

About Books, *More or Less*: A Liberal's Pilgrimage

By SIMEON STRUNSKY

WITHOUT consciously setting himself so ambitious a task, Frederick C. Howe has made a valuable contribution to the history of liberal thought and action in the United States during the first quarter of the twentieth century. His "Confessions of a Reformer" (Scribner's) is honest autobiography. He has dragged in no ten-mile canvases as a background for his personal record. If the spacious background is nevertheless there, the reason is that his personal experience was fortunate enough to touch on big men and big movements.

The word "Liberal" does not occur in the greater part of Mr. Howe's text. He describes himself as a reformer, which in itself requires no mean courage nowadays. But the chief value of his story, at least to the present reviewer, is precisely in the route-chart it supplies for the progress from reformism to liberalism. It starts with the days of America's awakening, when ardent young men battled against the shame of the cities, and it reaches these present times, when the field of battle has widened into a shame of civilization. It begins with the fight against ward bosses who were out for graft and easy street railway franchises; with the local bankers behind them, and it reaches the fight against the Clemenceaus and the Lloyd Georges, who were out for empires and Continental dominations, with the international bankers behind them. Looking back to the time when he stood like Spurius Lartius at the right hand of Tom Johnson and fought the Mark Hanna interests in Cleveland and at the Ohio State Capitol, and comparing it with his recent experiences at the Paris Peace Conference, Mr. Howe finds, after many lessons learned and unlearned, after a fair number of victories and a depressing number of defeats, that all the time he has been facing the same problem:

I began to see similarities, parallels, universal conditions. The scholar [Woodrow Wilson] at Paris had failed at home as he had failed abroad. Facts were of little value; morality did not guide men. In America, as in Europe, there was conquest, plunder was the universal object of men who made war on the city, on the State, on the nation, as it was the object of international wars. The great war was one kind of war; the struggles in Cleveland, San Francisco, Toledo, Ohio, Wisconsin were another kind of war. I had followed these wars as a magazine writer, had used war terms, but only as metaphors. Now I saw they described realities.

AND even if Mr. Howe ends his book on a tone of hope, it is essentially hope against the evidence. Though democracy slay him, yet will he believe in democracy. After many disillusionments, after many dogmas fervently embraced and reluctantly abandoned, he has cast in his fortunes with Labor. Hitherto he had made the mistake of working for the right ideals in the wrong "class," the middle-class into which he was born, whose standards and comforts strongly held him, but in which there is no hope. Has he found in Labor the "class" free from selfishness, from the plunder instinct, from the war-habit? He believes so. Yet from the entire course of his story emerges a note of caution. If Liberalism today is despondent over its battles of twenty years ago for better government in the United States, if it sorrows for the failure, or worse, of Woodrow Wilson at Paris, it might well frame a few reservations concerning Labor as the complete answer to the world riddle.

Not that Mr. Howe has estopped himself against one more disillusionment. An outstanding merit of these honest confessions is the picture they present of a man eager to learn and to unlearn. He did not learn fast. He was a man of 25 when he came up to Johns Hopkins for post-graduate work. There he fell under the guidance of Professor Woodrow Wilson and Richard T. Ely and entered upon horizons unsuspected in his pleasant, staid and standardized native Meadland, Pa.

But his real education began when he came into contact with Tom Johnson at Cleveland. What did he learn from Johnson in the matter of doctrine?

One night he talked about poverty, about how to be rid of it. He said that society should be changed, not by getting good men into office, but by making it possible for all men to be good. We had evil in the world because people were poor. The trouble was not with people but with poverty. It was social conditions that were bad rather than people. . . . This bothered me, as did most of his speeches. Surely some people were good, while others were bad. My classifications were simple. Roughly, the members of the University Club and the Chamber of Commerce were good; McKisson, Bernstein and the politicians were bad.

This is an innocence of the world, a naïveté almost, that is rather striking in a man of 35 who had worked his way through two colleges—partly by writing speeches for pickle salesmen—had had his fling with New York journalism, had studied law and bluffed an impressionable Pittsburgh examiner into admitting him to the bar—and had lived at university clubs and associated with chambers of commerce. Yet this susceptibility to new revelations from the outside will explain why Mr. Howe, with other Liberals, was disheartened by the failure of Woodrow Wilson at Paris, as Mr. Howe was previously discomfited by the failure, after a ten years' war, of Tom Johnson at Cleveland and in Ohio. If Tom Johnson's statement of Poverty and Woodrow Wilson's statement of the New Freedom and the world safe for democracy had been received with something of the critical judgment which we have a right to expect from men who know something of the world about them, the disillusionment of the reformer of fifteen years ago and of the Liberal of five years ago would not be so keen. And in-

cently greater justice would thereby be rendered to Tom Johnson and Woodrow Wilson in their respective spheres.

TO be intimately associated with Tom Johnson of Cleveland was hardly to fit into the traditional picture of the "reformer"—silk-stockinged, plaintive and arid. Mr. Howe's distrust of the "good citizens" of his community would have saved him, if there were not on the positive side an appreciation and liking of the politicians he fought. In the ward leaders, the bosses and the lobbyists he responded to the warm quality on which their power was based, as it continues to be based. It is an anomaly in our politics that the "machine" is so largely a human institution grounded in feudal loyalties. Mr. Howe's tribute to the Irish in politics is more than warm. It is the Irish, "unconsciously aiming to shape the State to human ends that have made New York what it is." Their instinct for "collectivity"—and for contracts—have given us, according to Mr. Howe, our parks and playgrounds, our water supply, Fire Department, library service and "as good a public school system as is probably to be found in any large city." Of the public offices he has held—member of the Cleveland City Council, President of the Sinking Fund Commission, State Senator and Commissioner of Immigration at Ellis Island—Mr. Howe declares that his work on the Cleveland Tax Commission was the most satisfactory experience. And where did he find the model for his own achievement in tax assessment reform in Cleveland? In the work of Lawson Purdy. And who was Mr. Purdy? "The most corrupt Tammany Governments had retained Mr. Purdy and given him a free hand in working out an honest and equitable assessments of real property. No city in England or on the Continent, as far as I know, approximated New York at that time in the honesty of

its tax system, and Mr. Purdy has made one of the most distinguished contributions to municipal politics of any man in this country or abroad."

When a corrupt political machine can, indirectly, make a distinguished contribution to honest city government, it means that the old formulas about good government and bad government need analysis and modification. Mr. Howe himself, as I have indicated, early abandoned his belief in the boss and ward-beeler as the primal source of municipal wickedness. But he substituted an even more rigid formula when he found the final cause of bad government in the bankers, the traction magnate, the entire propertied class. He simply broadens Mr. Hearst's Plunderbund to include the whole middle class and its vested interests. In the local sphere it is called The Interests. In the world sphere it is called economic imperialism. But if the interests behind Tammany Hall permitted the development, not of a perfect city but of a very good sort of city, as Mr. Howe finds our New York to be, is it not conceivable that the economic imperialists and the international bankers might permit the development of a fairly satisfactory world order?

Let us put it more directly. Mr. Howe, as "reformer," abandoned most of the accepted dogmas of reform when he discovered that the problem of good city government is one of complexity rather than of corruption. Mr. Howe as a Liberal, going to the Peace Conference in Mr. Wilson's entourage, might have been expected to view the bigger problem of world government in the same spirit. He did not. His account of the Peace Conference is a restatement of what has now become, frankly, the wearisome Liberal tradition; how Wilson landed in Europe as a messiah; how they burned candles before his picture in peasant cottages in France, Italy and Spain

(Incidentally, who as a matter of fact ever did see one of these Wilson ikons?); how Wilson was hamboozled, flattered, frightened out of his ideals. Secret treaties, oil, bankers, militarists, oppressed nationalities befooled—the familiar story is, here retold in a spirit of more than ordinary naïveté. Mr. Howe finds that Wilson's experts were ignorant, but the newspaper boys who lunched at the Dufayel Mansion in the Champs Elysées knew the facts every time. The President himself was bewildered, but the outsiders knew the answer; nearly every outsider having his own answer.

AT one point Mr. Howe does come close to understanding President Wilson's motives in consenting to the final bargain at Paris. It is a point seldom touched upon in histories of the Peace Conference, but a vital one in the opinion of the present reviewer, who was one of the lunchers at the Press Club in the Champs Elysées and had his own answer to a few of the leading world problems:

As the discussions wore on he [Wilson] became fearful of disorder, of revolutions that were everywhere impending. Russia had gone Red, also Hungary. Germany was filled with revolution. There were Communist uprisings in Berlin, Munich, Düsseldorf. Italian workmen were threatening to seize the factories. Everywhere in Central Europe the peasants were seizing the land. Ireland was in ferment, so were India and Egypt. There was even revolutionary talk in England. The world must be stabilized quickly, or all Europe might go Red. Wilson had made overtures to Russia before leaving America. He repeated them on arriving in France, but Russia was a red ogre to France, the enemy of civilization to the Paris press. His fears were constantly played upon.

Now it may be submitted that Mr. Howe's own summary of Europe in early 1919 presents a very substantial and sizable ogre. Europe was, indeed, quaking. Not only Paris played upon Mr. Wilson's fears. From back home he was continually being urged to hurry up and make a peace or Europe would go to smash. This word "ogre" symbolizes the blind spot in the Liberal vision. Mr. Howe, beginning to understand Woodrow Wilson, suddenly stops short, surrenders to the Liberal formula and ends by totally misunderstanding. Woodrow Wilson was precisely interested in stabilizing the Continent, whereas his Liberal critics were interested in a fermenting Continent. But to the critical judgment all the "wrongs" of the Syrians and the Iraqians, and even the Trentinians and the Saarians, must appear as a trifle compared with the necessity of keeping Europe from sliding into the morass where the Russian people now lie mired. Wilson saw as a responsible statesman. The Liberals have raged as doctrinaires.

And so with the League of Nations. The League was Wilson's answer to the complexity of international relations, which are a much more serious problem than international wickedness. The Liberal formularies had it that world peace cannot come unless at Paris, in the Spring of 1919, frontiers were drawn just so, reparations just so, tariffs just so, everything just so. The Wilson answer was that the world could not be made just so in 1919 if ever, and that the only feasible thing was the organization of all available good instincts in an imperfect world, leaving it to time to show results. If under a corrupt Tammany Hall our own city could make decided progress toward the status of a civilized community, then despite the Clemenceaus, Lloyd Georges and international bankers the world might move forward, once the ideal was formulated and the way prepared.

Woodrow Wilson's was the flexible mind at Paris. The Liberal mind was the rigid, schoolmaster, just-s mind and has so remained in large measure. And that is why today the Wilson program brings increasing cheer to humanity, while Liberal sit disconsolate in the web of their own formularies.



Frederick C. Howe.
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