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A POLITICAL TRANSFORMER

ON the outskirts of many a city and town in Canada you may notice an ugly building that does a deal of silent work and has enough voltage concentrating in it to wreck anything but a good democratic government. This building is connected up by hundreds of miles of high-voltage wires to a cataract that gathers its momentum from lakes and rivers reaching back thousands of miles into the interior. The transformer takes the current and steps it down to the community; whereby the boudoir lamp of Mrs. John Jones is as much in touch with Niagara as the 1,000-h.p. factory of Mr. John Jones, whose employees don't have electric-lighted boudoirs.

This is a very democratic picture, and it suggests very aptly the sort of man John W. Dafoe is.

Before the editor of the Manitoba Free Press sees this he will be up to the eyes in the biggest convention ever held in Winnipeg. Hundreds of grain-growers are gathering like storm clouds before a slow wind to discuss a new set of economic principles for the business management of this country. It is not on record that Dafoe called this convention. He may have had nothing directly to do with it. But if there is any one man present at this Magna Carta synagogue of agrarians who knows every iota of what it politically means, that man is the managing editor of the Manitoba Free Press.

Dafoe is the transformer of western ideals, impulses and opinions, planted down there at Winnipeg to step down political currents to Ottawa. It makes no difference that John W. Dafoe is temperamentally a Radical, any more than it does that the Manitoba Free Press is technically a Liberal sheet.

Sotto voce! This is not a political essay. It is an attempt to get a line on an editor—who, as Ottawa knows, has been as much of a puzzle to the machinery of Parliament Hill as ever was Nicholas Flood Davin, Clifford Sifton, or R. L. Richardson.

It was a sizzling summer's day when I first set eyes on Dafoe in his huge sanctum looking westward over the city of wheat. The big red building that houses the Free Press was just beginning to vibrate with the day's run. Newsboys screeched and struggled below. That morning a girl aviator had gone up under Free Press auspices and had come down advertising the Free Press. Dafoe took no interest in that. Circulation and advertising people might have their own ways of getting Vox Populi to sit up and take notice. The editor was not bothered about these heavenward things. His soul and body were intent upon problems that have naturally worn a track into his office.

DON'T imagine that the sudden arrival of Sir Wilfrid Laurier in his doorway would have flustered him. Neither would the visit of the humblest subscriber have found him anything but as cordial and outspoken as a big lion just after a full meal. The humble subscriber might have some trouble getting in there. Once in he would be sure of a good audience. Dafoe keeps the bars high. Once they are down democracy begins. And that is very much the way with the Free Press. The peculiar character of that paper must be credited mainly to the managing editor and to the ideas which of necessity that paper has come to express. The change from primitive conditions to a metropolitan character came somewhat suddenly in the Free Press. There was money behind it. To create such a machine money was needed sometimes faster than it was created by the paper itself. Once it was started on a broad gauge the machine operated independent of the money behind. The opinions it expresses and the services it conveys all over the middle west make the Manitoba Free Press seem much more arrogant than is the plain-spoken, blunt editor who is always ready to chuck old ideas into the discard when they are

John W. Dafoe, Managing Editor of the Manitoba Free Press, Steps Down Political Voltage to Ottawa

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

Illustrated by F. S. Challenger

unsuitable to the temper of the people behind the paper.

All which is very much aside from the essential man Dafoe as I saw him that summer day in his sanctum. What he talked about is not of first importance here. It was not an interview. There were two main topics in the talk—the Empire and Canadian politics. I don't pose as an interpreter of



Dafoe's opinions on either of these large, luminous subjects. But in all the men I have ever been able to listen to in private conversation along those lines, Dafoe ranks as one of the most clear-thinking and expressive. In considering his subject he clean forgot himself and his great newspaper.

They say in Winnipeg that John Dafoe has one eternal hate. He tries not to think about it, but when he does he gets ugly all over and—so runs the legend—sees red. The object of his animadversion is the barber-shop, or rather, the things the barber-shop does to John Dafoe's hair. Take a big woolly dog and tie him to a boy's sleigh. You know how it galls the dog. Tie a politician's fists so that he can't pound the table when he speaks. That is what smooth hair means to John Dafoe. When Dafoe addresses himself to an editorial his first act—I quote rumour only—is to mess up his hair. That done—away he goes! Not even his library and his clipping system—wonderful enough in themselves—are as essential to pushing in the face of the stiff-necked Tories of Winnipeg as the tousling of his name.

John Dafoe's first acquaintance with the West was at the time of Wolseley's expedition against Riel.

Dafoe, on that occasion, was the correspondent of the Toronto Globe. The Winnipeg Free Press in those days was a very uncertain sort of a paper, owned, it is said, by a man named Luxton, of London, Ont.

In 1883 he was the Montreal Star's man at the Quebec Legislature, and at the sessions in Ottawa. In 1885, being still under twenty-one, he became "editor" of the Ottawa Journal. In 1886 he went to Winnipeg as special correspondent for the Toronto Globe, but remained there city-editing the Free Press until 1892. City-editing in Winnipeg those days was a precarious and variegated performance. It consisted in being responsible for everything from book reviews to the settling of bets in the composing room. The staff consisted of whatever second or third-rate tramp scribes might have borrowed money enough to buy tickets so far west. But under the whip of John Dafoe's relentless determination it accomplished something that looked very much like a real paper.

IN 1892 he went east to Montreal and hitched his waggon to the Montreal Herald. The Herald was then owned by a company headed by E. D. O'Connor. It wasn't much of a comet, but it helped Dafoe show his mettle to such advantage that in 1895—two years before Brierly bought the Herald—he was taken on the staff of the Montreal Star as private secretary to Hugh Graham, and managing editor of the Weekly Star.

We now begin to see how J. W. Dafoe makes so good a transformer. Five wires, all different voltage, came to a focus in one man, who was not a professional hack writer or a maker of political phrases. Dafoe had never impressed himself on any one as a brilliant man. We hear of no slogans that he invented or issues that he built up year by year. He was no sort of sudden apostle. He was mainly a hard, digger after news and an assimilator of opinions. He had a calumet's hunger for work and no objections to the drudgery it entailed. Brilliant men like Nicholas Flood Davin, of Regina, and Ned Farrer, of the Globe, trailed like meteors across the sky of journalism. Dafoe plugged away at problems that gradually came to a focus in his odd combination of ideas and conscience. He saw very little of the humorous side of things; looked into all matters with constitutional gravity, and came to himself on his latest journalistic move a serious, constructive man who had tried many things and found them wanting, but was dead sure of a few.

This was at the beginning of the century. It was a time of much uplift among Liberals then in the fifth year of the Laurier regime on the verge of a new

Canada, which began at Winnipeg and reached back to the Pacific. One Clifford Sifton was Minister of the Interior. It was a spectacular job. Sifton was letting down the bars to let in half the people of the world. Winnipeg was beginning to clack like the tower of Babel. There was supposed to be a new Canada in the making. Melting pot got into our national vocabulary, along with assimilation, polyglot, franchise, transcontinental—all signs of new national ideas putting up our national pulse and temperature.

And Winnipeg, in 1900, was the place where the malady broke out—though its seat was at Ottawa, in the office of one Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior. At this time Sifton got hold of the Manitoba Free Press. Even he may not have known what a valuable property it might be in less than twenty years, or what sort of man Dafoe might turn out to be. At that time politics in the West was in an unorganized condition. There were no new provinces with Liberal majorities and there was no Grain Growers' movement to become the storm centre of Radicalism. Not even Sifton could foresee all of this, neither could he foretell that any complications might arise to bring about differences of opinion.