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Benjamin Chapman Browne, Knight

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I

Presidential Address to Northern
Union of Mechanics' Institutions

[AUG. 10TH, 1886]

I FEAR that, in comparing my address with those of my predecessors, it will appear very uneven and disjointed; but I have tried to bring forward a view of the proper position of the working classes which is apt to be overlooked, and from that I shall pass rather abruptly to a few social and legislative questions which may be considered to bear on their welfare and prosperity; and the whole address will, I fear, like everything around us, be in some degree overshadowed by the gloom of the prevailing commercial depression. It is within a few days of thirty years since I first started work as an engineer apprentice at Elswick, and although, since I have been an employer, I have had my attention much and sometimes entirely diverted from constructive engineering by commercial and other matters, still it would have been difficult to spend so large a portion of my life in, or in charge of, the workshop without forming some ideas about the mechanic, his training, his surroundings, and his future.

A MECHANIC DEFINED.

What do we mean by a mechanic? in what does he differ from other men? and how do we propose that he should improve himself? We live in a time when much energy is devoted to the education both of the young and the older. Depressed trade and keen competition have further urged us to endeavour to increase the ability of our producers, and a mechanic's institution is both theoretically and practically a focus of technical, scientific, and literary teaching for the benefit of our mechanics and apprentices,

B. P.

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and of a few others. But to consider the ways in which a class is to be improved or developed, or in which the members of it are to improve themselves, we must be sure that first we see clearly what they are like now, what are their essential characteristics, and what we would wish them to be. Now, what is a mechanic? I take it he is not merely a man who has acquired practical information on certain technical subjects, nor merely a man who has learned to perform certain processes with his hands; but he is a man who, having commenced his training in boyhood, has had his whole nature modified and certain faculties very much developed in accordance with the sphere of work to which he has devoted his life and energies. Eye, ear, and hand are quickened, so that he knows and feels more than other men, and can do more than other men. He must have what is really sympathy with the material, such as wood or metal, that he works in; or with the steam, gas, or electricity that works his engine. He knows the feel of every substance that he works on, and the sound that should respond to his blow or touch; and he has the art of using his tools with the greatest ease to himself, and the greatest benefit to the material on which he expends his skill and force. To be a good mechanic is the result of long years of careful training; and almost always of training in youth, while body as well as mind is very susceptible. It is rare for a man who does not learn his art as a boy to become a really good mechanic; we may teach him one or two processes, but he seldom becomes a good all-round man, who knows by instinct in an emergency what ought to be done, and whose hands at once know how to adapt themselves to new conditions. Add to this that a man ought to love his work, and be proud of his calling, and you have a fair specimen of the British mechanic.

EDUCATION FOR MECHANICS.

Now, while in this man there may be, and often is, much room for improvement, there is also much that may be spoiled. In these days we want to give him as much scientific knowledge as we

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possibly can, but we must take care not to weaken his practical efficiency. Soon after the School Boards came into operation, several of us, enamoured of school training, took to engaging our apprentices two or sometimes three years later than before, but we soon found that this was wrong, and that it was easy to go too far in this direction. An apprentice should begin work as a boy, not as a young man. If my view is correct, we must then chiefly provide such education as may be obtained in an evening after work hours; and I am sorry to say that I think it ought to be considered absolutely necessary for every apprentice to spend a great proportion of his evenings at classes, or in educational work of some sort. The classes that are generally provided by mechanics' institutions are, in my experience, admirable; and the good they do is incalculable. A lad who, during his apprenticeship, attends such classes with diligence, ought, when he becomes a journeyman, to have a sound groundwork of scientific knowledge that should not only be a foundation on which he can go on building all his life, but in itself should be sufficient to keep him from any serious scientific errors. The man may continue to learn either in these classes or elsewhere; for broader culture he can avail himself of the numberless organizations that now exist everywhere, such as the University Extension Movement, Public Libraries, etc. The more education a man can get, the better, provided that his health and spirits do not suffer, and provided always that we never let theoretical training take the place of practical skill. I fear that to keep up the standard we must not look with favour on any schemes that involve the taking of a man for any length of time from his work. Short absences I think are often best utilized as real holidays. Long absences may be sometimes necessary, but I think they are rarely beneficial. Movements have sometimes been set on foot to send working men to our universities, but I never thought them satisfactory, except in those cases where the man was permanently destined for a literary life; and such has nothing to do with the improvement of mechanics. Now a few men will always be found

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to attain to brilliant results in the way of self-improvement. Such should be watched for, and helped forward as much as possible, but we must also consider carefully how best we can improve the average man, and even the stupid man. The strength of a chain is the strength of its weakest link, and though I do not say that the efficiency of a workshop is to be measured by the efficiency of the worst workman in it, still it must be remembered that whatever he contributes to the general output will be below the average, and will lower the average accordingly. More economical work means more perfect machinery; and more perfect machinery requires higher-class attendance to keep it in order; *e.g.* a modern triple expansion marine engine, working at a high speed, requires far more sustained and intelligent supervision than an old-fashioned jet-condensing, low-pressure engine of bygone days.

NEED FOR INCREASED EFFICIENCY.

But in case anyone should ask, “Why all this talk about increased efficiency and higher-class work?” I need only remind you of our depressed trade, and you will agree that we must do all in our power to increase our efficiency and to satisfy our customers. For this, two things are essential: first, to find out what people want to buy; and then, to supply them as well and as cheaply as possible. It is often thought that Englishmen, both manufacturers and workmen, are too apt to make what they think people ought to buy instead of what the customer himself prefers. They say, “This would really be far best for him if he only had the sense to see it”; but it is an old proverb that “the man who pays the piper has a right to call for the tune,” and both our sense of justice and our self-interest ought to overcome our prejudice and make us acknowledge that the purchaser must be the absolute judge of what he requires. Some time, not long ago, many engineers, myself among the number, took opportunities publicly to deplore the fact that we were compelled, by price and efficiency combined, to use foreign instead of British steel-castings in our engines, etc.

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We could not get English makers to supply them at a reasonable price free from honeycombs. The Englishmen declared that their steel was far stronger and better, even with the honeycombs, than the foreign castings without. Perhaps this was true, but our customers would not accept the honeycombed castings from us, so we could not take them from the makers. But after a great deal of fuss and trouble our steelmakers took up the question in earnest, and I believe that to-day the average of English steel-castings are as sound as foreign castings, not more expensive, and decidedly stronger. Again, the manufacture of light iron girders for building was, practically, for many years a monopoly of Belgium. Now, I understand, girders can be bought on the Tees at the same price and of better quality. So with nearly all the articles of manufacture in which we have been surpassed by foreigners. We must carefully and most earnestly study and spend time and money to find out what people want to buy and give them that, and not something else; and we must never abandon the attempt to produce something always better than before, and at a diminishing price. But I must again remind you that the highest science and the most artistic taste will not make your manufactures good unless you have the trained skill of the high-class mechanic to carry them into effect.

TRADES UNIONS.

I would now pass on, and ask you to consider with me how good trade, bad trade, prosperity, or adversity will affect the mechanic himself, and also how he can affect them. Has he, by his ability and energy, made our trade? or has he, by greed and ignorance, ruined it? This brings us face to face with some of the gravest social problems of the day; may we be given wisdom to study them in a courageous, unprejudiced, and unselfish manner! And now we rise more to the tone of the addresses of my predecessors; we no longer take our tone from the ledger and workshop, but from the highest light of benevolence and Christianity. Not that I would

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disparage the tone of the workshop if we adopt it honestly and loyally. St Augustine truly says, "Little things are little things; but to be faithful in little things is great." The first general question that we must touch on, and without which the position of the mechanic can hardly be properly considered, is the trades union question. While mechanics themselves are proud of the position and influence of their unions, many people look on them as most mischievous and as having contributed not a little to the depression of our trade. My own impression, after many years' experience, is that workmen's unions are not only beneficial to the men, but are also an advantage to employers. No doubt unions are sometimes well and sometimes badly managed; sometimes union leaders make great mistakes, but on the other hand their constant attention keeps the working men out of many errors, and gives them both more information and wider views than they could get otherwise. Their faults probably amount to neither more nor less than those of railway companies or other public bodies and organizations; and if they sometimes keep up wages when they had better not, they sometimes make an important reduction with a speed and reliability that would be impossible if men had to be dealt with singly or in undefined groups.

WAGES.

As to what wages may be in the future it is hard to say. If the productive power of each man be very much increased, wages might remain where they are, but it must be remembered that the greatly reduced price of all the necessaries of life makes it possible for the rate of wages to be reduced without the standard of comfort being lowered. We cannot now investigate the abstract principles or the practical considerations that should govern a body of men in asking for an advance of wages or accepting a reduction; but I believe the question is capable of being reduced to a few broad principles which are not difficult of application, assuming always that workmen want to get as much for their labour as they fairly

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can, and do not, of course, wish to destroy or injure the trade by which they live.

LEGISLATION AND TRADE DEPRESSION.

But there are other social, and especially legislative questions which may affect the well-being of the mechanic; and those that interest us most are those that are likely to affect the present depression of trade. Some people advocate fair trade as a remedy for our evils. I cannot see my way to approve of it. For the moment it might alleviate, but only to produce a worse state of things afterwards. It would draw too much capital and labour into certain trades, and when they became as unremunerative as they are now, every way out of the condition of things then existing would be very disastrous indeed. We have our share of the trade of the world, but we want more than our share—except, of course, in that greatest of industries, agriculture. Some recent legislation connected with the working classes has, however, influenced seriously our position in the trading world. The Employers' Liability Bill brought about a distinct improvement on the old state of things, but further legislation in that direction would require much careful thought. No Act was more important to this district than the Mines Regulation Act; but, though in many ways beneficial, I fear there is no doubt that it very materially increased the cost of working coal. What the actual increase may be, I cannot of my own knowledge say; it is frequently stated that the working of this Act increased the cost of coal 1s. per ton; but if it increased the cost 9d., or even 6d., it is evident that it materially cripples the sale of British coal as against foreign. If our Northumberland coalowners could reduce their selling price 6d. per ton, they would bring to this country an enormous increase of orders which would enable thousands of men to work regularly who are now only partially employed or altogether idle. I have had the privilege of examining and verifying the accounts and working cost of steamers trading under foreign flags as compared with

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precisely identical work done under the British flag. I am sorry to say the results are not gratifying. Comparing the two, I find the wages for men and officers per month to work out thus:— English crew, £130 per month; foreign crew, £90. The foreigners are steady, sober, skilful men; and though perhaps they have hardly the dash and energy of Englishmen, yet they are not deficient in these points, and the foreign officers have the reputation of being very able men of business. In insurance and other matters I do not observe much difference. One point in our regulations I do think unfair, which is that while a British ship has a fixed load line weighted below which she may not go to sea, a foreign ship may jeopardize the lives and safety of the crew by leaving the port with an amount of cargo very much in excess of what is allowed to the English vessel. I think a vessel sailing from an English port should only carry what English law declares to be safe. I don't at all complain of our laws for the safety of miners and sailors, but nothing can be got for nothing, and in expressing satisfaction at this legislation, it is just as well to see what the cost of it really is.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES.

As to the state of trade. I will take the liberty of making a few remarks which I would impress, not on account of their novelty, but of their importance. The prosperity of a country does not depend only on its natural advantages. Many of the most fertile regions of the earth are in a very miserable condition. More depends on good government and security for life and property; and probably most of all depends on the industry, energy, and adaptability of the inhabitants. Now a revival of trade cannot be arbitrarily brought about either by a government or by a union of capitalists. Trade consists in enabling somebody to get something he wants; and we should remember that, as in a battle, not only the strategy of the general is necessary to victory, but the courage and self-sacrifice of each private soldier. Every man and every boy

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should use his utmost skill in production, and keep all his wits about him to see where one additional sale can be made or one order secured. First get us all to work again; after that, profits will follow. Let us each strive to bring a return of prosperity to the country, as if the whole matter depended on ourselves. I don't believe that England need consider that her time has gone by, and that other countries have superseded us. We may be handicapped in the race, but not, I think, beyond our strength, if we really exert ourselves. We can make our country essential to the commercial prosperity of the world yet; and, whether I were advising an individual or a nation, I could not do better than quote the advice Sir William Armstrong gave me when my apprenticeship ended: "Never mind what pay you get; get work and make yourself useful; and when people find they can't do without you they will *have* to pay you." I hope the world cannot do without England, and that England cannot do without her North-country mechanics.

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II

The Unequal Distribution of Wealth, and its Responsibilities

[NEWCASTLE DIOCESAN CONFERENCE, OCT. 29TH, 1890]

PROBABLY, though few will urge the possibility, and fewer still the desirability, of all incomes being equal, no one will say that the present distribution of wealth is all that can be desired. We may look on an income from two points of view: 1st, how much is necessary or desirable for our comfort; 2nd, how much can we usefully spend or distribute. As regards the first, I often question whether a man really adds to his comfort after he has sufficient money to supply his wants according to his bringing up, and a trifle over. No doubt he may easily learn new ones, and, having supplied those, his wants will grow and grow without limit. But no one in these days will tell us that we may look on wealth simply as a means of gratifying our fancies. It is trite to enlarge on how simple our needs may be. A rich man often finds that his greatest luxury is to sit over the fire with a pipe and a book or a daily paper, his drink either a cup of tea or a glass of whisky and water, all of which delights are within the reach of any of his workmen. There is no doubt that the most refined ladies and gentlemen can live on wonderfully small incomes, where there are plenty of others in the same position to keep them in countenance, and, generally speaking, I think we shall all agree that our feeling comfortably off depends very much on what our income is compared with that of our neighbours. But while we may take very philosophical views of what it is worth while for people to spend on their own enjoyment, when we have got rid of that question, we have hardly begun to consider the uses of an income. Even in the expenditure of rich men, the size of house, number of servants,