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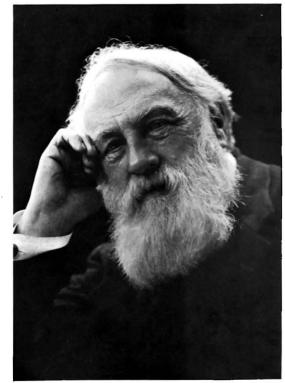
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HYNDMAN: PROPHET OF SOCIALISM

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# HYNDMAN Prophet of Socialism

(1842-1921)

FREDERICK J. GOULD

Author of Biographies of Thomas Paine and Auguste Comts

PREFACE BY
THOMAS KENNEDY, M.P.
(Chief Whip of the Labour Party)

Published on behalf of the HYNDMAN LITERARY COMMITTEE

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THE fact that Revolutionary influences in varied form, economic and political, are to-day at work throughout the whole of the civilised world, can no longer be ignored by the most conservative mind. Nowhere are those influences more highly developed, and more likely to find expression in a Socialist direction, than here in Great Britain. This is, indeed, a remarkable development, since it was only in the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century that the theoretical basis of inevitable and fundamental social change began to be generally understood, and to take the form of an organised political movement. In June, 1881, H. M. Hyndman published England for All, and presented first copies to the members of the Democratic Federation, a body which shortly afterwards became the Social-Democratic Federation. the first Socialist organisation to be formed in this country. For the ideas and much of the matter contained in Chapters II and III of that little book, as the author explained, he was indebted to "the work of a great thinker and original writer which he hoped would shortly be made accessible to the majority of his country-The Social-Democratic Federation still lives. Influenced by its propaganda, the working-class movement in Great Britain very soon began to assume a definite Socialist character and direction. The old Chartist programme and policy of class struggle and independent political action had been revived, and reshaped to meet existing needs and conditions. "Practical remedies for pressing needs" were embodied in a national programme of "stepping-stones" leading up to the establishment of a Co-operative Commonwealth based upon the collective ownership and democratic control of the means of wealth production, distribution and exchange.

In 1864 the International Working Men's Association was founded in London. In 1867, Marx, the "great

thinker and original writer" referred to above, had published the first volumes of Das Capital. Prior to that—in 1847—Marx and Engels had issued their Communist Manifesto. But the "First International" made little or no impression on the mind of the British people, and it was not until the early 'eighties, and mainly through Hyndman's efforts and writings, that the Marxian theory of value, and its revolutionary implications, found popular expression on British platforms.

Had Hyndman then, in his earlier years, been able, as he never was, to appear to suffer fools gladly; had he been in the slightest degree inclined towards political compromise, or the achievement of merely temporary personal success and recognition as an economist; had he even deigned to compete for the doubtful prize of nominal leadership of a political Labour Party, we can only speculate as to what he could or would have accomplished. But his deliberate choice led him in another direction. "If there are," he wrote in 1896, "among educated and thoughtful men two diametrically opposed and incompatible theories in regard to what regulates the exchange value of the commodities which constitute the wealth of our modern society, nothing is to be gained by shading over the antagonism between these conflicting schools of thought. Far better is it, in my opinion, to accentuate the differences which undoubtedly exist on this point, in order that students may be led to think out the whole question for themselves uninfluenced by mere authority, or great reputations, on either side."

Thus he ran, full tilt, against old ideas and prejudices and outworn economic theories. And thus he had to see the formation of the Fabian Society, the Socialist League, and a decade later the Independent Labour Party, all offshoots, although this may not be acknowledged, of the parent body. And thus it is that the estimate of Hyndman, which still persists in certain quarters, is that of an arrogant, quarrelsome, tactless person, unreasonably impatient of the ignorance and in-

competence of his followers, and studiously resolved to dissipate and destroy every opportunity of political leadership that came his way. Such a view of Hyndman and his life work is historically untrue and wholly He never, it is true, sought or received the applause of the foolish. It may be admitted also that for the politician, as such, he had little respect. "Mere Parliament men . . . . trimming their sails to suit the breezes of popularity, or manipulate the votes of the day." So he described them, seeking neither their patronage nor approval. Hyndman neither hesitated nor temporised when pompous phrasemongers or selfseeking and pretentious windbags had to be exposed. His undiluted contempt and scorn of anything that savoured of Liberal-Labour compact or compromise he made no effort to hide. Successful politicians therefore bore him many a grudge, although there are not a few, who still survive in one department of public life or another, who owe to him the direction and knowledge that enabled them to reach a level of self-advertisement and self-assertion that otherwise would have been beyond their reach.

Hyndman's differences with the Fabian Society were neither personal nor temperamental. They were deeprooted and fundamental, and related solely to matters of economic theory and political method, as his lecture on "The Final Futility of Final Utility," the seventh of the series published in 1896 as The Economics of Socialism, clearly shows. His quarrel with William Morris, which led to the formation of the Socialist League, occasioned him deep concern and pain. He called it "the saddest episode in the entire course of my Socialist career." Morris afterwards, as is well known, frankly and fully acknowledged the impetuous error which led Bax, the Avelings and others to secede with him from the Social-Democratic Federation, and a complete reconciliation and understanding followed. "Hyndman was quite right," said Morris on a

Burnley platform, "and I was quite wrong"! Not all of Hyndman's critics and detractors have been so generous.

Take, for example, the school of thought which regards internationalism as synonymous with antinationalism. The Russian Revolution of 1917, and subsequent events in Russia, and still more perhaps the unsettling effects of the Great War, have given a temporary stimulus to a sort of cosmopolitan anarchism which professes to regard national frontiers and national and racial characteristics as more or less accidental, if not indeed undesirable. When, therefore, Czardom fell and, later, the Constituent Assembly, elected by popular suffrage, was dissolved by armed force in order to secure Bolshevist domination of the Government machine, and to prepare the way for the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat," every advocate of "direct action" saw in those events the beginning of a simultaneous, uniform, and world-wide social revolution. That illusion was shortlived. But while it lasted it bred an infinite amount of mischief and did great harm to International Socialist organisation throughout the world, the full effect of which has not yet passed away. Even now, the so-called Communist Party of Russia, and its off-shoots and dependent sections in other countries, including what is called the "Third International," justify Russian interference in the domestic affairs of other countries on the ground that propertyless wage-earners owe allegiance to no country. Did not Marx say: "Workers of the world, unite"? Why then pay the slightest regard to national institutions, customs, traditions, political forms, or economic organisation? Raze them to the ground as the machinery of a capitalist conspiracy to enslave and exploit the workers, and from their ruin there will arise the Parliament of Man, the Federation of the World! Utopian fanaticism could surely go no farther than that. Ardent Internationalist as he was, striving as he always strove for the reign of peace and

goodwill amongst the nations, Hyndman nevertheless clearly saw that social revolutions cannot thus be made to order; that economic ripeness for change and intellectual appreciation on the part of those concerned of the need for change were essential, especially amongst the workers, if changes affecting the whole field of class and property relations were to be peacefully and permanently accomplished. Living in a competitive world market, wage-earners should cultivate close relations and understanding with each other, for purposes of mutual protection against their exploiters. But "the social problems in separate nations must be solved in accordance with the stage of development which each country has reached, and the historic traditions which it has inherited.... In the past I thought that only when all, or nearly all, nations and peoples had reached the comprehension of Social-Democracy, and the economic development of each had embraced the Co-operative Commonwealth of all, could men attain to that higher communal life and fraternal intercommunication towards which humanity, formerly unconsciously, and now in part at least consciously, is tending. This view I hold no longer. On the contrary, I believe it is possible that one people, which is in the latest period of developed capitalism, can so transform their national life as to be able to attain alone to that brotherhood of democratic collectivism or Communism which shall not only enable them to suffice for themselves, but by the social happiness secured for all their citizens shall also serve to lift others to the same level more rapidly than would otherwise be possible. This island, although it has fallen behind both the United States and Germany in the struggle of national capitalist competition, is, nevertheless, further advanced than any other country towards. the desired reconstruction. The reason is that here the working population is wholly divorced from the soil. .... But, it may be argued, if we admit that when all which it is possible to produce within the limits of our

populous island is produced, still there will be necessaries and luxuries that cannot be grown or produced within its limits. Here collective in place of individual exchange at once steps in, and it is certain that a highly organised society could and would produce so vast a surplus for exchange or barter that a higher offer could be made for desirable imports than any non-Socialist country could afford. The waste in all directions, from coal onwards, under our existing system is so great that, apart from infinitely improved methods, the mere cessation of this bootless extravagance would vastly increase national capacity for exchange." Words these of tremendous import to the British people. And to none. perhaps, should they appeal with greater force and with greater reason than to the members of the British Labour Party. They suggest sound national fiscal policy, and they cut right athwart the crude pretensions of Tory Protection and the equally crude doctrines of Liberal Free Trade.

For several years prior to 1914 Hyndman did his best to arouse European peoples, his fellow countrymen in Great Britain, and his Socialist colleagues in particular, to a recognition of the impending danger of war. On the International Socialist Bureau, the German Social-Democratic delegates, relying on what they believed to be the pacific intentions of the Kaiser, even while they were fully aware of the preparations for war on a large scale, by land and sea, refused to believe that any such danger existed. Here at home Hyndman was regarded by many Socialists and Labourists as a jingo and a scaremonger. Unthinking pacifists and equally thoughtless statesmen and politicians, especially Liberal politicians, were unanimous in their desire to prove that even if war did break out. British intervention could and would be prevented out of consideration for our financial and trading interests. Thus a powerful, even if wholly unwarranted, influence was cast in the scales to confirm German militarists in their view that in their policy of

aggression they had nothing to fear from Great Britain. The early days of August, 1914, brought disillusionment. For mere preachers of peace in the industrial or military sense, in a world in which there can be no peace. Hyndman had a hearty and healthy contempt. He regarded them as only a shade less culpable and dangerous than those who were directly responsible for provoking war. With him, when the Great War broke out, neutrality was unthinkable, and while he maintained throughout his abhorrence of militarism and war, he at the same time faced the realities of the world war and came to the conclusion that while capitalism "standing on its own demerits" was bad enough, capitalism dominated by German Junkers would be infinitely more dangerous to the cause of human progress. For that reason alone, had there been no other, he refused to associate himself with British Socialists and Labourists who, in their "ecstacy of pacifism," sought to help the cause of Peace by means of a strike in the British industries engaged in the production of the munitions of war, regardless of the fact that no corresponding restrictions were likely to be imposed on the industries engaged in the production of munitions on the side of the Central Powers! Pro-Germans he called them, and pro-Germans in effect they were, whatever their intention. But Hyndman had other reasons for his fervent hope that German militarism and Imperialism would suffer a decisive defeat. Unrelenting in his opposition to British Imperialism and aggression as he had always been, he was equally unrelenting in his opposition to German militarist Imperialism. Victory for the Central Powers would mean, he saw, German domination of Europe, and the permanent menace of war till that domination ended. Realist as he was, he viewed the war as a horrible fact, and not merely as a subject of pious exhortation and prayers for peace. Looking ahead he saw the collective machinery and organisation, State-owned and State-controlled, brought into being to meet an emer-

gency for which private enterprise was totally inadequate, used, when the war ended, by a united, disciplined army of free citizens for the purposes of the peaceful national organisation of the British Co-operative Commonwealth. He sadly under-estimated the capacity of his fellow-countrymen for patient endurance of social wrong, and over-estimated their capacity to claim their due share of the fruits of victory.

Regarding direct action, as he did, as a method which pushed to a conclusion involved the risk, if not the certainty, of civil war, and firmly believing, as he did, in the possibility of solving every national and social problem through the will and consent of the majority, expressed politically by legal enactment, the purely negative policy of the industrial strike, sectional or general, had for Hyndman no attraction. The propagandist value of a stoppage of work in order to resist the imposition of intolerable conditions, not otherwise curable, he appreciated. As an expression and evidence of class struggle he understood that the right to stop work was practically the only economic distinction between the modern wage-earner and the chattel-slave. But a mere stoppage of work, if entered upon in order to achieve a fundamental change in social and property relations, he looked upon as unnecessary, dangerous and futile. Of the idea of a General Strike in this connection, his view is definite and clear.—

"It must be noted that every General Strike yet attempted in Belgium, France and Sweden has completely failed. This would be by no means a conclusive argument against it, if it were the only objection. The U.K. differs from all these nations, and from every other nation, as has already been pointed out, in one very important particular. The whole of the working classes of England, Scotland and Wales are divorced from the soil. There is no Conservative peasant population as there is everywhere else. . . . The agricultural

labourers sympathise with and are impelled by the same motives as the wage-earners in the towns. . . . . It cannot be doubted, however, that if direct action took so wide a sweep as is contemplated, involving the cessation of work in the mines, on the railways, at the docks, wharves and elsewhere, this would almost certainly lead to civil war. There may easily then arise differences between the strikers themselves; for it is by no means certain that men who are too careless and slow to vote for their own class champions would develop a wholesouled eagerness to fight for themselves or their class. Starvation is apt to turn even enthusiasts for overthrow into partisans of a military dictatorship. No Government, also, would or could surrender at once to such an organised arrest of the functions of the whole national life without a desperate effort, in which all the resources of civilisation would be used! Is it advisable even to threaten to resort to such desperate tactics, when the alternative of political action is still open? Is it well to risk a defeat, which might throw back for a whole generation that steady advance towards the greatest economic and social revolution the world has ever seen. a revolution which the intending strikers are convinced is now inevitable within a calculable period? . . . . In short, direct action, though it may be useful in argument as a possibility, leads to anarchy when resorted to in actual fact, and unnecessarily risks defeat. action is a continuous education and training for administration of affairs."

In addition to England for All (1881) and The Historical Basis of Socialism in England (1883), his published works include The Economics of Socialism (1896); The Record of an Adventurous Life (1911); Further Reminiscences (1912); Life of Clemenceau (1919); The Evolution of Revolution (1920); and The Awakening of Asia (1920). No student of economic science can afford to be ignorant of this rich product of

Hyndman's genius. To the practical politician his works are of inestimable value, in this transition period. Now, more than at any time, in order to avoid confusion, disunity and disappointment, men and women charged with the responsibilities and endowed with the opportunities that are ours, should read the lessons of the past and thus be able to avoid the pitfalls of the future.

It is always a difficult matter to measure and value the extent to which great men, through their knowledge, initiative and vigour, really determine the political events in which they play a part. It may be that they are but the selected instruments through which currents and tendencies, stronger than themselves, are expressed. Whether that be so or not, none will deny that Hyndman was a great Englishman. There can be no manner of doubt as to his place in history as the Father of British Social-Democracy; a pioneer in the cause of British working-class political independence; the foremost British exponent of Marxian economics; an orator of the first rank; and a writer with powers of clear, fluent, and forcible expression, unsurpassed by any other writer of his time.

THOMAS KENNEDY.

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