SOCIAL HISTORY AND LITERATURE

R. H. TAWNEY

FOLCROFT LIBRARY EDITIONS / 1976

SOCIAL HISTORY AND LITERATURE

R. H. TAWNEY

LONDON
PUBLISHED FOR THE
NATIONAL BOOK LEAGUE
BY THE CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1950

The Seventh Annual Lecture of the National Book League, delivered by R. H. Tawney, at Friends House, Euston Road, London, N.W.1, on Tuesday, October 25, 1949, KENNETH LINDSAY, M.P., in the Chair.

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
LONDON: BENTLEY HOUSE, 200 EUSTON ROAD, N.W.1
NEW YORK: 51 MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK 10
CANADA: THE MACMILLAN COMPANY OF CANADA LIMITED

SOCIAL HISTORY AND LITERATURE

NATIONAL BOOK LEAGUE SEVENTH ANNUAL LECTURE

N.B.L. Annual Lectures

LEISURE IN A DEMOCRACY
by Viscount Samuel

SOME THOUGHTS ON UNIVERSITY EDUCATION
by Sir Richard Livingstone

PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS
by Bertrand Russell

HISTORY AND THE READER
by G. M. Trevelyan

I WANT! I WANT!
by John Masefield

SOCIAL HISTORY AND LITERATURE

No one could follow without a sense of inadequacy the distinguished lecturers who have previously addressed you; nor is my diffidence diminished by reflection on the topic which I have been rash enough to select. Discourses introducing a particular discipline with prefatory commendations of the pleasures to be derived from it are apt to resemble those Chinese dramas the spectator of which, after listening for five hours to a succession of curtain-raisers, discovers that the performance is over at the moment when he hoped that it was about to begin. Some sage has remarked that foreign travel is supposed to broaden the mind, but too often, in reality, merely elongates the conversation. It would be regrettable if voyages through time, as well as through space, gave ground for that reproach; and discretion requires that a speaker, whatever the sufferings he may ultimately inflict, should, at least in his propitiatory opening, endeavour to avoid it. The motives which lead us to one or both of the allied interests mentioned in my title are obviously of great diversity; but some, and not the least cogent, have their source in the nature of man as a social being. To indicate the aims of the quest inspired by them, and the character of the rewards for which, when fortune smiles, it may hope, should not demand prolixity.

In a famous passage of the *Inferno* Ulysses speaks to Dante and Vergil of "the passion to win experience of the world and of human vice and worth", which drove him when, after his twenty years of wandering he had at length reached home, once more to set sail, on his last fatal

voyage. Whatever else the world may contain, man's relations with nature, his commerce with his fellows, and the convictions, aspirations and emotions composing his inner life, are for us, as for the poet, its capital constituents. No one can be fully at home either with it or with himself until, through the vicarious experience of which the vehicle is books, he has learned enough of the triumphs and tragedies of mankind to catch a glimpse of the heights to which human nature can rise and depths to which it can sink. To such comprehension, which less enlightened ages called wisdom, there is more than one road; but an acquaintance which, for most of us, only reading can convey with the methods by which men of like passions with ourselves have wrestled, in circumstances different from our own, with problems of individual and collective existence—religion, law and government, the conquest of the material environment and the ordering of social life—that are also ours, can make a modest contribution to it. It is part of the process by which we surmount the limitations of our isolated personalities and become partners in a universe of interests which we share with humanity. Not the least potent of the magicians who fling wide the windows opening on these vistas are the Muses who preside over History and Literature. Each rules a separate province, with laws of its own; but the debatable land where they inter-common is not small; and, like terrestrial states, their immaterial kingdoms flourish best when friendly intercourse between them is unimpeded by artificial barriers. Naturally, neither is without its riddles; and both offer ample opportunities for finished exhibitions of the great art of complicating the simple and obscuring the obvious by which the authentic intellectual proves his title to that proud name. I observe these gymnastics with admiration and awe; but a consciousness that the stratosphere is not my spiritual home

deters me from imitating them. So, without attempting to add yet another to the philosophical rationalizations of activities which, if not as old as man, are in one form or another, coeval with his earliest written records, let me turn to my theme.

The humble branch of history, with which alone this evening I am concerned, cannot boast, like some of its more illustrious colleagues, that it supplies precedents and warnings of immediate utility in the conduct of great affairs. But the forces that figure most conspicuously before the footlights are not always those that set the stage; and, if studies dealing in the prose of common life neither breakfast with ministers nor dine at international conferences, they are not necessarily, for that reason, to be consigned to the limbo reserved for triviality. Each generation must write its history for itself, and draw its own deductions from that already written, not because the conclusions of its predecessors are untrue, but for a practical reason. Different answers are required, because different questions are asked. Standing at a new point on the road, it finds that fresh ranges of the landscape come into view, whose unfamiliar intricacies demand an amplification of traditional charts. It is obviously not an accident that when, after 1830, French thinkers reflected on the convulsions of the four preceding decades, the result should have been the search for the hidden cracks and fissures in the social order demolished by the earthquake, of which de Tocqueville's *L'Ancien Régime* remains a lofty landmark; or that England in the full tide of the Industrial Revolution should have provided Macaulay with the foil against which to throw into high relief, in his famous third chapter, the simpler society of an age politically brilliant, but, compared with his own, economically immature; or that the year of revolutions, in which his book appeared, should also have seen a less sanguine interpretation of

the material triumphs applauded by him begin, in the obscurity of a cheap pamphlet, a voyage that was to take it round the world; or that when, after 1870, the great industry and an urban civilization were in process of conversion from an insular peculiarity into European institutions, scholars of different nationalities and opposing views should have launched, with resources of knowledge and criticism not available to Marx, a debate on the historical origins of Capitalism which is not yet concluded. It was equally natural that a generation increasingly conscious of the problems posed by the profound changes in human relations which those movements had produced, should turn, with heightened curiosity, to works revealing the life of societies not yet affected by them or experiencing only their first disturbing impact.

Of the contributions of authors with widely varying interests—legal historians, writers whose interests were primarily economic, students of the development of local government and administration, experts on the history of particular localities, later geographers and ecologists—I must not pause to speak. By the end of the last century, not a few obscure departments of social life had been compelled to yield their secrets, and the doors into others since then unlocked have not been few. The adjective in my title is to be regarded, therefore, not as a signpost pointing to a recently discovered field, but merely as a reminder of riches already at our disposal, or waiting to be extracted from ground beneath our feet. All history has as its theme one aspect or another of collective life; and the function of Social History—if that term is to be employed—is not the enrolment of an additional recruit in the battalion of specialisms already at work. It is primarily, I suppose, to underline the truth that, if research requires a division of forces, a humane education requires a synthesis, however provisional, of the results of their labours, and to encour-

age us, by seeing those results, not as isolated fragments, but as connected parts of a body of living tissue, to acquire a more synoptic and realistic view of the activities composing the life of society. The subject, as I interpret it, is concerned not merely or mainly with the iridescent surface of manners, fashions, social conventions and intercourse, but with the unseen foundations, which, till they shift or crumble, most men in most generations are wont to take for granted. Nor, since human beings cannot live on air and rarely live alone, can public and private business—politics and economics—be excluded from its scope. These restless energumens are never so potent as when ignored; and notices to quit served on them in a preface rarely deter the pertinacious trespassers from slinking back into the text. The sensible course is to welcome them from the start as partners in a story which, the world being what it is, they have necessarily done much to shape.

Social history, thus conceived, can be approached by several paths. One, not the least pleasant and instructive, which starts from some familiar scene of daily life, I must not do more than mention. There are countries so unfortunate that a traveller can journey in them for several days with no companion but nature, who is delightful, but not, by herself, sufficient. England, like most of her European neighbours, is not among them. As in Mr. Chesterton's poem, it is "an island like a little book, full of a thousand tales". Something amusing or tragic has occurred at every corner; sweat, in the famous phrase, not to mention blood and tears, is thick on most of it. There are worse points of departure for history and those who teach it than the visible realities to which such associations cling. Some of them, I suppose, are treasured memories to most of us; and, of a hundred illustrations, one miniature must suffice. A tump—what the cultured call a *tumulus*—with neolithic

bones which the aged roadman at last consented not to throw away; a precipitate lane beside it, known to the natives, though not to writers of guide-books, as King Charles' Hill, because, on an early day in August, 1643, some enterprising staff officer contrived—Heaven knows how—to get the army down it on its way to the siege of the godly city the unforeseen tenacity of whose obstinate shopkeepers wrecked the year's campaign; twenty minutes one way the room in which, forty years before, the Catholic Throckmorton of the day had brooded with Catesby over projects for the famous plot; twenty minutes the other the farm called Abbey Farm, seized, two generations earlier, by the Defender of the Faith from a local religious house; a mile north the high point known as Wittentree Clump, where the wise men of the district are thought to have assembled in Saxon times and the Home Guard met in our own; a mile east a village not finally enclosed till the sixties of last century, in circumstances some of which—characteristically, the comic, not the sad—twenty years ago old men still recounted; a mile south the magnificent wrought-iron gates of the Haunted House, the work—so the probably mendacious story runs—of a smith convicted for murder, whom a wicked judge consented to spare, on condition that he made them, and then, when they were made, proceeded to hang; in the distance the hill from which, Mr. Madden [1] has told us, Clement Perks of the Hill, in *Henry IV*, took his designation, with the hamlet at its foot inhabited by the "arrant knave" favoured by Mr. Justice Shallow, the name of which is pronounced in the improbable manner in which Shakespeare, who, to judge by his spelling, must have heard it spoken, decided to write it—all, except the last, demand no more than tolerable boots and a longish afternoon. These human associations are as vital and moving a part of the landscape as its hills and streams. There are many districts, urban not less

than rural, as rich or richer in them. If education does not use them, of what use are they? I have never taught children; so, like every one else in that position, I know exactly how to do it. A one-inch ordnance map as the teacher's bible; an attempt to lead the older of the little victims really to see and feel scenes every day beneath their eyes; a few good books, when such exist, in which to read of what they saw; and only then a gradual advance towards wider horizons—such would be some of the ingredients in my prescription.

All this, however, is a digression for which I apologize. Let me return to the more powerful ally invoked in my title, on whom all of us, wherever our lot is cast, can always lean. It seems to be of the nature of scholastic institutions, not least Universities, to proliferate to excess in the artificial entities known in the language of the trade as "subjects". When we reach years of discretion—which I take to mean the age when youth shows signs of getting over its education—part of our business is to join those naturally connected interests which the demands of examinations and the exigencies of time-tables have temporarily put asunder. The enjoyment of great literature is an end, not a means; and only a barbarian would degrade its timeless truths to the status of materials for a humbler art. But, to the charge of Philistinism, two pleas may be advanced.

Some familiarity, in the first place, with the scenes amid which the masters lived and worked—the disorderly, brilliant, vulgar, little London of the great age of the drama, vivid with the mingled gaiety and squalor of a street in Peiping; the ways of the polite society which idolized Pope; the East Anglian villages beneath whose tranquil surface Crabbe encountered his experiences "sad as reality and wild as dreams"; the fusion of the traditions of a border region still not wholly tamed with the influence of

a city then not the least among the cultural capitals of Europe, which formed the mind of Scott—such knowledge not only is a tribute owed to genius by posterity, but can become, if kept in due subordination in the background of our minds, the foot of a ladder leading into the world of imagination which genius has created. It is equally true, in the second place, and more important for the historian, that literature opens windows on realities that would otherwise elude him. History, it is sometimes said, is concerned with facts; and, facts, Burns has remarked, in a line which I do not venture to quote, but which a friend has translated for me into gratuitously prosaic prose, do not shift their position, but remain unalterably what they are. There are, doubtless, many facts—though not, perhaps, so many as is sometimes supposed—which behave with the propriety ascribed to them by the poet. Some are more elusive monsters, of whom it may be said that to stay put, without entering into unanticipated and embarrassing combinations, is the last thing they can be trusted to do. Not a few are chameleons, which change their colour with the context in which they are seen and the eyes that see them.

To one poet who experienced it, the English Civil War was the vindication of providential justice; to a second, a reluctant soldier, a judgment on a people "by our lusts disordered into wars"; to a third, a "cause too good to have been fought for".[2] The mild and partial counter-revolution called the Restoration meant one thing to the writer of *Pilgrim's Progress*; another to the author of *Absalom and Achitophel*; a third to the Bishop—fat Tom Spratt—who composed the first history of the Royal Society; a fourth to the ex-cabin boy who, after rising to be Professor of Anatomy at Oxford and head of Cromwell's Army Medical Corps in Ireland, helped to found that famous body; showed his mettle by accepting a challenge to a duel, on

condition that, since he was short-sighted, it should be fought in a dark cellar, with hatchets as the weapon;[3] and ended as not the least among the pioneers of English economic thought. A reader, if such a person exists, of the philosophical poem by Erasmus Darwin—the grandfather of the famous Charles—on the technological triumphs of his day, who turns from it to the work in which, just over a decade later, Southey described their seamy side, may be pardoned for failing to realize that the same people and period are depicted in both.[4] The first of the five years immediately preceding the second Reform Act saw the work by Ruskin on the social ethics of his fellow-countrymen, the publication of which in the *Cornhill Magazine* was discontinued by Thackeray, then its editor, on the ground that the moral sentiments of his sensitive readers were outraged by it; the third, the novel in which the immortal Mr. Podsnap announced the great truth that "this island is blessed, Sir, by Providence, to the direct exclusion of such other countries as there may happen to be"; the fifth, the classic in which the constitution of the chosen people was expounded by Bagehot, not without some hints, developed more at length in a later edition, that its best days might be over.[5]

The facts which elicited these diverse responses were obviously, in some sense, the same; but, not less obviously, they break into a hundred different facets. In order to understand the situations composed by clusters of them, it is necessary to undertake a voyage of circumnavigation, which enables the ambiguous mass to be seen and probed from different angles. Clever *litterateurs*, all glitter and fizz, are the worst company in which to make it; great authors are the best. Experiencing the agonies of the *mêlée*, but with the strength to stand above it, they grasp as a whole realities which those in the line see only in fragments, and often—battles being, in this respect, what they always

have been and always must be—do not see at all. More important, their vision is sharpened by an emotional receptiveness which lesser mortals lack. All branches of history present enigmas, which only labour can unravel. The sciolism which finds in infallible formulae of universal application a painless alternative to thought need not be considered, but even honest work is not without its snares. The analogy of some other sciences make it natural that some of those engaged in history should be pre-occupied, at times to excess, with questions of change, development and causation. That approach has its uses, but to view either an individual or a society primarily as a problem is to make certain of misconceiving them. Sympathy is a form of knowledge. It cannot be taught. It can only be absorbed by association with those the depth of whose natures has enabled them most profoundly to feel and most adequately to express it.

Generalities are unconvincing. Let me endeavour to illustrate these commonplaces by glancing for a moment at the society and literature of a period whose epic quality no later discoveries or re-interpretations are likely to impair. The duration to be assigned to the Elizabethan age varies with the aspect of its existence which is under consideration. It is not the same in international as in domestic politics. In literature it is longer than in either; and, as in the case of the Victorian era, the resemblance between the opening and concluding phases of the reign from which it takes its name are less marked than the contrasts. A mood, an attitude of mind, an outlook on life, can hardly be dated. If, however, a watershed is sought at which earlier doubts of the survival of the *régime* melt into the buoyant self-confidence of its middle years, the collapse, at the end of its first decade, of the last of the feudal and Catholic revolts may be regarded as marking it. It is at some point in the quarter of a century following that defeat

of the old England by the new—the period when stability is assured and tempers, later to be spoiled by depression, the Irish fiasco and the war-taxation resulting from it, not yet set on edge—that the Elizabethan high noon may be said to begin. The phrase itself is of recent origin; but the sentiment expressed by it is not a modern idealization. Within a generation of the death of the Queen, the good days that ended with her were already a legend, to which antagonists soon to be at each others' throats continued to appeal at the moment when they were destroying the conditions that had produced it. The constitutional proprieties of the majestic past were to be invoked by Hyde; its sage, paternal authoritarianism by Wentworth; its anti-Spanish foreign policy, when that policy was out of date, by the house of Commons, and, later, by Cromwell; the success of its business diplomacy by the chief of the export kartels which spoke for the City; its conservative social reconstruction by the few who voiced the feelings of peasants and craftsmen; its indulgence to buccaneering and the non-commercial virtues by country gentlemen fretting for the golden days before, as one of them wrote, "peace and law had beggared us all".[6] The loftiest achievements of the literary movement fall outside the reign in which it began; but the 'eighties, with Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie* and Marlowe's tragedies, are its magnificent youth; while the appearance in the same decade of Camden's *Britannia* and Hakluyt's *Voyages*, and, in the first year of the next, of the first three books of *The Faerie Queene*, reflects the mood of a generation conscious of having done some things worth remembering. When posterity speaks of the Elizabethan age, it is commonly, I suppose, that dazzling outburst of artistic genius that the words first recall.

Legends are apt to be fallacious in detail and true in substance. If the England of Elizabeth has a title to its

reputation, the secret of its charm is not to be found in regions where a generation more refined might be disposed first to seek it. It is not humanity; for, judged by the standards of any period less debased than our own, its brutality was shocking. It flogged and branded the unhappy people whom poverty compelled to take the roads. In matters such as Catholic propaganda, where the safety of the state was thought to be at stake, it used torture without compunction. It practised, on occasion, a calculated atrocity in its treatment of the Irish. In England itself, the Northern rising had as its sequel, not only the punishment of great offenders, but an attempt to strike terror by mass executions of humble followers. Its long suit, again, was not enlightenment. It is needless to speak of its popular superstitions, sometimes innocent and graceful, sometimes barbarous; it is sufficient to recall that the view of the universe which appealed to many able and high-minded men as an improvement on them was that associated with the theology of Calvin. A forbearing and pacific spirit was not among its ornaments. Tempers were hasty; knives loose in the sheath. If, at home, private wars had ceased, private vendettas had not; while, abroad, the heroes of the maritime epic were justly denounced by their victims as pirates. Nor, finally, were saintliness and a reverence for it, which have redeemed some harsh ages, qualities much in esteem. A hard materialism, which saw the world in terms of title-deeds, rent-rolls and profits, was not a vice confined to worldlings. It had conspicuous devotees, not only, as would be expected, in business and at Court, but among the children of light on the episcopal bench.

If, therefore, a man has a taste for heavy shadows, he need not run short of paint. Yet, whatever the impropriieties of the magician, his spell somehow works. When everything has been said—and much more might be said