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978-1-107-53699-9 - Selected Papers on Social and Economic Questions
Benjamin Chapman Browne, Knight
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Selected Papers

of

Benjamin Chapman Browne

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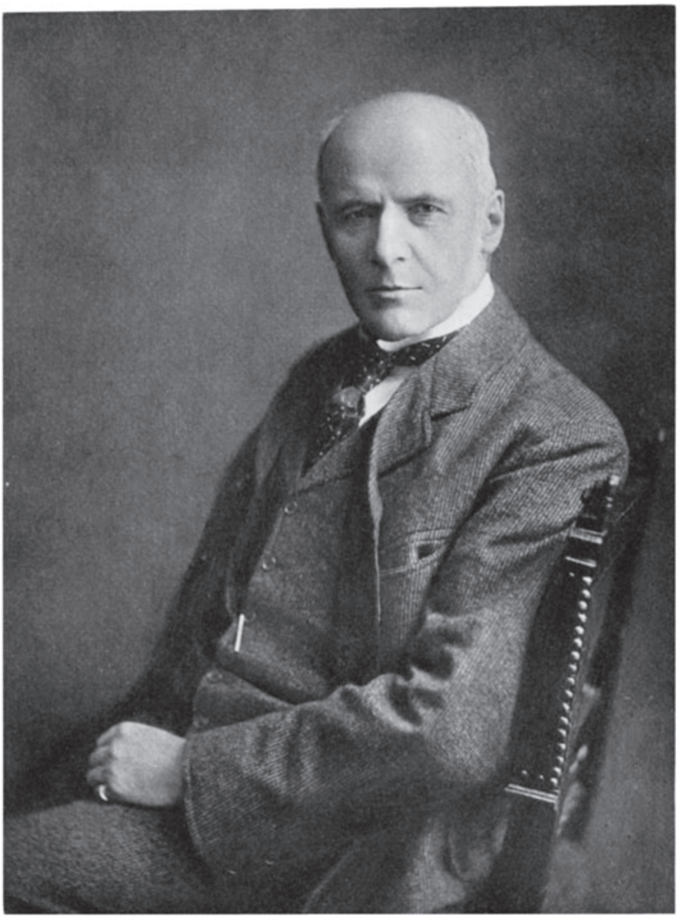

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Selected Papers
on
Social and Economic Questions

BY

Benjamin Chapman Browne, *Knight*

Hon. D.C.L. Durham University
Deputy-Lieutenant for the County of Northumberland

Edited by his Daughters
E. M. B. *and* H. M. B.

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1918

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PREFACE

FROM among many papers by Sir Benjamin Browne, the following thirty-two have been selected as the most useful and characteristic. While many existed only in manuscript or in the fugitive form of letters or articles to daily papers, some have already appeared in magazines, and for leave to reprint these, we desire to express our thanks to the Editors of the *National Review*, the *Times* and the *Engineer*, and at the same time to offer our apologies if we have in any instance failed to ask permission.

Sir Benjamin Browne felt strongly that when the great underlying principles of life had once been discerned, they could be applied to politics, industrial questions, and private conduct alike. These were the permanent Form, into which could be moulded the material of each day's events as they arose. This necessarily involved a certain amount of repetition in his writings, because, in discussing different questions before different listeners, or in approaching them from different standpoints, he came back again and again to these underlying principles, and drove them home by reiterated blows. Reading through his scattered writings is like listening to a sonata where three or four leading themes dominate the music, emerging repeatedly in varying keys, and giving coherence to the whole.

The dates when the various papers were written must of course be borne in mind, as some of the statistics, accurate at the time, may have altered. The date of each paper is printed at the head of the page. From the historic point of view, they show the consistent evolution of his opinions.

One good result of this disastrous war may be that all classes of the nation, with conscience aroused, may attack the problems of the industrial world in a better spirit. Sir Benjamin Browne wrote to one of his oldest friends, "I often think, if I had my

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industrial life to live over again, I would appeal far more to people's hearts, and not trouble so much about their heads"; and these questions were always to him alive with human interest. But he knew that however kindly the heart may be, the *facts that govern* political economy must be known and faced; so he gave continued thought and study to these facts, convinced that schemes of reform must be built on the rock of truth, not on the sands of sentiment.

These papers are published in the hope that the experience embodied in them may help some of those who are turning to study these questions in a new and better mood.

The editors offer their warmest thanks to Professor Edward Browne for his help in seeing the book through the press, and to Mr Benjamin Browne for his advice as to the selection of the papers.

E. M. B.
H. M. B.

WESTACRES,
NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE.
April 1918.

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INTRODUCTION

TO this small volume of selected articles by the late Sir Benjamin Browne, a short sketch of his life has been prefixed, in the hope that it may both serve as a key to his writings, and recall him, in some measure, to his friends, though it cannot hope to give, to those who never knew him, any adequate idea of the attraction of his character.

Benjamin Chapman Browne was born on August 26th, 1839, at Stouts Hill, Uley, Gloucestershire. His father, Colonel Benjamin Chapman Browne, was colonel first of the 9th Lancers and then of the Gloucestershire Yeomanry, and his mother was Miss Baker of Hardwicke Court, Gloucestershire. He was the youngest of their three sons, and grew up among a large circle of cousins, all living in the same county. His home, Stouts Hill, was a long picturesque grey house, situated in one of the loveliest of the Cotswold valleys, the sides of the hills being covered with beech and larch woods, carpeted in spring with bluebells. He spent his early years in the ordinary pastimes of a boy in the country. His home was in a hunting neighbourhood, and the Duke of Beaufort's and the Berkeley hounds afforded many a day's sport to himself and his brothers.

The associations of his boyhood were of the happiest description. To the end of his life, Gloucestershire was very dear to him, and even after fifty years of life and work in the north, his heart always turned to the old county, and anyone with a connection or introduction from Gloucestershire was sure of a warm welcome. Once after he had spoken at some public meeting, he related with delight how a stranger had accosted him afterwards with the remark, "If I may judge by your speech, Sir, you come from the West country, as I do myself."

His father died very suddenly, while on a visit to his half-

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brother, Mr. Orde of Nunnykirk, in Northumberland, when Sir Benjamin was a boy of fourteen; and from then, till the time of his marriage, his widowed mother, a woman of unusual force of character and great personal piety, was the chief influence in his life. He was educated at Westminster, and at King's College, London, but at the age of seventeen, he came to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, to serve his apprenticeship under Sir William Armstrong, at the Elswick works. It was the time of the Crimean War, and his elder brothers were both in the army. His great wish was to enter it too, but at his mother's strongly expressed desire to keep one of her sons at home, he consented to forego it, turned his mind in a different direction, and decided to study engineering.

He was not a born mechanician, like some men. He never aspired to the high technical knowledge of many of his colleagues. What attracted him was the idea of the management of a large number of men, and the co-operation of brain and hand workers for some special end. If he could not be a leader in war, he wished to be one in peace. He seemed born to be what, in the phrase of a later date, is known as a "captain of industry." Neither he nor any of his family had the slightest knowledge of business. He had everything to find out for himself, as to his own training and start. His relations were all either quiet country gentlemen, clergymen, or soldiers. This perhaps gives the key to his whole attitude towards industrial problems. He had in his blood the traditions of the squire, to whom the people dependent on him were the first charge on his income and care, and those of the commanding officer, whose men were as his children, to be trained, led, and kept in the highest possible state of efficiency. The necessity of any antagonism between employer and employed was absolutely foreign to his ideas. I think to the very last it gave him a shock of pained surprise when people spoke as if the interests of the two were opposed to each other. He would as soon have thought of husband and wife, or parent and child, as necessarily in opposition.

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At the age of twenty-one, he married Annie, daughter of Mr. Robert Thomas Atkinson, of High Cross House, Benwell, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and step-daughter of the Rev. William Maughan, the first vicar of Benwell; and they kept their golden wedding together several years before his death. Of his home-life, all that need be said is that it was one of almost unclouded happiness. He had nine children, of whom two died in very early childhood; the others, three sons and four daughters, survive him.

At first he worked as a civil engineer, which he greatly liked. The making of roads, piers, bridges and so on, was to him a very enjoyable and satisfactory branch of engineering. He used to say, "It is a great thing to have your theories tested at once. If your political scheme is a mistaken one, it may take years to prove it so; but if your theory of a bridge is not right, it tumbles down." He worked on the Falmouth harbour works, on the pier at the mouth of the Tyne, and for several happy years in the Isle of Man, at both Castletown and Douglas; but in 1870, the claims of a rapidly increasing family made him anxious for more settled work, and an opening offered itself of taking over the engine works of Messrs. R. and W. Hawthorn, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. It was a very large undertaking for a man of his age to find the capital and the management. He has told the whole story of it in his *History of the new Firm of R. and W. Hawthorn*, and how it was only the loyal support of his bankers and lifelong friends, Dr. Thomas Hodgkin and Mr. John William Pease, that enabled him to carry it through. In the first year of his work as senior partner, before things had got into any sort of shape, he was confronted with the great Nine Hours' Strike. It was a time of terrible strain and anxiety from every point of view, and it put an end to his youth once and for all.

Responsibilities and cares thickened, chiefly responsibility for the capital entrusted to him by relations and friends, and care for the men in his employment, that sufficient orders should be

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forthcoming to keep them in full work, and it was many years before he felt he had got his head above water.

He did not however confine his energies to his own works. He had inherited what is vaguely described as "philanthropy." His mother's great-uncle was Granville Sharp, the man who, by doggedly carrying the test-case of Jonathan Strong, the escaped negro slave, from one tribunal to another, finally forced the judges to give the historic decision that slavery is illegal on English soil. His own uncle, Mr. Barwick Baker, was one of the original founders of the scheme of reformatories for boys, after their first conviction, and had built one of the earliest on his own estate at Hardwicke Court. Questions connected with the Poor Law always stirred Sir Benjamin's deepest interest. He was one of the original supporters of the Charity Organization Society in Newcastle, and attended regularly for some years the Poor Law Conference at Gilsland. He was on the committee of the Netherton Reformatory, one of the Prison visiting committee, was a magistrate for Newcastle and the counties of Northumberland and Gloucestershire, and worked hard as a Guardian. He interested himself actively in the original founding of the Durham College of Science, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, feeling how important it was that the young men and boys of an industrial district should have within their reach opportunities of high-class scientific education. It was in recognition of this work that the Durham University conferred on him the honorary degree of D.C.L.

He was elected to the Newcastle Town Council in 1879, and threw himself warmly into municipal work. He greatly enjoyed coming into contact with all classes of the community, and the welfare of his adopted town was very dear to him. He was chosen Mayor of Newcastle for 1885–6 and 1886–7, and these two years, though busy and tiring, were years of great interest to him. An exhibition the first year, and the Royal Agricultural Show the second, both held at Newcastle, brought him much extra work but also much pleasure. King Edward VII, then Prince of Wales,

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visited the Royal Show, and with his keen insight into men, took marked opportunities of learning the views and experiences of his host the Mayor. Shortly afterwards, when all the Mayors were summoned to attend a meeting at St. James' Palace about the foundation of the Imperial Institute, the Prince of Wales singled him out with the special request that he would speak on the subject. Sir Benjamin was greatly pleased at the compliment, but took it as being paid entirely to the town he represented and not to himself.

It was after his strenuous work in connection with the Newcastle Exhibition that Sir Benjamin received the honour of knighthood at the hands of Queen Victoria at Osborne, in her jubilee year, June 1887. Some years later, he complied with the wish of the Lord-Lieutenant of Northumberland that he should be one of his Deputy-Lieutenants.

On his retirement from the mayoralty he bought Westacres, a pleasant house in the parish of Benwell, in which he spent the last thirty years of his life. When Hawthorns' was turned into a limited company, he became Chairman, which office he only resigned a few months before his death.

In the course of his various avocations, he necessarily had to give very careful attention to trade and commercial problems, and above all to labour questions, in which he took the most intense interest. Very early in his business career, he saw clearly that if there was any reality at all in political economy, it ought to be applied to practical business life. He gave great study to this subject, and wrote a number of articles, both in British and American magazines, including some notable articles in the *Times*, on various aspects of Capital and Labour. But perhaps his most conspicuous work was in connection with labour disputes. Being associated with the employment of labour not only in engineering and shipbuilding, but also in the Northumberland and Durham coal trades, he had an exceptional experience, and he was always anxious that such disputes should be treated with sympathy in regard to the difficulties of both sides.

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In 1905 he was a member of the special committee of the Home Office to enquire into the working of the Workmen's Compensation Act, and to make recommendations as to future legislation. He was frequently called upon to give evidence before various Royal Commissions on such subjects as the municipalization of various industries, unemployment, Trades Unionism, recruiting, and many other matters.

He passed through a period of much work in connection with the formation of the Engineering Employers' Federation of which he was for some time Vice-Chairman, and had constant and exhausting demands on his strength and energy in matters connected with the settlement of strikes. He always maintained that the day was not far distant when differences would be arranged by amicable discussion and mutual compromise, and when the old fighting methods would become as obsolete as duelling.

For working-men as a class, he felt the warmest affection. There was no trouble he would not take to put their cause on a permanently better footing; and it was always a singular pleasure to him to have a talk with one of his workmen, or with some old foreman under whom he had worked at Elswick, while he was on terms of warm personal friendship with many of the Trades Union and Labour leaders. But he deeply deplored the well-meant but ill-judged interference of theorists, whether politicians, journalists, or clergymen; and he looked upon those who deliberately tried to stir up class antagonism as madmen, flinging about firebrands.

But his interests were not limited to the problems connected with the workers in towns. His early life and friendships had taught him to understand those who farm and labour on the land, and had also given him a strong feeling for the small employers of labour in villages and country towns, whose point of view is so often overlooked.

His personality was one of exceptional charm. From an Irish grandmother he inherited his sense of fun, his love of a good

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story, his wit and quick repartee. Conversation was his chief recreation. He delighted in the exchange of ideas, and the exploration of other people's point of view. When increasing deafness prevented his joining in general conversation he still enjoyed nothing more than a tête-à-tête with a friend.

Between his busy public life and his happy home circle, he had not much leisure for general society, but he thoroughly appreciated it, and added lustre and interest to any party at which he was present, while his sparkling eyes and gay talk were a proof that he received as much pleasure as he gave.

He was a great reader, as far as the many claims on his time permitted, history being his favourite subject, and had explored various unusual by-ways of archæology and fairy lore, as well as of natural history. It was very characteristic of him that during the two busy years of his mayoralty, he re-read all the Waverley novels, finding his greatest relaxation in the manly and open-air romances of the idol of his boyhood.

His generosity was unbounded. Money was to him, in very truth, only of value in so far as it enabled him to supply the wants of others. What he gave in subscription lists was only a small part. Even those nearest to him were constantly finding out unsuspected instances of help given on a large scale, to tide one over a difficult time in business, to educate the son of another, or to enable a third to take a much-needed holiday. He simply could not refuse money to anyone who asked him for it, and when his family laughed at the obviously undeserving recipients of some of his half-crowns, he would answer, "Cold and hunger are no easier for a bad man to bear than for a good one." His lavishness in giving was the more striking, as his own tastes were simple in the extreme, and to spend money on personal pleasure or luxury never seemed to occur to him. Nor was it that he was vaguely reckless in regard to money. On the contrary, he had a very marked gift for finance, seeming to know by instinct when to venture and when to hold back.

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His friendships ranged over an extraordinarily wide social area, and included men and women alike. He was always much interested in the young, and was never happier than when he could help them by talking out their difficulties with them. He liked to hear their youthful theories, though his questions were on the Socratic lines, and would often pierce their cloud-built edifices with some shrewd practical enquiry. He loved original thought, and was always sorry when he found clever young men or women reproducing, as their own, views current in newspapers or magazines, without having assimilated them. On one such, his comment was, "She wants to go out alone into the wilderness and *think*."

Both by nature and tradition he was essentially chivalrous. In reading his writings, it is easy to see how, when discussing any legislative change, he did not heed its effect on the successful and rising young workman, so much as on the elderly or failing man, the struggling small employer, the crippled, one-eyed, infirm, and all those handicapped in the race of life. Though always ready to appreciate efficiency and capability, yet his sympathy was ever with the "lame dogs." It was possible for him, at any rate in earlier life, to be impatient or vehement with his equals, but towards the unfortunate or downtrodden his patience and gentleness were unfailing.

He was a faithful and devoted son of the Church of England, and to the very close of his life held that the Church Catechism was a complete guide to the practice of religion. His mother, who was the great influence of his boyhood, had been a disciple of the Oxford movement, and this was the atmosphere in which he grew up. As a young man, he came under some very strong evangelical influence, which for a time made a great impression on him. As he grew older, however, his deep and true personal religion transcended lesser differences. These things are almost too sacred to write about. The fruits of his faith were visible in his life and conduct. Numerous letters after his death spoke of

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him as "the ideal of a Christian gentleman," but only those who lived with him could have any idea of the closeness of his walk with God, the earnestness and reality of his prayers, and how, as the years went on, he was increasingly enabled to live more nearly as he prayed.

For the last months of his life, he suffered from growing heart-trouble, and after ten days of acute illness, in the early morning of Thursday, March 1st, 1917, he passed through the valley of the shadow into the fuller light and joy beyond.

When Mr. Valiant-for-Truth understood the summons, he said, "My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought His battles who will now be my Rewarder." So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.

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