



Photo. G. Bernard Shaw

BEATRICE WEBB

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1858-1943

THE death of Mrs. Webb on 30 April 1943 deprived the Academy of a distinguished member, whose contributions to the worlds of thought and of affairs remain of permanent importance. For over half a century she had laboured in both with single-minded devotion. At once student and reformer, historian, economist, and pamphleteer, an experienced observer of politics and the joint author of books which opened a new chapter in English sociology, she drove, without flagging or losing sight of her goal, several horses abreast, and her achievements are too diverse to be easily summarized. When asked her profession, she modestly described herself as a social investigator; but her mastery of her own specialisms had not narrowed her range or atrophied her emotions, and her friends knew her at moments when she spoke as a seer. The significance of her work and her husband's—one cannot think of them apart—will be more justly estimated half a century hence than it can be to-day.

I

Beatrice Potter was born in 1858, the youngest but one of nine daughters. With grandparents floated to fortune from farm and weaver's cottage when cotton became king, and then via radical politics into the reformed House of Commons, she knew the rise of the Great Industry and its political sequel, not as a story in books, but as a chapter of her family history. She could gossip with Bright in his old age, as the descendant of a supporter who had stood by his side in the great days of the League; stayed, on her first visit to Lancashire, with relations who had remained operatives on the Rossendale moors: and was not tempted to exaggerate the immutability of economic systems or to be unduly impressed by the capricious favours they confer. The career of her father, underlined the same lesson. He had intended to lead the life of a country gentleman; but a turn of the wheel, which was not a misfortune for the budding sociologist, sent him also into affairs. When the financial crisis of 1847-8 carried off his modest fortune, school and family connexions secured him a partnership in a firm of timber merchants at Gloucester and a directorship of the Great Western Railway. Other directorships followed, including the presidency of the

Grand Trunk Railway of Canada, together with a mass of miscellaneous undertakings of a kind which to-day would be epitomized as Big Business. His special gift, if his daughter may be trusted, was not for the tactical routine, but for planning and negotiation. Readers of *My Apprenticeship* will recognize with amusement in the portrait of him there drawn some traits which remind them of her formidable persuasiveness.

Richard Potter was not the slave of his success, nor was he of the magnates who treat business as a mystery. His daughters, with whom he discussed his affairs freely, made the acquaintance of the associates in different enterprises whom he invited to his house, and also—for he was a cultivated man with a wide circle of friends—of persons eminent in science and letters. The juvenile Miss Potter pursued self-culture with the remorseless intensity of youth, translating *Faust* at fifteen, and attacking next year the rocky fastnesses of Jewish history and English law; but the earlier passages in her diary leave the impression that her education owed less to governesses and to a year at a fashionable school than to the ceaseless debate on books, scientific and philosophical theories, and problems of religion and politics which she heard about her as she grew up. The death of her mother, a remarkable woman, whose diversity of attainments was the subject of admiring comment by Taine, closed six years divided between Mr. Potter's country houses in Gloucestershire, Westmorland, and Wales, London seasons—'riding, dancing, flirting and dressing-up'—and occasional long tours in Italy and Germany. Beatrice became at twenty-four the head of her father's household, administered his considerable income, acted as his secretary and counsellor, and acquired a sufficient acquaintance with the ramifications of his interests to cause him to suggest that she should be given a formal status as his business associate. She used later to ascribe part of her skill in marshalling and analysing the data of her inquiries to the apprenticeship served when she grappled with his affairs.

If increased responsibilities were a useful discipline for a future career, they did not make easier the choice of one. Her diary during these years shows her finding her way to the religious position which she was to hold throughout her life, but distracted to the point of misery by uncertainty how best to use her powers. Since womanhood she had found Society, with its 'occupational disease of vanity', increasingly distasteful, and had hoped to devote herself to intellectual work. But was she capable of serious work? And, if so, in what field? Her

sympathies were keen; but her mind, as well as her emotions, required to be satisfied. In childhood and adolescence she had owed much to Spencer, her parents' most intimate friend. At twenty-five she had outgrown him. The sage pressed her, with kindly obtuseness, to investigate 'the absorbent organs in the leaves, roots and seeds of plants'. She knew that the theme on which her heart was set was the strange ways of man in commerce with his kind, and that the study of that subject demanded methods of its own, on which the famous analogy between animal and social organisms threw but doubtful light. To observe poverty at first hand she undertook the management of a block of working-class dwellings, and did a spell of visiting for the Charity Organisation Society, then at the height of its reputation. She found the experience too exclusively pathological to be other than misleading. With few guides to help her, she seemed condemned to endless groping. Yet she knew what she wanted. 'If I were a man and had an intellect, I would leave political action and political theorising to those with faith, and . . . try to describe accurately and proportionately what actually happened in the different strata of society, more especially the spontaneous growth of organisation—try and discover the laws governing its birth, life, and death.'

The circle was broken, less by an effort of the intellect, than by what she came to call her 'sentimental journey'. It occurred to her to make the acquaintance of her mill-working relations, and, through them, of a region of industrial England which, in spite of her family connections with it, was still unknown to her. In the guise of Miss Jones, the daughter of a Welsh farmer bent on seeing the life of a Lancashire manufacturing town, she paid her cousins at Bacup the first of several visits, lived in a weaver's cottage as one of the family, and was introduced to their friends. The experience came to her as a revelation. She saw from the inside, what in London she had missed, the normal life of a working-class community. The simplicity, unworldliness, and religious faith of her friends—'a page of Puritan history'—profoundly stirred her feelings. The intellectual stimulus was equally keen. It was men and women like her hosts, overworked, underfed, and under-educated, who had covered the north with Nonconformist chapels, planted a Co-operative store in every village, and created, in the Lancashire cotton unions, the most powerful and best disciplined Labour organizations that the world had yet seen. To study society, not only through documents and books, but by personal

contact with human beings, had been her ambition. She returned to London convinced that it was her vocation. 'I had decided to become an investigator of social institutions.'

To act on the decision required leisure. It demanded also concentration on a specific field of work. The enforced withdrawal from social obligations caused by the sudden illness of her father, to whom she was deeply attached, in the autumn of 1885, gave her time to clarify her ideas as to methods of social study. Reading and reflection strengthened her conviction that, in order to be fruitful, it must rest on a broader foundation of carefully sifted evidence than had commonly been thought necessary. The two essays written in 1886 on *The Rise and Growth of English Economics* and *The Economic Theory of Karl Marx*, brief extracts from which were later included in *My Apprenticeship*, show the way her mind was moving. They were her salute and farewell to deductive economics.

The importance of continuous research into the facts of social organization was not in the later eighties the commonplace which it has since become. The sympathies of the circles in which Miss Potter moved were periodically stirred by reports of the existence of an underworld of misery; but the truth that emotion is impotent without knowledge had made few converts in high places. Full and accurate knowledge of social conditions was not, indeed, too easy to obtain. The provision of official information has usually developed as a by-product of the extension of official activities. The sources supplying it, invaluable as far as they went, were in the eighties both scantier and more selective than those available to-day. Nor, in spite of half a century of work by Statistical Societies—some of it of high quality—had private enterprise yet done much to fill the gap. English economic speculation had a distinguished history, but rigour in verifying its hypotheses had not been its longest suit. The first great inquiry into urban life and work, the parent of a long line of subsequent studies, though projected, was not yet launched. Funds for research into social and industrial conditions were not easily unlocked. 'In London', the authors of *Industrial Democracy* could write in 1897, 'the wealthiest of all cities in the world, and the best of all fields of sociological investigation, the sum total of all endowments for this purpose does not exceed £100 a year.'

In such circumstances social investigation, in any systematic form, had the difficulties, as well as the charms, of a pioneering venture. Miss Potter continued to spend the greater part of

each year with her father till his death in January 1892; but, once a rearrangement of his affairs had lightened her duties, she felt the need of a limited objective, and the question which perplexed her was what target to select. The answer was supplied by her cousin by marriage, Charles Booth. Dissatisfied, like her, with generalizations based on 'a series of assumptions very imperfectly connected with the observed facts of life', he was planning his inquiry into *The Life and Labour of the People of London*. He invited her to collaborate in it. She started work on the part assigned to her, a study of Dock Labour in the Tower Hamlets, in March 1887; and went on to investigate the scandals in the manufacture of cheap clothing in East London loosely summarized as sweating. The association with Booth was a landmark in her development. Her final position was not his, but her work for him brought her more than a modest reputation for reliable research. It taught her to try her conclusions by quantitative tests, and, without blunting the edge of her ardour, gave it a realistic toughness which both the undisciplined ally and the opponent not at home with his brief sometimes found disconcerting. Five years later, when her contributions to Booth's survey had been followed by her first book, *The Co-operative Movement*, and the study of Trade Unionism was already on the stocks, a more important turning-point was reached. In the summer of 1892 she married Sidney Webb.

II

Mrs. Webb's decision to devote her life to sociological research had been prompted by a belief in knowledge as the key to a better world. Her intellectual conscience was exacting, and she accepted the obligations which that belief imposes. Apart from her faith in science, she did not start with a creed. Her objection to 'these gigantic experiments, State education and State intervention in other matters', had been confided to her diary in 1884. 'Political agnosticism, tempered by individualist economics', remained her statement of her position when, some three years later, she began assisting Booth. Her conversion to Socialism, which had taken place, in all but name, by the time she had completed her book on Co-operation, was the result, not the cause, of her work as an investigator. Though she joined the Fabian Society in 1893—not without some qualms, which proved needless, lest political associations should impair her intellectual detachment—more than a decade elapsed before she played an active part in it. As her influence grew, she used

it to promote particular reforms of whose importance she was convinced; but she thought that her primary duty in life was that of a scholar, not of a propagandist. It was to reveal by her work the possibilities contained in the application of scientific methods to the study of society.

Except for the claims of public duties, which at times were heavy, and for eighteen months spent on visits to the United States and the Dominions, the Far East and Russia, she practised her craft for approximately half a century. The twenty odd volumes in which, almost always as joint author with her husband, she was concerned during that period fall into five main groups. They include four books on working-class organization and history; ten volumes on English Local Government; three substantial works and various shorter pieces on the reform of the Poor Laws; two books specifically devoted to Socialism; and a group of miscellaneous writings, of which the most striking are *My Apprenticeship*—the least egotistical of autobiographies, which characteristically turned into a social history—and the elaborate study of Soviet Communism.

Not all of these works stand on the same level. Like those of most writers who have been active over a long period, the books of the Webbs reflect different phases in their authors' lives and thought. Some, like *The History of Trade Unionism* and *English Local Government*, the latter of which appeared at intervals over a period of nearly thirty years, were the result of prolonged investigations in fields which had previously been little explored. Others were written quickly, and dealt with topics of current discussion. The common characteristic, which sets its stamp on all of them, is a matter less of style than of substance. It is the impression conveyed of large reserves of ordered knowledge. Whatever the subject, it is handled with respect. Whether the result is a brochure, like that on *English Teachers and their Professional Organisations*, or a volume on the scale of *The Parish and the County*, there is the same patient care in assembling materials, and the same self-restraint in refraining from generalization till the evidence has been sifted. Even those of their books which were designedly written to appeal to a wide public are marked by a range of information and a maturity of thought which sets them in a class apart from other *pièces de circonstance*. The conclusions advanced in them may be summarily expressed, but they have not been reached in haste. If the object of their authors is to persuade, as well as to inform, it is persuasion by an appeal, not to ignorance, but to knowledge.

'The "Webb speciality"', they wrote, in explaining their procedure, has been a study, at once historical and analytic, of the life-history of particular forms of social organisation during the last three or four centuries, such as the Trade Union and Co-operative movements in the United Kingdom and English Local Government. . . . The task before us was to discover . . . the recurrent uniformities in constitution and activities showing the main lines of development, together with all the varieties of structure and function arising in particular places, in particular decades, or within peculiar social environments.' Continuous labour by two busy people on so ambitious a scale demanded system and method. Both authors believed in planning, and the industry which they planned first was their own. They were assisted by secretaries—their one extravagance—to whom they gave an invaluable training in research; but they did not spare themselves. The materials required for their historical works were widely dispersed. The authors, who had started their honeymoon with a visit to Dublin to examine the records of Irish trade societies, spent part of each summer on voyages of exploration. For the books on Trade Unionism they not only used the wealth of sources available in London, but ransacked the archives of all important unions in the provinces, and of the great majority of smaller ones. The sources for the study of Local Government were more voluminous. In the process of discovering and making extracts from parish, county, manorial and borough records, they visited, singly or together, some hundreds of villages and towns, from Cornwall to Northumberland and from Neath to Norwich. They did not rely only on documents, but made a point of seeing in action the organizations concerned, by attending in person the meetings of Trade Unions, Trades Councils, and Local Government bodies. Nor did they confine themselves to the information to be obtained by watching institutions at work. An interviewer at once charming and inexorable, with a unique gift for making the dumb speak and the loquacious talk to the point, Mrs. Webb had discovered, when she worked for Booth, the lessons to be learned from conversations with a purpose. In the course of her inquiries into dock labour and the clothing trade, she had put through their paces a long list of workers, employers, factory and sanitary inspectors, school board officers, and representatives of philanthropic agencies; and finally, to see how a sweated industry looks from the inside, had taken lessons in tailoring and obtained employment in a succession of workshops as a

'plain trouser hand'. She did not forget the value of oral evidence, or the art of eliciting it, when the time came for their more massive works. The 'method of the interview' contributed not a little to the realism of the Webbs' interpretations. They gave it a place, side by side with more formal resources, in the repertory of the investigator. To watch a witness undergoing their skilful third degree was sometimes amusing.

The subjects on which the Webbs wrote were suggested by the problems of their day; but the authors took no short cuts. They planned their major works on the principle that, in the study of society, the longest way round is often, not merely the shortest, but the only, way home. Their field of investigation once determined, they resisted the temptation—long the economist's foible—to find formulae of general application, and attacked specific problems piecemeal, seeking solutions which could be tested by an appeal to facts. Of the generalizations suggested by them some, doubtless, will be modified or rejected; others have yielded fruit as well as light. If discovery is the revelation of significant, but previously unrealized, relations between phenomena, then in their own sphere they were discoverers.

The researches of Miss Potter, as she then was, into Sweating and Co-operation, which turned upside down widely accepted ideas, are early cases in point. They are described at some length in *My Apprenticeship*, and need not here be more than mentioned. As the result of her work on the former, the picturesque myth of an endless chain of sub-contractors, with a parasitic Jewish middleman as the villain of the piece, went the way of other legends. Henceforward, it was evident, the problem was, not the removal of exceptional scandals, but the maintenance, by voluntary combinations and legislative enactments, of proper standards of employment over the whole field of industry. Her ability to see facts through plain glass, and to cause others to do the same, was equally conspicuous in her study of the Co-operative Movement. Co-operation—to a generation conscious of tightening social strains a word of reassurance—had been widely interpreted to mean the multiplication of societies of producers dividing profits among all participants in the business. Miss Potter showed that, except here and there, the British version of Co-operation meant nothing of the kind. Economic democracy, as practised by the great majority of Co-operators, implied neither self-governing workshops, nor profit-sharing with employers. It involved the supply of goods, and wherever possible their production, for

the service of consumers by agents appointed by them; the payment of a fixed rate of interest on capital; and the elimination of profit by the return to the purchaser of any surplus arising between prices and costs.

Miss Potter's conclusions did not pass uncriticized; but they had the facts on their side, and are to-day a commonplace. *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain* was widely translated, and its influence on Co-operative policy was not confined to this country. Its importance to its authoress was that of a starting-point. In answering one question, it suggested two more. If the essence of Co-operation was the sovereignty of the consumer, what rôle was to be assigned to the vocational organizations of wage-earners, whose struggles, at the moment when she was writing, were more in the public eye than the almost unnoticed expansion of Retail Stores and Wholesales? If the natural units for the discharge of certain economic functions were associations of purchasers, might there not also be a wide range of services which could more appropriately be entrusted to public authorities? The views of Mrs. Webb and her husband on the second question were stated in several of their subsequent works. The first, which had occurred to her while she was still at work on Co-operation, was the occasion of their researches into Trade Unionism. It is a comment on the charge of bureaucratic propensities sometimes brought against the Webbs that the six years following their marriage should have been devoted to the study of voluntary organizations.

On the appearance of *Industrial Democracy* a reviewer expressed surprise that writers so gifted should have wasted their talents in investigating institutions so unimportant as Trade Unions. If the world of organized labour is no longer to-day the misty region which it was when the Webbs first turned their searchlight on it, it is partly to their efforts that the change is due. Trade Unionism, throughout its history, has had a dual character. It has been at once a body of professional associations, and a social movement focusing the aspirations of different groups of wage-earners and reflecting their reactions to the ebb and flow of politics and ideas. The relative importance of these different aspects has varied at different times; but in England, unlike some other countries, neither has completely overshadowed the other. *The History of Trade Unionism*, which no subsequent work has yet superseded, does justice to both. It throws its high lights on the slow welding of scattered clubs of

journeymen into national organizations; the long struggle for the right of professional association; the development of industrial policies appropriate to the varying circumstances of different trades; and the changing relations between Trade Unionism and the State. The authors had few secondary works to help them—they had to compile their own census of trade unionists, which figures later published by the Board of Trade confirmed—but the influence exercised by their book was due as much to the spirit in which it was written as to the addition which it made to knowledge. Studiously unemotional in tone, commanding respect by its scholarship, and candid, when evidence gave out, in admitting ignorance, it lowered feverish temperatures and turned on sensationalism a cooling stream of facts. Trade Unions, it appeared, were not an appropriate theme for impassioned denunciation or indiscriminating eulogy. They were prosaic institutions, which, like other institutions, had their virtues and their defects, but which, if submitted to dispassionate study, had some lessons to teach that the economist, the political scientist, and even the statesman, might do well to ponder.

The History of Trade Unionism was the first instalment of the Webbs' work on the subject; but it was only the first. It showed combinations of wage-earners bargaining collectively as to the terms of their employment to be a concomitant of modern industry as normal and inevitable as power-driven machinery or joint-stock enterprise. The question of their economic effects raised more controversial issues, which were discussed at length in *Industrial Democracy*. By the nineties the denunciation of Trade Unionism as 'contrary to the principles of political economy' was, except in odd corners, a thing of the past; but a faint flavour of economic impropriety still continued to cling to it. Its purpose was admittedly to maintain minimum standards of wages and working conditions which no employer, however hard-pressed, could evade. Was there truth in the allegation that the pursuit of that objective must necessarily be prejudicial to economic progress?

In demolishing what little remained of the theoretical basis of the earlier attacks on Trade Unionism the authors had an easy task. Their analysis of the effects of prescribing minimum standards of employment, which was the kernel of their argument, broke what was then new ground. The most general and characteristic of Trade Union policies was the common rule; and the common rule, so far from being incompatible

with economic efficiency, was actually conducive to it. It encouraged the selection for employment of the most competent workmen; stimulated management to discover methods of reducing costs by the progressive improvement of machinery and organization; and promoted the most effective utilization of the nation's resources by compelling trades which were parasitic, in the sense of using up the energies of successive relays of workers under conditions incompatible with health and vigour, either to mend their ways or to go out of existence. If the argument was valid, the conclusions implicit in it, though suggested by a study of the effects of Trade Unionism, had obviously a more general application. The legal enforcement of minimum standards of safety and sanitation had been the object of a long series of Factory and Public Health Acts. Why should a similar enforcement of minimum standards of remuneration be regarded as a heresy which must provoke an economic nemesis? *Industrial Democracy* was the first book to argue convincingly and at length the case for the policy later embodied in the Trade Boards Acts of 1909 and 1918. The forecasts which the authors permitted themselves in their concluding chapter, if they overestimated, like most prophecies, the pace of development, did not err greatly as to its direction. The future, they suggested, would see, not, as some theorists of the Left then supposed, the supersession of combinations of wage-earners by the action of a paternal State, but a modification of their functions. It lay with a Trade Unionism relying, for the advancement of the wage-earner's standard of life, on legislation, not less than on collective bargaining; extending government by consent from the political into the economic sphere; and increasingly becoming, as the area of public enterprise widened, an expert adviser whose counsel was sought on all matters relating to the welfare and professional competence of different bodies of producers.

'We may distinguish, as the dominant note of the last three-quarters of a century, an ever-growing elaboration of organised common action. What was formerly left to the individual household to provide, or left altogether unprovided, is now, to an ever-increasing extent, provided for large numbers of households by some collective administration. . . . Without the common rule that the law lays down, and without the services that the municipality supplies, the citizen of the twentieth century would usually find it impossible to live.' It was this 'spontaneous undergrowth of social tissue', rather than the more dramatic aspects of political action, on which, throughout their lives, the Webbs'

interest was focused. Partly for that reason, partly because their study of working-class movements had convinced them that the lessons derived from voluntary associations required to be supplemented by a study of the compulsory organizations in which men were grouped as citizens, their researches took a new turn.

The two preceding decades had seen the modernization of county government, and an impressive expansion of municipal enterprise. The emergence of the housekeeping State, as distinct from the police State, could already faintly be discerned. It was natural that, once the books on Trade Unionism were out of the way, their authors should regard as their next most urgent task the study of Local Government. They had begun with the intention of limiting their work to the problems of their own day, and of dispatching in a preliminary chapter the age before 1835; but they found the hand of the past too heavy to be shaken off. The period finally chosen was that in which local administrators found themselves confronted, as a result of rapid economic change, with problems of a new complexity, which they were left to solve or ignore as they themselves deemed best, unaided and unimpeded, save on rare occasions, by the intervention of the central government. Except for the volumes on the Poor Law, which began earlier and ended later, it was the century and a half between 1688 and the partial reconstruction of local institutions which followed the first Reform Act.

English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act was begun in 1898; the last instalment of it to be published appeared in 1930. The plan, as first conceived, was not carried to completion. Public duties intervened; and some subjects on which the authors had intended to write, such as the Suppression of Nuisances, the Provision of Markets, and the Regulation of Trade, had to be left for treatment by other hands. The four volumes on the structure of Local Government, and the six dealing with its functions, include, however, the greater part of the original design. The best introduction to the series as a whole is contained in the two concluding chapters of *Statutory Authorities for Special Purposes*—the cheerless title of a great book—which Mrs. Webb regarded as ‘the most intellectually distinguished’ of their works. It is in these *ad hoc* bodies, established under local acts for sewerage, paving, draining, lighting, and policing the rapidly growing towns of an insanitary and disorderly age, rather than in institutions, like the Borough, of greater antiquity and fame, that the Webbs find

the germ of the municipal and county government of to-day. The story of the transition, as they tell it, is one, not merely of the elaboration of machinery, but of the emergence of new principles. The substitution of the citizen-consumer, as the controlling power in Local Government, for the vocational organizations of agriculturists, traders, and craftsmen; of election for self-appointment or co-option; of the contractor employing hired labour for the obligation of gratuitous service; of salaried officials for the freehold tenure of profitable office; of the increasing intervention of departments of the central government for the almost unchecked predominance of local custom and the common law—such, they suggest, are the high landmarks on the road from the old order to the new.

On the validity of their conclusions, as on the details of their narrative, only a specialist can venture to speak. The layman will linger with sympathy, and sometimes with amusement, over the human elements in their story. The members of their local bodies breathe, move, and labour; plan for the public good, and sometimes for their own; toil selflessly for lofty ends; intrigue, swallow bribes, and engage, in Fielding's words, in 'plots and circumventions, parties and factions, equal to those which are to be found in courts'. The boss of Bethnal Green, a picture after Hogarth; the select vestry of St. George's Hanover Square, never known to levy an illegal rate or to indulge in convivialities at the public expense; justices who are devoted reformers, like Sir George Paul in Gloucestershire or Thomas Bailey in Lancashire, and the magistrates of the Middlesex Bench, whom Burke described as the scum of the earth; the precocious municipal democracy of Norwich, sinking into an orgy of corrupt and violent party politics; the rulers of the tiny town of Tetbury, blameless as the Ethiopians, who, having purchased the manor from its impecunious lord, administer the property as a trust for the benefit, not only of the freemen, but of all the inhabitants, persuade the commoners to allow their pastures to be ploughed for wheat till the debt is paid off, and actually induce them to permit all immigrants into the borough to enjoy, after the lapse of seven years, the same privileges as themselves—these portraits, lovable, scandalous, or comic, are a small selection from a large gallery. Local Government is interpreted throughout in a broad sense. The student seeking for light on the management of open-field farming, the part played by guilds in municipal life, the problems arising when villages were converted into towns unequipped with the apparatus of an urban civilization, or the

Poor Law history of the last quarter of a century, which the authors helped to make as well as to write, will not be disappointed. Not all their judgments will command assent; but here, as elsewhere, they put their cards on the table, and are at pains to provide the means of confirming or refuting their interpretations. The reader of their volumes, who stands back and considers the work as a whole, is likely to feel that he has been in contact with the history, not merely of English Local Government, but of the English people.

The Webbs were generally regarded, both in this country and abroad, as the intellectual leaders of British Socialism. The small number of their books specifically devoted to that subject may, at first sight, cause surprise. They had, as they wrote in 1921, 'been investigating and describing democratic institutions for nearly thirty years' before they 'published any volume dealing with national government or the political State'; and, neither then nor later, did the topics to which some Socialist thinkers have devoted a large space figure prominently in their pages. The truth is that their approach, not only to Socialism, but to economic issues in general, took a different line from that previously followed by most theorists, whether to right or left. Mrs. Webb has explained in her autobiography the reasons which led her, at an early stage of her career, to the view that the province of political economy, as commonly conceived in her youth, required to be redefined. They regarded the economics of profit-making capitalism—one of a long series of different methods which men had employed for organizing the production of wealth—as an important subject of study side by side with other social institutions; but they thought that analysis, in order to be fruitful, must go hand in hand with investigation. They were out of sympathy, therefore, both with the tradition of abstract speculation which descended from Ricardo and with the attempt of some Socialists to turn its batteries against itself by employing, as in the case of the labour theory of value, analogous methods to create a system of counter-doctrine. Dialectical materialism left them equally sceptical. 'If', they drily remark, 'there is any such influence at work, it is naturally a fit subject for objective study, together with the phenomena themselves. To us "the materialist conception of history" is merely one hypothesis among many . . . which, like all hypotheses, may be useful as an instrument of investigation, but acquires scientific value only in so far as it is verified by an objective observation of the facts.'

Their own attitude to questions of social policy was realist, experimental, and constructive. It resulted from the habits formed and lessons learned during their long career as students and administrators. Holding that light, not heat, was the world's chief need, and believing that reason and goodwill would, if given time, prevail, they were impatient of criticisms without affirmations, and refused to preach ideals till they had found the way to realize them. They thought it more important to interpret the trends of social development, and to prescribe, after careful diagnosis, specific remedies for particular evils, than to appeal to the appetite for emotionalism or system-mongering.

Mrs. Webb, while still Miss Potter, had been impressed by the fact that the class in which she was brought up 'habitually gave orders, but . . . seldom, if ever, executed the orders of other people'. The problem, as she and her husband saw it, was to substitute for that unconscious dictatorship of the capitalist, with the capricious inequalities and irresponsible power which appeared to them to result from it, arrangements permitting the effective participation of ordinary men and women in the conduct of the economic affairs on which their livelihood depended. Capitalism, they argued in *The Decline of Capitalist Civilisation*, had rendered genuine services in awakening dormant energies, and canalizing them, with profit as the magnet, for the production of wealth; but its cost in human suffering and degradation—a degradation not confined to the losers in the struggle—had been heavy. Till recently, a practicable alternative to it had been difficult to state. Now, thanks to the growth of new forms of social organization and to the administrative experience gained in the last half-century, it was possible to do better. The collective regulation of private industry, with its tentative approach to the establishment of minimum standards of civilized existence; the collective administration, by municipalities and the State, of an increasing number of services; the extension of communal provision for the needs of the young, the sick, the aged, and the unemployed; and the development of progressive taxation—not to mention, what they regarded as of equal importance, the growth of Co-operation and Trade Unionism—were creating, even before 1914, a society markedly different from that which they had known in their youth. It was by progress along these lines—progress rapid and deliberate, instead of halting and haphazard—that the goal at which they aimed was, they thought, to be attained.

Such views exposed flanks to attack from opposite extremes. They did not fail to receive it. An accusation whose validity the authors would not have admitted is that, perhaps, most often brought against them. It is the charge of a bureaucratic indifference to individual freedom. They would have replied to it that liberty means, not the right of particular individuals or groups to use as they may think fit such power as past history and present social arrangements may happen to have conferred on them, but the establishment of conditions promoting 'the utmost possible development of faculty' in all human beings, and that liberty, in that sense, has law as its mother. In an urban and industrial civilization the alternative to planning by a democratic State for the general good was not, it seemed to them, the freedom of every individual to arrange his own affairs as best suited himself. It was the acquiescence, under economic duress, of the mass of mankind in an environment and style of life created by the self-interest of powerful minorities. The freedom of the majority had been substantially increased since the middle of last century by the development of various forms of collective control, which the interests opposed to them had at first denounced as tyranny. Its further extension would take place by analogous methods. It required for its enlargement not less public action, but more.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the aspect of the Soviet social order which most aroused the Webbs' enthusiasm should have been, neither the first turbulent phase, nor the brief essay in syndicalism, but the subsequent 'deliberate planning of all the nation's production, distribution and exchange, not for the profit of the few, but for increasing the consumption of the whole community'. They had read, before their visit, almost everything written on Soviet Russia in English, French, and German; nor were they unacquainted with the considerable literature expounding the objections, economic and political, to the principle of a planned economy. In the two volumes of *Soviet Communism* they state their own conclusions. They thought that the system worked, that it had raised the low standard of life of the Russian people, and that it was not threatened with an internal breakdown. They thought also that, in spite of the absence of western democratic forms, it rested on a broad basis of popular support, which found expression through a wide range of different organs, and that it owed its achievements partly to the determination of its rulers to make the fullest use of scientific knowledge, partly to its success in evoking among

the mass of the population a spirit of service and solidarity to which capitalist societies, with their emphasis on the motive of pecuniary self-interest, were precluded from appealing in equal measure. Whether their book will survive, like de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, as the most illuminating of contemporary pictures of a new society in the making, time alone can show. Whatever the verdict upon it, it remains an impressive attempt by two experienced sociologists, who were neither innocents nor fanatics, to interpret to their fellow-countrymen an unfamiliar civilization.

III

It was of the nature of the studies which the Webbs made their own, as well as of their personal convictions, that knowledge and its application should go hand in hand. Their books were not the harvest of a life of leisure. They were written, and should be read, as the product, not only of scholarship, but of the civic temper. At the time when their joint work began, Mr. Webb, through his position on the London County Council, was deeply involved in the educational politics of the day, including the reform of the University of London and the discussions preceding the Education Act of 1902. Mrs. Webb, since her evidence before the Lords' Committee on Sweating, had been known as a woman who could be relied on to handle thorny questions with candour and without sentiment. Both had their own projects, which they wished to serve; but both were recognized to be personally disinterested, to be free from party attachments, and to care not at all, provided that the work which they thought necessary was done, what government or individual received the credit for doing it. Miss Haldane, the sister of their oldest friend in public life, has remarked on the influence which came to them from their political catholicity. The comment is just.

The claims on Mrs. Webb were not of a kind which can be neatly tabulated, but neither were they light. From the time when, in the nineties, she was coaching the Trade Union members of the Labour Commission, advising Conservative acquaintances on the Factory Bill of 1895, and helping her husband to float the newly founded London School of Economics and Political Science—their chief venture of those years—over the shoals which beset its youth, down to her service on the Reconstruction Committee and her assistance in the twenties to the reorganized Labour Party, she was rarely without some cause which needed nursing on her hands. She never abandoned

her long-term research; but there were periods when it had to take a second place. The five and a half years devoted to Poor Law reform were the longest of them. She had become a member of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws appointed in December 1905, and, down to January 1909, when it reported, she gave her whole time to it. She resisted the disposition of some of her colleagues to collect opinions instead of facts; insisted that expert assistants should be appointed to make detailed reports on different topics of importance; and carried out, with the aid of her secretaries, several inquiries of her own into subjects on which she thought further information was required. The Minority Report signed by herself and three other Commissioners, of which she and her husband were joint authors, while it naturally encountered opposition, was, by general consent, an impressive achievement. The knowledge behind it was not open to question, but its grasp of Poor Law history and administration was less important than its constructive proposals. By challenging the principle of an authority whose functions were confined to the relief of destitution, and insisting that the duty of the State was, not merely to alleviate distress, but to grapple with its causes, it shook an ancient problem out of the ruts of the past, and lifted the discussion of policy on to a new plane.

The Commission involved some hard fighting, as well as steady labour. It left Mrs. Webb temporarily worn out. Its sequel was not less exhausting. Hitherto, though strenuous in work behind the scenes, she had shunned publicity. The campaign for the break-up of the Poor Law was her first and only plunge into agitation on the grand scale. For more than two years, from the spring of 1909 to the summer of 1911, her whole energy was given to organization and propaganda. Backed by a National Committee representing all parties and denominations, and including men and women eminent in many different walks of life, the Webbs raised money, maintained an active and well-staffed central office, established branches, conducted a journal, arranged conferences and lectures, and themselves toured the country, Mrs. Webb sometimes speaking four or five times a week. The agitation cost them some friends, and was not immediately successful. Other plans found favour in high places, and the Insurance legislation temporarily diverted public attention. A sub-committee of the Reconstruction Committee endorsed in 1918 the main proposals of the Minority Report; but action did not follow. It was not till 1929, when

the authorship of the proposal had been almost forgotten, that the Local Government Act of that year wound up the Boards of Guardians, and transferred their functions to the Councils of Counties and County Boroughs.

The struggle for the reform of the Poor Laws was the heaviest piece of public work which Mrs. Webb undertook. In the breathing-space which followed it, in addition to publishing a further volume of *English Local Government*, she and her husband launched two new ventures. The period of acute industrial conflict from 1910 to 1914 was marked by the emergence of issues which, if not novel in principle, had not previously been formulated with equal sharpness. The attitude of the Webbs to the policies epitomized as 'workers' control', of which much was to be heard during the following decade, was a combination of interested scepticism as to the practicability of the programme with a resolute determination to remain on cordial terms with its advocates. Not less characteristically, they insisted that, whatever the merits of the doctrines advanced, the first essential was, not controversy or propaganda, but a dispassionate study of the industrial structure to which the new prescriptions were to be applied. The Fabian Research Department, founded on the initiative of Mrs. Webb, was intended to be an organ of unemotional knowledge. *The New Statesman*—during the first years of its existence an unconventional journal, which united with the ordinary functions of a weekly the publication of massive supplements on social subjects—was to diffuse light, as it grew, among wider circles than could be reached by books.

The war, whose outbreak found the Webbs at work on investigations into the Control of Industry, Insurance, and the Organization of the Professions, brought new duties. Mrs. Webb served on a series of official committees, including the Statutory Pensions Committee, which dealt with the pensions of disabled soldiers; the Reconstruction Committee established in 1917, where she piloted the proposals of the Minority Report on the Poor Laws through a sub-committee on problems of Local Government, and helped, as member of another sub-committee presided over by Lord Haldane, to produce a notable report on the Machinery of Central Government; and the Committee on Women in Industry. The subject referred by the War Cabinet to the last body—the relation between the wages of men and women—has not ceased to perplex. The analysis of the problem contained in her Minority Report is not yet out of date.

By the time that it appeared obligations of an unexpected kind were beginning to descend upon her and her husband. They had been members of the Labour Party since its foundation, and had maintained friendly relations with its leaders, as with those of other parties. Regarding, however, the promotion of social and economic knowledge as their principal task, they had turned a deaf ear to appeals to enter politics. The new situation which, it was evident, would develop on the return of peace caused a reluctant change of mind. From 1918, when Mr. Webb stood as candidate for the University of London, and still more from 1922, when he entered Parliament, the attempt to assist the Labour Party to become an effective political force was, next to his duties as a Minister and the completion of their books, the Webbs' main preoccupation. Mrs. Webb, who was not a lover of the ritualism of politics, evaded merely ceremonial claims as best she could; but she took seriously the practical obligations of political life, keeping closely in touch, by lectures and correspondence, with the women of Seaham Harbour; serving on the Advisory Committees of the Party; attending international Socialist Conferences at Hamburg and Geneva; and making their house in London a centre where members and leaders could meet in a congenial atmosphere. Their literary work was, doubtless, slowed down; but they were masters of the art of canalizing their energies, and it suffered less than might have been expected. The strenuous phase of the parliamentary episode lasted for nine years, during just under three of which one of the partners was in office. The three volumes of *English Local Government*, which, together with *My Apprenticeship*, were published during that period, do not suggest that they were composed in haste or by hands that had lost their cunning. Eight months after the election of 1931, in May 1932, the two authors, he seventy-three and she seventy-four, set out for Russia.

IV

Some of the problems discussed by the Webbs in their earlier works are, partly thanks to them, less urgent than they were. They were those of a generation impressed by the spectacle of a rapid increase in wealth, and disposed to believe, if with diminishing assurance, that positive measures to cure social evils were rendered superfluous by the certainty of its continuance. Neither Mrs. Webb nor her husband cherished sentimental illusions as to the unimportance of material progress.

So far, indeed, from endorsing the view that 'the problem of production has been solved', they were appalled by the inefficiency with which man's struggle with nature is often conducted. What distinguished them from most of their contemporaries who were interested in the same subjects was not merely their rejection of the doctrine, in the nineties still a power, that 'the answer to the question "how to make the nation rich" is "by letting each member of it make himself as rich as he can in his own way"'. It was their grasp of the truth that social processes, in order to be controlled, must be known thoroughly and in detail, and the inexhaustible energy, sustained for half a century, which they brought to the investigation of them.

The conception of a social order planned, with general consent, for the common good has a long history behind it; but earlier prophets of the destination had rarely mapped the roads. The Webbs were strong where their predecessors had been weak. Prescription not preceded by diagnosis appeared to them charlatanism, and diagnosis was a task to which virtuous intentions were less important than a sound technique. 'Only by watching the *processes* of decay and growth over a period of time', wrote Mrs. Webb, 'can we understand even the contemporary facts . . . and only by such a comprehension of the past and present processes can we get an insight into the means of change.' Hence their long list of works on particular topics, and their refusal to formulate a political philosophy except by way of comment on the specific subject in hand. Hence also their view of the path which reform must tread. Their gradualism was not, as was absurdly suggested, the statement of a preference, but a recognition of the facts of a world where life is lived in time. They were the last persons to wait on events, when it was in their power to accelerate them; and for the authors of real changes, whether small or great, whether a clause in a Factory Act or a Five Years' Plan, they had a profound respect. But they thought that invention and construction—the production, as they put it, of 'new social tissue'—not denunciation or demolition, were the root of the matter. Romantic revolutionaries, all rhetoric and blank cartridges, usually bored, and sometimes irritated, them.

Their long years of labour, and the persistence with which, unmoved by changing fashions, they held on their course, gave them the air of an institution. Disliking sciolism, they were cautious in expressing opinions on matters outside their own field. On those within it, the perplexed inquirer, whether

student, official, trade unionist, or politician, could appeal to them as an oracle, returning with collective wisdom—'we think'—unambiguous answers from a wealth of experience no one else could command. The comparison of them with Bentham is, in that respect, apt; but if, like the sage, they were a fountain of ideas, they had none of his eccentricity, and more than his humanity. Of the legends which gathered about them, some hit off salient traits, but most missed the mark. The noblest of all titles, they used to say, is that of servant, and 'the firm of Webb' served public causes with a concentration of purpose which few men bring to their own; but the partners were neither a card-index of facts nor bleak and arid doctrinaires. Their influence was not confined to their public activities, and they impressed those who knew them not less by what they were than by what they did. When at work, they drove themselves hard; but they were not righteous over-much and knew how to be busy without being hurried. To visit them at Passfield Corner, or to spend with them part of the holidays which they were fabled never to take, was to share the company of two sociable personalities, with a psychological curiosity not too elevated to enjoy gossip, an engaging capacity for laughing at themselves, and the appetite for physical exercise of a gryphon in the wilderness.

Of the characteristics which they had in common, simplicity and magnanimity were, perhaps, the most striking. The combination of worldly wisdom with personal unworldliness, though rare, is not unknown. The Webbs possessed it in more than ordinary measure. While they knew exactly what they wanted, and had few rivals in the business of 'getting things done', their achievements owed more to single-mindedness and integrity than to the artful astuteness ascribed to them by the credulous. Some hard knocks came their way, not only from opponents; but to bear no grudges was part of their creed. It was easy to disagree with them, but difficult to stage a quarrel, and, when friends insisted on nursing a grievance, they were indefatigable in seeking opportunities to re-knit broken links. To the young they were charming; smoothing their way to useful work; treating them as colleagues, not as disciples; and weighing the criticisms of the rebels who ridiculed them with a seriousness the more disarming because prompted, not merely by a desire to spare sensitive feelings, but by the assumption of an equality of interest in the advancement of the common cause. Like others, who did not share their political opinions, they were

shocked, if not greatly surprised, by the sins against light which followed the last war. Believers themselves in persuasion by an appeal to reason, they discerned symptoms of a growing disposition to stop ears and close minds, which seemed to them ominous, and their later writings sound a note of warning not heard in their earlier. They never lost, however, their faith in public spirit guided by knowledge as the architect of a better world. Their old age was free from disillusionment or cynicism. The Order of Merit conferred on Lord Passfield for 'eminent services to Social and Political Science' was an appropriate tribute to that part of their joint work to which Mrs. Webb, as well as her husband, attached most importance.

In lives so united individual contributions are not easily distinguished. It was not a case, as is sometimes suggested, of a division of labour between theorist and investigator or inventor and executant, or of flashes of creative insight later turned into generalizations which would stand criticism and plans which would march. The ideas of the partners were struck out in a continuous duologue, in which each was flint and steel in turn. The impression of a listener was rather of one complex personality communing with itself than of two debating with each other. The individuality of each, however, had its characteristic traits, the expression of a distinct psychological background. Their intellectual approach to problems was usually the same. In their emotional reactions to them they sometimes differed. The union of identity of purpose with diversity of temperament was part of their strength.

The Beatrice Webb of fiction, a combination of economic pedant with hard woman of affairs, did not survive the publication of *My Apprenticeship*. It is evident from her account of her early life that she was exceptionally sensitive and highly strung, with an artist's eye for the subtleties of individual character, and an unusual power of expressing them. The imagination to which collective humanity is as real and moving as individuals who are seen is not a common faculty. She possessed it to an extraordinary degree. 'To me', she once wrote, after quoting some lines by Sir Ronald Ross, the discoverer of the cause of malaria, 'a million sick have always seemed actually more worthy of sympathy than "the child sick in a fever" preferred by Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh'. Her early contacts with scientists strongly influenced her thought; but it was her imaginative grasp of the lot of unknown lives, rather than intellectual curiosity, which first turned her to sociology.

Once sure of her vocation, she mastered its methods by a long and painful conflict, disciplining her intellect and canalizing her emotions with an intensity of effort which, to judge by her diary, sometimes brought her near despair. Her touch of ascetic austerity, as of a Puritan casting behind him all impediments to his quest, was partly the legacy of that early struggle to subdue herself, partly the expression of a philosophy which disliked emphasis on the externals of life—luxury, ostentation, and the claims of pampered classes to special consideration—both as bad manners and as a source of social corruption. Her demands on brain and will were exacting; but she was not of the reformers who are intolerable in private life, nor did she, as some observers thought, live solely for her work. She diffused warmth, as well as light, and was quick, amid all her preoccupations, to offer sympathy, encouragement, and wise counsel to individuals in need of them. Acquaintances, to whom her intellectual eminence meant little, described her as the kindest woman they had ever met. She thought companionship the most delightful form of happiness, and welcomed it with open arms.

In trying, as occasionally she did, to formulate her own creed, she underlined the distinction between the spheres of means and ends, of machinery and purpose, of organization and the spirit. In the first she was a rationalist, severely critical of her own work, and impatient of sentimentality, slipshod argument, and dilettantism. In the second she was a mystic. 'The habit of prayer', she wrote, in describing some difficult years of early womanhood, 'enabled me to survive, and to emerge relatively sound in body and sane in mind.' It remained with her throughout life. After one of the opening sessions of the Commission on the Poor Laws, feeling her responsibilities heavy on her, she went to St. Paul's to pray, and she continued the practice at intervals during the period of its sittings. In the reflections on the study of society recently quoted by Professor Powicke from *My Apprenticeship*, two voices each answer each other:

'This ceaseless questioning of social facts', the Ego that denies was always insisting, 'seems an interesting way of passing the time, but does it lead anywhere?'

The Ego that affirms could now answer with confidence:

'Seeing that society is one vast laboratory in which experiments in human relationship, conscious or unconscious, careless or deliberate, are continuously being carried on, those races will survive and prosper which are equipped with the knowledge of how things happen. And

this knowledge can only be acquired by persistent research into the past and present behaviour of man.'

'How things happen!' mocks the Ego that denies, 'but that does not settle what *ought* to happen.'

'I thought I told you long ago', calmly answers the Ego that affirms, 'that, with regard to the purpose of life, science is and must remain bankrupt; and the men of science of today know it. . . . How each of us determines our scale of values no one knows. For my own part, I find it best to live "as if" the soul of man were in communion with a superhuman force which makes for righteousness. Like our understanding of nature through observation and reasoning, this communion with the spirit of love at work in the universe will be intermittent and incomplete, and it will frequently fail us. But a failure to know, and the fall from grace, is the way of all flesh.'

R. H. TAWNEY

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