

CARNOCK, CONFERENCE AND CURZON

MR. Harold Nicholson has completed his great trilogy,¹ thus concluding his survey of the diplomatic history of Great Britain from approximately the end of 'Splendid Isolation' to the death of Lord Curzon. And there has happened to Mr. Nicholson what has happened to other historians; in compiling an account he has unpremeditatedly formulated an indictment. He has focussed his lens delicately upon the clear-cut and aristocratic figure of Diplomacy, but the developed plate has revealed in the background and in the very act of sabotage the hulking and murderous figure of Democracy.

There are many counts upon which to praise Mr. Nicholson. He is an admirer of the modern and obscure method of prose writing, but his own style is limpid and traditional. The Supreme Council overworked him at Paris in 1919 because of his ability in drafting, and we reap the benefit of that ability in his concise précis of situations, protocols, treaties, crises and historic passages, précis which are clear, logical and full, and easier to read than many novels. Most of his historic estimates are not assailable. His narrative of Conferences and correspondences is broken by some of the most brilliant pen-sketches of places and personalities that our generation has produced—the meeting of Edward VII and the Czar at Reval, for instance, the Allied Mission to Bela Kun in 1919, Lord Curzon at Lausanne (a portrait which should be supplemented by his sketch of Arketall in *Some People*). His epithets and phrases enclose large and precise ideas, his knowledge of Europe and its working make the reading of his volumes almost an education in affairs. It would be unnecessary as well as futile to make their reading compulsory at schools. No ambitious boy would fail to couple them with M. Mauvois' *Lyautey* as the most exciting and essential element in his training for a career.

¹ *Lord Carnock. Peace Conference, 1919. Curzon, the Last Phase.* (Constable; 21/- each.)

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The three books are invaluable, however, not only for their intrinsic excellence, but for the tragedy they depict—in brief that of trained bureaucratic intelligence failing to save a world from destruction by 'statesmen' and those they rule. There are three phases in which this tragedy reveals itself; the hesitation of British diplomacy in June and July of 1914 because the British Cabinet dare not reveal its commitments; the desperate muddle of the 1919 Conference, its intrigue and injustice—Mr. Nicholson pays full value to the part played by Italy in insisting on the pound of flesh promised her by the Secret Treaty of London—the repudiation of Wilson; and, lastly, the subsequent years when the British Empire, after the greatest victory it had won, retreated helplessly before Oriental and conquered States like Turkey, Egypt and Afghanistan when they made unheard-of demands from British statesmen. How foolish and irresponsible that abdication of power might be is shown by the present condition of Egypt.

Mr. Nicholson is at heart a bureaucrat, and the follies of the time he ascribes to the inadequate knowledge of statesmen and the Press-ridden democracy that, in turn, rides them. It is worth noting in a little detail the point he makes about Great Britain's attitude to the crisis of June-July, 1914. Owing to German naval competition, we had made an arrangement with France for pooling our naval resources, France guarding our Mediterranean connections, we her North and Western coasts. This agreement was secret. When in the days immediately preceding the outbreak of war, M. Cambon asked Sir Edward Grey to implement that agreement, Sir Edward said that the Cabinet could give no such promise. In fact, they dare not. It was on this occasion that the invariably imperturbable M. Cambon staggered into Sir Arthur Nicholson's room, saying: 'Ils vont nous lâcher ils vont nous lâcher,' and later said to Mr. Wickham Steed: 'J'attends de savoir si le mot "honneur" doit être rayé du vocabulaire anglais.' Even when Sir Edward announced the ultimatum to Germany he spoke of this agreement in the following terms: 'We have had

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a long-standing friendship with France . . . But how far that friendship entails obligation . . . let every man look into his own heart and his own feelings, and construe the extent of the obligation for himself. I construe it myself as I feel it, but I do not wish to urge upon anyone else more than their feelings dictate as to what they should feel about the obligation." Concealing the actual agreement beneath the word 'friendship,' Sir Edward commits the honouring of that promise to an uninstructed individual 'feeling.' It was, it would appear, only the fact that they could appeal to popular indignation over the violation of Belgian neutrality that saved the Cabinet from exposure of their irresponsibility.

It is to save the conduct of diplomacy and thereby the peace of civilization from the menace of such dishonourable and humiliating imprecisions that Mr. Nicholson makes practical suggestions for the conduct of foreign affairs at the end of his third volume. He is strongly against such personal meetings between statesmen as occur at Geneva and against the atmosphere of Conferences. They produce in statesmen, he says, 'gratitude, affability and general silliness.' The only conference which arrived at practical conclusions in the years immediately after the war was Lausanne, which Lord Curzon, the perfect aristocrat and administrator, dominated with a matchless combination of Machiavellianism, acumen, audacity, personal magnificence, and incredible technical knowledge. Mr. Nicholson advocates meetings between professional diplomats to create precise diplomatic documents. Thus only will peaceful international relations be secured. But he is not in favour of the old secret diplomacy. The people should decide upon the general line of foreign policy, he says, though the application of that policy should belong strictly to diplomats. His evidence of a thousand pages confirms the second stipulation and demolishes the first.

The trouble lies within that term 'the People.' The twin shadows of Ratification and Repudiation obscure the

² See *The Listener*, August 8th, 1934.

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bright prospect of a world ordered by precise documents. A watertight treaty may leave a 'People' with a sense of injustice and the stitch of Repudiation, when once let drop, makes an ever-increasing rent in the fabric of civilization. Not 'the People' but 'the Person' rules in democracy—the individual voicing the grievances that his newspaper tells him to proclaim. In England the Whig and Tory cricket match theory has vanished before sterner realities. 'There is no 'English People.' We have not been a nation since the War. Everywhere 'the Peoples'—the mass of individuals conscious of their disunion, seek rallying points—N.R.A., Fascism, the Five Year Plans. In Germany *Blut und Boden* means little more than the blood of Nazi victims and the soil that covers them; the Junkers and Industrialists will hardly permit the imitation of Fascist corporativism; there remains the possible finding of unity in a mystical exaltation of the leader—the growing significance of the *Führerprinzip*. Where Britain is to find unity it is hard to see; it may be that coming events will revive Imperialism and the power of the Monarchy, and we shall return to a consciousness of our material greatness which may, as we have not to grasp more possessions, but merely to fulfil the potentialities of our position in those we have, give a noble and unifying impulse to the English character.

P. D. FOSTER.