

The Civic Revival in Ohio

Honest Man's Story: Frederic C. Howe

By ROBERT H. BREMNER

"An honest man's story, honestly told,"—Lincoln Steffens' comment on *The Confessions of a Reformer*, by Frederic C. Howe.

TO THE WRITER, one of the most engaging figures of the Civic Revival is Frederic C. Howe. Howe was one of the young men who gathered around Tom L. Johnson while the latter was mayor of Cleveland. He was elected to the Cleveland City Council as a Republican in 1901, but even before the election took place he had been won over by Johnson. Howe did valuable work for the Civic Revival as one of the originators of the Cleveland Group Plan, as a councilman, and as a member of the State senate and of the Cleveland Tax Commission, but his claim to rank as one of the leaders of the movement is derived more from his writings than because of his accomplishments in those posts. In numerous magazine articles he explained to outsiders what Johnson was doing in Cleveland;¹ in "The City, The Hope of Democracy," he presented the most complete picture of the aims of the Civic Revival; and in his autobiography, "The Confessions of a Reformer," he expressed the spirit of the movement.

"The Confessions of a Reformer," set the pattern for the large number of "personal histories" written in the last twenty-five years. These books are valuable to the student of history because they are frank records of how some interesting men and women of the twentieth century grappled with problems that seemed important to them and their contemporaries. Howe's book, however, has an importance quite aside from its value as an historical source. It is an inspiring illustration of how much an open-eyed and open-minded man can learn from experience. Howe thought the most important tendency in his life was his gradual divergence from the "evangelistic psychology" he had absorbed during his childhood and youth in Meadville, Pennsylvania. Broadly speaking, his development consisted in the sloughing off of one authority after another until at last he wonderingly realized that he could be his own authority. He didn't need any others. His is the story of the emancipation of a mind.

¹ See, for example, "Cleveland—A City 'Finding Itself,'" *The World's Work*, VI, 3988-9 (October 1903).

I

THE EVANGELISTIC PSYCHOLOGY Howe referred to is the spirit that puts the blame for social ills upon personal causes—the ignorance and depravity of the poor and the indifference and wickedness of the rich. Howe looked upon it as the characteristic influence of his generation.² It is the reform attitude in politics, the missionary spirit in diplomacy. It produces statesmen—moralists like Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, and Wilson. Prohibition, anti-trust laws, teaching the Latin Americans to elect good men, are all part of it. Pass laws; enforce the laws; punish the bad people; MAKE PEOPLE BE GOOD—this is its program.

Howe, like Johnson, Jones, and Whitlock, was induced by his experiences to shake off the evangelistic psychology and to replace it with a conviction that it was not men who were at fault, but the conditions under which they lived. It is not people who need to be reformed, but the system that must be changed so that they will have a chance to be good.³ This was the motivating belief of the Civic Revival. Its attack was on conditions, not men. That attitude is what distinguishes it from the national Progressive Movement which, for the most part, was a manifestation of the traditional reliance upon the evangelistic psychology.

In Meadville and at the small denominational college that Howe unenthusiastically attended, the authorities were the Methodist Church, the Republican party, and the neighbors. Howe's training as a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University in the early Eighteen Nineties released him from these limitations, giving him in their stead a new set of ready-made standards. These were the standards of his professors. Of the professors, Albert Shaw stirred Howe's imagination more than the others. He lectured on municipal government and revealed to Howe the vision of an orderly city that was managed as a big business enterprise. It owned its own street car lines and gas and light plants and made a success out of operating them. It was governed with efficiency and economy by trained public servants and by business men who had given up their business interests to serve the city.

With this ideal in mind, Howe's program on leaving Johns Hopkins included war on the political bosses, the substitution of trained men for spoilsmen in the administration of city affairs; and the awakening of busi-

² For Howe's discussion of the evangelistic psychology see "Confessions of a Reformer," p. 17, pp. 130-1.

³ This does not mean that the Civic Revivalists overlooked the necessity for the personal regeneration of the individual that Jones came to stress so much. They looked upon this as a private matter, however. Regulatory legislation in questions of morals was never a part of their political program.

ness men to their responsibilities in municipal politics. He thought the trusts should be curbed or destroyed and that cities should either own the public utilities or regulate them in the interest of the public.⁴ Howe was later inclined to smile at the naïveté of some features of this program, but we should notice that through Albert Shaw, who represents the late nineteenth century concern with municipal problems, Howe had acquired an interest in cities that he never lost and a dream of what they could be like that was to serve as his inspiration for many years. When Howe looked back at his career at Johns Hopkins the thing that seemed important to him was that while there he had done no creative thinking of his own. He had merely accepted what the professors said.

When we look at this period of his life, however, the thing that stands out to us is simply that there was a change in his manner of thinking as a result of his graduate work. He gave up old prejudices and took on new ideas. That is, he learned something. Maybe he had to unlearn much of it later, but at Johns Hopkins the foundation, at least, was laid for the rational approach to life which was to make it possible for him to keep on learning after he left the university.

II

IN THE YEAR and a half he spent in New York City after receiving his degree, Howe lost one long-accepted idea and gained a new conception of the rôle of government. To one of his background it seemed obvious that the saloon was the root of New York's political evils. Eager to be a reformer, Howe volunteered as one of Dr. Charles Henry Parkhurst's agents in the vice crusade then being waged by that clergyman. He was to check up on the observance by saloons of laws relating to closing hours, Sunday sales, sales to women, and the alliance of saloons with houses of prostitution. The way to end evils was to enforce the laws.

Howe tried to be a conscientious investigator but within a short time the thing that began to impress him was the kindly side of the saloon. It was the poor man's club, the only escape the tenement dweller had from his drab existence. Out of the things he saw in saloons and from his talks with bar-keepers came Howe's conviction that the evil was not inherent in saloons, but was the result of tax laws. In order to pay the taxes imposed upon him by the city and state in the guise of license fees, the saloon-keeper either had to break the closing and other regulatory laws or go broke. If he decided to disregard the laws he had to corrupt the police.

⁴ In this and the following paragraphs, except where otherwise stated, I am following the account of Howe's development as presented in "The Confessions of Reformer."

After considerable deliberation, Howe wrote a letter of resignation to Doctor Parkhurst in which he explained the problem as he saw it: the fault was in the laws—not the saloons. This was Howe's first break with authority. He was giving up an idea he had himself decided was false.

Howe had come to New York hoping to obtain a position as an editorial writer on a newspaper. Rebuffed in this, he began to study law and found a job in a law office. It was typical of him that he crowded a two-year law course into one. Much of his work consisted of collecting unpaid bills on the lower East Side. Here he was introduced to a new theory of politics. Previously, politics had appealed to him as an opportunity for disinterested service. His highest ideal had been the scholar in politics. The scholar and the enlightened businessman, wanting nothing for themselves, working only for the goal of good, clean, efficient and economical government, would redeem the state.

On the East Side, Howe met people who thought politics meant getting something out of the government for themselves and their friends. Gradually Howe began to admit to himself that these people had a contribution to make to American political theory. Their highest civic ideal was loyalty to the boss. To them, government was the boss, the district leader, the policeman, and the police court judge. But they had made the State human and they had done it by wanting things. They wanted parks and playgrounds, of course. They wanted cheap utilities, too.

More than that, they wanted, and they had got for themselves, a government that helped them in their daily lives. Their boss-dominated government, like the saloon, had a kindly side. It helped them when they were sick, it helped them when they were out of a job, and it helped them when they were in trouble with the law. Their lives were richer for the kind of government they had. Richer and happier than they would have been if their government, instead of being human, had been only business-like.

Howe was admitted to the Ohio Bar in 1894 and began to practice in Cleveland. That is, he sat around the outer office of the Garfield brothers' law firm doing whatever unimportant tasks were occasionally assigned to him. He was uninterested in his work, ill at ease in the apartment he shared with five other young men. At night, convinced that he was a failure, he would climb nine flights of stairs and sit moodily at a window overlooking Lake Erie.

An opportunity to live at a newly-opened settlement house in the slums gave him a temporary sense of responsibility. He was made a trustee of

the Charity Organization Society, a supposedly scientific approach to the charity problem. Cards were given donors to the society which they, in turn, gave to people who applied to them for help. The applicants then took the cards to the offices of the society where their cases were investigated by social workers.

One day Howe received a letter from Dr. Louis Bryant Tuckerman in which the Charity Organization Society and its methods were severely criticized. Tuckerman, a Cleveland minister and physician, was one of the forerunners of the Civic Revival. He was one of the directing influences in the life of Peter Witt. In this letter to Howe he argued that love and brotherhood were two things which could not be institutionalized. "If Christ applied to your society for aid," he told Howe, "he would be turned away as a 'vagrant without visible means of support.' Your society is not interested in charity. If it were it would fight for abolition of the twelve-hour day, for higher wages, and for industrial compensation. It is interested only in getting the wreckage off the streets."

Howe found himself in agreement with what the clergyman wrote. Tuckerman had expressed for him his own discontent with the Society. Like Elizabeth Ward, a character in one of Brand Whitlock's novels, he had begun to feel that organized charities were organized "not to help the poor but to help the rich forget the poor."⁵ What little zeal he had been able to muster for social work left him. "I ceased attending meetings of the trustees; then I resigned, and soon after left the settlement."⁶

III

IT REMAINED for Tom Johnson to deliver the crucial blow to the evangelistic psychology which, until his association with Johnson, had made Howe a reformer rather than a radical. After leaving the settlement house Howe had gone to live at the University Club. He found a friend in Morris Black, another young attorney whose idealism received little chance for expression in the law. Together they began to work on a plan for the grouping of Cleveland's public buildings into the kind of civic center they had both admired in European cities. Black ran for the city council and in a spirited campaign upset the candidate of the district boss. Howe became secretary of the Municipal Association, a political reform league. He attacked the corruption of the administration of Mayor McKisson and during the Farley administration wrote a pamphlet urging the defeat of an ordinance granting the street railway companies an extension of their franchises.

⁵ "The Turn of the Balance," p. 291.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

Howe was thirty-four years old when he met Johnson. He had been persuaded by a delegation of citizens that it was his duty to accept the Republican nomination for councilman from his district. During his campaign Howe stressed the need for civil service reform, called upon the voters to purge the council of its known grafters and continued his opposition to the street-railway franchises. Occasionally he dropped in on meetings at which Johnson spoke. He was attracted by the man, half-convinced by what he said, and often resentful of his disdain for Howe's kind of reform.

At length he called on Johnson at his office. They began to talk about "Progress and Poverty." Howe had read the book in his student days. What he read had then seemed to be true but he had supposed that there must be something wrong with it. Johnson told Howe the story of his conversion to the philosophy of Henry George. He told him how he thought the single tax could be used to rid the city of the twin evils of poverty and privilege. Poverty is what makes poor men "bad." Privilege is what makes "good" men corrupt government. The fight should not be against badness but against the conditions which make goodness impossible.

Howe was not ordinarily an impulsive man but something about Johnson appealed so strongly to him that his usual caution was thrust aside. "I think I will withdraw from the Republican ticket and come and support you," he found himself saying. "You can do things I never could do."⁷ Johnson told him to get elected as a Republican. Parties didn't matter.

Howe left the conference a believer in Johnson and in his program. In the years that followed he became one of Johnson's intimate friends and one of his most understanding co-workers. As Johnson was a different man because he had known Henry George, so Howe was a different man because he had known Tom Johnson.

At the outset Howe did not realize the full implications of the ideas he had gained from Johnson. He did not realize how far his renunciation of the self-imposed duty of reforming men for the goal of improving social conditions would take him from his accepted principles of political science. His experiences in the Cleveland Council (1901-1903) revealed to him that the businessmen he had chided for their indifference to politics *were* in politics; as a member of the Ohio Senate (1905-1907) he was confirmed in his dawning conviction that ours is a businessmen's government rather than one representative of the people as a whole. Service in the Council and the Senate made plain to Howe the *fact* of business domination of government, but his understanding of the *why* of the business-

⁷ "Confessions of a Reformer," pp. 88-99.

man's attitude toward government had to wait until he understood business itself.

IV

WHILE A MEMBER of the Cleveland Council, Howe introduced an ordinance granting a franchise to a natural gas company that was prepared to provide gas for light and fuel at a rate fifty cents less per thousand cubic feet than that charged by the artificial gas company then serving the city. The ordinance provoked bitter hostility. To its opponents the fact that its passage would mean a great saving to three hundred thousand consumers was a much less important consideration than that it would threaten the investment of the old company and possibly hurt the coal business.

Howe's friends at the University Club and in his office building were not outraged at the revelation that the old company had resorted to bribery in an attempt to defeat the ordinance. Bribery was not nice but sometimes, as in the present case where an investment of thirteen million dollars was at stake, it was necessary. Howe said the inability of a private gas company to carry on its business without corrupting government was the best argument he had ever heard for municipal ownership of public utilities.

To his shame and surprise he learned that the old gas company had contributed to his own campaign fund and that its employees had worked for his election.⁸ Because he was a member of a firm of corporation attorneys it had been mistakenly assumed that Howe knew the facts of political life.

Howe learned how complete was the control of business over government during his term in the State Senate. The legislature of which he was a member seemed to have more than the usual quota of men of intelligence and liberal sympathies. It had capable leadership. The relations between the two houses were reasonably harmonious. It had the support of popular and press opinion. Yet, in spite of all of these initial advantages it secured the passage of only a fragment of its progressive program.

The reason for its failure, Howe came to believe, was simply that the machinery of government was controlled by a small group of businessmen instead of by the public. The real government was something outside of the Constitution he had been taught to revere. The real government was the system by which businessmen controlled the political parties and through them the personnel of executive offices, legislative assemblies, courts, administrative boards, and law enforcement agencies.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 101-7.

While Howe was becoming aware of the businessman's activity in government he was also observing his attitude toward government. He learned much about the latter problem from studying the career of Mark Hanna. In him Howe saw the aims and ideals of businessmen in general writ large. Business is the only important thing. The State exists for business. All men and measures are judged by their effect upon business. The businessman has much the same attitude toward government as the people of New York's East Side: government is something through which you get what you want and protect what you have. You get what you want from the boss; you pay for it through campaign contributions (only occasionally is bribery necessary); and you protect what you have by your prerogative of dictating nominations and platforms.

This was the way the kind of men Howe had once been anxious to see take an active part in government actually felt about politics. Because he was a logical and methodical man, Howe was not content to leave the problem there. He felt a real urge to know why some of our most vigorous and practically talented men were a force for evil rather than good in politics. He did not quarrel with their desire to make use of the government for he, too, felt the function of government was to be useful to its citizens. He did dislike, however, the use to which they meant to put it.

It was not the enactment of measures which would make life better for all men that they wanted, but only the passage of laws which would make their own profits larger and safer. Yet Howe remembered that not all businessmen were active in legislative halls and council chambers. His own experience seemed to indicate that the most active were the representatives of railways, the public utility companies, and the banks (which were interested in the first two). They had something concrete to get; there was something about their business which linked it to politics.

The concept of privilege and an understanding of the source of wealth—both of which he drew from the revived interest in the single tax philosophy which association with Johnson had given him—helped him to see what they wanted and why their demands were immoral. Great wealth, the big money, he came to believe, is not obtained by observing the kind of copy-book maxims (“take care of the pennies and the dollars will take care of themselves”) that he had learned in his youth. Nobody gets very rich by saving his wages and paying bills promptly. Only a few men make much money out of competitive industry.

Wealth is produced by society's needs; the way to get really rich is to invest your money in a field that will give you a grip on something every-

body needs or must use: land, natural resources, transportation facilities, or an accumulation of capital. The right of supplying, or of enjoying the financial benefits produced by supplying these common needs is conferred upon some individuals by law. It is in order to secure or protect these monopolistic privileges (which give their possessors an unfair advantage in the economic struggle) that some business men use the government.

That is why some of our best men are a force for evil in politics. Their private economic interests are at war with the best interests of society. It explains why some businesses are more directly concerned with politics than are others. Not "business," not "big business," not "the corporations," but *privileged business* corrupts politics.

Howe wrote a straight-faced little book called "Confessions of a Monopolist" (1906) to illustrate the connection between privileged business and politics. It purported to be the autobiography of a man (who might be patterned after Mark Hanna) who grew rich out of land holdings, street railway interests, coal mines, and banking enterprises. His two principles of conduct were "Make society work for you," and "Make a business of politics." Like Hanna, he was compelled to go into politics to protect his financial interests. He became boss of his city, then of the state, and finally, while the newspapers hailed him as an example of the kind of businessman who would redeem politics, he was elected to the United States Senate.

V

To HOWE, the political scientist, the immediate problem was one of political sovereignty. The effective control of government must be wrested from the hands of a small group of businessmen and restored to the people. After a characteristic period of study and self-examination, Howe listed the means by which he thought this could be obtained: nomination by petition rather than by conventions; the short ballot; the initiative and referendum on the Constitution, state laws, and city ordinances; the recall of all elective officials including judges; complete home rule for cities; a one-house legislature; and the abolition of judicial review of legislation.⁹

These were typical ideas of the Progressive Era. Noting their pre-occupation with such reforms, present-day critics condemn the Progressives for having offered only insipid political remedies for disorders that were primarily economic in nature. At least in the case of the Civic Revivalists, this is not a valid criticism. Howe's proposals were not remedies or ends in themselves. They were methods by which it was believed govern-

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-8.

ment could be made simpler, more workable, more responsive to public opinion—means by which the people could reassert their control over their government.

Howe, Whitlock, Jones, and Johnson knew, and knew a long time ago, that our problems were basically economic. Like us, they had two possible ways of attacking them: by violence or by peaceable political action. It did not occur to them to use any but the latter alternative. Consequently they saw that the breaking of the grip of privilege on the political life of the state had to be accomplished before the problems could be solved in a way advantageous to the people.

The failure of the Legislature in which Howe served and the difficulties Johnson encountered in Cleveland showed the impossibility of carrying through fundamental economic reforms by political action until the friends of reform had gained control of the political agencies which had the power to nullify them. Howe believed that once the government was made actually representative of the people, the extension of its functions (by municipal ownership of public utilities, for example) would make it so important in their daily lives that the voters would take an intelligent interest in it.

Once divested of their privileges (by such devices as the appropriation by the state of the economic rent of land), capable men, whose interests had formerly kept them at odds with the city, would be able to devote their best talents to its improvement.

In "The City, the Hope of Democracy," Howe stated the ideas about government with which he was left after he had rid himself of his earlier preconceptions. The core that had been uncovered by his process of unlearning was to be the foundation for his later development: Democracy has not failed—it has never been tried. Having lost the businessman as an ideal, Howe had found the people. We will see in later studies that eventually Howe's attitude toward competition (for in 1905 the abolition of privilege meant to him the restoration of competition) was altered, but he never lost the faith in the people which had been aroused in him by his participation in the Civic Revival.

He never gave up the belief that the cure for the ills of democracy lay in more democracy. The title of his book, "The City, the Hope of Democracy," is illustrative of the change in his approach to life which had been produced by this new faith. He wrote no longer of the problems with which the city presents democracy, but of the opportunity it offers for democracy's achievement.

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