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Philip Snowden: A Puritan Socialist

By WICKHAM STEED

Editor, *English Review of Reviews*

ASK any man in English public life what he thinks of Philip Snowden, and he will pause awhile. Ask him about Lloyd George, Stanley Baldwin, Ramsay MacDonald or Winston Churchill and he will be likely to answer in a prompt phrase, friendly or hostile according to personal bias. Yet, in character and temperament, Philip Snowden seems the most clear-cut of them all. Why, then, do men hesitate to define him?

It is, I think, because Snowden's blood runs hot beneath a cold exterior, because a "brain packed with ice" controls a heart of flame, and because friend and foe respect his honesty even when they wince under the lash of his acrid humor. Though he has been for a quarter of a century an outstanding figure, and has twice held the Chancellorship of the Exchequer, the writers of "thumb nail" sketches and of "pen portraits" fight shy of him. Only one biography of him exists in English;* and one biographical essay in French.†

Few things are harder than to draw a good likeness in silver point on gray paper. For slapdash strokes and strong light and shade there is little scope. To portray features that hide, behind a mask of grim determination, a sensitiveness quick to suffer from and to resent unkindness; to lend physical charm to a cripple with an angular cast of mind that

scorns soft words and takes more delight in wounding than in healing, are tasks from which artists of the market-place instinctively shrink. Nor has full success been achieved by those who have tried to paint Snowden from the life. Something essential is missing from their work.

What is it? Last April I heard him make his third budget speech to a House of Commons which knew that the effort was almost beyond his physical powers. Most of its members were not of his own party. Yet they behaved like a family circle eager to welcome and to cheer a convalescent invalid whose sickness had threatened to deprive them of a beloved relative. The glad alacrity of Mr. Neville Chamberlain, the Conservative spokesman, in congratulating Mr. Snowden on his return to Parliament, came from the heart.

Of Philip Snowden, the man and the politician, Touchstone's line holds good: "Sweetest nut hath sourest rind." Mr. Snowden's method, complained Mr. Lloyd George last June, is to grant unavoidable concessions "as disagreeably as he possibly can, and there is no doubt about his capacity in that direction." Snowden had compelled the Lloyd George Liberals to swallow, with wry faces, nine-tenths of the "principles" they had sworn to uphold against his land valuation bill; and he took the same delight in "rubbing their noses in the mud" as he might have taken if the Labor Government were not beholden

**Philip Snowden. An Impartial Portrait.* By C. E. Bechhofer Roberts. London, 1930.
†*Philippe Snowden. L'Homme et sa Politique Financière.* By Andre Andreades. (Felix Alcan).

to the Lloyd Georgians for its very life. Snowden and Lloyd George are, or were, old friends; but Snowden had got the measure of Lloyd George's tactics, and could not resist the temptation to let him know it.

Was he wise? Snowden is not a trimmer. In his eyes prudence and "forthrightness" are synonymous. His acidity corroded the last tenuous link between Mr. Lloyd George and the non-Lloyd Georgian Liberals who revolve round Sir John Simon. To that extent it made the government's tenure of office still more precarious. But Philip Snowden would not be Philip Snowden if he set a guard upon his tongue; and experience has taught him that, when a man is without a shadow of self-seeking or meanness, he can afford a biting gibe where other men dare not risk a dubious caress.

He comes from Yorkshire, the biggest county in England, where dwell shrewd, hard-headed, blunt and obstinate folk. When, at The Hague Reparations Conference of August, 1929, he became overnight a national hero by standing out against French attempts to take his supineness for granted, a humorous French artist drew a cartoon that showed an excited Frenchman exclaiming: "There is nothing for it but to occupy Yorkshire!" The epithets "grotesque and ridiculous" which Snowden, ignorant or careless of their peculiarly offensive tang in French, applied to the proposals of the French Finance Minister, came as naturally from Snowden's lips as did, at a later stage, the biblical terms of his ironic encouragement to the harassed Belgian Prime Minister who brought him, late at night, reduction after reduction in the French demands: "Be not weary in well-doing!" When weariness threatened, nevertheless, to overcome the unfortunate M. Jaspar, and the difference between Snowden's claims and French reductions had almost disappeared, Snowden wrote his final terms on a slip of paper and got them

accepted. He had known all along exactly how far he meant to go.

On the morrow all England, nay, Scotland too, was "Yorkshire," not so much because Snowden had gained substantial advantages in a wrangle about war debts and reparations which most Britons would have been glad to see wiped out, but because a British Minister had put down his foot and kept it there. At one moment there had been a suggestion that Ramsay MacDonald might pour some elixir of sweet reasonableness into the hard wine which his Chancellor of the Exchequer was decanting. It caused the country to growl ominously; and had the suggestion been acted upon, the growl would have become a savage roar. Mr. MacDonald heard the growl, and heeded it.

Even today this episode is worth analyzing, all the more because most Englishmen have forgotten exactly why they gave Snowden a national welcome on his return from The Hague. For years British public opinion had held—as it still holds—that the right way to deal with the remaining international liabilities of the war would be to obliterate them as quickly as possible. This conviction really inspired the famous (or, as Snowden called it, the "infamous") Balfour Note of August, 1922. The principle of the Balfour Note was that Great Britain would not require her war debtors (mainly Germany, France and Italy) to pay her more than she might have to pay the United States. Its "infamous" quality lay in its veiled discourtesy toward the United States, and in its abandonment of British freedom to take any further initiative in the matter of war debt reduction.

Once proclaimed, the "Balfour principle" was adhered to. On the strength of it Great Britain forgave nearly 58 per cent of the French, and 85 per cent of the Italian war debts, despite a reduction of only 18 per cent in her own debt to the United

States. She accepted, too, substantial reductions of her claims on Germany. But before the French and Italian debts were funded, the British Treasury had paid nearly \$1,000,000,000 to the United States, and it was thought equitable that, under the "Balfour principle," some provision should be made for the recovery of this sum. During the Young Plan Conference in Paris, the British experts had consented, without express official authority, to scale down British receipts from Germany in such a way as to render doubtful the maintenance of the "Balfour principle" in future, let alone the provision of any amount to set off against the \$1,000,000,000 already disbursed.

This had been done under the Conservative Government which suffered defeat at the general election of May, 1929. Mr. Snowden, on succeeding Mr. Winston Churchill at the Exchequer, declared that the Young Plan would have to be changed before he could accept it. France thought he was bluffing; and, at The Hague Conference, tried to "call his bluff." The "Young" experts had proposed to decrease the British share of "conditional" German reparations by \$12,000,000 a year. Snowden consented only to a reduction of \$2,000,000, and raised the British share of the "unconditional" German annuities from \$10,000,000 to \$24,000,000, besides arranging that Italy should buy annually 1,000,000 tons of British coal for three years instead of taking German reparations coal. As an example of grit his achievement stood high; and it was the grit rather than the gain that his countrymen applauded.

The grit comes from Yorkshire where Snowden was born on July 18, 1864, at Cowling in the West Riding, on the edge of the moors. The people of Cowling had, for generations, woven woolen cloth by hand, and had fought a grim and losing fight against the power looms which ended by turning them into mere "mill

hands." His father, John Snowden, a devout Wesleyan and a Left Wing Liberal, was a weaver, as his mother had been. Like her husband, she took her full part in the village life that centred round the Wesleyan Chapel and the Liberal Club.

Philip Snowden was a wiry youth with a ready tongue and a hunger for knowledge. Eschewing the mill, he became a pupil teacher at the local school, and afterward an insurance clerk. Then, passing an examination, he got employment as an excise official and was sent to many parts of England and Scotland on duty. His politics were those of his father. From the Liberal faith he might never have been weaned had not his back been injured in a cycling accident which left him helpless in bed for a year, and thereafter a cripple. While he was laid up his father died; and when, at length, he could move painfully about, he was asked to read a paper on "Socialism" to the Cowling Liberal Club. By way of preparing it he attended a Socialist lecture and studied Socialist literature. It was not long before he convinced himself that he, too, was a Socialist; though, in point of fact, the old Liberal leaven continued to work strongly in him and is working still. Like other British "Socialists" brought up in the Liberal tradition and nurtured in Liberal individualist philosophy, he has never felt quite at home in the collectivist creed or been able to assess the "values" of life by purely economic standards of judgment. The doctrines of the "class struggle" and the ideal of a "dictatorship of the proletariat" appeal to him but feebly. He remains an advanced Liberal in Socialist disguise; and such propagandist zeal as there may be in him is rather that of a mind impregnated with the atmosphere of the Wesleyan Chapel than that of a materialist fanatic who believes in Marxism as the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Snowden knows enough of the pre-

carious lives of wage earners to dislike the arbitrary power of irresponsible capitalism, and to wish to curb it. Yet his dislike is not compounded of envy. More than once he has poured scorn upon Socialists who would have been Tories had they happened to be born rich. His aim is to draw clear conclusions from hard facts and to stick to the conclusions thus reached. Time after time he has defied wavering electors, and spurned the advice of friends who urged him to concede something to popular prejudice. His answer has always been: "These are my principles; take them or leave them."

Popularity is not lightly won in this way but, once won, it is accompanied by solid respect. Snowden won it in the teeth of difficulties such as few labor leaders have had to contend against. Not until 1906, after twelve years of intense effort, was he first elected to Parliament by the Lancashire city of Blackburn. Meanwhile he had tasted, again and again, the bitterness of defeat, and had learned that a man's worst foes are often to be found in his own party household. In the early years of the century the Labor members of Parliament, especially the nominees of trade unions, acted as allies of the Liberal party. Snowden set his face against this practice and forced the "Labor Representation Committee"—the parent of the present Labor party—into a position of permanent independence of Liberals and Conservatives alike. He overcame, moreover, the tendency of trade unions to exclude "intellectuals" from the Labor ranks, and he himself was acknowledged as a "brain" in the party.

In the House of Commons his ascendancy was soon established. The cultured tone and terse phrasing of his maiden speech marked him as something more than an equal among equals, while his physical handicap and ascetic mien won him sympathy. Year by year Snowden's hold on the House of Commons grew. He liked its

atmosphere, and its members liked him. They felt he was a man, not a "dead-head." On occasion he voted against his own party, and in 1911 resigned from its executive as a protest against a Parliamentary "deal" which Ramsay MacDonald had made with Lloyd George.

Differences more serious arose after the outbreak of the war. Most of the Labor members heartily supported the allied cause. Snowden disagreed with them. He was not pro-German. He was simply anti-war. He opposed conscription and criticized every measure for the more vigorous prosecution of the war. "The Honorable Member for Blackburn smiles!" exclaimed an opponent during a debate on the munitions act. Snowden retorted: "I don't smile; I sneer at you." Whereat Arthur Henderson, the present Foreign Secretary, joined the first War Coalition Cabinet. Snowden held on his way—and was rejected by his constituents at Blackburn in the "victory" election of December, 1918. "Not for 10,000 votes," he told them, "will I apologize for anything I have done or modify my attitude or sacrifice my principles in the slightest degree."

He paid the price. Four years passed before he could secure re-election. Never had his fortunes seemed to be at a lower ebb. He may well have doubted whether his public career were not finished. But he set his teeth and kept on keeping on. His reward came in November, 1922, when, after the overthrow of the Lloyd George Coalition Cabinet, he found himself one of the leaders of 140 Labor members who, for the first time, outnumbered the Liberals. Fourteen months later the defeat of the Baldwin Administration in the general election of December, 1922, placed Snowden in office as Chancellor of the Exchequer in the first Labor Government.

It was a minority government. The Labor members numbered only 191 in a House of 615. Though Snowden

disliked the idea that Labor should take office without a clear majority of its own, he recognized that it would be wrong to reject the opportunity, which Mr. Asquith's far-sighted decision offered the Labor party, to gain direct experience of public administration. Instead of attempting to frame a Socialist budget, he wisely took counsel of Mr. Asquith, a fellow-Yorkshireman, whom he visited night after night in quest of advice which the Liberal leader and former Chancellor of the Exchequer freely gave. As an exposition of sound finance Snowden's budget speech made a deep impression—nowhere deeper than in the City of London.

His reputation as a financial statesman was made. His critical analyses of the Conservative budgets from 1925 to 1929 were heard with deference. Well do I remember the epithet with which he greeted Mr. Churchill's last budget in April, 1929. Though Mr. Churchill had been guilty of an impudent piece of electioneering, he had presented it so humorously that the House rocked with laughter. He sat down amid a tumult of cheering. Then Snowden rose and in one phrase—"a briber's budget"—spoke the true mind of the House.

His own record as Chancellor since June, 1929, gives no clue to his future. Mr. Churchill's raids upon every hidden resource of the treasury had left Snowden no option but to increase taxation in 1930; and this year's budget has merely marked time in the hope that the financial depression may pass.

Given health, he may yet become the most effectively "dangerous" of Labor leaders, for he believes in the righteousness of redistributing wealth by mulcting the rich to help the poor. He overrode the scruples of Miss Margaret Bondfield, who holds the Ministry of Labor, by declining to retain in the Unemployment Insurance bill of 1929 the condition that recipients of the dole must prove that they are "genuinely seeking work." The

abolition of this safeguard has brought the Unemployment Insurance Fund within sight of bankruptcy. And, this year, in his Land Valuation bill, Snowden has deliberately established the principle that the proprietary rights of the community over land are superior to the rights of private landowners.

On the other hand he has discountenanced schemes for lavish expenditure on economic means of creating employment; and upon the subject of a revenue tariff, which many Labor members, like the Conservatives and not a few Liberals, now favor, he is wholly intractable. "Never," he has declared, "will I sanction so pernicious an expedient." Negatively he rules the Labor Government from within more firmly than Ramsay MacDonald rules it from above.

Philip Snowden is by far the strongest character in his party and in the government, and character is precisely the asset in which the party is poorest. He has set up a standard of hard work and harder thinking that no successor, in any party, will find it easy to excel or even to equal. His life has been spent in fostering the welfare of the wage-earning class. For it he has striven according to the best of his knowledge and belief, both of which are sustained by a definite philosophy.

He may be mistaken. His reading of the economic crisis, at home and abroad, may be wrong. But, at least, his mind has background and outlook, and is never superficial or time-serving. Socialist though he thinks himself, he abhors Bolshevism and all its works; for he is convinced that, if the Labor Party is to be fit to rule the State in its own right, its members must gain fitness by individual merit, self-discipline and self-sacrifice. In him the Puritan strain persists; and to me it seems that, as the years go by, the Wesleyan Chapel and the Liberal Club of Cowling in the West Riding of Yorkshire hold him ever more firmly in their grip.