(April 23, 1934)

Interpreting England to the United States

By Mr. Angus Fletcher.

President Arscott:—Gentlemen, before proceeding with the formalities today, I should like to say we are delighted to have with us again, our old friend, Mr. Harry Sifton. We are all very pleased that he is able to be out again and shall look forward to having him at these meetings regularly.

I think we all agree in these times that the great thing is to have co-operation—not only co-operation in business and government but in other lines of endeavor, including international relations. To make progress along the lines of co-operation we must have not only goodwill but an intelligent understanding of the views and the difficulties confronting the party with whom we wish to co-operate.

We have as our guest today Mr. Angus Fletcher who has been very active in this work. Mr. Fletcher is associated with the British Foreign Office and is Director of the British Library of Information in New York. You will observe from the card of announcement, among his other duties is that of presenting the British viewpoint to our neighbors across the line. The subject of his address today is "Interpreting England to the United States." I shall now ask him to address you.

Mr. Fletcher:—Mr. Chairman and gentlemen, I had hoped that your chairman, in introducing me, would have at least referred to the fact that in addition to being a servant of the Crown, I had the privilege of having been born in one of the Dominions. I have another grievance against him. Although I took occasion to point out to

him a few moments ago, he completely omitted to inform you that by blood and race, I am purely Scottish.

The subject upon which I have to offer a few observations today is "Interpreting England to the United States." Although I, myself, approved of that title, I must say, at least, it is not entirely accurate because the work that we do is not a work of direct interpretation. It is rather providing facts and allowing the American people to do the interpreting themselves. Now, although I usually feel quite at home across the line, for some unaccountable reason I find myself a little bit diffident in speaking for the first time in Canada. It ought not to be so. But it is so. Perhaps it is something similar to the small boy who does not mind showing off before strangers but who feels a little bit less bashful in the family.

I want first of all to say that the City of Toronto has two associations in my mind—two impressions. I think first of the extraordinary work which is being done in your children's library, and particularly of the work of reference, a copy of which I have here, a text for boys and girls, which may not perhaps be familiar to you but which I regard as one of the great pieces of literary and biographical work in our language. If I had any say, I would urge that a copy of that work, which is edited by Miss Lillian Smith, be in the hands of every schoolmaster and every school librarian throughout the British Empire. It is a book which I hear spoken of in the highest praise in the United States. I think it is a great tribute to your public library system to have introduced it. I think, secondly when I hear of Toronto, of the part Hart House plays. Those are the two impressions which I have of your city. Perhaps, you may be a little surprised that they should be so little related to your economic strength and your political importance. I had hoped that you would cherish them. The one is almost exclusively a Canadian possession, but the other is the possession of every person who speaks the English language.

Now, I am to speak to you about the work of the British Library of Information. I may refer to it as the B.L.I. Coming, as I do from the United States, you may

be ready to accept alphabetical denominations. I think, perhaps, in order to clear the ground I had better give you a brief description of the library itself. The British Library of Information in New York was established by the British Office in 1920 to supply the demand for official information on economic and political conditions in the United States and the British Empire, not including, however, the Dominions of Canada, Australia and South Africa. Each maintain their own representatives in the United States. There is, of course, the residue. The core of the material in the British Library of Information consists of the official publications of the United Kingdom and those are supplemented by the standard works of reference with which you are doubtless familiar, such as *The Statesmen's Yearbook* and the various encyclopædias and reference books. It is not, perhaps, generally recognized that in its official publication, we have quite an extraordinary history of the political and economic development of Great Britain and, to a large extent, of the Empire. The range is very wide. You have in the political sphere, of course, Hansard, the proceedings in the House. You have texts of diplomatic correspondence; you have texts of treaties; you have reports of Royal Commissions; you have the evidence given before Royal Commissions. Some of these documents, for example, the Macmillan Report, are classics and will remain classics in their field for generations. Some of the older documents are extraordinarily valuable. At the other end of the scale, you have some of the most beautiful productions in the field of art, and in between, you have extraordinarily valuable documents relating to medical, scientific and industrial research. Then, of course, there is the whole mass of statistics which are of greatest use to business men, students and others.

What are the circumstances which gave rise to the establishment of this library, It became clear after the war that there existed in the United States a considerable amount of misapprehension in regard to Great Britain and the Empire, its constitution, its people, its public opinion, its policy, and so on, misapprehensions that related primarily, to matters of fact. I am not referring at all to differences of opinion. I am referring only to misapprehensions as to matters of fact.

Now, with the existence of an American point of view about our affairs or anybody else's affairs, of course, no one can quarrel. We were concerned, however, that the American point of view might, sometimes, be based upon misapprehension of fact. We were particularly concerned when we noticed organs of public opinion, the press or the platform, show a general though undeserved harshness in regard to certain matters. We were concerned because the premises from which this point of view started, seemed to be inaccurate. It, therefore, seemed necessary, if relations were to be on a wholesome basis, that something should be done to correct that situation. The library, therefore, was established, not, however, to interfere with the complete freedom of the American public opinion. It could not do so in any case. It could not interfere with the complete freedom of American public men to think as they chose in regard to any particular situation, nor even involve their liberty to choose whether or not they should inform themselves with regard to British affairs, but rather in this spirit, that inasmuch as in the press and on the platform. British policy, British affairs and the British Empire were frequently discussed, facilities should be provided so that, at least, what we believed to be the truth should be made available.

Now, the information which we provide, as you will have already appreciated, is not information specially prepared for American consumption. It is no more — no less — than the ordinary day-to-day official information which the British taxpayer receives from his executive or legislatures. And that is supplemented by standard works of reference which have run the gauntlet of criticism throughout the English-speaking world and which, therefore, may be regarded as reasonably accurate. "Now," you may say, "here, if your information is not hand-picked to produce a given result, is there not some danger that within the pages of your documents may occur some statement which does not reflect advantageously to the British Government or some particular British statesman?" One can

recall debates in the House of Commons which would make admirable ammunition, if somebody wished to shoot at our country. Should we not, therefore, provide only hand-picked information as one is obliged to do, for example, in every advertisement? I hope I am not unduly critical of the advertising profession, but I suppose it is no exaggeration to say that an advertiser chooses the points which are advantageous and does not stress those that are not advantageous. The answer to the question is that we take that risk cheerfully because it is inevitable. It is inevitable and we take it, not because we are so absolutely certain of the eternal righteousness of British statesmen and British Governments. The fact is, whether we like it or not, Britain and America speak the same language, or, as one of my American friends put it, approximately the same language. They are also what we call democracies. Though precisely what that word means, I am not very clear. They both enjoy, or perhaps I should say, they both suffer from, the freedom of the press. Everything that we write in Britain — everything that we say in Britain, can be read or overheard by any American who chooses to take the trouble. American correspondents of news agencies, especially within the British Empire, are as alert as they are ubiquitous. To gild the unpleasant pill, to sit on the baby to keep it from howling, would be stupidity so far as Anglo-American relations are concerned.

In short, so far as the United States is concerned, the British people wear their shortcomings on their sleeve and, possibly, the same is true of the American people, though that is another matter. I wish our virtues were equally conspicuous to each other. At any rate, you see here why it is that one of the principles upon which we work is that the information is just the same information that we have ourselves and not specially hand-picked to produce a given and always specific result upon the American people. We have to take the rough with the smooth and, incidentally, it is just as well for ourselves.

There is another feature of the library which arises at this point. It is not an advertising proposition. We cannot claim or attempt to produce a given result within a

specific time or within a short period. The fact is that the extent of our work, the field it covers and the rate of progress must be governed by the American public themselves. If the American public should decide that the Library of Information was of no use to them and if, accordingly, they made no use of it, the Library would die, and, I am sure, that no British taxpayer would ever spend a penny on official respiration. So you see the Library has a service to offer and the character of that service, the speed with which it works, is determined by the people to whom it is offered. Now, at this point, I wish to refer to the underlying assumption in regard to the foundation of the Library. We assume that the people of the United States would prefer to see established neighborly relations with the British people rather than any other state of affairs. It is no assumption but an essential fact of British policy that we desire nothing better than the relations of a friendly neighbor with the United States. In our times of distress we would appreciate their sympathy, and in our moments of wrong-headedness (yes, we do have our imperfections) in our moments of wrong-headedness, a little restrained and friendly counsel would not come amiss. Friendly relations of neighbors is what we desire. I think perhaps that we of the new Empire—the Empire which has come into existence in recent years, we of the new Empire and the Old Country — in recent years do take a broader view than we did perhaps at the time of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. It ought to be easier for us, therefore, to approach this question in a broad and generous spirit.

Now, you will ask what in practice does the Library's work consist of? Well, first of all, it is a general centre of information in the United States. It answers a great many questions on a great variety of subjects. Many of these are petty and do not call for anything but the briefest treatment. Many of them can be answered quite adequately if the enquirers take the trouble to use their own libraries, in fact, even books on their own shelves. But there are a great many other cases in which we are able to render a good service to persons whose work and interests

take them into the realm of British affairs. We make a point of sending no one away, though we are not a living encyclopædia, as perhaps, we ought to be, we always endeavor to avoid leaving the impression that we know nothing of any British question that is asked of us. I am reminded here of a story about the people in the Western Isles of Scotland. They are noted, as you may know, not only for their great stature but for their pride. They are rather sensitive, which is not unnatural for those who live in an island, on the score of insularity and, above all, they never liked the people from the mainland to get the better of them. The story is told of two visitors from the mainland going to the Isle of Mull which, like Skye and other islands, has recently been the field of activity of Mr. Seaton Gordon in connection with sea birds, and so on. Well, these visitors spoke to an old man in the Isle of Mull and said, "Well, you will have many octogenarians here?" Now, the old man was not going to let down the Isle of Mull. He was very deliberate. "Octogenarians?" he said. "Well, there were two but McIlroy shot one and the other flew away." That, in general, is the principle, perhaps, upon which we are obliged to proceed.

Then, of course, to the serious students who read treaties, or people engaged in writing books on international questions, for those who are studying for the purpose of public discussion, we provide texts of documents, diplomatic correspondence, treaties, speeches in the House and so on. We allow students to come to the Library and provide them with facilities for quiet study. We discuss British and Imperial questions. When I say Imperial, I hope you don't misunderstand. We do not broach upon the sphere of the great Dominions, but, as you appreciate, there is another aspect of Imptrial relations. Finally, we also assist persons who are going to England who wish, for example, to have access to British records in the Foreign Department.

We do not set out to correct mistakes in the press systematically, chiefly because it is not worth while. We do, however, occasionally correct misstatements which occur in any of the very important papers where we know they

are likely to be used for reference. For example, *The New York Times* I think it was, referred to the Privy Council as the supreme court of appeal for the United Kingdom, whereas you know it is the House of Lords. That was a matter of no great importance to Anglo-American relations but when one of these references appears in a paper like *The New York Times,* we feel it ought to be corrected. We also took the trouble to correct another journal which made a completely misleading statement regarding Sir John Simon. It stated that Sir John was a shareholder in Vickers Limited, the great armament people. Neither Sir John nor any of his family have been connected with that armament concern.

In order to do our work the better we make a point of trying to follow and grasp and, if possible, to understand the American viewpoint in regard to British questions.

Now you will have seen that one of the features of the Library is that it is not merely a collection of books and documents.

There are a hundred libraries in the United States which have far better and more complete British documents and reference books than we have. But the essential character of the British Library is that it is a living organization. It is that fact which enables us to help even the Library of Congress, one of the great libraries of the world, and the New York Public Library, another great library. We give our services very readily and freely to other libraries. We lend documents under the inter-library lending system and sell documents to anybody who wishes to purchase them. We sell them to the public. While on this subject I should like to say if any of you can get the documents through the Canadian Customs, we would be glad to sell them to you. We can assure you there are no strings at all, if any of you wish to communicate with us to ask any question, economic or political, in connection with art-works or the British Government, we shall be only too delighted to answer them.

Now, I want to say a word on some of the misapprehensions to which reference has been made. I am not going to discuss those mistrusts and entagonisms which have their

roots in history. I am not going to talk about the feelings that arose from the revolution, from the war of 1812, from Lord Palmerston's bad manners or some of the cartoons in *Punch*. I am not going to discuss them though they still exist. Only the other day, I picked up a book with an introduction by a leading public man in the United States and these are the charges that he made against the British people. He objected to the British because (1) of apparant, instinctive, conscious assumption of superiority; (2) because of their inability to co-operate on an equal basis; (3) of their assumption of the propriety of British interests; (4) of their obviously highly-organized wide-spread propaganda; (5) their refusal to permit trade rivalry; (6) their unethical and, at times, immoral, diplomacy.

I must confess I find it very difficult to discover the present-day basis for those views concerning our English friends. I am speaking now in a rather detached way. I am South African first and Scottish second. I am also well aware that there is no blindness quite so complete as blindness with regard to one's nationality or one's own country.

I am impressed, however, in looking into these charges to find that most of the evidence adduced goes back to an earlier generation, even an earlier century. We, on our side, may profit perhaps in going over those complaints. They ought to make us think. It will do us no harm to look again into the old volumes of *Punch* and read some of the remarks Lord Palmerston made on occasions. Many more specific misapprehensions exist. There is a curious illusion that the overseas empire is a kind of real estate venture on the part of Britain, and is possibly a hangover from 1897. I need not expatiate on the illusion. It reminds me of the minister of the Parish of Cumbraes. When you go up the Firth of Clyde in Scotland you come to the Greater and Lesser Cumbraes which form one parish. And the minister of the Cumbraes was accustomed every Sunday to pray to Almighty God that he would give his blessing to the inhabitants of the Greater and Lesser Cumbraes and to the adjacent islands of Great Britain and Ireland. Possibly, if some of my American friends had

heard a minister make that prayer to Almighty God, they might have perhaps realized how far from the truth it is to think of the overseas Empire as a real estate venture of Britain's.

With regard to the great current question of war debts, there are American books and pamphlets in which you can see the whole case dealt with in a detached completeness which could not be better. At the same time, I think there is quite a general misapprehension in the United States in regard to Britain's position. I doubt whether the people of the United States, by and large, realize that already Britain has paid a sum equal to one half of the total amount of the original debt and the greater proportion by far has been in the terms, not of capital but of interest. If we were to wipe out the interest it could be said that they had paid off already something like half of the total debt.

As to the circumstances under which it is raised, I think, too, that the situation is not adequately elaborated in the United States. Those debts rose out of the Great War and out of nothing else. It was not because of investment, as when you buy a limited bond; it was because of a loan for a specific purpose to be spent in a specific way. However, in regard to the details, the Americans themselves have already adequately documented that matter.

Now, our administration in India and our experimental policy in regard to Bombay has been another fruitful field of misapprehension. There is something which the British people regard as one of their great achievements. I am not suggesting perfection. We need not waste time on that point of view. But, by and large, realizing that we are human beings, the administration of India is, we consider, I think rightly so, one of our great achievements. It has been held up over and over again in the States as another example of British tyranny and exploitation. I am glad to say that in recent years, a closer view of the Indian problem and of the Bombay problem has enabled the people of the United States to get a closer conception of what Britain has been doing. There has, of course, been considerable irresponsibility on the part of the press in regard to a similarity of matters, names of places and so on. Sometimes

when I complain to the American newspaper. In one paper they had Sir Edwin Lutyens as Syd. Ed. Lutyens, as though he were a prize fighter — they say, "Well, the American public is not interested in foreign affairs. They are not interested in titles. That reminds me of a story I heard in New York the other day. I hope it has not been told here in Canada. A certain man wanted to buy a horse for his daughter. He looked at an animal and asked the owner to turn it out in a field to see how it would go. It went careering round the field and finally ran into a bush in the middle of the field. The would-be purchaser said, "I cannot buy that horse, it is blind." "Blind," said the horse dealer, "he ain't blind, he just don't give a damn."

Might I say that friendly relations with the United States form the corner stone of our policy. It demands from both parties, mutual restraint and mutual respect. It is not a one-sided matter, though I am speaking only of one side. I hope we can take as a text the words of a great American President—"Comprehension must be the soil in which shall grow all fruits of friendship."

MR. ARSCOTT:—I am very sorry, Mr. Fletcher, that you have any feeling of grievance in connection with the introductory remarks, inasmuch as I did not mention you were a Scot. When you were telling me I felt that it would come out somewhere or other in your address. However, you have given us a very comprehensive review of the work of the British Library of information in the United States. Some of your remarks were very appropriate, this being St. George's Day. We are very glad to have had a most interesting address. We hope you enjoy your visit to Canada and that we shall have you with us again.