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978-0-521-08564-9 - Sir John Brunner Radical Plutocrat, 1842-1919

Stephen E. Koss

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

A NONCONFORMIST YOUTH¹

Sir John Tomlinson Brunner, who left his mark not only on the landscape but also on the folklore of Cheshire, merits no less prominent a place in the economic and political history of the British nation. Others might be more readily identified with the history of the Liberal Party, but few better personified the sources of its impetus and inspiration. Industrial magnate, politician, philanthropist, he was the very stuff of Liberalism, which was for him more an ethic than a party allegiance. His business career, among the most remarkable of his time, was distinguished by the consistent application of Liberal principles, as he understood them, to problems of labor and commerce. His parliamentary career, which spanned the years from the party's split over Home Rule in 1886 to its ultimate fissure under the impact of the first world war, keenly reflected the shifting content of Liberalism, its achievements and frustrations.

When Brunner died in 1919, H. W. Massingham paid tribute to him in the *Nation* as 'one of the Conscript Fathers of Liberalism', who, before the outbreak of war, had 'aimed at being, and in some degree was, a leader of its medium thought'.² His Liberalism, observed a correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, was 'expansive, courageous, militant against evil, and eager for experiment and action'.³ Lord Bryce, an ally in countless battles, wrote that his friend's 'uprightness, his candour, his geniality and his unfailing public spirit inspired confidence in all who knew him'. He could think of no one who 'was more popular in the

¹ Material for this chapter has been drawn, except where otherwise indicated, from the following sources, all among the Brunner Papers: a set of brief autobiographical memoranda that Sir John dictated late in life; a series of letterbooks into which he or his secretaries pressed his correspondence; and a typescript of his inaugural address at the University of Liverpool, written in 1909 and from all indications never delivered. The letterbooks pose a particular problem, for the addressees are often as obscure as the penmanship for the early years. I have therefore identified in footnotes to this chapter only printed sources, letters to and from well-known individuals, and items from other manuscript collections.

² July 5, 1919.

³ July 2, 1919.

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House of Commons on both sides, for though he was a “good party man,” he never allowed partisanship to lead him into acrimony or ill will’.¹ But by far the best testimonial to the quality of Brunner’s Liberalism came during his lifetime from the thousands of men at Brunner, Mond and Company, who recognized the confluence of their interests and his—what one historian has designated the ‘political mutualism’ that often emerged in such situations²—and accordingly gave him their enthusiastic support in his successive electoral campaigns. They knew him as a progressive employer who helped to pioneer the eight-hour day, ungrudgingly assumed responsibility for workmen’s compensation, devised schemes for paid holidays and baby bonuses and, in short, achieved in his firm’s relations between capital and labor the harmony for which he strove with equal ardor but less success in international affairs.

In politics and business, Brunner waged a double-edged crusade against poverty and privilege. His two careers cannot be compartmentalized, for each drew sustenance from the other, and both were governed by the same Liberal maxims of peace, retrenchment and reform. His Liberalism was completely spontaneous, a product of upbringing as much as enlightened self-interest. Service in Parliament exposed him to new currents of thought that helped to make him a more liberal employer; and his parliamentary Liberalism was, in turn, enriched by his experience as an entrepreneur. His interest in such causes as temperance and educational reform was fostered by a desire to make his countrymen more responsible as citizens, more productive as workers, and more virtuous as human beings. His efforts to promote disarmament and international cooperation were inspired no less by his nonconformist idealism than by his disdain, as a businessman, for wasteful expenditure.

When he was first elected to Parliament in 1885, *The Times* (to his unending delight) dubbed him the ‘Chemical Croesus’. He revelled in his immense wealth, grateful for the opportunities for

¹ Bryce to J. F. L. Brunner, July 28, 1919, Brunner Papers (hereafter BP).

² J. Bartlet Brebner, ‘Laissez Faire and State Intervention in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, in R. L. Schuyler and H. Ausubel, eds., *The Making of English History* (New York, 1966), p. 508.

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leadership and public service that it opened to him. ‘Gentlemen, I am a rich man,’ he remarked to the Northwich Liberals whose endorsement he sought for his first candidacy, ‘and it is possibly because I am a rich man that I am standing here. Otherwise I would not be here, being a man with nine children.’¹ In an age when elected office carried no salary, his success as co-founder of the largest British alkali works gave him ample means to undertake a political career; certainly it permitted him to be a generous patron of party projects. In his quarter century in the Commons, not only his wealth but also the force of his personality won for him an influence in party councils that far exceeded his reputation. Adding to his stature was the high esteem in which he was held by scores of Liberal backbenchers who shared his background and convictions, and among whom he became in time an elder statesman. J. A. Spender, the veteran Liberal journalist, ranked him ‘as one of the *virī pietate graves* who stand aloof from office but have a great influence over private members and are always consulted by their leaders when parliamentary weather is unsettled’. ‘When Brunner shook his head,’ Spender declared, ‘the Whips began to run about and it was recognized that the leaders were in danger of touching, perhaps unconsciously and unintentionally, one of the sensitive nerve centres that are just below the surface in the Liberal physiology.’² In private as well as public life, Brunner was the quintessence of the nonconformist Radical, a mainstay of the nineteenth-century Liberal order whose gradual decline deprived Liberalism of a large measure of its social relevance and popular appeal.

Like many prominent Liberals of his generation he was of alien extraction, though not himself an alien. Like countless others he was a self-made man, intensely proud of the fact, whose roots were in the industrial north. His father, after whom he was named, came to England from Switzerland in 1832 to join Dr Carl Voelker, a fellow Swiss, who kept a school at Everton, then a prosperous suburb of Liverpool. The eldest of six children, he had been intended by John’s grandfather, a dyer by trade, to enter

¹ Speech at Leftwich, April 11, 1885, *Northwich and Winsford Chronicle*, April 18, 1885.

² J. A. Spender, *Sir Robert Hudson, A Memoir* (London, 1930), pp. 123–4.

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the Lutheran ministry. Probably he had all along doubted his call, for in 1826, on a passport application, he described himself as '*un homme de lettres*'. After years of preparation, he found himself unable to take ordination and, acutely aware of his father's disappointment, left his homeland and renounced his patrimony. Soon after his arrival in England he became a Unitarian, which allowed him to reconcile his theological uncertainties with a strict Christian piety. The foremost figures in Unitarian thought and society prided themselves on advanced pedagogical views and emphasized the value of catechetical instruction to the young. Though Brunner never had a congregation, he was known to his students and neighbors as the Reverend, probably because it was common in his day for Unitarian schoolmasters to be ministers who ran schools in order to disseminate ideas as well as to supplement their meager incomes.

In 1835 the first John Brunner terminated his informal partnership with Voelker and, at thirty-five years of age, began his own school and family. He married Margaret Catherine Curphey, born in 1814 at Ballydroma on the Isle of Man, and moved to a large, old-fashioned building in Netherfield Road, Everton, known as St George's House. 'It is my house,' John Brunner could recall his father remonstrating proudly, 'not St George's.' There he founded a school that he maintained until his retirement in 1863, and there John, his parents' fourth child and second son, was born on February 8, 1842.

John had only dim memories of his mother, who died five years after he was born, but he enjoyed a warm companionship with his father, whom he eulogized as 'the gentlest of men, never willing to believe evil of others, always ready to impute to them good motives. . . He was the truest Christian I have ever known.' His father's scholastic attainments, particularly his linguistic talents, were a source of pride and amazement to his children. He taught his pupils at St George's House mathematics, astronomy, anatomy, and geology, as well as German, French, English, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. John remembered with affection a family outing in North Wales one Sunday shortly after his mother died, when his father was accosted by

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a tall bearded stranger who turned out to be a Polish Jew. He . . . told him that he had come to Wales to study Welsh—his seventeenth language. They spoke at first in English, then my father addressed him in German and then in response to a demand from us conversed with the Jew in French and then in Italian, following with Latin and Greek and with classical Hebrew. The Jew thoroughly appreciated the fun and smiled broadly. We children stood round and clapped our hands and applauded vociferously and then we were all utterly cast down when the Jew spoke in a Slavonic language.

As an educator, the elder Brunner was guided by the precepts of Jean Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), precepts that later influenced John's campaigns for educational and penitentiary reform. There were marked similarities, personal and professional, between the elder Brunner and Pestalozzi, though it is doubtful that they ever met. Both Protestants from Zurich, they were equally dedicated to the mingling of children from different economic backgrounds, to a nonsectarian approach to education, and to the inculcation of moral standards that would assist the natural development of each student. And, like Pestalozzi, John's father spent most of his career on the brink of bankruptcy, more concerned with training minds than collecting fees. His school, like Voelker's, was conducted along Pestalozzian lines:

The means employed for the development of the moral faculties are religious and moral instruction, and the attention which is paid to the direction of the feelings and affections, and to the conduct of the pupils; and the endeavour on the part of their masters to implant by precept and example, in the heart of their pupils, a veneration for what is holy, a love towards every thing that is good, and an aversion to all that is evil. The treatment of the pupils is marked by patience and parental kindness, severe language and punishment being never resorted to but in extreme cases.¹

To be sure, Pestalozzian theory and Unitarian practice reinforced each other, and there were other Unitarian schools—including Dr Lant Carpenter's at Bristol and the school attached to Upper Chapel, Sheffield—that drew their inspiration from Locke or Priestley with much the same effect.

In deference to what Pestalozzi called 'the essential needs of childhood', Brunner and Voelker postponed the study of

¹ 'Plan for the Education & Instruction of the Pupils Under Mr Chas Voelker's Care at St Domingo House, Everton, near Liverpool' (BP).

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classical languages by their pupils and devoted the preliminary years to 'such branches of education as are adapted to their age', the reading and writing of English, arithmetic, and the sciences. No less daring were their attempts, also reminiscent of Pestalozzi, to provide religious instruction that would propagate values without imposing dogma. An exclusively secular education would have failed in its primary task, but equally distasteful was the imposition of a religious uniformity or the mindless memorization of texts that, more often than not, passed for religious training. At each level, the pupils were offered instruction in a different aspect of the history and ideas of Christianity. At San Domingo House, Voelker's establishment, and afterwards at Brunner's own school, the curriculum was typically Unitarian, wide in intellectual breadth, and coupling a strong interest in the natural sciences with an emphasis upon morality.

As an immigrant and an educational reformer, the elder Brunner found particularly vexing the sectarian disputes that rent English society. His attempts to achieve a fervent yet tolerant Christianity were applauded by James Martineau, the eminent Unitarian divine, whom he met soon after his arrival in England. 'I deeply sympathise with your sentiments respecting the state of religion in this country', Martineau wrote to him in 1834,

and with the difficulties in which, in common with all enlightened and conscientious instructors, you have found yourself involved by it. I can never advert to the subject without melancholy; nor cease to sigh for a time, which our boasted Reformation ought not to have been so long in introducing, when entire freedom of thought may prevail in union with deep religious sentiment, and a morality may be adopted by society, friendly alike to the intellect, the benevolence and the devotion, of mankind. Few things will contribute more to this happy end, than such instructions as, it is evident, you impart to your pupils,—instructions which impart ideas and awaken feelings, instead of the dead language of creeds, and the senseless prejudices of faction.¹

The next generation of nonconformists, enjoying the fruits of the 1867 franchise reform, sought the solution to this problem not in

¹ Martineau to John Brunner, December 12, 1834 (BP). It is worth mention that Martineau, then minister of Paradise Street Chapel, Liverpool, wrote this letter at a critical moment in his career, when he broke with the Priestleyan tradition.

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an intensified faith, but in a militant political Radicalism, the public manifestation of their private sense of duty.

John Brunner later credited his worldly success to his Unitarianism, which had 'put into him that courage and that independence of thought which, if only backed by perseverance and good health, would almost inevitably lead to fortune, and if not to fortune, at any rate would lead to a determination, and usually to a successful determination, to share in the public work of his country'.¹ He could remember accompanying his father ('or rather I used to run after him') to Renshaw Street Chapel, where he would listen enthralled to 'the giants of the nonconformist world in Liverpool': John Hamilton Thom, William Henry Channing, and Charles Beard. These were men with tremendous local influence and national reputations, spokesmen for a younger generation of more evangelical Unitarians, whose powerful oratory rang in John's ears to the end of his days. He remembered least Thom, who came earliest, but Channing's lessons on 'the comparative anatomy of religions', delivered in 'gentle tones and his earnest voice' in the vestry on a Sunday afternoon, made an indelible impression. John later cited them as a justification for his espousal of Irish Home Rule. Beard was a friend of John's father, to whom he entrusted the education of his only son. In the summer of 1865 he lectured on the subject of 'Christian Politics', imploring the congregation 'never to put before your fellow countrymen in matters of politics any motive except the highest'. It was an appeal that John, then a young man of twenty-three, heard and took to heart.

In 1847 John's mother died, and the next year John's father proposed marriage to Nancy Inman, a lady who shared his Unitarian convictions and who ran a school in the neighborhood of Birkenhead. At first, she sent her 'most respectful refusal', though she paid ample tribute to his 'attainments' and assured him that

all I have heard of your character has but contributed to raise you in my esteem... I deeply sympathise with you in the loss you sustained by the death of your lamented wife, but Sir if you look around you will... find

¹ Speech at the laying of a foundation stone, Unitarian Chapel schoolrooms, Nantwich, Cheshire: newspaper cutting labelled '1886' (BP).

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many who far better than myself will be able and willing to assist you in the duties of Education, and be a Mother to your children.

Their correspondence continued, and, two years later, he again broached the subject. This time she hesitated for only two reasons, the first that his five children might not 'love me and confide in me fully and freely', and the second that marriage might some day require her 'to leave my native country to dwell among strangers of whose language and customs I am quite ignorant'. Apparently John's father, at this time beset with financial and family burdens, had vaguely contemplated a return to Switzerland. But Miss Inman's fears on both scores were allayed, and the marriage took place in the spring of 1851.

Brunner's second wife placed at her husband's disposal not only her shrewd business sense but also a small reserve of capital. They had discussed each other's 'pecuniary circumstances' before marrying, and though she was disappointed 'to find that you do not receive a more ample and generous return for your devoted services and unremitting exertions in your professional sphere', she was nonetheless determined that 'this consideration would not influence my decision if I thought I could add to your resources'. As a woman, alone in the world, 'and having a great dread of becoming dependent upon the bounty of friends', she had put aside some money, most of it invested in shares of the Midland Railway. Unlike her husband's school, hers had 'been prosperous. . . and I have been enabled to treat my children and teachers liberally and to lay by yearly upwards of a hundred pounds'. She made these savings available to her stepson John in 1873 as a source of capital for Brunner, Mond and Company, and he increased them for her many times over.

The second Mrs Brunner quickly took in hand her husband's family, badly in need of maternal affection, his older pupils, badly in need of discipline, and his finances, badly in need of replenishing. In each case she succeeded admirably. It was from his stepmother, whom he soon learned to call 'Mama', that John claimed to have derived his facility with practical affairs. In all probability he was at least as influenced by his father's negative example. Years later he described his father as 'an absolute child in matters

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of business', too much a Christian to press the parents of his pupils for tuition fees long overdue. His gentleness may have endeared him to his charges, but not to his creditors, and it was due to his wife's tightfisted management that the school at last showed a modest profit. 'She introduced methodical principles into the household which enabled my father to begin to save money,' John recalled, no mean tribute from a man of business. But it would be wrong to imply that her 'methodical principles' operated at the expense of comfort or affection. She was a warm-hearted woman, devoted to her new family, of whom she was inclined to be more than a bit indulgent. One of the pupils at St George's House enjoyed memories of

Mrs Brunner with her benign face and gold spectacles, taking tea with Miss Brunner (who used to box my ears) one night when her 'John' came in 'from the office'... On the evening in question old Brunner's grey hairs were proudly and affectionately stroked by Mrs Brunner, as she explained to us the advantages of washing the head with cold water, and using no pomatum.

Everton, where John spent his boyhood, was, according to his earliest recollection, 'the prettiest suburb of a great town that you could find throughout the North of England. Its streets were lined with trees, and from one end to another you saw the houses and gardens of merchants and rich men'.¹ As he grew older, 'Liverpool slowly crept up the hill of Everton', and the village was presently incorporated within the city limits. The air was no longer fragrant, the views were no longer unimpeded. Though population density never reached the proportions of nearby areas, the broad expanses of Everton were gradually carved into small leaseholds, and hundreds of working-class families crowded together on the site where once a single mansion had stood. The 44,000 square yards on which St George's House was comfortably situated were, a relative reported in 1891, covered 'by row upon

¹ *Parliamentary Debates*, 4th ser., LXVI, cols. 532 ff. (February 10, 1899). Sir William Forwood, who earned his fortune as a merchant and banker, describes society in Liverpool and its suburbs in his autobiography, *Recollections of a Busy Life* (Liverpool, 1911); there is also some charming anecdotal material in B. G. Orchard, *The Clerks of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1871).

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row of streets and small houses, and the lake on it . . . is filled up and converted into a children's playground'.

But at mid-century Everton still justified its claim, inspired by the proximity of a toffee works, to be 'a place of very sweet reputation'. It was an eminently suitable place for the merchant princes of the north-west, many of them Unitarians, to school their sons, and Brunner's roll-book boasted such respected names as Tate, Rathbone, Forwood, Gladstone, and Brocklehurst. Years later John reminded Sir Henry Tate, head of the sugar firm and benefactor of the Tate Gallery, that he had given him his first half-crown when he came to visit his three sons at St George's House. When John entered the House of Commons in 1885, he found no fewer than five of his school fellows: William Rathbone, Henry Mitchell, Sir Bernard Samuelson, Sir James Stansfeld, and Sir Charles Tennant, all Liberals like himself. The last had spent evenings studying French at Everton while he was apprenticed to his godfather, a Liverpool shipper.¹ These families constituted a society unto themselves, steadfastly nonconformist and confirmed in their self-righteousness by their material success. They formed what one historian has described as 'an urban governing class which, through intermarriage and business and political associations, had national ramifications'.² It was in this class, already in decline, that John Brunner would eventually take a prominent place.

Like his two brothers, Henry (Harry) and Joseph, John was educated at St George's House. From all indications he was not the least inhibited by the fact that his home was the schoolhouse and his father the schoolmaster. On winter afternoons he joined the other boys behind the hedge to roast 'surreptitious potatoes', and took an active part in the Mischief Club, of which his brother Henry was captain. On the academic side John cut something less of a figure. He could master any subject that fired his imagination, but found it difficult to concentrate upon the theoretical or abstract. He respected book learning, but lacked the patience to

¹ I am grateful to Lady Crathorne, Sir Charles's daughter, for this information.

² J. F. Glaser, 'English Nonconformity and the Decline of Liberalism', *American Historical Review*, LXIII (1957-8), 354.