

The Conservationists.

In the midst of all the turmoil over high-class stealing of public lands—water power, coal deposits, etc., etc.—it may be as well to reflect that this kind of stealing can make little substantial difference to the people. It is bad in one way for the thieves, since their character must be more or less degraded by it. And it is bad in another way for unsuccessful competing thieves, since they lose the plunder. But what difference can it make to a plundered people whether they are plundered by thieves larcenously or by good people legally? None at all. Fifty years from now the relation of the public to their lost lands will be precisely alike regarding those that are grabbed and those that are granted. The owners will have a mortgage upon the work of the producers of their day, unlimited in duration and crushing in weight. For this reason one may take very little interest in the National Conservation Association whose organization we report in our news columns this week. But its idea of conservation does ring truer than some of our friends might expect. Its declarations though not radical enough to frighten the timid are suggestive enough to attract the aggressive. These ponderously conservative movements, when headed in the right direction, even if they move slowly, and throw out no brilliant bunting, are among the most gratifying signs of radical progress. They mark the beginning of the advance from a period of agitation to one of action.

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IS THE LOVE OF FREEDOM LOST?

We do not go for exact and clear thinking, or for careful expression, to writers who delight in paradox and extravagance, who would rather say a thing brilliantly and strikingly than say it truly. Still, when men like Bernard Shaw and Gilbert Chesterton seriously declare that the love of liberty is dead, even those who habitually make all the necessary allowances for these erratic philosophers are impressed. They pause and ask whether the charge is well founded. And they do it the more since occasionally an American radical gives utterance to the same sentiment.

Mr. Shaw recently said in an address:

The English people has lost its tradition of liberty. . . . If the Star Chamber were revived tomorrow I do not think there would be a single protest in London. The Press and the public would take no notice of it whatever, until Dr. Clifford had been put in the pillory with his ears cut off. Then the political side of Nonconformity would make a tremendous outcry against putting Dr. Clifford in the pillory instead of the Archbishop of Canterbury or Lord

Hugh Cecil, and there would be a tremendous protest in the Times; but there would be no protest on the grounds of principle.

Of course, Mr. Shaw, to drive his point home, deliberately exaggerates. He knows perfectly well that "the press," even the part of it he dislikes, *would* take notice of such a thing as the revival of the Star Chamber, and that there would be not one protest but thousands of protests, against it.

What he means to say is that the protests would be too feeble to accomplish anything, for the great majority of Englishmen would be indifferent, or insufficiently interested. The *principle* of liberty, he thinks, has lost its hold.

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Chesterton also believes that the Briton has morally degenerated and become a slave. The sentiment of freedom has, in his opinion, declined along with the idea or principle of freedom, and the result is given graphically as follows:

Political liberty, let us repeat, consists in the power of criticising those flexible parts of the state which constantly require reconsideration, not the basis but the machinery. In plainer words, it means the power of saying the sort of things that a decent but discontented citizen wants to say. He does not want to spit on the Bible or to run about without clothes or to read the worst page of Zola from the pulpit of St. Paul's. Therefore the forbidding of these things (whether just or not) is only tyranny in a secondary and special sense. It restrains the abnormal not the normal man. But the normal man, the decent discontented citizen, does want to protest against unfair law courts. He does want to expose brutalities of the police. He does want to make game of a vulgar pawnbroker who is made a peer. He does want publicly to warn people against unscrupulous capitalists and suspicious finance. If he is run in for doing this (as he will be) he does want to proclaim the character or known prejudices of the magistrate who tries him. If he is sent to prison (as he will be) he does want to have a clear and civilized sentence telling him when he will come out. And these are literally and exactly the things that he now cannot get. That is the almost cloying humor of the present situation. I can say abnormal things in modern magazines. It is the normal things that I am not allowed to say. I can write in some solemn quarterly an elaborate article explaining that God is the devil; I can write in some cultured weekly an aesthetic fancy describing how I should like to eat balled baby. The thing I must not write is rational criticism of the men and institutions of my country. The present condition of England is briefly this: That no Englishman can say in public a twentieth part of what he says in private.

All of which is very grave indeed—if true. But there is scarcely a word of truth in it. What men or institutions are above criticism in England? The land reformers are attacking the monopoly of

the soil; Lloyd George is hitting from the shoulder at the ducal and other beneficiaries of privilege; the socialists are fighting the whole existing order; the Tories are calling the Chancellor of the Exchequer "a second-class Jack Cade;" there is nothing to prevent any one from advocating republicanism, the abolition of the peerage, the ending of the lords, the adoption of the referendum and recall.

Perhaps Chesterton finds that certain organs which enjoy his fooling and clowning have no interest in his "normal things." But there are other papers which have such an interest and would allow him to say anything on any man or institution. Shaw has been saying things normal and abnormal about every existing institution and relation, yet he is still at large, as is Hardie, as is Hyndman.

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But Chesterton, like Shaw, though unsuccessful in expressing his thought, *has* a thought. He agrees with Shaw that love of freedom has declined, that principles are no longer cherished, and that the people are indifferent to invasions of their ancient liberties.

Is this true? Is society being rebarbarized, as Spencer savagely and gloomily charged, and reenslaved? If so, where is the evidence?

Spencer's evidence was—the growth of trade unionism, socialistic legislation and state interference with contracts and industry. This would not be evidence at all to Shaw and Chesterton. Is it evidence to sober-minded libertarians? If not, is there any other evidence?

There is not.

There never was a golden age of love of freedom in the abstract, of devotion to principle. There has been no retrogression therefore. As Walter Bagehot said, the human mind is "factish"; concrete, specific things alone really lay hold upon it. A few thinkers generalize, and a little larger group will clothe the generalizations in rhetorical, eloquent formulas; but the overwhelming majority are conscious only of particular abuses, particular grievances, particular nuisances, as well as of particular benefits they would secure.

The American Revolution was not a revolution in the interest of freedom and principle; it was a revolution against practices and methods which irritated and offended the Colonists. Some of their spokesmen "generalized" about the rights of men and essential principles, but the indictment of King George was concrete and definite. It was a bill of particulars, and these particulars would have "done the work" if no formula or brilliant

generalization had occurred to the orators and authors of the period.

Again, take the French Revolution. Was it the result of a popular devotion to the principle of freedom? No; it was the explosion of wrath, bitterness, hatred accumulated during centuries of cruel wrong and oppression, of insolence, tyranny, outrage. The Revolution was not caused by philosophers and men of letters; but the latter, watching events and drawing inspiration from them, found generalizations which reflected the passions, the aspirations of the masses. The love of freedom in the abstract had very little share in the historic upheaval. It did not prevent the excesses of the Terror, nor the reaction which followed them.

The lovers of religious liberty who sought refuge in America in order that they might worship in their own way, did not consider it necessary to grant religious liberty to those whom *they* considered heretics and apostates. The constitutional guaranty of religious liberty was a necessity, not a virtue; not respect for principle, but the desire to avoid strife, dictated it.

The love and appreciation of freedom and of principles generally develop with extreme slowness. To regret this would be idle, for we must deal with human virtue as it is. On the whole, humanity is advancing, for is not constitutionalism gaining ground even in the Orient? Are Britons and Americans losing love of freedom just as Persians, Turks and Chinese are acquiring it? There is no foundation for any such pessimistic conclusion.

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The explanation of the Shaw-Chesterton error is simple. They hear little talk about personal or political freedom; and much about opportunity, equality, equity, justice in wealth distribution. Men are demanding industrial insurance, shorter hours, steadier employment, comfort and more of the joys of life. They have found that "freedom" under monopoly and plutocracy is a mockery. They have acquired political *power*, and are beginning to use it, with such intelligence as they possess, for certain purposes. What they are fighting now is poverty, plunder, privilege; and their absorption in these vital and urgent issues, tends, perhaps, to render them indifferent to echoes of former cries, to old issues that have lost either their significance or their primacy.

Let us not exalt and idealize the past at the expense of the present. We, too, are living in stirring times, and the struggle we are witnessing or participating in is also a struggle for liberty, for progress, for justice.

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