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JOHN BURNS AND THE GREAT WAR

CHUSHICHI TSUZUKI

It was three-quarters of a century ago that Europe saw the beginning of a fratricidal conflict of an unprecedented scale. That all the nations had 'stumbled into the war' was the view taken by none other than Lloyd George,¹ one of the most uncompromising war leaders. In each nation, however, there was a small minority in determined opposition to the war throughout. In Britain two cabinet ministers resigned in protest, John Burns, President of the Board of Trade, formerly of the Local Government Board (LGB), the first working-class cabinet minister, and John Morley, Lord President, a Gladstonian liberal. The following is an attempt to analyse Burns's motives for resignation which have not been explored before and to describe his attitude to the war which terminated his remarkable career as the one who regarded himself as the proud representative of the British workers in the Liberal Government led by Campbell-Bannerman and later by Asquith.

In August 1914 Lord Eversley, formerly of the Admiralty and an opponent of the 'monstrous' naval estimate, congratulated John Burns upon his resignation: 'You have crowned your great administrative work of the past eight years by an act of courage and disinterestedness which will add to your reputation and fame when the political history of our time is written.'² L.T. Hobhouse, who had a low opinion of his administrative work at the LGB, nevertheless, felt obliged to express his admiration for his selfless act, though with a reservation: 'We cannot continue criticism of the policy which has led to this war as we did in the case of South Africa, for our safety is at stake. . . . Nevertheless it is clear that that policy has for years past been seriously wrong, & to you who have stood out against it the honour of all of us is due.'³ George Lansbury, whom Burns had once attacked for what appeared to the LGB to be too generous a policy for the poor pursued by him and other Guardians at Poplar, East End, now sent his 'sincere and hearty congratulations.'⁴ But the real cause of his resignation remained obscure, as he obstinately refused to comment on it. It is true, he remained a little Englander all his life, but he was never a pacifist. Even his known pro-Boer attitude did not mean that he was opposed to the continued existence of the Empire in some form.

What is more important and less appreciated was that when he became a Liberal minister in 1905, he did not desert his own class. 'His failings were on the surface and his heart was pure gold,' wrote C.P. Gooch.⁵ In fact, he identified himself with the cause of Labour as best as he could in his own way. There was nothing incompatible or inconsistent be-

¹ H.K. Koch (ed.), *The Origins of the First World War* (London, 1972), p. 5.

² Lord Eversley to J. Burns, 5 Aug. 1914, Add MSS 46303, John Burns Papers, British Library.

³ L.T. Hobhouse to J. Burns, 6 Aug. 1914, Add MSS 46303, JBP.

⁴ G. Lansbury to J. Burns, 6 Aug. 1914, Add MSS 46303, JBP.

⁵ C.P. Gooch, *Under Six Reigns* (London, 1958), p. 148.

tween his stern attitude towards what he took to be measures for greater pauperisation, dependence and degeneration of the poor and his open sympathy with the workers' claims in the years of labour unrest which preceded the outbreak of the war. The same thing could be said with his attitude to the men in the army: his constant attention to their welfare gives an impression that he might well have aspired to see a new model or a citizen army created in due course.

* * *

Alderhot, home of a military camp, was one of his favourite spare-time resorts. In October 1901 he was there to see 'Guards at Mounted Infantry,' and saw 'several soldiers from the War in South Africa, all bitter with policy and Rhodesians, some furious with officers' conceit and ignorance of war.'⁶ On one weekend in May 1907 he visited military camps on Salisbury Plain from Weyhill to Stonehenge, and had a long chat with Lord Roberts who had given critical evidence on the conduct of the war in which he had achieved brilliant successes. 'The littel man bigger than his inches and kinder than his calling. He is very enthusiastic about universal training.'⁷ In the summer he took his son Edgar to Portsmouth to see the Naval Review:

On board Enchantress glided by miles of ships, crowds of cheering sailors, booming guns, pennants flying and all around the bright sun shining on the bright barrels that some day may belch forth death and destruction to mark the ambition of a Kaiser or the folly of a ministry here or abroad. . . . Edgar enjoyed boylike this great display of power and wealth. I had mingled feelings of pride and pity, pride that my country was capable of this Xerxran fleet, pity that it should be used, sorry that it might be abused.⁸

Campbell-Bannerman's policy of naval retrenchment was already in danger in view of the hostile response from Germany. At one of the last cabinet meetings held under the old premier, Burns spoke strongly against an increase of Naval Estimates.

Stood my ground, gave facts, pressed my case by figures as to cost, fleets, condition and needless waste but all in vain. The P.M. lost grip and acquiesced in general desire not to reduce, 'Country' would not stand it etc. etc. No support from LG [Lloyd George], silent, only from R McK [Reginald McKenna, then President of the Board of Education]. We were defeated but not disgraced.⁹

He was favourably impressed by the Territorial Force, a Haldane's creation of 1907, though some of his erstwhile friends such as Will Thorne denounced it as 'a disguised form of compulsory service.'¹⁰ In the summer of 1908, Burns saw a number of Territorials in various camps on Salisbury Plain and 'formed a good opinion of them.'¹¹

⁶ Burns, Diary, 9 Oct. 1901, Add MSS 46319, JBP.

⁷ Burns, Diary, 19 May 1907, Add MSS 46325, JBP.

⁸ Burns, Diary, 3 Aug. 1907, Add MSS 46325, JBP.

⁹ Burns, Diary, 28 Jan. 1908, Add MSS 46326, JBP.

¹⁰ W. Thorne to Lord Warwick, 31 Dec. 1907, *Justice*, 4 Jan. 1908.

¹¹ Burns, Diary, 8 Aug. 1908, Add MSS 46326, JBP.

Motor car proceeded via Devizes to Netherarm and thence all over the Plain wherever there were points of interest. Saw Cavalry charges and beheld the Scots Greys emerge from a fold of the land like a flight of gulls, or a covey of grey birds. . . . Saw the March past, Review Regulars, Cavalry, Artillery, Engineers, all very good indeed as were the Territorials considering the shortness of time since experiment was started.¹²

He continued his regular visits to Aldershot. In February 1910 he felt, the camp there 'resembled a University rather than the Aldershot of old,' as he saw many foot ball matches attended by soldiers and officers.¹³ In April he went to see his son Edgar who was in the Cadet Corps at Andover. In the following month he spent quite some time with the soldiers on the Plain.

After the naval alarm of 1909 when McKenna, now the first Lord of the Admiralty, took the lead in maintaining British naval supremacy that had been seriously challenged by Germany, and after the Bosnian crisis of the same year, when Europe had been brought to the brink of war, there was a short spell of detente in international politics. It was in such circumstances that Burns wrote in his diary: 'Cabinet. . . . Army and navy. General agreement on reduction of amount in both. W.C. and J.B. worked quite well together in securing regular sufficient power for Navy as against spasmodic equipment.'¹⁴ The lull was soon broken by the Moroccan crises caused by the dispatch of the German gunboat *Panther* to Agadir, in the course of which took place what Burns was later to describe as 'perhaps the most vital of all the contributory causes' of German preparations for war: 'the fatal and provocative speech by LG at MH in 1911.'¹⁵ In his speech given at a Mansion House dinner held on the evening of 21 July Lloyd George with the approval of Asquith and Grey gave a warning or a 'counter threat' to Germany by declaring that peace that might endanger Britain's place and prestige among the Powers would be 'a humiliation intolerable for a great country like us to endure.'¹⁶ Burns at the time was perhaps too busy dealing with the strikes of the Transport workers to pay serious attention to the implications of the speech or even of the Moroccan crisis, though on that same day he walked with Grey in St. James's Park, 'discussing Foreign relations, Germany, France and Metternich.'¹⁷ A month later he wrote: 'Cabinet at 11.30. Grey very good, quiet, calm, lucid, decisive. Trouble over Morocco has terminated and war now impossible between France & Germany.'¹⁸

The two Balkan wars in October 1912 and June 1913 did not appear prominently in Burns's diary. In January 1914 the Railwaymen, the Transport workers and the Miners formed a 'Triple Alliance' to synchronise industrial action, which, though only remotely inspired by the Syndicalist idea, was threatening enough. In the same month the Dublin workers provided the nucleus for the Citizen Army set up against the Ulster Volunteers that had been launched by Sir Edward Carson and Bonar Law in defiance of the law. Violence and direct action now loomed large on the horizon.

¹² Burns, Diary, 12 Aug. 1908, Add MSS 46326, JBP.

¹³ Burns, Diary, 9 Feb. 1910, Add MSS 46332, JBP.

¹⁴ Burns, Diary, 1 March 1911, Add MSS 46333, JBP.

¹⁵ Burns, Diary, 20 June 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

¹⁶ John Grigg, *Lloyd George: The People's Champion* (London, 1978), p. 308.

¹⁷ Burns, Diary, 21 July 1911, Add MSS 46333, JBP.

¹⁸ Burns, Diary, 25 Oct. 1911, Add MSS 46333, JBP.

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In the Government reshuffle which took place in January 1914, Burns was given a new post as President of the Board of Trade. Asquith assured him that it was a 'well earned transfer to equally important and congenial sphere of labour.'¹⁹ However, he did not appear very happy. Two days later he wrote in his diary:

I wish I could be free and lead Labour again. There are very troublous times ahead for the workman and the people. Good though my work has been, 'honourable' though my achieved position has been, it is not so dutiful to my instincts and so dear to my heart's desire as I would have wished. . . . But I had to plant the banner of Labour on the citadel of Government and to have held it here against all assailants, has been dogged work. Today begins another advance, ending where?²⁰

The advance did not go very far.

On 17 February he collected his papers at the LGB and moved to the Board of Trade. 'Thence to Levee. At Levee, I said to H.S. [Herbert Samuel who had succeeded Burns at the LGB], as Seely [then Secretary for War] and Churchill [first Lord of the Admiralty] preceded us, "Look at these representatives of War and Destruction leading us, the symbols of Trade & Peace." W.C. retorted "Trade follows the Flag." There was an answer but W.C. so pleased deservedly with his retort that I left him in cheerful enjoyment of it.'²¹

'Exaggerated stories as to defection of officers and sympathy of soldiers with the Volunteers? We shall see,' he wrote on the day after the ominous conference of officers at Curragh which revealed grave implications of the unwise concession made by Seely to the demands of the commander-in-chief of Ireland favourable to Ulster.²² 'There is in the minds of the timid,' he added a week later:

a vague view that the Army may make it difficult. A large number of MPs would be pleased if I went to War Office. If PM is wise and prescient he will drive on even though horse, foot and artillery confront him. Over them through them but not under them is the only way to Civil supremacy, popular will and democratic control.²³

He desired 'supremacy of Parliament over Army and Navy and Police.'²⁴ The country was roused over Ulster, and the upshot was that Asquith himself replaced Seely as Secretary for War. 'P.M. directs the whirlwind and rides the Storm,' wrote Burns. Then came serious news of the gun-running to arm the Ulster Volunteers. 'Lincoln's mistake of allowing the Northern People to look on whilst Southern Rebels snowballed up their resistance should have been borne in mind,' and Burns was for 'handling . . . the situation very forcibly'²⁵ to prevent civil war in Ireland. Meanwhile, the European scenes appeared equally threatening and demanded his urgent attention.

¹⁹ Burns, Diary, 29 Jan. 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

²⁰ Burns, Diary, 31 Jan. 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

²¹ Burns, Diary, 17 Feb. 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

²² Burns, Diary, 21 March 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

²³ Burns, Diary, 26 March 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

²⁴ Burns, Diary, 27 March 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

²⁵ Burns, Diary, 26 April 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

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'War news serious but not critical. . . . Fleet prevented from dispersing,' wrote Burns on 25 July. Serbia had succumbed to Vienna's ultimatum, but her conciliatory reply was rejected, and Austria had begun mobilising part of her army. The two alliances, Anstro-German and Russo-French, were now arrayed against one another. 'The outlook of war rather serious,' wrote Burns on 27th:

Why 4 great Powers should fight over Serbia no fellow can understand. This I know there is one fellow who will have nothing to do with such a criminal folly the effect of which will be appalling to the welter of nations who will be involved. It must be averted by all the means in our power. Apart from the merits of the case it is my special duty to dissociate myself and the principle I hold and the trusteeship for the working classes which I carry from such a universal crime as the contemplated war will be. My duty is clear and at all costs will be done.²⁶

It has been said that 'John Burns was at once the most resolute and the least coherent of all the waverers. None of his colleagues ever quite understood why he decided to resign.'²⁷ Yet it is obvious that what he called 'the trusteeship for the working classes' or his belief that he represented the workers in the Cabinet dissociated him from his colleagues, from other 'waverers' or the anti-war or neutralist group who counted ten or eleven in the Cabinet of twenty. On the following day at the Board of Trade he 'discussed Railway, Food and transport problems in the light of a probable war or preparation for war with L.S. [Llewellyn Smith, his secretary who had assisted him years before at the Strike Committee of the London Dockers in August 1889].'²⁸ At the 'critical Cabinet' on 29th 'situation seriously reviewed from all points of view. It was decided not to decide.'²⁹ He walked away from the Cabinet with John Morley who later recalled: 'he [Burns] pressed my arm and said with vehement emphasis, "Now mind, we look to you to stand firm"'.³⁰ Asquith and Grey did not challenge or try to convert anyone of the neutralist group, while nobody would dare lead the latter. Burns again approached Morley on the 31st but the latter 'was not keen in response' as to his taking any lead.³¹ On 1st August Burns himself took the lead. 'Cabinet, serious, united for the day,' he wrote in his diary:

but no decision as in all our minds there rested the belief and hope for agreement. Lunched with Grey, Haldane, Runciman at 28 Queen Annes Gate. After others had gone had a pleasant yet serious talk with Grey about situation. Grey wears well under the sustained pressure of insistent events. He remarked the same about myself. I told Grey my fears as to Germany beaten allying herself with Russia and Japan. Urged him to press for the triumphs of Peace rather than the laurels of war. The one everlasting, the other withers and fades. Cabinet Committee as above from 2 till 10.30.³²

²⁶ Burns, Diary, 27 July 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

²⁷ Cameron Hazlehurst, *Politicians at War* (London, 1917), p. 58.

²⁸ Burns, Diary, 28 July 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

²⁹ Burns, Diary, 29 July 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

³⁰ J. Morley, *Memorandum on Resignation* (London, 1928), p. 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Burns, Diary, 1 Augst 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

According to John Morley, 'Burns . . . intimated in his most downright tones that the warning to Germany not to try it on against French coasts or ships in the Channel was more than he could stand.' To this Burns himself added in Morley's Memorandum: 'not only because it was practically a declaration of war on sea leading inevitably to a war on land, but mainly because it was the symbol of an alliance with France with whom no such understanding had hitherto existed.'³³ The existence of such understanding had not been disclosed yet.

The Cabinet was reopened at 11:30 on the following day, 2nd of August, and lasted till 2. Before this Lloyd George and several other 'waverers' had met at 11 Downing Street, but Burns and Morley were conspicuous in their absence: 'neither would have tolerated the sham.'³⁴ After a discussion it was decided at the Cabinet to assure France that Britain would protect the French coast and shipping against attacks by the German fleet. 'Burns, with remarkable energy, force, and grasp, insisted that this was neither more nor less than a challenge to Germany, tantamount to a declaration of war against her. He wound up with a refusal to be a party to it.'³⁵ Asquith persuaded Burns to postpone his resignation until the evening cabinet to be held at 6:30. Seven or eight waverers including Morley himself lunched at Lord Beauchamp's house at Belgrave Square. Morley later admitted that it had been 'in truth a very shallow affair,' but 'the general voice was loud that "Burns was right."' They felt that 'the Cabinet was being rather artfully drawn on step by step to war for the benefit of France and Russia.' 'The dissolution of the Ministry was that afternoon in full view,' added Morley,³⁶ but nobody took the initiative. At the Cabinet held in the evening Burns affirmed his determination to resign. 'Told Pattie of my decision which she accepted ruefully,' he wrote in his diary: ' . . . A man must be Captain of his own soul, pilot of his course when a vital decision like mine has been taken.'³⁷ Morley wrote a letter of resignation on the following morning, 3rd August. The waverers' unity had been broken, and in fact no point of contention had been pressed at the evening Cabinet on 2nd August. Arguments for protection of British interests appeared to have disarmed them. In the meantime, the German violation of Belgian neutrality, the celebrated *casus belli*, took place; on 4 August Britain sent her ultimatum to Germany and by the following morning the nation found itself at war.

The strength of the opposition in the Cabinet, as Morley observed, had been only on the surface. Yet Eversley wrote to Burns, saying that one of his former colleagues had told Eversley that 'you [Burns] made a most splendid fight in the Cabinet against the war & that if the actual invasion of Belgium had been postponed for 48 hours the Government must have been broken up & a Coalition one formed.'³⁸ Burns himself took the view that Lloyd George and 4 others 'could have kept Britain out and adjusted Russian and French difficulties.' He added another cause of the war 'on our side'—'too large a Cabinet: too small a coterie inside and a Commons kept innocent of what was transpiring and a country

³³ Morley, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³⁴ Hazlehurst, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

³⁵ Morley, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁷ Burns, Diary, 2 August 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

³⁸ Lord Eversley to J. Burns, 1 Oct. 1914, Add MSS 46303, JBP.

ignorant of all that occurred.'³⁹ He finally pinned down the villain, Lloyd George, who 'more than any other living man has helped to plunge the credulous country into' the war.⁴⁰ He remembered Lloyd George's Mansion House speech and believed that he had been in the hands of clever bankers.

* * *

We shall follow Burns's diary for several days after his resignation so as further to explore his real feelings as to the war and his conduct. On the 4th August he 'walked to Chelsea to see mobilisation of Territorials and by the Wellington Barracks at which Grenadiers and Irish Guardsmen were drilling and a small crowd looking on. To Office. . . . C.P.T. [Trevelyan, Under-secretary at the Board of Education] called to tell me he had resigned. I urged him to be calm and discreet for a few hours.'

On the 5th he was

Summoned to Cabinet but did not go. Went instead to Board of Trade to clear up, work off arrears, bring Precautionary Measures to completion and protest against 'Convention on Safety of Life at Sea Bill' being thrown over. . . .

I reviewed quite calmly the course of events and am convinced that the decision to resign fatal though it may be personally and probably is, was the only course open to a statesman and a man of honour given my views. 'The Conversations' of 9 years ago [the entente with France], the instigation of the Tory Press, the belittling of our country by Tariff Reformers, the distraction of Ireland to the Germans spelling weakness, the class antagonism needlessly culminated [*sic*] by LG, all these visualise us as a nation that can be ignored. The effect of which is to make Roberts, Law, Garvin & Co. assume a hectoring attitude where calmness, strength and justice to all would have pulled us through.

On the 6th he had a talk with the Prime Minister in the House of Commons for five minutes and heard him 'attempt to justify his policy which incorporate Britain in "A Continental System," land us in Conscription and if successful make John Bull John Bully of the world.' On the 9th he visited Morley at his house at Wimbledon and 'cheered him up.' On the 12th on the way to the LGB he 'saw Coldstream Guards fine fellows from Chelsea off to the war. I was touched to the heart to see these splendid fellows sacrificed to ambitious statesmen, designing Emperors and disordered patriots.' And a few days later he 'walked to and all around Aldershot to see the empty barracks, the vacant parades, the silent drill yards.' He was among the very few who predicted a long war of attrition. 'It looks as if the Germans were fighting to the death,' he wrote on the 19th August: '. . . A long, serious, dogged war is ahead of us and the issue as unsettled at end as at beginning.' He was never a Pacifist, mainly because he was on the side of the people, the working men, who, Quelch used to say, were the sufferers both in war and in peace. 'I am struck,' wrote Burns towards the end of August:

³⁹ Burns, Diary, 4 May 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

⁴⁰ Burns, Diary, 4 May 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

with the indifference of the people generally, the quiet unconcern, the collapse of jingoism now that the calamity has arrived nearer their doors than ever. They seem to be sobered as never before. I am also convinced that so far as the Regulars are concerned . . . this is an army almost exclusively composed of workmen. The conscripts of Industry are ever the recruits for War. Except the traditional military upper classes who for centuries have officered the Army and done it well individually the others are not only not paying their head tax. They are so far shirking and flinching. 500,000 men could and should have been thrown into Belgium and France 3 weeks ago.⁴¹

His venom was especially reserved for 'LG': 'Liberal organisers engaged now in recruiting. LG being clamoured for by Belgravian Journalists to drum up recruits from the East End for a West End War in the interests of Mayfair,'⁴² The war was a war for the wealthy, but the workers were compelled to fight. He could not share the responsibility for such a war, but he could not remain indifferent to the fate of the people.

He lunched with Asquith at 10 Downing Street late in October when 'PM suggested that as I know so much of soldiering I ought to be willing to be a Brigadier General.'⁴³ Earlier when the mayor of Battersea asked Burns to address a recruiting meeting to be held in the Town Hall, he declined to participate for the reason of his other duties. Earl Kitchener, War Secretary, invited him, with Asquith's approval, to become chairman of the Garrison and Canteen Board of Control, 'knowing,' as he said, 'what personal interest you have taken in all that concerns the welfare of the soldier.'⁴⁴ He cordially declined the invitation. Despite his negative response, he felt himself close to the men. When he saw the new Guardsmen at Chelsea doing bayonet exercises he was overwhelmed by the feeling of pity for the men who appeared 'keen on their contributions to the bloody solution of a quarrel that patient statesmen should have avoided.' Yet "'the New Army" is really a New Model so far as the bearing of the men is concerned, men look better than officers and for their duty relatively better trained.'⁴⁵ Asquith was not wide of the mark when he made his half-joking comment that Burns would make a Brigadier-General. News of the first major outcome of 'the bloody solution' duly came in. Asquith announced 38,000 casualties from Dardanelles in the House of Commons on 1 July 1915: 'more than all S.A. [African War] losses and 14,000 more than all the troops at Waterloo,' commented Burns.⁴⁶ Yet enlistments were going on as happily as ever: 'companies of men headed by familiar pipers marching to Waterloo, Navvies, Labourers, Carmen, average age 30 to 45, now nearly all poor industrials.'⁴⁷

* * *

'I am engaged in hunting our relief works,' he wrote to Margot Asquith about a fortnight after the outbreak of the war:

⁴¹ Burns, Diary, 26 August 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

⁴² Burns, Diary, 29 August 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

⁴³ Burns, Diary, 28 Oct. 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

⁴⁴ Lord Kitchener to J. Burns, 7 Dec. 1914, Add MSS 46303, JBP.

⁴⁵ Burns, Diary, 26 August 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

⁴⁶ Burns, Diary, 1 July 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

⁴⁷ Burns, Diary, 10 July 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

and have been successful in getting sufficient for at least 20,000 men for five months, capable of further extension as necessity compels. We are confronted with all the philanthropic mischief of the social butterflies and sentimental busibodies, Lady Bountiful competing with Lady Prodigal for the smiles of the poor and the bibulous cheers of the loafers in distributing other people's money at the cost of the character of all the poor.⁴⁸

Burns was a member of the Cabinet Committee set up to deal with distress and at the same time acted as the chairman of a London Committee for the Prevention and Relief of Distress. Widespread distress had been anticipated to follow the outbreak of the war and the consequent dislocation of economy. He brought his restrictionist policies into the London relief work, and often found himself at loggerheads with Mrs. Webb and Charles Masterman, members of the same committee, whom and whose likes he vilified, calling them 'these vivisectioners of the poor, those Pauper Vaccinators and statistical ghouls who regard life as a hunting ground for social facts and the bodies of the poor as a corpus vile for their analysis and dissection.'⁴⁹ 'BW [Beatrice Webb] sly,' he wrote again,

devilish sly, defeated last week and angry, with true intriguing instinct she had subdued Samuel [President, LGB] to her will, by 8 to 3 we carried the scale . . . beat Samuel out of his Webb entrenchment. Not a soul supported him. It was the most contemptible surrender to the Pauperism I have seen in public life. Long, Murray, Gibb, Beveridge, even CWM [Masterman] and W.B. were against him. The latter did not even give out a bleat in favour of defending his POW Fund.⁵⁰

Apparently Burns's Committee recommended relief scales lower than those paid by the War Office to the soldiers' families,⁵¹ another example of his adherence to the principle of less eligibility. While recruiting considerably relieved the labour market, war economy, as it gradually emerged, pushed up the demand for labour. 'LGB practically nothing to do,' wrote Burns in November: 'London Pauperism nearly down to the best summer figures of past 10 years.'⁵² By the spring of the following year, he was writing to Asquith, tendering his resignation of Chairmanship of the London Relief Committee and membership of the Cabinet Committee 'as there is now little to do.'⁵³

His distrust of Lloyd George became more intense because of his high-handed manner of dealing with Clyde men and also of his handling of drink question. 'But for my connection with Government,' he wrote, 'I would have criticised his implied slander on workmen.'⁵⁴ He was against the Coalition which he regarded as 'a cowardly piece of submission to a small clique' around Lloyd George. 'Great Liberal Party disappears,' he wrote on 19 May: 'LG, WC pull down the pillars and the structure built up with devotion and loyalty tumbles to the ground. . . . PM is now suffering for his indecision of 3 years ago.' He even felt

⁴⁸ J. Burns to M. Asquith, 17 August 1914, M. Asquith, *The Autobiography*, vol. II (London, 1922), p. 186.

⁴⁹ Burns, Diary, 18 August 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

⁵⁰ Burns, Diary, 20 Nov. 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

⁵¹ Kenneth Brown, *John Burns* (London, 1977), p. 182.

⁵² Burns, Diary, 20 Nov. 1914, Add MSS 46336, JBP.

⁵³ Burns, Diary, 18 April 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

⁵⁴ Burns, Diary, 29 April 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

that PM had 'sold his party.'⁵⁵ He was urged by several MPs to create an opposition, 'a determined body of Radicals.'⁵⁶ Although he was further annoyed by Lloyd George, now Munition Minister, whose 'attacks upon the workmen are disgraceful,' he did not take any step to oppose his former colleagues openly.

* * *

Burns paid little attention to the Union of Democratic Control, a rallying point for anti-war forces in the country. 'The anti-war men are doleful,' he wrote, 'almost as the war partisans and generally there is a feeling that consistent with honour and self-preservation Peace should come.'⁵⁷ In the meantime he continued to take interest in the welfare of London, including an effort, though futile, to take away the 'ugly railway bridge' across the Thames to Charing Cross. His major concern still remained with the Government, especially as he believed that Lloyd George was making 'a challenge to PM for supremacy' by advocating conscription as the best means of bringing down the government. 'PM should dismiss him as a disturbing and depressing element. PM has made 3 cardinal mistakes, he should have gaoled Carson, dismissed the Investors [in Marconi including Lloyd George] and kept a tighter hand on F.O. [Foreign Office].'⁵⁸

From about this time Burns became a partisan for Asquith and sometimes visited him and his family at the 'Wharf,' Sutton Courteney, Berkshire. He was against conscription himself. 'Many people would rather lose the war with Conscription than win it with Volunteers. They will be denied this opportunity but class feeling is rising and Conscription is asked for ostensibly for war but really for civil war afterwards.'⁵⁹ This was perhaps an overstatement, but the Conscription controversy became serious in the autumn, as thousands of 'slackers' were believed to be evading their duties. A final effort to avoid it by encouraging men of military age to 'attest' their willingness to serve appeared successful. 'The "Common People" have emerged triumphant'—Burns was jubilant, and even thought of himself playing some vital role 'when opportunity arises.'⁶⁰ The sentence should read 'when opportunity for Peace occurs.' Morley told him that there was 'a movement for alternative Government,' and discussed with him as to 'the policy, possibility, and wisdom of this course.'⁶¹ But Asquith surrendered 'to Conscriptionists and to the LG Intriguers.'⁶² Burns was prepared to speak against the Conscription Bill but as it was obvious that 'a sham fight . . . was taking place,' he 'decided not to speak' but contented himself with voting with 39 others against it.⁶³ Any possibility of an alternative government, if there had been any, now vanished.

After this he began to indulge in revolutionary sentiments. Referring to the condition of the people under kings, emperors and their 'attendant tools' he wrote: 'The Haldanes,

⁵⁵ Burns, Diary, 19, 21 May 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

⁵⁶ Burns, Diary, 10, 16 June 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

⁵⁷ Burns, Diary, 23 Nov. 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

⁵⁸ Burns, Diary, 17 Sept. 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

⁵⁹ Burns, Diary, 3 Dec. 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

⁶⁰ Burns, Diary, 12 Nov. 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

⁶¹ Burns, Diary, 10 Dec. 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

⁶² Burns, Diary, 30 Dec. 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

⁶³ Burns, Diary, 12 Jan. 1916, Add MSS 46338, JBP.

Webbs and Wells offer no solid suggestion for this problem. . . . Only in a revolutionary movement of all the countries is there hope.⁶⁴ But as far as Britain was concerned, it was not the cause of revolution but of reaction that appeared to have triumphed. 'The soldiers, Conscriptionists and Army Council are now exploiting LG against the PM and Moderates in Cabinet, LG playing a gambler's part with a desperado's audacity. . . . For the sake of the country, for decency in public life for all that is dear to good causes I hope he fails.'⁶⁵ As early as 1911 Burns told Charles Hobhouse that 'he [Lloyd George] had a conscience as good as new, for he had never used it.'⁶⁶ Perhaps he now concluded that he had had none of it. There was a suggestion that Burns should lead a Labour government now, rather a preposterous view which Burns, though flattered, dismissed as such.⁶⁷

At the time of the Easter Rebellion in Dublin, the collapse of which, he felt, was inevitable 'due to mismanagement and failure' on the part of the 'Intellectuals,' he wrote: 'I am powerless to help My position in Government, my reasons for resigning, my present views, all stay my hand and still my voice.'⁶⁸ In November he attended an Anti-Conscription Dinner at which some 35 people including Simon, Ramsay MacDonald and Pringle were present. 'I was pressed for a speech,' he wrote, 'and delivered myself freely of my opinion about this avoidable, unnecessary, unjustified war to the approval of those present.'⁶⁹ A momentary optimism born from this gathering was dashed away by the government crisis in the following month, when Asquith was overthrown. 'LG is in the saddle, Asquith is dismounted and "The Tribune of the People" is now the darling of reaction.' 'Balfour, Law, Cecil, Curzon and others,' he added, 'have allowed or used LG to destroy Liberal Government, then Coalition and now the Gentlemen of England serve under the greatest cad in Europe.'⁷⁰

* * *

His feeling for the men in military service led him to maintain a close contact with the commander-in-chief of the British Army in France—Douglas Haig. On the eve of the Battle of the Somme, Haig wrote to John Burns: 'we had certainly got a real *Civilian* Army now, but its fine solidarity spirit and determination to conquer is beyond all belief.'⁷¹ 'As you say the soldiers,' replied Burns, 'and I add the people from whom they came, have done well, except for a few politicians, several ministers, and nearly all the newspapers the nation as a whole in past 2 years have behaved splendidly.' 'I am all for initiative & spontaneity, even audacity when emergently [*sic*] necessary,' he added:

but I am afraid we have lost many gallant fellows by indisciplined enthusiasm tolerable in expeditionary war but not so easily countenanced in this lengthy, deadly, mechanical

⁶⁴ Burns, Diary, 13 March 1916, Add MSS 46338, JBP.

⁶⁵ Burns, Diary, 17 April 1916, Add MSS 46338, JBP.

⁶⁶ Edward David (ed.), *Inside Asquith's Cabinet: From the Diaries of Charles Hobhouse* (London, 1977), p. 101.

⁶⁷ Burns, Diary, 25 April 1916, Add MSS 46338, JBP.

⁶⁸ Burns, Diary, 30 April 1916, Add MSS 46338, JBP.

⁶⁹ Burns, Diary, 22 Nov. 1916, Add MSS 46338, JBP.

⁷⁰ Burns, Diary, 8 Dec. 1916, Add MSS 46338, JBP.

⁷¹ D. Haig to J. Burns, 29 June 1916, Add MSS 46303, JBP.

fighting that means conservation of men, morale & energy for the decisive days and hours of final struggle. I see with delight in today's newspapers that you and Joffre are working to that end. With sincere good luck and with best wishes.⁷²

On the first day of the battle the British army suffered the greatest loss sustained by any army in the First World War, and the prolonged battle ended in a stalemate, bogged down in the muddy fields. Burns sent Haig an ancient book entitled *Wars in Flanders* and wrote: 'It will interest you at this moment, and I hope you will accept this memento of our old time acquaintance at Aldershot.'⁷³ 'Greatly touched' by this, Douglas Haig wrote back, saying that 'we are keeping steadily pegging away at the enemy,' and enclosed 'a map showing our steady progress from 1st to 25th July.'⁷⁴ Burns wrote in his diary that 'he saw a member of N.L.C. [National Liberal Club] who had lost 3 out of his 4 boys with Haig's letter in my hand.'⁷⁵ About the time when the battle quieted down at the Somme, Haig invited Burns to come over and 'see the splendid achievements of the British soldier.' Burns replied that he would have accepted the offer but for his son who had just invalided from the Somme.⁷⁶

Edgar was a problem to his father. After all he was not the son of a proletarian. One day in 1915 Burns had 'a serious and stiff talk with Edgar, whose "public school" attitude on all social, political and military problems colour his human view and distort inherent kindness to the popular aspirations.'⁷⁷ Edgar was now keen on enlisting: 'whilst his intellect and judgment objects, his heart is in the trench.' Burns had another talk with Edgar which was rough and fruitless:

whatever his mother expresses he opposes, whatever view his father explains he demises. Callous, obstinate, unromantic, regarding sentiment as the 8th deadly sin, opposed to popular claims and rights. Supermanish to the greatest extent. Where he got these views from I cannot understand except that he got them from his Orange School-master and that explains everything that is crossgrained and unpleasant.⁷⁸

Again he found Edgar 'in a very Prussian temper and a callous mood.'⁷⁹ In January 1916 Edgar enlisted in the Garrison Artillery and proceeded to Dover. The disappointed but indulgent father went to see his son; he went by motor bus, as the railway was blocked by heavy snow. 'I walked 3 miles alone in driving snow.' At Priory he met his son 'looking strong, erect, manly' and felt 'a father's joy in meeting his son.'⁸⁰

Edgar soon moved to Lydd, but fell ill and returned home for a sick leave in April. By the middle of May he was back at Lydd, ready to go over to France. On his 21st birthday his father wished 'good luck to him at war in France.' The battle of the Somme, fought doggedly all through the summer, tailed off in November. By then Edgar, invalided

⁷² J. Burns to D. Haig, 1 July 1916, Add MSS 46303, JBP.

⁷³ J. Burns to D. Haig, 26 July 1916, Add MSS 46303, JBP.

⁷⁴ D. Haig to J. Burns, 30 July 1916, Add MSS 46393, JBP.

⁷⁵ Burns, Diary, 1 Aug. 1916, Add MSS 46338, JBP.

⁷⁶ D. Haig to J. Burns, 15 Nov. 1916; J. Burns to D. Haig, 30 Nov. 1916, Add MSS 46303, JBP.

⁷⁷ Burns, Diary, 16 Oct. 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

⁷⁸ Burns, Diary, 5 Dec. 1915, Add MSS 46337, JBP.

⁷⁹ Burns, Diary, 2 Jan. 1916, Add MSS 46338, JBP.

⁸⁰ Burns, Diary, 23 Feb. 1916, Add MSS 46338, JBP.

home, found himself at a hospital in Liverpool. Burns went to see him. 'I was seated on his bed,' he wrote:

chatting with a man of the Humpshire Regiment who came home from Rouen with Edgar. Edgar was delighted to see me. He is little taller, more serious and ever so much lighter and thinner. . . . He told me all his experience in France, his escapes, his work, his experiences of war, and we are very lucky to have him back again.⁸¹

'A pleasant letter' came from Edgar who had nearly recovered in Liverpool. He was stationed for a while in his new camp in Suffolk, and then was sent to Egypt. He moved to Jerusalem and then to Alexandria where he still was when the armistice finally came. After that Burns's diary ceased to mention Edgar.

* * *

Hobhouse recalled that Burns had been one of the silent members of the Asquith Cabinet.⁸² Burns once wrote to Lord Fisher, who had resigned his post as First Sea Lord at the time of a political crisis over the Dardanelles campaign: 'Our motto, The noblest answer to them all is simple silence when they bawl.'⁸³ His response to any constructive plans for opposition to the war, for a negotiated peace, was usually negative, the only exception being the anti-conscription group dinner already referred to.

He was evidently moved by the Revolution in Russia, 'a Revolutionary movement' in which, he believed, there was 'only hope' for Europe and for Britain, but his reaction was restrained. Bertrand Russell and Miss Catherine Marshall of the No Conscription Fellowship sought to persuade Burns to take the chair at a public meeting in support of the British 'Charter of Freedom' which they had prepared in response to the Russian charter issued by the Provisional Government after the March Revolution. 'Both urged me to take a certain course,' wrote Burns in his diary, 'which I declined as I did not agree with their reading of events and their judgment of the situation.'⁸⁴ It is true, he had been greatly encouraged by the Russian Revolution 'effected with comparatively little bloodshed.' He wished success to the Russians who might weld the religious fervour of the people with the Communism of the Mir and with 'the enlightened tolerant intelligence of the modern reformer.'⁸⁵ He wondered what Prince Kropotkin, whom he had known 'intimately for 30 years,' thought of 'Bolshevism and the many varieties of catastrophic communism that are now alternately struggling for mastery against each other.'⁸⁶ Arthur Henderson, a member of Lloyd George's War Cabinet, was publicly disgraced in the door-mat incident after his visit to Petrograd for the cause of peace, and resigned. His place was taken by George Barnes, former secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE). 'A talk at tea table with G.N. Barnes very unhappy even miserable at his present position and

⁸¹ Burns, Diary, 23 Nov. 1916, Add MSS 46338, JBP.

⁸² David (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 121.

⁸³ J. Burns to Lord Fisher, 17 Nov. 1915, Add MSS 46303, JBP.

⁸⁴ Jo Vellacott, *Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War* (London, 1980), pp. 155-56; Burns, Diary, 18 March 1917, Add MSS 46339, JBP.

⁸⁵ Burns, Diary, 16, 21 March 1917, Add MSS 46339, JBP.

⁸⁶ Burns, Diary, 27 Jan. 1918, Add MSS 46340, JBP.

longing to give it all up,' wrote Burns, ' . . . Poor Barnes. He who had been so severe on me at ASE and so critical when at LGB has now his turn of responsibility.'⁸⁷

In June 1918 he attended a meeting at the Battersea Town Hall as one of the 10 nominated candidates for Parliament and spoke against the war, against conscription, against protection and imperialism. He for a while toyed with the idea of resuming an active political life and was encouraged by his former supporters to do so. But the armistice, when it came, did not end his reticence, and he withdrew from the Parliamentary contest that followed it. He knew that Liberalism was now doomed, while he could not reconcile himself to the idea of accepting a place in the Labour Party still dominated largely by the old ILP [Independent Labour Party], nor could he hope for the emergence of a revolutionary Socialist party which he could lead. G.D.H. Cole remembered Burns telling him one day in 1918 about the reorganisation of the Labour Party, in which Arthur Henderson was then taking the initiative. He said that 'it [the reorganisation] was all on the wrong lines, and that what was needed was a "straight" Socialist Party, with no nonsense about it, and no attempt to compromise. To use his own words, "Hyndman's stuff, my boy, without frills; and I'm the man to lead them."' ⁸⁸ His memories often went back to the 1880s, but it was impossible now to revive the glory of the bygone days.

LG carrying everything before him, Poor Old Country, Liberals impotent, Labour unprepared but growing, Tory Party using LG against Labour and Progress in the hope now that war is over reaction as usual after war will triumph and their LG will be discarded. The victory of reaction is certain.⁸⁹

This was his forecast for the immediate future and possibly for a long time to come. The same sentiment can be seen in his letter to 'Douglas' [possibly Cole] dated 8 March 1919: 'I regard the world as mad, every Chancellerie as an asylum, no. 10 Downing Street as a padded room. This administration will be known as "Le Charlatanisme organisé" and L.G. is the Doctor Dee.'

Then came a deadly blow from which Burns could not recover his strength to speak out: the death of his son Edgar. Edgar apparently was suffering from shell-shock, and many a blank page in his father's diary would attest the depth of his own agony and regret as well as his father's. After his repatriation, he volunteered to serve as clerk for the Imperial War Graves Commission at Rouen. He was living at the Hotel du Champ de Courses, Grand Quévilly, south-west of Rouen, and died at Hotel Dieu, Rouen, on 22 June 1922. The circumstances of his death is not known. The aggrieved father fetched the body at once, and his hapless son was buried at Battersea Rise Cemetery on 27 June. 'My son has been added to the millions of victims,' he wrote to Massingham:

not martyrs of this great tragedy which I did my best to avert, and nearly succeeded. Place, power, 'honours,' authority fell from me as the reward of duty and conscience, but above all prescience in what we unregretfully did and the painful results vindicate us in the full. No room is there for tears, either for my brave boy, his devoted mother and his mournful father, but we miss him sadly. Thanks for sympathy.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Burns, Diary, 30 Jan. 1918, Add MSS 46340, JBP.

⁸⁸ G.D.H. Cole, *John Burns*, (London, 1943), p. 5.

⁸⁹ Burns, Diary, 16 Nov. 1918, Add MSS 46340, JBP.

⁹⁰ J. Burns to H.W. Massingham, 2 July 1922, Add MSS 46304, JBP.

This can be a fitting epitaph not so much for Edgar as for his father who might have averted the war if he had gained support of more of his colleagues in the cabinet or of the majority of his own class in August 1914. Although he went on living for another twenty years, he practically died when his son died. The war killed them both.

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