

## VANISHED TOWNS

BY HILAIRE BELLOC

THE older Europe and North Africa and the Near East — the Roman Empire in a word — holds a number of dead towns. The number is not large in proportion to the towns still living, because, save under a violent pressure, men will not abandon the city; for the city is the storehouse, not only of the material wealth, but of all their tradition, which makes them and their wealth together. The number of such towns is especially limited in Britain, because Britain, in spite of the Pirate Invasions of the Dark Ages, preserved its material continuity with antiquity better than any other province. If you make a list of the principal English towns standing before the modern change — say, in the time of the Civil Wars — you will be astonished to find what a very large proportion of them are *certainly* of ancient establishment, and what a very small proportion can even doubtfully be ascribed to origins later than the Roman occupation.

It is so with all the surface of England. It is so with the Roman roads, as I recently stated. It is so with the harbors, save the quite modern ones, and it is so with the distribution of wealth and of political importance in the various districts up to the industrial revolution.

The dead or decayed cities, then, are less numerous with us than with most other communities. But what there are of them have a special interest, because they stand to-day in such a crowded land.

There are three sorts of towns or sites of this kind.

There are, first of all, the sites to which tradition (sometimes only preserved in a vague name) ascribes the position of some centre that has disappeared, or, failing tradition, the remains of fortification and the convergence of many roads. Badbury Rings, for instance, in Dorset, where five of the great roads meet, and where certainly there stood a centre all memory of which has disappeared. Or fields where the word 'old' appears grotesquely isolated. 'Old Winchester,' for instance, right away from the town, upon the hills. These last names are a puzzle all over Europe. You very often find them in places where a town could hardly ever have been. Sometimes they are associated with a legend which may have some germ of truth, but which as it stands is incredible, and that legend often enough tells one in detail of how and why the original inhabitants migrated.

There has been much debate upon that adjective 'old' attached to such bare fields without a trace of building or of defense. But I have seen no acceptable conclusion.

The second kind of dead town is one of which we know certainly the historical existence, and which has yet within recorded time altogether ceased to be inhabited. Some very few of these have up and down Europe kept ruins of their buildings: whether preserved by the same cause which destroyed them, as at Pompeii, or saved from loot by desert or distance — as at Timgad, the most wonderful place under the sun. But the greater

part have lost even their foundations, though often their defenses remain. Silchester is our great example in this country; Wroxeter is another. Old Sarum is a third.

There is a third sort of town often called dead which is not dead, but decayed; and this decay has come usually from causes which history can trace. Either an industry has left the place, or means of transport, the sea, or a river, have become less convenient. Or, more rarely, direct political action, apart from material causes, has doomed it. This third class is the most numerous, naturally enough. For the fortunes of towns may fluctuate, but the complete death of a town is rare.

Of the three categories, it is the second which presents the greatest interest — at least, the greatest historical interest — because it presents the most problems. How and why did such a town as Silchester disappear, or such a town as Wroxeter? Why did men completely abandon Timgad? Or, for the matter of that, Babylon?

Then there is that other problem, how, each having been abandoned, should the vestiges of each so thoroughly disappear within the few centuries allowable?

I have written the word 'loot,' and that is certainly the main cause. But its thoroughness is astonishing! The very foundations disappear. How do they disappear? Hippo, in North Africa, was a great town. It was a chief bishopric. It was so big that an army of certainly more than 70,000 could not properly besiege it. Its site is known. There is nothing left. I despair before such a puzzle. Academic men have been found who would say that the old buildings were insignificant. That is nonsense. Towns of which the corporate life is known, wealthy, loaded with generations of

building, towns whose material was stone, and of which the surviving fragments are sufficient to show their character, leave hardly a trace. The earthworm covers any slight ruin with a little cushion of mould — not very deep, but that will not answer the question posed. I can only suppose that when these places were quarried everything was taken. It would certainly pay one better to dig out the bricks from an old cellar and foundation if a strong modern house fell into ruin than to make new bricks, and one can point to many places where the foundations have thus been looted with-in living memory. I know the site of more than one old house in my own country which has entirely disappeared; cellars, footings of the walls, and all.

Another problem as to these dead towns is the lack of reference to them. One would have thought that during the interval between their last habitation and the revival of modern and accurate research, there must have been a long period during which the appearance of the place would have excited curiosity and provoked stories. But one does not find them.

Take Pevensey. Pevensey was a traditional port. It must have had importance, for it had a keep very heavily fortified by the Romans. It remained important at the time of the Norman Conquest, for it was the goal of William's fleet. It has only gradually declined because the harbor went dry. But you cannot trace the decline save in quite its later stages, and of that long period when it must have been partially cut off from the rest of England we know nothing.

Nor do we know anything of the Port of Lympne, except that it was a Roman harbor, and is now dry land.

I remember one — and only one — reference to such things in the period

of transition, and that is a single famous sentence the origin of which (though not the present form) is as old as the seventh century. It describes the site of one of those innumerable battles in which the kinglets of the Dark Ages raided into their neighbors' territory from the marches of Wales to the North Sea, and from the North Sea to the marches of Wales. It was a battle which impressed its own time and posterity, because, though it had no political effects that we know of, it involved a great slaughter of the clergy and seemed to fulfill a prophecy of St. Augustine's. In the few words remaining to us of that fight there is the phrase 'By the waste Chester that is there,' which means 'By the formerly inhabited fortified Roman post' (or camp or town). To what post or town it refers we do not know, for it cannot possibly relate to the continuous town of Chester itself, though the struggle was somewhere in the neighborhood.

As a rule a town dies without witnesses to its death and without mourners, and its memory perishes.

Therein lies the physical fascination of such places. They are at once haunted and isolated. You are certain that you will hear no voices and have no vision, and yet you know that they were crowded. It is like going into a house which you knew well in youth, and which has been empty for many years. Or it is like seeing palely reflected in a window-pane the portrait of someone dead, so that it seems like the figure of the dead alive again and caught in the glass advancing. It is a fascination felt much more strongly as time passes and as one's acquaintance with the place increases. Why, I do not know. It ought, one would think, to be the other way.

There is a Roman theatre unused which I have visited many times, and I know that after my last visits

to it it seemed more peopled than before.

No small part of the magic of a town it stolen away from it by the detestable modern habit of belittling the past. Luckily, we can apply to this basest of historical errors the most powerful of historical criteria, which is common sense. One can appeal to the common experience of mankind and so correct the worst errors of pedantry even in a time when the pedant is worshiped as he never was worshiped before.

For instance, when an academic man tells you that a boat could not sail into the wind until the seventeenth century, you can refer then to the people who sail boats, unless indeed you have time to teach the man to sail a boat himself; then he will find out *first*, what would happen to any boat that could not sail into the wind; *secondly*, how no one, not even an ape, could sail a boat without the boat itself teaching him how to put it on a wind. It is so all through the field of history, and it is so particularly in the case of these dead towns.

Take the case of Pevensey. There is at Pevensey (now but a village) and there remains, outside the village, the wall of a fort — largely Roman. If a man tells you that the wall marks the size of the whole of the Roman town, ask him to consider what is worth while at all by way of a port. You have here a place which a fleet of many hundred vessels carrying a force (William the Conqueror's) of many thousand men and horses could still use as a port six hundred years after the full imperial period of Rome. A port which not only can be used in that fashion, but which obviously suggests itself for use in that fashion to an invader is not a port served by a little village. It is obviously a port served by some considerable town. The dimensions of

the Roman fortification correspond well enough to the *arx*, the stronghold of such a town. They do not and cannot correspond to the whole periphery. Then there is the very tenacious legend of the great pirate attack on Pevensey at the beginning of the Dark Ages. It is only a legend, of course, and it was not written down until many centuries after the event; but the thing must have been of some magnitude to leave such an impression. Pevensey is the only one of the Roman towns the memory of an attack on which by the pirates has survived. Unlike the other Roman towns, it was apparently sacked, and there was a massacre which legend has exaggerated into a complete destruction of the population. A memory of that kind does not arise about a walled station a furlong square.

Another habit which falsely lessens our interest in the dead towns is a misconception upon the nature of their fate. Hardly ever in history has a town disappeared through one act of war — at least, until modern times. For war has become far more murderous and far more destructive since the first confident statements (barely a hundred years old), that war as an institution was coming to an end. I think there is no certain case in all history of any considerable town having completely disappeared as the result of a single act of war. There are many cases of a town having declined under successive acts of war, spread over a considerable time, and a few of such a decline ending in a complete waste. But for one such case you have a score of cases in which the decline can be attributed to almost any other cause than arms; and, as I have said, not a little of the fascination of the study lies in the common absence of evidence describing the decline. It is always a safe negative hypothesis

in the absence of evidence that whatever caused an ancient town to fail it was not war.

In most historical problems it is a useful thing to try to get a modern parallel. For instance, if you want to understand how legend arose you have the modern case of the imaginary Russian troops passing through England in 1914. If you want to understand the spirit of religious persecution, which may seem odd and incomprehensible, you have the modern case of large minorities forbidden to drink fermented liquor because it is taboo to other citizens in the State.

To understand, then, the very puzzling problem of how these older towns decayed and disappeared, what can help you best is a modern parallel; but a modern parallel is not easy to find.

We live in a time and country marked by rapid expansion in numbers and in wealth. Such towns as have decayed were checked in their decay long ago, and most of them have grown larger again. We can hardly find a single example familiar to us of a town in process of decay: a process which we can watch and understand.

As difficult to explain as the disappearance of foundations in the decline of a town is the varying depth at which its last ruins are found. Of course, a town continuously inhabited rises gradually in level. Rome is a conspicuous example, and the rise in level is naturally greater in periods of loose administration than in periods of highly organized life. But this process, common to every ancient inhabited site of Europe, does not account for the great depth of earth covering the floor level of the abandoned houses; still less can one explain the capricious differences in that depth.

There is a last speculation to which, confess, I continually turn, although

it is purely imaginary, and that is the method of decline that would be followed by our own great industrial towns.

There is nothing to make them permanent save the combination of industrial expansion and expense in the distribution of power. If either of these factors were to be modified they would go to pieces. No one wants to live in them; no one has any religious feeling or even affection for their wretched sites. What will happen in their decay? The amount of material to loot will be enormous, and a declining society will hardly have the energy to loot it thoroughly. The soil has been turned and re-turned and tunneled to great depth by one stratum of communication underlying another. Many of the buildings are so deeply founded and of such solid material that one cannot see them in imagination, covered even by centuries of the work undertaken by worms. What a waste of intolerable ugliness they will make! The great patches on the coalfields on either side of the Pennines! The Midland patch round Birmingham! The Five Towns! Who will look at them and wonder,

Land and Water.

and what will you see a few hundred years hence? Further, what oddities of survival will there be?

The other day, in Glasgow, I saw the enormous Tennant chimney lifting up into the skies after such a fashion that if we had inherited it from antiquity it would be one of the wonders of the world. Will any of those striking towers remain?

For that matter, more curious even than the fate of our meaningless industrial towns is the fate of the ways connecting them: the railways. What will a remote posterity make of immense earthworks — and earthworks are the most enduring of human things — leading on to hillsides, and there stopping, for the tunnels will have fallen in. What will they make of the fragments of viaducts? If they guess the uses of these things and imperfectly explain them we shall have (when we are dead, and can no longer laugh at them) delightful theses of incongruity. At any rate, it is a consolation, or a shame, to know that we are leaving no records. For we are establishing no permanent language, nor carving even our changeful idiom upon enduring things.

# ECONOMICS, TRADE, AND FINANCE

## SYNDICALISM AND PHILOSOPHY \*

BY L. P. JACKS

MR. SCOTT is to be congratulated on having produced a timely book in which a thoughtful mind will find abundance of nourishing meat. His work is equally valuable in leading the student of social facts to become a philosopher, and in leading the philosopher to become a student of social facts. It is precisely by such 'correlations' of social and philosophical tendencies as Mr. Scott here seeks to establish that we learn the high uses of philosophy. The book is full of promise, and of promise that points in many directions. It evinces social sympathy as well as the trained mind; and Mr. Scott is the more welcome to the ranks of philosophical authors because he makes his entry by bringing the truths of philosophy into relation with the facts of life. It is to be hoped he will continue on these lines, and enlarge the considerable debt we owe him for the book now before us.

Mr. Scott opens the campaign by the description of Syndicalism as 'the voice of something that has failed,' an interesting proposition, which at once engages the attention of the reader to the subsequent diagnosis of the failure. In spite, however, of a chapter devoted to answering the question 'What is it that has failed?' we are not quite clear as to whether the 'failure' which Syndicalism voices is its own or that of something else. It can hardly be the former, since a

\* *Syndicalism and Philosophical Realism*. By J. W. Scott, Lecturer in Moral Philosophy in the University of Glasgow. A. and C. Black. 10s.6d.

movement which has failed would have no voice to speak of, the voice which announced its failure being presumably that of somebody else. In describing Syndicalism as a voice Mr. Scott has incidentally credited it with a certain measure of life, if not of success, and we are compelled to make the alternative assumption, namely, that the failure it announces is that of some other thing or idea. In this, however, there is nothing to distinguish Syndicalism from any movement of thought that has ever taken place in the world. Everyone of these announces the failure of something it proposes to supersede. This holds true of Christianity, and it holds conspicuously true of the 'constructive idealism' of Mr. Scott, which is the voice of the failure of the non-constructive idealisms that went before it — a failure very powerfully voiced in some of the best pages of this book. Mr. Scott, indeed, does not go the length of saying that all who went before him, or his philosophical teachers, were thieves and robbers, but he announces the failure of several philosophies, more especially those of Professor Bergson and Mr. Bertrand Russell. Indeed, one might almost offer Mr. Scott a little of his own sauce by describing his book as the voice of two philosophies that he thinks have failed. Mr. Scott's book is, however, much more than that. But Syndicalism also is much more than the voice of the failure of something. By so describing Syndicalism Mr. Scott does it more honor than he thinks. He puts it into one class with all the great discontents and all the fine adventures of the human soul, from the migration of Abraham to the