(January 31st, 1916.)

Impressions in Germany and France in the First Year of the War.

By Professor W. A. Neilson.*

AT a regular luncheon of the Club held on the 31st January, Professor Neilson said:

Mr. Chairman, Gentlemen of the Canadian Club,—I have a brother who still lives in Canada, and when he heard that I was coming here to-day to speak to you about Europe he sent me a note in haste saying that Toronto was very anti-German, and that I should have to take care lest they supposed that I was pro-German, and that I might be mobbed. (Laughter.) Gentlemen, I have no nervousness about that. If there is anything that distinguishes the allied countries from the countries of Central Europe at the present time it is the fact that the allied countries have proved themselves more able to look facts in the face and more willing to learn the truth about the situation all round than the people of the Central Empires. (Applause.) And whether I have anything to say or no that is not as you would like to hear it, I know that your desire to have faithful impressions is greater than any possible prejudice. (Applause.)

I did not go to Europe to see the war. I was invited by the French Government to go as exchange professor to the University of Paris. But family reasons took me first to Germany in July of 1914, and I found myself there at the outbreak of the war in the beginning of August, and remained there in considerable hesitation as to my next move through the greater part of the fall of 1914. Finally I got to Paris in the beginning of December and stayed there until Easter, as I had planned to do. In April I came back to Germany and remained there until I sailed from Holland in the middle of August of this past year.

I, therefore, was in Germany during the war for eight months, in France for four months; I was one month in Switzerland and some short time in Holland. I saw nothing

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of the war at the front. The only trenches I ever saw were unoccupied trenches in the outskirts of Strassburg. My experiences, if they deserve such a name, had to do entirely with the population behind the lines, and I thought it might be worth your while to hear what a civilian might have received in the way of impressions from the behavior of the French and Germans who are not fighting.

There is no question that at the beginning of this trouble nobody in Germany, in the Government or among the people, expected or wished *at that time* to fight Great Britain. The tone of the German papers up till the third of August was entirely friendly to Great Britain, and the man on whom they lavished their praise most freely was Sir Edward Grey. In two days you could not tell Sir Edward Grey from the devil. (Laughter.) The abruptness of the change was sufficient to show the shock of surprise. I do not know whether or not the Germans meant to fight Britain in 1915, 1916 or 1917 but they did not mean to fight her in 1914.

The people among whom I was were the people of South Germany. I lived in a small town of about 20,000 people on the German side of the Rhine, within sight of the towers of Strassburg Cathedral, within sight of the Vosges Mountains. And for weeks and weeks one sat there and heard the thunder of guns from the fighting in the Vosges, so that we could tell from the firing when there was to be a big train of wounded or whether reinforcements were to be hurried to this or that part of the front.

The common people in that part of Germany were undoubtedly taken by surprise, and they received the news of the beginning of the war with no exhilaration, with no rejoicings, with no sense of easy triumph. They had faith in their army, but they did not believe that they were faced with an easy task. The general temper was grave, sober, even depressed, and the domestic demands of the mobilization were the things that seemed to impress the ordinary man and woman most. I heard that in Berlin and to some extent in Leipzic and Munich, there were roystering crowds who sang patriotic songs in cafés, but it was not until weeks had elapsed that I heard any organized singing of that kind at all, and then only when patriotic concerts were got up to raise funds for humanitarian purposes. What one saw, rather, was lines of women standing at the gates of the barracks weeping, waiting to take a farewell of their husbands and fathers and sons. And then crowds of people standing around bulletin boards or lining the embankment of the railroad, waving good-bye to the trains that went through.

The spectacle of the mobilization was as wonderful as anybody has said. On the 4th of August I found no one who had any idea, for example, that the uniforms in which the active army were clad were not war uniforms. Nobody had seen or apparently heard of "field-grey." And within eight days two million men were at the front in new field-grey uniforms. Where they sprang from nobody knew, but they were ready. The same with all equipment, new boots, new cartridge belts, new everything. The men went out spick and span. I lived in a house overlooking a railway which ran parallel with the Rhine north and south, and just outside the house was the junction where the Black Forest Railway brought the men in from Bavaria and Wurtemburg and joined the main north and south line. Thus troops going into Alsace by Leopoldshöhe, going over to Strassburg, or going farther to Metz by Rastadt, all passed by the house. And for weeks one could tell where the point of greatest tension was from the direction in which the troops were moving. They moved with incredible rapidity and smoothness. I counted once the number of trains, each carrying a thousand men with horses, field artillery and field kitchens which passed in twenty-four hours, and there were sixty. One army corps, practically, on that one pair of rails. And that—not always for twenty-four hours at a stretch, but at the same speed—was repeated again and again all through the months that I watched it.

At first, with regard to the causes of the war, the people were dazed. But once the machinery for moulding German opinion was set agoing by the Government—and its management of native opinion in Germany has been marked by as great intelligence as its treatment of neutral opinion has been marked by great stupidity—nothing could excel its cleverness in knowing how to handle the psychology of its own people, except its inability to grasp the point of view of outside nations.

I am often asked: How can a German believe in his own cause? And I have read, as you have read, about the peculiar phenomenon of a nation gone mad, abandoning its old ideals, abandoning humanitarianism, becoming a set of atrocious brutes. None of these things applies to the people that one sees as one goes about among those who are still at home attending to their business in Germany.

I think it is worth while to consider the means by which this nation has been brought to support the sometimes incredible policies of this Government without losing touch with ordinary human nature.

The first, and the greatest agency, of course, is the press. The press of Germany contrasts broadly with the press of the allied nations in the method of Government control. If you buy a Paris newspaper, any newspaper any day, you will almost certainly find stretches of white in the middle of the columns, where despatches or articles have been stricken out by the official censor. Thus anyone with any intelligence knows, after reading a French paper, that he is not getting everything that the newspapers counted news, and therefore probably he is not getting all the facts, and certainly not all the rumors! (Laughter.)

In Germany in eight months, having read hundreds of newspapers, I never once saw a blank space in the columns. No censor superintends what goes into a German paper or cancels any of it. The system is worked positively, not negatively. The journalist is told what he may say, not what he may not say. Any new event occurs, like the sinking of the "Lusitania," and at once, before any newspaper comments on it, all the newspapers are told the line which the Government is going to adopt about that. Newspapers of all shades of opinion, from the extreme conservative and Agrarian papers of East Prussia, to Liberal papers like the Frankfürter Zeitung, announced the sinking of the "Lusitania" as the sinking of an English auxiliary cruiser, with fifteen large-calibre guns on the deck. And they at once spread that in capital letters abroad over the nation and harped on it morning, noon and night for weeks, so that, no matter what later facts may come to light, that impression is there and is going to stay. The ordinary German cannot now be convinced that the "Lusitania" was not an armed cruiser. They will tell you, "Why, in the English navy list you will find her listed with the number of guns she was going to carry." You ask, "But did she carry them? Had she been taken by the Government?" They say, "Of course." "How do you know?" "It was in the papers." (Laughter.) "The Government said it." Now, are they so very credulous? Is it so very extraordinary that a people should believe what its Government says? Nothing is more remarkable than the difficulty that the most fervid pro-Ally has in Germany in proving his case, because in the long run he has to fall back upon belief, not knowledge. He has no documents. He has never seen the despatches between Governments. He has not been in Belgium. He only has read and believed what has been said by the people whom he trusts. I do that; you do that, and the Germans do the same. They believe the people they trust, and they trust their own people before they

trust ours, as we trust ours before we trust theirs. Every crisis in war, the invasion of Belgium and everything of that sort, has been treated in this way by the German Government. They have got up their case; they have presented that to all the newspapers. The newspapers have kept repeating it, and then it appears in the weeklies and then in the monthlies, until everybody is soaked in that particular line of argument, and there is hardly any escaping from it. In eight months I met one German who had kept his intellect free; who had been able to discount what his own Government said, and who took what is in general our view of Belgium, of the negotiations before the war, and of the sinking of the "Lusitania" and the submarine campaign in general. But he was a man with revolution in his blood; whereas the more ordinary German is docile to authorised power to a degree that no man of our breed can realize. That docility, with the cleverness of the Government in handling it, then, is entirely sufficient to account for the Germans backing their Government without either having lost their mind or lost their conscience. How far what we regard as the truth will ever penetrate, it is very difficult to say.

I was told when I went to the Embassy in Berlin, that you could buy English and French papers in the book shops. I confess that I tried hard, that I searched Berlin and I found one foreign paper, and it was in Spanish; but I was told I did not go to the right shop. (Laughter.) I believe that those papers were there for sale, because I believed the Americans who told me they had bought them. But they were at least ten days late; and what do you care for a newspaper ten days old to-day, especially if you have got to translate it out of a foreign language that you do not command very well? The Germans can perfectly well admit all pro-Ally stuff in foreign languages that applies for admission without running any risk of converting any large number of their population. The barrier of language is enough to begin with to make it pretty safe, the age of the articles helps it; and then meantime the main part of those despatches have already been published in the German newspapers with corrective foot notes or still more deadly exclamation marks pointing out how ridiculous they are. Thus the teeth of these foreign despatches are drawn, so to speak, before the text of them ever reaches the German public. So they are not going to be convinced by any foreign views about the general policy of the war or the causes of it until it is all over. We have got to reckon with people that are patriotically convinced and are willing to go to the utmost in what everyone of the ordinary people regards as a war of self-defence.

The mood of gravity and depression that I described at the beginning, as I saw it in this town, continued for the most part unbroken; but there were slight exceptions. About the 18th of August we got despatches that the French offensive in Lorraine had been thrown back with great loss and that the Germans had taken 10,000 prisoners. Then began the working of a piece of mechanism that I saw again and again all through these months. The Post Office put out its flag, then everybody put out his flag. The German Government decides when a victory is good enough to celebrate, and it happened now and again that there not having been a victory worth celebrating for sometime, they have a celebration anyhow on a despatch that is not confirmed. (Laughter.) The flags are thrown out and the bells begin to ring. And if you want a none too pleasant sensation, it is to live under a big bell tower that thunders the victory of your enemies in your ear half an hour at a time. I don't know a greater strain on human nerves than that. The first day this began, the flags went out and the bells began to ring, and had been going perhaps for fifteen minutes when a train pulled into the station. Then from the station over the bridge toward the school houses that had been turned into hospitals started a long line of furniture waggons and improvised ambulances bearing the wounded; then came men walking, with bandaged heads and arms, leaning on the shoulders of their comrades; and this procession filed through the town, and the bells stopped and the people went back into their houses and the beginning of the exhilaration died away. That was the first dramatic clash between the two sides of war that I saw. Afterwards this matter of the wounded came to be a daily affair. When one went walking in the Black Forest, every village had its hospital, and around every station the loafers were men with one arm and one leg, one eye, until one had the impression of a population of mutilated men. One went into the street car and two-thirds of the women were in mourning. If you went on a railway journey you never could be sure what you could say to anybody you sat with in the car. I went down in the end of September to Switzerland, and in the carriage there were three or four girls whom I met, speaking English, Canadian girls from along the lake here, who had been interned in Baden-Baden and had just been liberated and were going home through Switzerland. Beside them was a young woman going to Zurich, who did not speak to anybody. Every little while she pulled out a

letter and read it and dried her eyes and put it away. This was repeated again and again. Then the others left the car and I was left alone with her, and finally she looked at me. I had said nothing to her except the commonplaces one exchanges in travelling. She broke down. She said, "We were just eleven months married and he fell at Mülhausen," and then was silent again. And that kind of thing haunted you, until the feeling of what the country was suffering could not be shaken off. We know enough of that from our own experience now. We are going to know more of it. But as you know here, so it is in Germany, it produces no effect in making people weak.

It was about the 29th of September that I first went out of Germany after war began. At that time I had not heard of the Battle of the Marne. As a rule the French official despatches appear in the German papers, but they did not appear there for some time after the beginning of September, 1914. I had maps and had been following the German bulletins and I had concluded from the maps and the names of the places that occurred in the German despatches, that the progress towards Paris had ceased; in fact, some of the names seemed to indicate that the invaders were back of where they had been, and I inferred that a check had occurred. But it was not until I reached Geneva that I heard about the Battle of the Marne.

Switzerland was very wonderful. During the first months of the war it went through a crisis that outsiders had no conception of. The Swiss told me that if the French had come in at Pontarlier the French-Swiss of Geneva and Lausanne would not have fought them. If the Germans had come in on the Northeastern front, the German-Swiss of Zurich would not have fought them. They saw nothing for it, if the frontiers were crossed, but the disruption of the Federation, and they lived for some months in terrible anxiety lest their nation should go to pieces. The intelligent men got to work, and I presume Switzerland is better bound together to-day than it was before the war. Yet if that particular test were applied, no one knows even now what would happen, for the French of Paris are not as French as the French of Lausanne and Geneva.

Then they turned to humanitarian work. The country is full of little children from Belgium and North France. Many of its industries are almost at a stand-still and, of course, the hotels are empty. And yet they are devoting their time and their means to the people who are suffering. In the Musie Rath in Geneva two thousand people go every day

for nothing and re-address letters for the prisoners on either side, to the extent of hundreds of thousands of letters every week. The whole country is a great hospital and humanitarian work-shop. The spirit of the people is superb. (Applause.)

I got into France in the beginning of December, coming up from Geneva by Bellegarde. The first sign of the war I saw, since it was dark through the first part of the journey, was a great Turco with red trousers whom I ran into on the staircase of the station at Lyons. The vast station was deserted; no porters, no officials. You found your way to your train and found out where it was going by asking the engine driver. Nobody else seemed to know. The café was crowded with what seemed to be people of all nations of the earth. I reached Paris on a grey Sunday morning in December and found it pretty doleful. But it depended upon where you went in Paris. There were parts, working class districts, that were almost unaffected apparently. In parts like the great Boulevards, again, the usual crowd sat in front of the cafés, and the usual promenade went up and down, except that it was more variegated than usual. Parisians, English, Scotch Highlanders, Senegalese, Senegambians, Belgians—men in every sort of uniform of the Allies walk up and down there, sometimes battered and lame, sometimes fresh, ready for the front. It was a great contrast to Germany, where every soldier wore field grey and one saw nothing but Germans. The town at night, of course, was and still is dark. Only main crossings have electric lamps, and they have great shades above which throw the light down on the pavement. On the night of the first Zeppelin attack, about a little more than a year ago, even these went out at once and the place was actually pitch dark. You could not find your way about. The alarm that occurred last Saturday night was, I suppose, exactly like what I saw last Spring. Firemen went through the streets blowing some kind of a trumpet, making a sound very much like a fish horn. I did not know what the signal was to be, and I was awakened at about one o'clock in the morning by this strange noise, and got up. I was not in the right quarter of the town and saw nothing, only heard the reports of the dropping bombs and the anti-aircraft guns and saw search-lights crossing the sky. Many things puzzle the civilian in connection with this war, and one is the use of search-lights by cities that are vulnerable. Every night I was in Germany I could place the Town of Strassburg by the pencil of lights from the forts surrounding it. As I went up on the roof to look for Zeppelins in Paris, it seemed

to me that the search-lights of the forts around supplied direct instructions to the Zeppelins as to where Paris lay. In any case, of course, the Seine running through the centre of Paris identifies it from any height when it is visible at all. So that Paris is very hard to hide.

There was no effect in the way of terrifying the people. In Paris I found the people as calm and as grave and as assured of victory as the Germans. They had a particular basis for their assurance in France. It was in a way re-action from the despair of the last week of August, 1914. Gathering what I could of the state of mind of the Parisians at that date—coming there, of course, three months later—I got the impression that they thought the game was up, that it was 1870 over again and that Paris was lost. And then came the Marne, and every Frenchman goes through the simple argument: If we could stop them then in the condition we were in at that time, we can stop them any time anywhere. (Applause.) That is the whole logic of the French confidence, along with their knowledge of the spirit of their soldiers, of the improvement of their equipment, and of the growing strength of their Allies across the channel. Nothnig is more touching than the attitude of the ordinary French people—not the soldiers, I don't know about them—but the ordinary people at home towards the English and Canadians. I spent an evening with an old pupil of mine who was in the American Ambulance Corps wearing a uniform not to be distinguished by the ordinary person from the uniforms your boys are wearing, so that the French always took him for English or Canadian. This man said that he could not stop at the corner of the street without a woman running out of the store and asking if she could show him the way. If he went into the café he was hardly allowed to pay for his drinks. Soldiers and civilians would come up, and the civilians would tell them about their men at the front and the soldiers would show them pictures of their family at home. The attitude of gratefulness was inexpressibly touching, and whatever you hear about petty jealousies between officers or between commands, I am convinced, after four months in Paris, that the feeling of the French towards the English is as cordial, as affectionate, as one can conceive between two nations of different stock.

My time is up; I want to speak on two special things. (Cries of: "Go on. Go on.")

One is with regard to the use of aircraft. I have, metaphorically speaking, dodged the bombs of both sides. (Laughter.) I got out of Freiburg just about in time to escape the

first French bombs that fell near the station there when they began attacking it a year ago in December. I gathered my children off the street time and time again to escape possible bombs as French aviators flew over the town where I was, between Freiburg and Karlsruhe, both of which were bombarded. I was in Paris, as I said, when the Zeppelins first came there. I am fairly impartial in my dislike of bombs. (Laughter.) It was my conviction that the use of aircraft for attacking towns is a profound mistake on both sides. (Hear, hear.) I have no doubt as to who began it. I question whether it is worth our while to throw away our moral advantage by doing it too. First of all, because we practically never hit what we aim at. I was in a town where the Allies tried several times to destroy a railway junction. I never saw a roadbed torn up. Once I saw a shed near the station with a hole in its roof. That was the closest they had come. They killed, of course, a lot of people. In the town where I had been, on the day I got home here, they hit twelve. It is absurd to talk about "open towns" as the German official despatches do. No town near the line is a non-military town on either side. All frontier towns are full of soldiers. Every place where there is a lathe that can turn they are making bits of shells. I knew of a printer whose place was taken over for making ammunition. The railway repair sheds where I lived were used for that. Thus there is the excuse of a military aim everywhere, in attacking any town near the line. But they constantly miss. They have to sail too high. Their geography is not good enough. I was telling your chairman of a very successful attack that the French supposed they made on the great powder factory at Rothweil, and I read fine descriptions of black clouds going up from the explosion. As a matter of fact, they had dropped their bombs twenty miles away, where there was not any powder factory. The Germans make the same mistakes in France and in England. And what does it amount to? They waste a lot of material; they lose a lot of their own airmen, and no great military achievement by that means has yet been accomplished. But the cost is being paid all the time. They defend it, of course, also on the ground of reprisals.

Reprisals is the other thing I wanted to say a word about. The doctrine of reprisals is a very natural doctrine. The other people are behaving abominably; you cannot see how to stop them except by threatening to do it too. I do not know of any atrocity that has been stopped in this war by the other side doing it too. What happens is, that the first side does it again and does it worse. And so on it goes, and the breach

of the laws of humanity goes on increasing on both sides, and the side that did not begin first throws away its moral advantage.

Let me close by a single anecdote that I gathered from the hospital in the street where I lived. There was lying there from September of 1914 until last Spring a young South German who had been wounded in the battle of the Aisne. His wound had apparently healed, but he did not get well. Month after month he lay there broken and depressed and the surgeons could make nothing of it. Ultimately the nursing sister got him to tell her what the trouble was, because it was purely internal. He told her that he was lying on the battlefield near a wounded French soldier who signaled him that he wanted to drink, and he crawled over to him and gave him a drink out of his field bottle and then crawled back beside his own gun. Then as he got back to his position he saw the French soldier put his hand into his hip pocket. He said, "I had been told how the wounded French shot the men who rescued them, and I was not going to have this fellow kill me, and so I shot him first. Then I thought I might as well have his revolver, and I crawled over and put my hand in his pocket and pulled out a photograph of his wife and children he was going to show me." And that thing obsessed this man and the picture of it, and the thought of the family stayed with him night and day and was literally killing him.

Gentlemen, we have nothing to lose by keeping what is at the bottom of our minds, the unalterable conviction that the mass of our enemy remain human beings. (Applause.) We will fight just as well. It will do us good to realise that there is going to be no collapse from their finding out things that never can be brought home to a people in the state of mind of the German of to-day. If they are ever going to come to our point of view it will be after the war. They will go to the end believing in their cause. We have to reckon on that. They are full of resource, they are full of courage, they are full of heroism—we lament that it is not in a better cause, but it is there and we have got to go them one better on their own line. Only by doing that can we save ourselves and save the world from the unspeakable calamity of a German victory. (Great Applause.)