

A Contrast of Two Careers

John Bright (1811-1889)—Donald Alexander Smith, Lord Strathcona (1820-1914)

Written for *The Grain Growers' Guide* by "Ironquill"

FIRST ARTICLE

Two of the most notable books of biography published during the past few years in London are the "Life of John Bright," by George Macaulay Trevelyan, and the "Life and Times of Lord Strathcona," by W. T. R. Preston. The editor of *The Grain Growers' Guide* has asked me to write articles about these two books, and it has occurred to me to link the two articles together, making the two careers which these two books deal with thus present themselves to the reader's mind in a contrast which will suggest food for thought.

These two men were among the most remarkable in the long list of men born in the nineteenth century whose names will hold a place in history. Bright was a boy of nine when Smith was born; when Bright died at the age of seventy-eight, Smith, then a man of sixty-nine, had still a quarter of a century of life ahead of him. The contrast between the two men and the work they did in the world will stand out and speak for itself in the recital of their careers.

Financier and Agitator

In the years when the future Lord Strathcona was laying the first broad foundation of the colossal wealth which he piled up before he died, by securing a large holding of the stock of the Bank of Montreal, then in its infancy, Bright and Cobden were devoting themselves wholly to leading the crusade which secured the repeal of the Corn Laws which made food dear in Great Britain. While "Donald A," as he was then known, was securing a controlling interest in the Hudson's Bay Company and making himself a multimillionaire by his achievements in railway "high finance" in the states adjoining Manitoba, Bright was devoting himself heart and soul to securing the parliamentary franchise for the working men of Great Britain. And so the contrast stands thruout.

The one was a life of self-sacrificing devotion to the highest ideals of public service and duty; the other was a life devoted to the amassing of stupendous wealth by methods which were far from having an elevating and purifying effect on Canadian public life—from which wealth, when it had grown to enormous proportions, millions were devoted to colleges and hospitals and other worthy institutions, and one historic outlay was made during the South African war in equipping and providing for the Canadian regiment which achieved such fame as the Strathcona Horse, an outlay without precedent in the history of any country.

Every man is, to a greater or less degree, what his environment has made him; but a man of strong character and will shapes his environment more than his environment shapes him, and of every man it is to be said that it rests with himself, day by day as his years are added to eternity, to determine whether higher or lower motives and aspirations shall dominate his life and his work. No books contain lessons of greater value than books of biography, provided they tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—a proviso rarely, if ever, fulfilled in complete measure.

Of the two books before us, we will consider the book written by Mr. Trevelyan (whose father was the nephew of Macaulay, the historian, and who made for himself a place in the front rank of English writers of our own time), and the life whose story is set forth so fully, so justly and sincerely and with such admirable skill in that book.

John Bright

Born at Rochdale on November 16, 1811, the son of a much respected Quaker who had started a cotton mill in that Lancashire town two years before, John Bright had no more than four and a half years' schooling outside his own home, where the best part of his early education was acquired, his mother fostering in him a love of what was best in English literature. He early developed a devotion to outdoor pursuits. In his sixteenth year he entered his father's mill, and

in due time became a partner in the business. While working faithfully and industriously in the mill, he continued his education, rising early in the morning to study.

In those years the beginnings of the agitation for parliamentary reform were in evidence in Rochdale, as in other parts

in a cabinet council, or by sharing in the deliberations of a political party did he achieve such great things, but by speaking as a private citizen, or as an individual member of parliament, nobly outspoken and unfailing in his devotion to his deepest convictions, so that more than once he had to face derision, misrepre-

My father was as poor a man as any in this crowd. He was of your own body, entirely. He boasts not—nor do I—of birth, nor of great family distinctions. What he has made, he has made by his own industry and successful commerce. What I have comes from him, and from my own exertions. I have no interest in the extravagance of government; I have no interest in seeking appointments under any government; I have no interest in pandering to the views of any government. I have nothing to gain by being the tool of any party. I come before you as the friend of my own class and order, as one of the people, as one who would on all occasions be the firm defender of your rights."

Cobden and Bright

It is the thirty years of Bright's life from his first connection with the Anti-Corn Law League to the passing of the second reform bill that constitute the most historic portion of his career. Save for his life-long friend and associate, Cobden, he stands as the sole and unique instance in history of a member of parliament in no connection with any political party, exercising an immense influence upon the thoughts and hearts of his fellow-countrymen. That powerful personal influence exerted by Bright covered the whole range of political action and touched upon all the main issues of the time. But the chief chapters in the record of his career are those that tell of the Anti-Corn Law agitation, the Crimean war, the Civil war in the United States, and the winning of the franchise for the working men. In the first of these controversies Bright served under Cobden as his chief lieutenant; during the second he fought at his side as an equal. But the American question and the great agitation for the extension of the electoral franchise were Bright's own, in which Cobden in the one case followed the initiative of his friend, and in the other took no notably active part.

Bright won for the working classes of Great Britain the right of the vote, and he won it by long years of single-handed agitation which concentrated on his head the hatred and scorn of the upper classes and of the official world, and the devoted loyalty of the mass of the people. It is only necessary to turn to the files of the London Times for those years, and to Punch, and other contemporary records, to see how bitterly Bright was reviled as a demagogue.

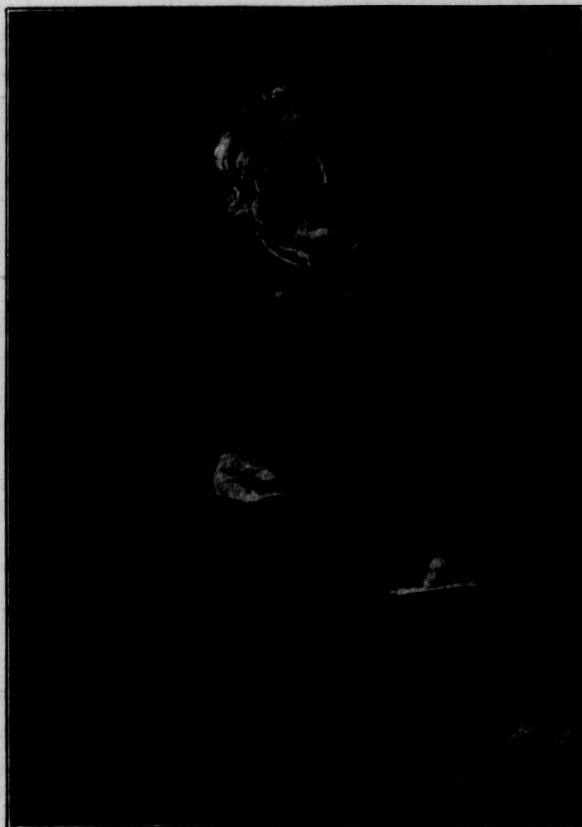
At length, after Palmerston's death in 1865, Gladstone, in three eventful years, reconstituted the Liberal party, no longer as a Whig party, but as a party of progress and democracy, sworn to carry Bright's principles into effect, and to begin by enfranchising the working classes. Then there followed in rapid succession the Franchise Act of 1867, which Disraeli, indeed, introduced, but which Bright and Gladstone compelled him to make effective, and the other reforms that were introduced in that great period of Liberal fruition, which Bright had prepared and brought about by thirty years of agitation, which might well be termed political guerilla warfare carried on from the public platform and from his place in the House of Commons as an independent member, in defiance alike of Whigs and Tories.

The Corn Law Fight

But to go back to the beginnings of the Anti-Corn Law movement, Bright himself has left us the story of how, after he had for several years taken part in the earlier stages of that great movement, he was inspired by Cobden to throw himself with all his strength into the work of organising the historic agitation carried on by the Anti-Corn Law League. In his speech at the unveiling of the statue of Cobden in Bradford, on July 25, 1877, Bright said:

"At that time I was at Leamington, and on that day when Mr. Cobden called upon me (September 13, 1841)—for he happened to be there at the time on a

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JOHN BRIGHT

of England, and young Bright's interest in the great work to which his whole life was destined to be devoted—the work of making the conditions of life better for the mass of the people—was early kindled. It was as a member of the Rochdale Juvenile Temperance Band that he made his first attempts at public speaking. For his first speech he prepared notes; but he got his notes muddled and broke down. The chairman gave out a temperance song, and during the singing told young Bright to put his notes aside and say what came into his mind. Bright obeyed, began with much hesitancy, but found his tongue, and made an excellent address. That was in his twenty-first year. It is interesting to know that such was the first attempt at public speaking of the man who was to become unquestionably the greatest orator of his time in the English language. "He was the greatest master of English oratory that this generation has produced, or I may say several generations back," said Lord Salisbury, the Prime Minister, speaking in the House of Lords, on Bright's death in 1889. "I have met men who heard Pitt and Fox, and in whose judgment their eloquence at its best was inferior to Bright's."

His Speeches

In the introduction to the biography before us, Mr. Trevelyan notes that the book will be found to contain many quotations from Bright's speeches. But this is as it should be. Not only were Bright's speeches his crowning and perfect achievements, considered as oratory, but they were his great and powerful means of achieving results which were of profound importance and will live in a high place in the roll of the world's truly greatest men. Not by legislative or administrative work, or by argument

sentations and bitter hostility from large sections of the public and of the membership of parliament. For years he stood almost alone.

"Against allurements, custom and a world of offenders, fearless of reproach and scorn."

"They call him a demagogue," said Thomas Henry Green, speaking at Oxford, in 1867, "but whom does that name best fit? Men whose trade is to prophesy smooth things to anyone who has aught to give, or one who has been a butt for more insult and contumely than anyone else in this generation? They say he is a revolutionist, when they themselves advocate a system which, by treating five-sixths of the people as political aliens, would lead by inexorable necessity to revolution."

Colleague of Gladstone

Not until he was in his fifty-seventh year, in 1868, did he enter a cabinet, and then he was drawn in unwillingly, and only because he could not but regard it as a plain duty to accede to Gladstone's very pressing anxiety to have him as a colleague, for the furtherance of the franchise and other reforms which Bright had so deeply at heart. But, while he was a minister in the government, he still "dwelt among his own people." All thru his life he spoke to and for the mass of the British people, as a man consecrated to a high mission which lifted him high above the level of political self-seeking. Never was there a public man in any country whose whole public career, whose whole life, was more nobly consistent. What he said in one of his early election speeches (he represented a Birmingham division in the House of Commons for thirty years) in 1843, rings with the truth and sincerity that marked every moment of his whole career:

"I am a working man as much as you."