TRUTH

AN ESSAY IN

MORAL RECONSTRUCTION
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BY

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Truth is one of the greatest material assets in the life of a nation and must be directly guarded and developed as are Life and Property.

Freedom of the Press does not mean freedom to disseminate lies and errors.
PREFACE

This Essay (which is a supplement to my earlier book Aristodemocracy) was written during the autumn and winter of 1917–18. For various reasons, its publication has been delayed. Though the actual war has ended, this momentous change has not affected the purpose and the arguments of the book. In spite of the influence and supreme importance of economic causes which prepared for the inception and continuance of the war, as they affect the terms of peace and will dominate the civilised world for some time to come, I maintain now, as I expressed my opinions from the beginning, that the efficient cause of the war is to be found in the defective moral standards and moral education of the civilised world, and that Moral Reconstruction is at least as urgently needed as industrial and financial re-adjustment.

The immediate influence of the war—in spite of all the heroism and self-sacrifice which it has evoked in millions of patriotic citizens—has been to lower the moral standards of the world, already defective and anachronistic before the war. To the previous inadequacies and defects of our ethical systems and education in pre-war times must now be added, among minor symptoms of degeneration, the lowering and coarsening of our sense of the value of human life, a necessary, almost logical sequence to all wars; the growth of thriftlessness and profligacy owing to the unsettling of economic and financial standards and the suspension of the laws and regulations governing contracts
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and, in many cases, the acquisition of surplus income to those not accustomed to such affluence; and, above all, the lowering of the standards of Truth. This increase of untruthfulness is not only caused by the general derangement of social life and the unbalancing of nerves among the majority of the population, as well as by the growth of more or less justified suspiciousness against one’s neighbours, when spying and illicit dealing with the enemy exist and must be forcibly counteracted; but it is, above all, encouraged, if not produced, by the recognised use of deception and trickery of all kinds as a legitimate method of warfare. The last and most distasteful outcome is the introduction into our vernacular of that hateful word “camouflage,” used with nauseating frequency and gratification by even the most illiterate. Camouflage is the attempt at deception—lying—not by words, but by means of objects. It is an extension of untruthfulness which is a recognised and legitimate form of warfare.

Thus the delay in the publication of this book has served to present us with fresh conditions which demand even more urgently than before the need for reconstruction of our morals as regards truthfulness.

What concerns the life of the individual citizen applies equally, if not more so, to public morality. The numerous infringements of personal liberty and of higher spiritual morality, made necessary by the pressing expediency of war, have in innumerable cases, set expediency above morality. The enactment by what has popularly been summarised under the name of an interfering and not too scrupulous “person” called “Dora,” however justified by the exceptional necessities of war, has not infrequently led
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to the suppression of truth and even to the direct encouragement of deception. The activity of the Censorship, private and public, has tended in the same direction. Some time must elapse, even after the suspension of the censorship, for the tradition of scrupulous recognition of the sanctity of private information by word and in letters to be re-established among us, as well as the straightforward adherence to truth and nothing but the truth. The same applies emphatically to the great organ of publicity, the Press. Its power of suppressing facts and, positively, of producing "stunts," which, to say the least, present facts or whole groups of facts out of all proportion, has grown inordinately and asserted itself as a fixed tradition during this time of war. The crying need for action to regulate this most powerful and most dangerous institution in modern life, to which I have devoted much of the space in this book, can hardly be overstated.

In view of the fact that (page 98) I single out one of the leading journalists of the world to illustrate one of the most glaring defects in our system of publicity and the absurdity of established traditions as regards the personal and, at the same time, irresponsible power of such journalists, I desire here to bear testimony to the patriotic intentions of Lord Northcliffe and to the important work in many directions achieved by him during the war. It is possible that, in the future, history may confirm the claim which he may have established to the gratitude of the country. But the system itself remains wrong and a growing evil.

In the Appendix I have reprinted extracts from previous books and articles by me dealing with some of the subjects
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treated in the book itself. I have done this because I believe that it strengthens the argument to show that the same conclusions were arrived at in earlier years under essentially different conditions and from an independent point of view. But I should like to draw especial attention to the fact that the praise which was in earlier years bestowed upon the scientific spirit prevailing in German universities and in their whole educational system, applied to the Germany of old and not to the Germany of modern Streberthum. The advent of the latter régime I endeavoured to indicate in my book Aristodemocracy. The older spirit of scientific thoroughness, we hope, is not wholly dead even now. Its decline in more recent years has been pointed out on various occasions and quite recently by leading Germans of the “old school.” This moral and intellectual degeneration began with Bismarck. I may claim to have recognised this process of degeneration in what I wrote about thirty years ago; but most clearly in my little book, The Expansion of Western Ideals and the World’s Peace, published in 1899, from which I may be allowed to quote the following passages (pp. 139 seq.):

...But again there turned up a great man of action who, knowing his countrymen and the trend of the times, utilized all these currents to weld together the separate blocks,—smoothly polished and florid marbles of prince-ridden principalities and clumsy unhewn stones and rubble stones of independent cities or towns,—the huge edifice of the German Empire. The scientific spirit which was pervading the civilized world of Western Europe was recognised by Bismarck as a useful force which could be turned into practical advantage for the great purpose he had in view. He called upon the German professor—even the ethnologist, philologist and historian—and
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they obeyed his commands with readiness and alacrity. The theoretical and scientific lever with which these huge building blocks were to be raised in order to construct the German Empire was to be the scientific establishment of the unity of the German people based upon the unity of Germanic races. An historical basis for German unity was not enough; an ethnological, racial unity had to be established. The historical and philological literature of German University professors belonging to the time of Bismarck’s ascendancy, can almost be recognised and classified by their relation to the problem of establishing, fixing, and distinguishing from those of other races, the laws and customs, literature, languages and religions, the life and thought, the productions and aspirations of the Germanic race... The distinctive feature in this modern version of the old story of national lust of power is that it now assumed a more serious and stately garb of historical justice in the pedantic pretensions of its inaccurate ethnological theories. The absurdity of any application of such ethnological theories to the practical politics of modern nations at once becomes manifest when an attempt is made to classify inhabitants of any one of these western nations by means of such racial distinctions. What becomes of the racial unity of the present German Empire if we consider the Slavs of Prussia, the Wends in the North and the tangle of different racial occupations and interminglings during the last thousand years within every portion of the German country?... But the German professor with his political brief wrapped round the lecture notes within the oilcloth portfolio, pressed between his broadcloth sleeve and ribs, as he walks to his lecture-room, was forced further afield and deeper down in his “scientific” distinctions. The divisions he established for the purposes of national policy were but minor sub-divisions of broader ethnological distinctions. Here the philologist took the lead and established “beyond all doubt” the difference, nay, the antagonism, between the Arian and Semitic, which makes the Hindoo more closely related to the German and Saxon than these are to Spinoza, Mendelssohn and Heine, Carl Marx and Disraeli...
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Since Bismarck's time the falsification of humanistic studies, especially History and the "Science of Politik" to uphold the German theory of the State, of Autocracy, Bureaucracy, Militarism, as well as the "Ethics of Might," has been amply demonstrated in recent publications.

But, with the growth of Real Politik since Bismarck, the predominance of the one aim,—to increase material prosperity, industrial and commercial,—has led to the lowering of the purely scientific spirit of natural and physical science which formerly ruled their Universities and, through them, their whole educational system down to the elementary Schools. The University has been affected by the Polytechnic and Technical High School. Modern German Streberthum has effectually lowered the standards of their scientific and educational system, and this has of late years been admitted by the best representatives of German thought, who have had the courage to oppose the current of political and military domination responsible for this war. It is the older valuation of Theoretical Truth which formerly flourished in Germany from which we can learn. In the domain of Practical Truth, in political and social life, as developed by our political and social traditions and favoured by the spirit of fair-play in our national sports and pastimes, the Germans and all nations on the Continent of Europe can learn from us and from the people of the United States—in fact from all English-speaking nations.

I have gratefully to acknowledge the help given me in advice and criticism by various friends. My colleagues, Professor J. B. Bury and Mr N. Wedd, Fellows of King's College, Cambridge, as well as Mr Sydney Brooks (especi-
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ally as regards the part dealing with Journalism and Publicity) have made most valuable suggestions. The same applies to my wife and to my friend, Mr George Leveson Gower, who have again helped me in seeing the book through the press; while my step-daughter, Dorothy Seligman, has given efficient secretarial help. I must also thank the Editor of the Nineteenth Century and After for the kind permission to reprint the article "The Kaiser and the ‘Will to...’ The need for universal Moral Reconstruction” which appeared in the January number of that review.

C. W.

Newton Hall, Newton, Cambridge.

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