

The founding text of International Relations? Norman Angell's seminal yet flawed "The Great Illusion" (1909–1938)

Author(s): MARTIN CEADEL

Source: *Review of International Studies*, October 2011, Vol. 37, No. 4 (October 2011), pp. 1671-1693

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23025571>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/23025571?seq=1&cid=pdf-](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23025571?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

[reference#references_tab_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23025571?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Review of International Studies*

The founding text of International Relations? Norman Angell's seminal yet flawed *The Great Illusion* (1909–1938)

MARTIN CEADEL

Abstract. Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion*, which ran through six versions in London between November 1909 and December 1938, has some claim to have launched International Relations as a self-consciously independent yet sub-consciously liberal discipline. Understood to argue primarily that the interlocking fragility of the international financial system stopped modern states profiting from aggression, its ideas were promoted by a specially created foundation as 'the science of international politics' or 'international polity'. Since the 1970s, moreover, the book has been credited by scholars with pioneering the concepts of interdependence and globalisation. Now, therefore, it is less its seminal qualities than its fundamental flaws that require emphasis. Its celebrated claim about the irenic implications of financial interdependence was widely misunderstood as implying the impossibility, in addition to the disutility, of aggression. And a little-noticed second argument – that political control over territory brought no substantive benefits – was not only implausible but inconsistent with Angell's declared opposition to cuts in arms spending. *The Great Illusion's* policy recommendations were thus ambiguous, and altered from edition to edition as its author grappled first with the contradiction between pacifist and pro-defence strands in his thinking and then with the changing international situation.

Martin Ceadel is Professor of Politics in the University of Oxford and a Fellow of New College. His research has mainly focused on peace ideas and activities in Britain, his books including *The Origins of War Prevention: the British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1730–1854* (Oxford, 1996) and *Semi-detached Idealists: the British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854–1945* (Oxford, 2000). He has most recently published a biography of Sir Norman Angell.

Introduction

Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* has some claim to have launched International Relations as a self-consciously independent yet sub-consciously liberal discipline. First published as *Europe's Optical Illusion* in London during November 1909, and reissued commercially in an expanded version and under a new title twelve months later, it enjoyed huge success, being revised in January 1911 and September 1912, and updated in 1933 and 1938. (Many foreign editions were also produced, though this article considers only their British originals).

Understood to argue primarily that the interlocking fragility of the international financial system stopped modern states profiting from aggression, it was

widely received as objective analysis rather than anti-war propaganda, its thesis soon being presented by its author, a hitherto obscure journalist, as 'the science of international politics' or 'international polity'. It was taken up by a British foundation established in April 1912 by Sir Richard Garton, an industrialist, at the behest of Viscount Esher, a royal adviser and member of the Committee of Imperial Defence, and A. J. Balfour, the leader of the Conservative Party and former prime minister. The wealthier and more famous American charities set up during the previous couple of years, the World Peace Foundation and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, had defined themselves in terms of a normative goal – the avoidance of war – and gave some of their money to the peace movement. By contrast, the Garton Foundation professed a value-neutral purpose and funded only educational activity (such as 'international polity clubs' in universities), thereby arguably constituting the first investment in International Relations as a professedly autonomous social science. In that sense, Angell produced the founding text of an academic discipline.

In fact, *The Great Illusion* was 'based on a liberal view of human beings and human society'¹ that helped to shape the new discipline during its formative phase. And Angell's writing, which became prolific, contained arguments (such as 'complete interdependence means the complete stultification of force')² and terminology (including 'complex financial interdependence', 'the "realist" view' as a shorthand for scepticism about the reformability of International Relations, 'transnational' distinguished from 'international', and the modern world's ability 'to annihilate space')³ that, reinvented by scholars, were to become staples of liberal International Relations theory. After receiving a knighthood in 1931 as a Labour member of parliament and the Nobel Peace Prize for 1933 as an internationalist campaigner, he became a principal target of E. H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis* in 1939, and suffered neglect during realism's subsequent hegemony within academic International Relations. But from the 1970s, as liberalism was born again, he began to be re-acknowledged, as a pioneer of the concepts of interdependence and globalisation.⁴

In consequence of Angell's rehabilitation, it is less *The Great Illusion's* seminal qualities than its fundamental flaws, both presentational and substantive, that will

¹ Robert Jackson and Georg Sørensen, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 34.

² Norman Angell, *The Problems of the War and the Peace: A Handbook for Students* (London: Garton Foundation n.d. [1914]), p. 72.

³ Norman Angell, *The Fruits of Victory: A Sequel to 'The Great Illusion'* (Glasgow: William Collins, 1921), pp. xii, 63, 66–72, 100, 300; *New Judea* (March–April 1930), pp. 121–2.

⁴ Joseph S. Nye, Jr. and Robert O. Keohane, 'Transnational Relations and World Politics: A Conclusion', *International Organization*, 25 (1971), p. 725. Albert Marrin, *Sir Norman Angell* (Boston: Twayne, 1979); David Baldwin, 'Interdependence and power: a conceptual analysis', *International Organization*, 34 (1980), pp. 481–5. L. R. Biscopaglia, *Norman Angell and Liberal Internationalism 1931–1935* (New York: Garland, 1982); J. D. B. Miller, *Norman Angell and the Futility of War: Peace and the Public Mind* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986); Cornelia Navari, 'The great illusion revisited: the international theory of Norman Angell', *Review of International Studies*, 15 (1989), pp. 341–58; Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 'Power and Interdependence in the Information Age', *Foreign Affairs*, 77 (1998), p. 81; Lucian Ashworth, *Creating International Studies: Angell, Mitrany and the Liberal Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999); Martin Wolf, *Why Globalization Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 33, 34; Harold James, *The Roman Predicament: How the Rules of International Order Create the Politics of the Game* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 26.

be emphasised in this article, the by-product of a first biography.⁵ Though superficially lucid, Angell's prose was imprecise and diffuse. His celebrated claim about the irenic implications of financial interdependence was expounded in so loose and colourful a way as initially to be misunderstood as implying the impossibility, in addition to the disutility, of aggression. And he offered a second reason why conquest was futile – because political control over territory brought no substantive benefits – that was not only implausible but, implying that the defence of territory was pointless, also inconsistent with Angell's declared opposition to cuts in arms spending. *The Great Illusion's* policy recommendations were thus ambiguous, and indeed altered from edition to edition as its author grappled with a contradiction between the pacifist and pro-defence strands in his thinking. Moreover, the book addressed an international situation that soon changed so fundamentally as to render its message redundant and even unhelpful.

Provenance of the 'illusion' thesis

The Great Illusion grew in part out of its author's eclectic reading about international and financial issues, but to a much greater extent out of his personal experiences. Born in Lincolnshire in 1872, the son of a successful shopkeeper, he was highly intelligent but not highly educated, his formal schooling, some of which had taken place in France, ending at the age of fourteen. The first step towards the 'illusion' thesis that made him famous in his late thirties was his adolescent rebellion against his mother's evangelical Christianity: at the age of eighteen, by which time he was working on a newspaper in Geneva, he announced that his personal mission was to combat 'The Great Fraud' of life after death.⁶ The second, on migrating to the US in 1891, was his discovery of Anglophobia, which he considered no less dogmatic and irrational than religion: it puzzled him that California's farmers, whose ranks he unsuccessfully joined at a time of agricultural depression, tended to vilify the British Empire even though it was their most reliable customer. The third, on returning to Europe in 1897 and finding journalistic employment in Paris, was his realisation that hostility in France to the unjustly imprisoned Dreyfus and fervent support in Britain for the Boer War were the counterparts of Anglophobia in the US: all were manifestations of a dogma called 'patriotism', which became the subject of his first book, *Patriotism under Three Flags*, published in 1903 under his real name, Ralph Lane. The fourth and final step, after joining Lord Northcliffe's right-wing personal circle on his appointment as production manager of the continental edition of the London *Daily Mail* in 1905, was his experience of its panicky response to Germany's naval challenge: he was surprised at the prevailing assumption on both sides that prosperity, as well as security, depended on military strength. The trigger to publish a critique of this latest and most dangerous illusion was an alarmist letter

⁵ Martin Ceadel, *Living the Great Illusion: Sir Norman Angell, 1872–1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Sources for unsupported claims about Angell in this article can be found here.

⁶ Unpublished letter to Harry Lane, 10 February [1891, though the transcript is misdated 1890]: Angell Papers, Bracken Library, Ball State University.

in *The Times* of 18 March 1909 from the veteran Positivist intellectual Frederic Harrison, who now feared a German invasion.

November 1909 edition

Adopting a pen-name to avoid embarrassing his employer, Angell replied with a book, *Europe's Optical Illusion*, and, on discovering that no commercial firm would take it, shortened it and funded its publication himself. Sensing a loss of confidence that conventional defence policies would keep the peace, he began with the observation: 'It is pretty generally admitted that the present rivalry in armaments with Germany cannot go on indefinitely', and went on to note that although a minority, dismissed in both countries 'as dreamers and doctrinaires', believed that peace could be preserved through 'general disarmament, or at least a limitation of armament by agreement', the majority view on both sides, 'accepted as one of the laws of life', was that 'the present state of rivalry and recurrent irritation is bound to culminate in armed conflict'.⁷

To Angell this majority view assumed that Britain's 'past industrial success' had been attributable to an ability 'to make her power felt' and that Germany's 'giant strides in general prosperity and well-being' of recent years were 'the result of her military successes and the increasing power which she is coming to exercise in Continental Europe'. It rested, in other words, on the mistaken assumption 'that the victorious party in the struggle for political predominance gains some material advantage over the party which is conquered', which was shared by 'the pacifist', who, in calling 'for "altruism" in international relationships', implied that 'successful war may be in the interest of, though the immoral interest, of the victorious party'. This acceptance on all sides of the illusion that 'national power means national wealth, national advantage' was the reason, Angell argued, 'why [...] peace propaganda has so signally failed'. He therefore posed the question: 'But are these universal axioms unchallengeable?', and insisted that it 'had to be answered in the negative'.⁸

To make this point, he surveyed some typical expositions of the conventional wisdom, as expounded by militarists in Germany and alarmists in Britain, before identifying the misconceptions they contained. He insisted that 'since trade depends upon the existence of natural wealth and a population capable of working it', it could be destroyed by an invader only 'by destroying the population, which is not practicable'. Moreover, to the extent that 'the confiscation by an invader of private property' was achieved, 'the internationalisation and delicate interdependence of our credit-built finance and industry' would 'so react upon the finance of the invader's country as to make the damage to the invader resulting from the confiscation exceed in value the property confiscated'. Even annexation would not result in economic gain: 'if Germany conquered Holland, German merchants would still have to meet the competition of Dutch merchants, and on keener terms than originally, because the Dutch merchants would then be within the German's

⁷ Norman Angell, *Europe's Optical Illusion* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1909), pp. 1–2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–5, 10, 13–14.

customs lines'. More generally, the 'wealth, prosperity, and well-being of a nation depend in no way upon its political power', as was shown by the fact that the 'trade *per capita* of the small nations is in excess of the trade *per capita* of the great'. And Britain 'could not suffer material damage' by the loss of its self-governing colonies because they were 'in fact independent nations, in alliance with the Mother Country, to whom they are no source of tribute or economic profit'. He also asserted, somewhat breezily, that Britain's directly ruled colonies did not 'differ essentially' from the self-governing ones in this respect.⁹

These economic realities were new, being a consequence of 'the complex financial interdependence of the capitals of the world' that had arisen from the improved communications 'of the last thirty years'. Thus the arrival of a German army to loot the Bank of England would now trigger an international financial 'collapse' that would affect Germany and give rise there to 'a condition of chaos hardly less terrible than that in England'. Indeed, it was 'not putting the case too strongly to say that for every pound taken from the Bank of England German trade would suffer a thousand', because an attempt to confiscate wealth would cause the credit system to 'collapse like a house of cards'.¹⁰

Having set out these propositions, Angell was aware he might be accused by militarist critics of ignoring non-economic impulses towards aggression, such as the emotional thrill of hegemony. He therefore considered an objection he expected the followers of the American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan to make, namely that 'though Europe might so reform her political conceptions as to admit that there can be no material gain from conquest, their mere desire for domination and mastery, apart from all question of material advantage, will suffice to push nations into war'. Angell readily conceded – as befitted the author of *Patriotism under Three Flags* – that 'the role of emotionalism in international conflicts is enormous', but immediately went on to insist that, even so, such emotionalism

has its origin in the same sort of optical illusion as that which is responsible for so much misconception when the material interests of nations are under consideration. For just as we commonly overlook the fact that the individual citizen is quite unaffected by the extent of his nation's territory, that the material position of the individual Dutchman as the citizen of the small State is not going to be improved by the mere fact of the absorption of his State by the German Empire, by which he becomes the citizen of a great nation, so in the same way his moral position, despite Captain Mahan, remains unchanged. Do we respect a Russian because he is a citizen of one of the greatest Empires of history, and despise the Norwegian because he is the citizen of one of the smallest States of Europe? The thing is absurd [...]¹¹

After arguing that 'national vanity' was 'of a distinctly lower order than the vanity which obtains between civilised individuals', *Europe's Optical Illusion* tackled militarism's basic premise: that because moral progress was achieved through struggle and sacrifice, it had nothing to do with social and economic development. On the contrary, Angell insisted: 'Without material well-being, without a well-fed body, and a decent dwelling and tolerable physical comfort no high morality, no character development is in the long run possible [...]. The best service the statesman can do for the moral well-being of his people is to ensure their material

⁹ Ibid., pp. 25–9, 85.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 44, 46–7, 56.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 89, 92–3.

well-being.' Indeed, this last consideration, 'far from constituting a sordid aim or a sordid test of political and sociological effort, is, all things considered, the most practical, the most useful, the very highest to which the politician can aspire'.¹²

In the last part of his text Angell considered the policies to be inferred from his analysis. Acknowledging that it might be thought to imply pacifism, he confronted the question whether 'the practical outcome of a recognition of the foregoing truths' was that we ought 'immediately to cease preparation for war, since our defeat cannot advantage our enemy nor do us in the long run much harm?' His answer was a resounding negative. He argued that 'so long as the misconception we are dealing with is all but universal in Europe [...] we all do, in fact, stand in danger from [...] aggression'. Indeed, he insisted that in the present climate of opinion 'we or any other nation are justified in taking means of self-defence to prevent [...] aggression', which meant that he 'would not urge the reduction of our war budget by a single sovereign'. And, because governments could not currently be expected to behave differently, he even criticised 'the peace advocate' for having 'concentrated upon securing Governmental action', a tactic 'foredoomed to sterility'.¹³

Instead of asking governments to disarm unilaterally and practise non-resistance, Angell called on civil society to absorb a truth that would of itself abolish war: 'Were there a general recognition in Europe of the fact that it has become a physical impossibility to benefit by military conquest the whole *raison d'être* of the aggression of one nation upon another would disappear', in which case it was 'inconceivable that such an attack as that which haunts Mr Harrison should be made'. He proposed 'a campaign of education in political rationalism' that would proceed in parallel in Britain and Germany in order to avoid militarily disadvantaging the country in which it made more progress, implicitly Britain. He suggested a 'pairing' arrangement on the lines used in the House of Commons to equalise the effect of absenteeism on voting: thus, were 'an anti-armament league' to be established in London, 'for every member enrolled in England a corresponding league should enrol a German in Germany'. Angell expressed the hope that the efforts of such a league would be assisted by the increasing international connections of both capital and labour, which ultimately held out the prospect of 'the organisation of society on other than territorial and national divisions'. Even so, he insisted that these cross-border links between interest groups, which he would later label 'transnational', would not suffice on their own: 'a revolution of ideas' was also essential. He therefore devoted his final chapter to showing that such revolutions had been achieved in the past, most notably when Europe had repudiated religious persecution and individual duelling.¹⁴

Flaws of the 'illusion' thesis

For all his confidence and ambition, Angell did not expect his hasty contribution to a current controversy to become not only the basis of a three-decade-long

¹² Ibid., pp. 94, 102–3.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 104–5, 107–8.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 106–7, 113–5, 124–5.

political campaign but a text that the practitioners of a new academic discipline would long scrutinize. Unsurprisingly, some of its exposition, internal logic, assumptions, and implications proved defective. Seven flaws in *Europe's Optical Illusion* must therefore be noted.

First, its most persuasive and best-remembered argument, that a spoils-seeking conqueror would be worsted by the disruption of an interdependent financial system, was advanced in a form that invited misunderstanding and left its claims about the more general impact of war unclear. The metaphor of the credit system collapsing 'like a house of cards' with a losses-to-profits ratio of 'a thousand' to one was so vivid that readers mostly failed to notice that it was being applied to the attempted confiscation of wealth during war, such as the looting of a national bank, and not to war or even conquest as such. For that reason Angell's thesis is still widely believed to have been that 'advanced capitalist countries would be brought economically to their knees within months, if not weeks, of the outbreak of a major war'.¹⁵ In fact, despite the odd casual remark implying otherwise, Angell never considered it likely a conqueror would attempt expropriation of a kind that would result in financial melt-down; and he was to be surprised as well as horrified by the reparations demanded of Germany after the end of the First World War. Nonetheless, he believed that a state embarking upon conquest without trying to confiscate property, though it would not suffer economic paralysis, would nonetheless incur heavy enough costs to be discouraged from doing so lightly: this was implicit in his subsequent reference to economic interdependence as 'a mechanical check on war'.¹⁶ In view of this belief, however, he was astonishingly imprecise about how much financial and other damage would result from a great-power war of the *non-expropriatory* kind he expected.

This first flaw – extreme vividness on certain points masking extreme vagueness on others – can be blamed on an intellectual training that was journalistic rather than academic. It had serious consequences for Angell's reputation: because he was widely misread as claiming that warfare itself, rather than the confiscation of wealth, would precipitate the disabling crash of an interdependent financial system, he was commonly misunderstood, particularly after the outbreak of the First World War, as having asserted war's *impossibility* – on the grounds 'that the bankers would stop it, or that the money would run out' – as well as its unprofitability, and was later forced to admit that this error indicated a 'fundamental defect of presentation in a book that was highly, at times extravagantly, praised for its clarity and lucidity'.¹⁷ Part of the problem was the failure of its title to signal its argument clearly both to careless readers and to the even more important category of non-readers who had merely heard about it. Angell would have been spared much heartache had he called his book 'The Economic Contradictions of Conquest' or some similarly substantive formulation that would have clarified that he was not disputing the possibility of war.

Second, the book's famous interdependence argument was buttressed by a less successful and now generally forgotten assertion: that the annexation of territory

¹⁵ G. R. Searle, *A New England? Peace and War, 1886–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 517.

¹⁶ Norman Angell, *The British Revolution and American Democracy: An Interpretation of British Labour Programmes* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1919), p. 149.

¹⁷ Norman Angell, *After All: The Autobiography of Norman Angell* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951), p. 150.

brought no economic advantage at all. Angell made it because, although not expecting aggressors to attempt the extortion of wealth from their victims, he knew they might hope to seize territory, writing as he did at a time when France sought to reacquire Alsace-Lorraine. Wanting to show that this too would prove unprofitable, he argued that wealth was held by individuals and did not move from state to state when provinces were transferred, as Alsace-Lorraine had been to Germany within living memory. Yet this territorial-control-brings-no-benefits claim was disbelieved even by otherwise sympathetic readers: for example, the Liberal MP and Quaker T. E. Harvey was privately to complain that it overlooked Britain's evident gains from exploiting Ireland and India.¹⁸ More seriously, it had unanticipated policy implications of a paralysing kind: if, because holding territory brought no benefit, 'our defeat cannot advantage our enemy nor do us in the long run much harm', why not espouse pacifism or at the very least appeasement?

Angell intermittently conceded 'the logical inference that if aggression is not profitable, the best way is for us not to resist', as he put it on 24 July 1914 at a private discussion with his followers.¹⁹ He announced in a lecture at Geneva during August 1934: 'I am personally of the opinion [...] that there is a great case for simple non-resistance [...] I happen on one part of its economic side to have been arguing it all my life. I have tried to show that wealth can no longer be seized by a conqueror to his advantage.'²⁰ In a letter to *The Times* of 19 September 1936 he admitted that 'for 30 years' he had 'urged considerations which certainly up to a point support' non-resistance. And in a book finished in the spring of 1939 he described his early work as having made 'the economic case for pacifism'.²¹

That Angell occasionally admitted the pacifist logic of his assertion about the economic irrelevance of territorial control helps to explain why between 1915 and 1939 he from time to time asserted a personal belief in non-resistance. Admittedly, he did so in a less than resounding way, which was unsurprising given that during those same years he more commonly argued the pro-defence case. After first opposing his country's entry into the First World War and then co-founding the Union of Democratic Control (a radical association that called for foreign policy to be made accountable to parliament), he for several years fancied himself as a possible future leader of the British left, and wondered if non-resistance would not only rally a war-weary working class but also – as a leading peace activist, the philosopher Bertrand Russell, began arguing in 1915 – wrong-foot an adversary more effectively than an armed response. Angell therefore discussed with his closest colleagues the idea of leading a pacifist campaign and declaring himself a conscientious objector. In the event he held back, and found himself above the age limit when compulsory military service was introduced in 1916. Yet a few years later, Germany's passive resistance to France's occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 seemed to confirm that Russell's and his wartime hunch had been correct: non-resistance was indeed a clever technique. So, during the late 1920s and early

¹⁸ Unpublished letters from Harvey, 27 and 29 September 1910: Angell Papers.

¹⁹ John Hilton (ed.), *International Polity Summer School, Old Jordans Hostel, Beaconsfield, Under the Auspices of the Garton Foundation, July 17th to July 27th* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1915), p. 241.

²⁰ Norman Angell, 'Pacifism is Not Enough', in William E. Rappard et al., *Problems of Peace: Lectures Delivered at the Geneva Institute of International Relations, August 1934* (London, Geo. Allen & Unwin, 1935), p. 133.

²¹ Norman Angell, *For What Do We Fight?* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1939), p. 105.

1930s as the public mood became more anti-war, Angell started making such statements as: 'I have always held that the risks of unilateral disarmament are immeasurably less than popular fears would seem to indicate.'²²

But because at the same time he increasingly favoured collective security through the League of Nations as the most practical means of upholding international order, he developed another and more paradoxical motive for declaring himself a pacifist – as a strategy of ingratiation. He emphasised his belief in non-resistance in order to curry favour with pacifists. His next rhetorical move was to point out to them that the overwhelming majority of their fellow citizens, though anti-war, would never be won over to so extreme a policy. In practice, therefore, all pacifists, himself included, had to fall back on their next-best policy, which was obviously collective security rather than the national free-for-all in defence that had triggered so many wars in the past. This strategy of ingratiation was, of course, deeply ambivalent: it caused him to exaggerate his commitment to pacifism, which had never been unreserved, in order to subvert it. In reality, as the fascist threat developed and he joined Winston Churchill's private circle, Angell's professed personal preference for non-resistance became disingenuous. When in 1936–1937 a sudden pacifist upsurge, marked by the early impact of Britain's Peace Pledge Union, called his bluff about endorsing collective security only because his own preferred policy could not achieve mass support, he was thrown into such intellectual confusion that he abandoned the book on pacifism he was contracted to write and succumbed to (probably psychosomatic) illness. His claims about pacifism became very hesitant and confused, until at the outbreak of the Second World War he not only abandoned them but wiped from his mind that he had ever made them.

In similar but less extreme vein, the territorial-control-brings-no-advantage argument might have been read as justifying appeasement. If colonies came without economic rewards, why not concede some of them to an imperial challenger, on realist grounds, in order to forestall a military confrontation that was more trouble than it was worth, even though a legitimate and adequate defensive capability was available? Contemporaries did not pick up on this point, however, because appeasement was a dog that almost completely failed to bark in British politics before the First World War – in stark contrast to a quarter of a century later. Admittedly, a few friendship associations were formed, particularly on an inter-church basis, in an effort to ease the tension between London and Berlin; yet such 'Anglo-German junketings, dinner-parties, exchange visits of clergymen, and what not' incurred Angell's derision at this time.²³ Looking back on the pre-1914 years from the vantage point of 1920–1921, he was briefly to regret this, stating that he should have recommended some economic concessions to Germany in an effort to prevent the First World War,²⁴ though he did not persist with this retrospective appeasement, and forgot it when in the 1930s he became a scourge of the prospective variety.

The third flaw of *Europe's Optical Illusion* was its failure to explain why, despite the pacifist or appeasing implication of its second main argument, it declined to cut

²² *Time & Tide* (2 May 1931).

²³ Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage* (London: William Heinemann, 1912), p. 356.

²⁴ Unpublished letter to Harold Wright, 20 October 1920: Angell Papers. Angell, *Fruits*, p. 336.

Britain's arms budget 'by a single sovereign' until its ideas had been universally accepted. Admittedly, Angell made clear his conviction that strong military and naval forces offered some prospect of deterring war – unlike most pacifists, who insisted that they triggered rather than prevented conflict. But he also knew that such an attempt at deterrence might well fail because of the destabilising effect of the unprecedented arms race: indeed, that had been the starting point for his book. Even so, he was unable to explain why, if aggression thus occurred, armed resistance should be offered, given that it involved costs beyond those of submission.

Angell had a practical incentive to endorse Britain's defence effort: to do otherwise would scare off the political élites he wanted above all to reach. Yet he also regarded the act of self-defence as a psychological and even moral imperative, though until circumstances required him to do so three decades later he failed to understand this. His pre-1914 propaganda avoided the subject. When he expressed his belated support for the First World War, he was bowing to the general will and did not need to offer a justification to those who were keener on fighting than he was, though he did use the argument that defence should be regarded as the 'cancellation' of coercion, 'the attempt to see that military force is not imposed upon us', rather than as itself a forcible action.²⁵ And during the inter-war period, when he supported the League of Nations, denounced appeasement, and eventually became a Churchillian, he explicitly worked from the pro-defence premises of the right-wing isolationists and appeasers he most needed to win over to the cause of collective security, and did not declare his own hand. In a 1934 book about British security he thus stated neutrally that whether the majority's 'decision to stand by armed defence is wise or not, is not here discussed'²⁶ and that he was concerned merely to show how it could best be carried out – that is, collectively and without conceding territory to potential aggressors. However, as the prospect of deterring the dictators faded later in that decade and he needed to justify war to an apprehensive public, he began to probe the values that underlay his own determination to offer armed resistance. In early 1938 he argued, albeit as yet in morally detached language, that a 'deep urge for defence' was 'something which, like the feeling for nationality, we must accept as a fact likely to remain constant for a very long time, and take into account'.²⁷ Only when his country stood by Poland in the autumn of the following year did he at last celebrate 'defence' positively, as 'a universal impulse, rooted not only in a powerful instinct of self-preservation, but in [an] ingrained conception of dignity, of Right'.²⁸ From that point, moreover, he silently dropped his claim of a personal pacifism, and indeed began denying he had ever made it.

Yet because he had been unable to articulate these pro-defence convictions while writing *Europe's Optical Illusion*, that book was ambiguous, failing to explain why armed resistance to aggression could be a good thing if was also economically irrational. When he glossed his text over the years to come, he normally did so in

²⁵ Norman Angell, *Prussianism and its Destruction, with which is reprinted part II of 'The Great Illusion'* (London: William Heinemann, 1914), p. xiv.

²⁶ Norman Angell, *The Menace to Our National Defence* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1934), p. 14.

²⁷ Norman Angell, *Peace with the Dictators? A Symposium and Some Conclusions* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938), p. 258.

²⁸ Angell, *For What?*, pp. 65–7.

a pro-defence way and occasionally, as already noted, in a pacifist way; but he never properly reconciled these two possible interpretations, other than by invoking a very distant future when, his 'illusion' thesis having been generally accepted, defence for all its legitimacy would have become unnecessary. Yet with better access to his own intuitions during 1909 he could have achieved an immediate reconciliation. He could have argued that the justification for protective or defensive acts was more straightforward than for acquisitive or aggressive ones: the former had merely to take into account values, such as human dignity and moral duty; whereas the latter had additionally to pass the test of economic rationality, which was now impossible. It would have been entirely persuasive to have celebrated the defence of national, cultural, or ethical values against alien interference while also insisting on the economic futility of military adventurism. In the event, the book's third flaw – its inability to explain why armed resistance was good – doomed Angell's 'illusion' campaign to send a mixture of pro- and anti-defence signals that long confused even its leader.

Flaw number four of *Europe's Optical Illusion* was its aspiration to go beyond the economic claims that took up most of the book, and tackle 'emotionalism' too. This was to stop Mahan and others accusing him of overlooking war's non-material causes, which was why he had insisted that although an aggressive state might achieve domination and mastery, its citizens would not thereby achieve greater respect from the citizens of other states. But this not only ignored the possibility that they might none the less obtain personal gratification: it also failed as an attempt at pre-emption, Mahan himself later accusing Angell of exaggerating the role of material self-interest in human motivation.²⁹ With hindsight Angell would have done better to accept that his conquest-does-not-pay thesis applied only to the economic consequences of aggression, and not to its moral, political, cultural, psychological, or other effects, and then to make the plausible further point that material well-being was the precondition for all other kinds of well-being. Admittedly, this would have made it easier for his critics to write him off as a sordid materialist; but they were to do this in any case. Exclusive concentration on the economic sphere would have spared him not only much authorial effort over the next few years but also certain intellectual contortions, such as those he was to go through during the Balkan War of autumn 1912 when he tried to deny the undoubted political gains made by the victors of that attack on the Ottoman empire.³⁰

The fifth flaw of *Europe's Optical Illusion* was tactical: it failed to make clear whether the 'advance of political rationalism' for which he had called could indeed be 'effected imperceptibly' by a purely educational process,³¹ or whether overt pressure politics was also needed. The traditional peace associations had not sought merely to educate the public in the wrongness of war: they had also campaigned for the government to adopt particular war-preventing policies, such as disarmament. Angell was not only impatient with pressure-group activity of this kind: he initially assumed that his 'illusion' thesis could win over German and British decision makers largely through its unaided intellectual merit – an approach

²⁹ *North American Review*, CXCIV (1912), pp. 322–4.

³⁰ Norman Angell, *Peace Theories and the Balkan War* (London, H. Marshall, 1912).

³¹ Angell, *EOI*, pp. 114, 124.

that came across as reassuringly apolitical to his conservative backers. Yet his tactical approach was inconsistent: in proposing 'a campaign of education in political rationalism', he had immediately gone on to suggest an 'anti-armament league', though it was hard to see how this differed from previous disarmament efforts. Admittedly, Angell stressed that his pairing arrangement would ensure that arms reductions were made by all states rather than by Britain alone;³² but multilateral disarmament of this kind was what the peace movement – apart from its pacifist minority – had long been seeking too. He maintained his self-denying tactical ordinance for the next three years, criticising all 'short-cut' or 'mechanical' reforms for distracting attention from efforts for long-term attitudinal change,³³ while inconsistently still proposing his anti-armament league.

During 1912–1913, however, he realised that, for a long-term propaganda effort such as his to sustain public interest, it had no choice but relate its message to concrete reforms and contemporary issues, though he now dropped his anti-armament league as too utopian. At first anonymously, but then under his own name, he accepted the need for a 'definite policy susceptible of legislative treatment, providing subjects of topical political discussion and forming the object of political effort'.³⁴ This involved changing a taxation system that currently enabled the propertied classes to ignore the true costs of rearmament, and avoiding secret treaties that might entangle Britain in a European conflict. By the early 1920s he was privately admitting that he had been wrong in 'not going forward to a positive policy' of this kind from the outset.³⁵ Although he never understood this, his early tactical inhibition had arisen from his assumption that it was sterile to expect a government to implement the reforms long pressed on it by the peace movement, and that civil society must first put its own house in order. He had not then realised that pressure-group activity was necessary to the changing of *social* as well as governmental attitudes, and that the peace movement had never sought merely to lobby the political authorities, being fully aware that its leverage with them depended on such support in civil society as it could mobilise for its ideas. Yet once Angell hitched his educational efforts to pressure politics in support of particular policies, he had to work with the progressive forces applying that pressure. This raised the question of whether he should overtly espouse liberalism, radicalism, or (as he was eventually to do for a while) socialism, and, if so, what the intellectual relationship would be between a reformist ideology chosen in an effort to maintain the momentum of his campaign and his original goal of illusion-removal through value-free analysis that even conservatives could accept. This fifth flaw, tactical uncertainty, ensured much perplexity for Angell the campaigner over the next few years. Indeed, it ultimately came to seem the most

³² Ibid., pp. 114–5.

³³ See Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to their Economic and Social Advantage* (London: William Heinemann, 1910), p. 285, and his preface to A. H. Fried, *The German Emperor and the Peace of the World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912), p. ix.

³⁴ Norman Angell, *Towards a Parliamentary Platform of Pacifism* (London: 'For Private Circulation', n.d. [1913]), p. 3; Angell, *War and the Workers* (London: National Labour Press, 1913), pp. 55–6.

³⁵ Unpublished letter to Harold Wright, 20 October 1920.

important weakness of all: he was to assert in his autobiography that 'where my work failed mainly was in giving a plain and simple answer to the question: "How shall a political truth, once established, be translated into workable policy?"'³⁶

Flaw number six was much more understandable, given that Angell was responding to a contemporary military panic rather than composing a timeless academic monograph: *Europe's Optical Illusion* assumed that the international economic interdependence arrived at in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was there to stay. In fact, as he began to realise in the final year of the First World War, it was being undone by the increased government intervention in national economies that conservatives and liberals had accepted for reasons of military efficiency. And this process was likely to continue, because socialists – among whose number he by then counted himself – wished to retain state control after the war for reasons of social justice. Yet, with his 'illusion' thesis coming back into fashion in the early 1920s, as the adverse consequences of the 1914–1918 conflict became increasingly apparent, Angell was reluctant to declare it obsolete, and so left its intellectual status more than a little uncertain in a world of fast-shrinking interdependence.

The seventh and final flaw was prolixity. This may seem a harsh judgement on a text that, to reduce self-publishing costs, had been cut to 28,000 words before seeing the light of day; but as early as January 1910 a Boston publisher abridged it by almost another two-thirds to 9,600 words simply by excising redundant paragraphs.³⁷ Though it was seemingly never issued, this abbreviation without loss of substance was an indication of Angell's propensity, already evident in *Patriotism under Three Flags* and apparent again in *The Great Illusion's* progressively lengthier editions of November 1910, January 1911, and September 1912, to clutter his argument. Only when looking back on his early writing late in life did he acknowledge his incorrigible tendency to delve into 'side issues and incidental matters arising in the course of the discussion',³⁸ thereby leaving his main claims either buried or underdeveloped.

In the long term Angell's intellectual and campaigning life would have been much easier had a more tautly written and informatively titled book merely done four things: first, highlighted the catastrophic costs arising from disruptions to the international credit system that even successful aggressors would incur if they attempted to confiscate wealth; second, specified the less severe but none the less adverse consequences of any kind of war for an advanced industrial economy; third, explained the human need for self-defence irrespective of economic calculations; and, fourth, welcomed campaigning efforts of all kinds and inspirations that drew attention to these arguments. But in the short term the ambition, exaggeration, chattiness, imprecision, and dismissiveness towards conventional peace activism of *Europe's Optical Illusion* enhanced its appeal. In particular, British conservatives wanted its emphatic and professedly objective message drawn to the attention of their German counterparts, who were building a fleet to challenge the Royal Navy. After Esher bought 250 copies and sent them to Balfour and other

³⁶ Angell, *After All*, p. 318.

³⁷ Copyrighted January 1910 by Edith M. Williams and printed by 'The Colonial Press, C. H. Simmonds and Co.': a proof copy is in the Angell Papers.

³⁸ *Time & Tide* (29 January 1955).

influential public figures across Europe, it achieved a considerable intellectual impact; and publishers belatedly fell over themselves to issue an expanded version.

November 1910 edition

The first commercial edition appeared at the beginning of November 1910 as *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to their Economic and Social Advantage*. Still producing the *Continental Daily Mail*, Angell had little time for reflection, and so extended more than revised his text, bolstering its arguments with illustrations and with responses to criticisms of *Europe's Optical Illusion*. Even the mainly economic material carried over from the original version was 'considerably reinforced', as the preface admitted. Most of this reused and afforded material became part one, 'The Economics of the Case', which included a new chapter, 'The Indemnity Futility', written in recognition of the fact that critics were invoking the substantial reparations extracted by Prussia from France after winning the war of 1870–1871 as an example of victory generating a financial profit. This admitted that a vanquished state could make a large payment from which a victorious government might benefit, but in somewhat leaden language argued that nonetheless

the population as a whole of any nation receiving a large indemnity must suffer from any consequent financial disturbance in the credit of the paying nation; that if the Protectionist doctrine is just they must suffer great disadvantage from the receipt of wealth – i.e., commodities – which has not employed the home population, and from the rise of prices which checks their exports; that those are the factors which must be taken into consideration in estimating the real advantage to the *general population* of any country which may succeed in extorting bullion from another as war plunder.³⁹

In other words, an indemnity had adverse side-effects even for its recipient.

The main addition, comprising half of *The Great Illusion*, was part two, 'The Human Nature of the Case', which greatly expanded the short section of the first version that had dealt with 'emotionalism'. It has already been argued here that tackling non-economic factors was a mistake; and one of Angell's sharpest contemporary critics was to describe part two as 'more ambitious' than part one 'and in the same proportion unsuccessful'.⁴⁰ Yet it was understandable that, faced with 'the very commonest objection urged to a purely economic statement of the case for peace', namely that it ignored motives for fighting that had nothing to do with 'material interests',⁴¹ Angell felt obliged to attempt a thoroughgoing rebuttal. He thereby not only overloaded his text further but pretended familiarity with a non-economic literature of which in reality he knew little.

Part two began by confronting the objection 'that those who plead for rationalism in the international relationship "leave human nature out of account"'. Its answer was that this accusation of 'ignoring human nature' was 'often used as implying, not that men are disposed to overlook their material interests, but that

³⁹ Angell, *GI* (1910), p. 83.

⁴⁰ G. G. Coulton, *The Main Illusions of Pacifism: A Criticism of Mr Norman Angell and of the Union of Democratic Control* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1916), p. 30.

⁴¹ Angell, *GI* (1910), p. 108.

it is absurd to suppose they should ever do so. In other words, the phrase is often used indifferently to mean two diametrically opposed things.' Here Angell had a point: when challenging his essentially economic ideas, militarists stressed the non-materialistic side of human nature, and lauded its capacity for self-sacrifice; yet when faced with the traditional peace movement's essentially idealistic 'old pacifism', they switched to the realist claim that humans necessarily gave priority to their own self-interest. Militarists evaded this basic inconsistency in their thinking, he argued, by lazily implying that international conflict arose 'from sudden "hot fits" [...] too obscure in cause for examination'. But this was 'the extreme of unscientific fatalism', because in reality war 'in the modern world' was 'the outcome of armed peace' in the sense of being the product of 'fixity of policy and purpose extending over years and sometimes generations'. In other words, deliberate and longstanding policies of military preparedness caused war. In order to understand why militarists not only tolerated but welcomed this, to him unsatisfactory, state of affairs, he focused on their belief that 'at the bottom of man's tendency towards war lies some quality which makes for his uplift and for his material and moral advance'. After a cursory examination of militarist literature, he concluded that it boiled down on two core propositions: 'The unchangeability of human nature in the matter of pugnacity'; and 'The survival of the warlike nations of the world'.⁴²

He began his challenge to the first of these militarist propositions by conceding that 'the law of survival with man, as elsewhere' was indeed one of struggle, yet insisting that this was 'the struggle of man with the universe, not man with man'. In respect of relations with his fellows, moreover, man's increasingly successful contest with his environment was producing an 'irresistible drift away from conflict and towards cooperation'.⁴³ It is worth quoting how he began proving this point, because it revealed his facility – albeit not an infallible one, as will be seen – for reducing abstract generalisations to what he would later call 'homely illustrations':⁴⁴

When I kill my prisoner (cannibalism was a very common characteristic of early man), it is in 'human nature' to keep him for my own larder without sharing him. It is the extreme form of the use of force, the extreme form of human individualism. But putrefaction sets in before I can consume him (it is as well to recall these real difficulties of the early man, because, of course, 'human nature does not change'), and I am left without food. But my two neighbours, each with his butchered prisoner, are in like case, and though I could quite easily defend my larder, we deem it better on the next occasion to join force and kill one prisoner at a time. I share mine with the other two; they share theirs with mine. There is no waste through putrefaction. It is the earliest form of the surrender of the use of force in favour of cooperation, the first attenuation of the tendency to act on impulse.⁴⁵

Angell liked this pseudo-historical conceit enough to reuse it.⁴⁶

In addition to this growing propensity to cooperate in a common struggle against the universe, men were finding it harder to hate their traditional political foes. This was because pugnacity towards a rival depended 'upon our conception

⁴² Ibid., pp. 108–9, 113, 115, 128.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 129, 130.

⁴⁴ Norman Angell, *The Political Conditions of Allied Success: A Plea for the Protective Union of the Democracies* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1918), p. 217.

⁴⁵ Angell, *GI* (1910), pp. 131–2.

⁴⁶ Angell, *Foundations*, p. 100.

of the foreign State with which we are quarrelling as a homogeneous personality'. Yet, as was becoming increasingly apparent, all nations were composed of a 'variety of community interests', many of which 'cut clear across State boundaries'. Examples included Lancashire's textile industry, which, being dependent on Louisiana's cotton crop, was more interested in its suppliers in the American south than in 'say, the Orkneys, part of the same State', and an Oxford professor, who had a 'closer community of feeling with a member of the French Academy than with, say, a Whitechapel publican'. Indeed: 'In a thousand respects association cuts across State boundaries, which are purely conventional, and render the biological division of mankind into independent and warring States a scientific ineptitude.' Angell inferred from these intensifying transnational ties the development in due course of a 'psychic community' based on awareness that state borders were 'artificial', and predicted a dawning realisation that 'the real psychic and moral divisions are not as between nations, but as between opposing conceptions of life'. He had been made more aware of such intra-state conflict by a class-conscious constitutional crisis, which had begun in Britain just as the first version of his book had appeared and to which he now alluded. (The hereditary, Conservative-controlled House of Lords had shockingly rejected the 'people's budget' for which the Liberal government had secured the approval of the elected House of Commons in 1909). He also saw the ruling élites in Berlin and St Petersburg as motivated by an ideological fear of progressivism, having noted that Britain's defence alarmists were already claiming 'that an autocratic Germany or Russia will find sufficient ground in the defence of its national conception of life for attacking a Liberal or Radical England whose influences threaten autocratic conceptions the world over'. He now argued that

at the bottom of any conflict between the armies or Governments of Germany and England lies not the opposition of 'German' interests to 'English' interests, but the conflict in both States between democracy and autocracy, or between Socialism and Individualism, or reaction and progress, however one's social sympathies may classify it. That is the real division in both countries, and for Germans to conquer English or English Germans would not advance the solution of such a conflict one iota [...]

Because human development was speeding up – 'We see more change now in ten years than originally in ten thousand' – it was possible that very soon 'both States will find inconceivable the idea that artificial State divisions [...] could ever in any way define the real conflicts of mankind'.⁴⁷ In rejecting the solidaristic and hubristic conception of the state favoured by militarists Angell thus went so far in the opposite, pluralist and transnational, direction that even some progressive thinkers, including A. D. Lindsay, accused him of underestimating the nation-state's potential for fostering social cohesion and justice.⁴⁸

After this provocative venture into the theory of the state Angell jumped back to the issue of human nature, querying how its 'alleged unchangeability' could be sustained in the face of the evident progress of the species 'from cannibalism to Herbert Spencer', as he summarised it, which included the abandonment of duelling. Shrewdly, he pointed out that even militarist writers accepted that humans were becoming less pugnacious, though they feared that this was

⁴⁷ Angell, *GI* (1910), pp. 121, 137–40, 141.

⁴⁸ Miller, *Norman Angell*, pp. 48–51.

particularly the case among their own compatriots: thus, American, English, German, and French ‘advocates of war’ were ‘at one in declaring that foreign countries are very warlike, but their own country “sunk in sloth”, [and] drifting away from war’.⁴⁹

He then turned to militarism’s second core proposition: ‘that the warlike nations inherit the earth’. This enabled him to indulge a disapproval of certain Latin American republics that he had first manifested while in California a decade and a half previously. In the racially insensitive vocabulary of the era he argued that it was ‘the “Sambo” republics, like San Domingo, Nicaragua, Colombia, and Venezuela’ that were ‘always fighting’ and should logically be held up as model polities by militarists. Exasperatedly, he asked how critics of Cobdenism could seriously ‘urge that non-military industrialism, which, with all its shortcomings has on the Western Continent given us Canada and the US, makes for decadence and degeneration, while militarism and the qualities and instincts that go with it have given us Venezuela and San Domingo?’ Moreover, ‘what Venezuela and Nicaragua are to the American Continent, Arabia, Albania, Armenia, Montenegro, and Morocco are to the Eastern Hemisphere’. He also denied that war eliminated the unfit, offering an illustration that showed his adherence to the prevailing assumption that, when left alone, the non-European races were suffering demographic decline. In the case of India, however, Britain’s conquest of the sub-continent had given ‘the inferior race [...] an extra lease of life’, so that if ever ‘the Asiatic threatens the white race, it will be thanks in no small part to the work of race conservation which England’s conquests in the East have involved’.⁵⁰ In other words, the military success of the supposedly superior British had revived, rather than hastened the demise of, the allegedly unfit Indians.

Angell concluded part two with a couple of afterthoughts, which, had his book been better constructed, would have been fitted in at appropriate places in the preceding text. The first explained why, despite the decline of physical force in human affairs, ‘the police-force’ remained so important to civilised societies: this was because ‘force employed to secure completer cooperation’, as in policing, was efficacious. The second was that likening the state to a person exaggerated its unity, whereas his own contacts over ten years ‘with financiers on one side and labour leaders on the other’ had led him to realise the extent to which the ‘internationalization’ of both sides of industry was in fact fragmenting the state.⁵¹

If part two was vitiated both by an unnecessary and in places injudicious venture beyond the economic sphere and by some structural looseness, part three, ‘The Practical Outcome’, which expanded the brief section of *Europe’s Optical Illusion* dealing with policy and tactics, was flawed mainly by confusion. In respect of policy, Angell showed some awareness that his stance on disarmament was muddled, though he could not as yet straighten it out. Instead of straightforwardly reprinting his assertion that Britain should not yet reduce its arms budget ‘by a single sovereign’, he reproduced it as a quotation – in itself a distancing device – before commenting: ‘I see no reason to alter a word of this, but I would add one or two [...]’. Moreover, these added words warned that ‘so long as the production

⁴⁹ Angell, *GI* (1910), pp. 142, 146–7, 149–51.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 161, 167, 170, 173–4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 197, 248.

of war material and the training for war are our only preparation for peace, we shall almost certainly prepare, not for peace, but for war'. Yet in case this seemed to identify him with traditional pacifism, he went on to deny having 'overlooked the fact that arms are for defence and not aggression', thereby reaffirming the no-disarmament policy from which he had just seemed to waver. The tension between the non-resistant and pro-defence strands in his thinking was causing him evident difficulty, even though he now set out more fully than in *Europe's Optical Illusion* the syllogism explaining how this tension might ultimately be resolved. (Defence was required to guard against attack. Only when states believed that there was 'some advantage in aggression' were they likely to indulge in it. *The Great Illusion* showed that there was no such advantage. So: 'If it be demonstrated that no possible advantage can be obtained by a successful attack, no one will make that attack.' The need for defence thus eventually disappeared).⁵²

In respect of tactics, too, Angell's uncertainty continued. He still insisted that his ideas should be spread by an educational process rather than a political fix, and so defended his 'not pointing to any very royal road, to any fascinating short-cut, or responding [...] to the very human desire to "do something"'. Yet he not only reiterated his suggestion of an anti-armament league with a German counterpart but commented on 'how favourable the present moment' was for such a pairing arrangement given 'the most deep-seated opposition in the Social Democratic Party to the naval policy of the German Government', thereby encouraging the international labour movement to indulge in the pressure politics he was simultaneously criticising. Even so, in a sentence that was so tactless he dropped it from subsequent editions, he disparaged the causes that both the traditional peace movement and diplomats had taken up: 'No mechanism, however, well devised, no leagues, no *ententes cordiales*, no Hague Conferences, will in the long-run avail anything if the great illusion on which the whole armament competition is based remains undisturbed.'⁵³

Part three also included some inept propaganda. In a chapter on 'Methods' Angell's knack of producing a simplifying illustration temporarily deserted him as he constructed a cumbersome analogy between the contemporary naval challenge by a conservative German regime to liberal Britain and a hypothetical example from the era of religious conflict in which 'a nominally Catholic Teutonia was about to commit an aggression upon a largely Protestant Britain'. Understandably, this was dropped from the next edition, as was a seven-page appendix on the cost of colonies that made for an anti-climactic ending.⁵⁴

These additions and alterations meant that on its appearance in November 1910 *The Great Illusion* weighed in at 90,000 words. Yet despite its length, complexity, and confusions it sold so well that a new British edition was almost immediately needed.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 258, 273–4.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 285, 292–4, 297.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 286–8, 306–12.

January 1911 edition

Angell therefore 'modified it a little' for the version that appeared under an unaltered title in the new year. The main change was the addition of a chapter in part one to explain why the undeniable benefit derived by the US and France from their annexations of California and Algeria respectively did not refute his thesis. Entitled 'Conqueror or Policeman', it argued that – unlike, for example, Alsace Lorraine when Prussia took it over – these were disordered territories, so that 'in each case the arms were employed not, properly speaking for conquest at all, but for police purposes, for the establishment and maintenance of order; and so far as they filled that role, their role was a useful one'. Angell also modified part three, making some excisions (already identified), and refocusing it on the disappointing quality of some reviews – not the half dozen that had disputed his thesis, but the larger number that claimed to accept it while insisting that, even so, the people who mattered, whether politicians, capitalists, workers, or Germans, would never be won over.⁵⁵

Despite these alterations of January 1911, Angell still wanted 'to make the whole thing clearer'.⁵⁶ He also wished both to meet new criticisms, and, though this was left unsaid, to make his policy recommendations wholly congenial to the conservative admirers who after some hesitation decided to provide him with financial backing. In April 1912 the Garton Foundation was created to study his conquest-does-not pay thesis, thereby enabling him to reduce his commitments to the Northcliffe press and become a virtually full-time campaigner, adopting his pen-name as his day-to-day identity.

September 1912 edition

As he embarked on his new career in September 1912, he issued a fourth version of *The Great Illusion* (if *Europe's Optical Illusion* is taken as the first). He amended the preface so as to specify for the first time that his thesis was 'not that war is impossible, but that it is futile'.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, he also redoubled his unavailing efforts to contest the charge of being solely concerned with material questions, which both glorifiers and critics of war had more than ever been levelling at him. He therefore altered *The Great Illusion's* subtitle to *A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage*, 'National' sounding less materialistic than 'Economic and Social'. And he incorporated a mention of morality into the title of part two, which thus became 'The Human Nature and Morals of the Case'.

He also took the opportunity to rework the final sections of part one. He cut and rewrote the chapter on the French indemnity, inserted in November 1910, 'in order to clear up misunderstandings'. (He did so to avoid offending free traders, though he later came to regard their objections as misconceived, and so restored the original version of the chapter in the 1933 and 1938 editions). He recast the interpolation of January 1911, 'Conqueror or Policeman?', as 'The Fight for "The

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 115, 304–9.

⁵⁶ Unpublished letter to David Starr Jordan, 10 April 1912: Jordan Papers, Stanford University.

⁵⁷ Angell, *GI* (1912), pp. v–vi.

Place in the Sun". And he included a new chapter, 'The Bearing of Recent History', to incorporate some of the optimistic observations he had recently made in a high-profile address to the Institute of Bankers in the City of London. The new illustrative material he added to part two included references to the Prussian author of a recent militarist classic, *Germany and the Next War*, General Friedrich von Bernhardi, and a libertarian warning, 'England stands in danger of being Prussianized by virtue of the fact of fighting Prussianism',⁵⁸ which Angell was frequently to repeat during the First World War.

Most importantly, he undertook a second complete overhaul of part three. He supposedly did so 'to meet the changed form of criticism which has resulted from the discussion of this subject during the last year or two'; and indeed critics who personally accepted his analysis yet declared that Europeans in general would never do so were now condemned more robustly than formerly for an 'Oriental fatalism' and belief in either 'Kismet' or 'the will of Allah', which he blamed on general disillusion at 'the failure of such efforts as Hague Conferences'. In reality, his purpose in rewriting part three was mainly to clarify his policy and tactics. Albeit in more measured terms than two years previously, he revived his criticism of the 'mechanical' reforms favoured by much of the peace movement. Thus, whilst tactfully conceding that the gatherings at The Hague, along with arbitration treaties, notions of international federation, and attempts to foster friendship between particular states, 'involve a new conception of relationship between nations', he warned against such attempts 'to modify by mechanical means the political machinery of Europe, without reference to the ideas which had brought it into existence'.⁵⁹ And in a preface contributed to another book at this time he dismissed 'any such short cut as a mechanical contrivance, any federation scheme' and insisted that there was no substitute for 'the sweat of hard thinking, of better understanding'.⁶⁰ He seemingly now understood that his anti-armament league was itself both 'mechanical' and a 'short cut', as well as unpopular with the trustees of the Garton Foundation. So he now dropped it, along with his hopeful references to the German Social Democrats.

Instead, he argued that Britain had a special mission to reform international relations on its own, having long shown itself 'a leader in political ideas, or rather in the application of political ideas to practice', as for example in the abolition of slavery. This was a claim that the traditional peace movement had made from time to time.⁶¹ But Angell differed in now presenting Britain's *imperial* role as its most exemplary feature, asserting that its 'Empire, a congeries of independent States' was already 'itself a forecast of what the relationship of all European States will be', in that the constituent elements of the British empire had already 'surrendered [...] the use of force against each other', to their common advantage. It was, in consequence, 'to English practice, and to English experience, that the world will look as a guide in this matter. The extension of the dominating principle of the British Empire to European society as a whole is the solution of the international

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 254.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 339, 350–1.

⁶⁰ Fried, *German Emperor and the Peace of the World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912), p. ix.

⁶¹ Martin Ceadel, *The Origins of War Prevention: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1730–1854* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996), pp. 136–8.

problem which this book argues.⁶² Angell thus presented the harmonious relations among the British Dominions (which were what he always meant by the empire) as a practical demonstration that the renunciation of aggression among all sovereign states was achievable: by learning to understand the British empire, the countries of Europe might yet reason themselves into similar self-restraint towards each other. It must be emphasised that Angell did *not* as yet invoke the British empire in order to claim that reasoning alone was insufficient to prevent aggression and must therefore be supplemented by an international organisation that could bring its members to order through its institutional procedures. By the time he revisited *The Great Illusion* in the 1930s to update it; he wished he had done precisely this, because by then he regarded the collective-defence system of the British empire, in conjunction with the collective-security system of the League of Nations, as an essential buttress of international order. In 1912, however, he merely invoked Britain and its Dominions as exemplars of mutual tolerance. This complacent attempt to present the British Dominions as role models may have pleased his imperially-minded paymasters at the Garton Foundation, but had little prospect of being taken seriously in Europe.

These changes stretched *The Great Illusion* to 115,000 words. At the time Angell expressed both 'very great regret' and the hope that this 'increase in bulk will not render it less clear'.⁶³ Later he recognised it as a 'hodge-podge' generated by a sense that 'criticisms had to be replied to'.⁶⁴ Even so, the September 1912 edition was reprinted four times in the next two years. And although the First World War and Angell's consequent lurch to the left destroyed his popularity for a time, the victors' failure to secure substantial reparations from Germany during the 1920s appeared to vindicate his argument that military victory had no economic pay-off.

1933 and 1938 editions

During the two decades before he was called on to produce further editions, the world situation changed and with it Angell's priorities.⁶⁵ Japanese, German, and Italian threats to international order persuaded him of the need above all for collective security (although he still claimed, albeit with diminishing conviction, personally to prefer pacifism) and turned him into a leading critic of appeasement. The First World War having done his task for him, he no longer needed to assert the economic futility of war: by contrast, his task was to convince war-averse democracies that another military effort might even so be necessary in the interests of international justice.

Only after agreeing late in 1932 to update his *magnum opus*, did Angell belatedly realise that it had little to say about current problems. *The Great Illusion* 1933 thus not only omitted 'certain matter which belongs entirely to the past' but for the first time articulated the unspoken policy assumption of the pre-1914

⁶² Angell, *GI* (1912), pp. 360–2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. v.

⁶⁴ Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion* 1933 (London: William Heinemann, 1933), pp. 73–4.

⁶⁵ Angell's response to altered circumstances after the First World War is fully examined in Ceadel, *Living the Great Illusion*, chaps 7–8.

editions: that 'when nations realised the futility of conquest they would just drop the effort and you would get throughout the world an international relationship somewhat similar to that which marks the members of the British commonwealth', namely 'a peaceful anarchy'. Hitler having come to power while he revised his text, Angell understood that militarists could not, as he had originally assumed, be reasoned into restraint in time to prevent another conflagration. In the short term either the carrot (appeasement) or the stick (collective security) would have to be deployed; and he now decisively ruled out the former. The final legacy of his pre-1914 arguments was a deep intellectual scepticism towards Japanese, German, and Italian claims to have economic justifications for their territorial expansionism. *The Great Illusion 1933* thus concluded with a rebuttal of Japan's assertion that its seizure of Manchuria offered a solution to its population and other problems. It also contained a 'recantation' of its author's former isolationism: having once 'been deeply disturbed at the notion of definite commitments [...] for mutual defence', he now sought 'the conscious international organization of power'.⁶⁶ He evidently wished he had made this point from the start of his career.

Within five years he had persuaded himself that he had in fact done so. Approached in autumn 1938 by the publisher Allen Lane (no relation) with a lucrative invitation to issue a further updated version of his signature work as a 'Penguin Special' paperback, he forgot his original argument. *The Great Illusion – Now*, which 'sold in very large numbers' when it appeared in mid-December 1938, wrongly claimed that the early editions of the book had preached collective security:

The writer agreed that if the power of Germany became preponderant, she could deprive this country of all means of defending its rights, would place us at a rival's mercy, a position no free country should accept. But he also insisted that the right alternative was not to ask Germany to accept it; to do what we refused to do; to be at our mercy. Nor was the practical alternative the maintenance of an unstable equilibrium, a Balance of Power, which could be upset from day to day by some new alliance combination. The way out was to make of power in the international field what it is within the state, an instrument whereby the settlement of disputes by the sheer brute force of one of the parties is made impossible by the commons and collective resistance to aggression [...]

The 1938 version also downgraded the real theme of the original book, claiming that merely 'among other things' had it argued that 'certain preliminary assumptions about the economic advantage of conquest, accepted universally as true, were in fact false'.⁶⁷ Angered by the recent Munich agreement, Angell had tacitly abandoned his 'illusion' thesis in order to make the case against appeasement. He was also retreating from his claim to believe in non-resistance.

Conclusion

The main intellectual achievement of *The Great Illusion* was to intuit that the complex financial interdependence which had developed in the late-nineteenth

⁶⁶ Angell, *GI 1933*, p. 369; Norman Angell, *Prussianism and its Destruction, with which is reprinted part II of 'The Great Illusion'* (London: William Heinemann, 1914), p. vii.

⁶⁷ Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion – Now* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1938), pp. 16, 17–18.

century constrained the use of military force by great powers. The book helped to launch the discipline of International Relations by giving rise to a foundation claiming dispassionately to study 'international polity' whilst also setting this new subject off on its early liberal trajectory. It was significant for the substance of International Relations insofar as its influence helped to kill off the centuries-old expectation that major powers could benefit materially from starting even major wars, thereby removing one motive (or justification) for aggression. Admittedly, Jean de Bloch and Jacques Novicow had already made substantial contributions to the disutility-of-war thesis, as the European peace movement pointed out.⁶⁸ What ultimately did most to convince the public that aggression did not pay, moreover, was not the work of intellectuals but the events of 1914–1918. And what was most shocking about the First World War was less its adverse financial impact, upon which Angell had concentrated, than its heavy toll of human life and inconclusive political outcome. But Angell's greater popular impact during 1909–1914 than any other peace campaigner, and his post-1919 rehabilitation as the man who had been right about the war, show that his contemporaries credited him with conveying a number of important truths: that International Relations were worthy of serious study in their own right; that this applied even to Britain and the US, despite their isolationist traditions; and that in the twentieth century realists had to factor the international economy, as well as geopolitics, into their thinking. Paradoxically, he achieved this through a book that not only was surprisingly imprecise and ambiguous but later embarrassed its author by largely overlooking the issue of international security.

⁶⁸ Verdiana Grossi, *Le Pacifisme Européen 1889–1914* (Brussels: Bruylant, 1994); Sandi E. Cooper, *Patriotic Pacifism: Waging War on War in Europe, 1815–1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).