

[*The New Statesman*]

WHAT IS 'PATRIOTISM'?

ALL through the nineteenth century there was a perfectly senseless and even ruinous conflict between the idea of patriotism and the idea of the unity of civilization. People who called themselves internationalists were more often than not people who regarded the love of one's country as a vice. They did not realize that in doing so they were dealing a disastrous blow to the cause the success of which they had at heart. If internationalism can be purchased only by the sacrifice of one's country, the average man will have none of it any more than if it could be purchased only by the sacrifice of his mother and his children. And the instinct of the average man in this matter is sound. If a man is indifferent to the fate of his own family or his own country, it is not likely that he will have a heart to spare for Europe or the world.

The truth is, internationalism as it was commonly preached in the nineteenth century had as little to do with the heart as has the binomial theorem. It was purely a paper doctrine which might be applicable enough to a bloodless world but which ignored human nature. It was preached by many amiable men who were disgusted by the crimes and follies of national and family egoism. The amiable men, however, were exceedingly foolish for, instead of attempting to moderate the egoism, they wished to abolish the nation and the family themselves. Others even wished to abolish religion, because bishops and the clergy in general have so often passed on the blessing of God to every sort of national and personal egoism. They thought of God as a mixture of Tamerlane and a nineteenth-century capitalist. They declared that belief in God

was a form of private property that could not be tolerated. Obviously, there is no future for either internationalism or Socialism which flies in this way in the face of human nature. It is merely a form of intellectual nonsense, and those who profess it might as well play dominoes for all the help they will be able to give in solving the great problems of human coöperation and freedom.

The Socialism that cannot build on the basis of love of country and love of family, on the basis, moreover, of personal freedom and private property, is merely a tea-table problem for enthusiasts. The Utopian, like the painter, must respect his materials, and the materials out of which the new world can be made are chiefly the affectionate and generous instincts and the actual needs of human beings. Many enthusiasts are of the opinion that enthusiasm is a sufficient substitute for personal affection. They prefer enthusiasm for the world at large to affection for England or Italy or France or Ireland. They even imagine that it is a nobler passion.

For ourselves, we believe that at its best it is a noble and a necessary passion, but at its worst it can become a form of mere excited self-righteousness. Enthusiasm in itself is neither a good nor a bad thing. It may mean simply drunkenness as a result of imbibing too much theory. In any case, among common men, any quarrel between the enthusiasm of theory and the enthusiasm of affection must always end in the victory of the latter. That is why internationalists all the world over rallied to the aid of their country at the beginning of the war. The theories broke down: the affections triumphed. It is possible to deplore this but not to deny it. Many earnest men do deplore it. But the fact, it seems to us, is so significant that it would be madness

to ignore it in any movement that has for its object a world united by closer ties than in the past. The ordinary decent man is a patriot: the ordinary decent man is a nationalist. He who forgets this fact had better not waste his time on international politics. He would be better occupied in making dandelion wine or growing parsnips.

It is time, we think, that this should be said, for in certain Liberal and labor circles there has been noticeable for some time past a tendency to revert to the old pre-war suspicion of patriotism and nationalism. Examples may be found in the reports of the Socialist conferences held during Easter week. One speaker roundly denounced patriotism as though it were an evil thing that must be extirpated at all costs. Now the war proved — though no such proof was necessary to an intelligent man — that Liberals and Socialists were equally ready to lay down their lives for their country with true-blue Conservatives. To be a Socialist is not to cease to be an Englishman or a German. The Socialist desires his country to be free as well as to be the scene of a better civilization.

If the Liberal and Socialist are patriots in practice, however, we cannot understand why anyone should detest their being patriots in theory. It is, we are aware, only a small minority who object, but it is an eloquent minority and it does an injury to the prospects of the democratic parties as a whole. One result of this is that it leaves the theory of patriotism largely in the hands of reactionary and demagogic politicians, and many men are tempted to become patriots of the jingo sort, as a saner and juster patriotism is seldom preached with the same vigor.

The jingo sort of patriotism, it may be admitted, disgusts many people, just as the opposing want of patriotism

does, but we doubt if it disgusts as many people at a crisis. It is especially odious because it has no respect for the patriotism of other people. It is a patriotism of aggression and hegemony. It is Nietzschean and beyond good and evil. It is the patriotism of Ahab and Jezebel. 'And Ahab spoke unto Naboth, saying, Give me the vineyard that I may have it for a garden of herbs, because it is near unto my house, and I will give thee for it a better vineyard than it; and if it seem good to thee, I will give thee the worth of it in money. And Naboth said to Ahab, The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee. . . . And Jezebel his wife said unto [Ahab], Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel? Arise and eat bread, and let thine heart be merry: I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite. So she wrote letters in Ahab's name . . . saying . . . Set two men, sons of Belial before him, to bear witness against him, saying, Thou didst blaspheme God and the King: and then carry him out, and stone him that he may die.'

There you have a fable which sums up the history of Frederick the Great and how many more of the great patriotic conquerors! First, there is the desire for the vineyard 'because it is near unto my house': then there is the pretext — Frederick said: 'Give me a war, and I will find a pretext for half a crown'—and then there is the necessary bloodshed. To be a patriot in this sort is no virtue. The recent war was fought in order to undo the ravages of this sort of patriotism. Many a good man, suspecting his country of patriotism of the kind, has been known even to pray for its defeat. A considerable number of Englishmen adopted this attitude at the time of the American War of Independence and again at the time of the war against

the French Revolution. Wordsworth, who was afterward to become the great patriotic poet during the war against Napoleon, has told us how during the French Revolutionary War he used to pray for French victories and:

Exulted in the triumph of my soul,
When Englishmen by thousands were o'erthrown
Left without glory on the field, or driven
Brave hearts! to shameful flight.

The average man, however, finds it difficult to wish to see his country defeated, even for its good. He believes as a rule that it is all-important that his country should win even in a dubious war. Cowper, though of the liberal-minded school of Burke, had no desire to see the American colonists triumphant. 'I consider,' he declared, 'the loss of America as the ruin of England.' When America was finally victorious and broke free, he almost screamed with rage. 'The Americans,' he declared, 'who, if they had contented themselves with a struggle for lawful liberty, would have deserved applause, seem to me to have incurred the guilt of parricide, by renouncing their parent, by making her ruin their favorite object, and by associating themselves with her worst enemy, for the accomplishment of her purpose.'

The event has proved Cowper wrong, and a wiser patriot would, perhaps, have screamed less. Burke, who was the wisest patriot of his century, spoke and wrote neither in the spirit of victory at all costs nor in that of a defeatist. He fought against the false patriotism during the war, but he did not surrender the true. America would possibly never have seceded if the patriotic philosophy of Burke had been generally accepted in English politics. We are told that in the early days of the rebellion separatism was so rare in America that one of the leading separatists was 'avoided like a man infected with leprosy,' and 'walked

down the streets of Philadelphia in solitude, borne down by the weight of care and unpopularity.' Aggressionist patriots in England, however, made America a nation in spite of itself. It was of them that Burke said: 'They imagine that their souls are cooped up and cabined in, unless they have some men, or some body of men, dependent on their mercy. . . . This disposition is the true source of the passion which many men . . . have taken to the American war. *Our* subjects in America, *our* colors, *our* dependents. This lust of party power is the liberty they hunger and thirst for; and this siren song of ambition has charmed ears that we would have thought were never organized to that sort of music.'

Burke never attacked patriotism itself merely because the lust of party power disguised itself as patriotism. He began with patriotism as a first necessity, and made it his object to prevent patriotism from coming into conflict with justice and liberty.

It seems to us that, at the present day, democrats will make a serious mistake if they allow themselves to be driven by disgust with the excesses of national egoism into disgust with nationalism itself. The fact that Poland has a swelled head is not an argument that Poland should have no head at all. The mutual suspicion of European nations, odious as it is, should not make us indifferent to their liberty. We see perversions of patriotism everywhere. The cure for these is, not the abolition of patriotism, but a better sort of patriotism. Patriotism, we may be told, is bound ultimately to lead to national egoism. We admit that egoism is a vice difficult to eradicate either in the nation or in the individual. Both men and nations are imperfect, and they cannot be made perfect at this stage in the history of this particular planet. All we can do is to make

the best of them — to take coöperation and good will out of the realm of sappy phrases and see that they play their part as realities in politics.

In a real League of Nations the various patriotisms would not vanish but coöperate. Man does not need to be indifferent to his family in order to serve his country, and he does not need to be indifferent to his country in order

to serve the world. If internationalism cannot reconcile itself with this fact, internationalism is doomed. An anti-patriotic internationalism can only result in leaving the bellowing and bellicose sort of patriots in full possession of the field. For a bellowing patriot, in the eyes — and ears — of most people, is better than no patriot at all.

[*The Poetry Review*]

A POET CONFESSES

BY ALBERTA VICKRIDGE

I AM afraid lest God, one day
 (I crouching at His feet) should lift
 My head in kindly hands, and say:
 'What didst thou, Soul, with life, My gift?'

Then I must shun the eyes whose beam
 Is searching as the dawn's, and cry:
 'Lord, Lord, I wrapped it in a dream —
 Because 't was fair, I laid it by
 In woofs most delicately wrought
 With ghosts of faces, moons, and trees,
 And shreds of human ardors, caught
 In thin, unpassionate semblances;
 For I have seen like shadow-throngs
 The shapes of joy and love and grief;
 But all my sorrows, all my songs,
 And all my loves, were make-belief.'

Then other souls shall stand and meet
 God's glance unfearing, eye to eye,
 And say: 'Before Thy mercy seat
 We lay Thy loan, with usury;
 We have not hoarded power or sense
 That Thou hast bidden the will employ,
 Nor fled from gray experience,
 Nor halted at the doors of joy. . . .'

These many souls God shall redeem;
 The spendthrift, even, shall find His grace;
 But I — I wrapped life in a dream,
 Nor looked upon its naked face.