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YES AND ALBERT THOMAS
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by

E. J. PHELAN

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E. J. P.

April 1936.
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Introduction

Albert Thomas was certainly one of the significant figures of our time. It is to be hoped, therefore, that some day a biographer will be found who will present us with a balanced account of his achievements and a vivid portrait of his impressive personality.

Meanwhile those who worked with him can do something in the way of providing or preserving raw material for future biographical use. The present volume is intended to be a modest effort in that direction and it has, perhaps, a special justification. As a journalist, a politician, a Member of the French Cabinet, and an Ambassador, Albert Thomas' work can be appraised against a known background and measured by common standards. As the first Director of the International Labour Office his position was unique, and there are no comparisons that will serve. That his achievement in this difficult post was a notable one is generally admitted, but his real success in this sphere can be only partially measured, if at all, by official records of Conferences held, Conventions adopted, and ratifications obtained. Such records must be weighed, or rather weighted, in the light of the creative effort that preceded them and the difficulties which it had to overcome.

Albert Thomas was, indeed, much more to the International Labour Office than its successful manager. He came, in fact, to be identified with it to a degree which made it difficult for many
people to distinguish between the institution and its Director, and it is possible that the reader may feel that this volume leads him to the same conclusion. If so, it will have succeeded in recreating something of the impression that Albert Thomas made in life on those with whom he came in contact. That impression was a sincere tribute to Albert Thomas' tremendous and all-pervading personality. But it was misleading and unjust. It obscured Albert Thomas' constructive gifts, and it ignored the rôle and the contribution of certain members of the Governing Body, in particular of its Chairman, Arthur Fontaine, and of Harold Butler, the Deputy Director of the Office. In any history of the International Labour Office their names will inevitably find frequent and honourable mention. In the present volume they appear only incidentally, since what is attempted is a portrait of Albert Thomas and not a history of the I.L.O.

But though others made outstanding contributions to the inception and development of the Office, Albert Thomas' contribution had a special quality and a special value; and it is a sound though inaccurate popular instinct which credits him with its creation. As a matter of fact, Albert Thomas had no hand in planning the International Labour Organisation nor in bringing it into being. Barnes, Butler and Delevingne built the ship, and sound and seaworthy she proved. But Albert Thomas was the Captain chosen to take her on her voyage across uncharted seas. Men keep in their memory Columbus and not the shipwrights who fashioned and caulked the Santa Maria. While the name of Columbus inevitably suggests America, it is not from his discoveries that we learn to know and appreciate the man. Albert Thomas' biographer will find plenty of records of cargoes brought safely to port. But he will find little of the

1'1 say that without the present Director, in my opinion, this Organisation would be dead' (Mr. Gemmill, South African Employers' Delegate, speaking in the discussion on the Director's Report at the xvth session of the International Labour Conference, 1931).
perils of the voyage, little of the difficulties of navigation, little—and how could he?—of non-existent charts. So it may be of some value to have, in however fragmentary a form, some of the recollections and impressions of a member of the crew. This volume pretends to be no more. To tell the full story of Albert Thomas and the International Labour Office would involve reviewing the social policy and development of half the countries in the world during more than a decade. Nothing remotely resembling such an ambitious task is here undertaken. Neither is any attempt made to give an account of the thirty odd Conventions which the Conference adopted under his leadership, nor the many hundreds of decisions which he secured from the Governing Body. Here will be found only some indication of what he was aiming at, and how he conceived and organised the instrument which was given into his charge. Even within this limited field no claim is made to completeness. All that has been attempted is to show the nature of his effort, the kind of obstacles he had to overcome, and to try to give some idea of his ideals and personality in the framework in which they were made manifest to his staff.

One matter has, however, been dealt with in fairly complete fashion, and that is the story of how Albert Thomas came to the International Labour Office. He told the story himself as follows:

‘The Washington Conference had been convened. It was at that moment that my friends, the French workers, came to me and asked me if I would be a candidate for the Directorship of the International Labour Office. They desired to seek support for my nomination among their comrades from other countries and even from employers and governments. They went to Washington with this intention and when... the Governing Body met they put forward my candidature... I was provisionally elected by eleven votes against nine. The eleven votes in my favour were the votes of six workers and five employers.'
A telegram informed me of this result, and a telegram from the workers urged that nevertheless I should accept. I accepted. The Governing Body met in Paris in January 1920, and on this occasion the governments were pleased to ratify my appointment unanimously.\footnote{Speech at Bucharest, 1930.}

Albert Thomas' account is, of course, correct, but it is more discreet than complete. It was not thus easily that even the first and simplest steps towards setting up an international organisation could be taken, and since it is possible to tell the story more completely, I have ventured to do so. It provides a sample of the kind of difficulties which the creation of the new international machinery had to encounter. These difficulties are not easy to describe or appreciate in the more complicated forms in which they constantly threatened every step of the new Organisation throughout its early years. It is worth while, therefore, to be able to see them clearly revealed in connection with one simple issue.

The detailed story of Albert Thomas' appointment also serves incidentally to warn the reader of certain prejudices which require no apology. I came into the international service after some years in the British Civil Service. I brought with me, I hope, some of the qualities which British civil servants are supposed to acquire. I certainly brought many of their prejudices. I did not find it easy to accept other methods which seemed to me repugnant to some of the principles which in the British service were regarded as fundamental. And in particular I had a sane and holy horror of administrative methods which savoured of political inspiration or interference. Perhaps my experience was insufficient to enable me to realise that even in England the greatest civil servants must be to some extent politicians. Perhaps, though more certainly, I did not realise sufficiently the difference between the smooth and perfect running of the wheels of the English service in their well-worn
grooves, and the fact that the wheels could not be left to guide themselves where there were no grooves. Perhaps, heretical thought as it would have seemed to me then, in an era of rapidly changing conditions, even England cannot afford grooves, and her tried and proved administrative methods do not represent the last word and a final perfection. Be that as it may, Albert Thomas had very definite ideas of his own as to the administrative methods which the Office should apply. There was bound to be conflict, and, though out of the conflict came concessions on both sides and the beginning of an international technique of administration, the process was neither rapid nor easy. That fact is proof that those of us whose ideas differed from his did not just succumb to his charm, nor wilt before his overwhelming personality, nor surrender before the assaults of his indefatigable energy. If little by little we came to the conclusion that even when he seemed most wrong there was quite a possibility that he might be right, it was that the conviction was steadily born in us that in him the Organisation had found its destined leader, and that his vision of its poten-
tialities was both profound and prophetic. With none more than with those who served under him from day to day is his reputation more secure. In attaching a value to their testimony it should not be forgotten that their tribute is no facile response, such as he could constantly obtain from a great audience, but something that grew out of an original attitude of criticism, misgiving and even sometimes distrust.

Here is one such testimony. That it has taken the form of a rather personal narrative is to be explained in part by the belief that it might thus be rendered more readable, but probably more truly by the fact that it was easier to write that way. It is naturally through the medium of personal experiences that those who worked with Albert Thomas approach his memory. In recounting such experiences I have made no effort to arrange
them in chronological order where strict chronological order is not important. They have been used as they suggested themselves to me while writing, as apt to illustrate either a trait of Albert Thomas' character or a feature of the background against which he worked.

There will be found in the following pages not only some account of Albert Thomas at the International Labour Office but also some discussion of certain problems of international administration. They have been stated in terms which it is hoped will prove easily intelligible to the general reader. They are, in fact, an inevitable element in any attempt to describe or appreciate Albert Thomas' achievement. But the discussion of them, such as it is, should be accompanied by a note of warning. The reader will find French and British procedure sometimes contrasted, and almost always to the advantage of the latter. He must not assume that the description of either is in any sense authoritative. It was in the main French and British procedure which had to be conciliated or welded in the early stages of the Office's existence. Where they are compared in the present narrative the comparison is made on such smattering of knowledge as the author possessed at the time. No doubt authorities on the respective administrative methods of these two great countries might have stated their practice more accurately, perhaps even quite differently. But the problem of conflicting procedures and conceptions of organisation was not laid for solution before experts or authorities. It had to be solved ambulando, or rather currendo. I have described the difficulties, the apprehensions and the misunderstandings of those early days as my limited knowledge apprehended them. It is only as to what was the practice ultimately evolved that I can pretend to speak with any authority, and even there I can only bear witness to the facts and must not be taken as expressing any final judgment. The problem of the working of international
institutions is still in its infancy. They work, and they work with a high degree of success. But unquestioned and almost automatic methods of administration, giving every guarantee of fairness and efficiency, comparable to those employed in great national government departments where responsibilities are accurately defined and nicely adjusted, will be achieved only when the international organisations have had time to evolve their own tried rules and traditions.

Whatever those rules and traditions may eventually be, there is little doubt, however, that Albert Thomas will be held to have contributed to them with astonishing foresight. In so doing he made not the least of his many contributions to the better and more peaceful ordering of our world.
There is an island among the thousand in the Mälaren peninsula. . . . There are in the middle of the islet, a hundred feet up, a restaurant and a dancing-floor. . . .

Suddenly on the path beneath us there was the sound of running feet. A girl, dew-spangled as a spider’s web, came into the tiny circle of light and paused there like Psyche listening for the god’s beloved feet. Presently she heard his step. Light as the mist into which she melted she sprang forward. All gazed; and now, as in the spot-light of the stage, the pursuer vaulted on with the great bound of the immortal Nijinsky in The Spectre of the Rose. Like Discobolus, he leaned forward in the act to throw, the first lines of his beautiful adolescence as decisive as the last lines of a sonnet. He too heard and, laughing aloud, followed the nymph in flight.

Albert arose. ‘Behold’, he said, looking into the misty night, ‘our task—to make the world safe for such. That is the everlasting movement of life—saying, “Yes, oh yes.” Behind us is the eternal stagnation of death or war, muttering, as it crashes the axe, “No, no, no.” We will say “yes” for them and for all like them hereafter. I give you the toast of “yes”.

‘Coupled’, cried someone, ‘with the name of Albert Thomas.’

We rose and drank to ‘yes’ coupled with the name of Albert Thomas.

Humbert Wolfe, Portraits by Inference
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