefore, though myself be crosst
The shuddering of that dreadful day
When friend and fire and home are lost
And even children drawn away—
The passer-by shall hear me still,
A boy that sings on Duncton Hill."

It is of a robuster sort than the other poems and in a way their climax for it expresses the same emotion. It is indeed the final movement of the book which treats in particular of the love of Sussex, but also of the general emotion of the love of one's own country. There is melancholy mixed with this feeling, as with all strong affections: with it are associated the love of friends and the dread of parting from them and regret for the accomplishment of such a thing.

In these few poems, his best, Mr. Belloc seems to have expressed this mood completely and so to have shown—we have said as it were by accident—an abiding and fundamental mood. We have been constrained to criticize his poetry much as he has criticized the poetry of others, that is to say, sporadically and without continuity. But we have touched here perhaps on a thing, the obscure existence of which also we indicated, the secret root that shows his poetry to be a true and native growth of the soil from which his other writings have sprung.

CHAPTER V

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THE STUDENT OF MILITARY AFFAIRS

Mr Belloc's most important writings on the war are to be found in *Land and Water*, the *Illustrated Sunday Herald*, and *Pearson's Magazine*. To these must be added his series of books of which only one has so far appeared—*A General Sketch of the European War*. His series of articles in *Pearson's Magazine* has also been reprinted in book-form under the title *The Two Maps*.

Of these his writings in *Land and Water* are, at the present time, the most important. Since the earliest stages of the war Mr. Belloc has contributed to *Land and Water* a weekly article. What is the nature of this article? In the first place, it is a commentary on the current events of the campaign. Mr. Belloc himself, when challenged recently to defend his work, said very modestly (as we think)—"My work ... is no more than an attempt to give week by week, at what I am proud to say is a very great expense of time and of energy, an explanation of what is taking place. There are many men who could do the same thing. I happen to have specialized upon military history and problems, and profess now, with a complete set of maps, to be doing for others what their own occupations forbid them the time and opportunity to do."

With part of this description we may heartily agree; with the rest we must disagree. We agree with Mr. Belloc when he refers to his work as being accomplished "at a very great expense of time and of energy." There may be some who doubt the truth of this statement. There is undoubtedly a large section of the public which, led astray by that cynicism and that distrust of newspapers and journalists which a certain section of our Press has engendered in the public, has come to regard all newspaper reports on the war as unreliable and the writings of so-called "experts" as mere vapourings, undertaken in the hope of assisting the circulation of the paper in which they appear rather than the circulation of the truth. If, then, any reader be inclined to include Mr. Belloc in such a denunciation and to doubt that his weekly commentary in *Land and*

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Water is written as he says, "at a very great expense of time and of energy," let him turn to one of Mr. Belloc's articles, reprinted in *The Two Maps*, on "What to Believe in War News."

In this article Mr. Belloc asks the question—"How is the plain man to distinguish in the news of the war what is true from what is false, and so arrive at a sound opinion?" His answer to this question is that "in the first place, the basis of all sound opinion are the official *communiqués* read with the aid of a map." And to this he adds the following explanation:

When I say "the official *communiqués*" I do not mean those of the British Government alone, nor even of the Allies alone, but of *all* the belligerents. You just read impartially the *communiqués* of the Austro-Hungarian and of the German Governments together with those of the British Government and its Allies, or you will certainly miss the truth. By which statement I do not mean that each Government is equally accurate, still less equally full in its relation; but that, unless you compare all the statements of this sort, you will have most imperfect evidence; just as you would have very imperfect evidence in a court of law if you only listened to the prosecution and refused to listen to the defence.

Mr. Belloc then proceeds to show what characteristics all official *communiqués* have in common, and then to outline the peculiar characteristics of the *communiqués* of each belligerent. Although not one unnecessary sentence is included, this short summary of his own discoveries covers seven pages. The final sentence of the article is as follows: "Nevertheless, unless you do follow fairly regularly the Press of all the belligerent nations, you will obtain but an imperfect view of the war as a whole." [37]

This comparison of the *communiqués* of the belligerents, which is seen in these pages to be no light task, naturally forms but a small part of Mr. Belloc's work; so that further proof of his own statement, that his work necessitates the expenditure of much time and energy, need hardly be adduced.

This slight insight into the nature of Mr. Belloc's work will also serve to emphasize the point in which we disagree with Mr. Belloc's own description of his work. If, let us say, a bank manager, who may be regarded as a type of citizen of considerable intelligence and leisure, were to adopt and faithfully to pursue the methods described in this article, the methods which Mr. Belloc himself has found it necessary to adopt, he would certainly find his leisure time swallowed up. In so far as this alone were the case, we might agree with Mr. Belloc when he says of himself—"I ... profess now ... to be doing for others what their own occupations forbid them the time and opportunity to do." But our bank manager, when he had accomplished the long process of sifting out the only war news that is reliable (and he would be only able to accomplish this much, be it noted, with the aid of Mr. Belloc) would still be unable, in all probability, to grasp the full meaning and importance of that news. To do that he would need what, in common with the majority of Englishmen, he does not possess, and what it would take him years to acquire, namely, a knowledge of military history and military science.

We see then that Mr. Belloc, in his weekly commentary in *Land and Water*, is doing for others not merely "what their own occupations forbid them the time and opportunity to do," but *what they could not do for themselves*, even had they the time and opportunity.

To undertake this task he is peculiarly qualified. In his writings on the war, indeed, Mr. Belloc appears as an expert, in the true sense of that much abused word. He says of himself, in the paragraph already quoted—"I happen to have specialized on military history and problems." That is again too modest an estimation of the facts. He has done far more than merely to specialize on military history; he has given military history its true place in relation to other branches of history. The study of history at the present time is specialized. We subdivide its various aspects, classify facts and speak of constitutional history, economic history, ecclesiastical history, military history, and so forth. Now Mr. Belloc, in addition to his study of all the branches of history, has not merely made a special study of military history, but has realized and proved, more fully than any other historian, of what tremendous importance is the study of military history in its relation to those other branches of the study of history, such as the constitutional and economic. "In writing of the military aspect of any movement," he says, "it is impossible to deal with that aspect save as a living part of the whole; so knit into national life is the business of war." [38]

In those words, "so knit into national life is the business of war," Mr. Belloc has finely expressed his conception of war as one of the weightiest factors in human events. In accordance with this attitude Mr. Belloc has shown us, what no other historian has ever made clear, that the French Revolution, "more than any other modern period, turns upon, and is explained by, its military history." In the preface to his short thesis *The French Revolution* there occurs this passage:

The reader interested in that capital event should further seize (and but too rarely has an opportunity for seizing) its military aspect; and this difficulty of his proceeds from two causes: the first, that historians, even when they recognize the importance of the military side of some past movement, are careless of the military aspect, and think it sufficient to relate particular victories and general actions. The military aspect of any period does not consist in these, but in the campaigns of which actions, however decisive, are but incidental parts. In other words, the reader must seize the movement and design of armies if he is to seize a military period, and these are not commonly given him. In the second place, the historian, however much alive to the importance of military affairs, too rarely presents them [39]

as part of a general position. He will make his story a story of war, or again, a story of civilian development, and the reader will fail to see how the two combine.

In this short excerpt we catch a glimpse, not only of Mr. Belloc's attitude towards military history, but also of his method in dealing with it; and since this aspect of Mr. Belloc's work is of such capital importance we may perhaps quote that passage which begins on page 142 of *The French Revolution* and is so illuminating in regard both to Mr. Belloc's attitude and to his method:

The Revolution would never have achieved its object; on the contrary, it would have led to no less than a violent reaction against those principles which were maturing before it broke out, and which it carried to triumph, had not the armies of revolutionary France proved successful in the field; but the grasping of this mere historic fact, I mean the success of the revolutionary armies, is unfortunately no simple matter.

We all know that as a matter of fact the Revolution was, upon the whole, successful in imposing its view upon Europe. We all know that from that success as from a germ has proceeded, and is still proceeding, modern society. But the nature, the cause and the extent of the military success which alone made this possible, is widely ignored and still more widely misunderstood. No other signal military effort which achieved its object has in history ended in military disaster—yet this was the case with the revolutionary wars. After twenty years of advance, during which the ideas of the Revolution were sown throughout Western civilization, and had time to take root, the armies of the Revolution stumbled into the vast trap or blunder of the Russian campaign; this was succeeded by the decisive defeat of the democratic armies at Leipsic, and the superb strategy of the campaign of 1814, the brilliant rally of what is called the Hundred Days, only served to emphasize the completeness of the apparent failure. For that masterly campaign was followed by Napoleon's first abdication, that brilliant rally ended in Waterloo and the ruin of the French army. When we consider the spread of Grecian culture over the East by the parallel military triumph of Alexander, or the conquest of Gaul by the Roman armies under Cæsar, we are met by political phenomena and a political success no more striking than the success of the Revolution. The Revolution did as much by the sword as ever did Alexander or Cæsar, and as surely compelled one of the great transformations of Europe. But the fact that the great story can be read to a conclusion of defeat disturbs the mind of the student.

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Again, that element fatal to all accurate study of military history, the imputation of civilian virtues and motives, enters the mind of the reader with fatal facility when he studies the revolutionary wars.

He is tempted to ascribe to the enthusiasm of the troops, nay, to the political movement itself, a sort of miraculous power. He is apt to use with regard to the revolutionary victories the word "inevitable," which, if ever it applies to the reasoned, willing and conscious action of men, certainly applies least of all to men when they act as soldiers.

There are three points which we must carefully bear in mind when we consider the military history of the Revolution.

First, that it succeeded: the Revolution, regarded as the political motive of its armies, won.

Secondly, that it succeeded through those military aptitudes and conditions which happened to accompany, but by no means necessarily accompanied, the strong convictions and the civic enthusiasm of the time.

Thirdly, that the element of chance, which every wise and prudent reasoner will very largely admit into all military affairs, worked in favour of the Revolution in the critical moments of the early wars.

The reader who could make closer acquaintance with this aspect of Mr. Belloc's work, and it is an aspect, as has been said, of capital importance, need only turn to the too few pages of *The French Revolution*, where he will find ample evidence not only of Mr. Belloc's understanding of the importance of military history, but of his vast knowledge of military science; and the same may be said of those little books Mr. Belloc has published from time to time on some of the outstanding battles of the past, such as *Blenheim*, *Malplaquet*, *Waterloo*, *Cressy* and *Tourcoing*.

[41]

It is apparent, then, that Mr. Belloc brings to a task which the mass of the English public is quite incapable of undertaking for itself peculiar advantages, in that he has combined with a long and careful study of military history a thorough technical knowledge of military science.

In addition to this major and essential qualification he possesses, as the outcome of his pursuits and experience, other minor and subsidiary though still very necessary qualifications. In this war, as in all wars of the past, the lie of country and the fatigue of men are two of the weightiest factors; and Mr. Belloc is enormously assisted in attempting a nice appreciation of these factors by the knowledge acquired in the long pursuit of his topographical tastes and by his practical

experience in the ranks of the French army.

On this latter point too much insistence should not be laid, though to ignore it entirely would be as foolish as to exaggerate its importance. We may best assess its value, perhaps, by saying that Mr. Belloc has been in possession for more than twenty years of certain definite knowledge which the vast majority of Englishmen have only acquired in the past year. More than twenty years ago he learnt the elementary rules of military organization and the ordinary facts of army life which are common knowledge in conscript countries. In England we have remained ignorant of these facts. Many of us have learnt them for the first time since August, 1914; many of us, though we have come to a consciousness of them, will never learn them. In a passage in *A General Sketch of the European War*, in which Mr. Belloc exposes "the fundamental contrast between the modern German military temper and the age-long traditions of the French service," though he brings into play much information that he has doubtless acquired in more recent years, we can see shining through, the memory of early experiences. [42]

This contrast [he says] appears in everything, from tactical details to the largest strategical conception, and from things so vague and general as the tone of military writings, to things so particular as the instruction of the conscript in his barrack-room. The German soldier is taught—or was—that victory was inevitable, and would be as swift as it would be triumphant; the French soldier was taught that he had before him a terrible and doubtful ordeal, one that would be long, one in which he ran a fearful risk of defeat, and one in which he might, even if victorious, have to wear down his enemy by the exercise of a most burdensome tenacity.

No useful purpose would be served by entering here into details of the nature of Mr. Belloc's service in the French army. There occurs, however, in *The Path to Rome*, a short passage which is too interesting and too amusing not to quote. Arriving at Toul, Mr. Belloc is reminded of the manoeuvres of 1891:

For there were two divisions employed in that glorious and fatiguing great game, and more than a gross of guns—to be accurate 156—and of these one (the sixth piece of the tenth battery of the eighth—I wonder where you all are now; I suppose I shall not see you again, but you were the best companions in the world, my friends) was driven by three drivers, of whom I was the middle one and the worst, having on my livret the note "Conducteur médiocre."

In *Hills and the Sea* Mr. Belloc says:

In the French Artillery it is a maxim ... that you should weight your limber (and, therefore, your horses) with useful things alone; and as gunners are useful only to fire guns, they are not carried, save into action or when some great rapidity of movement is desired.... But on the march we (meaning the French) send the gunners forward, and not only the gunners, but a reserve of drivers also. We send them forward an hour or two before the guns start; we catch them up with the guns on the road; they file up to let us pass, and commonly salute us by way of formality and ceremony. Then they come into the town of the halt an hour or two after we have reached it.

But of far more vital interest is that vast fund of special knowledge which Mr. Belloc has amassed in the indulgence of his tastes in travel and topography. Of this knowledge the evidence to be found in Mr. Belloc's writings is so voluminous and overwhelming that it is as unnecessary as it is impossible to quote freely here. A detailed examination of Mr. Belloc's books on travel will be found in another chapter; if one point more than another needs emphasis here, it is that Mr. Belloc primarily views all country over which he passes from a military standpoint. To accompany Mr. Belloc on a motor run through some part of his own county of Sussex suffices to convince one of this. Whether tramping along causeways and sidepaths, or speeding over railway lines, he cannot pass through any considerable stretch of country without exercising his mind as to the possible advantages that might be afforded opposing armies by this or that natural formation. It is fair to say that this question, if we may call it such, has been uppermost in Mr. Belloc's mind throughout every journey of an extent that he has undertaken, whether in Southern, Western or Eastern Europe. It would be false to imagine that the prime motive of all Mr. Belloc's journeys was to view country purely from the military standpoint, but it is fair to say that almost the first question Mr. Belloc asks himself when he strikes a stretch of country with which he is unfamiliar, and the question he repeatedly and continually asks himself as he traverses that country, is—"How would the natural formation of this country aid or hinder a modern army advancing or retreating through it?" That great stretches of country, notably in France and Belgium, have been visited by Mr. Belloc, moreover, with the definite object of viewing them from a purely military standpoint, it is almost unnecessary to state; no reader who will turn to the pages of *The French Revolution* or of *Blenheim* or *Waterloo*, can fail to realize as much for himself. Common sense, indeed, plays a great part in Mr. Belloc's study of history. He regards it as virtually essential that a historian who would describe the action of a great battle of the past should be in a position faithfully to reconstruct the conditions under which that battle was fought. Mr. Belloc himself has settled the vexed question of why the Prussians did not charge at Valmy by visiting the battlefield under the conditions of the battle and discovering that they could not have charged. [43] [44]

Through the vast store of knowledge acquired in this way Mr. Belloc enjoys an advantage in his treatment of the present war which cannot be overestimated. In writing of the country in which

the campaigns of to-day are taking place he is not writing of country as he sees it on the map. To him that country is not, as to the majority of Englishmen it is, a conglomeration of patches, some heavily, some lightly shaded, of larger and smaller dots, joined and intersected by an almost meaningless maze of thin and thick lines. To him that country is hills and vales, woods and fields, rivers and swamps, real things he has seen and among which he has moved. As an example of this we may perhaps give his description of the line of the Argonne which occurs on page 157 of *The French Revolution*:

The Argonne is a long, nearly straight range of hills running from the south northward, a good deal to the west of north.

Their soil is clay, and though the height of the hills is only three hundred feet above the plain, their escarpment or steep side is towards the east, whence an invasion may be expected. They are densely wooded, from five to eight miles broad, the supply of water in them is bad, in many parts undrinkable; habitation with its provision for armies and roads extremely rare. It is necessary to insist upon all these details, because the greater part of civilian readers find it difficult to understand how formidable an obstacle so comparatively unimportant feature in the landscape may be to an army upon the march. It was quite impossible for the guns, the wagons, and therefore the food and the ammunition of the invading army, to pass through the forest over the drenched clay land of that wet autumn save where proper roads existed. These were only to be found wherever a sort of natural pass negotiated the range.

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Three of these passes alone existed, and to this day there is very little choice in the crossing of these hills.

We may compare with this extract a most remarkable description of country given by Mr. Belloc in his article on "The Great Offensive" in the issue of *Land and Water* of October 2, 1915. Describing the chief movement in Champagne, he points out that the French advanced on a front of seventeen and a half miles from the village of Aubèrive to the market town of Ville-sur-Tourbe. He continues:

The first line of the enemy's defence in this region follows for the most part a crest.... This ridge is not an even one, nor was the whole of it occupied by the German works. In places it had been seized by the French during their work last February, and has been held ever since. Generally speaking, its summits nearly reach, or just surpass, the 200 metre contour, above the sea, but the whole of this country lies so high that such a height only means a matter of 150 to 200 feet above the water levels of the little muddy brooks that run in the folds of the land. It is a country of chalk, but not of dry, turfy chalk, like those of the English Downs; rather a chalk mixed with clay, which makes for bad going after rain. It is the soil over which, further to the east, the battle of Valmy was fought, an action largely determined by the impracticable nature of the ground when wet. On the other hand, it is a soil that dries quickly. The country as a whole is remarkably open. There are no hedges, and the movement of troops is covered only by scattered, not infrequent plantations of pine trees and larches, which grow to no great height. From any one of the observation posts along the seventeen miles of line one sees the landscape before one as a whole. It is the very opposite of what is called "blind country." On the east, to the right of the French positions, there runs along the horizon the low, even-wooded ridge of the Argonne, which rises immediately behind Ville-sur-Tourbe. Far to the east, from the left, in clear weather one distinguishes the great mass of Rheims Cathedral rising above the town.

This tremendous advantage which he possesses is casually mentioned by Mr. Belloc in his Introduction to *A General Sketch of the European War*, where he says:

[46]

It is even possible, where the writer has seen the ground over which the battles have been fought (and much of it is familiar to the author of this) so to describe such ground to the reader that he will in some sort be able to see for himself the air and the view in which the things were done: thus more than through any other method will the things be made real to him.

In co-relation with these particular and highly specialized qualifications which Mr. Belloc possessed before the war, should be reckoned perhaps two other qualifications of a more general character. The first of these is the very long and thorough training which his scholarship has necessitated in the dispassionate examination of evidence. Through years of historical study he has learnt carefully to sort out strong from weak evidence and to base his judgements only on such evidence as may be regarded as thoroughly reliable. A cursory glance through the pages of *Danton* and a quite casual perusal of a few of the foot-notes in that book will leave the reader with no doubts on this point. In course of years this careful practice naturally develops into a habit; and the value of this habit in approaching reports of actions and statistics of prisoners or effectives may easily be grasped.

The second of these two general qualifications with which we must credit Mr. Belloc is the fact of his envisagement of the possibility of this war. Europe, Mr. Belloc argues, reposes upon the foundations of nationality. Internationalism, whether it be expressed in the financial rings of Capitalism or the world-wide brotherhoods of Socialism, is only made possible by a harmony of

the wills of the great European nations. Should a conflict of wills not merely exist but break out into expression in war, internationalism, though outwardly so powerful, must inevitably go by the board and the ancient foundations upon which Europe rests stand poignantly revealed. Such a conflict of wills Mr. Belloc has always seen to exist between Prussia and the rest of the nations of Europe. His knowledge of their history and character led him years ago to that idea of the Prussians which this war has shown to be the true idea, and which we find expressed on every hand to-day with remarkable sageness after the event. This view is that which recognizes fully that the Prussian spirit, "the soul of Prussia in her international relations," is expressed in what is called the "Frederician Tradition," which Mr. Belloc has put into the following terms:

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The King of Prussia shall do all that may seem to advantage the kingdom of Prussia among the nations, notwithstanding any European conventions or any traditions of Christendom, or even any of those wider and more general conventions which govern the international conduct of other Christian peoples.

Mr. Belloc further explains this tradition by saying:

For instance, if a convention of international morals has arisen—as it did arise very strongly, and was kept until recent times—that hostilities should not begin without a formal declaration of war, the "Frederician Tradition" would go counter to this, and would say: "If ultimately it would be to the advantage of Prussia to attack without declaration of war, then this convention may be neglected."

Or, again, treaties solemnly ratified between two Governments are generally regarded as binding. And certainly a nation that never kept such a treaty would find itself in a position where it was impossible to make any treaties at all. Still, if upon a vague calculation of men's memories, the acuteness of the circumstance, the advantage ultimately to follow, and so on, it be to the advantage of Prussia to break such solemn treaty, then such a treaty should be broken.

To this he adds:

This doctrine of the "Frederician Tradition" does not mean that the Prussian statesmen wantonly do wrong, whether in acts of cruelty or in acts of treason and bad faith. What it means is that, wherever they are met by the dilemma, "Shall I do *this*, which is to the advantage of my country but opposed to European and common morals, or *that*, which is consonant with those morals but to the disadvantage of my country?" they choose the former and not the latter course.

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That this tradition not merely existed but was the paramount influence in Prussian foreign politics Mr. Belloc had long realized, while, at the same time, he had been very well aware of the fatuous illusions about themselves under which the Prussians and a great portion of the German-speaking peoples labour—illusions which necessarily led the German national will into conflict with the will of the other European nations. Proof of the fact that Mr. Belloc had long held this view of Prussia may be found by any reader of his essays, while a passage which occurs in *Marie Antoinette* is especially illuminating:

It is characteristic of the more deplorable forms of insurgence against civilized morals that they originate either in a race permanently alien to (though present in) the unity of the Roman Empire, or in those barbaric provinces which were admitted to the European scheme after the fall of Rome, and which for the most part enjoyed but a brief and precarious vision of the Faith between their tardy conversion and the schism of the sixteenth century. Prussia was of this latter kind, and with Prussia Frederick. To-day his successors and their advisers, when they attempt to justify the man, are compelled still to ignore the European tradition of honour. But this crime of his, the partition of Poland, the germ of all that international distrust which has ended in the intolerable armed strain of our time has another character added to it: a character which attaches invariably to ill-doing when that ill-doing is also uncivilized. It was a folly. The same folly attached to it as has attached to every revolt against the historic conscience of Europe: such blindnesses can only destroy; they possess no permanent creative spirit, and the partition of Poland has remained a peculiar and increasing curse to its promoters in Prussia....

There is not in Christian history, though it abounds in coincidence or design, a more striking example of sin suitably rewarded than the menace which is presented to the Hohenzollerns to-day by the Polish race. Not even their hereditary disease, which has reached its climax in the present generation has proved so sure a chastisement to the lineage of Frederick as have proved the descendants of those whose country he destroyed. An economic accident has scattered them throughout the dominions of the Prussian dynasty; they are a source everywhere of increasing danger and ill-will. They grow largely in representative power. They compel the government to abominable barbarities which are already arousing the mind of Europe. They will in the near future prove the ruin of that family to which was originally due the partition of Poland.

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To Mr. Belloc, then, holding this view of Prussia, it was obvious that the conflict of wills between Prussia and the other nations would inevitably grow so intense as some day to result in war.

Briefly to recapitulate, we may say that Mr. Belloc, in his weekly commentary in *Land and Water*, has undertaken and carried on since the beginning of the war a task which the vast majority of the English public is quite unable to undertake for itself. He was qualified to undertake that task, and has been enabled to carry it on by the fact that he has combined with a deep study of military history an exact knowledge of military science; by the knowledge he has gained from practical experience of army service; by the wide acquaintance he has made with the vast stretches of country in the indulgence of his tastes in travel and topography; by the long and thorough training he has passed through in the dispassionate examination of evidence; and, lastly, by the fact that he had long envisaged the possibility of this war.

With this brief summary we may usefully contrast Mr. Belloc's own summary of his work already quoted in the early part of this chapter. In this he says: "My work ... is no more than an attempt to give week by week, at what I am proud to say is a very great expense of time and energy, an explanation of what is taking place. There are many men who could do the same thing. I happen to have specialized upon military history and problems, and profess now, with a complete set of maps, to be doing for others what their own occupations forbid them the time and opportunity to do."

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CHAPTER VI

MR. BELLOC AND THE WAR

Having contrasted these two summaries, we will leave the reader to form his own estimate of the nature of Mr. Belloc's work and of the qualifications he brings to it. There remains to be determined the measure of success which has attended Mr. Belloc's "attempt to give an explanation of what is taking place." "There are many men," he says, "who could do the same thing." On this point we cannot argue with Mr. Belloc. He may know them: we do not. What we do know is that there are many men who are trying to do the same thing. In saying this we have no wish to belittle either individuals or as a class those courageous gentlemen, among whom the best-known, perhaps, are Colonel Repington and Colonel Maude, who are striving, and striving honestly, we believe, to provide the readers of various papers with an intelligent explanation of the courses taken by the different campaigns. Nor do we regard them as in any way imitators of Mr. Belloc. We merely assert that no single one of them is achieving his object so nearly as Mr. Belloc is achieving his. This should not be understood to mean that the course of events has proved Mr. Belloc to be right more often than it has proved his contemporaries to be right, though if it were possible to collate all the necessary evidence, such a statement might conceivably be proved correct. This assertion should be understood, rather, to mean that no single commentary on the war, regularly contributed to any journal or newspaper, displays those merits of dispassionate honesty, detailed explanation and lucid exposition in so marked a degree as does Mr. Belloc's weekly commentary in *Land and Water*.

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Were there any necessity to adduce proof of this it would be sufficient to regard the great gulf fixed between the circulation of *Land and Water* and any other weekly journal of the same price. It is of greater service, however, to realize how and why Mr. Belloc surpasses his contemporaries than to waste space and time in proving what is already an admitted fact. The two outstanding features of Mr. Belloc's work in *Land and Water*—two of the most conspicuous features, indeed, as will be seen in the course of this book, of all his work—are his fierce sincerity and amazing lucidity. In this first characteristic we are willing to believe that his respectable contemporaries equal though they cannot surpass him. We will suppose, though we can find no signs of it, that they equal him in that extraordinary combination of qualifications acquired by study, travel and experience which he has been seen to possess. Even then, all other things being supposed equal, they fall far short of him in this quality of lucidity.

This is not merely the gift of the journalist to state things plainly. It is the gift of the Latin races which Mr. Belloc was given at his birth: it is the furnace of thought in which Mr. Belloc has forged his prose style into a finely-tempered instrument.

Two of life's chief difficulties, it has often been said, are, first, to think exactly, and, second, to give your thought exact expression. It is the lot of the majority of men to know what they want to say but to be unable to say it. Many men are shy of expressing their thoughts because of the very present but indefinite feeling they have that their thoughts, though real and sound in their minds, become in some extraordinary way unreal and unsound when expressed. That this curious transformation takes place we all know; newspaper reporters carry incontestable evidence of it in their notebooks. Few public speakers, indeed, realize how deeply in debt they are to reporters, who are trained in the art of reproducing in their reports and conveying to the public, not what the speaker said, but what he intended to say. And this curious transformation of our thoughts in the process of expression from reality to unreality, from sense to nonsense; this divergence between thought and language; this disability under which we all labour, but which so few of us overcome, which is so common among men as almost to justify the jibe that "language was given to men to conceal their thought," is due entirely, of course, to the insufficiency of our power of expression. A speaker or writer is great in proportion as his power of expression nears perfection.

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According as we are satisfied to read in print what a writer says, and do not find it necessary to read between the lines what he intended to say, we may regard him as possessed of lucidity of thought and lucidity of style.

Many of the ideas, emotions and actions to which Mr. Belloc has given expression in his essays are so intimate a part of the collective experience of man as to allow each one of us to see that he has visualized and expressed them with exactness; and so to realize that he possesses in his style a wonderful instrument.

With the aid of that instrument it has been said he can expose the technicalities of a battle or the transformations of the human heart. How great is the power of that instrument is at no time so generally susceptible to proof as when it is seen applied to facts as in the writings of Mr. Belloc on the war, which it is proposed to examine in this chapter. But before we enter upon our examination of the nature and influence of those writings, it may be well to emphasize their importance as an example of style. [53]

In his writings on the war, and more especially in his weekly chronicle in *Land and Water*, Mr. Belloc is not expressing views or ideas of his own; he is not writing in support of the thesis or argument; he is stating facts. He is stating the facts of military science, which may be found in a hundred books, side by side with the facts of the war, which may be found in a thousand official *communiqués*; and he is stating both sets of facts, so that the one set is explanatory of the other set, and so that both may be easily understood. This Mr. Belloc is only able to accomplish by virtue of his peculiar power of lucid expression.

Not alone, then, in this particular, but supremely alone in this particular, Mr. Belloc towers above other contemporary writers on the war. He can explain as they can never explain: expound as they can never expound: describe as they can never describe. His meaning stands clear in print while theirs must be read between the lines. He makes himself understood while we must make ourselves understand them.

This is the supreme power that has carried all his other powers to fruition. We do not think that "there are many men who could do the same thing."

That this great power, tremendous as it is, is afflicted by weaknesses in practice is unfortunately true. These weaknesses arise mainly from the clash of Mr. Belloc's overpowering honesty with the cynical attitude towards newspapers in general which recent methods in journalism have engendered in the public. There was a time in the history of journalism when it was a crime to be wrong. For "wrong" modern journalism has substituted "dull." In recent years competition among newspaper proprietors and editors of newspapers has not been, as in times past, for the most reliable news or the most trustworthy views on important events, but for the latest news and the brightest "stories." The reputation for a newspaper which has been looked upon as pre-eminently desirable is not that it should be regarded by the public as well-informed or as expressing a sound judgment, but as pithy and interesting. The inevitable consequence of this tendency is that the great mass of English daily newspapers have lost their former high place in the estimation of the public as serious and necessary institutions, and have descended to the level of an amusement. The only exceptions that can be made from this sweeping condemnation are the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Morning Post*, the *Manchester Guardian*, and the *Westminster Gazette*. Of the rest, some are of a higher, some of a lower type, but all are virtually forms of amusement and of distraction rather than of learning and instruction. What differences exist between them are differences of degree, not differences of kind. Some of them may be compared to a good comedy; others to those musical plays which are less plays than exercises in the production of plays; many rank no higher than the picture palace. The most base of all, though they rank as distractions, can scarcely be classed as amusements. They are patent medicines. It has been well said that the *Daily Mail* has achieved what no other paper has ever achieved, in enabling some millions of the English proletariat to be whisked from the breakfast to the office table every day of the week and to forget in the process the discomfort they undergo. [54]

Viewed from the other side, the existence of this state of affairs argues a curious temper of mind in the public, which permitted and assisted, even if it did not always quite approve of its continuance. That is to say, English people bought and read the papers which were pithy and interesting, but did not imagine that they were learned or instructive, and when, by chance, they sought some statement on which they could place reliance, they realized that it could not be found in the newspapers. This strange development in the attitude of the public towards newspapers in general, real as it is, is hard to follow and difficult to define. It was due in great measure to the fact that the public in ever-increasing numbers was gradually ceasing to regard as real what the newspapers regarded as real. The chief realities for the newspapers remained the various aspects of capitalism and party politics, when to the public eye other things already appeared more real. The whole effect of this development may best be summed up, perhaps, in the expression, half of annoyance, half of resignation, so usual on the lips of newspaper readers: "It says so in the paper, but who knows how much to believe." [55]

Some such pass had been reached in the growing estrangement between the public and the Press when the war broke out and the public was faced by an event of overwhelming interest. The people of England woke to a desire for the truth and clamoured for the newspapers to give it to them. The newspapers were helpless. They had forgotten where truth was to be found. So far as any of our modern newspaper men could remember it was one of those antiquated encumbrances, such as wood-cuts and flat-bed machines, which they had banished long ago. The only distinct impression of it they retained was that it had been plainly labelled "not interesting."

So they met the emergency by buying a new set of type, blacker and deeper than any they had used before, and introducing the page headline.

We have seen how, while the mass of the English Press was left fatuously floundering before the spectacle of the greatest military event the world has ever seen, Mr. Belloc set out quite simply to give the public an account, week by week, of the progress of that event which was as plain and as truthful as he could make it. That approximately a hundred thousand persons are willing to pay sixpence a week to read this account we already know. It is inevitable, however, that a considerable percentage of Mr. Belloc's readers should approach his commentary in *Land and Water* in the same attitude of mind as they have for so long approached the perusal of the daily newspaper. They will tend to speak of Mr. Belloc's articles as "interesting" or "dull," forgetting that criticism on these lines can rightly be directed only to the events of which Mr. Belloc is writing. For it is not Mr. Belloc's object to make the events of the war interesting to his readers. It does not even remotely concern him whether those events are interesting or not. His sole object is to give his readers as detailed an explanation of the nature of those events and as clear an account of their progress as it is possible for him to give. [56]

There is one other point in which Mr. Belloc's amazing lucidity is afflicted by a peculiar weakness in practice. The method which he adopts so extensively of explaining situations by means of diagrams is undoubtedly very successful. It has, however, its limitations. So long as the situation which he is concerned to describe is of a simple nature it may be admirably expressed in diagrammatic form. When, however, the situation itself is complex the diagram is also necessarily complex, which results, in the text of his writing, in long strings of letters or figures which lead to almost greater confusion than would the enumeration of the objects they are intended to represent. This weakness appears very plainly in a passage in *A General Sketch of the European War*, in which Mr. Belloc describes how the Allied force in the operative corner before Namur stood with relation to the two natural obstacles of the rivers Sambre and Meuse and the fortified zone round the point where they met. To illustrate the position of the Allied force he draws a diagram which is excellently clear. In describing this diagram, however, he falls into difficulties which may be seen very plainly in the following extract in which he describes the French plan: [57]

Now, the French plan was as follows. They said to themselves: "There will come against us an enemy acting along the arrows VWXYZ, and this enemy will certainly be in superior force to our own. He will perhaps be as much as fifty per cent. stronger than we are. But he will suffer under these disadvantages:

"The one part of his forces, V and W, will find it difficult to act in co-operation with the other part of his forces, Y and Z, because Y and Z (acting as they are on an outside circumference split by the fortified zone SSS) will be separated, or only able to connect in a long and roundabout way. The two lots, V and W, and Y and Z, could only join hands by stretching round an awkward angle—that is, by stretching round the bulge which SSS makes, SSS being the ring of forts round Namur. Part of their forces (that along the arrow X) will further be used up in trying to break down the resistance of SSS. That will take a good deal of time. If our horizontal line AB holds its own, naturally defended as it is, against the attack from V and W, while our perpendicular line BC holds its own still more firmly (relying on its much better natural obstacle) against YZ, we shall have ample time to break the first and worst shock of the enemy's attack, and to allow, once we have concentrated that attack upon ourselves, the rest of our forces, the masses of manœuvre, or at any rate a sufficient portion of them, to come up and give us a majority in *this* part of the field."

Alongside these slight criticisms we may mention, perhaps, another criticism which has been publicly levelled against Mr. Belloc's writings on the military aspect of the present war. The issue of the *Daily Mail* of September 6, 1915, contained an article in which Mr. Belloc was charged with grave errors of judgement. The gist of this article was that Mr. Belloc had regarded an enemy offensive in the West in the spring of 1915, as certain to take place, whereas, in point of fact, the Germans made their great effort against the Russians in the East. This was the chief charge brought against Mr. Belloc; and to it were added a number of lesser charges of which the majority were perfectly just, showing how in this place and in that Mr. Belloc had overrated one factor or underrated another. [58]

With this criticism it is unnecessary to concern ourselves further than to note the nature of Mr. Belloc's reply, which appeared in *Land and Water* on September 18, 1915:

There is in such an indictment as this [he says] nothing to challenge, because I would be the first, not only to admit its truth, but, if necessary, to supplement the list very lengthily. To write a weekly commentary upon a campaign of this magnitude—a campaign the facts of which are concealed as they have been in no war of the past—is not only an absorbing and very heavy task, but also one in which much suggestion and conjecture are necessarily doubtful or wrong, and to pursue it as I have done steadily and unbrokenly for so many months has tried my powers to the utmost.

But I confess that I am in no way ashamed of such occasional errors in judgment and misinterpretations, for I think them quite unavoidable. They will be discovered in every one of the many current commentaries maintained upon the war throughout the Press of Europe and even in the calculations of the General Staffs.

Nay, I will now add to the list spontaneously: In common with many others, I thought that an invasion of Silesia was probable last December. At the beginning of the war I believed that the French operations in Lorraine would develop towards the north—an opinion which will be found registered many months later in the official records recently published. In the matter of numbers my early estimates exaggerated the proportion of wounded to killed, while only a few weeks ago I guessed for the number of German prisoners in the West a number which subsequent official information conveyed to me proved to be erroneous by between 17 and 18 per cent. I long worked on the idea that the line from Ivangorod to Cholm was a double line—a matter of some importance last July. I have since found that it was single. The total reserve within and behind Paris which decided the battle of the Marne was, I believe (though the matter is not yet public), less large than I had suspected, and the figures I gave would rather include the Sixth Army as well as the Army of Paris. A few weeks ago I suggested that there was difficulty in moving a great body of men rapidly across the Upper Wierpz. Yet the movement, when it was made, might fairly be described as rapid. At any rate, the aid lent to the Archduke came more promptly than had seemed possible. I certainly thought, though I did not say so in so many words, that the capture of the bridgehead at Friedrichstadt would involve an immediate and successful advance by the enemy upon Riga, and in this opinion, I believe, no single authority, enemy or ally, differed. What has caused the check to the enemy advance here for ten full days no one in the West can tell, nor, for that matter, does any news from Russia yet enlighten us.

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To this criticism of the writer in the *Daily Mail* Mr. Belloc's reply is so final and complete that any addition would be out of place. It is very necessary, however, that we should devote careful consideration to the facts which prompted the publication of this criticism; and this will be done in the succeeding chapter.

CHAPTER VII

MR. BELLOC THE PUBLICIST

So far as this article in the *Daily Mail* was confined to an exposure of Mr. Belloc's errors in judgement, it may be regarded as a piece of legitimate and fair, if foolish, criticism. But the irrelevant jeering which the article also contained, and, even more, the manner in which the article was given publication (accompanied, as it was, by the circulation of posters bearing the words "Belloc's Fables"), constituted nothing short of a violent personal attack. To understand how such an attack came to be made it is sufficient to possess an acquaintance with the methods of Carmelite House or a knowledge of the personality of Lord Northcliffe—a subject on which we could enlarge. It will better suit the present purpose, however, to give Mr. Belloc's own explanation of the reason why this attack was made upon him. In his "Reply to Criticism," before proceeding to the part which has been quoted in the foregoing chapter, he says:

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It has been the constant policy of this paper to avoid controversy of any kind, both because the matters it deals with are best examined as intellectual propositions and because the increasing gravity of the time is ill-suited for domestic quarrel. I none the less owe it to my readers to take some notice of the very violent personal attack delivered by the Harmsworth Press some ten days ago upon my work in this journal. I owe it to them because I should otherwise appear to admit unanswered the depreciation of my work in this paper, but, still more, because the incident would give the general public a very false impression unless its cause were exposed. I will deal with the matter as briefly as I can. It is not a pleasant one, and I doubt whether the principal offender will compel me to return to it. I must first explain to my readers the occasion of so extraordinary an outburst on the part of the proprietor of the *Daily Mail*. I have become, with many others, convinced that a great combination of newspapers pretending to speak with many voices, but really serving the private interests of one man, is dangerous to the nation. It was breeding dissension between various social classes at a moment when unity was more necessary than ever; pretending to make and unmake Ministers; weakening authority by calculated confusion, but, above all, undermining public confidence and spreading panic in a methodical way which has already made the opinion of London an extraordinary contrast to that of the Armies, and gravely disturbing our Allies. They could not understand the privilege accorded to this one person. I, therefore to the best of my power, determined to attack that privilege, and did so. I shall continue to do so. But such action has nothing to do with this journal, in which I have hitherto avoided all controversy.

Now this matter, as Mr. Belloc rightly says, is not a pleasant one, and we owe some apology both to Mr. Belloc and the public for returning to it here. It forms, however, so noteworthy an example of that aspect of Mr. Belloc and his work which it is proposed to examine in this chapter that any consideration of that aspect without some mention of this unpleasant affair would necessarily be

incomplete.

The attitude of mind expressed by Mr. Belloc in this explanation should be carefully noted. In this he appears, not, as we have seen him in the previous chapter, as the exponent of intellectual propositions, but as the champion of an opinion of his own. He is here expressing and upholding his particular view of the necessity, during the war, of unity among social classes and of the strengthening of public confidence. This view of his proceeds from two co-related causes; the first, his conception of the nature of the war, and, second, his knowledge of the part played in government by public opinion. [61]

These two causes must be examined separately.

Mr. Belloc has made clear his conception of the nature of the war in the following words:

The two parties are really fighting for their lives; that in Europe which is arrayed against the Germanic alliance would not care to live if it should fail to maintain itself against the threat of that alliance. It is for them life and death. On the other side, the Germans having propounded this theory of theirs, or rather the Prussians having propounded it for them, there is no rest possible until they shall either have "made good" to our destruction, or shall have been so crushed that a recurrence of the menace from them will for the future be impossible.... The fight, in a word, is not like a fight with a man who, if he beats you, may make you sign away some property, or make you acknowledge some principle to which you are already half-inclined; it is like a fight with a man who says, "So long as I have life left in me, I will make it my business to kill you." And fights of that kind can never reach a term less absolute than the destruction of offensive power in one side or the other. A peace not affirming complete victory in this great struggle could, of its nature, be no more than a truce.

The second cause, Mr. Belloc's knowledge of the important part played by public opinion in government, he has expressed in the following terms:—

The importance of a sound public judgment upon the progress of the war is not always clearly appreciated. It depends upon truths which many men have forgotten, and upon certain political forces which, in the ordinary rush and tumble of professional politics, are quite forgotten. Let me recall those truths and those forces.

The truths are these: that no Government can effectively exercise its power save upon the basis of public opinion. A Government can exercise its power over a conquered province in spite of public opinion, but it cannot work, save for a short time and at an enormous cost in friction, counter to the opinion of those with whom it is concerned as citizens and supporters. By which I do not mean that party politicians cannot act thus in peace, and upon unimportant matters. I mean that no kind of Government has ever been able to act thus in a crisis. [62]

It is also wise to keep the mass of people in ignorance of disasters that may be immediately repaired, or of follies or even vices in government which may be redressed before they become dangerous.

It is always absolutely wise to prevent the enemy in time of war from learning things which would be an aid to him. That is the reason why a strict censorship in time of war is not only useful, but essentially and drastically necessary. But though public opinion, even in time of peace, is only in part informed, and though in time of war it may be very insufficiently informed, yet upon it and with it you govern. Without it or against it in time of war you cannot govern.

Now if during the course of a great war men come quite to misjudge its very nature, the task of the Government would be strained some time or other in the future to breaking point. False news, too readily credited, does not leave people merely insufficiently informed, conscious of their ignorance, and merely grumbling because they cannot learn more, it has the positive effect of putting them into the wrong frame of mind, of making them support what they should not support, and neglect what they should not neglect.

The view, then, which Mr. Belloc holds, and which these two factors combine to form, is one of enormous importance. This view is the key to all Mr. Belloc's writings on the political aspect of the war. He has expressed it over and over again, but never in more solemn terms than in the following passage. After showing the existence of the political effect of the German advance to the borders of Russia, he points out how necessary it is to control, by public authority and through our own private wills, any corresponding political effect in England:

If, here, the one territory of the three great Allies not invaded [he says] any insanity of fear be permitted, or any still baser motive of saving private fortune by an inconclusive peace, then the political effect at which the enemy is aiming will indeed have been achieved. These things are contagious. We must root out and destroy the seed of that before it grows more formidable. If we do not, we are deliberately risking disaster. But be very certain of this: That if by whatever lack of judgment, or worse, an inconclusive peace be arranged, this country alone of the [63]

great alliance will, perhaps unsupported, be the target of future attack....

He then goes on to show how the enemy's great offensive through Poland began in April, 1915, and throughout the summer failed and failed and failed. He concludes:

It is not enough to know these things as a proposition in mathematics or as a problem in chess may be known. They must enter into the consciousness of the nation; and this they will not do if the opposite and false statement calculated to spread panic and to destroy judgment be permitted to work its full evil unchecked by public authority.

These passages will suffice to show not only that Mr. Belloc works with an object, but also the very important nature of that object. In his own words, he works "for the instruction of public opinion." His whole desire is to elucidate for the general public who have not the advantages of his knowledge and pursuits, events which are both puzzling and urgent. In his commentary in *Land and Water* he deals with those problems which belong of their nature to the military aspect of the war, and we have seen how extraordinarily qualified he is to undertake that task as well as with what marked success he has accomplished it. His writings on the political aspect of the war are to be found chiefly in the *Illustrated Sunday Herald*, while many articles which he has contributed at various times to other journals and newspapers are of a similar character.

In so far as he is writing, as he is in these articles, on general topics of the day for the public of the day, Mr. Belloc is a journalist. In its former restricted meaning the word "journalist" expressed this. To-day, however, we include under the designation of journalist all those workers in the editorial departments of newspaper offices who, though skilled in various ways, are not necessarily writers at all. In referring, then, to Mr. Belloc as a journalist we are using the term in its older and more restricted sense: in the sense in which the term was employed when journalism was a profession and not a trade, when the newspaper was not merely an instrument to further the ends of a capitalist or syndicate, but a means of communicating to the public the views of an individual or group of individuals, each of whom was prepared to accept personal responsibility for the views he expressed. [64]

The journalist in this sense is a rare figure to-day: so rare, indeed, that we have forgotten he is a journalist and invented a new name for him. In the field of journalism as it is at the present time it is possible to count on the fingers of one hand the number of men who write constantly on general topics of the day and sign what they write, thus accepting personal responsibility for the views they express and not leaving that responsibility with the newspaper in which their views appear. Every weekly or monthly journal as well as the greater number of daily newspapers contain, it is true, signed articles. The leader-pages of the halfpenny dailies make a feature nearly every day of one or more signed articles. But these articles, in the main, deal only with subjects on which the writer who signs his name is a specialist. They are written by men who happen to possess special knowledge of some subject which is of pronounced interest to the public owing to the course of events at the moment. For instance, when the Germans were on the point of entering Warsaw, articles dealing with various aspects of the city, its history, character and buildings, appeared in nearly every newspaper: and the better articles of this nature were written and signed by men who possessed an intimate knowledge of the subject on which they were writing. In the same way, all signed criticism, literary, dramatic or musical, which appears in the columns of the newspapers of to-day is, or professes to be, the work of specialists. Many of the larger newspapers, indeed, pay retaining fees or salaries and give staff appointments to such specialists. Thus, the *Daily Telegraph* has as its literary specialist Mr. W. L. Courtney, its musical specialist Mr. Robin H. Legge, its business specialist Mr. H. E. Morgan. [65]

It is the practice, then, of newspapers at the present time to make personally responsible for the opinions they express those who write in their columns on subjects which, though of great interest and importance, can of their nature only concern certain classes of the community. It should be noted, however, as perhaps the most curious anomaly among the mass of anomalies which constitute modern journalism, that the newspapers do not insist upon this personal responsibility of the writer in their treatment of those matters which concern not one class but every class of the community. What the newspaper insists upon, on the ground, presumably, that it is right and natural, in the minor affairs of life, it entirely ignores in the major matters of life. While it insists, for example, that the writer who expresses an opinion in its columns on the ludicrous inadequacy of the Promenade Concerts shall accept personal responsibility for that opinion, it allows views and opinions on such vital matters as the sovereignty of Parliament, the invincibility of Capitalism and the immorality of Trades Unionism to be expressed anonymously.

This practice is now firmly established. These anonymous opinions are the "opinions of the paper." But what does that phrase mean? A newspaper itself, as a mere material object, is incapable of forming or holding an opinion. Some person, or group of persons, must form and hold and be ready to accept the responsibility for the expression of these "opinions of the paper." And since the ultimate responsibility can fall on nobody but the proprietor or proprietors of the papers, these anonymous opinions must properly be regarded as the opinions of the capitalist or syndicate owning the paper in which they appear. In other words, the opinions anonymously expressed in the leading articles of the *Daily News* can only be the opinions of Messrs. Cadbury: of the *Daily Telegraph* of Lord Burnham or the Lawson family: in the *Manchester Guardian* of Mr. C. P. Scott and his fellow-proprietors: in the *Morning Post* of Lady Bathurst: in the *Daily Mail* of Lord Northcliffe and the Harmsworth family. [66]

Of this system of purveying to the public opinions which, by an absurd, illogical and pernicious

tradition, are supposed to be those of the public, but which, in reality, are those either of a single capitalist or syndicate, Mr. Belloc is not merely the avowed enemy but the most active enemy. It was his persistently inimical attitude, ruthlessly maintained, which evoked the angry personal attack made upon him by Lord Northcliffe; and we have seen how Mr. Belloc explains, justifies and maintains his attitude. In this we see his enmity avowed, but we do not perhaps realize how practical and active is the expression he gives it.

It has been said, indeed, just above, that of this system he is the most active enemy; and, in truth, we can find no other to equal him in this respect except such as are working in co-operation with, if not under the leadership of, Mr. Belloc. We have seen how, in so far as he is writing on general topics of the day for the public of the day (as he is doing, for example, in his articles which are concerned with various phases of the political aspect of the war in the *Illustrated Sunday Herald* and other journals and newspapers), Mr. Belloc is a journalist in the older and more restricted sense of the term. It has been further shown that the journalist in this sense is a rare figure to-day, it being the practice of modern journalism to deal with general, as distinct from special, topics of the day in the form of leading articles, which, in reality, contain what can only logically be regarded as the opinions of the proprietors of the newspapers in which they appear. The journalist who writes what may be called signed leading articles is so rare among us to-day that we have forgotten he is a journalist and invented a new name for him. We call him a publicist. [67]

Among the writers of the day the number who rank as publicists is very small. The names that occur to one are those of Mr. G. K. Chesterton, Mr. H. G. Wells, Mr. Bernard Shaw, Mr. A. G. Gardiner, Mr. E. B. Osborn and, possibly, Mr. Arnold Bennett. In addition there are a few publicists who speak through organs which they personally control, such as Mr. A. R. Orage, Mr. Sidney Webb, and Mr. Cecil Chesterton. Mr. Arnold Bennett, indeed, has only occupied the position of publicist since he has been a regular contributor to the *Daily News*, and we can only say that, high as Mr. Bennett stands in our estimation as a novelist and writer, we fail to see any particular in which his views on political and social matters of the day are of extraordinary importance to the welfare of the community at large. In a word, it seems to us that those articles of his which from time to time occupy so prominent a position on the leader page of the *Daily News* might appear as fitly in the correspondence column. Mr. G. K. Chesterton has won for himself a high place in contemporary letters, but it is more probable that that place is due rather to the excellence and individuality of his writing than to the originality of the opinions he holds. It may be said, indeed, of Mr. G. K. Chesterton, as an exceedingly competent critic has said of Mr. Shaw, that it is his manner of expressing his philosophy rather than his philosophy itself that will be valued by posterity. And as Mr. Shaw has expressed most of his views in his plays and prefaces rather than in the columns of the newspapers (and this is said in full remembrance of his manifold and copious letters to *The Times*), so Mr. H. G. Wells has given us his philosophy in his novels and fantasies. His appearances in the newspapers have been rare and invariably regrettable. The two other gentlemen whose names are mentioned, Mr. E. B. Osborn and Mr. A. G. Gardiner, should be classed, perhaps, rather with those other three who are in control, more or less, of the papers in which their writings appear, since both Mr. Osborn and Mr. Gardiner are definitely attached, the one to the *Morning Post* and the other to the *Daily News and Leader*, of which, before the amalgamation, he was editor. This being the case, it is to be assumed that these two gentlemen express and sign their views in these papers because their views correspond to a determining extent with those of the proprietors of the papers. This must logically be the case with Mr. Gardiner. So far as Mr. Osborn is concerned, he occupies on the *Morning Post* the same position as was occupied on that paper by Mr. Belloc and on the *Daily News* in former times by Mr. Gilbert Chesterton. That is to say, he is an essayist of such standing as to make a regular contribution from him of value to the newspaper so long as the views and opinions he expresses in those essays do not contrast too violently with the opinions expressed in the leading articles. [68]

Of the other three gentlemen we have named, Mr. Orage, Mr. Cecil Chesterton and Mr. Webb, it is difficult to speak as of individuals. They are referred to more properly as the *New Age*, the *New Witness*, and the *New Statesman*, and their respective personalities and attitudes of mind are fitly expressed in the names of the organs through which they speak. All three agree in finding the times out of joint and desiring new and better conditions of life: they differ in the standpoints from which they approach an analysis of present conditions and in the solutions they propound. The *New Age* is the most valuable because it is the most thorough. Not only is its analysis of present conditions the most acute and the most sound that we have to-day, but the solutions it propounds to the problems it analyses are the most fearless, the most thorough and the most idealistic. The *New Witness* is equally thorough but more immediate. The scope of its analysis is not so wide. Although its views are based on principles similar to those of the *New Age*, it is concerned more to influence the actions than the thoughts of men. Its object is to bear testimony to the wrongs that are being done to-day, the crimes that are committed every day against the welfare of the community, and to cry aloud for the immediate righting of those wrongs, the stern punishment of those crimes. Though these two journals are aiming at the same object, the methods they adopt are in almost direct contrast. Mr. Orage looks down from the height, not of philosophic doubt, but of philosophic certainty (where he alone feels happy) upon the petty house of party politics, and seeks, by the magic music of his words and phrases, so to move and draw after him the sand of human nature on which that house is built, that it may no longer stand but fall and be banished utterly. Mr. Cecil Chesterton, on the other hand, only happy in the rôle of the new David, gives fearless battle to the modern Goliath, caring no whit if at times the struggle go against him and he find himself hard pressed at the Old Bailey, but gleefully and dauntlessly springing at his monstrous assailant, in the hope that some day a lucky stone from his [69]

sling will find its mark. Somewhere between these two extremes stands (or wavers) the *New Statesman*, sometimes inclining more to the one, more to the other method. It is concerned neither entirely with the thoughts nor entirely with the actions of men, but with each in part. Its object is so to influence the thoughts of men that they will find natural expression in the clauses of beneficent Bills.

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These are the publicists. As individuals they are of value to the community according to the value of the views they hold and express. As a class they are of value to the community because the views they hold and express, whether right or wrong, are *sincere*. In contrast with the great body of the Capitalist Press that expresses anonymous opinions which, whether sincere or not (and it can be proved that they are often quite insincere), must still necessarily aim at the maintenance and strengthening of present social and economic conditions, these men express their own personal convictions as to what is wrong with the world and how, as *they* think, the world may be made a better place.

It is this inestimable quality of sincerity which links Mr. Belloc with the too small band of publicists of the day. It has been said of Mr. Belloc that he is a "man of independent mind, and, where necessary, of unpopular attitude ... his estimates, right or wrong, are his own ... he carries a sword to grasp not an axe to grind." In the following chapters a brief exposition of Mr. Belloc's views both of Europe and of England will be given with a short summary of his translation of these views into the language of practical reforms; and we shall then be able to form some estimate of Mr. Belloc's particular value to the community. In his articles both on the military and on the political aspect of the war Mr. Belloc is working, as we have seen, "for the instruction of public opinion." That this is to-day true, moreover, of Mr. Belloc's whole attitude towards the public is not fully realized. Large numbers of people have found in Mr. Belloc's war articles their only hope of sanity in the midst of distressing and unintelligible events. In the general course of modern life events move less rapidly, but are equally important, and there, too, Mr. Belloc has attempted with almost pathetic lucidity to explain. His true earnestness will not be rewarded, his true purpose will not be attained, until the thoughtful public realizes that it can find in Mr. Belloc's historical and political writings at large the guide to the formation of opinion and the help to sanity which it has already found in his explanations of the war.

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CHAPTER VIII

MR. BELLOC AND EUROPE

The beginning of Mr. Belloc's literary career was in history. He took a first in the school of modern history at Oxford, and his first important work was a study of the career of Danton. A study of Danton's career, be it noted, and not a biography: for this book deals more with so much of the French Revolution as is reflected in its subject's actions than with its subject's actions in themselves.

It is, then, as an historian that he begins and mainly as an historian that he continues. His activities are varied, but all are related to a conception of the world, its growth and destiny, which is founded on a conception of universal history. He sees in man a political animal, whose distinguishing function is not commerce or art, but politics. History is the record of man exercising this distinguishing function. Our own politics are based on the results of the exercise of this function in the past, and cannot be properly understood without a knowledge of the details of that exercise. To link up the argument: man is a political animal and finds his expression in the work of politics; he can only be fitted for that work by the study of history. Mr. Belloc, then, regards this as the most important of all studies.

A casual glance at his essays will reveal some sentences or other testifying to the strength with which this opinion is rooted in his mind. Take this from *First and Last*:

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Of those factors in civic action amenable to civic direction, conscious and positively effective, there is nothing to compare with the right teaching and the right reading of history.

Or again from *On Anything*, regarding the matter from a somewhat different point of view:

History may be called the test of true philosophy, or it may be called in a very modern and not very dignified metaphor the object-lesson of political science, or it may be called the great story whose interest is upon another plane from all other stories because its irony, its tragedy and its moral are real, were acted by real men, and were the manifestation of God.

Wherever you turn over these pages, you are more likely than not to find some such earnest and emphatic sentence: this opinion is essential to Mr. Belloc's life and thought. With the practical and business-like position of the first of these quotations it is our affair to deal in this chapter: and the more spiritual and poetic view expressed in the second will receive consideration in a later place.

In this chapter it is our purpose to outline as briefly and as clearly as possible Mr. Belloc's conception of the growth of Europe, from the prehistoric men who knew how to make dew-pans

which "are older than the language or the religion, and the finding of water with a stick, and the catching of that smooth animal the mole," to the outbreak of the present war. From this we shall omit, to a large extent, the development of England, which, as it is singular in Europe, is singular in Mr. Belloc's scheme of things, and must be considered separately.

We shall endeavour, as far as possible, to piece together from a great number of books and writings on various subjects a continuous view of European history, which we believe to be Mr. Belloc's view, but which he has never, as yet, stated all together in one place. We shall draw our material from such varied sources as *Esto Perpetua*, *The Old Road*, *Paris*, *The Historic Thames*, and inevitably the essays: inevitably, for all practical purposes, from all the books that Mr. Belloc has ever written. At some future time, it is very seriously to be hoped, Mr. Belloc will do this himself. It should be his *magnum opus*: "A General Sketch of European Development," let us suppose. In the meanwhile, we conceive that we shall serve a useful purpose if we make a consistent scheme out of the hints, allusions and detached statements which occur up and down in Mr. Belloc's books. For some such scheme, existing but unformulated, is, beyond all doubt, the solid sub-structure of all his thinking.

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In the essay *On History in Travel*, Mr. Belloc says: "It is true that those who write good guide-books do put plenty of history into them, but it is sporadic history, as it were; it is not continuous or organic, and therefore it does not live." It is living, organic history that is necessary, he would consider, to the proper understanding of present problems and the proper furnishing of the human mind. He desires to see and grasp the development of Europe as a symmetrical whole, not as a conglomeration of unco-ordinated parts or a succession of unrelated accidents. He believes that Europe has developed from prehistoric man by way of the Roman Empire, the Christian religion, and the French Revolution, in an orderly, organic manner. He believes, far more than Freeman, in a real unity of history.

And from this observation of continuous history he draws certain morals. He sees, or believes that he sees, in Carthage a wealthy trading plutocracy, ruling a population averse from arms: and he sees this society falling to utter ruin before the Roman state, a polity of peasant proprietors with a popular army. From that spectacle he draws certain conclusions. He sees the Roman Empire and the way in which it governed Europe, and from that huge organization and its mighty remains he also draws certain lessons of wonder and reverence. From the decline of the Empire, the growth of a slave, and economically enslaved, class, the growth of a wealthy class, he again deduces something. All these conclusions he applies constantly and unrelentingly to our own problems and institutions: he cannot forbear from mentioning imperial Rome when he comes to discuss our war in the Transvaal. He cannot forbear from seeing the counterpart of the Peabody Yid in imperial Rome. All history is to him a living and organic whole. And as individuals can judge in present problems what they shall do only by reference to their own experience and what they know of that of others, so also societies and races. *There is no guide for them but recorded history*. This accumulated experience, however, requires to be set out and interpreted.

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Mr. Belloc's view and conception of the history of Europe begins with Rome. All the roads of his speculation start from that nodal point in the story of man. Let us take a grotesque example:

Do you not notice how the intimate mind of Europe is reflected in cheese? For in the centre of Europe, and where Europe is most active, I mean in Britain and in Gaul and in Northern Italy, and in the valley of the Rhine—nay, to some extent in Spain (in her Pyrenean valleys at least)—there flourishes a vast burgeoning of cheese, infinite in variety, one in goodness. But as Europe fades away under the African wound which Spain suffered or the Eastern barbarism of the Elbe, what happens to cheese? It becomes very flat and similar. You can quote six cheeses perhaps which the public power of Christendom has founded outside the limits of its ancient Empire—but not more than six. I will quote you 253 between the Ebro and the Grampians, between Brindisi and the Irish channel.

I do not write vainly. It is a profound thing.

That passage illustrates admirably how Mr. Belloc's mind, playing on all manner of subjects, remains true to certain fixed points. In two phrases there he gives us our starting-point: "the public power of Christendom" and "the limits of its ancient Empire." For Rome is to him the beginning of Europe, and Christianity inherited what Rome had stored up in public power, public order, and public intelligence.

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He sees in Rome the power which established a unity among the Western races which lay already dormant in them. We can trace this idea very clearly in *Esto Perpetua*, where he speaks repeatedly of the Berbers, as having fallen easily under the power of Rome because they are "of our own kind." We can trace it again inversely in *The Path to Rome*, in such a passage as this:

Here in Switzerland, for four marches, I touched a northern, exterior and barbaric people; for though these mountains spoke a distorted Latin tongue, and only after the first day began to give me a Teutonic dialect, yet it was evident from the first that they had about them neither the Latin order nor the Latin power to create, but were contemplative and easily absorbed by a little effort.

It is in this order, this power to create, that Mr. Belloc sees the greatness of Rome and the innate gifts of our Western race. And if one objects that a certain power of order would seem to reside also in Prussia, undoubtedly a Northern, exterior and barbaric country, Mr. Belloc would reply

that the power to create was lacking, the power to make their order living and to inform it with a spirit.

It is his opinion, we say, or rather one of the articles of his creed, that Rome first beat and welded into unity the kindred peoples that inhabit Western Europe. What name he gives to this Western race, if any, he has not yet explained. Professor Müller and his contemporaries used to talk about the Indo-Germanic race, and Professor Sergi came forward with a more plausible Mediterranean race, and all sorts of people talk with the utmost possible vagueness about the Celtic race, that rubbish-heap of ethnological science or pretence. Whatever name he may give to this race, or however ethnologically he may justify his conception of it, Mr. Belloc believes that it exists and that Rome first discovered it and gave it expression. [76]

Like all large and generalized conceptions, this idea of the Western race is best explained in a contrast, and Mr. Belloc finds a sharp example of such a contrast in the struggle between Rome and Carthage. He sets it out in *Esto Perpetua*:

It [the Phœnician attempt] failed for two reasons: the first was the contrast between the Phœnician ideal and our own; the second was the solidarity of the Western blood.

The army which Hannibal led recognized the voice of a Carthaginian genius, but it was not Carthaginian. It was not levied, it was paid. Even those elements in it which were native to Carthage or her colonies must receive a wage, must be "volunteer"; and meanwhile the policy which directed the whole from the centre in Africa was a trading policy. Rome "interfered with business"; on this account alone the costly and unusual effort of removing her was made.

The Europeans undertook their defence in a very different spirit: an abhorrence of this alien blood welded them together: the allied and subjugated cities which had hated Rome had hated her as a sister.

The Italian confederation was true because it rested on other than economic supports. The European passion for military glory survived every disaster, and above all that wholly European thing, the delight in meeting great odds, made our people strangely stronger for defeat.

It is in the European spirit, the spirit of "our people," that Mr. Belloc finds the mission and the justification of Rome. It is on a belief in the reality of this spirit that he founds his views of all subsequent developments, of our own present and of our future. The work of Rome has been minimized in common estimation by our extraordinary habit of telescoping the centuries and viewing history, as we say, in a perspective. There is no perspective in a right view of history: the centuries do not diminish in length as they recede from our own day. The perception of this very simple fact has not come to many of our historians or to any of our politicians. It should be, indeed, the first sentence in every school history-book, and the don should begin each course of lectures with it. [77]

The reasons for the overlooking of so elementary a maxim are fairly clear. Time simplifies. The later centuries are more full of detail, and that detail is more confused: much of it, moreover, relates more directly to the urgent detail of our own life than the similar events of earlier times. But for a sound conception of the historical development of the world, we must make an effort to overcome these delusive influences: we must realize that from the accession of Augustus to, say, the death of Julian the Apostate was as long a period of time as the period from the accession of Queen Elizabeth to the death of Edward VII. Only a false perspective has so telescoped these years together as to make them seem a short and rapid period of decline, filled up with wars, massacres and human misery. Gibbon has given the greatest weight of authority to these errors and shown the Empire as a period of decay and horror.

Under the reign of these monsters [he says] the slavery of the Romans was accompanied with two peculiar circumstances, the one occasioned by their former liberty, the other by their extensive conquests, which rendered their condition more wretched than that of the victims of tyranny in any other age or country.^[1]

Even Mommsen closed his history of the Republic with the gloomy assertion that Cæsar could only secure for the dying ancient world a peaceful twilight.

As a matter of fact, during the first four centuries, the Empire was the most successful, satisfactory and enduring political institution which the world has yet seen, and a recognition of this is essential to the proper understanding of Mr. Belloc's theories. We should, as he says, attempt "to stand in the shoes of the time and to see it as must have seen it the barber of Marcus Aurelius or the stud-groom of Sidonius' palace." [78]

We know what was coming [he continues],^[2] the men of the time knew it no more than we can know the future. We take at its own estimate that violent self-criticism which accompanies vitality, and we are content to see in these 400 years a process of mere decay.

The picture thus impressed upon us is certainly false. There is hardly a town whose physical history we can trace, that did not expand, especially towards the close of that time.

... Our theory of political justice was partly formulated, partly handed on, by those generations; our whole scheme of law, our conceptions of human dignity and of right.... If a man will stand back in the time of the Antonines and look around him and forward to our own day, the consequence of the first four centuries will at once appear. He will see the unceasing expansion of the paved imperial ways. He will conceive those great Councils of the Church which would meet indifferently in centres 1,500 miles apart, in the extremity of Spain or on the Bosphorus: a sort of moving city whose vast travel was not even noticed nor called a feat. He will be appalled by the vigour of the Western mind between Augustus and Julian when he finds that it could comprehend and influence and treat as one vast State what is, even now, after so many centuries of painful reconstruction, a mosaic of separate provinces.

The reader has there a handy conspectus of Mr. Belloc's view on a period he considers cardinal in the history of what he would call "our own kind." This is one of the pillars of his conception of the world: what the other pillars are will appear later in this chapter.

In pursuing the story, he insists on minimizing the effect and extent of the barbaric invasions. He does not indeed regard the auxiliary troops of the Empire who set up kingdoms in the West as invaders at all. The Wandering of the Peoples which assumes such a dreadful aspect in Gibbon, is, to him, until after Charlemagne at least, certainly a sign of decay and certainly an element of disorganization, but neither the one nor the other to the extent which we are accustomed to believe. Here we have a sign of a definite attitude towards historical fact, an attitude which is open to question but which is still permissible. He believes that the civilization of Rome endured for the main part, particularly in Gaul, until the ninth century. In *The Eye-Witness* he states roundly that Charlemagne came of an old family of wealthy and powerful Gallo-Roman nobles. In *Paris*, an earlier work, he declines to estimate the exact amount of German blood in this ruler's veins.^[3]

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In any case, he believes that the German auxiliaries partly replaced and partly allied themselves with a rich, powerful and long-established aristocracy; that they did in truth separate the State into fragments; but that they touched very little the main social fabric, and only at most hastened the elements of change. He perpetually insists on the fewness of the invaders who settled, and he believes that the Western race, welded almost into one people by the vast political action of Rome, was, in bulk, but little affected by the Northern barbarians.

Not until the ninth century will he admit anything approaching the death of Roman influence in her Western provinces, except in Britain. Here, in the ninth century, under the invasions of the Danes and the onslaughts of the Arabs, civilization is in peril and the West suffers its most serious wounds at the hands of the barbarians. And here already, the new influence, the Roman Church, which began to show itself in the coronation of Charlemagne, first takes up its inheritance of the œcumenical power of the Empire. The ninth century saw the climax of "the gradual despair of the civil power; the new dream of the Church which meant to build a city of God on the shifting sands of the invasions."^[4]

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The new dream was but beginning to take on reality and the civil power had in all fullness despaired. The old civilization, which had lasted so long and changed so gradually, required to be refreshed by catastrophe: even as some men believe of our own times. The catastrophe came, and, through the struggle with the North and with Asia, the transformation took place unseen in that lowest ebb of humanity. Europe had reached the crest of one wave in the height of the Empire under the power of the Roman government. It was to reach another in the thirteenth century under the influence of the Roman Church.

The most of Mr. Belloc's conception of the Middle Ages is to be found in his book *Paris*, where it is really incidental though profoundly important. We cannot too often insist upon this fact, that the brief and insufficient historical sketch presented in this chapter is a piecing together often of mere indications as well as of detached statements. The reader will do well to bear in mind that in this exposition we are laying before him to the best of our powers what we take to be the definite scheme of events undoubtedly present in our author's mind, but never as a whole expressed by him. It is frequently necessary to infer from what he states, the precise curve of his thought: this skeleton of history is deduced only from a few bones.

In the book *Paris*, then, we find the best guide to his conception of the Middle Ages. It is naturally in principle a work of topographical and architectural purpose. But architecture is a guide to history. It is the capital art of a happy society. (And, incidentally, an art that is, in a definite and positive manner, dead in the present age.) Athens, at her climax, built: and the grandeur of Rome has been preserved in arches and aqueducts. For Mr. Belloc, the progress of the upward curve from the ninth century to the thirteenth reaches its culmination in the best of the Gothic. He sees in that structural time one of humanity's periods of achievement, and he will not assent to the common theory of a gradual upward curve from the Dark Ages to the Renaissance.

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The progress of the Middle Ages was a progress towards unity, less successful but more spontaneous than that which was achieved under the compelling hand of the Roman armies. Christianity, wounded and threatened by the advance of the heathen, of a power opposed to them by religion and by race, was shocked into feeling the existence of Christendom. The Western spirit, which had rallied to the Republic against Carthage, now gathered under the flag of the Church and expressed itself in the Crusades.

The levying of Europe for a common and a noble purpose began the process which was continued by the intellectual stimulation of these wars. It flowered briefly but exquisitely in the Gothic, in the foundation of the universities and the teaching of philosophy, and in the establishment of strong, well-ordered central governments in the feudal scheme.

The merits of the Middle Ages, to Mr. Belloc, lie not only in their artistic and philosophical achievements, but also and especially in their security. He has the French, the Latin attachment to a vigorous central power, and, of all political forms, he most fears and hates an oligarchy. To others, to Dr. Johnson and to Goldsmith, for example, it has seemed very clear that the interests of the poor lie with the king against the rich. Mr. Belloc sees in the feudal system strongly administered from a centre, with the villein secured in his holding and the townsman controlled and protected by his guild, if not a perfect, at least a solidly successful polity. He applauds therefore those ages in which central justice was effective, the ages of Edward I in England and St. Louis in France. [82]

But [he says] the mediaeval theory in the State and its effect on architecture, suited as they were to our blood, and giving us, as they did, the only language in which we have ever found an exact expression of our instincts, ruled in security for a very little while; it began—almost in the hour of its perfection—to decay; St. Louis outlived it a little, kept it vigorous, perhaps, in his own immediate surroundings, when it was already weakened in the rest of Europe, and long before the thirteenth century was out the system to which it has given its name was drying up at the roots. [5]

Why, then, was this crest of the curve so much less durable than that on which the Empire rode safely through four ordered centuries? To that there are many possible answers. Some might suppose that the binding spiritual force of the Roman Church was weaker than the physical force of the Roman army. Mr. Belloc suggests that the mediaeval system came too suddenly into flower and had not enough strength to deal with new problems. He offers also other reasons, such as these [6]:

First, the astounding series of catastrophes ... especially in the earlier part; secondly, its loss of creative power. As for the first of these, the black death, the famines, the hundred years' war, the free companies, the abasement of the church, the great schism—these things were misfortunes to which our modern time can find no parallel. They came suddenly upon Western Europe and defiled it like a blight.... They have made the mediaeval idea odious to every half-instructed man and have stamped even its beauty with associations of evil.

So for two hundred years the curve continued evilly downwards, and at last, after a period of horror, rose in the lesser crest of the Renaissance, a time more splendid than solid, more active than beneficent. In this period occurred the Reformation, an event which Mr. Belloc, a Catholic, frankly regards as evil. [83]

He thinks that it tore in two the still expanding body of Christendom. But, with the exception of one province, it left to the See of Rome all those Western countries which the Empire of Rome had governed. Britain was torn away in the process, but the remainder of the Western races was left, if not united, at least with a bond of unity.

So the course of history went into the welter of religious wars which gradually merge into dynastic wars and confuse the record of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century. At the end of the last of these divisions of time came the Revolution.

This event is the third of the three pillars on which Mr. Belloc supports his notion of Western history: the Roman Empire, the thirteenth century, and the Revolution. He sees in it the principle result of the Reformation, but an event which also undid and increasingly nullified the effects of that schism.

He regards the Reformation as having not only disturbed the unity of Europe, but also having encouraged the growth of those wealthy and selfish classes of whom he has a particular dread. He speaks—in his *Marie Antoinette*, which becomes for some little distance here our principal guide—of how "the attempt to force upon the French doctrines convenient, in France as in England, to the wealthy merchants, the intellectuals and the squires was met by popular risings." He believes that to the Catholic tradition descended from the Roman Empire that idea of the State which is always the salvation of the people as opposed to the rich. The violent adhesion of France to the Church—only tempered by some jealousy of Austria—saved the Faith for Europe: France thus became the capital stronghold of the Western idea, whence it issued in renewed force at the Revolution. [7] The Revolution itself was a drastic return to the ideas of universality and equality which are essentially Roman. [84]

It has been Mr. Belloc's task and delight to reconcile the principles of the Revolution with his own faith. He would show that the two were opposed only by this intellectual accident or that political blunder: that the dogmas of each are capable of being held by the same mind. And, in the revival of religion in our own times, which "may be called, according to the taste of the scholar, the Catholic reaction or the Catholic renaissance," he sees not only the first and most beneficent result of the principles of the Revolution, but also a sign that the wounds then inflicted are beginning to be healed.

His clearest and most connected exposition of these things is to be found in the little book which is called *The French Revolution*, of which the object, he says, is "to lay, if that be possible, an explanation of it before the reader."

He begins by making a detailed explanation of the democratic theory, which is drawn from Rousseau's treatise *Le Contrat Social*. Let us select one significant passage on the doctrine of equality:

The doctrine of the equality of man is a transcendent doctrine: a "dogma" as we call such doctrines in the field of transcendental religion. It corresponds to no physical reality which we can grasp, it is hardly to be adumbrated even by metaphors drawn from physical objects. We may attempt to rationalize it by saying that what is common to all men is not *more* important but *infinitely more* important than the accidents by which men differ.

On such a simple statement does he found his explanation of the greatest event of the modern world, an upheaval and a remoulding which astonishes us equally whether we consider how far it fell short of its highest intentions or how much it actually accomplished. [85]

Now he proceeds from the obvious and historical fact of the quarrel which actually took place between the Revolution and the Church, and asks: "*Was there a necessary and fundamental quarrel between the doctrines of the Revolution and those of the Catholic Church?*" And he replies:

It is impossible for the theologian, or even for the practical ecclesiastical teacher, to put his finger upon a political doctrine essential to the Revolution and to say, "This doctrine is opposed to Catholic dogma or to Catholic morals." Conversely, it is impossible for the Republican to put his finger upon a matter of ecclesiastical discipline or religious dogma and to say, "This Catholic point is at issue with my political theory of the State."

So much for the negative argument which at that point in that book was enough for Mr. Belloc's purpose. He proceeds to explain the material accidents and causes which nullified this argument. But we must attempt further to discover from the general trend of Mr. Belloc's character and thought the positive grounds by which he reconciles these two principles which have so far shown themselves divided in practice.

The two things are of Latin, that is to say of Roman origin. The Church is "the ghost of the Roman Empire sitting crowned and throned on the grave thereof": it is a new manifestation (and a higher one) of the political and social ideal which inspired the Roman people. Also the French have inherited most of the Latin passion for reason, law and order: under Napoleon they strove to make a new empire, and they carried together a code of law and the idea of equality all over Europe.

In both the Faith and the Revolution there are secure dogmas on which the mind can rest. Fundamental unprovable things are established by declaration, and fruitless argument about them is cut off at the roots. In the clear certitude of such doctrines is a basis for action and for civilization. [86]

The purpose and the scope of work of both these ideas was much the same. Each proposed to establish a European community, in which the peoples of kindred blood might rest together and develop their resources. The Revolution might well have restored that unity of the Western race which vanished with Rome and which the Reformation forbade the Church to accomplish.

That conception of Europe as an entity so far only conscious of itself, as it were, by lucid intervals in a long delirium, is very dear to Mr. Belloc. We have dwelt on it at the beginning of this chapter and must return to it now, for, if one idea can be said to underlie all his historical writings, this is that one idea. The notions which we have described as the three pillars of his historical scheme are three expressions of this vision, and the vision is of something transcendent, like the dogmas on which his mind rests, something which is a reality, but cannot be proved in words or seized by any merely physical metaphor. He begins *Marie Antoinette* with these words: "Europe, which carries the fate of the whole world ..."

This fundamental point in its three expressions is the point which Mr. Belloc would have his public grasp before beginning to discuss the problems which await it in the polling-booths and in the everyday conversations which more weightily mould the fate of the world. He is a propagandist historian, and his work has the liveliness given by an air of eagerness to convince.

His bias, the precise nature of his propaganda, are frankly exposed. He would have the State and European society, especially the society of England, revived by a return to the profession and the practice of his own faith. In Prussia also historians compose their works with such a definite and positive end in contemporary affairs. [87]

But between them and Mr. Belloc lies this great difference. He writes, as we have said, candidly, in a partisan spirit, with the eagerness of a man who wishes to convince. In the University of Berlin the indoctrination of the student is pursued under the cloak of a baleful and gloomy pedantry, laughably miscalled "the scientific method." The propaganda of Frederick is not obvious and many are deceived.

The Catholic historian lies in England under a grave suspicion. Lingard, who wrote, after all, one

of the best histories of the English nation, certainly more readable than Freeman and less prejudiced than Froude, is neither studied nor mentioned in our schools. Even poor Acton, whose smug Whig bias is apparent to the stupidest, who nourished himself on Lutheran learning, "mostly," as he says, pathetically "in octavo volumes," is thought of darkly by the uninstructed as an emissary of the Jesuits. But who can either suffer from or accuse the Catholic bias of Mr. Belloc?

He says to you frankly in every page: "I am a Catholic. I believe in the Church of Rome. For these and these reasons, I am of opinion that the Reformation was a disaster and that the Protestant peoples are still a danger to Europe." Can you still complain of the propagandist turn of such a man? As well complain of a professed theologian that he is biased as to the existence of God. He warns you amply that he has a particular point of view, and he gives you every opportunity to make allowance for it. When you have done so, you will find that his narrative and interpretation are still astonishingly accurate and just. And he has a corrective to bias in his vivid poetic love of the past, which we shall analyse in the succeeding chapter.

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This also is made a reproach against him by scholars. It is true that in his serious historical works, *Robespierre*, *Danton*, and *Marie Antoinette*, he introduces more of romance than is commonly admitted by serious writers. He is apt to give his descriptions something of the positive and living character which we more usually expect in a novel. The charge is made against him, under which Macaulay suffers justly and Prescott, the American, with less reason, of having written historical romances. Let us grant that it is not usual to give so much detail or so much colour as that in which Mr. Belloc takes delight.

Is his accuracy thereby spoiled? He insists on seeing all the events and details of Cardinal de Rohan's interview with the pretended Queen of France. But it does not of itself testify that Mr. Belloc cannot judge whether this interview took place or interfered with his estimate of its importance. We contend, very seriously and very gravely, that these books will be found to show a singularly high level of accuracy and justice. In the interpretation of facts bias will show: in Acton equally with Froude. If it did not, if the historian were an instrument and humanly null, what effect would either his narrative or his reading have on the student? He could not convey to another mind even his comprehension of the bare facts. Mr. Belloc invests his narrative with a living interest, and how he does this and why it is the surest guarantee of accuracy and impartiality, we shall endeavour to show in the succeeding chapter.

FOOTNOTES:

- [1] Professor Bury adds coyly in a footnote: "But there is another side to this picture which may be seen by studying Mommsen's volume on the provinces."
- [2] *Esto Perpetua*.
- [3] These sentences may appear to indicate indecision in Mr. Belloc's mind as to this point. He has now informed us that Charlemagne did come of this Gallo-Roman family.
- [4] *Paris*, p. 93.
- [5] *Paris*, p. 226.
- [6] *Ib.*, p. 227.
- [7] The Italian historian, Guglielmo Ferrero, of whom Mr. Belloc, however, has no very high opinion, betrays some similar ideas in writing of the importance of Gaul in the Empire.

CHAPTER IX

[89]

THE HISTORICAL WRITER

In an essay in *First and Last*, Mr. Belloc says:

... That earthwork is the earthwork where the British stood against the charge of the Tenth Legion, and first heard, sounding on their bronze, the arms of Cæsar. Here the river was forded; here the little men of the South went up in formation; here the barbarian broke and took his way, as the opposing General has recorded, through devious woodland paths, scattering in the pursuit; here began the great history of England.

Is it not an enormous business merely to stand in such a place? I think so.

There you have compactly and poignantly expressed a mood which is common to all men who have any feeling for the past. It is a pathetic, almost a tragic mood, a longing more pitiable than that of any fanatic for any paradise, any lover for any woman, because it is quite impossible that it should ever be satisfied. To see, to feel, to move among the foundations of our generation—it is so natural a desire, and it is quite hopeless.

It is a desire which one might naturally suppose to be common among historians, and to govern

their thoughts: but you will not find it in the academies. Only in the true historian, the student who, like Herodotus, is also a poet and names the Muses, will you find its clear expression. But it is and must be the mainspring of all good historical writing, for this desire to know the concrete past is, in the end, the only corrective to the propagandist bias, which is, as we have seen, the right motive of useful research. Acton had it not, Froude perhaps a little, Maitland, one might believe, to some extent,^[8] Professor Bury, Lord knows, neither that nor any other emotion comprehensible in man. To the don, indeed, the absence of the past is one of the factors in his fascinating, esoteric game: were some astounding document to appear that should make the origin and constitution of the mediaeval manor as clear as daylight, the problem would lose its interest, the agile don would find it too easy for him. The equipment of the ideal historian consists of the attributes of practical and poetic man, the desire to gain some present benefit, to learn some urgent lesson, and the desire to perfect the spirit by contemplation of the past.

[90]

History, indeed, is the record of the actions of individual men, and these men, like ourselves, had arms, legs and stomachs, and suffered the workings of the same fears and passions that we suffer. To derive any practical or spiritual benefit from the study of history, we must understand, as far as possible, by analogy from our own experience, how the events of which we read came about: we must see them as personal events, originated by the actions, and influencing the lives of human beings like ourselves.

We have expressed sufficiently in the previous chapter an opinion on the value of Mr. Belloc's historical conclusions: we must now examine more closely the method by means of which he presents these conclusions and its effect on the reader.

His method, it goes without saying, is more lively. In the whole of the *Cambridge Modern History* (sixteen volumes of unbelievable dimensions) you will not find one living character or one paragraph of exhilarating prose.^[9] Mr. Belloc's work, on the other hand, is full of both. But this must not be taken, without further inquiry, to be an unqualified merit.

The lively writer is, by an ever-living commonplace, considered to be inaccurate: the donnish historian may, by his plodding want of imagination, give us only the strict facts. The lively writer, perhaps, in the desire to round out a character of a man concerning whom little is known or to perfect the rhythm of a paragraph, will consult his convenient fancy rather than the difficult document. In academic circles, it is rather a reproach to say that a man writes in an interesting way: they remember Macaulay and would, if they could, forget Gibbon.

[91]

Mr. Belloc's writing, nevertheless, is not affected by the desire either to impress or to startle his readers, any more than the writing of a good poet springs from an aiming at effect: it is like all true literature, in the first place, the outcome of a strong and personal passion, the passion for the past. He says himself^[10]:

To study something of great age until one grows familiar with it and almost to live in its time, is not merely to satisfy a curiosity or to establish aimless truths: it is rather to fulfil a function whose appetite has always rendered History a necessity. By the recovery of the Past, stuff and being are added to us; our lives which, lived in the present only, are a film or surface, take on body—are lifted into one dimension more. The soul is fed.... One may say that historical learning grants men glimpses of life completed and a whole; and such a vision should be the chief solace of whatever is mortal and cut off imperfectly from fulfilment.

Such a passion, then, such a purely poetic, spiritual, impractical passion is perhaps the cause of Mr. Belloc's note and career. It is the passion of a poet. Assuredly actuated by such a feeling, he has developed his practical and political opinions: the true poet is always practical.

It is also in result a materially useful passion. It allows us to see in the deeds of Henry VIII's Parliament not the blind working of political development, the impersonal and inevitable action of economic laws, but the hot greed of a king and the astuteness of his supporters.

[92]

Acton speaks of "the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong."^[11] But how are we to fix a stigma, unless we know the man's motives? How can we know his motives without an estimate of his character? How can either of these be known unless we visualize him as he lived?

Mr. Belloc has made his most conscious and determined effort at visualization in a book which is not historical, but which falls more, though not altogether, into the category of historical fiction. This is the book which is called *The Eye-Witness*.

It consists of twenty-seven sketches of historical incidents ranging from the year 55 B.C. to the year A.D. 1906. It begins with Cæsar's invasion of Britain, and goes by way of the disaster at Roncesvalles, the Battle of Lewes, the execution of Charles I and the Battle of Valmy to an election in England which was held on the issues of Tariff Reform, Chinese Labour in the Transvaal and other topics. One might say—a gloomy progress.

It falls partly into the category of historical fiction because much of it is sheerly created out of Mr. Belloc's own head. The interlocutors in most of the sketches (where there are interlocutors), the individual who is the eye-witness (when there is one), these are imaginary. Mr. Barr, who was held up in a crowd by the execution of Marie Antoinette and suffered annoyance, the apprentice who saw an earlier royal head cut off, the Christian who was killed in the Arena by "a little, low-

built, broad-shouldered man from the Auvergne of the sort that can tame an animal in a day, hard as wood, and perfectly unfeeling," these are characters of fiction.

But in the "stories" that make up the book there is no plot. There is just a glimpse of a past life, sometimes, but not always, at a significant moment. In one of Mr. Wells' stories there is a queer fable of a crystal mysteriously in touch with a twin crystal on another planet. Glancing into this, we get a glimpse of that different world. Mr. Belloc's sketches are such crystals, suspended for a moment at a time in centuries foreign to our own. [93]

He has endeavoured passionately to be accurate in these. A passage from his preface will show how this adverb is justified:

As to historical references, I must beg the indulgence of the critic, but I believe I have not positively asserted an error, nor failed to set down a considerable number of minute but entertaining truths.

Thus the 10th Legion (which I have called a regiment in *The Two Soldiers*) *did* sail under Cæsar for Britain from Boulogne, and from no other port. There *was* in those days a great land-locked harbour from Pont-de-Briques right up to the Narrows, as the readers of the *Gaule Romaine* must know. The moon *was* at her last quarter (though presuming her not to be hidden by clouds is but fancy). There *was* a high hill just at the place where she would have been setting that night—you may see it to-day. The Roman soldiers *were* recruited from the Teutonic and the Celtic portions of Gaul; of the latter many *did* know of that grotto under Chartres which is among the chief historical interests of Europe. The tide *was*, as I have said, on the flow at midnight—and so forth.

The temper of that is the temper of the man who was at the pains, when writing his life of Robespierre, to look up the reports of the Paris Observatory, so as to be able exactly to describe the weather in which such and such a great scene was played that hugely affected the fortunes of Europe. It is the temper, too, of a man with an immense historical curiosity, who will not be satisfied with less than all of the past that can reasonably be reconstructed.

Mr. Belloc desires knowledge and experience of the past so earnestly that he makes imaginary pictures of it, as it were to comfort himself. Some men, in this way, when walking alone, make imaginary pictures of their own futures, often to cheat the disappointments of a narrow life. Too fervid political idealists make pictures of the world's future: you think immediately of Morris and Bellamy and many another. Mr. Belloc is not likely to give way to this temptation. [94]

But the strength and disinterestedness of this desire guarantee the reader of the book against the aridity of the pictures of past civilizations which we all know: such as descriptions of how "the *poeta* (or poet) entered the *domus* (or house), kicked the *canis* (or dog) and summoned the *servus* (or slave)." It will be at all events a living picture: it will be, to the best of the author's power, an accurate and impartial picture. It will translate characters, language and things as nearly as possible into terms comprehensible in our own times: but not so literally, or so extravagantly as to degenerate into the *opera-bouffe* of, for example, Mr. Shaw's *Cæsar and Cleopatra*. There will also be no tushery.

The method of description which Mr. Belloc employs in these sketches is cool and transparent. The emotion of the writer, as regards the particular events he is describing, is suppressed, though the feeling of eagerness to realize the past leaps out everywhere. It is only by great steadiness of the vision and the hand that Mr. Belloc can secure the effects he here desires to convey.

It is only by great care in writing that he can secure the easy, even and real tone in which these glimpses of other centuries and other societies can be presented. Should he err on one side, he is in the bogs of tushery: on the other, he commits that fault of self-conscious, over-daring modernization, of which Mr. Shaw has been so guilty.

Let us take a passage from the illuminating picture, "The Pagans," which describes a dinner in a Narbonese house in the fifth century:

When it was already dark over the sea, they reclined together and ate the feast, crowned with leaves in that old fashion which to several of the younger men seemed an affectation of antique things, but which all secretly enjoyed because such customs had about them, as had the rare statues and the mosaics and the very pattern of the lamps, a flavour of great established wealth and lineage. In great established wealth and lineage lay all that was left of strength to those old gods which still stood gazing upon the change of the world. [95]

The songs that were sung and the chaunted invocations had nothing in them but the memories of Rome; but the instruments and dancers were tolerated by that one guest who should most have complained, and whose expression and apparel and gorgeous ornament and a certain security of station in his manner proved him the head of the Christian priests from Helena. When the music had ceased and the night deepened, they talked all together as though the world had but one general opinion; they talked with great courtesy of common things. But from the slaves' quarters came the unmistakable sing-song of the Christian vine-yard dance and hymn, which the labourers sung together with rhythmic beating of hands and

customary cries, and through that din arose from time to time the loud bass of one especially chosen to respond. The master sent out word to them in secret to conduct their festival less noisily and with closed doors. Upon the couches round the table where the lords reclined together, more than one, especially among the younger men, looked anxiously at their host and at the Priest next to him, but they saw nothing in their expressions but a continued courtesy; and the talk still moved upon things common to them all, and still avoided that deep dissension which it was now useless to raise because it would so soon be gone.

There came an hour when all but one ceased suddenly from wine; that one, who still continued to drink as he saw fit, was the host. He knew the reason of their abstinence; he had heard the trumpet in the harbour that told the hour and proclaimed the fast and vigil, and he felt, as all did, that at last the figure and the presence of which none would speak—the figure and the presence of the Faith—had entered that room in spite of its dignity and its high reserve.

For some little time, now talking of those great poets who were a glory to them all, and whose verse was quite removed from these newer things, the old man still sipped his wine and looked round at the others whose fast had thus begun. He looked at them with an expression of severity in which there was some challenge, but which was far too disdainful to be insolent, and as he so looked the company gradually departed.

We have quoted this passage at some length, because it is an almost perfect example of Mr. Belloc's style in these sketches, and because it touches on, is the visualization of, a cardinal point in his historical theories. This point has been dwelt upon more fully in the preceding chapter, and we cannot do more than mention it here. It expresses that view of the gradual development and transformation of the Roman Empire with which Mr. Belloc would replace the gloomy view of Gibbon and the exaggerated horrors, to take a conspicuous but not now important example, of Charles Kingsley's *Roman and Teuton*. He would represent it as a period of wealth and order, full of menace, warning and change, but no more prescient of utter disaster than our own time. [96]

The sketch is a visualization of a short passage in the essay *On Historical Evidences*:

You have the great Gallo-Roman noble family of Ferreolus running down the centuries from the Decline of the Empire to the climax of Charlemagne. Many of those names stand for some most powerful individuality, yet all we have is a formula, a lineage, with symbols and names in the place of living beings.... The men of that time did not even think to tell us that there was such a thing as a family tradition, nor did it seem important to them to establish its Roman origin and its long succession in power.

Mr. Belloc has endeavoured to see the reality of such a family, as he believes, as that from which Charlemagne sprung. He fights, paradoxically, for the unity of history against Freeman, who invented that phrase and who yet thought that "Charles the Great" came from a line of German savages.

He has endeavoured passionately to realize this thing; it would be pathetic, were not his desire so triumphantly gratified. Observe the ease and sincerity of that long passage quoted above. One forcing of the note, one moment's wish to show too great a scholarship or to emphasize the antiquity of the scene, would have ruined the effect. It is full of emotion, the most poignant, the regret for passing and irrevocable things, but the author is detached and cool. He is all bent on the fidelity of his picture. [97]

The Girondin is very much a different matter and occupies a place in Mr. Belloc's work difficult to discuss. It is frankly a novel, written as novels are, to entertain, to edify and to perform the spiritual functions of poetry and good literature. It is also unique in that it contains a story of love, a motive largely absent from Mr. Belloc's imaginative writing.

In so far as it is an historical novel, we may expect to find in it, and we do find in it, an accurate and living picture of one aspect of the age in which it is set. It should not surprise us to find this an unusual aspect; it is unusual. There are here none of the customary decorations, no guillotine, no knitting women, no sea-green and malignant Robespierre, no gently nurtured and heroic aristocrats. The progress of the story does not touch even the fringes of Paris. The hero is an inhabitant of the Gironde and not a member of the party which bore that name.

The action moves from a town in the Gironde to the frontiers. The hero is killed by an accident with a gun-team soon after the Battle of Valmy. That is the unfamiliar aspect of the hackneyed French Revolution with which Mr. Belloc here chooses to deal: an aspect, we might even say, not merely unfamiliar, but practically unknown to the English reader.

The matter of raising the armies was a matter of prime importance to the Republic, and involved a task which even we, in this country, with all our recent experiences, can hardly comprehend. The officers had deserted, the men were not all to be trusted, all told there were not enough for the pressing necessities of the State. A corps of officers had to be improvised from nowhere, recruits had to be taught to ride as they went to meet the Prussians. Such were the beginnings of the army that afterwards visited the Pyramids, Vienna, Berlin and Moscow. [98]

All this Mr. Belloc has shown with sufficient vividness in isolated passages. Even those who have

played no part in the raising of the new armies of England, can gain from his descriptions something of what that business must have been. But in this book he is not merely writing a sketch to visualize the past, he is writing a real story with a number of living characters and a sort of a plot. And in some way the story and the historical matter weaken one another. They go and come by turns. The whole book is an irregular succession of detached incidents. The witty Boutroux is a sport of chance and dies, fitly enough, not in action, but by a mishap.

If we separate from the rest the incident of the girl Joyeuse, it is extremely beautiful. Take by themselves the stratagems and the conversations of Boutroux: they are extremely witty. Take by themselves the military scenes: they are impressive. But these do not make the book a whole or leave the impression that the author knew from chapter to chapter what he was going to write next.

Frankly, then, *The Girondin* is a disappointment, but, perhaps, only because it held such possibilities and because we had reason to anticipate that Mr. Belloc would surprise us with these possibilities. His great historical novel is yet to come.

That he is qualified to write such a book, whether from the standpoint of imaginative power or from that of historical knowledge, needs no discussion here. Whether he can, should he choose, combine these qualities, in an extended work, so perfectly that they do not clash, and that neither transcends the other, is a question for the future to decide.

But his imaginative power serves him already in the study, and in the writing of pure history. It is a guarantee, we have said, that the reader will be preserved from barren, unco-ordinated details, which are set down without any reference to human purpose. It is also a guarantee, and this is most important, of as much impartiality as is possible to man. For the imaginative man does not seek fantasy in these things: he can make that for himself in other and more suitable places. Here the plain facts are enough to feed his spirit and to make it rejoice. The most fantastic theories that diversify the page of written history have sprung from the minds of barren dons, who sit in studies unhindered by any realization of the world, and in whose hands the facts are wooden blocks to be piled up in any shape of the grotesque. Mr. Belloc, with a desire to realize and to know the past, a poetic desire that quite overcomes any propagandist bias or routine of thought, is sure of this at least: that he will see the past centuries as clearly and as truly as possible, and with a vision that steadily resolves economic developments and political movements into the actions, and the results of the actions, of human beings.

[99]

FOOTNOTES:

- [8] But Maitland, of course, was human. He lived some part of his life away from Cambridge.
- [9] We make this statement confidently without having read, and not intending to read, the whole of the *Cambridge Modern History*.
- [10] *The Old Road*, p. 9.
- [11] *Inaugural Lectures: Lecture on Modern History*, p. 24.

CHAPTER X

MR. BELLOC AND ENGLAND

Mr. Belloc is a democrat. He is politically democratic in the sense in which the French Revolution was democratic, and he is spiritually democratic in the sense in which the Church of Rome is democratic. What is common to all men is to him infinitely more important than the accidents by which men differ. The same may be said of his view of the nations of Europe. He does not view these great nations separately, but in their relation one to another. That in its history which each nation has in common with the other European nations is infinitely more important than that which is peculiar to itself alone.

Mr. Belloc said of Danton that he possessed a singularly wide view of the Europe in which France stood. We may say that in Mr. Belloc's view England juts out from Europe in a precarious position. England forms an integral part of Europe, but her position to-day, owing mainly to the accidents of her peculiar history, is as unique as it is perilous.

[100]

There are two books written by Mr. Belloc which deal exclusively with different aspects of the England of to-day. Of these, the first is *The Servile State*, in which Mr. Belloc is writing to maintain and prove the thesis that industrial society, as we know it, is tending towards the re-establishment of slavery. In this work he is concerned with an analysis of the economic system existing in England to-day, and with sketching the course of development in which that system came into being. In the other book, *The Party System*, in which Mr. Cecil Chesterton collaborated, he is concerned with an analysis of our present methods of government.

With *The Party System* and the views contained in it we shall deal in a later chapter. Here we are

concerned solely with Mr. Belloc's view of the development of England and especially with that most startling and original view which he expounds in *The Servile State* as to the origin of our present economic system.

Whether in Mr. Belloc's view, or the view of any other historian, the cardinal point in the history of England is that England was Britain before it became England: though Mr. Belloc would probably add the reminder that England was Britain for as long a period as from the time of Henry VIII to the present day. England was once as much a province of the Roman Empire as was France. This fact, of course, is commonly recognized. Where Mr. Belloc differs from other historians, so far as can be gathered by piecing together hints and allusions from his various writings, is in emphasizing the fact that the successive hosts of barbarian invaders were repeatedly brought under the influence of that Christian civilization which had inherited the magnificent institutions of the Empire. Thus the Angles and Saxons came under the influence of St. Augustine and the later missionaries, who, as they became ecclesiastics and Christianity was recognized as the national religion, introduced pieces of Roman Law into the Witenagemot and preserved in the Benedictine foundations the learning and experience of bygone centuries. In the monastic institution of the sixth and seventh centuries Mr. Belloc sees the power which re-created North and Western Europe. [101]

This institution [he says] did more work in Britain than in any other province of the Empire. And it had far more to do. It found a district utterly wrecked, perhaps half depopulated, and having lost all but a vague memory of the old Roman order; it had to remake, if it could, of all this part of a Europe. No other instrument was fitted for the purpose.

The chief difficulty of starting again the machine of civilization when its parts have been distorted by a barbarian interlude, whether external or internal in origin, is the accumulation of capital. The next difficulty is the preservation of such capital in the midst of continual petty feuds and raids, and the third is that general continuity of effort, and that treasuring up of proved experience, to which a barbaric time, succeeding upon the decline of a civilization, is particularly unfitted. For the surmounting of all these difficulties the monks of Western Europe were suited in a high degree. Fixed wealth could be accumulated in the hands of communities whose whole temptation was to gather, and who had no opportunity for spending in waste. The religious atmosphere in which they grew up forbade their spoliation, at least in the internal wars of a Christian people, and each of the great foundations provided a community of learning and treasuring up of experience which single families, especially families of barbaric chieftains, could never have achieved. They provided leisure for literary effort, and a strict disciplinary rule enforcing regular, continuous, and assiduous labour, and they provided these in a society from which exact application of such a kind had all but disappeared. [12]

In this way the just heritage of "our own kind" was preserved for us. The great monasteries suffered severely in the Danish invasions, "the pagan storm which all but repeated in Britain the disaster of the Saxon invasions, which all but overcame the mystic tenacity of Alfred and the positive mission of the town of Paris"; but they re-rose and were again exercising a strong civilizing influence "when civilization returned in fullness with the Norman Conquest." [102]

The Conquest, in Mr. Belloc's view, is "almost as sharp a division in the history of England as is the landing of St. Augustine ... though ... the re-entry of England into European civilization in the seventh century must count as a far greater and more decisive event than its first experience of united and regular government under the Normans in the eleventh." But it did not change the intimate philosophy of the people:

The Conquest found England Catholic, vaguely feudal, and, though in rather an isolated way, thoroughly European. The Normans organized that feudality, extirpated whatever was unorthodox or slack in the machinery of the religious system, and let in the full light of European civilization through a wide-open door, which had hitherto been half-closed. [13]

The organization of feudal government by the Normans brings us to a consideration of the territorial system of England which can be traced certainly from Saxon and conjecturally from Roman times.

In making the study of history, as does Mr. Belloc, living and organic, it is of capital importance to seize the fact that the fundamental economic institution of pagan antiquity was slavery. Before the coming of the Christian Era, and even after its advent, slavery was taken for granted. Mr. Belloc says:

In no matter what field of the European past we make our research, we find, from two thousand years ago upwards one fundamental institution whereupon the whole of society reposes; that fundamental institution is Slavery.... Our European ancestry, those men from whom we are descended and whose blood runs with little admixture in our veins, took slavery for granted, made of it the economic pivot upon which the production of wealth should turn, and never doubted but that it was normal to all human society. [14]

With the growth of the Church, however, the servile institution was for a time dissolved. This dissolution was a sub-conscious effect of the spread of Christianity and not the outcome of any direct attack of the Church upon slavery: [103]

No dogma of the Church pronounced Slavery to be immoral, or the sale and purchase of men to be a sin, or the imposition of compulsory labour upon a Christian to be a contravention of any human right.

Mr. Belloc traces the disappearance of this fundamental institution rather as follows. He says:

The sale of Christians to Pagan masters was abhorrent to the later empire of the Barbarian Invasions, not because slavery in itself was condemned, but because it was a sort of treason to civilization to force men away from Civilization to Barbarism.^[15]

The disappearance of slavery begins with the establishment as the fundamental unit of production of those great landed estates which were known to the Romans as *villae* and were cultivated by slaves. In the last years of the Empire it became more convenient in the decay of communications and public power and more consonant with the social spirit of the time, to make sure of the slave's produce by asking him for no more than certain customary dues. In course of time this arrangement became a sort of bargain, and by the ninth century, when this process had been gradually at work for nearly three hundred years, what we now call the Manorial system was fairly firmly established. By the tenth century the system was crystallized and had become so natural to men that the originally servile character of the folk working on the land was forgotten. The labourer at the end of the Dark Ages was no longer a slave but a serf.

In the early Middle Ages, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, at the time, that is, of the Crusades and the Norman Conquest, the serf is already nearly a peasant. As the generations pass he becomes more and more free in the eyes of the courts and of society. [104]

We see then that Saxon England, at the time the Conqueror landed, was organized on the Manorial system. This arrangement, with its village lords and their dependent serfs, was common to the whole of the West, and could be found on the Rhine, in Gaul and even in Italy; but the Manorial system in England differed from the Manorial system of Western Europe in one fatally important particular.

In Saxon England [says Mr. Belloc] there was no systematic organization by which the local landowner definitely recognized a feudal superior and through him the power of a Central Government.... When William landed, the whole system of tenure was in disorder in the sense that the local lord of the village was not accustomed to the interference of the superior, and that no groups of lords had come into existence by which the territorial system could be bound in sheaves, as it were, and the whole of it attached to one central point at the Royal Court.

Such a system of groups *had* arisen in Gaul, and to that difference ultimately we owe the French territorial system of the present day, but William the Norman's new subjects had no comprehension of it.^[16]

The order introduced by William was not strong enough to endure in face of the ancient customs of the populace and the lack of any bond between scattered and locally independent units. A recrudescence of the early independence of the landowners was felt in the reign of Henry II, while under John it blazed out into successful revolt. Throughout the Middle Ages we may see the village landlord gradually growing in independence and usurping, as a class, the power of the Central Government.

What the outcome of this state of affairs would have been had events been allowed to develop without interruption, it is impossible to say. Whether or not the peasant would have acquired freedom and wealth, at the expense of the landlord; whether then a strong Central Government would have arisen; whether property would have become more or less equally distributed and the State have been composed of a mass of small owners, all possessed of the means of production—these are things we can only guess. What we do know, and what Mr. Belloc has made abundantly clear, is that "with the close of the Middle Ages the societies of Western Christendom, and England among the rest, were economically free." In England the great mass of the populace was gradually becoming more and more possessed of property; but at the same time there existed a very considerable class of large landowners, who were not only wealthy and powerful, but incapable of rigid control by the Crown. [105]

This, then, was the state of England when an immediate and overwhelming change occurred. "Nothing like it," says Mr. Belloc, "has been known in European history." An artificial revolution was brought about which involved a transformation of a good quarter of the whole economic power of the nation. If we are to understand Mr. Belloc's view of the England of the present day, it is essential that we should grasp clearly his view of the Dissolution of the Monasteries, for from this operation, he says, "the whole economic future of England was to flow."

Mr. Belloc analyses the effect of the Dissolution of the Monasteries thus:

All over England men who already held in virtually absolute property from one-quarter to one-third of the soil and the ploughs and the barns of a village, became possessed in a very few years of a further great section of the means of production

which turned the scale wholly in their favour. They added to that third a new and extra fifth. They became at a blow the owners of *half* the land!^[17]

The effect of this increase in ownership was tremendous. The men of this landowning class, says Mr. Belloc, "began to fill the universities, the judiciary. The Crown less and less decided between great and small. More and more the great could decide in their own favour." [106]

The process was in full swing before Henry died, and because Henry had failed to keep the wealth of the monasteries in the hands of the Crown, as he undoubtedly intended to do, there existed in England, by about a century after his death, a Crown which, instead of disposing of revenues far greater than that of any subject, was dominated by a wealthy class. "By 1630-40 the economic revolution was finally accomplished and the new economic reality thrusting itself upon the old traditions of England was a powerful oligarchy of large owners overshadowing an impoverished and dwindled monarchy."

And this oligarchy, which was originally an oligarchy of birth as well as wealth, but which rapidly became an oligarchy of wealth alone—Mr. Belloc cites as an example the history of the family of Williams (alias Cromwell)—not only so subjugated the power of the central government as to reduce the king, after 1660, to the level of a salaried puppet, but also, in course of time, ate up all the smaller owners until, by about 1700, "more than half of the English were dispossessed of capital and of land. Not one man in two, even if you reckon the very small owners, inhabited a house of which he was the secure possessor, or tilled land from which he could not be turned off."

Such a proportion [continues Mr. Belloc] may seem to us to-day a wonderfully free arrangement, and certainly if nearly one-half of our population were possessed of the means of production, we should be in a very different situation from that in which we find ourselves. But the point to seize is that, though the bad business was very far from completion in or about 1700, yet by that date England had already become capitalist. She had already permitted a vast section of her population to become *proletarian*, and it is this and *not* the so-called "Industrial Revolution," a later thing, which accounts for the terrible social conditions in which we find ourselves to-day.^[18] [107]

It is perhaps Mr. Belloc's most valuable contribution to the study of modern English history that he has destroyed piecemeal that unintelligent, unhistorical and false statement, found in innumerable textbooks and taught so glibly in our schools and universities, that "the horrors of the industrial system were a blind and necessary product of material and impersonal forces"; and has shown us instead that:

The vast growth of the proletariat, the concentration of ownership into the hands of a few owners, and the exploitation by those owners of the mass of the community, had no fatal or necessary connection with the discovery of new and perpetually improving methods of production. The evil proceeded in direct historical sequence, proceeded patently and demonstrably, from the fact that England, the seed plot of the industrial system, was *already* captured by a wealthy oligarchy *before* the series of great discoveries began.^[19]

We see then that the slave of the Roman villa, a being both economically and politically unfree, developed throughout North-Western Europe, in the course of the thousand years or more of the uninterrupted growth of the Church, first into the serf and then into the peasant, a being both economically and politically free:

The three forms under which labour was exercised—the serf, secure in his position, and burdened only with regular dues, which were but a fraction of his produce; the freeholder, a man independent save for money dues, which were more of a tax than a rent; the Guild, in which well-divided capital worked co-operatively for craft production, for transport and for commerce—all three between them were making for a society which should be based upon the principle of property. All, or most—the normal family—should own. And on ownership the freedom of the State should repose.... Slavery had gone and in its place had come that establishment of free possession which seemed so normal to men, and so consonant to a happy human life. No particular name was then found for it. To-day, and now that it has disappeared, we must construct an awkward one, and say that the Middle Ages had instinctively conceived and brought into existence the Distributive State.^[20]

By the mishandling of an artificial economic revolution which was so sudden as to be overwhelming, namely, the Dissolution of the Monasteries, an England which was economically free, was turned into the England we know to-day, "of which at least one-third is indigent, of which nineteen-twentieths are dispossessed of capital and of land, and of which the whole industry and national life is controlled upon its economic side by a few chance directors of millions, a few masters of unsocial and irresponsible monopolies." [108]

Thus Mr. Belloc traces the growth and development of our economic conditions. In *The Servile State* he goes further and shows what new conditions are rapidly developing out of those now in existence.

At the present time, we know, the economic freedom of nineteen-twentieths of the English people has disappeared. Will their political freedom also disappear?

To this question Mr. Belloc's answer is as decided as it is startling. He does not argue that the political freedom of the proletariat may possibly disappear. He says that it has *already begun* to disappear.

The Capitalist State, he argues, in which all are free but in which the means of production are in the hands of a few, grows unstable in proportion as it grows perfect. The internal strains which render it unstable are, first, the conflict between its social realities and its moral and legal basis, and, second, the insecurity to which it condemns free citizens; the fact, that is, that the few possessors can grant or withhold livelihood from the many non-possessors. There are only three solutions of this instability. These are, the distributive solution, the collectivist solution, and the servile solution. Of these three stable social arrangements the reformer, owing to the Christian traditions of society, will not advocate the introduction of the servile state, which Mr. Belloc defines as "that arrangement of society in which so considerable a number of the families and individuals are constrained by positive law to labour for the advantage of other families and individuals as to stamp the whole community with the mark of such labour." If this arrangement be not advocated, there remain only the distributive and the collectivist solutions. Collectivism being to a certain extent a natural development of Capitalism and appealing both to capitalist and proletarian, is apparently the easier solution. But, says Mr. Belloc—and this is the kernel of his whole thesis—the Collectivist theory *in action* does not produce Collectivism, but something quite different; namely, the Servile State. There is only one way, according to Mr. Belloc's argument, in which Collectivism can be put into force, and that is by confiscation. The reformer is not allowed to confiscate, but he is allowed to do all he can to establish security and sufficiency for the non-owners. In attaining this object he inevitably establishes servile conditions. [109]

In the last chapter of this extraordinarily valuable book Mr. Belloc points to various examples of servile legislation, either already to be found on the Statute Book or in process of being put there. He is convinced that the re-establishment of the servile status in industrial society is already upon us; but records it as an impression, though no more than an impression, that the Servile State, strong as the tide is making for it in Prussia and in England to-day, will be modified, checked, perhaps defeated in war, certainly halted in its attempt to establish itself completely by the strong reaction which such free societies as France and Ireland upon its flank will perpetually exercise. [110]

FOOTNOTES:

[12] [Historic Thames](#), p. 91.

[13] [Historic Thames](#), p. 101.

[14] *Servile State*, p. 31.

[15] *Ib.*, p. 41.

[16] [Historic Thames](#), p. 141.

[17] *Servile State*, p. 64.

[18] *Servile State*, p. 68.

[19] *Ib.*, p. 62.

[20] *Servile State*, p. 49.

CHAPTER XI

THE REFORMER

It is impossible, unfortunately, in so brief a summary of Mr. Belloc's views, even to suggest with what force of argument and wealth of example he supports the thesis of *The Servile State*. What that thesis is it may be well to state in full. Mr. Belloc says that *The Servile State* was written "to maintain and prove the following truth":

That our free modern society in which the means of production are owned by a few being necessarily in unstable equilibrium, it is tending to reach a condition of stable equilibrium by the establishment of compulsory labour legally enforceable upon those who do not own the means of production for the advantage of those who do. With this principle of compulsion applied against the non-owners there must also come a difference in their status; and in the eyes of society and of its positive law men will be divided into two sets; the first economically free and politically free, possessed of the means of production, and securely confirmed in that possession; the second economically unfree and politically unfree, but at first secured by their very lack of freedom in certain necessities of life and in a

minimum of well-being beneath which they shall not fall.^[21]

Now, the reader who has followed the brief summary of the preceding chapter cannot fail to arrive at a consideration of apparently cardinal importance. Even if he be convinced—as we are convinced—that the servile state is actually upon us, he will yet feel that a people still politically free will never allow what is to-day but a young growth to attain its full stature. The English people, he will argue, hold their own destiny in their own hand. We already possess all but manhood suffrage; and, until that power is taken from us, which it could never be without a fierce struggle, we possess a weapon with which any and every attempt to re-introduce the servile status can successfully be resisted. [111]

A man reasoning thus should ask himself two questions: first, does the proletariat object to the re-introduction of the servile status, provided it brings with it security and sufficiency? second, does the enjoyment of a wide suffrage connote the power of self-government?

These are questions which every intelligent man must be able to answer for himself, and, if he answer them honestly, his answers, we think, will agree with those Mr. Belloc has given. In *The Servile State* he affirms what we all know to be the fact, that the English proletariat of to-day would not merely fail to reject the servile status, but would welcome it. He puts the matter in this way:

If you were to approach those millions of families now living at a wage with the proposal for the contract of service for life, guaranteeing them employment at what each regarded as his usual full wage, how many would refuse?

Such a contract would, of course, involve a loss of freedom; a life contract of the kind is, to be accurate, no contract at all. It is the negation of contract and the acceptance of status.^[22]

Every thinking man knows that the number to reject such a proposal would be insignificant.

If, then, the great mass of the English people, the majority, that is, of the voters, is prepared to welcome rather than to reject the re-introduction of slavery, the possession or non-possession of the power to reject it appears immaterial.

Let us suppose, however, an extreme case. Let us suppose an attempt to reduce the wage-earners to slavery without guaranteeing them sufficiency and security. There are many amiable maniacs who would be willing to support such an attempt, though we cannot believe that their efforts would be rewarded with success. They would be rewarded with revolution. [112]

This is a point upon which too great insistence cannot be laid. Such an attempt, if it were ever made, would produce a revolution: it would not be quashed in a General Election or by any other form of constitutional procedure, because, as a fact, the English people have no constitutional power.

Ultimately, of course, the power of government can only rest with the majority of the people, but in practice that power is often taken from them. It has been taken from the English people.

These, then, are the two great simple truths which underlie Mr. Belloc's whole attitude towards the public affairs of the England of to-day:

First, we are economically unfree.

Second, we are politically unfree.^[23]

The causes of the existence of the first condition are analysed, as we have seen, in *The Servile State*; the causes of the second are analysed in *The Party System*.

With the prime truths of this book every man possessing but the most elementary knowledge of political science and constitutional history is familiar. They were proved by Bagehot many years ago, and no observant man of average intelligence can fail to realize them for himself to-day. Briefly, they are these. The representative system existing in England, which was meant to be an organ of democracy, is actually an engine of oligarchy. "Instead of the executive being controlled by the representative assembly, it controls it. Instead of the demands of the people being expressed for them by their representatives, the matters discussed by the representatives are settled, not by the people, not even by themselves, but by the very body which it is the business of the representative assembly to check and control." [113]

These truths are to-day common knowledge. We all know that the power of government does not reside in practice with the people, but with some body which remains for most of us undefined. It is the peculiar service of the authors of *The Party System* to have defined that body for us and to have exposed its nature and composition. Bagehot referred to this body as the Cabinet; in *The Party System* it is shown that this body is really composed of the members of the two Front Benches, which form "one close oligarchical corporation, admission to which is only to be gained by the consent of those who have already secured places therein." The greater number, and by far the most important members, of this corporation enter by right of relationship, and these family ties are not confined to the separate sides of the House. They unite the Ministerial with the Opposition Front Bench as closely as they unite Ministers and ex-Ministers to each other. There is thus formed a governing group which has attained absolute control over the procedure of the House of Commons. It can settle how much time shall be given to the discussion of any

subject, and therefore, in effect, determine whether any particular measure shall have a chance of passing into law. It can also settle what subjects may be discussed and what may be said on those subjects. Further, this group has at its disposal large funds which are secretly subscribed and secretly disbursed, and, by the use of these funds, as well as by other means, it is able to control elections and decide to a considerable extent who shall be the representatives of the people.

Can this system be mended? Is any reform possible within the system itself? As long ago as 1899, [114] in the first important book he published, Mr. Belloc wrote these words:

... the *Mandat Impératif*, the brutal and decisive weapon of the democrats, the binding by an oath of all delegates, the mechanical responsibility against which Burke had pleaded at Bristol, which the American constitution vainly attempted to exclude in its principal election, and which must in the near future be the method of our final reforms.

It is a striking example of the solidity of Mr. Belloc's opinions to find him expressing, twelve years later, exactly the same views. He went into Parliament in 1906 holding this view; he came out of Parliament in 1910 confirmed in it. In 1911, the only possible means of reforming our Parliamentary system, so far as he can see, is this:

It might be possible, by scattering and using a sufficient number of trained workers, to extract from candidates definite pledges during the electoral period.... The principal pledge which should and could be extracted from candidates would be a pledge that they would vote against the Government—whatever its composition—unless there were carried through the House of Commons, within a set time, those measures to which they stood pledged already in their election addresses and on the platform.

But, just as Mr. Belloc realizes that the power of government must always rest ultimately with the majority of the people, so he realizes that all final reforms are brought about by the will of the majority. Consequently, the first need in the attempt to remedy any evil is exposure. The political education of democracy is the first step towards a reform.

To tell a particular truth with regard to a particular piece of corruption is, of course, dangerous in the extreme; the rash man who might be tempted to employ this weapon would find himself bankrupted or in prison, and probably both. But the general nature of the unpleasant thing can be drilled into the public by books, articles, and speeches.

This is the whole secret of Mr. Belloc's actions as a reformer. His whole object, as has already been said in another connection, is to instruct public opinion. His views and opinions are to be found clearly expressed in books, but he is not content merely to express his views as intellectual propositions, he is supremely anxious to convince men of the truth and justice of his views, and to inspire men to action. Just as he regards history as the record of the actions of men like ourselves, so he regards the evils of the present day as the result of men's actions and men's apathy. His whole object is to check those actions and uproot that apathy. [115]

It was with this object that he founded, in 1911, the weekly journal called *The Eye-Witness*, the chief aim of which was to conduct a steady and unflinching campaign against the evils of the Party System and of Capitalism, and a notable feature of Mr. Belloc's editorship was that the paper, during the time he was connected with it, reached and maintained an extraordinarily high literary standard. It is a matter of regret that Mr. Belloc, owing to a variety of circumstances, was obliged, in the early part of 1912, to resign the position of editor of the paper which he founded and which now, under the title of *The New Witness*, is edited by Mr. Cecil Chesterton.

There can be no doubt, however, that the campaign which Mr. Belloc then initiated has achieved some measure of success. Although it is impossible to point to any organized body of opinion which definitely supports Mr. Belloc's views on economic and political reform, yet it is undeniable that those views have taken root and are to-day far more common than at the time either *The Party System* was written, or *The Eye-Witness* founded. This has come about by a very simple process—a process which Mr. Belloc himself has analysed. In the last pages of *The Party System* there occurs this passage:

Truth has this particular quality about it (which the modern defenders of falsehood seem to have forgotten), that when it has been so much as suggested, it of its own self and by example tends to turn that suggestion into a conviction. [116]

You say to some worthy provincial, "English Prime Ministers sell peerages and places on the Front Bench."

He is startled, and he disbelieves you; but when a few days afterwards he reads in his newspaper of how some howling nonentity has just been made a peer, or a member of the Government, the incredible sentence he has heard recurs to him. When in the course of the next twelve months five or six other nonentities have enjoyed this sort of promotion (one of whom perhaps he may know from other sources than the Press to be a wealthy man who uses his wealth in bribery) his doubt grows into conviction.

That is the way truth spreads....

The truth, when it is spoken for some useful purpose, must necessarily seem obscure, extravagant, or merely false; for, were it of common knowledge, it would not be worth expressing. And truth being fact, and therefore hard, must irritate and wound; but it has that power of growth and creation peculiar to itself which always makes it worth the telling.

FOOTNOTES:

[21] *Servile State*, p. 3.

[22] *Servile State*, p. 140.

[23] The reader should take care to distinguish between the phrase "politically unfree," as connoting the lack of constitutional power, and the phrase "politically unfree," used by Mr. Belloc in *The Servile State* as connoting the lack of a free status in positive law, and therefore the presence of servile conditions.

CHAPTER XII

THE HUMORIST

Humour is the instrument of the critic. If the psychological explanation of laughter be, as some have supposed, the sight of "a teleological being suddenly behaving in an ateleological manner," then the mere act of laughter is in itself an act of comparison and of criticism. The true castigator of morals has never striven to make his subjects appear disgraceful, but to make them appear ridiculous. Except in the case of positive crime, for example, murder or treason, the true instrument of the censor is burlesque. It fails him only when his subject is consciously and deliberately breaking a moral law: it is irresistible when its target is a false moral law or convention of morals set up to protect anti-social practices. Among these we may reckon bribery of politicians, oppression of the poor, vulgar ostentation, the habit of adultery and the writing of bad verse. Aristophanes, Molière, Byron, and Dickens—these attempted to correct the social vices of their times by laughter. [117]

But humorous literature is not wholly confined to such practical ends. We may derive pleasure from reading literary criticism for its own sake and not for the purpose of knowing what books to read: we also gain and require a pure pleasure from that constant criticism of human things which we call humour. It remains a function of criticism, as may be seen from the simple fact that no man was ever a good critic of anything under the sun who had not a sense of humour. It is a perpetual commentary on life, a constant guide to sanity. And a good joke, like a good poem, enlarges the boundaries of the spirit and puts us in touch with infinity. But too much abstract disquisition on the subject of humour is a frequent cause of the lack of it.

Mr. Belloc's first essays in humour were not of the satirical or purposeful sort: unless we consider an obscure volume called *Lambkin's Remains* to be of this nature. The author has kept in affection, it would seem, only one of these compositions sufficiently to reprint it out of a volume which can hardly now be obtained. Mr. Lambkin's poem, written for the Newdigate Prize in 1893 on the prescribed theme for that year, "The Benefits of the Electric Light," might fairly be considered a warning to the examiners to set their subject with care.

The first of his popular essays in amusement, the one by which—owing to an accident of music—he is still best known, though anonymously, to a large public, is *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts*. Successors in a similar manner are *More Beasts for Worse Children* (delightful title), *A Moral Alphabet*, and *Cautionary Tales for Children*. These are successful books for children, of a great popularity, and may be read with considerable pleasure by elder persons.

To define the particular quality which makes them good is more than a little difficult. It is much easier to analyse and expose the virtues of the most affecting poetry than to explain what moves us in the mildest piece of humour. This is amply proved by the fact that innumerable volumes exist on the origin of comedy and the cause of laughter, and there are more to come: while, roughly speaking, even philosophers are agreed as to the manner in which serious poetry touches us. [118]

A great deal, too, of the appeal of these pieces is due to the illustrations of B. T. B. which complement the text with an apt and grotesque commentary. The pleasure given by the verse, perhaps, if one may handle so delicate and trifling a thing, lies in a sort of inconsequence and unexpectedness. Witness the poem on the Yak:

Then tell your Papa where the Yak can be got,
And if he is awfully rich
He will buy you the creature—

(The reader now turns over the page.)

Or else
he will *not*.
(I cannot be positive which.)

Or it may reside in mere genial idiocy, as in *The Dodo*:

The Dodo used to walk around
And take the sun and air.
The Sun yet warms his native ground—
The Dodo is not there!

The voice which used to squawk and squeak
Is now for ever dumb—
Yet may you see his bones and beak
All in the Mu-se-um.

This is the quality which chiefly inspires the *Cautionary Tales*, that admirable series of biographies. "*Matilda, Who told Lies and was Burned to Death*" is perhaps too well known to quote, but we may extract a passage from "*Lord Lundy, who was too Freely Moved to Tears, and thereby ruined his Political Career*":

[119]

It happened to Lord Lundy then,
As happens to so many men:
Towards the age of twenty-six,
They shoved him into politics;
In which profession he commanded
The income that his rank demanded
In turn as Secretary for
India, the Colonies and War.
But very soon his friends began
To doubt if he were quite the man:
Thus, if a member rose to say
(As members do from day to day),
"Arising out of that reply...!"
Lord Lundy would begin to cry.
A hint at harmless little jobs
Would shake him with convulsive sobs,
While as for Revelations, these
Would simply bring him to his knees
And leave him whimpering like a child.

This genial idiocy, this unexpectedness and inconsequence, are perhaps the most characteristic qualities of his freest humour elsewhere. Take, for example, the flavour of this singular remark from *The Four Men*. Grizzlebeard is telling, according to his oath, in a most serious fashion the story of his first love. He says:

"I learnt ... that she had married a man whose fame had long been familiar to me, a politician, a patriot, and a most capable manufacturer.... Then strong, and at last (at such a price) mature, I noted the hour and went towards the doors through which she had entered perhaps an hour ago in the company of the man with whose name she had mingled her own."

Myself. "What did he manufacture?"

Grizzlebeard. "Rectified lard; and so well, let me tell you, that no one could compete with him."

Let the reader explain, if he can, the comic effect of that startling irrelevance; we cannot, but it is characteristic.

It is some effect of dexterity with words, some happy spring of inconsequence, which produces this particular kind of joke. A certain exuberance in writing which plainly intoxicates the writer and carries the reader with it, is at the bottom of humour of this sort. What is it that causes us to smile at the following passage, a disquisition on the aptitude of the word "surprising"?

[120]

An elephant escapes from a circus and puts his head in at your window while you are writing and thinking of a word. You look up. You may be alarmed, you may be astonished, you may be moved to sudden processes of thought; but one thing you will find about it, and you will find out quite quickly, and it will dominate all your other emotions of the time: the elephant's head will be surprising. You are caught. Your soul says loudly to its Creator: "Oh, this is something new!"

One might suggest that psychological analysis with an example so absurd provokes the sense of the comic, but it is not quite that. It is not Heinesque irony, the concealment of an insult, nor Wilde's paradox, the burlesque of a truth. It is merely comic: a humorous facility in the use of words, though not barren as such things are apt to be, but quite common and human. The philosophical rules of laughter do not explain it: but it is funny.

Something of the same attraction rests in a quite absurd essay, wherein Mr. Belloc describes how he was waylaid by an inventor and, having suffered the explanations of the man, retaliated with advice as to the means to pursue to get the new machine adopted. The technical terms invented for both parties to the dialogue are deliciously idiotic, a sort of exalted abstract play with the dictionary of technology.

In descriptions of persons we are on safer ground, and the reader, if he still care, after all we have said, for such-like foolishness, may explain these jokes by the incongruity of teleological beings acting in an ateleological manner. We are determined to be content in picking out passages that amuse us and in commenting on them but by no means explaining them. [121]

Mr. Belloc himself has invented or recorded the distinction between things that would be funny anyhow, and things that are funny because they are true. Most of his jokes fall into the second category. The German baron at Oxford, the gentleman who asked when and for what action Lord Charles Beresford received his title, the poet who wrote a poem containing the lines:

Neither the nations of the East, nor the nations of the West,
Have thought the thing Napoleon thought was to their interest,

all these people are admirably funny because they do, or very well might, exist. In fact, most of Mr. Belloc's humour is observation, a slow delicate savouring of human stupidity and pretence.

The sporadic stories in his books are funny because, at least, we can believe them to be true. Read this from *Esto Perpetua*:

An old man, small, bent, and full of energy opened the door to me.... "I was expecting you," he said. I remembered that the driver had promised to warn him, and I was grateful.

"I have prepared you a meal," he went on. Then, after a little hesitation, "It is mutton: it is neither hot nor cold." ... He brought me their very rough African wine and a loaf, and sat down opposite me, looking at me fixedly under the candle. Then he said:

"To-morrow you will see Timgad, which is the most wonderful town in the world."

"Certainly not to-night," I answered; to which he said, "No!"

I took a bite of the food, and he at once continued rapidly: "Timgad is a marvel. We call it 'the marvel.' I had thought of calling this house 'Timgad the Marvel,' or, again, 'Timgad the——'"

"Is this sheep?" I said.

"Certainly," he answered. "What else could it be but sheep?"

"Good Lord!" I said, "it might be anything. There is no lack of beasts on God's earth." I took another bite and found it horrible. [122]

"I desire you to tell me frankly," said I, "whether this is goat. There are many Italians in Africa, and I shall not blame any man for giving me goat's flesh. The Hebrew prophets ate it and the Romans; only tell me the truth, for goat is bad for me."

He said it was not goat. Indeed, I believed him, for it was of a large and terrible sort, as though it had roamed the hills and towered above all goats and sheep. I thought of lions, but remembered that their value would forbid their being killed for the table. I again attempted the meal, and he again began:

"Timgad is a place——"

At this moment a god inspired me, and I shouted, "Camel!" He did not turn a hair. I put down my knife and fork, and pushed the plate away. I said:

"You are not to be blamed for giving me the food of the country, but for passing it under another name."

He was a good host and did not answer. He went out, and came back with cheese. Then he said, as he put it down before me:

"I do assure you it is sheep," and we discussed the point no more.

That is an amusing episode and wholly characteristic. The humour of Mr. Belloc's books, particularly of his books of travel, resides in a quantity of such tales, not acutely and extravagantly funny, but all amusing because they are all (apparently) true.

With that more practical branch of humour, satire, the angle of view shifts a little. The power of making laughter becomes here a weapon, and its hostile purpose, as it were, sharpens the point. Mr. Belloc's satire has a hardness and a precision lacking in the broad and general effects of his quite irresponsible humour.

All satire, as we have said, has a definite moral intent, whether it be to restrain a corrupt politician or a bad poet, and this makes it serious, sometimes painful, always, in failure, heavy

and unpleasant. The little book called *The Aftermath: or Caliban's Guide to Letters* is not altogether a success. One might believe that Mr. Belloc's disgust with the tricks of journalism has killed, as never his disgust with the tricks of government, his sense of joy in human pretence. These sketches, by just a little, fail to give one a feeling of rejoicing in the author's wit: they seem bitter, strained, and, while one appreciates the justice of the serious charge, the humour which was to carry it off, becomes from time to time heavy and lifeless. It is even a depressing book: but this may be because the deepest rooted of our illusions, deeper than the illusion about politics, is the illusion concerning the cleverness of authors. [123]

The skit, written with Mr. G. K. Chesterton, on the proceedings of the Tariff Reform Commission, is, on the other hand, one shout of laughter: as though that singular inquiry could not raise bitterness or indeed any emotion but delight in the breasts of true observers of humanity. It is a pity it is no longer obtainable.

The two or three satirical poems show a very definite and determined purpose, a sort of ugly competent squaring of the fists, a fighting that pleases by clean hard hitting.

It must have been a great pleasure to Mr. Belloc to write:

We also know the sacred height
Up on Tugela side,
Where the three hundred fought with Beit
And fair young Wernher died.

The little empty homes forlorn,
The ruined synagogues that mourn
In Frankfort and Berlin;
We knew them when the peace was torn—
We of a nobler lineage born—
And now by all the gods of scorn
We mean to rub them in.

It must have been a great relief, too, to have planted such sound and swinging blows on the enemy's person. The enemy is not appreciably inconvenienced, but—Mr. Belloc has probably told himself—a few have chuckled, and that begins it. [124]

In such a way we come naturally to the five satirical novels, obviously an illustration of the passage in *The Party System*, where Mr. Belloc advocates the annulling of political evils by laughing at them. It is not our business here to analyse these compositions from the point of view of considering the amount of political usefulness they may have achieved. We must consider rather Mr. Belloc's fine, contented industry in his satiric task, the persistence with which he builds up his instrument of destruction.

The method in these books is exclusively ironic. Never does the writer overtly state that he seeks to drag down a system which he hates by laughter. In *Emmanuel Burden*, that extraordinary book, the severity of the method is extreme, almost overwhelming. The author supposes himself to be writing a biography especially designed to uphold the principles of "Cosmopolitan Finance—pitiless, destructive of all national ideals, obscene, and eating out the heart of our European tradition": and he preserves that pose consistently.

Elsewhere, for example, in *Mr. Clutterbuck's Election*, the pretence is less elaborate: winks and nudges to the reader are permitted, and the whole effect is less careful and more human, less bitter and more humorous. But the general tone is maintained throughout the five books, discussing the same characters who appear and reappear, the Peabody Yid, Mary Smith, the young and popular Prime Minister, "Methlinghamhurtht, Clutterbuck that wath," and the excellent Mr. William Bailey, who had the number 666 on his shirts, subscribed to anti-Semitic societies on the Continent and cherished with a peculiar affection *The Jewish Encyclopædia*. Such a preservation of tone is admirable, for it is a subtly restrained acidity, requiring either intense and unremitting care (which seems unlikely) or a special adjustment of temperament. It is very Gaulish, it must have been modelled on Voltaire: but it is also enlivened with flashes of irresponsibility that are the author's own. [125]

To have composed five such volumes as, taking them in order, *Emmanuel Burden*, *Mr. Clutterbuck's Election*, *A Change in the Cabinet*, *Pongo and the Bull*, and *The Green Overcoat*, is an achievement of a very remarkable sort, the more remarkable that the interest of these stories lies entirely in Mr. Belloc's peculiar views upon politics and finance. Even Disraeli, who liked writing novels about politics, could not restrain himself from love interests, romance, poetry, and what not else: but Mr. Belloc, serious and intent, concentrates his energies with malevolent smile on one object.

In this consistent level of irony there are undoubtedly exalted patches of more than merely verbal humour, such as, for example, Sir Charles Repton's jolly speech at the Van Diemens meeting, in which he outlines with enormous gusto the principles of procedure of modern finance. (It will be remembered that an unfortunate accident had deprived Sir Charles of his power of restraint and afflicted him with Veracititis.)

"Well, there you are then [he says], a shilling, a miserable shilling. Now just see what that shilling will do!

"In the first place it'll give publicity and plenty of it. Breath of public life, publicity! Breath o' finance too! We'll have that railway marked in a dotted line on the maps: all the maps: school maps: office maps. We'll have leaders on it and speeches on it. And good hearty attacks on it. And th-e-n ..." He lowered his voice to a very confidential wheedle—"the price'll begin to creep up—Oh ... o ... oh! the *real* price, my beloved fellow-shareholders, the price at which one can really *sell*, the price at which one can handle the *stuff*."

He gave a great breath of satisfaction. "Now d'ye see? It'll go to forty shillings right off, it ought to go to forty-five, it may go to sixty!... And then," he said briskly, suddenly changing his tone, "then, my hearties, you blasted well sell out: you unload ... you dump 'em. Plenty more fools where your lot came from.... Most of you'll lose on your first price: late comers least: a few o' ye'll make if you bought under two pounds. Anyhow I shall.... There! if that isn't finance, I don't know what is!"

[126]

That is great, it is humour of a positively enormous variety, and pure humour bursting and shining through the careful web of purposeful irony.

Such is the tendency of Mr. Belloc in his most intent occupations, to be suddenly overcome with a rush of something broad, human and jolly, in a word, poetic. In these moments he abandons his theories and his propaganda and sails off before the inspiration. By such passages, as much as or more than by their constant flow of skilful jeering, these books will last.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TRAVELLER

In a verse which criticism, baffled but revengeful, will not easily let die, it has been stated that "Mr. Hilaire Belloc is a case for legislation *ad hoc*. He seems to think nobody minds His books being all of different kinds." They certainly do mind. They ask what an author *is*. Mr. Bennett is a novelist, and so, one supposes, is Mr. Wells; Mr. Shaw and Mr. Barker are dramatists; Mr. W. L. Courtney is a Critic, and Mr. Noyes, they say, is a Poet.

There is, after all, a certain justice in the query. A novelist may also write a play or a sociological treatise: he remains a novelist and we know him for what he is. What, then, is Mr. Belloc? If we examine his works by a severely arithmetical test, we shall find that the greater part of them is devoted to description of travel. You will find his greatest earnestness, perhaps his greatest usefulness, in his history: but his travel lies behind his history and informs it. It is the most important of the materials out of which his history has been made.

[127]

The clue, then, that we find in the preponderance among his writings of books and essays drawn directly from experience of travel is neither accidental nor meaningless. All this has been a *training* to him, and we should miss the most important factor not only in what he has done, but also in what he may do, did we omit consideration of this.

Travel, in the oldest of platitudes, is an education: and here we would use this word in the widest possible sense as indicating the practical education, which is a means to an end, a preparation for doing something, and the spiritual education which is a preparation for being something. In both these ways, travel is good and widens the mind: and here, as in his history, we can distinguish the two motives. One is practical and propagandist, the other poetic, the passion for knowing and understanding. Travel, considered under these heads, gives the observant mind a fund of comparison and information upon agricultural economy, modes of religion, political forms, the growth of trade and the movement of armies, and gives also to the receptive spirit a sense of active and reciprocal contact with the earth which nourishes us and which we inhabit.

These moods and motives seem to be unhappily scarce in the life of this age. Neither understandingly, like poets, nor unconsciously (or, at least, dumbly), like peasants, are we aware of the places in which we live. We make no pilgrimages to holy spots, nor have we wandering students who mark out and acutely set down the distinctions between this people and that. Facilities of travel have perhaps damped our desire to hear news of other countries. They have not given us in exchange a store of accurate information. Curiosity has died without being satisfied. Both materially and spiritually, we and our society suffer for it: our lives are not so large, we make more stupid and more universal blunders in dealing with foreign nations.

[128]

Of the spiritual incentive to travel, Mr. Belloc has put this description into the mouth of a character in an essay:

Look you, good people all, in your little passage through the daylight, get to see as many hills and buildings and rivers, fields, books, men, horses, ships and precious stones as you can possibly manage. Or else stay in one village and marry in it and die there. For one of these two fates is the best fate for every man. Either to be

what I have been, a wanderer with all the bitterness of it, or to stay at home and to hear in one's garden the voice of God.

There you have the voice of Wandering Peter, who hoped to make himself loved in Heaven by his tales of many countries. On the other hand, you have Mr. Belloc's voice of deadly common sense adjuring this age, before it is too late, to move about a little and see what the world really is, and how one institution is at its best in one country and another in another.

Without any doubt whatsoever [he says] the one characteristic of the towns is the lack of reality in the impressions of the many: now we live in towns: and posterity will be astounded at us! It isn't only that we get our impressions for the most part as imaginary pictures called up by printers' ink—that would be bad enough; but by some curious perversion of the modern mind, printers' ink ends by actually preventing one from seeing things that are there; and sometimes, when one says to another who has not travelled, "Travel!" one wonders whether, after all, if he does travel, he will see the things before his eyes? If he does, he will find a new world; and there is more to be discovered in this fashion to-day than ever there was.

It is Mr. Belloc's habit, an arrogant and aggressive habit, not to be drugged if he can avoid it with the repetition of phrases, but to dissolve these things, when they are dissoluble, with the acid of facts. He applies his method, as we have already seen, in history: in travel, the precursor of history, he strives to be as truthful and as clear-sighted.

He wishes to report with accuracy—as a mediaeval traveller wished to report—what he has seen in foreign lands. He looks about him with a certain candour, a certain openness to impressions, which is only equalled, we think, among his contemporaries by the whimsical and capricious Mr. Hueffer: an artist whose interest lies wholly in literature, and whose mania it is rather to write well than to arrest the decay of our world. [129]

In the essay which we have quoted above, Mr. Belloc continues:

The wise man, who really wants to see things as they are and to understand them, does not say: "Here I am on the burning soil of Africa." He says: "Here I am stuck in a snowdrift and the train twelve hours late"—as it was (with me in it) near Sétif, in January, 1905. He does not say as he looks on the peasant at his plough outside Batna: "Observe yon Semite!" He says: "That man's face is exactly like the face of a dark Sussex peasant, only a little leaner." He does not say: "See these wild sons of the desert! How they must hate the new artificial life around them!" Contrariwise, he says: "See those four Mohammedans playing cards with a French pack of cards and drinking liqueurs in the café! See! they have ordered more liqueurs!"

So Mr. Belloc would have us go about the world as much like little children as possible in order to learn the elements of foreign politics.

But travel is also, quite in the sense of the platitude, an education. All that we can learn in books is made up of, or springs from, the difference between the men living on the banks of this river, and the men who live in the valleys of those hills. The man who understands the distinctions of costumes, manners, methods and thought which thus exist, is tolerably well equipped for dealing with such problems in his own country: he has had a practical education which prepares him for life.

Mr. Belloc goes about the world with a ready open mind, and stores up observations on these matters. In an essay on a projected guide-book he sets out some of them—how to pacify Arabs, how to frighten sheep-dogs, how the people of Dax are the most horrible in all France, and so on. It is a great pity that the book has never been written. [130]

All this is human knowledge, of which he is avid. It has been gained from fellow wayfarers by the roadside and in inns. The persons he has met and gravely noted on his travels are innumerable, and merely to read of them is an edification. His landscapes are mostly peopled, and if not a man, perhaps the ghost of an army moves among them, for he is strongly of the belief that earth was made for humanity and is most lovable where it has been handled and moulded by men, in the marking out of fields and the damming of rivers, till it becomes a garden.

His acquaintances of travel make a strange and entertaining gallery of people. How admirable is the Arab who could not contain himself for thinking of the way his fruit trees bore, and the tinner of pots who improved his trade with song, and the American who said that the Matterhorn was surprising. There is something restrained and credible in Mr. Belloc's account of these curious beings. He seems to sit still and savour their conversation: he hardly reports his own.

He conveys to the reader a solid and real impression of the men he has met, and it is one of the most delightful parts of his work. They go and come through the essays like minor characters in a novel written with prodigality of invention and genius. It is no exaggeration to say that they are all interesting, persons one could wish to have met. They stand out with the same clearness, the same reality, as the landscapes and physical features that Mr. Belloc describes: they bear the same witness to his curious gift for receiving an impression whole and clean, and presenting it again with lucidity.

This want of exaggeration we find again in the common-sense tone of his descriptions. He makes

no literary fuss about being in the open air: perhaps because he did not discover the value of the atmosphere as a stimulant for literature, but always naturally knew it as a proper ingredient in life. He is no George Borrow. There is a reality in his travels that may seem to some often far from poetical: dark shadows and patches about food and its absence, and a despair when marching in the rain which is anything but romantic. He is not self-conscious when speaking of countries, and his boasting of miles covered and places seen has always an essential modesty in it. He disdains no common-sense aid to travel, neither the railway nor his meals; he seems to keep excellently in touch with his boots and his appetite, and to those kindred points his most surprising rhapsodies are true. [131]

Take as an illustration the end of his admirable and discerning judgment upon the inns in the Pyrenees:

In all Sobrarbe, there are but the inns of Bielsa and Torla (I mean in all the upper valleys which I have described) that can be approached without fear, and in Bielsa, as in Venasque and Torla, the little place has but one. At Bielsa, it is near the bridge and is kept by Pedro Pertos: I have not slept in it, but I believe it to be clean and good. El Plan has a Posada called the Posada of the Sun (del Sol), but it is not praised; nay, it is detested by those who speak from experience. The inn that stands or stood at the lower part of the Val d'Arazas is said to be good; that at Torla is not so much an inn as an old chief's house or manor called that of "Viu," for that is the name of the family that owns it. They treat travellers very well.

This is all that I know of the inns of the Pyrenees.

That is practical writing, admirably done, and, as we should judge, without having tested it, no less likely to be useful to the traveller because it is a prose of literary flavour. On the other hand, the personal avowal in the last sentence gives confidence.

We must continue to look at Mr. Belloc's travels from what we loosely call the practical point of view, and we arrive now at those books in which travel is the means to the pursuit of a certain sort of study. That is the study of history and, in particular, of military events, which can properly be carried out only on the ground where these took place. [132]

We have said that his travel is the material out of which his history is made, and that, though a wide generalization, is to a great extent strictly accurate. His notion of the Western race and its solidarity derives its force not only from a careful and vigorous interpretation of written records, but also from observation of that race to-day. You may see in *Esto Perpetua* how he verified and amplified his theory very practically by a journey through Northern Africa.

It is true also that his gifts of clear-headedness and lucidity which make valuable his interpretations of written records make it easy for him to read country, to grasp its present possibilities and the effects which it must have had in the past. This steady gift of shrewd and apt vision of the things which really are makes him a useful monitor in a time when men usually deal in gratuitously spun theories.

His eye for country is a symbol, as well as an example, of his best talents. To him, it seems, a piece of ground, an English county, say, is an orderly shape, not the jumble of ups and downs, fields, roads and woods which appears to most. In a similar way an historical controversy in his hands reveals its principal streams, its watershed, and the character of its soil.

At this point, just as we distinguished in his history the practical from the poetic motive, we can see the blending of the two motives for travel. Mr. Belloc's researches into history and pre-history do show these motives inextricably mixed: in *The Old Road* you cannot separate the purpose of research from the purpose of this pleasure.

In this book he gives us a few remarks on the origin of the prehistoric track-way which ran from Winchester to Canterbury, an itinerary as exact as research can make it, and a little discourse on the reasons why it is both pious and pleasant to pursue such knowledge. [133]

Searching for Roman roads or the earlier track-ways and determining as near as possible the exact sites of historical events is with him a sport. The method pursued is that of rigid and scientific inquiry. *Paris* especially, *Marie Antoinette* and *The Historic Thames* in a lesser degree, bear witness to this, which, in a don, we should call minute and painstaking research, but which in our subject we guess to be the gratification of a desire.

In *The Old Road* Mr. Belloc describes with severe accuracy but with an astonishing gusto how, having read all that was printed about this track and studied the best maps of the region through which it passes, he set out to examine the ground itself, and thus to reach his final conclusions. We have not space here to recount his methods at length or to show, as he has shown, how this parish boundary is a guide here, those trees there, that church a mile further on. It is but one example out of many of his spirit and tastes in the numerous tasks of identification which he has undertaken.

And here is the proper place, perhaps, to disengage what we have called the poetic motive of travel. He manifests a particular reverence for these rests of antiquity which he has sought out. It is both in a religious and in a poetic spirit that he considers The Road as a symbol of humanity. He writes in a grave and ritual tone:

Of these primal things [he says] the least obvious but the most important is The

Road. It does not strike the sense as do those others I have mentioned; we are slow to feel its influence. We take it so much for granted that its original meaning escapes us. Men, indeed, whose pleasure it is perpetually to explore even their own country on foot, and to whom its every phase of climate is delightful, receive, somewhat tardily, the spirit of The Road. They feel a meaning in it: it grows to suggest the towns upon it, it explains its own vagaries, and it gives a unity to all that has arisen along its way. But for the mass The Road is silent; it is the humblest and the most subtle, but, as I have said, the greatest and most original of the spells which we inherit from the earliest pioneers of our race. It was the most imperative and the first of our necessities. It is older than building and than wells; before we were quite men we knew it, for the animals still have it to-day; they seek their food and their drinking-places and, as I believe, their assemblies, by known ways which they have made.

[134]

All travel is a pilgrimage, more or less exalted, and a Catholic with a mind of Mr. Belloc's type makes the performance of such an act both a religious ceremonial and a personal pleasure. He feels it to be no less an act of religion because it is full of jolly human and coloured experience.

Out of this conception he has developed a new and personal form of the Fantastic or Unbridled Book of Travels: much as Heine's form of the same thing developed from a faint reflection of a half-remembered tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's praise of nature. It is odd to compare the two, Mr. Belloc on pilgrimage for his religion of normality and good fellowship, Heine walking in honour of the religion of wit.

The comparison indeed is inevitable: for these men, each solid, sensible and humorous, each availing himself of the same form of literature, each standing apart from the windiness of such as George Borrow, are as alike in method as they are distinct in spirit. The form, the method indeed, are admirable for men of the type of these two who resemble one another so much in general cast, in line of action, though so very little in thought.

It is a form, as it were, made for a man of various tastes and talents, for the progress of his journey makes a frame-work suggesting and holding together a multitude of discursions. An event of the day's march can set him off on a train of entertaining or profitable reflection and Mr. Belloc, in the earlier of the two books which are the subject of this disquisition, will abruptly introduce an irrelevant story as he explains, to while away the tedium of a dull road. And at the end of the irrelevance, the purpose of travel restores him to the path and preserves the unity of the book.

[135]

The Path to Rome, though perhaps better known, is a younger and a less mature book than *The Four Men*. It is brilliantly full of humour and poetic description: it has even remarkable stretches of Fine Writing. One could deduce from it without much difficulty the general trend of Mr. Belloc's mind, for he has tumbled into it pell-mell all his first thoughts and reflections. With the fixed basis of thought, on which we have already so often insisted, he will think at all times and on all things in the same general way. This gives his observations a uniform character and a uniform interest. The pleasure in reading a book of this sort is to see how his method of thinking will play upon the various hares of subjects that he starts.

This basis of thought in him is continuous: it has not changed, but it has ripened, and it is more fully expressed. *The Path to Rome* is the book of a young man, vigorous, exuberant, extravagant, almost, as it were, "showing off." The flavour is sharp and arresting. *The Four Men*, which we believe to be the present climax of Mr. Belloc's literature, is, Heaven knows, vigorous, exuberant and extravagant enough. But it is also graver, deeper, more artful, more coherent.

It is, in all its ramifications, a lyric, the expression of a single idea or emotion, and that the love of one's own country. The cult of Sussex, as it has been harshly and awkwardly called, makes a sort of nucleus to Mr. Belloc's examination and impression of the world. If he knows Western Europe tolerably well, he knows this one county perfectly, and from it his explorations go out in concentric circles. He finds it, as he found with *The Road*, a solemn, a ritual, and a pleasurable task to praise his own home.

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We cannot here analyse this book in any detail, nor would its framework bear so pedantic an insistence. The writer describes how, sitting in an inn just within the Kentish borders of Sussex he determined to walk across the county, admiring it by the way, and so to find his own home. He is joined on the road by three companions, Grizzlebeard, the Sailor, and the Poet. It would be stupid, the act of a Prussian professor, to seek for allegories in these figures, who are described and moulded with a quite human humour. The supernatural touch given to them in the last pages of the book, the faint mystic flavour which clings to them from the beginning and marks them as being just more than companions of flesh, these things are indicated with so delicate a hand, so reticently, that to analyse the method would be destruction—for the writers at least.

The book should be, by rights, described as "an extraordinary medley." As a matter of fact, it is not. Mr. Belloc gives it, as sub-title, the description "A Farrago," but we are not very clear what that means. It contains all manner of stuff from an excellent drinking song, an excellent marching song (which has now seen service), and a first-rate song about religion to the story of St. Dunstan and the Devil and an account of Mr. Justice Honeybubbe's Decision. But all this is strung together with such a curious tact on the string of the journey across Sussex that the miscellaneous materials make one coherent composition.

The recurrent landscapes which mark the progress of that journey are slight but exquisite. Take this one example, describing the gap of Arundel, just below Amberley:

... The rain began to fall again out of heaven, but we had come to such a height of land that the rain and the veils of it did but add to the beauty of all we saw, and the sky and the earth together were not like November, but like April, and filled us with wonder. At this place the flat water-meadows, the same that are flooded and turned to a lake in mid-winter, stretch out a sort of scene or stage, whereupon can be planted the grandeur of the Downs, and one looks athwart that flat from a high place upon the shoulder of Rockham Mount to the broken land, the sand hills, and the pines, the ridge of Egdean side, the uplifted heaths and commons which flank the last of the hills all the way until one comes to the Hampshire border, beyond which there is nothing. This is the foreground of the gap of Arundel, a district of the Downs so made than when one sees it one knows at once that here is a jewel for which the whole County of Sussex was made and the ornament worthy of so rare a setting. And beyond Arun, straight over the flat, where the line against the sky is highest, the hills I saw were the hills of home.

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These pages are full of sentences, graciously praising Sussex, in themselves small and perfect poems, as for example the praises of Arun, "which, when a man bathes in it, makes him forget everything that has come upon him since his eighteenth year—or possibly his twenty-seventh," and again, "Arun in his majesty, married to salt water, and a king."

We should be doing an injustice to *The Four Men* did we give the impression that it is nothing but a graceful and pleasant poem written about Sussex. We have said that it is grave and deep and informed with emotion. We will quote one passage, Grizzlebeard's farewell:

There is nothing at all that remains: nor any house; nor any castle, however strong; nor any love, however tender and sound; nor any comradeship among men, however hardy. Nothing remains but the things of which I will not speak, because we have spoken enough of them already during these four days. But I who am old will give you advice, which is this—to consider chiefly from now onward those permanent things which are, as it were, the shores of this age and the harbours of our glittering and pleasant but dangerous and wholly changeful sea.

Of such stuff is the basis of this book: on this basis, which is poetic, a spiritual motive, the whole creation is raised, and the book is destined to be more than an occasional account of travel or an amusing but trivial display of wit and fancy. It is a poem, and a poem, as we think, which will endure.

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It is, in truth, the poetic instinct which animates all his activities and particularly his travel. The poetic instinct consists of two itches, the first to comprehend fully in all dimensions the reality which we see before us, the second to express it again in words, paint, clay or music. This instinct in its pure and proper form has regard to no kind of profit, either in money or esteem. It moves the poet to the doing of these things for the sake only of doing them.

But by a very wise dispensation it is also the mainspring of all material usefulness in the world. We have sought to show, in this chapter as in others, how you can find the poetic, the disinterested motive, whenever you try to discover what gives their value to Mr. Belloc's studies in actuality. Particularly this is so in the accumulation of knowledge which he has acquired in his travels and in the use he makes of it. It seems as though this passion to see and to understand must sharpen his wits and his vision: it gives that life and energy to his writings on this matter without which poetic composition is worthless and journalism fails to convince.

CHAPTER XIV

MR. BELLOC AND THE FUTURE

You cannot sum up Mr. Belloc in a phrase. It is the aim of the phrase to select and emphasize; and if you attempt to select from Mr. Belloc's work you are condemned to lose more than you gain. It is not possible to seize upon any one aspect of his work as expressive of the whole man: to appreciate him at all fully it is essential to take every department of his writings into consideration.

If we are to answer the question as to what Mr. Belloc is, we can only reply with a string of names—poet and publicist, essayist and economist, novelist and historian, satirist and traveller, a writer on military affairs and a writer of children's verses.

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Such overwhelming diversity is in itself sufficient to mark out a man from his fellows; but if this diversity is to have any lasting meaning, if it is to be for us something more than the versatility of a practised journalist, it must have a reason.

The various aspects of Mr. Belloc's work are interwoven and interdependent. They do not spring one out of another, but all from one centre. We cannot take one group of his writings as a starting-point, and trace the phases of a steady development. We can only compare the whole of

his work to a number of lines which are obviously converging. If you take one of these lines, that is to say, one of his works or a single department of his activities, you cannot deduce from its direction the central point of his mind and nature. But if you take all these lines you may deduce, as it were mathematically, that they must of necessity intersect at a certain hypothetical point. This point, then, is the centre of Mr. Belloc's mind, a centre which we know to exist, but at which we can only arrive by hypothesis, because he has not yet written any full expression of it.

This point, the centre of all Mr. Belloc's published work, is to be found, we believe, in the fact that he is an historian. History to him is the greatest and most important of all studies. A knowledge of history is essential to an understanding of life. Although only a small part of his work is definitely historical in character, yet it is on history that the whole of his work reposes. This is very apparent when he is dealing with economic or political problems of the present day: it is less marked, though still quite obvious, in his essays and books on travel. It is in his poetry, and his children's verses that it appears perhaps least.

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But it is the qualities which make him a poet and give him an understanding of children, his catholicity, and his desire for simple, primitive and enduring things which give him that consistent view of history which we believe him to hold, and which we have attempted to outline in the eighth and again in the tenth chapters of this book. We endeavoured there to make clear what we believe to be Mr. Belloc's view of the general course of European history, and, as we pointed out, we found considerable difficulty in the fact that Mr. Belloc has never written any connected exposition of this view. We were, indeed, deducing the existence of a centre from the evidence of the converging lines.

That such a centre exists in Mr. Belloc's mind we have no doubt whatever. It is perfectly plain that he relates to some such considered and consistent scheme of history any particular historical event or contemporary problem which is brought under his notice. If at some future date he should set out this scheme as fully and adequately as we think it deserves, the resulting work would be of paramount value, both as an historical treatise, and as a guide to the understanding of all Mr. Belloc's other activities.

What we believe Mr. Belloc's view of the mainspring and the course of history to be we have outlined sufficiently, at least for the present purpose. The reader is already familiar with his conception of the European race, of the political greatness of Rome, of the importance of the Middle Ages, and of the principles of the French Revolution. But behind this material appearance, dictating its form and inspiring its expression, there is something else—the point of character from which he judges and co-relates in his mind, not only transitory, but also eternal things.

We might baldly express this point by saying that it is in the nature of a reverence for tradition and authority: but such phrases are nets which, while they do indeed capture the main tendency of ideas, allow to escape the subtle reservations and qualifications wherein the life of ideas truly resides. On such a point we can at best generalize: and this generalization will most easily be made clear, perhaps, by a contrast.

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The point from which Mr. Belloc views the whole of life, the point about him which it is of cardinal importance to seize, is the point where he cuts across the stream of contemporary thought. All literature and all art is conditioned by the social influences of the time. Mr. Belloc has told us that the state of society which exists in England to-day, and which he regards as rapidly nearing its close, is necessarily unstable, and more properly to be regarded as a transitory phase lying between two stable states of society. If we examine in its broadest outline the literature which is contemporaneous with the general consolidation of capitalism we find that it bears stamped upon it the mark of interrogation. From Wilde to Mr. Wells is the age of the question mark. In almost every writer of this period we find the same tendency of thought: the endless questioning, the shattering of conventions, the repeal of tradition, the denial of dogma.

It is the literature of an age of discomfort. Mr. Wells does not so much denounce as complain; life appears to ruin Mr. Galsworthy's digestion. Mr. Masefield, that robust and versifying sailor, is as irritable as a man with a bad cold. Our poets and our thinkers do not view the world with a settled gaze either of appreciation or of contempt: they look at it with the wild eye of a man who cannot imagine where he has put his gloves. Their condemnations and suggestions are alike undignified, whirling and flimsy. They pick up and throw down in the same space of time every human institution: they are in a hurry to question everything and they have not the patience to wait for an answer to anything.

We would not appear to think lightly of our contemporaries. It was necessary that they should arise to cleanse and garnish the world. They are symptomatic of an age, an evil age that is passing. They have cleared the ground for other men to build. If the world is not fuller and richer for their work, it is at any rate cleaner and healthier.

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That their work is done, that the time is ripe for more solid things, grows clearer every day. We are weary of our voyage of discovery and wishful to arrive at the promised land. We are glutted with questions, but hungry for answers. Theories are no longer our need; our desire is for fact. The philosophy and art of to-day exhibit this tendency. In literature especially the naturalist method has seen its day: and a general return to the romantic, or better, the classical form, is imminent. In a word, the tendency to establish as opposed to the tendency to demolish is everywhere to be seen.

By the very nature of his first principles Mr. Belloc is as much an ally of this tendency as he is an enemy of the tendency which is now reaching its term. His simplicity and catholicity give him a solid hold on tradition, and he will attack, on *a priori* grounds, nothing that is already established in the tradition of man. He is by no means a friend of reaction; but he can see nothing but peril and foolishness in Mr. Wells' attempts to construct a new universe out of chaos between two numbers of a half-crown review. Being, as he is, mystically impressed with the transitoriness of individual man and the permanence of the human race, he will not lightly condemn anything that has appeared useful to many past generations, and he cannot accept the mere charge of age as a damaging indictment against any human institution.

It is not Mr. Belloc's aim to drive us towards "a world set free." He does not visualize an ideal state which he would have the world attain. His whole object is to solve our immediate problems, practically and usefully, as they may best be solved; that is, by applying to the present the teachings of the past. He leaves himself open to the influences of his time: he does not attempt to force the men of his day into a mould of his own creation. For example, he points to the distributive state as the happiest political condition to be found in the Christian era. He sees no safe solution of present problems which does not involve a return to that state. But he does not indulge in the foolish exercise of elaborating a ready-made scheme by which the distributive state may be reinstated. He is too much of an historian, too practical a reformer, to be a lover of fantasy.

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In *Danton*, Mr. Belloc says:

A man who is destined to represent at any moment the chief energies of a nation, especially a man who will not only represent but lead, must, by his nature, follow the national methods on his road to power.

His career must be nearly parallel (so to speak) with the direction of the national energies, and must merge with their main current at an imperceptible angle. It is the chief error of those who deliberately plan success that they will not leave themselves amenable to such influences, and it is the most frequent cause of their failure. Thus such men as arrive at great heights of power are most often observed to succeed by a kind of fatality, which is nothing more than the course of natures vigorous and original, but, at the same time, yielding unconsciously to an environment with which they sympathize, or to which they were born.

We believe that society to-day is searching for a fixed morality and a dogmatic religion. We are seeking to establish once more conventions of conduct by which we may be ruled: our anxiety is to submit to the authority of eternal truths.

It is on tradition and authority that the whole of Mr. Belloc's work is based. He stands already on the heights society is striving to reach. That his influence on the progress of society towards its goal will be considerable we may fairly believe; the exact measure of that influence only the future can determine.

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Transcriber's note

The following changes have been made to the text:

Page 6: "blinds all of them" changed to "[binds](#) all of them".

Page 13: "leisurely obligarchy" changed to leisurely [oligarchy](#)".

Page 20: "crown and best achievement" changed to "crown and best [achievement](#)".

Page 56: "perusal of the daily newspaper" changed to "[perusal](#) of the daily newspaper".

Page 88 (in this version of the text): In Footnote #1 "Mommesen's volume on the provinces" changed to "[Mommsen's](#) volume on the provinces".

Page 119: "freeest humour" changed to "[freest](#) humour".

Page 119: "What did he manufactare" changed to "What did he [manufacture](#)".

"Page 129: "liqueurs in caf!é" changed to "liqueurs in the [café](#)."

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

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