

(December 2, 1929)

England and the English

BY THE REV. DR. TREVOR H. DAVIES

The Chairman, Vice-President Smith having briefly introduced the speaker, Rev. Dr. Trevor Davies, the latter continued as follows:—Mr. Chairman, you have asked me to speak to you upon England and the English. I may say as, the chairman has reminded you that I qualify in one particular to take an impartial, unprejudiced view of my subject because, so far as I know, there is not a single drop of English blood in my veins. But I have lived in England for the major part of my life and I want to share with you some of the impressions that have come to me from that very delightful experience. Now, there is one thing about England and the English, you can discuss these subjects in the presence of an Englishman to your heart's content and he will not be disturbed at all by what you say. If you do not praise—well, he will just pity you. I think it was Ian Hay who said in one of his delightful books, that our friends on the other side, the American nation—are quite sure that America is the greatest nation in the world—and they tell you so—the Englishmen, on the contrary, are quite sure that theirs is the greatest nation in the world, but do not tell you so because they are certain you must be aware of it. Dean Inge, that very great Englishman, wrote a book on England some time ago. In that book, after taking his nation to task, he uses these words: "This much can I vow that never, even when the storm clouds appeared blackest, have I been tempted for a moment

to wish I was other than an Englishman." Whereupon a Scotsman said naturally, "the man has nae ambection." But it is well that the Englishman is satisfied, because I find he has never been happy in his imitation. He may have many imperfections, but his genuine self is very much higher than what he becomes when he attempts to change his character in accordance with the vogue and customs of other great peoples. But he is never likely to do that. You know what Gilbert said:—

"For in spite of all temptations
To belong to other nations
He remains an Englishman."

Now what do we think of when we think of England? When our minds cross the ocean as they do sometimes to the Old Land, what is it that first comes to memory? I feel quite certain that the very first thing that comes is the thought of the country side. I was travelling in a crowded street car sometime ago. The man next to me was reading a newspaper and when I saw that he was following the football contests, the league contests in England, I knew I was on safe ground. I asked him about my own favorite team over there, how it had been doing, and he put aside his paper and we began to talk. We had not been speaking five minutes, I am quite sure, before he was telling me about his home in the country with the primrose and the violets and the smell of the woods on an autumn evening. England has become a land of great cities—cities that have sprung up like mushrooms, some of them hideous beyond description. But, if you want to touch the deepest chord in the heart of an Englishman, you must talk to him about the countryside. You look at the war poetry of England the work of some of these brilliant young poets that England produced. Owen wrote of "the green fields and the school he knew", Julian Grenfell of "the song of the black-bird" and Rupert Brooke of "the peace and holy quiet of

Grantchester Mill." It is my impression that when you go to England sometimes and you notice the unrest of modern life, it is due to this fact—people born in the country are trying to adjust themselves with enormous difficulty to the changed conditions of city life.

Then, too, we have the dialects of England. Purists are at times offended by their oddities, but they express individuality and virility. We could not well afford to lose some of the English words and phrases. We do not know how they came; we cannot trace them back to a known origin, but they stand full of life and strength. English expresses individuality despite the fact that it has been drawn from so many different sources.

And then, of course, we never think of England but we think of the climate. Every Englishman grumbles about the weather and he is very fortunate inasmuch as he has a great deal of weather to grumble about. He is a born grumbler but he does not worry. And the weather which he grumbles about has created the exquisite lawns, the greenness of the trees and the marvellous color effects of hills and downs. A battleship was once coming up the River Thames. The sailors had been on Mediterranean seas for six months under beautiful skies and brilliant sunshine and came right into the Thames in a fog and a drizzle. One sailor said to another, "Ain't it grand to get away from that blinking sunshine?"

Now, greatly daring, I am going to name some of the qualities of the English character. It is not very easy to do this because that character is singularly complex. We no sooner make one discovery than we find something else that is the counter-part or contradiction. So many materials have been blended in the English temper. Its history is very old and it has made many experiments.

The first thing I would name is good-nature. No nation is less cruel. The instinct to run and help has been wonder-

fully developed. The Englishman is not vindictive. He does not brood over ancient enmities. He will fight hard and keep fighting, but when he has finished he is prepared to assist his opponent. A great many people here were angry when the other day a German submarine captain, in a southern city of England, was honored and feted. It is just like the Englishman. There is a magnanimity that is born of strength. The Englishman so far as sentiment is concerned is chockful of sentiment and his heroes—who are they? Nelson in the world of action who died saying, "Kiss me, Hardy." Johnson in the world of letters—chockful of sentiment as you know.

Then again he is sincere. I have no hesitation in saying that English diplomacy in contrast with the diplomacy of other great nations has been singularly straightforward. The word of the Englishman still stands good in the world, as it ever did. It always is significant to me that the deepest convictions he expresses are in the terms of a game. He has invented nearly all the games of the world. When he believes in a thing he says it is playing the game or it is fair play; when he would eulogize his friend he declares he is 'a good sport.' Cricket which is the national game is the cleanest game in the world—partly no doubt due to the fact that it is the slowest game—but in the main we may attribute to the Englishman in his public and private life the stolid virtue of honesty.

Then I find the Englishman is a very reserved man. Of course we know the venerable story of two Englishmen upon a desert island who were there for years and never spoke to each other because they had never been introduced. He resents a curious man. He has no use for an inquisitor. He builds walls around his gardens. Few things surprised me more than the open gardens when I came to live here. Mark Twain said that the English are mentioned in the Bible—"The meek shall inherit the earth." The extraordinary thing about this sense of superiority is that it is a sort of subconscious element. He cannot help it. When I think of how the Englishman has been chastened and disciplined in recent times, I am grateful that he is able to regard with certain wholesome indifference the criticism of others.

It is sometimes said that the Englishman is less open to intellectual appeal than the Latin races. The late Bishop Creighton declared that his countrymen "hate an idea when they see one." It is true that he is not fond of theories. Watchwords are not readily acclaimed by him and rhetoric leaves him cold. And yet no nation has produced more geniuses. In Science there are Bacon, Newton, Darwin, Lister, Kelvin. In Art, Reynolds, Romney, Turner, Constable. In Literature he owns the songs of the early sagas, the pilgrimage of Chaucer, the allegories of Spenser and Bunyan; the eagle vision of Milton, the cloud-capped majesty of Shakespeare, the sublime eloquence of Burke, the mystic wonder of Wordsworth and Coleridge, the prophetic utterances of Ruskin and Morris, the sweet music of Tennyson and the heroic affirmations of Browning. Never surely since the great days of Greece has a nation possessed a greater literature than that in which the sorrows and joys, the hopes and aspirations of the English people have poured themselves. The humor is of its own kind. It wells up from the imagination of the people. If you want to understand English humor I think you can find it best illustrated in Gilbert's immortal productions. Gilbertian humor is typical English humor. You can also find it in the pages of Punch. I took up Punch, the last one that came to my house, and I found this: A mistress is rebuking her maid because she had jewelry on while waiting at table. She said, "I wish you would not wear jewels when there are guests present." The maid said, "That is all right, mum. They are not really very valuable."

Mr. Chairman, since the days of the Saxons, the English temper has been that of an independent and free-spoken people. I believe that great nations have been raised up to render some special, specific contribution to the human race. It is quite a commonplace to say that the Greek was raised to proclaim art and the Roman to lay the foundations of constitutional order and government. They had the genius for that. The genius of the Jew was in the realm of ethics and religion. What is Canada's specific, definite and original contribution to civilization?

You see I came to Canada in recent times. I have been able to read our wonderful history with fresh eyes. I may

say, in just one word, Canada has shown the world how it is possible to combine and harmonize local independence together with a deeper political unity. You have the autonomy of the Province and yet, at the same time, the unity of the Dominion. We have not sacrificed our local independence and we have found ourselves in a great and magnificent federation. And if at any time, anybody in my presence questions the possibility of what the League of Nations is aiming at, and what some day will be accomplished, I say, immediately, "look at the history of Canada; not merely Provincial independence and Dominion unity, but also Dominion independence and unity of the Empire." It is demonstrated to be possible in our own wonderful history. I think that is Canada's contribution. You can see at once what a very important contribution it is.

What is the contribution of England to Western civilization? It has been given to her to show the tremendous power which lies in the associated action of free citizens. She is the mother of Parliaments. In her government we find a remarkable union of the stable and the flexible. It has moved forward from precedent to precedent. It has avoided the two perils of inflexibility and of cutting itself summarily away from its own past. That nation is doomed to destruction which has no power to embody new ideas in its constitution, but when it severs itself from its traditions and original genius it readily becomes a prey to anarchy. It is interesting to compare the members of the present Government with those of fifty years ago. Their education has not been that of Public Schools and Universities. They have come from foundries, factories, workshops and cottages to rule a nation. Their ideals are different, their speech is changed, but they keep up the great traditions. There is no danger of swift and violent revolution. The throne still stands broad-based upon the people's will. The most popular man in England today is King George V. I am not surprised at Russia's distrust of England. She has reason to. So long as a nation is able, by its government, to respond to the changing influences and aspirations of our new day, then that irreconcilable idea of government of class by class for class finds its contradiction and, it may well be, the destiny of the English people will reveal to the world

that justice may be granted to all classes of the community, as it ought to be granted, not by revolution, bitter and bloody, but along the progressive evolution of her own great and noble constitution.

Now, gentlemen, I have tried to name some of the qualities which have characterized England at home and abroad—some of the qualities which have been carried by her to other lands. In Canada, you have many races: French, Scotch, Irish, Welsh and a great many others. It has been given to everyone of these to make its own contribution after its own genius and ability. I feel quite sure that those same traits of character which have made the Englishman great at home will find expression in our country and materially help to make Canada a great, prosperous and progressive nation.