THE WEBBS AND THEIR WORK

By

R. H. TAWNEY

WEBB MEMORIAL LECTURE

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by R. H. TAWNEY

The topic on which I have been asked to speak requires no apology, but I approach it with some diffidence. There are many in my audience who knew the Webbs too well to require an account of them; nor am I sure that the indefatigable lecturers, who are the subject of my remarks, would have enjoyed being turned into the text for a lecture. They submitted patiently to publicity, as to everything else, when the cause required it, and no one knew better, if limelight was the order of the day, what buttons to press; but they were not lovers of honorific ritual. Their air, when the thing was over, was, "There, that's done; now for something serious." I suspect that they would have regarded an address devoted to themselves as among the emotional substitutes for work which they were accustomed to dismiss, in their more frivolous moments, under the name of "religious exercises."

So my sensations are much what they were when, as a youth who had not yet got over his education, I paid my first visit to 41 Grosvenor Road, and was so unfortunate as to depart with the headgear of another guest. I felt, as a more than ordinarily massive bowler settled heavily on my shoulders, a momentary surprise; but I had not yet learned from my hosts that investigation, measurement and verification are among the first duties of man, and I assumed, with the casual optimism of youth, that, though the incubus seemed unfamiliar, it would come all right somehow. It was not till next morning that a scorching letter from Mrs. Webb informed me that I had eloped with the property of one whom I hope it is not disrespectful to describe as taking, in all senses of the expression, an out-size in hats, the then about to be Right Honourable John Burns, over whom at the moment she was casting her flies, and was anxious to retain in a humour to swallow them. The episode confirmed her conviction of the incorrigible incompetence, unreliability, moral laxity and mental imbecility of most products, however insignificant, of the older universities, and took some years to live down. I feel now somewhat the same embarrassment as I experienced then, an embarrassment at once softened and reinforced by later memories, as though Beatrice, her skirts turned back and crouching over the fire, were ejaculating into one ear, "Beware of dilettantism," and Sidney, full-length on the sofa, were murmuring into the other, "Above all, no intimacies."

The latter injunction I propose to follow. In the library of hell a special stack is reserved for those biographies—a vast and dreary host—of great men and women, which throw light on every aspect of their victims' personalities, from their taste in dress to their second cousins' Christian names, except the characteristics in which their greatness consisted. I should be sorry to add another item to it. The Webbs, when off duty, were known to their friends as two sociable people, with a psychological curiosity not too elevated to enjoy gossip, an engaging capacity for laughing at themselves, and an appetite on the part of one partner for physical exercise, defended by
her with arguments, hygienic and ethical, of terrifying cogency, against which the other occasionally rebelled, but always, in my experience, rebelled in vain. They are also, however, historical figures, and figures whose stature increases as their world recedes. They faced great issues, and grappled with them in a great way. They changed thought and action. They founded new institutions and launched ideas which re-made old ones. They conquered for knowledge and made habitable for men departments of social life which, before them, were a trackless jungle. They forced upon national attention the importance of movements which today are a power, but which, till the Webbs' searchlight was turned on them, still awaited recognition; revealed their significance to a public sceptical and often hostile; and charted some segments of their course to their goal. They researched, wrote, agitated, administered and—since only the last stages of legislation take place in Parliament—were not the less legislators because, save for ten years when both of them were over sixty, County Hall and the British Museum saw more of them than the House of Commons.

The study of social institutions with a view to transforming them, which was their special sphere of work, does not lend itself to treatment in terms of the spectacular exploits of extraordinary individuals. But there is authority for the statement that the serpent on the rock is as miraculous, in his own way, as the eagle in the air; and what the Webbs' unflagging war on ignorance, apathy, and prejudice may lack in drama it gains in the impressiveness of positive accomplishment. If a man looks back on the successive chapters of British social history from 1880 to 1930—if he reflects on such movements as Trade Unionism, Co-operation and the rise of the Labour Party; or considers, in another sphere, industrial policy, financial policy, public education and public health, unemployment, the Poor Law, the development of municipal enterprise and Local Government in general; or ponders the advance in civilisation which the changed public attitude to all these subjects represents—he is unlikely, I think, to conclude that the patient labourers ploughed the sands. He will find few problems which they failed to illumine, few abuses against which their blows were not the heaviest struck, and few reforms in which they did not play a decisive, if often a deliberately self-effacing, part. Whatever our individual interests and creeds—whether we are active workers in social movements, or merely students of them, or ordinary citizens concerned for decency, good sense and fair play in the management of our common concerns—we are all their pupils. The authors of such achievements have no need of the small change of reminiscences to perpetuate their memory. The noblest of all titles, they used to say, is that of servant. The legacy, scientific and practical, of their half-century of devoted labour is the monument by which we may most fittingly recall them.

If the work of the Webbs is too massive for biographical gossip, an attempt to provide them with intellectual ancestors is equally superfluous. Historians of political thought are apt to be obsessed with origins and pedigrees, as though ideas were transmitted in the same manner as property, and different attitudes to society and theories about it succeeded each other by direct descent. To most of us, who take our views at second-hand, that procedure may apply. Where creative minds are concerned,
it is absurdly off the mark. Original people are not links in a chain; more often they are breaks in one. Presented with the metaphorical torch which each generation is supposed to hand on to the next, they insist on making certain that it is what it is alleged to be. If it turns out on investigation, as not infrequently it does, to be, not an authentic illuminant, but a smelly taper, they incontinently blow it out, and proceed to replace it with lamps of their own. The Webbs were voracious readers, endowed with memories of embarrassing efficiency, which armed them with precedents for every innovation, and rarely left them at a loss for apt quotations from authors who would have trembled with apprehension at the alarming causes they were cited to support. But they possessed—a quality which all readers should have, and most of us have not—a high degree of resisting power. They took from their predecessors hints which served their purpose, and let the rest slide off them. The clue to their outlook on the world of their day is to be found less in what they absorbed of its prevalent assumptions and fashionable philosophies than in what they ignored or dropped into the dustbin.

Their position is not to be understood, therefore, by analysing it into elements derived from different sources. It was too much their own. It is interesting that Beatrice should have been brought up in an atmosphere compounded of London Society, country houses, and the Big Business which kept both the merry-go-rounds spinning; that she should have mixed from childhood with the scientists and men of letters whom her father, a civilised capitalist, invited to his house; and that the most intimate of her parents’ friends, at whose feet for a time she sat, should have been that forgotten celebrity, Herbert Spencer. It is more significant that at twenty-five she had outgrown him; that, when the sage, whose long suit was not humour, urged her, with kindly obtuseness, to begin her life-work with a study of “the absorbent organs in the leaves, roots and seeds of plants,” she already knew that the subject on which her heart was set was the strange ways of man in commerce with his kind; that, with grandfathers 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 saw the Industrial Revolution and its political sequel, not as a story in books, but as a chapter of her family history; and that the influence which finally clinched her decision to devote her life to research into the social system came, not from books or teachers, but from sympathies aroused and lessons learned on the occasion of a month’s visit to some Lancashire cousins, who, when her own branch of the family had been wafted upwards, had remained operatives at Bacup. It is interesting that Sidney should have been nurtured on the purest milk of Victorian radicalism; that he should have attended lectures on Natural Science by Huxley—an occasion on which, since the course was confined to workers in industry, he put down his trade as that of a wood-carver, on the ground that he would carve if he could—that the only contemporary economist whom he respected should have been Mill, with whose deductions from Ricardo’s theory of rent he later himself did much execution; and that he should have thought that, if a theory of value was necessary to salvation, the article supplied by Jevons was, on the whole, a less unhandy instrument than that of Marx. It is more significant that, at an age when most well-to-do young people have not left the University, he had seen the inside of a
broker's office in the City and of three Government Departments; that his first paper to the Fabian Society, at the age of twenty-six, had the characteristically curt and trenchant title, The Way Out; and that, when offered Liberal constituencies to stop his mouth, he decided that there was more both to be done and to be learned on the L.C.C. than in Parliament.

The truth is that neither of our friends was of the kind which is disposed to take opinions from a master. Each of them independently had gone young through the business of settling accounts with current cant, whether to right or left, which is the necessary preliminary to serious work. Apart from the influence of science, in whose disciplined attack on its problems they saw an example for sociologists, both of them owed more to experience than to the doctrines of the schools. One partner, according to his own account, had been converted to Socialism by a lecturer at Birkbeck College, an otherwise unknown Mr. Smith. As, however, what convinced him of the virtues of nationalisation, and set him agog to propound plans for applying it, was the fatuity of the arguments advanced by Mr. Smith against it, his debt to his teacher was more negative than positive, and he is not an example of the docile disciple. The abandonment by the other of a creed which she described as "agnosticism tempered by individualist economics" was slower and more painful. It had begun, to her own surprise, in the course of her collaboration with Booth in his Life and Labour in London. It had taken place, in all but name, before she had completed her book on Co-operation.

Both possessed the fire at the centre without which great things are not done; but, having made up their minds on first principles, they took their work too seriously to be emotional about it, and there is a sense in which the fact that they were Socialists is less important than the kind of Socialists they were. They looked at facts through plain glass; held that light, not heat, was the world's main need; saw no reason why the devil should have a monopoly of the business virtues; and thought that capitalism was most likely to be brought to terms, not by blowing trumpets round its walls, but by mobilising against it, not only the qualities which, it despised, but also the organising ability and concentrated effort which were its special boast. They regarded the Co-operative Commonwealth neither as a distant Utopia, nor as the inevitable climax of an irresistible evolution, but as an edifice to be built piecemeal by hard, practical labour, an edifice which—since its building was a long-term job—should be begun here and now, and to the erection of which system, method, application, technical skill, a reasonable consideration for the prejudices and susceptibilities of ordinary men and women, and, above all, knowledge, were not less indispensable than enthusiasm and eloquence. Their first contributions to that programme were made when they were under thirty. They were continuing to make them when they were both over eighty.

Their business, as they saw it when they joined forces in 1892, was pioneering on two fronts. The first essential was to know exactly and in detail what required to be done; the second to mobilise the energy to do it, which meant, till the distant day when a Government of their own persuasion should be in power, the education
of public opinion and the instruction of politicians in matters about which both at the time were ill-informed and the latter, when not actively hostile, were commonly indifferent. They approached that task from slightly different angles. Mrs. Webb’s introduction to economic questions had been that of an investigator, not of a propagandist. She joined the Fabian Society in 1893, but a long interval elapsed before she played an active part in it. For a decade following her marriage, she remained primarily a student, though a student who found in the service of social causes the inspiration to her work. Her husband, after ten years in the Colonial Office, to which a generation later he returned as Minister, had been elected to the London County Council in 1892. As chairman of its Technical Education Committee, into whose orbit he contrived to sweep, much to the advantage of the service, almost the whole of London’s higher education, he was a busy administrator, though an administrator with a profound conviction of the dependence of social progress on systematic research and the application of its results. But they saw theory and practice as complementary aspects—the staff-work and operations—of a single campaign. Each laboured unceasingly and simultaneously at both, and both threw their whole selves into each. The London School of Economics, the chief venture of their early years, was designed by them, not as a cloistered college, but as a mundane institution around which should eddy the full tide and roar of London life. The supercilious description of it given me in a more secluded University—“one of those places like Selfridge’s, isn’t it?”—though its hint of financial prosperity is unfortunately unfounded, conveys a suggestion of workman-like realism which the founders of the School, so far from resenting, would have welcomed as a compliment. If, therefore, I touch separately on their literary work and their practical activities, the reason is not that they themselves distinguished between them. It is merely considerations of practical convenience.

The first publications of both the authors appeared in the same year, when, in 1887, one produced the first edition of Facts for Socialists, and the other an article on The Dock Life of East London. The last, a joint-work, The Truth About Soviet Russia, was published in 1942. In the intervening half-century, they were together responsible, usually as partners, for some forty-five volumes, apart from a long list of pamphlets—Webb produced not less than forty-seven for the Fabian Society alone—articles, essays and introductions to books composed by other writers. Their more important works may be classified, perhaps, into five main groups. They include four books on working-class organisation and policy; ten volumes on English Local Government; four substantial works and various shorter pieces on the reform of the Poor Laws; four books—two of them by Sidney alone and two of them by both together—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—the elaborate study of Soviet Communism, and the two shorter books on the same subject which followed it.

Continuous labour by two busy people on so ambitious a scale demanded system and method. Both of them believed in planning, and the industry which they planned first was their own. They were assisted by secretaries, their one extravagance—there was a period, I believe, when they found work for six at once—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, when the Council was in recess, 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 their study of Local Government were even 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 organisations concerned, by obtaining permission to attend in person the meetings of Trade Unions, Trades Councils, Co-operative Societies 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 employers, workers, factory and sanitary inspectors, school board officers, and social agencies of different kinds; had taken lessons in tailoring; and finally, to see how a sweated industry looked from the inside, had obtained employment in a succession of workshops as a “plain trouser hand.” They did not forget the value of oral evidence, or the methods of eliciting it, when the time came for their more massive works. The “method of the interview,” as they called it, added not a little to the realism of the Webbs’ interpretations. To watch a witness undergoing their skilful third degree was sometimes amusing.

To appraise in their totality the contributions of authors so wide in their range and so exhaustive in detail is a task, not for individuals, but for a corps of specialists. Even the layman, however, can hardly fail to be impressed by certain features of their work, which are found in the same degree in no other sociologists. 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 deal with topics of the moment. The common characteristic which sets its stamp on all of them, so that a reader familiar with their writings can tell at a glance whether an anonymous pamphlet is from their mint or not, 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 English Teachers and their Professional Organisations or a volume of 800-odd pages, like The Parish and the County, there is the same patient care in assembling materials.
and the same self-restraint in refusing to suggest conclusions till the evidence has been sifted. Even their slighter books are marked by a wealth of information and a maturity of thought which set them apart from other occasional pieces. The opinions 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.

That quality of their work does not stand alone. It is accompanied by two others, which are even more impressive. The first is an extraordinary gift for illuminating generalisation. The Webbs, for all their wealth of data, were never at the mercy of them. They were at the opposite extreme from the legendary bookworm, and valued facts, not for themselves, but for the meaning to be extracted from them. If discovery is the revelation of significant, but previously unrealised, relations between phenomena, then in their own field they were discoverers, and discoverers whose finds yielded fruit, as well as light. The second characteristic is equally remarkable. It is their power to carry conviction to their readers, and to do so not by pathos, or eloquence, or other literary artifices, but by the weight of massed evidence and a measured force of argument which strikes home to the mind with a kind of inevitability, as though what spoke were the voice, not of two fallible mortals, but of society herself, instructing her children how to learn to live together.

The researches of Miss Potter—as she then was—into sweating and Co-operation, are early cases in point. As a 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 merely 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. The ability to see facts as they are, 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 multiplicity of societies of producers dividing profits among all participants in the business. She showed that, except here and there, the British version of Co-operation meant nothing of the kind. Economic democracy as practised by Co-operators implied neither self-governing workshops nor profit-sharing with employees. It involved—a statement today a platitude, but then a revelation—the supply of goods, and whenever 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 eliminations of profit by the return to the purchaser of surpluses arising between prices and costs.

The same qualities of insight in penetrating realities and of persuasiveness in expounding them were displayed on a broader canvas in their books on Trade Unionism and on Local Government. To appreciate the significance of the former,
they must be seen against the murky background of the age in which they appeared. On the publication of the second of them, in 1897, a reviewer, not more imbecile than most, could write in a journal not otherwise inane that it was regrettable that writers so gifted should have wasted their talents on the investigation of institutions so unimportant as Trade Unions. The observation is memorable, not because it was exceptional, but because it was typical. The right of professional association was secure on the Statute book; but a generation had elapsed without the morals from it being drawn. Public ignorance of the objects and methods of Trade Unions; a prejudice slow to die among professional economists; misrepresentation in the press; persecution by employers outside the staple industries; and a hostility on the part of Courts which they hardly troubled to conceal—these forces combined to produce in the England of the eighteen-nineties an attitude to Organised Labour somewhat resembling that still common down to 1935 in the United States. And deeper depths than that no mortal eye can plumb.

To suggest that this mountainous load of uninformed or interested opposition could have been rolled back by two books, or indeed, by any dynamic less powerful than the will to freedom of those who suffered from it, would be, no doubt, absurd. But what authors could do the Webbs did, and did superbly. They had few earlier 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 of the History of Trade Unionism and of Industrial Democracy was due as much to the spirit in which they were written as to the addition which they made to knowledge. Studiously unemotional in tone, commanding respect by their scholarship, and arguing their case with unanswerable logic, they lowered feverish temperatures and turned on sensationalism a cooling stream of facts. The former showed combinations of wage-earners bargaining collectively as to the terms of their employment to be a concomitant of modern industry as normal, inevitable and permanent as power-driven machinery or an urban civilisation. The latter carried the war into the enemy’s camp. Trade Unionism had been denounced, and was to be denounced again, as an obstacle to economic progress. Trade Unionism, the Webbs retorted, so far from being the enemy of industrial efficiency, was actually its ally. By prescribing minimum standards of employment, which no employer, however hard pressed or unscrupulous, could evade, it diverted competition from exploiting human beings into channels more compatible with social well-being; stimulated management to discover methods of reducing costs by the progressive improvement of machinery and organisation; and promoted the most effective utilisation of the nation's resources by compelling trades which were parasitic, in the sense of using up the energies of the workers in them under conditions incompatible with health and vigour, either to mend their ways or to go out of existence. Few historical or economic works can expect a life of as much as ten years. The Webbs' books on Trade Unionism contain some statements and interpretations which may need, in the light of later work, much of which they inspired, to be qualified or recast. They remain, however, after the lapse of half a century, not only alive, but incomparably the best English books on the subject. That successive generations of readers should have learned to see the world of Organised Labour through the eyes of authors with
the Webbs' profound knowledge of it and faith in its future has been an inestimable service, not only to them, but to the Labour Movement as a whole.

The bearing on contemporary issues of the great study of Local Government from the Revolution to the Reform Bill seems, at first sight, more remote. In reality, if less obvious, it is hardly less direct. The two preceding decades has seen the modernisation of county administration and an impressive expansion of municipal enterprise. The growth of the house-keeping state, as distinct from the police state, could already faintly be discerned. The Webbs' interest had always been concentrated on what they called the "spontaneous under-growth of social tissue," rather than on the more dramatic aspects of political action. It was natural that, once the books on Trade Unionism were out of the way, they should regard the study of Local Government as their next most urgent task. The practical morals for the present which their researches yielded are best stated in the two concluding chapters of Statutory Authorities for Special Purposes—the cheerless title of a great book—with which the students of their ten volumes would be wise to begin. The story, as they tell it, is one, not only of the elaboration of machinery, but of the emergence of new principles. The central theme in their account of the transition from the old order to the new is the transference of authority from little oligarchies of traders and property-owners to representative bodies employing salaried officials to organise the services necessary to health and civilisation for all residents in their areas. It is, in short, the rise of the citizen-consumer as the controlling power in local government. The conclusion agrees so admirably with the Webbs' own philosophy that the reader is half-tempted to believe that their success in producing at the right moment a lively rabbit from the hat must be due to the fact that they first put it there; but, if they did any conjuring, I, at least, have failed to detect the sleight of hand. It is simpler to believe that history was kind enough to confirm their theories, because from the start they based their theories on history.

It belonged to the studies which the Webbs made their own, as well as to their personal convictions, that knowledge and its application should go hand in hand. Their literary work was not the harvest of a life of leisure. It was planned, and should be read, as a product, not only of scholarship, but of the civic temper crusading for great ends. Immediate objectives and tactics naturally changed with changing circumstances; and to recount their activities would require a volume, not a lecture. It is sufficient to say that, from the time of their marriage, and, indeed, before it, down to the twenties of the present century, they were never without some campaign on their hands.

They were not of the generals who rarely see the line, and they took their full share of hard fighting, as well as of staff work. In the nineties, when the London County Council is struggling on to its feet, one partner not only provides it, in The London Programme, with a policy of large-scale municipal socialism, and himself does more than any other individual to carry it out, but attempts, not without some success, to inoculate the Liberal Party with a virus of Fabianism suitably diluted for infants; writes the Minority Report which remains the part best worth reading of the twelve portentous volumes of the Labour Commission; and struggles to convert
the disorderly welter of London colleges into a Peoples' University. The other, in addition to her work for the same causes, and to the continuous research which was the basis of their practical activities, does what one person can to turn Conservative Factory Legislation into something not wholly futile. Both, as the principal authorities among economists on Trade Unionism, labour hard to counter the attack on it of which the Taff Vale judgment fired, if not the opening, the loudest, gun, and in the intervals are floating their child, the London School of Economics, over the shoals which beset its youth.

The early years of the next century were equally strenuous. They saw Webb's tract on The Education Muddle and the Way Out, which supplied the ideas for the Education Act of 1902; and the withdrawal next year by the Government of its preposterous first draft of a bill for London proposing to entrust the service to twenty-eight Borough Councils, before a storm of opposition in the Conservative press—a storm which might have astonished ministers less could they have heard the question which Sidney once put to me: "Did you know that for a week I was editor of The Daily Mail?" They saw also, what was not less important, the launching of the programme for a national minimum of subsistence and civilisation, which contained the germs of a multitude of subsequent policies, some partially carried out, others still awaiting application. Then came the epic labours of Mrs. Webb on the Poor Law Commission of 1905-1909, when she fought the Local Government Board and its allies to a standstill; the two famous reports on the Break-up of the Poor Law and the Prevention of Destitution; and the three years' campaign by herself and her husband to extort action on them from a government whose members disliked their proposals in proportion as they understood them. They had made up their minds at an early stage of the first world war that it could be turned into a watershed, not only in international, but in social, history; and the fourth chapter, which opened in 1915, is not the least crowded. Webb's co-operation with Arthur Henderson on the executive of the Labour Party; his joint-authorship with him of the new constitution of the Party adopted at the Conference of 1918; the two pamphlets from his pen, Labour and Peace and Labour and the New Social Order, the latter a classic which might with advantage be reprinted today; and the magnificent services which he rendered, in the following year, both to the miners and also—if only it had had the wits to realise the fact—to the general public, by his masterly advocacy of nationalisation on the Commission presided over by Lord Sankey, are high landmarks in the development of Socialist policy. Together with the work of Mrs. Webb on the Reconstruction Committee, and on the Committee on Women in Industry, for which she wrote a report that is still not out of date, they stand out from the sterility of those feverish years like oases in a desert.

With the country what it was—and, it may be, still is—to see reforms carried out at the time when they are proposed and in the form in which they are advanced is rarely given to their sponsors, however skillful and pertinacious; but some of the measures launched and championed by the Webbs, if not all that they were meant to be when they left their hands, staggered at last into port. A legal minimum wage in trades once notorious for sweating; the extension of the services of health,
education and pensions on a scale which, inadequate though it is, would thirty years ago have seemed hardly credible; the abolition of the Guardians and the break-up of the Poor Law long after the authorship of the proposal was forgotten; the admission, in principle, of the responsibility of the State for the victims of unemployment; the prevention of mass unemployment itself, long declared to be beyond the wit of man, now blessed by most economists and endorsed in a White Paper; the tardy acquisition by the nation of the most important of minerals, and the prospective nationalisation of a group of key industries—all these and much else had been not only preached by them when there were few to listen, but turned into workable schemes. Before their retirement, they could have pointed, had they been interested in doing so, to that most convincing of compliments which is paid when former opponents claim the credit for measures once denounced by them, and friends dismiss reforms for which formerly they laboured as antiquated trivialities too commonplace to deserve mention.

In reality, there is nothing which would have interested the Webbs less. Two-thirds of their working lives were passed in a world where not only was capitalism firmly seated in the saddle, with its prestige undimmed and its moral unimpaired, but outside small circles, the bare possibility of a practicable alternative to it was regarded as, at best, an interesting speculation. Like the scientist who commands nature by first obeying her, they accepted that situation, with all the limitations and disillusionments it involved, in order to end it. They played to the score; did first things first; if successful at one point, did not pause to congratulate themselves, but hurried on to the next; if blocked in their course by an obstacle, did not waste time in lamentations, but found some other path which turned it. They never, however, lost sight of their destination, or forgot, amid all their preoccupations with the dusty business of the day, what that destination was. Studiously moderate in speech; regular in their habits, and frugal in their expenditure; a model of domestic felicity; Beatrice with a touch of ascetic austerity, as of the lay-sister of some order; Sidney with the air of scientific detachment—as though if suitably fee’d, he not only could, but would, argue any case—which is said to have caused one ingenuous mine-owner to be overheard in 1919 saying sadly to another, “I told you we made a mistake in not hiring that man Webb,” these demure representatives of the bourgeois virtues belonged, in reality, to the dangerous handful of human beings, perhaps half-a-dozen in a generation, who live for an idea. They organised their lives as the servants of a cause for which no labour could be too great, and no task too small.

Between the appearance of Fabian Essays in 1889 and the ’twenties of the present century, the Webbs’ version of Socialism became, it may fairly be said, the characteristic British version. As such, it was naturally honoured with hard knocks, from more than one quarter. An accusation whose validity they 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 powers as past history or present social arrangements may happen to have conferred on them, but “the utmost possible development of faculty” in every human being,
and that liberty in that sense, has law as its mother. In an urban and industrial civilisation, the alternative to planning by a democratic state for the general good is not, they observed, the freedom of every individual to arrange his own affairs as best suits himself. It is 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. In such conditions, the extension of collective action, so far from impairing freedom, is the necessary condition of it.

Nor, again, was their Socialism the unbending skeleton of bloodless formulæ, neatly classified and labelled with exasperating finality, which set successive generations of young lions sniffing nervously and sometimes growling angrily, as at an un-nutritious dinner of dehydrated truth. The four-fold way of the years before 1914 —regulation, communal services, the taxation to extinction of unearned incomes, and a wide variety of different forms of public ownership—continued to summarise not too inadequately the main heads of their programme; but its authors, long after they had acquired the status of an oracle, returning with collective wisdom—"We think"—unambiguous answers to perplexed inquirers, remained personally humbeminded. They did not cease to learn, and later statements of their position revealed concessions both to criticism and to the teaching of events. Under the influence of the gild socialists, they came to give a larger place to the participation in the conduct of nationalised industries of the representatives of the workers than at one time they would have admitted. They were quick to grasp the significance both of the war-time experiments in State-organisation and of the capitalist ramp which insisted on their abolition. More surprising, they underwent a re-birth when they were over seventy. Not being simpletons, they did not suppose that the achievements of the Russian Revolution could be replanted, as they stood, in a different soil and climate; nor were they wholly at ease in the atmosphere created by what they described as "the disease of conformity." But the deliberate adjustment of economic means to social ends; the reliance on science; the glad tidings, in short, of "planned production for community consumption" with which, for ten years after their visit, it was the exhilarating practice of Mrs. Webb to welcome the coming, and speed the parting guest, not only appealed to their intellects, but profoundly stirred their emotions. Whether their chapters on the Soviet economic system are a reliable picture of Russia I have not the knowledge to say. As an account of one type—though not, of course, the only possible type—of planned economy, they are in a class by themselves.

It is of the nature of political thought that much of its best work is topical. It achieves immortality, if at all, not by eschewing the limitations of time and place, but by making them its platform. It is both inevitable and satisfactory that some of the problems with which the Webbs dealt should be now, partly thanks to them, less urgent than they were, and that on others, which occupy today the fore-front of the stage, they should have thrown out pregnant hints, while leaving it to later hands to elaborate and apply them. As is not uncommon in the case of great people, their premises were more important than the particular conclusions which they themselves derived from them. The essence of their work can be simply stated.
It was to reveal the methods by which a political democracy can become, if it pleases, a Socialist democracy.

The fathers of Socialist thought, both British and Continental, had belonged to the pre-democratic era. Their conception of the political strategy required to accomplish the transition to Socialism had taken—inevitably taken—its character from that fact. The Webbs realised, not, indeed, alone, but with an unrivalled comprehension of the full consequences of the change, that Liberalism had created a political tool which Liberals themselves, inhibited both by interests and by doctrines, were incapable of using, but which Socialists could employ for the creation of a Socialist State based on the deliberate choice of the great majority of their fellow-countrymen.

The things necessary to salvation they believed to be two. The first was primarily a matter of the intellect. 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 road. The Webbs were strong where their predecessors had been weak. Prescription without diagnosis appeared to them charlatanism, and diagnosis was a task to which virtuous intentions were less important than hard work and a sound technique. Hence their long list of books on particular topics, and their refusal to formulate a philosophy of Socialism except by way of comment on the specific subject on hand. Hence also their view of the path which Socialists must tread. Their gradualism was not, as was absurdly suggested, the statement of a preference, as though loitering were their favourite foible, 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-year Plan, they had a profound respect. But they were not of the intellectuals who see in the Labour Movement a substitute for the cinema, and who relapse into paroxysms of grief, scorn and indignation at its lamentable indifference to their appetite for melodrama. Believers themselves in persuasion by an appeal to reason, and holding that "morality," as Webb used to say, "is in the nature of things," they were impatient of criticisms without affirmations, refused to preach ideals until they had found a way to realise them, and thought that invention and construction, not eloquence in denunciation, were the root of the matter. Romantic or self-advertising revolutionaries, all rhetoric and blank cartridges, usually bored, and sometimes irritated, them.

The truth that social processes, in order to be controlled, must be known thoroughly and in detail was the Webbs' first legacy to the Movement to which they gave their lives. The second, if less obvious, was not less important. It was the temper and attitude of mind which they brought to the service of it. Trenchancy and good sense, audacity and prudence, the nerve to take risks for great ends and a reasonable adaptability in the choice of means, are not necessarily antithetic. Sad experience suggests, however, that they are not easily run in harness, and that the proud possessors of one set of qualities are too often disposed to proceed instantly.
to stultify it by a resolute refusal to combine it with the other. The Webbs thought that both types of character and mentality are equally indispensable, and themselves united them to an unusual degree.

Like most of us, they would have welcomed the discovery of a short cut to the Cooperative Commonwealth; but they knew too much of Socialist history, contemporary affairs, and the nature of their fellow-countrymen to suppose that that recurrent illusion has any basis in realities. While not of the kind to shrink from drastic action, when circumstances called for it, they were impatient of the pretence that mere emotional demonstrations are either action or drastic. Having made up their mind that Socialism could be made to come in England by the procedure of democratic government—of course, suitably accelerated—and could not be made to come by any other, they were at pains to exemplify in themselves and to encourage in others the mentality and habits which democracy requires. They were consistently unsectarian, insisted that the points on which British Socialists are agreed are both more numerous and more important than those on which they differ, and were tolerant, not only of opponents, but—a more difficult accomplishment—of embarrassing friends, possibly with the reflection that a modicum of imbecility is a necessary ingredient in any party which aspires to be representative. Themselves formidable in debate, they were not of the controversialists to whom any argument is good which brings down its bird. They cared too intensely for the cause to be interested in winning dialectical victories. They took as much pains to make Socialism acceptable to the weaker brethren among their fellow-countrymen as have some of its more voluble exponents to render it repulsive to them.

The Webbs’ belief in democracy, however, was a creed not less exacting, but more exacting, than most more truculent evangels. They did not under-estimate the severity of the struggle which lay before the Labour Movement, and cherished no illusions as to the resourcefulness of its opponents. They knew from experience that the plutocracy consists of agreeable, astute, forcible, self-confident, and, when hard pressed, unscrupulous people; that, if seriously threatened, it will use every piece on the board, political and economic, in the honest belief that it is saving civilisation; and that, in the meantime, one of the trades—by no means the least profitable—of which it is master is lion-taming by kindness. Not the crudities of forcible repression, but flattery, blandishments and caresses, which would ensure, if the animal succumbed to them, that there would be nothing to repress, seemed to them the gravest danger. It was against these arts of seduction that Mrs. Webb, when a minister’s wife, made a characteristic protest, and that her husband, in an article written shortly after he left office, uttered his warning of the perils of “the aristocratic embrace.” Independence of spirit, and a contempt for the discreet, gentlemanly bribes employed to undermine it, were, in short, as essential a part of their testament as the belief in knowledge. They have not done the job for us, but they have given us the tools, both intellectual and moral, with which to do it. It is for us to use them.