

#### IV. BRAINTREE, BOCKING, AND THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD

Will the war be followed by a period of great distress, social disorder and a revolution in Europe, or shall we pull through the crisis without violent disaster? May we even hope that Great Britain will step straight out of the war into a phase of restored and increasing welfare?

Like most people, I have been trying to form some sort of answer to this question. My state of mind in the last few months has varied from a considerable optimism to profound depression. I have met and talked to quite a number of young men in khaki--ex-engineers, ex-lawyers, ex-schoolmasters, ex-business men of all sorts--and the net result of these interviews has been a buoyant belief that there is in Great Britain the pluck, the will, the intelligence to do anything, however arduous and difficult, in the way of national reconstruction. And on the other hand there is a certain stretch of road between Dunmow and Coggeshall....

That stretch of road is continually jarring with my optimistic thoughts. It is a strongly pro-German piece of road. It supports allegations against Great Britain, as, for instance, that the British are quite unfit to control their own affairs, let alone those of an empire; that they are an incompetent people, a pig-headedly stupid people, a wasteful people, a people incapable of realising that a man who tills his field badly is a traitor and a weakness to his country....

Let me place the case of this high road through Braintree (Bocking intervening) before the reader. It is, you will say perhaps, very small beer. But a straw shows the way the wind blows. It is a trivial matter of road metal, mud, and water-pipes, but it is also diagnostic of the essential difficulties in the way of the smooth and rapid reconstruction of Great Britain--and very probably of the reconstruction of all Europe--after the war. The Braintree high road, I will confess, becomes at times an image of the world for me. It is a poor, spiritless-looking bit of road, with raw stones on one side of it. It is also, I perceive, the high destiny of man in conflict with mankind. It is the way to Harwich, Holland, Russia, China, and the whole wide world.

Even at the first glance it impresses one as not being the road that would satisfy an energetic and capable people. It is narrow for a high road, and in the middle of it one is checked by an awkward bend, by cross-roads that are not exactly cross-roads, so that one has to turn two blind corners to get on eastward, and a policeman, I don't know at what annual cost, has to be posted to nurse the traffic across. Beyond that point one is struck by the fact that the south side is considerably higher than the north, that storm water must run from the south side to the north and lie there. It does, and the north side has recently met the trouble by putting down raw flints, and so converting what would be a lake into a sort of flint pudding. Consequently one drives one's car as much as possible on the south side of this road. There is a suggestion of hostility and repartee between north and south side in

this arrangement, which the explorer's inquiries will confirm. It may be only an accidental parallelism with profounder fact; I do not know. But the middle of this high road is a frontier. The south side belongs to the urban district of Braintree; the north to the rural district of Bocking.

If the curious inquirer will take pick and shovel he will find at any rate one corresponding dualism below the surface. He will find a Bocking water main supplying the houses on the north side and a Braintree water main supplying the south. I rather suspect that the drains are also in duplicate. The total population of Bocking and Braintree is probably little more than thirteen thousand souls altogether, but for that there are two water supplies, two sets of schools, two administrations.

To the passing observer the rurality of the Bocking side is indistinguishable from the urbanity of the Braintree side; it is just a little muddier. But there are dietetic differences. If you will present a Bocking rustic with a tin of the canned fruit that is popular with the Braintree townfolk, you discover one of these differences. A dustman perambulates the road on the Braintree side, and canned food becomes possible and convenient therefore. But the Braintree grocers sell canned food with difficulty into Bocking. Bocking, less fortunate than its neighbour, has no dustman apparently, and is left with the tin on its hands. It can either bury it in its garden--if it has a garden--take it out for a walk wrapped in paper and drop it quietly in a ditch, if

possible in the Braintree area, or build a cairn with it and its predecessors and successors in honour of the Local Government Board (President £5,000, Parliamentary Secretary £1,500, Permanent Secretary £2,000, Legal Adviser £1,000 upward, a total administrative expenditure of over £300,000 ...). In death Bocking and Braintree are still divided. They have their separate cemeteries....

Now to any disinterested observer there lies about the Braintree-Bocking railway station one community. It has common industries and common interests. There is no octroi or anything of that sort across the street. The shops and inns on the Bocking side of the main street are indistinguishable from those on the Braintree side. The inhabitants of the two communities intermarry freely. If this absurd separation did not exist, no one would have the impudence to establish it now. It is wasteful, unfair (because the Bocking piece is rather better off than Braintree and with fewer people, so that there is a difference in the rates), and for nine-tenths of the community it is more or less of a nuisance.

It is also a nuisance to the passing public because of such inconvenience as the asymmetrical main road. It hinders local development and the development of a local spirit. It may, of course, appeal perhaps to the humorous outlook of the followers of Mr. G.K. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc, who believe that this war is really a war in the interests of the Athanasian Creed, fatness, and unrestricted drink against science, discipline, and priggishly keeping fit enough to join

the army, as very good fun indeed, good matter for some jolly reeling ballad about Roundabout and Roundabout, the jolly town of Roundabout; but to anyone else the question of how it is that this wasteful Bocking-Braintree muddle, with its two boards, its two clerks, its two series of jobs and contracts, manages to keep on, was even before the war a sufficiently discouraging one.

It becomes now a quite crucial problem. Because the muddle between the sides of the main road through Bocking and Braintree is not an isolated instance; it is a fair sample of the way things are done in Great Britain; it is an intimation of the way in which the great task of industrial resettlement that the nation must face may be attempted.

It is--or shall I write, "it may be"?

That is just the question I do not settle in my mind. I would like to think that I have hit upon a particularly bad case of entangled local government. But it happens that whenever I have looked into local affairs I have found the same sort of waste and--insobriety of arrangement. When I started, a little while back, to go to Braintree to verify these particulars, I was held up by a flood across the road between Little Easton and Dunmow. Every year that road is flooded and impassable for some days, because a bit of the affected stretch is under the County Council and a bit under the Little Easton Parish Council, and they cannot agree about the contribution of the latter. These things bump against the most unworldly. And when one goes up the scale from the

urban district and rural district boundaries, one finds equally crazy county arrangements, the same tangle of obstacle in the way of quick, effective co-ordinations, the same needless multiplicity of clerks, the same rich possibilities of litigation, misunderstanding, and deadlocks of opinion between areas whose only difference is that a mischievous boundary has been left in existence between them. And so on up to Westminster. And to still greater things....

I know perfectly well how unpleasant all this is to read, this outbreak at two localities that have never done me any personal harm except a little mud-splashing. But this is a thing that has to be said now, because we are approaching a crisis when dilatory ways, muddle, and waste may utterly ruin us. This is the way things have been done in England, this is our habit of procedure, and if they are done in this way after the war this Empire is going to smash.

Let me add at once that it is quite possible that things are done almost as badly or quite as badly in Russia or France or Germany or America; I am drawing no comparisons. All of us human beings were made, I believe, of very similar clay, and very similar causes have been at work everywhere. Only that excuse, so popular in England, will not prevent a smash if we stick to the old methods under the stresses ahead. I do not see that it is any consolation to share in a general disaster.

And I am sure that there must be the most delightful and picturesque reasons why we have all this overlapping and waste and muddle in our

local affairs; why, to take another example, the boundary of the Essex parishes of Newton and Widdington looks as though it had been sketched out by a drunken man in a runaway cab with a broken spring.

This Bocking-Braintree main road is, it happens, an old Stane Street, along which Roman legions marched to clean up the councils and clerks of the British tribal system two thousand years ago, and no doubt an historian could spin delightful consequences; this does not alter the fact that these quaint complications in English affairs mean in the aggregate enormous obstruction and waste of human energy. It does not alter the much graver fact, the fact that darkens all my outlook upon the future, that we have never yet produced evidence of any general disposition at any time to straighten out or even suspend these fumbling intricacies and ineptitudes. Never so far has there appeared in British affairs that divine passion to do things in the clearest, cleanest, least wasteful, most thorough manner that is needed to straighten out, for example, these universal local tangles. Always we have been content with the old intricate, expensive way, and to this day we follow it....

And what I want to know, what I would like to feel much surer about than I do is, is this in our blood? Or is it only the deep-seated habit of long ages of security, long years of margins so ample, that no waste seemed altogether wicked. Is it, in fact, a hopeless and ineradicable trait that we stick to extravagance and confusion?

What I would like to think possible at the present time, up and down the

scale from parish to province, is something of this sort. Suppose the clerk of Braintree went to the clerk of Bocking and said: "Look here, one of us could do the work of both of us, as well or better. The easy times are over, and offices as well as men should be prepared to die for their country. Shall we toss to see who shall do it, and let the other man go off to find something useful to do?" Then I could believe. Such acts of virtue happen in the United States. Here is a quotation from the New York World of February 15th, 1916:

"For two unusual acts Henry Bruère may be remembered by New York longer than nine days. Early in his incumbency he declared that his office was superfluous and should be abolished, the Comptroller assuming its duties. He now abolishes by resignation his own connection with it, in spite of its \$12,000 salary."

Suppose the people of Braintree and Bocking, not waiting for that lead, said: "But this is absurd! Let us have an identical council and one clerk, and get ahead, instead of keeping up this silly pretence that one town is two." Suppose someone of that 300,000 pounds' worth of gentlemen at the Local Government Board set to work to replan our local government areas generally on less comic lines. Suppose his official superiors helped, instead of snubbing him....

I see nothing of the sort happening. I see everywhere wary, watchful little men, thinking of themselves, thinking of their parish, thinking close, holding tight....



I know that there is a whole web of excuses for all these complicated, wasteful, and obstructive arrangements of our local government, these arrangements that I have taken merely as a sample of the general human way of getting affairs done. For it is affairs at large I am writing about, as I warned the reader at the beginning. Directly one inquires closely into any human muddle, one finds all sorts of reasonable rights and objections and claims barring the way to any sweeping proposals. I can quite imagine that Bocking has admirable reasons for refusing coalescence with Braintree, except upon terms that Braintree could not possibly consider. I can quite understand that there are many inconveniences and arguable injustices that would be caused by a merger of the two areas. I have no doubt it would mean serious loss to So-and-so, and quite novel and unfair advantage to So-and-so. It would take years to work the thing and get down to the footing of one water supply and an ambidextrous dustman on the lines of perfect justice and satisfactoriness all round.

But what I want to maintain is that these little immediate claims and rights and vested interests and bits of justice and fairness are no excuse at all for preventing things being done in the clear, clean, large, quick way. They never constituted a decent excuse, and now they excuse waste and delay and inconvenience less than ever. Let us first do things in the sound way, and then, if we can, let us pet and compensate any disappointed person who used to profit by their being done roundabout instead of earning an honest living. We are beginning to

agree that reasonably any man may be asked to die for his country; what we have to recognise is that any man's proprietorship, interest, claims or rights may just as properly be called upon to die. Bocking and Braintree and Mr. John Smith--Mr. John Smith, the ordinary comfortable man with a stake in the country--have been thinking altogether too much of the claims and rights and expectations and economies of Bocking and Braintree and Mr. John Smith. They have to think now in a different way....

Just consider the work of reconstruction that Great Britain alone will have to face in the next year or so. (And her task is, if anything, less than that of any of her antagonists or Allies, except Japan and Italy.) She has now probably from six to ten million people in the British Isles, men and women, either engaged directly in warfare or in the manufacture of munitions or in employments such as transit, nursing, and so forth, directly subserving these main ends. At least five-sixths of these millions must be got back to employment of a different character within a year of the coming of peace. Everywhere manufacture, trade and transit has been disorganised, disturbed or destroyed. A new economic system has to be put together within a brief score or so of weeks; great dislocated masses of population have to be fed, kept busy and distributed in a world financially strained and abounding in wounded, cripples, widows, orphans and helpless people.

In the next year or so the lives of half the population will have to be fundamentally readjusted. Here is work for administrative giants, work

for which no powers can be excessive. It will be a task quite difficult enough to do even without the opposition of legal rights, haggling owners, and dexterous profiteers. It would be a giant's task if all the necessary administrative machinery existed now in the most perfect condition. How is this tremendous job going to be done if every Bocking in the country is holding out for impossible terms from Braintree, and every Braintree holding out for impossible terms from Bocking, while the road out remains choked and confused between them; and if every John Smith with a claim is insisting upon his reasonable expectation of profits or dividends, his reasonable solatium and compensation for getting out of the way?

I would like to record my conviction that if the business of this great crisis is to be done in the same spirit, the jealous, higgling, legal spirit that I have seen prevailing in British life throughout my half-century of existence, it will not in any satisfactory sense of the phrase get done at all. This war has greatly demoralised and discredited the governing class in Great Britain, and if big masses of unemployed and unfed people, no longer strung up by the actuality of war, masses now trained to arms and with many quite sympathetic officers available, are released clumsily and planlessly into a world of risen prices and rising rents, of legal obstacles and forensic complications, of greedy speculators and hampered enterprises, there will be insurrection and revolution. There will be bloodshed in the streets and the chasing of rulers.

There will be, if we do seriously attempt to put the new wine of humanity, the new crude fermentations at once so hopeful and so threatening, that the war has released, into the old administrative bottles that served our purposes before the war.

I believe that for old lawyers and old politicians and "private ownership" to handle the great problem of reconstruction after the war in the spirit in which our affairs were conducted before the war is about as hopeful an enterprise as if an elderly jobbing brick-layer, working on strict trade-union rules, set out to stop the biggest avalanche that ever came down a mountain-side. And since I am by no means altogether pessimistic, in spite of my qualmy phases, it follows that I do not believe that the old spirit will necessarily prevail. I do not, because I believe that in the past few decades a new spirit has come into human affairs; that our ostensible rulers and leaders have been falling behind the times, and that in the young and the untried, in, for example, the young European of thirty and under who is now in such multitudes thinking over life and his seniors in the trenches, there are still unsuspected resources of will and capacity, new mental possibilities and new mental habits, that entirely disturb the argument--based on the typical case of Bocking and Braintree--for a social catastrophe after the war.

How best can this new spirit be defined?

It is the creative spirit as distinguished from the legal spirit; it is

the spirit of courage to make and not the spirit that waits and sees and claims; it is the spirit that looks to the future and not to the past. It is the spirit that makes Bocking forget that it is not Braintree and John Smith forget that he is John Smith, and both remember that they are England.

For everyone there are two diametrically different ways of thinking about life; there is individualism, the way that comes as naturally as the grunt from a pig, of thinking outwardly from oneself as the centre of the universe, and there is the way that every religion is trying in some form to teach, of thinking back to oneself from greater standards and realities. There is the Braintree that is Braintree against England and the world, giving as little as possible and getting the best of the bargain, and there is the Braintree that identifies itself with England and asks how can we do best for the world with this little place of ours, how can we educate best, produce most, and make our roads straight and good for the world to go through.

Every American knows the district that sends its congressman to Washington for the good of his district, and the district, the rarer district, that sends a man to work for the United States. There is the John Smith who feels toward England and the world as a mite feels toward its cheese, and the John Smith who feels toward his country as a sheep-dog feels toward the flock. The former is the spirit of individualism, "business," and our law, the latter the spirit of socialism and science and--khaki.... They are both in all of us, they

fluctuate from day to day; first one is ascendant and then the other.

War does not so much tilt the balance as accentuate the difference. One rich British landowner sneaks off to New York State to set up a home there and evade taxation; another turns his mansion into a hospital and goes off to help Serbian refugees. Acts of baseness or generosity are contagious; this man will give himself altogether because of a story of devotion, this man declares he will do nothing until Sir F.E. Smith goes to the front. And the would-be prophet of what is going to happen must guess the relative force of these most impalpable and uncertain things.

This Braintree-Bocking boundary which runs down the middle of the road is to be found all over the world. You will find it in Ireland and the gentlemen who trade on the jealousies of the north side and the gentlemen who trade on the jealousies of the south. You will find it in England among the good people who would rather wreck the Empire than work honestly and fairly with Labour. There are not only parish boundaries, but park boundaries and class and sect boundaries. You will find the Bocking-Braintree line too at a dozen points on a small scale map of Europe.... These Braintree-Bocking lines are the barbed-wire entanglements between us and the peace of the world. Against these entanglements in every country the new spirit struggles in many thousands of minds. Where will it be strongest? Which country will get clear first, get most rapidly to work again, have least of the confusion and wrangling that must in some degree occur everywhere? Will any country go altogether to pieces in hopeless incurable discord?

Now I believe that the answer to that last question is "No." And my reason for that answer is the same as my reason for believing that the association of the Pledged Allies will not break up after the war; it is that I believe that this war is going to end not in the complete smashing up and subjugation of either side, but in a general exhaustion that will make the recrudescence of the war still possible but very terrifying.

Mars will sit like a giant above all human affairs for the next two decades, and the speech of Mars is blunt and plain. He will say to us all: "Get your houses in order. If you squabble among yourselves, waste time, litigate, muddle, snatch profits and shirk obligations, I will certainly come down upon you again. I have taken all your men between eighteen and fifty, and killed and maimed such as I pleased; millions of them. I have wasted your substance--contemptuously. Now, mark you, you have multitudes of male children between the ages of nine and nineteen running about among you. Delightful and beloved boys. And behind them come millions of delightful babies. Of these I have scarcely smashed and starved a paltry hundred thousand perhaps by the way. But go on muddling, each for himself and his parish and his family and none for all the world, go on in the old way, stick to-your 'rights,' stick to your 'claims' each one of you, make no concessions and no sacrifices, obstruct, waste, squabble, and presently I will come back again and take all that fresh harvest of life I have spared, all those millions that are now sweet children and dear little boys and youths, and I will

squeeze it into red pulp between my hands, I will mix it with the mud of trenches and feast on it before your eyes, even more damnably than I have done with your grown-up sons and young men. And I have taken most of your superfluities already; next time I will take your barest necessities."

So the red god, Mars; and in these days of universal education the great mass of people will understand plainly now that that is his message and intention. Men who cannot be swayed by the love of order and creation may be swayed by the thought of death and destruction.... There, I think, is the overriding argument that will burst the proprietorships and divisions and boundaries, the web of ineffectiveness that has held the world so long. Labour returning from the trenches to its country and demanding promptness, planning, generous and devoted leaderships and organisation, demanding that the usurer and financier, the landlord and lawyer shall, if need be, get themselves altogether out of the way, will have behind its arguments the thought of the enemy still unsubdued, still formidable, recovering. Both sides will feel that. This world is a more illuminated world than 1816; a thousand questions between law and duty have been discussed since then; beyond all comparison we know better what we are doing. I think the broad side of John Smith (and Sir John Smith and John Smith, K.C.) will get the better of his narrow ends--and that so it will be with Jean Dupont and Hans Meyer and the rest of them. There may be riots here and there; there may be some pretty considerable rows; but I do not think there is going to be a chaotic and merely destructive phase in Great Britain or any Western



European country. I cast my guess for reconstruction and not for revolt.