

England Re-Visited

NEW ZEALAND MINISTER'S IMPRESSIONS OF THE OLD COUNTRY

Interview with Rev. Dr. Gibb

The Rev. Dr. James Gibb, of Wellington, who has been spending the past summer in revisiting England after many years absence in New Zealand, was good enough to give me this week the benefit of some of his ideas on things seen in the course of his wanderings. They are interesting as being the impressions of a close observer and keen student of social affairs, whose long residence, first in the Old Country and then in New Zealand, has given him a particularly favourable standpoint from which to compare and judge the present conditions in this country.

THE DEAD HAND.

"My impressions of the Old Country after a long absence? That is rather a large order," said Dr. Gibb, "but perhaps I may summarise by emphasising your adjective 'old.' The contrast of which the colonial on holiday in Britain is chiefly conscious is between the newness, some might add the crudeness, of his own country, and the oldness, some might add the venerableness, of the Mother Land. Your ancient buildings and the historic associations of your country are no doubt largely responsible for this feeling; but there is more to be said. The attitude of the British people to social and political problems gives the colonial the impression of the caution and conservatism which is characteristic of age. Tennyson hit on the situation exactly when he spoke of freedom slowly broadening down from precedent to precedent in this country. You are worshippers of use and wont. Of course, this temperament has its advantages as well as its disadvantages, but a colonial may be forgiven for a certain feeling of impatience with your deliberateness, and of thankfulness that he lives in a land where the dead hand of the past does not fetter the living present.

"I may illustrate this point—I am trying to make by a reference to the extraordinary and, indeed, alarming contrast between the prodigal wealth and the unspeakable poverty of London. A New Zealander would say somehow or other this state of matters must be brought to an end. He might fail to effect any radical improvement, but he would never sit down, as it seems to me the average Englishman does, with the feeling that these things are the ordering of Providence, and that what has been must continue to be.

CHANGES IN SOCIAL CONDITIONS.

"But with all this saying I note not a few changes in your social conditions. This is the second visit I have paid to the Home Land during a colonial experience of twenty-six years. The last time I was home, thirteen years ago, I was struck by the changes that had taken place. This time I am even more impressed in this way. Of course, my impressions are largely superficial, but as far as material things are concerned, I think there has been a marked improvement in the condition of the working classes. They are better clad, they appear to be better fed, and they are certainly better housed than they used to be. I saw a good deal of the slums of London, and although, as I have already indicated, there is such poverty there as might well give a man a nightmare, I am sure that things are not so bad as formerly. The London County Council seems to have put an end to the filth and insanitation of which we used to read in books like 'How the Poor Live' and 'Horrible London.' All along the line there seems to have been improvement in this respect. In my native city, Aberdeen, the slums have well-nigh disappeared."

I suggested that Dr. Gibb might indulge in some reflections on the subject of

POVERTY IN THE OLD COUNTRY.

He replied: "In what I have been saying I have been 'reflecting' on this subject. You are advancing, but you have yet a very long way to go before you are abreast of Australia. The improvement seems to be largely confined to the artisan and skilled labouring class. The condition of your unskilled labourer is dismal indeed. The other day while cycling along a country road in Scotland in a perfect deluge of rain, I passed at least a score of out-of-works, and among them two middle-aged women who asked for charity. They had no look of drunkenness or vice in their faces. They were thin, haggard, and miserably clad. They had already walked seven miles in search of work, through the pitiless rain, and were drenched to the skin. I noticed that the hands of one of the women was scamed and lined—evidently the hands of a hard worker. My heart bled for them, and I could have thanked God that no such experience could befall any man in all the length and breadth of New Zealand. We have, I suppose, the desperately poor among us, but almost to a man they are also the desperately ill-doing. Decent people wouldn't get down to this level in our country.

AND ITS CAUSES.

"What is the cause of this dire poverty in the Home Land? Or, let me put the question in this way: How is it that we in New Zealand happily know next to nothing of it? Is it that a new country necessarily secures a higher average of prosperity for the people than an old country? Is it due to our semi-Socialistic legislation? Is it that we are a more sober country, and spending less in liquor, have more to spend on legitimate needs? One can ask questions fast enough, but the answers? Of one thing I am almost sure; drunkenness is as much a result as a cause of poverty in your country. What would you do if you were a coster with a wife and several children, and an average income of 7/6 a week, of which 2/ went out in rent for the half-room, half-cellar, which they call their home? Drink whenever you had the chance!"

"DON'T KNOW, DON'T CARE."

"What impression do you find New Zealand makes upon Home people?" I asked.

"I find that while a certain number of people know a good deal about New Zealand, and are simply interested in its legislative and other improvements, the great majority of folk at Home know little, and, I am tempted to add, care less about their kinsfolk at the Antipodes. Again and again I have been minded to quote Kipling's ringing question, 'What do they know of England who only England knows?' Of course, it is possible that New Zealanders take themselves too seriously, and every candid colonial will admit the existence among us of a certain amount of bombast and 'cock-a-doodle-do.' It is well for us to remember that New Zealand is only a speck on the map of the British Empire, and that our population does not yet number a million souls. But it would be well if the people at Home were to realise not only what this small population had done, but also that we have a very great future before us. This is the day of small things with us, but the day of great things is sure to come. Australasia will one day be a great factor of the Empire, and it is to the interest of every patriotic Englishman and Scotchman to do all he can to strengthen the ties that bind the colonies to the Mother Land. Ignorance and indifference only weaken these bonds. Every Australasian who returns to his own country dissatisfied with the attitude of the people at Home is a force making for the ultimate disintegration of the British Empire. The other day in Stirling I got an intelligent

looking youngster to show me the Castle and some other places I wished to see. I had some conversation with the lad, and among other things asked him if he knew what New Zealand was and where it was. 'Oh, y!' said he, 'it's a country a hundred miles awa' from Scotland.' Symptomatic!"

THE CHURCH AND THE PEOPLE.

I turned the subject, asking, "Do you think the Churches are sufficiently in touch with the social views of the people?"

"I think the Churches are trying very seriously to put themselves in touch with these views. There has never been a time when the spirit of philanthropy dominated the Churches as it does to-day. They do not generally get the credit they deserve for what they have done and are trying to do in this respect. And their critics fail to realise how difficult and delicate the situation is. The Church may say and does say to the selfish rich man, 'Unless you use your wealth to promote the community, you will perish.' But this does not content the critic. He would have the Church identify itself with a definite political propaganda, take a stand with the out and out Socialist, and preach collectivism as the only solution of our social woes. Is it the Church's business to pronounce between competing systems of economics? I do not think so, although I am aware that a great change seems to be taking place in the minds of many churchmen on the question. I was speaking recently with one of the best known leaders of the United Free Church, and in the course of conversation said that the people of New Zealand had gone three-fourths of the way to Socialism. 'Three-fourths,' said he, 'I have gone four-fourths of that way.'"

A PASSING PHASE.

"Do you notice a falling off in the public support of the Churches?"

"Unquestionably. In Scotland it seems to me that only those Churches are well attended where a man of strong individuality and exceptional preaching power occupies the pulpit. The old feeling for the Church as an institution is becoming decadent. But there has at different periods been a much worse day for the Churches than the present time. The tide will turn. 'Man does not live by bread alone,' and the practical materialism of the hour will pass. If it does not disappear in Britain the British civilisation will. But it would be too long a story to go into this."

I asked another and final question: "Interesting people? Yes, I have met a good many such. I have met a number of Parliamentary representatives, leaders of Nonconformity in England and of the Churches in Scotland. It would be an interesting if invidious thing to compare the public men of this country with the public men of New Zealand. There is much more of polish and the culture of the schools on this side; but if the question related to grit, energy, virility, I do not think we should come badly out of the comparison."

Constitution and Morals.

The question "Can a healthy person be wholly bad?" is raised by the unusual reason given by the Rev. C. G. Gull, vicar of Hounslow, at the Brentford Police Court, for his interest in a would-be suicide.

The vicar stated, says the "London Express," that as the man had recovered in a remarkable way from his self-inflicted wounds, it proved that he had a splendid constitution, and therefore he could not be wholly bad.

Mr. Gull declared in an interview that his argument was based only on common sense. "If the man had been a drunkard," he said, "or had been leading a dissipated life, he would never have come out of the hospital alive. The mere fact that he recovered from the severe wounds shows that he had previously led a steady life. During my two years' work as a chaplain in Malta I had a good deal of hospital experience, and I know that we used to die the men there according to the life they led. There is no doubt whatever that constitution and morals are very closely connected."

Dr. Josiah Oldfield was equally emphatic on the subject. "After many years' experience among both rich and poor," he said, "I am sure that no man who has reached 'middle age' is wholly bad, for if he had been he would have ruined his constitution years before and

would thus never have reached middle age."

Mr. Eugen Sandow gave it as his opinion that Mr. Gull's theory was based on sound deduction. "A strong argument in favour of what he says is the fact that ninety-nine out of every hundred convicts in English prisons to-day are physical degenerates," said Mr. Sandow. "A person's constitution is regulated to a great extent by the life he leads, and I have proved over and over again that if every criminal were compelled to undergo a strict course of physical exercise during the period he is in gaol it would go a long way toward the ultimate stamping out of crime."



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