

Obstinacy of British Postmasters-General

THE STORY OF MEN WHO ARE BLIND BECAUSE THEY DO NOT WANT TO SEE.

By JOHN A. COOPER

ONE of the strangest of unchronicled stories is that of the obstinacy of the Postmasters-General of Great Britain—Lord Londonderry, Mr. Austen Chamberlain, Lord Stanley and Mr. Sidney Buxton. They have been blind because they have refused to see. They have steadily and persistently declined to reduce the tax of eight cents a pound now imposed on British newspapers and periodicals mailed to the Colonies.

Railway companies and other public service corporations are often charged with levying undue rates for their services, but no corporation was ever more greedy than is the British Post-Office. For carrying this material to Liverpool and putting it on board the steamer for Canada they charge eight cents a pound—\$8 a hundred pounds—\$160 a ton. They pay something to the steamer, but it is doubtful if the charge would be increased if a few more publications were carried; consequently, this portion of the cost may be overlooked. When the mails land here they are taken in charge by the Canadian Government and distributed free. The British Post-Office gets all the revenue and the Canadian Post-Office does most of the work.

These same newspapers and periodicals are taken from London to Toronto—not to Liverpool merely—by express for 2 cents a pound, \$2.00 a hundred, or \$40 a ton. This is one-fourth of the rate charged by the British Post-Office for little more than half the service.

The newspaper or magazine posted in Birmingham, Glasgow or any British city, collected by the Post-Office and sent over here as a separate article is not under discussion. On this the rate may be considered to be fair. The portion under discussion now is the matter mailed in bulk by publishers or their agents. This can be handled at much less cost than that posted by private individuals, because it is delivered to the Post-Office in large quantities—in sacks which need not be opened for sorting purposes until this side of the Atlantic is reached. It is on this kind of package that the rate is exorbitant.

The Canadian Post-Office performs a similar service for Canadian publishers on matter collected here and sent to Great Britain. The Canadian charge on individual copies is the same as in Great Britain, but on publishers' bulk shipments the rate is one-half cent per pound, 50 cents a hundred, or \$10 a ton. In other words, the Canadian Government charges for a like service only one-sixteenth that charged by the British Government.

What are the results of this blindness and obstinacy on the part of the British Post-Office? In the first place, Canadians are deprived of the privilege of reading British newspapers and periodicals. They know little of British life and feeling. They are out of touch with British affairs. In the second place, the British advertisements are not circulated here and people are not familiarised with British brands, trade-marks and styles. The sales of British goods in Canada are declining. The Canadian market for imported goods is increasing year by year, but Great Britain gets a much smaller percentage of the increase than the United States. Trade follows the advertisement, and the United States advertisement is the only one that circulates freely in this country.

For ten years this state of affairs has been pressed upon the attention of successive British Postmasters.

For ten years they have declined to investigate or to take any steps to bring about reform. About 1898, Sir William Mulock, then Canadian Postmaster-General, drew official attention to the anomaly. On the 18th of June, 1901, Mr. Charles Trevelyan, M.P., drew the attention of the British House of Commons to it. The Chambers of Commerce in England brought a strong resolution on the subject before the Government. The Congress of the Chambers of Commerce at Montreal in 1903 drew further notice to it. In February, 1905, Sir George Drummond made a speech on the subject in the Canadian Senate and copies of the speech were sent to every British Legislator. In the following month twenty-one members of the British House waited on the Postmaster-General and tried to convince him of the absurdity. At that time there was presented a petition signed by thirty-eight prominent Canadians representing the Press Association, the British Empire League, the Universities, the Clergy and other prominent organisations. The press of both countries has discussed it for years.

And what is the answer? They cannot reduce the rate to the Colonies without reducing the domestic rate. This is either a deliberate or an ignorant evasion! It is no answer at all. Publishers in Great Britain do not mail their publications—they send them out by express to dealers. The compactness of their territory enables them to do this. The lower rate is not required in their case. A cheap express rate to the Colonies is impossible because of the distances and because of the scattered population to which these journals must be distributed on their arrival. Only the Post-Office can carry reading matter to the homes of Colonials. A cheaper rate in Great Britain would disturb present conditions to their confusion; a cheaper rate to the Colonies would be in the interests of the Empire and would give privileges not obtainable in any other way.

The British Postmaster-General, who says that the domestic rate must be lowered at the same time as the colonial, is a blind man because he keeps his eyes shut. When he says he would lose a large amount of revenue he is deceiving himself and the public. All this talk about Imperialism, paramount interest of the Empire, and good-will toward the Colonies is a hollow mockery so long as these distinguished statesmen refuse to allow British literature to find a cheap and ready access to the Colonial markets.

If the British Government does not arouse itself, it may be too late so far as Canada is concerned. The old Postal Convention between Canada and the United States comes to an end on May 7th. If a new treaty favourable to the continued predominance of United States reading matter is arranged before that date, the golden opportunity for British newspapers and periodicals will not come again for another generation. When another generation has passed away, Canada may not be anxious about British literature and British periodicals, for she will then have them "made in Canada." This reform, like the repeal of the famous Stamp Act, may come too late. There is a tide in the affairs of Empires as in the affairs of men.

The Manitoba Legislature is giving power to municipalities to buy land and build coal sheds thereon; also to purchase a year's supply of fuel. The lesson of the winter has been taken to heart.