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Beatrice and Sidney Webb



by Margaret Cole

Preface by C. R. ATTLEE, MP

FABIAN SOCIETY

THREE & SIXPENCE

Fabian Biographical Series

The first pamphlet in the Fabian Society's biographical series was published in 1912. It was on *Francis Place* and by St. John Ervine. It was followed immediately by pamphlets on *Robert Owen*, *William Morris* and *John Stuart Mill*. Others followed at intervals, C. E. M. Joad, Harold Laski, Kingsley Martin and G. D. H. Cole being among the authors. The last, by G. D. H. Cole on *John Burns*, was published twelve years ago, however, and almost all of them have been out of print for some time.



This pamphlet, the fifteenth in the series, deals with two people who played a leading part in initiating the great social changes of the first half of the twentieth century. It is not only the British Labour Movement which owes them a great debt.

We hope that other pamphlets in the series will follow shortly.

THE FABIAN SOCIETY,
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NOTE.—This pamphlet, like all publications of the FABIAN SOCIETY, represents not the collective view of the Society but only the view of the individual who prepared it. The responsibility of the Society is limited to approving the publications which it issues as worthy of consideration within the Labour Movement.

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BEATRICE
AND
SIDNEY WEBB

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MARGARET COLE

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Preface

by C. R. ATTLEE MP

THIS pamphlet, describing the life and work of two of the greatest contributors to the British Socialist Movement, was overdue.

To the younger generation the Webbs are now as much historic figures as were William Morris and Karl Marx to my contemporaries. It is therefore right that this brief account of the Webbs' personalities and of the work which they did should be made available.

When one considers the changes which have come about in the country during the last half-century, both in the climate of opinion and in the development of institutions, one realises how much was due to these two selfless workers.

To take an outstanding example, the conception of the Welfare State now generally accepted ran contrary to the prevailing social philosophy of the 19th century. It was implicit in the proposals of the famous minority report on the Poor Law, which challenged the whole idea of the relationship of the citizen and the community laid down in the principals of the 1834 Poor Law. When I was young these principals were still generally accepted.

It was characteristic of the genius of the Webbs to seize upon this opportunity of what might have been a routine review of a dull subject to make a social revolution.

Another great service which the Webbs rendered to the Socialist Movement was by their exhaustive examination of local government and the Trade Union and Co-operative Movement. They gave a wider concept to democracy which had formely been considered largely from the angle of parliamentary institutions. Young Socialists of my time, though for the most part directed into the movement by an idealist revolt against existing conditions, drew their weapons in the fight against capitalism from the armoury provided by the Webbs.

The Labour man or woman, elected to the local Council, was generally well-versed in the history and practice of local government and thus outmatched his Tory opponents. The socialist trade unionist,

instructed in the history of his movement, won the day against the Lib-Labs, while the ordinary propagandist found abundant matter for the street corner and the branch meeting.

In the wider field of the development of the modern State the influence direct and indirect of the Webbs has been of immense importance: for instance Sidney Webb's contribution to the development of secondary and technical education through his work in the London County Council cannot be overestimated, while the foundation of the London School of Economics is a monument to his labour.

The pamphlet points out some flaws in its heroes. The Webbs were undoubtedly too prone to overestimate what could be done by skilful wire pulling and to undervalue the work of the propagandist. They were in fact, better at dealing with institutions than persons. They were not always good judges of the latter and some of their cygnets turned out to be geese. They were also curiously misled in their judgment of Soviet Russia. But these errors cannot detract from their massive achievement.

C. R. Attlee

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Introduction

IF this booklet were an old-fashioned fairy tale, its plot might be summarised somewhat as follows:

‘Once upon a time there were a boy and a girl who were very nearly the same age. They did not meet when they were young. They were born and brought up in quite different classes in society and learned to live in quite different ways. But as they grew older they both became deeply interested in the way in which their country was run and in the welfare of ordinary people, and this common interest at last brought them together. They met; they were married and lived happily ever after, and when they died they were buried in Westminster Abbey. And though, while they were apart, they were One and One, when they came together they made not Two but Eleven.’

The last sentence is drawn from an inspired plea made by Sidney Webb in the course of his courtship; and it is almost a literal statement of fact. For great as were the individual gifts of each partner—gifts which, although Beatrice modestly described them as ‘second-rate’, made it certain that they would both have played a part in English social history even if they had never met—their combination was as effective as a chemical rather than a mechanical process. It resulted in the terrific output of writing, organisation, and agitation which this study can do no more than briefly sketch, but which has deeply affected both the social thought and the social organisation of Britain. So far as I know, there has never in this country been a Partnership like the Partnership of Sidney and Beatrice Webb; I think it improbable that there will ever be another.

It was not merely a Partnership; it was also a lifelong romance. Since the publication of *Our Partnership*¹, with its simply-phrased references to their emotional relationship, everyone can see that the one-time description of the Webb ménage as ‘two typewriters clicking as one’ was superficial nonsense. They were, it was true, complementary to a remarkable degree. Sidney brought to the common fund an exceptional gift for quick and rapid drafting, in ‘a faultless handwriting’ (compare Beatrice’s scrawl, sometimes unreadable even by herself!), for tearing the heart out of books and documents which made her head ache to read, and for remembering almost any fact with which he had ever had nodding acquaintance, which, to put it at the lowest, made their joint literary output many times greater than Beatrice could ever have achieved alone: she, for her part, excelled in the spoken interview, in the extraction of information—and sometimes of money—from individuals, and she had, when she was in a position to use it, a vivid descriptive style to which he could lay no claim. It would seem, also, that she, rather than he, had

¹ *Our Partnership*, by Beatrice Webb, edited by Barbara Drake and Margaret Cole. Longmans Green & Co. 1948.

intuitive flashes in which she suddenly 'saw' the shape of a book or the answer to a social problem¹; whereas he adhered more steadfastly to a line once adopted, and when she showed signs of weakening, whether in the matter of attending Society dinners or of disliking the Soviet-German Pact of 1939, he gently but firmly drew her back to the proper path.

This perfect mutual 'dovetailing' made them a unique combination; it accounted for a great deal of their strength and steadiness, though it could at times prove a weakness, since when their combined judgment was wrong—and nobody can always be right—they were so thoroughly and *unassailably* wrong. But it was not nearly the whole of the 'truth about the Webbs', as everyone realised who ever had personal relations with them. They were deeply, almost youthfully in love till death did them part, and both found in their marriage an unshakeable happiness, an emotional as well as an intellectual satisfaction so profound that Sidney, at least, seemed scarcely to need the companionship of any other person in the world. This gave the basic security upon which all their fifty years' life-work was built; it is all the more astonishing to contemplate when one realises that they might very easily not have married at all. They were both over thirty when they first met; neither was the other's first love; their social provenance was so different that the engagement had to be kept a secret until Beatrice's father died, and several of her former friends were estranged from her by her marriage. It was a step in the dark, albeit a well-considered step; but no one at the time could have prophesied that it would have so triumphant a result.

¹ Their plan for the reform of the English political system and the idea that poverty should be regarded and treated as a social nuisance both came to her, as she has recorded, 'in a flash.'

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Beatrice

BEATRICE WEBB came from the executive classes. Not from the aristocracy; her great-grandfather, John Potter, had a small draper's shop at Tadcaster and a small farm nearby, and her grandfather Richard started life as a shop assistant and rose, in the palmy days of the industrial revolution, to ownership of a cotton warehouse in Manchester and thence to the position of one of the leading Radical business-men of Lancashire, amassing a reasonable fortune on the way. His son, another Richard, was brought up, it is true, to be a Victorian 'gentleman'; he was sent to a public school and to London University, was called to the Bar—without intending to practise—married the brilliant daughter of a well-off merchant in Liverpool, and would in all probability have settled down on an estate in the country with an eye to a Parliamentary career had not the financial crash of 1847-8 removed most of his inherited wealth and forced him to go back to business to make a living. He was not, certainly, reduced to any distress; he became immediately a director of the Great Western Railway and a partner in a timberworks at Gloucester—out of which he made handsome profits during the Crimean War; he played a part in a great many enterprises of various kinds, and kept up very comfortable establishments for his wife and his nine daughters. But he had ceased to be a *rentier*; he was a business man, and Beatrice in her girlhood very soon observed that he and her mother and all the friends and acquaintances who came in and out of their various houses belonged to the class who did nothing manual for themselves, but 'habitually gave orders.' Almost from the time that she could think in general terms at all, it was borne in upon her that British nineteenth-century society comprised a top stratum which gave orders and a vast foundation, called impersonally 'labour', which carried them out.

Beatrice was the eighth of nine daughters, all of whom made excellent marriages in the conventional sense; her only brother died when a very little boy. She was a delicate, rather lonely, and sometimes unhappy child; ill-health prevented her from the companionship of school life; she was seven years older than her younger sister, and her mother seems to have had little sympathy for her in her early youth. 'Beatrice,' she wrote in her diary, 'is the only one of my children who is below the general level of intelligence'—a really staggering misapprehension. Further, the child herself suffered from the introspectiveness which so often goes with ill-health, and like many another Victorian child, often wondered anxiously—sometimes in the diaries which she began to write when she was very young—whether she was being good enough, or hard-working enough, and whether she was not, perhaps, becoming 'a frivolous, silly, unbelieving woman.' (In after years, she occasionally meditated on Sidney's good fortune in possessing 'a robust conscience').

She was not, therefore, a happy child, largely because she had not a happy temperament; but this does not mean that she was in any way a

repressed or a miserable child. She intensely loved and admired her father, who was both fond and proud of all his daughters and (in contrast to many Victorian parents) gave them the same freedom of reading and action as he would have given to his sons; and at least two of the friends whom she made in her childhood proved very valuable contributors to her own development.

The first of these was her nurse, Martha Jackson, nicknamed 'Dada', and herself a distant relative of the Potter family. Beatrice in her own autobiography, *My Apprenticeship*, calls Martha Jackson 'the only saint I ever knew,' and seems to have regarded her as something between a nurse and a mother-confessor; it was Martha Jackson who, when she was twenty-five, took her to stay with the Co-operators of Bacup and for the first time made the abstraction 'labour' take on flesh and blood; it was perhaps through Martha Jackson that Beatrice first learned, what some of her contemporary students of radical politics never learned, how to talk without embarrassment with members of working-class communities.

The other friend was that curious and crabbed philosopher Herbert Spencer, who had met the elder Potters when he was a very young man, and retained a deep admiration for Mrs. Potter in particular. Spencer's peculiar philosophy, his attempt to construct upon the researches of Darwin and other nineteenth-century scientists a 'scientific' system of sociology, is remembered nowadays by hardly anyone but specialists; but he was very kind to the Potter children, especially to Beatrice. He made himself her confidant and mental guide; he was genuinely concerned about her health; he patiently read and criticised her youthful scribblings 'about Greek and German philosophers'; and above all, he encouraged her intellectual efforts and set her 'the example of continuous concentrated effort in carrying out, with an heroic disregard of material prosperity and physical comfort, a task which he believed would further human progress.' Beatrice never swallowed Spencer's philosophy; but she greatly admired his persistent and lifelong collection of facts, and followed his methods to some extent when she came to do research work of her own. And certainly Spencer's insistence that sociology ought to be considered a science and to use scientific methods influenced her all through her life.

Meantime, she grew up into a young lady living the life of many another Victorian young lady of the comfortable classes. She 'came out' in 1876; she took part in the gaieties of the London Season; she spent part of the year at various country houses owned by her father, and occasionally accompanied him on business tours abroad. After her sisters were married, and particularly after her mother's death in 1882, she undertook the management of the large Potter household and became her father's close companion and at times something approaching his confidential secretary. She entertained his friends, and as 'the brilliant Miss Potter' she was a considerable success in that world of London Society which she afterwards learned to distrust and despise. She met politicians and Great Men; for a while during the early 'eighties she was very much attracted by a man much older than herself, Joseph Chamber-

lain, who was then at the height of his career and had not yet broken with the Liberal Party, and the possibility of her becoming his third wife was discussed with her family. (This would have been an unfortunate alliance, in view of Chamberlain's later career; even at the time when she was most deeply moved by him Beatrice recognised with some uneasiness his appetite for personal power). But all the time, underneath, she was searching for a faith to live by and a life-work which should be worthwhile. It was not for some years that she found both together, and with them her life's partner.

Like other Victorian young ladies with social consciences, she devoted some time to good works, or 'slumming.' She worked as a visitor for the Charity Organisation Society and as house-manager and rent-collector for a block of working-class flats in Dockland; but she soon found that these well-meant attempts at relieving the depressing mass of London poverty yielded her no satisfaction, and very gladly accepted the request of her cousin Charles Booth to become one of his voluntary helpers in that great Inquiry into the Life and Labour of the People of London whose findings, issued in many large volumes over a number of years, shocked all the shockable members of the English upper classes, as they realised the mass of squalor, ignorance, misery and starvation which in the Golden Age of British capitalism still filled the poorer quarters of the richest city in the world. It was in the course of this Inquiry that, in order to find out the truth about sweated labour in the tailoring trade, she got a job as a 'plain trouser hand' in the East End of London, and collected evidence which she subsequently gave in public to the House of Lords committee of enquiry into sweated labour, and wrote up into her first published work. Alfred Marshall, the economist, was so much impressed with her investigations that he advised her to make herself an authority on women's labour in general; but she felt that such a study, for her, led nowhere, reached no conclusions about society, and brought her into contact only with hopeless and unhelpable groups of persons.

In 1883 she had gone—under the name of 'Miss Jones, farmer's daughter from near Monmouth'—to stay with Martha Jackson's friends among the co-operators and mill-workers of Lancashire; and there, she felt, she had found real working-class people, a real social life and living institutions which the theoretical economists of her day had never condescended to notice. Accordingly, after her work in the sweated trades was completed, she went north again—this time using her own name—to conduct by herself an enquiry into co-operation and to produce in 1890 a small book on *The Co-Operative Movement*. This book, small as it was, held the field for many years as an important study of its subject; it also brought its author into contact with a little man called Sidney Webb, recommended as one who 'literally pours out information' (on the subject of working-class conditions in the eighteenth century). The Whitsun of that year saw them both attending the Co-operative Congress at Glasgow, and among the drunken crowds of the Glasgow streets, 'two Socialists came to a working compact.'

'You understand,' said Beatrice, 'you promise me to realise that the chances are that nothing comes of it but friendship.'

Sidney and the Fabian Society

BY 1890 the other partner to this compact was already a considerable person in his own world, if not in Beatrice's; the long persistent legend that Beatrice picked him up out of the gutter, as it were, in the course of her social investigations and forcibly married him has not the slightest foundation in fact. But his early days were lived at a social level much lower than hers. His grandfather was an innkeeper in a small Kentish village, and all his relatives were 'little folk' of one sort or another, the only one of them to attain any distinction being his cousin Fred Webb, who once rode a Derby winner. His mother kept a retail shop in Cranbourn Street off Leicester Square; his father earned a small income as an accountant, and in his spare time was an inveterate worker in voluntary public service—he had, *inter alia*, been one of John Stuart Mill's committeemen in his Westminster election campaign. The two sons, Sidney and his brother Charles, left school when they were about sixteen; this was the standard of the household.

What chiefly impressed Miss Beatrice Potter, when she came to know the Webb family, was the entire absence in it of any social ambition or will-to-power. They did not seem to want to *give orders* to anyone, or to climb out of their social class, or even to make more money than they had already. The family income, she says, in *Our Partnership*, never exceeded £500 a year—a pittance in the eyes of a young woman who was to inherit double that sum for herself alone. Nor did they seem in need of society, with a large or small 's'; they did not entertain, and Sidney's recollections of his youth, as he once retailed them in the *St. Martin's Review*, are not associated with friends or sports—though Bernard Shaw says that he was a remarkably good shot with a rifle!—but almost wholly with the streets and shops of London. Towards London, indeed, he did display an emotion which most human creatures reserve for their families, their old school or their old friends; he wandered by himself all over the London of the 'sixties, with its riches and squalor; the shop-windows and their advertisements were his earliest spelling-book and *Kelly's Directory* his favourite reading. He remembered his mother lifting him up to see the Lord Mayor's Show and promising him that if he were a good boy he might himself one day be Lord Mayor of London. In his formative years he grew up a patriotic Londoner, as fervent as was Herbert Morrison a generation later; therein he had a certain advantage over his wife, who had no local habitation of her own to love.

But however modest the ambitions of the Webb household, it must soon have become clear that Sidney Webb was not destined to remain long at the economic level of a small shopkeeper and a piecework accountant. His was one of the not infrequent cases in which a family of unassuming ducks suddenly produces an unmistakable and unaccountable swan. His power of concentrated work, of memorising facts

and making rapid and efficient use of them was phenomenal; immediately after leaving school he started to attend evening classes, and by this means succeeded, first in passing the Civil Service Open Examination and becoming a Second Division Clerk, and three years later (1881) in reaching the First Division with marks high enough to have entered the Foreign Office had he wished. He chose instead the Colonial Office, and was it seemed all set to become a distinguished civil servant—as a side-issue, he passed his Bar examinations four years later. But a different career was in store for him.

The first shaper of destiny for him was the man who became his only close lifelong friend—a lean, red-bearded, perverse, poverty-stricken young journalist named Bernard Shaw. They met first in 1879, at a Hampstead debating club which had christened itself the Zetetical Society; there they practised impromptu discourse upon all manner of subjects, discussed with each other the parlous state of the world and possible remedies for it, and learned to take economical holidays together. After a while, Shaw made the acquaintance of another tiny group of Socialistic debaters who called themselves The Fabian Society and met in the room of a young man of middle-class parents named Edward Pease, who had taken up cabinet-making because as a Socialist he thought he ought to have a trade. Having had some years' experience of his friend's phenomenal knowledge of facts, Shaw, the brilliant debater, decided that Sidney Webb was exactly the man needed to give weight and stiffening to the infant Society—to bottom its ideological discussions by producing *Facts for Socialists*. Accordingly, Webb was brought into the group; by 1885 he and Shaw were both members of the Society's tiny Executive Committee; in 1887 *Facts for Socialists* which has run to 18 editions) first appeared as a Fabian Tract, to be followed a year later by another called *Facts for Londoners*, designed to provide ammunition and a policy for the Progressive Party (Liberals) in the first elections to the London County Council; by the end of 1888 Shaw and Webb were collaborating with Graham Wallas, Sydney Olivier, Annie Besant, Hubert Bland, and an eccentric named William Clarke in the series of London lectures which, reprinted as *Fabian Essays*, sold for sixty-five years after their first delivery and put the infant Society right on the Radical map. All this before Webb had even met his future wife.

There is no need—and no space—to enlarge here upon the history of the Fabian Society, now well past its seventieth birthday; it is pertinent, however, to note that for over a quarter of a century Webb was its chief guiding spirit both on method and on policy, which may perhaps be summed up in two phrases, 'the inevitability of Socialism and the inevitability of gradualism.' The second principle is clearly assumed in *Fabian Essays*, thirty-four years before Webb proclaimed it to the Labour Party Conference; the first implied that any reasoning person who looked at the hard facts of late Victorian society could not fail to reach the conclusion that Socialism—by which the Fabians meant State and municipal enterprise—was the only reasonable solution. But reasoning persons, if they were to be convinced, must be presented with the relevant facts

set out in an intelligible manner; hence the preoccupation of the Fabians with collecting basic facts, arranging them so that their Socialist implications should be understood, and handing them out to the public by means of Fabian Tracts, series of lectures in towns and provinces, or suggestions made to individual leaders or groups. (Much of the early programmes—particularly the municipal programmes—of the I.L.P. was based on Fabian-provided material).

The essential qualification for an active Fabian was that he should be prepared to work hard without pay, to learn to speak fluently and to deal with questioners on any relevant subject before any audience, large or small, influential or merely 'seeking guidance'. He was furthermore expected to be accurate in his statements, and so far as humanly possible, to verify his references and check his proposals at the bar of common-sense, and—an important point—not to make unwarranted claims for the Fabian Society, not to suggest, for example, that all Socialists ought to become *Fabian* Socialists, that the Fabian Society should dictate policy, or that it should undertake, or persist in carrying on activities which other institutions could do better¹. It is this attitude which partly, at any rate, accounts for the long life and influence of the Society; it was an attitude very congenial to Beatrice, who joined it (and appeared at an Annual Meeting as 'representative of Sowerby Bridge!'—near Bacup) a little while before her marriage in the summer of 1892²; it was in this spirit that the new Partnership set off to spend its honeymoon studying early Trade Union records in Dublin and Glasgow.

¹ See Fabian Tract 42 and Tract 70.

² 'Sidney Webb was married on 23rd ult. to Beatrice Potter': *Fabian News*, August, 1892.

Trade Unionism and Local Government

THERE is something highly characteristic—even if there is also something a little comic—in this opening to the lifelong work of the Webbs. They did not marry without thought or without a plan, and the plan which they made envisaged living the life they wanted to live and doing the work they wanted to do in their own way, whether or not it would have seemed attractive to others. They were never unconventional, in the ordinary sense of the word; they did not believe in shocking their neighbours save in so far as their political opinions were shocking; their range of enjoyment was limited, their appreciation of art, for example—though not of natural beauty—being almost non-existent, and they did not see why they should spend precious time on pleasures which they did not find pleasurable, or honeymoon among Florentine paintings when what they really wanted to look at were old rule-books and reports of branch meetings. Critics like H. G. Wells, or society acquaintances like Margot Asquith, would have appreciated them better if they had been more unconventional in their behaviour, and less comfortably confident that what they did was almost exactly what they wanted to do. Though they did not believe in overwork or in discomfort or asceticism for its own sake—their homes were always adequately staffed and comfortable if not luxurious—their most recurrent extravagance was the employment of an extra secretary!

Thanks to Beatrice's father, they enjoyed an unearned income of £1,000 a year, which in the 'nineties, with income tax at sixpence in the pound, was a considerable sum. It relieved both of them from the need to earn a living; and they proposed to devote their lives to political and research work, and to trust that such books as they might publish would in the long run pay for themselves. This hope was fulfilled; the profit-and-loss account of the great library which stands to their credit shows a favourable balance on the whole. But this result could not have been achieved if they had been dependent upon their writing for a living; it was the existence of the independent income which enabled them both to produce long works of research (such as the ten-volume *corpus* on the history of local government) and also to take the risks of issuing, for the benefit of working-class and other slender pockets, cheap editions of books like *The History of Trade Unionism* and *Soviet Communism* at highly unremunerative prices. Seldom can an 'unearned income' have paid so handsome a social dividend.

Their plan of living was arranged; their house, the famous 41 Grosvenor Road on the Thames Embankment, was taken and furnished almost immediately after their marriage. Joint research and authorship was to take up most of the mornings; the afternoon, while Beatrice relaxed, Sidney was to devote to work at the London County Council, to which he had just been elected, or the Fabian Society, or whatever

else he found to his hand; in the evenings they might write, or read—Sidney according to his wife, did not care for ‘chatter’—or upon occasion see a friend or neighbour. But public life was to be Sidney’s sphere, working among his Fabian and Progressive colleagues, with the possibility of entering Parliament in due course; Beatrice resigned herself, not, one gathers, without a pang or two, to giving up the world of Society in which she had shone and became Mrs. Sidney Webb, the wife of a not-yet-very-distinguished public man and the friend of his friends—of whom she found Bernard Shaw, with all his brilliance, in some ways the least easy to understand. She loyally accepted him, however, classified him to her satisfaction as a ‘Sprite’—a sort of Undine without human qualities—and thereafter remained firmly his friend.

Such a tidy and humdrum pattern was hardly to be carried out literally by two people of such qualities. Their first joint venture was in fact Beatrice’s doing. During her work on Co-operation she had reached the conclusion that one of the greatest weaknesses of the massive Consumers’ Co-operation Movement was its tendency to ignore or to despise associations of employees; and as soon as she had finished her book on it she set herself the task of investigating Trade Unionism, then a subject practically unknown to the general public and even to economists. The task was enormous, and but for her marriage could never have been completed; but the two of them together accomplished it, and with Bernard Shaw and Graham Wallas to help in the polishing of the style they produced in 1894 their first great classic, *The History of Trade Unionism*, and in 1897 the companion volume on the philosophy of Trade Unionism and employer-worker relationships, which is called *Industrial Democracy*. The work which they did for these two books brought them closely into contact with leaders of the Trade Union movement of the ’90s, both old-style craft Unionists like Henry Broadhurst of the Stonemasons and fiery young Socialists like Tom Mann of the Engineers; and their advice and counsel was frequently sought, so much so that Beatrice, whose main preoccupation this was and who, as Shaw has said, ‘really enjoyed hob-nobbing with Trade Union secretaries over their pipes and drinks,’ had, even at that early date, a vision of the Webbs becoming (in the medieval sense) ‘clerks to organised Labour.’ This vision came to pass, more or less, towards the end of the first world war; but not at the time of its conception. The most obvious reason for this was that John Burns, the hero of the London dock strike, the biggest figure in the Trade Union world, and due to receive Cabinet office in the 1906 Liberal Government, had no intention of being advised or tutored by the Webbs—or for that matter by anyone else; but a more important cause was their own absorption in other interests—local government research, education, and Liberal politics.

Of their local government research work, great and enduring as it was, there is space to say very little here. As soon as their Trade Union task was finished, they plunged into an even bigger and more uncharted jungle, the history and growth of English local government institutions. This was not an accidental or unplanned activity; it was a fundamental Fabian belief that the associations of consumers known as Town and

County Councils, etc., had a great part to play in the making of modern democracy, and to the Webbs it was obvious that reformers could not use the Councils for reforming ends unless they knew what they were like and how they had come into existence. Accordingly, they began to work upon the history of local government as they had worked upon the history of Trade Unionism; but soon found that they had taken on what would have seemed a life-sentence to most people. *After a year's work*, they discovered that they had taken the wrong starting-point; they had to scrap most of what they had done, and to go back further, to 1688 or, in the case of the Poor Law, to early Stuart times, in order to make a satisfactory study. So big was the job that the first volume, on *The Manor and the Borough*, was not given to the world until 1906, and the last of the great ten, *English Poor Law History*, not until 1929. (Some half-dozen other, slighter volumes were included during the intervening years).

The work was not, of course, continuous: subsequent pages will show the kind of strenuous other activity with which local government research had to compete in the working hours of the day. But that it was a labour of love there is no shadow of doubt. Beatrice's vivid description, in *Methods of Social Study*, of the delights of spending hour after hour 'in the chancel of an old parish church, in the veiled light of an ancient muniment, in the hard little office of a solicitor, in the ugly and bare anteroom of the council chamber of a local authority, or even in a dungeon without ventilation or daylight . . . with a stack of manuscripts, or a pile of printed volumes, to get through in a given time, shows clearly enough that it was the enthusiasm of the genuine creator that was here engaged. If they should have needed any further encouragement, they might have found it in the fact that they produced some 6,000 or so pages of permanent and unquestioned value—a quarry for succeeding generations.

The L.C.C., Education and Permeation

AFTER the ending of the Trade Union chapter in the history of the partnership, the next phase, in its public aspect at least, is mainly Sidney's, though as time went on Beatrice came to take a more and active part on the social side. It may be summarised as 'The London County Council, Education, and Permeation'—and the comprehensiveness of the summary is itself indicative of the sheer amount of work which the two of them got through in the years before the last Liberal Government changed the face of party politics and Beatrice turned to reforming the Poor Law.

To begin with the first item. Sidney was elected to the L.C.C. in 1892 as a Progressive, and sat there until 1910. During that time he was a member of at least sixteen important committees and represented the Council on half-a-dozen other bodies; and as he was a most hard-working committeeman, an extremely skilful and ready draftsman and reconciler of opposing points of view, his influence on the day-to-day work of the Council was immense. 'In the absence of any evidence to the contrary,' wrote Edward Pease, 'in the case of any report it must be assumed that Webb wrote it.' The greatest and most permanent work that he did for the Council, however, was not, as might have been expected, in the field of direct socialisation, but in education, particularly secondary education. It is not too much to say that the present huge organisation of secondary 'further' education in London County (costing over £5 million in a single year) practically owes its existence to Sidney Webb and his paid collaborator, William Garrett.

When he joined its ranks, the Council had done practically nothing for London higher education. The Government, however, had three years previously passed a Technical Instruction Act which gave the newly-created County Councils power to levy a rate for education of this kind. Webb seized upon this opening, and directly after his election persuaded the L.C.C. to set up a Technical Education Committee, with himself as Chairman and three other Fabians among its membership, its first job being to conduct a full survey of the opportunities provided in London for 'education above the primary level'—and to disclose its pitiable inadequacy. The words quoted have considerable point. The Committee might bear the name Technical; but Webb had no intention of letting public education for children over twelve be restricted to what are commonly regarded as 'technical' subjects. What he intended to create was a real system of secondary education; and though he was working with the stream of current advanced thought and was helped by many others—such as the late Arthur Dyke Acland—it was very largely his eye for possibilities, his ready grasp of any opportunity that offered, his persuasive management of colleagues and 'interests', and his unremitting attention to detail, which got the job done.

The widening of the scope, for example, was achieved by persuading

the Government, with Acland's cordial assistance, to enlarge successively its interpretation of the term 'technical' until, in Webb's own words, it included 'the teaching of every conceivable subject other than ancient Greek and theology'—it is not certain why he left out Greek!—and by appointing really able men—men like Sir William Garnett, Sir Gilbert Frampton the sculptor, and W. R. Lethaby the architect and art critic—to be its servants and advisers. Possible opposition was largely disarmed by persuading existing institutions to take part in the scheme and setting up new ones, which might have caused rivalry and heart-burnings, only in case of proved necessity.

To keep his fellow-counsellors on their toes, Webb first fired them with a scheme for providing 500 yearly scholarships (with maintenance grants) for intelligent primary pupils, and then brought them down to earth by pointing out that the just-completed survey showed that there were practically no schools for the bright young scholars to go to, thereby forcing the Council to set about building its own secondary schools; and the interest of the parents and citizens he kept alive, not merely by writing and speaking, but by such homely devices as sending a personally-signed letter of congratulation to the parents of every successful school child. Though his attitude to primary education and the Education Act (see below) was less uniformly approved, and ended by estranging him from his fellow-Progressives, his secondary education record was so impressive that he was made Chairman of the Higher Education Committee for so long as he remained on the Council.

Meanwhile the net of his energies had spread from secondary education to take in higher education in a stricter sense. Himself self-educated after sixteen by evening classes at Birkbeck College, he had long felt it astonishing and disgraceful that the commercial centre of the world did so little to tell its adolescents and adults anything about the economic and social conditions of the world they were living in. 'King's College,' he said of the '90s, 'had a nominal professorship which was suspended. Professor Foxwell held a chair at University College, but had only a score of students, reported to be "one-half coloured." A rather elementary course of lectures was annually repeated at Birkbeck College. That was all that existed in the capital of the British Empire for a population comparable to that of the whole of Scotland (or Belgium or Holland), each of them having several universities.' This state of things was naturally intolerable to a Fabian who believed firmly that study of economic and social *facts* was sufficient to turn any sensible and intelligent person into a Socialist; and in 1895 came an unexpected chance of remedying it.

A cranky old Fabian from the north, by name Henry Hutchinson, died, and when his will was read it was found that he had left his property of some £10,000 in trust to his daughter and Sidney Webb, with three other members of the Fabian Society 'to the propaganda and other purposes of the said Society and its Socialism and towards advancing its objects in any way they deem advisable.' To anyone less far-sighted than Webb and the colleagues whom he influenced the obvious thing to do with this windfall might have seemed to make a splash within the

Fabian Society, to equip it with fine offices—as H. G. Wells wanted to do ten years later—or to launch a raring-tearing propaganda for Socialism. Ten thousand pounds, in the '90s, would have made a considerable show in either of those directions. The Webbs, however, would have none of it; neither they, nor the other Fabians, wanted to make the Fabian Society showy, and they believed that the I.L.P. was doing all the propaganda required. 'Reform,' remarked Beatrice in her *Diary*, 'will not be brought about by shouting. What is needed is *hard thinking*.' Accordingly, after setting aside some provision for Hutchinson's family, the trustees divided the remainder into approximately equal parts of which one was spent on sending Fabian speakers to lecture in provincial centres, and the other went to found the London School of Economics and Political Science, an institution, in the words of Lord Beveridge, who was for so many years its Director, 'where men should be free to study and teach scientifically, pursuing truth as they saw it in independence of any dogma, whether of Socialism or the reverse.' 'No religious, political, or economic test or qualification,' said the Articles of Association of the School, 'shall be made a condition for or disqualify from receiving any of the benefits of the Corporation, or holding any office therein.'

The subsequent history and rapid growth of the L.S.E., 'on whose buildings,' it was said before the war, 'the concrete never sets,' is outside the scope of this book, though the Webbs long took an active part in its life and Sidney was for many years its Professor of Public Administration (unpaid). But it is important to underline the word Science in its name. It was the firm conviction of Sidney, as of Herbert Spencer's former pupil Beatrice, that the study of economics and of sociology is essentially a science and not a branch of deductive philosophy, and that effective thought on either of these subjects is prevented and bedevilled by the classical attempts to formulate them by *a priori* reasoning from 'first principles', either without studying the actual facts or by relegating them to a quite lower plane of thought. They would not, of course, ever have been foolish enough to make the claim that social science could be studied exactly as though it were a physical science such as chemistry, or that ultimate values could be left out of account; they had their own stoutly-held values and expressed them quite clearly time and again. The meaning which they attached to the word science was nearer to that of the French *science* or the Latin *scientia* ('knowledge') than the very narrow sense which it has acquired in some circles to-day. But they did very strongly hold that all hypotheses about the conduct of economic and social affairs should be tested by a continuous comparison with the actual ascertainable facts—*Measurement and Publicity* was a Webbian slogan coined some twenty-five years later; they also believed that a dispassionate study of the facts would often yield conclusions quite unexpected by the student or by anyone else. For these reasons, they believed that the *method* of study in economics and sociology ought to approximate much more nearly than hitherto to the methods of the natural sciences; so Webb, with the assistance of his friend R. B. Haldane, succeeded in getting the L.S.E. degree in Economics recognised as a

science degree in the reorganised University of London. The many thousands of ex-London students who write B.Sc.(Econ.) after their names owe it to Webb's efforts.

There is no space here to describe the reorganisation of London University, which took final shape in 1898 and turned it from a mere examining and degree-granting body into a teaching institution, with Webb as a member of its Senate. This, however, like the foundation of L.S.E. and the Technical Education Committee, was part of a process which, round about the turn of the century, was drawing the Webbs more into politics proper (and thus back into London Society). It was at this time that they followed, if they did not exactly formulate, the policy known as 'permeation'.

In a sense, 'permeation' had been the policy of the Fabian Society for many years. Knowing themselves to be few in numbers though full of ability, and neither hoping nor desiring to become a large organisation, the Fabians had never thought of a 'Fabian Government' coming into existence under that name. (Nor, indeed, of a 'Labour Government'; before 1900 there was no Labour Party, and even after that it was scarcely worth the Webbs' attention before 1914). The Fabian idea was if possible to convert future Ministers and persons in key positions to Fabianism, or, as that would not be possible in most cases, to station Fabian advisers at their elbows, and to persuade parties, groups, committees, councils or what not, to endorse pieces of a Socialist programme as it were unawares. For these purposes it did not matter in theory whether the persons or groups to be 'permeated' were Tories, Liberals (or Anarchists!); the Fabians were ready to try their hand on anyone, and in fact the nineteenth-century history of British social development gave some colour to the view that, for bringing about separate pieces of social change, one major Party was about as hopeful as the other. Disraeli had enfranchised the town artisans, Gladstone the miners and the agricultural workers; the Liberals had given the Trade Unions recognition, but the Tories had allowed them to picket during trade disputes.

During the latter half of the century, of course, the politically-minded working man had generally been a Liberal; early working-class candidates for Parliament stood as Liberals. But in the last decade confidence in the Liberal Party was shaken on all sides. It had split over the Irish question; its zeal for reform seemed to have waned or vanished; Chamberlain, once its greatest social crusader, had now to all appearance deserted social problems in favour of imperialist adventure, while the caucus system which he had set up within the party was unwilling to make concessions to labour or even to encourage the adoption of working-class candidates. The leadership of the party was weak and divided, and there was considerable antagonism between the supporters of Sir William Harcourt, the originator of death duties, and those of the rich racing peer Lord Rosebery. Though the Fabians and the Radicals had by clever tactics forced upon the party's 1891 conference a policy of advanced social reform (the 'Newcastle Programme'), they did not believe that the existing leadership would carry it out: in contrast to their position among the Progressives of London, they had not sufficient

support among the potential Ministers and influential members of Parliament. It seemed to some of the Fabians that there was much to be gained by bringing together in discussion Liberals of their way of thought and intelligent Tories who could be awakened to the inevitability of *some* social change, particularly if there could be added to the discussion civil servants and administrators already inoculated with Fabian ideas.

In this way was 'permeation' born; on the Liberal side its chief participants were Haldane and Edward Grey—and to a less extent Asquith; among the Tories the chief prize was Arthur Balfour, Prime Minister from 1902 to 1905, a philosopher-politician who always had great charm for Beatrice; and a good deal of the discussion took place at dinner-parties in 41 Grosvenor Road—so convenient for the House of Commons. Beatrice was still not then a politician in her own right; she was a politician's lady running a *salon*. But her personality was beginning to take on more and more importance in the political world; Grosvenor Road was beginning to be a place which counted; and her Diaries show how much she enjoyed those evenings and lunches of discussion and high-principled semi-intrigue over the future of the London County Council, the London School of Economics, the party system, the Balfour Education Bill, and so forth—enjoyed them all the more, as she candidly pointed out, because the standard of living, of dress, and of general conversation was more like 'what she was brought up to' than that of Trade Unionists and their wives at Co-operative teas. She may have liked hobnobbing with Trade Unionists—at intervals—and she certainly set no store by rich food and drink. But amenities, pleasant rooms and efficient service, and, above all, conversation that was brilliant as well as purposeful, was another matter. She would not have been human had she not been pleased to find herself reviving the social successes of her youth while pursuing an object which she felt well worth-while; but only an exceptionally strong and honest mind would have admitted it so frankly.

The Webbs took to 'permeation' the more readily because they and Bernard Shaw and a number of other Fabians disagreed with Liberals like Lloyd George and with almost all other Socialists on the issue of the South African War, on which they regarded the champions of the Boer Republics as sentimental reactionaries and pointed out (as was of course perfectly correct) that neither Milner's supporters nor Kruger's cared a hoot about the welfare of the great majority of the inhabitants of South Africa—the blacks. This encouraged them to believe that the 'Liberal-imperialists' might achieve a re-shuffle of power which would result in a Government whose home policy would run on cautiously Fabian lines. These calculations came to an abrupt end when Campbell-Bannerman won his smashing majority in 1906; the major success of the 'permeation' period was the Education Acts of 1902-03, and a minor success Balfour's appointment of Beatrice to the 1905 Poor Law Commission.

The Education Acts were on the face of it a triumph of Fabian policy and method. The original idea, that of transferring primary education from the control of *ad hoc* School Boards to that of the

generalised local authorities (strengthened by the inclusion for this purpose of 'outside experts') and of solving, or partially solving, the century-old conflict between Church and Chapel by giving, under conditions, support out of the rates to schools run by religious denominations, came from Robert Morant, a Civil Servant; it was recast and written up, in a Tract called *The Educational Muddle and the Way Out*, by Sidney Webb, a Socialist; the Tract was circulated in galley form by a Conservative Minister, Sir John Gorst, to his civil service staff; the resulting Bills were brought in by Balfour, the Conservative Prime Minister; they were passed, and became the basis of the whole present structure of English primary education. But the indignation aroused by them contributed in a small degree to the fall of Balfour's Government and in a large degree to Webb's loss of influence in the London County Council.

Whatever the merits or demerits of the Acts, they serve very well to illustrate certain gaps in the Webbs' political imagination which go far to account for the ill-success of 'permeation'. Sidney was convinced of the rightness of the policy. Himself an agnostic at the most, he believed, and asserted strongly, that to refuse grant-aid to schools run by religious communities would not merely be unjust but would also mean that the children of such communities would be grievously under-educated. Like Morant, however, he was entirely unaware of the strength of the non-rational nonconformist hatred of Rome and the Anglican Church, derived from a long history of semi-class sectarian warfare, which induced a number of leading Nonconformists to undergo the mild martyrdom of having their goods distrained for refusing to pay the education rate; and he also underrated the disappointment of the enthusiastic members of the London School Board (several of them Fabians) at losing their independence to the L.C.C.

The Webbs discounted, or failed to observe, the emotional strength of the opposition to the Education Bills, as they had previously discounted the emotional strength of the opposition to the South African War. Psychologists may suggest that their own spiritual content with each other had something to do with their failure to appreciate the deeper currents of popular feeling; it is in any event a fact that they were altogether unaware of the growing wave of radicalism that was soon to sweep away the Tories in the biggest landslide in British electoral history, and, as a corollary, failed to make connection with the leaders who held the real power in the next decade. They despised Campbell-Bannerman and never got on terms with Lloyd George. The result was that during the exciting years of 1906 to 1910 they were without influence in high politics and to some extent under suspicion as intriguers who had failed; had it not been for the Poor Law Commission that period might have looked very jejune.

6

The Poor Law

‘PERMEATION’ of the older political parties together had in fact failed as a policy by the end of 1905. Unless the new Liberal Government could be diverted into Socialism, which in view of its thumping majority and the inclusion in its ranks of politicians like Asquith and Winston Churchill was highly unlikely, the only future for the Socialists lay in the little new Labour Party with its membership of 30, mostly elected by agreement with the Liberals. But in 1906-14 the Labour Party was not Socialist—though it included Socialists—had no defined policy and no individual membership. It did not look at all capable of becoming the government of the country within measurable time, and though the Fabian Society had taken part in its foundation and was officially part of it, the leaders believed it to be of barely marginal usefulness, and some of the rank-and-file, particularly ardent Socialists who joined the Society during the Radical boom, came, under syndicalist influences, to regard it as an actual drag on working-class progress. Sidney, with Shaw, continued to work actively on the Fabian Executive and at producing Tracts, lectures, and propaganda generally; but they took no part in Labour Party politics, and Beatrice’s attention was almost entirely occupied by the Poor Law Commission and the national campaign which followed it.

The Royal Commission on the Poor Law, set up by the Balfour Government as almost its dying act, was not the result of any widespread public outcry, but of a general *malaise* and a feeling on all sides that something must be done about the Poor Law. Nominally, the relief of the poor was still conducted according to the Act of 1834—that Act which, rushed through Parliament by a triumphant combination of doctrinaire Utilitarians, Malthusians and enthusiastic bureaucrats, had driven parts of the country nearly to civil war before it could be enforced, and was more bitterly hated by the working classes than any other legislation which remained on the Statute-Book for over a hundred years.

The system had, of course, undergone a good deal of alteration since the days of Brougham and Edwin Chadwick. The original purpose, to make the lot of *anyone* who received *any* relief out of public funds harder and less desirable than that of the worst-paid labourer in employment, and to segregate husbands on relief from their wives, lest they should breed and add to the number of hungry mouths, had been steadily modified, partly because Victorian economic prosperity undermined the theoretical basis for such savagery and partly because growing humanitarianism—combined with such fierce propaganda as Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*—made human beings less and less willing to be responsible for it. The system began to leak all through its length. Guardians of the Poor, and their Relieving Officers, refused to tear families apart because the wage-earner had fallen out of work or because illness had eaten up their meagre savings, or to insist that all personal possessions

should be sold or pawned before they would grant any relief, or to make their workhouses correspond as nearly as possible to penal establishments.

This humanising, however much in line with popular feeling, was undoubtedly contrary to the intentions of the original Act, and was, moreover, necessarily a piecemeal effort. If one Board of Guardians strove to discharge its functions in as kindly a manner as might be, and its Relieving Officer to think of himself as a welfare worker rather than a supplementary agent of the police, the next-door Board was pretty sure to have nothing in mind but saving the rates and to employ the nearest possible approach to a Bumble that it could find. There was thus a continuing state of uncertainty—the ‘shadow of the House’—i.e. the workhouse—darkening the lives of that enormous part of the population which, before the days of social insurance, was always in danger of being suddenly reduced to penury; and the central administrators, the men in charge of the Poor Law at the Local Government Board, also complained that it was impossible for them to carry out their task in any logical manner if individual Boards of Guardians were sporadically able to alter the conditions of relief and get away with it.

To this general conviction that the system was not working as it ought to work were added three new factors: the revelations of Charles Booth's London enquiry—supplemented by the studies of investigators like Seebohm Rowntree, Lady Bell, and others in the provinces—of the shocking conditions of poverty in which millions of people lived before ever they had recourse to the Poor Law; the big trade fluctuations of 1878 and onwards, which threw out of work many whose characters could not possibly be made to bear the blame for their misfortunes; and the organisation of the unskilled and their uprising on occasions like the London Dock Strike, which induced in the governing class some fear that if no mitigation of living conditions was granted to the rabble they might be led by fiery Socialists and left-wing Trade Unionists to come and take it for themselves. Keir Hardie, ‘the M.P. for the Unemployed’, as he was called, might be howled down by well-fed persons when he rose to protest in the Commons; but cooler heads among the Ministers knew well enough that he would not be howled down outside.

The Government appointed a Royal Commission—a large and representative Commission under the chairmanship of a Tory ex-Cabinet Minister. Nine of its members were poor law administrators; half-a-dozen or so were prominently associated with the Charity Organisation Society, a body of public-spirited persons who endeavoured to regulate indiscriminate and anti-social distribution of alms, and whose tactless zeal often earned them as much hatred as the Poor Law itself. There were four representatives of the Churches, two political economists, a Trade Union official, George Lansbury—and Beatrice Webb.

It is not very certain what the Government intended to be the result of the Commission; possibly they did not know themselves. But certain officials, particularly Mr. James Davy, the head of the Poor Law Division of the Local Government Board, had decided well in advance what the result was to be. They wanted the system tidied up, and they wanted

the Commissioners to recommend 'reversion to the Principles of 1834 as regards policy, to stem the tide of philanthropic influence that was sweeping away the old embankment of deterrent tests.' (Beatrice Webb's *Diaries*). This they were to be gently led to do by evidence carefully arranged and prepared by Davy's own subordinates. Davy, however, in a moment of astonishing incaution, confided his intentions to the one member of the Commission from whom he should have concealed them. 'To-day at lunch,' wrote Mrs. Webb gleefully, 'I put Mr. Lansbury on his guard against this policy.'

Her own idea of the Commission was entirely different. She wanted it to call its own evidence, conduct its own investigations, and finally to produce a Report as revolutionary as the Report of 1834, calling for an entirely new treatment of the problem of destitution based on the principle of prevention and the establishment of what the Webbs called The Standard Minimum of Civilised Life. Herein she failed; the majority of her fellow-Commissioners were not prepared either to work as hard as she was, or to undertake stiff fundamental thought about the creation of an entirely new system; even had they been willing it is improbable that they would have come to the same conclusions, not only because Beatrice, as she readily admitted, tended to harry and bully rather than to persuade the slow-moving or hostile minds, but also because what she was suggesting amounted, in fact, to an instalment of Socialism which they were not in the least ready to receive. In fact, during the later years of the Commission, she all but abandoned its sittings, devoting herself to making her own enquiries—in which she was helped by an army of secretaries partly paid for by Mrs. Bernard Shaw; and the Report which she got Sidney to write out for her was finally signed only by herself, Lansbury, Chandler the Trade Unionist, and the Rev. Russell Wakefield.

It was a very good thing, both for posterity and for the Webbs' own reputation, that Beatrice stuck so determinedly to her guns and did not soften the outlines of her own scheme so as to secure the adherence of a majority. For there is very little evidence to show that Asquith's Government would have carried out any lesser reform of the Poor Law; even the proposals of the majority were completely shelved. Beatrice's intransigence, however, produced a *Minority Report* which is one of the great State Papers of this century and which, whatever its immediate fate, has been an inspiration and a guide to social workers and social reformers right down to our own day, when the social security, State medical service, and full employment policy for which she then asked are part of the law and practice of the land. It also produced a nationwide campaign against poverty which, though it failed in its immediate objective, both roused the country and provided political baptism for thousands who subsequently played a part in building up the Socialist movement and the Labour Party. The National Council for the Prevention of Destitution, as the new campaigning organisation was called, reached in a few months a membership of 16,000—more than five times any figure previously achieved by the Fabian Society; it enrolled as speakers and writers distinguished persons from all parties and all walks

of life; and the greater part of its day-to-day work, both in London and the provinces was done, unpaid, by hundreds of enthusiastic voluntary workers, many of them very young. Beatrice, presiding over all this activity, writing pamphlets, leaflets and articles for its journal *The Crusade*, organising committees, and taking on lecture tours of considerable strenuousness, enjoyed herself immensely. Up till then, her public life had been lived largely behind the scenes, in private rooms and in discussions with a few; now, at fifty, she suddenly found herself an important figure with a national audience.

She enjoyed herself; but the campaign, as a campaign, was a failure. It could not have been otherwise. For the real purpose of the N.C.P.D., as it developed, was to force upon the capitalist system, by means of a supposedly all-party agitation, the dose of Socialism which Beatrice had failed to induce the Royal Commission to swallow. In a sense, it was to be a noisy 'permeation' of the nation by sixteen thousand persons instead of by a handful of instructed Fabians. But Edwardian England was not at all inclined for a dose of Socialism; it was distressed about starvation and disease, and shocked at the administrative muddles and tyrannies which the Poor Law enquiries had brought to light, but it did not at all accept the view that destitution could not be prevented except by major change. When the Boards of Guardians and the Local Government Board, under stress of the 'revelations', made some efforts to put their houses in order, and above all when Lloyd George, realising that something must be done to appease the feeling aroused by the Webbs, went to Germany for inspiration and produced his 'ninepence-for-fourpence' contributory insurance scheme, the non-Socialist supporters of the N.C.P.D. sank back with a sigh of relief. Even though the Poor Law was to remain, the destitution due to sickness and (in a few occupations) to sudden storms of unemployment would be at least alleviated—and who, in a competitive world, could ask for more? Why should the Socialists, Webbs and I.L.P. alike, go on grumbling and demanding the *abolition* of the Poor Law and the establishment of a national minimum? Could they not take what they were offered and be reasonably thankful? As Beatrice admitted, 'all the steam went out' of her great organisation; the Webbs, never inclined to mourn over lost causes, accepted the event, wound up the N.C.P.D. and *The Crusade*, and, tired with all their efforts, set off on a year's world-tour. Before she left, however, Beatrice had pronounced the final epitaph on their permeative activities. The older parties were hopeless; what was now essential was to form a strong and independent Socialist political party.

Fabian Research and the Labour Party

THE first movements they made in this direction were unsuccessful. Up to 1914 the infant Labour Party had no Socialist policy—no defined programme at all—and the Webbs barely took account of it; after the 1910 elections, indeed, when the Liberals lost their commanding majority, it was committed to keeping the Asquith Government in office, and many of the most vigorous Trade Unionists, those, for example, who led the great strike wave of 1911-14, openly despised it. The Webbs neither liked nor respected the I.L.P. of Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald, which was much the largest Socialist society; their thought was to build a new Socialist Party out of the Fabian Society and what was left of the N.C.P.D. But they had reckoned without certain factors, of which the most important were the discontent with Parliamentary constitutionalism—shown by such diverse persons as the militant Suffragettes, the Unionists of Ulster, G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, and George Lansbury—the slowly rising cost of living, producing ‘industrial unrest’, and the emergence of an anti-collectivist opposition within the Fabian Society itself.

The Fabian Society had shared in the post-1906 Radical revival—a ‘little boom’, as Beatrice rather patronisingly described it in her *Diary*—but the new membership from the first differed considerably from the faithful hardworking hundreds who for nearly two decades had followed the line of *Facts for Socialists* and *Fabian Essays*. It was argumentative, restless, and highly critical of the leaders. H. G. Wells, the Webbs’ own recruit, started a vigorous anarchic opposition movement, aimed, insofar as it could be said to be aimed at all, at turning the Fabian Society into a large imposing body with large imposing publications and offices, in which the Samurai of his *Modern Utopia* could be trained; when he indignantly resigned, defeated by Shaw’s greatly superior debating powers and Sidney’s cruel command of facts, his place was almost immediately filled by one opposition after another, differing in their immediate proposals, but all more or less condemnatory of the leaders. The last of these, the Guild Socialist opposition led by G. D. H. Cole and William Mellor (long afterwards editor of the *Daily Herald*) was the most formidable, both because its protagonists were of very high intellectual quality and of industry as great as that of the pioneer Fabians, and because they had a coherent ‘functionalist’, revolutionary philosophy to oppose to the pure gradualist *Etatisme*, tempered only by some concessions to organised Trade Unionism, to which the Webbs were at that time committed. This opposition, which included a great many of the ex-workers for the N.C.P.D., came on one occasion within one vote of capturing the Fabian Society; it did capture, and staffed with its own supporters, the Fabian Research Department, which—ironically enough—Beatrice had herself created as an organisation in which talented and vigorous young University men might do good work in the collectivist

cause; and it certainly was in no mood to be enrolled in a political party controlled and directed by the older Fabians.

The Fabian—later Labour—Research Department had a long and active life, and did a great deal of work, largely in the field of Trade Unionism which had been the Partnership's own first love. And though feelings ran high and harsh words were uttered, the connection was kept up until the L.R.D. came under Communist control; Beatrice, more tolerant on this occasion than Sidney, recognised that these young men, however aggravating, were as enthusiastic and as single-minded as she could have wished, and made real efforts to understand what they were driving at, while they on their part, however much they abused the collectivist pair, never refused either to discuss or honestly to collaborate where they felt collaboration was possible. Nevertheless, during that period, the period of the Webbs' greatest unpopularity, when Wells in *The New Machiavelli* drew his venomous picture of their political factory in their 'hard little house', the main contribution they made to the cause they had at heart was neither a political party nor any sort of organisation but the *New Statesman*.

The original idea of the *New Statesman* was in essence 'permeatory'. The Webbs wanted to create an *independent* journal of opinion which would *independently* lead all intelligent persons to embrace Socialist views; it must therefore not be controlled by any political party or group—even the Fabian Society; and yet it must somehow be assured of sufficient support to get on its feet. The method they devised was (a) to offer reduced annual subscriptions to members of the Fabian Society (which secured for the new journal an initial roll of over two thousand); (b) to promise contributions from the best-known Fabians, including themselves and Shaw; (c) to appoint a young Fabian, Clifford Sharp, as Editor, and to give him practically a free hand for dealing with contributors.

From a prestige point of view the venture was an immediate success, for two main reasons. First, because of the high quality of the individual contributors. Shaw, it is true, found that the paper—and the opinions of the Editor—failed to come up to his standard, and soon ceased to write regularly, though he did give it his famous pamphlet, *Commonsense About the War*; but the names of Sir John Squire, Desmond MacCarthy, S. K. Ratcliffe, Emil Davies, C. W. Saleeby ('Lens'), and Robert Lynd ('Y.Y.'), as well as those of the Webbs themselves, and at a later date C. M. Lloyd and G. D. H. Cole, as regular contributors, provided a sufficient guarantee of standard. Secondly, because it was more than a weekly review, but in its famous *Supplements* gave its readers really solid matter to bite on. *Commonsense About the War* was such a Supplement; another was the first study for a League of Nations, produced by Leonard Woolf at the Webbs' instigation; others were weighty research studies on Co-operation, industrial insurance, the professional organisation of teachers, State and municipal enterprise, and so forth—studies longer than Fabian *Tracts*, but not so long as the Webbs' books.

Financially, however, it had to wait for success; to the usual birth-pangs was added the difficulty of the 1914 war, breaking out when it was

only eighteen months old. It was not until long after the war was over that it got itself on to a firm footing, ate up competitor after competitor in the weekly market, and became, gradually, as monumental a feature of English life as the London School of Economics, the Webbs watching it grow without interference and with a feeling of friendly pride. Meanwhile, however, world events had made the Webbs, at long last, 'clerks to Labour' and had led them to look for their Socialist Party within the Labour Party itself.

Their entry during the war into the counsels of the Labour Party was as nearly accidental as anything can be. No more than the great majority of their countrymen had they foreseen the events of August 1914; they had very little concern with 'foreign affairs' as such, though they were mildly interested in Paris municipal government, nationalised enterprises in other countries, and in meeting distinguished foreign Socialists. Their attitude to the issues of war and peace was so little defined that, when war seemed imminent, they were invited to take part both in demonstrating against it and (by the same group a few days later) in a patriotic meeting. They were perfectly prepared, therefore, once war had broken out and its continuance seemed inevitable, to accept it as a fact of nature and try to work within the limits set by war conditions.

This attitude of theirs was, in fact, also the attitude of the bulk of the Labour movement, at least in the beginning. In accordance with anti-war resolutions passed by the Socialist International, the Labour leaders had summoned a great delegate conference, with representatives from the Labour Party, the Socialist Societies, the Trades Union Congress, the General Federation of Trade Unions, the largest individual Trade Unions, the Co-operative movement, and the school-teachers. This was the first really representative gathering of all wings of the working-class; but, by the time it had assembled, war had been declared, Belgium had been invaded, and it was clear that the opportunity for protestations had passed, and that what was now needed was organisation to protect the standards of the workers against wartime encroachments. The Conference, therefore, set up a representative executive called by the clumsy title of War Emergency Workers' National Committee; Arthur Henderson, by then Labour Party Secretary, became its chairman, and Sidney Webb its chief draftsman.

The first and continuing preoccupation of the Committee was to *defend* working-class standards. Few of those who remember only the second world war, in which working-class co-operation was so instantly recognised as essential, and secured by means of price-fixing, rationing, food subsidies and the like without question raised, can really imagine how little of this was suggested in 1914; recruiting meetings and military bands were supposed to be a sufficient inducement to the workers; prices, it was assumed, would rise in a 'natural' manner, but any attempt by Labour to cash in on a scarcity situation was unpatriotic, almost treasonable, and should be sternly repressed. So the historian finds the War Workers' Committee initiating campaigns on such subjects as adequate allowances for the dependants of serving soldiers and sailors—including unmarried women and their children; provision of canteens for soldiers

and munition workers, and of day nurseries for the children; control of rents and of mortgage interest—this, through Webb's ingenuity, being demanded in joint deputation by the workers and the property-owners; fixing of maximum food prices; and the right of the working classes to representation on all official bodies concerned with their problems. At the same time, it was actively supporting, wherever necessary, the struggles of the Trade Unions in the engineering and other industries to prevent the breaking-down of established wage standards by the importation of women at starvation rates.

But as the war went on the Labour movement, and particularly the association of Henderson and Webb, began to reach out to much more positive functions; for this there were two reasons. The first was simply the growth in importance and organisation of the workers, particularly in the war—the membership of the T.U.C. more than doubled between 1913 and 1918. However much their 'betters' disliked that fact, they could not ignore it; they might make strikes illegal but they could not jail 200,000 Welsh miners when coal was so urgently needed; they had to bargain and concede, and increasingly to invite the opinion and even the collaboration of Trade Union leaders on new schemes for Government control of industry. This tendency was crystallised in the public mind when Lloyd George invited Henderson to become a member of his Coalition cabinet; Labour was recognised as a partner, albeit a very junior partner, and one, as later events showed, to be firmly put in its place if it became presumptuous.

Late in the war, however, the second important factor emerged. Particularly after the Russian Revolution, which caused the workers to feel that there was a chance of a people's peace and their rulers to be more determined on a fight to a finish, it began to appear that Labour was developing a definite policy of its own, not merely upon rents, wages, and prices, but upon international and imperial affairs, which was widely at variance with that of the Tory-Liberal Coalition. After Henderson had been virtually frozen out of the War Cabinet because he disagreed with their policy towards Russia, the split became patent, and its first-fruits was the pamphlet *Labour's War Aims* (1917), a statement of policy upon international and colonial affairs, owing much to Leonard Woolf's studies mentioned earlier, which proclaimed to a war-weary world a coherent, intelligible alternative to jungle politics—and laid down a foreign policy faithfully followed by the Labour Party for half a generation, until world unemployment and the Nazis brought the jungle back again.

The eager reception of this pamphlet in many other countries beside Britain encouraged Webb and Henderson and their collaborators to go further and turn the Labour Party into a real Party, a real potential Opposition instead of a pressure group. The result of their efforts, in the last year of the war, was the new constitution of the Labour Party, the comprehensive political programme drafted by Webb under the title of *Labour and the New Social Order*, the departure of Labour, as soon as the war was over, from the Coalition, and its return to Parliament, in the

1918 'coupon' election, as a real Opposition—tiny in numbers but yet larger than Asquith's dissentient Liberals.

The constitution was largely of Webb's drafting, the programme entirely so, as the language shows. The importance of the former was that by creating Divisional Labour Parties, with individual membership, throughout the country, it for the first time enabled persons to join the Labour Party as such, not indirectly through a Trade Union or Socialist Society, and thereby reduced to some extent the dependence of the Party on Trade Union money; the importance of the second needs no stressing. For the first time in its history, the Party had a definite policy—and it was a collectivist-Socialist policy¹. It was a clear and comprehensive statement—more so than some of those which followed it—and if the electorate, drunk with prospects of hanging the Kaiser and making Germany pay, declined for the moment to accept it, that only indicated the need for more and more intensive Socialist education. And there was Sidney Webb, since 1915 on the Executive Committee of the Labour Party and having come within a few votes of being returned to Parliament for the University of London, ready to embark upon this education—and Beatrice to stand by his side.

¹ 'Collectivist' must be emphasised. *Labour and the New Social Order* did little to solve the problem of 'workers' control'.

Committees and Books—Sankey and Seaham

IT should not be thought that the activities of the Webbs, during the war years, were entirely confined to laying the foundations for the new Labour Party. Apart from their (sometimes stormy) collaboration with Guild Socialists in the Labour Research Department, and the writing of books like *How to Pay For the War* (which suggested an extensive programme of socialisation), Sidney, in 1916, was made a member of the enormous After-War Reconstruction Committee, which spawned so many hopeful sub-committees, and in connection with these did a good deal of drafting and writing for the press. Beatrice, after a period of ill-health, served on the Local Government Panel of the same body, to which she reintroduced her eight-year old proposals for doing away with the Poor Law. 'Informed opinion' had moved on since 1909; on this occasion Beatrice effectively carried the other committee members with her to draft the unanimous Maclean Report—which, along with most of the other efforts of the Reconstruction Committee, disappeared in the orgy of 'return to normalcy' which followed the war. A similar fate befell her efforts on another official body, the War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry, set up in 1918 in response to an angry outbreak of propaganda, to report upon whether the Government had or had not observed its pledge that where women were employed on work previously done by men they should be paid at men's rates. The majority of the Committee exonerated the Government; Beatrice, reaching the conclusion that a pledge had been made and been flagrantly broken, wrote a Minority Report in which she went well outside her brief and argued the whole case for equal pay between the sexes. Her report was reissued by the Fabian Society under the title *The Wages of Men and Women—Should They Be Equal?* and remains a minor classic, its arguments unrefuted, and its conclusions mostly unapplied, to this day. But in the immediate post-war climate of opinion the work which the two of them did on Government account—including that of Sidney as a member of the Committee on Trusts and Profiteering, which after the end of the war collected so much damning fact about the operations of capitalism *redivivus*—could have very little direct effect. Much more important was Sidney's post-war connection with the Miners' Federation over the Sankey Coal Commission.

It was not only in Russia that the war created revolutionary feeling. Political revolutions happened also in Germany, Austria, Hungary; and among the victorious powers the feeling was only less strong. There were mutinies in the armies in France; the soldiers would not stay enlisted and were expecting a new world for heroes when they came out; in many industrial centres of Britain, particularly Liverpool and the Clyde, there were large and menacing outbreaks; the London police went on strike; the railwaymen demanded nationalisation of the railways and

improvement of conditions; and the Miners' Federation, three-quarters of a million strong, asked for wage increases, reduced hours, and the nationalisation of the mines, and threatened a national mining strike if these were not immediately granted.

The overwhelming Parliamentary majority which Lloyd George had secured by rushing an election clearly did not at all reflect the economic mood of the electors; nevertheless, those who had been elected, the 'hard-faced men who had done well out of the war', were quite determined to continue to do well and even better out of the peace. Wartime controls, it was certain, would have to yield quickly to the headlong price-and-profits boom which distinguished the next two years; but it looked very much as if industrial strife amounting possibly to civil war and revolution might accompany them.

Lloyd George and his Cabinet played for time; they let the soldiers demobilise themselves anyhow and minimised the resulting confusion by the 'cushioning' device of a State allowance, at the unprecedented rate of 29/- per week, to be paid to all workers demobilised from the armed forces or the war industries until they found work; they rushed through an Act to prevent wage reductions and provided subsidies to the local authorities for building houses at whatever prices the building material combines chose to exact; they dealt with individual strikes as best they could. The most formidable threat, however, was that of the Miners' Federation; and this the Government met by setting up a Statutory Commission representative equally of miners and coalowners, with three outside experts appointed by each side, to survey the whole situation. The chairman was the late Lord Sankey, and Bonar Law, speaking as Acting Premier, twice undertook that the Government would carry out the recommendations of the Commission 'in the spirit and in the letter.'

It is a matter of history how that promise was broken, once the immediate urgency was past and a mining strike no longer a thing to be avoided at all costs; how the majority report recommending nationalisation was discussed for many weary months and finally shelved; and the results of this policy in the General Strike and afterwards. What concerns us here is the part played by Sidney Webb and its results.

The hearings of the Sankey Commission were public, on the crimson benches of the House of Lords; they excited, for a time, enormous interest, when distinguished peers who were also royalty-owners were arraigned at the bar to account to society for their incomes; and in Robert Smillie, the Miners' Federation of Great Britain leader, and their three experts, Sir Leo Chiozza Money, R. H. Tawney, and Sidney Webb, the miners had outstanding champions, against whom the representatives of the mineowners could make little headway. Webb was the statistical expert and the best cross-examiner among them; he drove the witnesses remorselessly from point to point; and when all was over the Miners' Federation showed their gratitude first by using their large block vote to return him to the Labour Party Executive at the head of the poll in 1919, and in 1920, after it had become fairly clear that nothing was coming of the Sankey Report, to ask him to stand for the Parliamentary Division of Seaham Harbour in Durham.

The request was partly of his own doing. For when, during the dismal summer of that year, a group of miners' leaders came to ask what he would advise them to do in face of their industrial failure, he suggested that they should turn to political action to redress their grievances, that they should send their own men to Parliament, and men, moreover, to express their views and drive home their points to a hostile House. Nevertheless, when they so promptly took him at his word and assured him that the seat was a safe winner, he found the decision difficult. He was over sixty, not a good age at which to take on a new job, still less a job so incalculable, so exhausting, and at times so exasperating, as sitting in Parliament as a member of a small and not very experienced or gifted Opposition. The days before his marriage, when an eventual seat in Parliament had seemed a matter of course, were far behind him; he had built up on very different lines a full and satisfying joint life with Beatrice, which had become more and more closely integrated during the past ten years, after he left the London County Council and she took to active work in the Fabian Society and the Labour Party; and the thought of the hours of physical separation from her which a Parliamentary life would entail was depressing. Nor could he look to find much compensation in Parliamentary honours; though an admirable lecturer, he was no orator (and, in actual fact was not a success in debate except on subjects like rating which he knew inside out); and though he might reasonably expect to be a competent Minister if a Labour Government were ever formed—which in 1920 did not seem likely to happen soon—he had no desire for office or power, and certainly would become no better known by it. Parliament, in short, would be no treat to him, and would leave his wife lonely.

It was thus a real sacrifice of 'the good life' that the two of them were asked to make. How much they hesitated we do not know; we only know that they came quite firmly to the conclusion that the sacrifice ought to be made, that the interests of the Labour Party—by then, it will be remembered, accepted by them as the political party making for Socialism—would be very ill-served if those who had the ability, could afford the time and expense, and had won the admiring trust of the industrial workers, refused, when asked, to serve it in the Parliamentary field. They took the public-spirited course; and it is pleasant to be able to record that the initial stages, at least, turned out much more agreeable than they had anticipated. They found new interests, and in the Durham miners and their wives new friends of the solid working-class 'salt-of-the-earth' type whom Beatrice Potter had once known in Lancashire but whom they had scarcely met since *Industrial Democracy* was finished.

For, having taken on the job, they intended to do it thoroughly. They read up the history of mining, Durham mining in particular, till they had it at their fingers' ends; then, before ever they set eyes on the constituency they mapped it out and card-indexed all the organisations—religious, educational, and social—into which they intended to insinuate themselves with lectures on such non-political-sounding subjects as the History of Mining, Social Services, and the like. Many times during the year they took the long journey to Seaham and spent days

there lecturing, answering questions, taking classes, or simply having tea with the miners' wives. Beatrice wrote them a weekly News Letter and provided a circulating library of solid literature sent down from London: she called the organisation 'the University of Seaham' and often praised the natural good manners and open-minded intelligence of her students there. Sidney, characteristically, produced within a year of his adoption a *History of the Durham Miner*, to tell his constituents things that they did not know about themselves. After all this intensive activity, it is not surprising that when the election came he was returned with the resounding majority of 11,800 votes, or that Seaham Harbour was his as long as he cared to hold it. If by work in one constituency Socialism could have been built in Britain, the Webbs would have built it.

But, of course, it could not. Apart from the avowed political opponents, who would have to be converted or outvoted, the Labour Party and Labour supporters themselves left a good deal to be desired as instruments of social change. True, the Labour Party was now a real party with a real membership—strengthened on the intellectual side by a number of pacifists, internationalists, and anti-imperialists who had left the Liberal ranks during or after the war; and it was equipped with a vigorous Socialist programme. But it was not so well equipped for carrying it out, either in personnel or in general appeal; a large number of the M.P.s who survived the 'coupon' election were pro-war Trade Unionists of no particular skill or brains, their leader being an undistinguished miners' official; they did not really look as though they could be taken seriously in politics.

The Webbs set themselves, patiently and persistently, to remedy this state of things. They urged upon Henderson and other officers reform of the Party organisation so as to make it more efficient, to get more vital research done and more effective propaganda—in view of the slenderness of the Party's purse and the unwillingness of some Trade Union (and other) officials to offer adequate pay or opportunity to brain-workers, this effort made little progress for a good many years. They made it their business to meet and discuss problems and policy with all the leaders who would discuss with them, and not only the leaders, but the rank-and-file M.P.s as well; even when subsequent elections had swollen the numbers of Parliamentary Labour to a comparatively enormous size they still managed to have all the M.P.s in batches to lunch. Beatrice invented a special organisation called the Half-Circle Club, where Labour women, the wives of M.P.s and the wives of Trade Unionists, might meet together for training in social *aplomb*; and the two of them kept a persistent look-out, as they had in Fabian days, for promising young men who might be brought into the movement.

Concurrently, they were writing and publishing a number of books intended to instruct Labour supporters and potential Labour supporters in the past, present, and future of Labour and Socialism. In 1920, they brought out a revised edition of *The History of Trade Unionism*—and distributed it at very cheap rates to branches of Trade Unions, Labour

Parties, and adult education classes; in 1921 they produced a big book on *The Consumers' Co-operative Movement*. In 1920, in response to a request from the secretary of the International Socialist Bureau, they wrote their sole blue-print for Utopia, *A Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth*, and in 1923 they followed this up with a long indignant indictment of existing conditions entitled *The Decay of Capitalist Civilisation*, which drew its examples largely from the information acquired by Sidney during his sessions with the Government Committee on Trusts. In all this activity they were attempting in effect to permeate the Labour movement, actual and potential, with Fabian ideas and Fabian technique, as they had long ago endeavoured to permeate all political parties alike. In his presidential address to the 1923 Party Conference Sidney made it perfectly clear what they hoped to achieve.

He was arguing that the chief fault of the civilisation of his own day was its immorality, its failure to take account of the fact that 'morality, like economics, is part of the nature of things', and was saying that any plan for the future of society would fail unless it realised that the free competition postulated by *laissez-faire* Liberals no longer existed, that the 'overweening influence' of rich persons in politics and society was a social danger, and that widespread unemployment was not merely socially dangerous but morally intolerable. He proceeded:

'Let me insist on what our opponents habitually ignore, and indeed, what they seem intellectually incapable of understanding, namely *the inevitable gradualness* of our scheme of change. The very fact that Socialists have both principles and a programme appears to confuse nearly all their critics. If we state our principles, we are told, "That is not practicable". When we recite our programme the objection is "That is not Socialism". But why, because we are idealists, should we be supposed to be idiots? For the Labour Party, it must be plain, Socialism is rooted in political democracy; which necessarily compels us to recognise that every step towards our goal is dependent upon gaining the assent and support of at least a numerical majority of the whole people. Thus, even if we aimed at revolutionizing everything at once, we should necessarily be compelled to make each particular change only at the time, and to the extent, and in the manner in which ten or fifteen million electors, in all sorts of conditions, of all sorts of temperaments, from Land's End to the Orkneys, could be brought to consent to it. How anyone can fear that the British electorate, whatever mistakes it may make or condone, can ever go too fast or too far, is incomprehensible to me. That, indeed, is the supremely valuable safeguard of any effective democracy.'

This passage, including the italicised phrase which in after years was so angrily quoted against the Webbs but which, as we have seen was nothing new but inherent in the early Fabian doctrine, expresses with admirable clarity the Webbs' views about the development of democracy and Socialism in Britain up to the time when, influenced partly by the spectacular failure of the second Labour Government and partly by their experiences in the Soviet Union in 1932, they turned over to advocacy of Soviet Communism. This policy was what they were endeavouring to achieve in the Labour Party of the 'twenties; it remains to enquire how far they were successful.

Educating the Labour Party

THE Webbs could not, of course, have either hoped or wished to have full entire guiding influence on the development of a growing party the bulk of whose strength lay far away from London, in the industrial districts of the north and of South Wales, to hold there the predominance they had held in the London County Council, for example. Apart from the strong influence exercised by the Trade Unions on finance and in counsel, the work of building the Party machine had to be done by hundreds of obscure persons up and down the country with whom they never came in contact. (The Fabian Society, which had been so energetic in the years before the war, after 1918 tended to do its direct political work through membership of local Labour Parties, and though the Webbs remained on its Executive Committee until the 'thirties, there is no evidence that they used it to bring influence upon the Party). Sidney was a member of the Party Executive until he resigned in 1924, and undoubtedly played his part in discussing questions of organisation. But his main contribution lay in persuading the central office to set up a number of Advisory Committees on different aspects of policy—which functioned with varying success according to the extent to which they succeeded in enlisting the services of able people who did not want to be paid. All were hampered by the non-existence of adequate research services.

In the realm of declared policy and programme, the Webbian principles had it almost entirely their own way. Henderson, who became daily a more dominating figure, was in almost complete agreement with them, and *Labour and the New Social Order* remained the Party gospel. Later programmes built upon it—or in some cases watered it down—and emphasised continually 'the inevitability of gradualism'; the left-wing opposition, whether of the Guild Socialists and Syndicalists surviving from the war or of the Independent Labour Party clamouring for a more rapid advance, made as little permanent headway as did the new Communist Party attacking from outside. (The Webbs, in the 'twenties, were as anti-Communist and anti-Russian as the most ardent Social-Democrat could have desired). The policy of the Labour Party was firmly established as Fabian.

The newer and more far-reaching suggestions which they made in their own writings, however, received for less acceptance. In the *Constitution for a Socialist Commonwealth* they had proposed, with magnificent disregard for tradition, first, that the House of Commons should be cut into two halves labelled Political Parliament and Social Parliament, and secondly that the local government of Britain should be completely re-designed, that all existing units should be swept away, and their place taken by thousands of new units to be called Wards, which would be arbitrarily grouped, on grounds of convenience, in different ways for the administration of different local services. It must be admitted that both

these suggestions disclose an astonishing (in historians) failure to understand or appreciate British tradition and the emotional attachment of the Briton to his Parliament, his city, or even to his parish, and they never had the faintest chance of gaining acceptance; they fired nobody's imagination.

Even their more imaginative appeals, however, fell on pretty stony ground. 'Choose equality and flee greed', they called to their fellow-Socialists, echoing Matthew Arnold forty years before, and they laid tremendous stress on the bad social manners produced by capitalism.

'We do not,' they wrote in *The Decay of Capitalist Civilisation*, 'think it compatible with the manners of a gentleman to give the governess a cheaper wine than is served to the other persons at table, nor even to put off the servants' hall with cheaper meat. But towards the great unknown mass of our fellow-citizens, *who are really sitting down with us at the world's table*, this principle of good manners is observed only by a tiny minority, even among those who think themselves well-bred.'

So far, so good—even if the use of the words 'governess' and 'servants' hall' did not carry with them a slight *de-haut-en-bas* patronising implication not very pleasing to working-class members of the Labour Party, who did not like to think of themselves as part of the servants' hall¹. But there was also a suggestion—often, no doubt unconscious—that what the Webbs meant by 'good social manners' was a universal living at the standard of the Webbs, suitably adapted to those of lower incomes, a ban on extravagance of any kind, and an abolition of titles, honours, and all the apparatus of snobbery. Beatrice herself certainly felt this very strongly. She had 'rational austerity' in her bones; part, at any rate, of her subsequent falling-in-love with the Soviet Union was its stern prohibition of unnecessary luxury to members of the Russian Communist Party. And she genuinely hated the hierarchical snobbery of London Society; when, purely for administrative reasons, Sidney agreed to take a peerage, she firmly refused to make any concessions with regard to her own name. She was Mrs. Sidney Webb, and Mrs. Sidney Webb she would remain, however much it upset the heads of the Colonial Office or the wives of Governor-Generals.

In spite, however, of its past republican principles—now fast fading as the occupant of the Throne made concessions to democratic practice which must have made his grandmother turn in her grave—the inarticulate feeling of the Labour Party was not with Mrs. Webb. Like a very large number of his fellow-countrymen, the rank-and-file member had an affection for a lord—and the party leader, Ramsay MacDonald, shared this to what later proved an unfortunate extent. Nor did the average member—still less, of course, those outside the ranks of the party—feel any strong sympathy with ideas of austere standards of living imposed as a general social principle and not, as during wartime, in response to a temporary state of national emergency.

Whatever the cause, Mrs. Webb did have an impression, during the 'twenties, that the Labour Party was failing to give what she considered

¹ Many candidates in election times have discovered the danger of describing the voter whose support they solicit as 'living in a slum'—even if he does.

an imaginative lead to the country; again and again in those years visitors to their week-end home at Passfield Corner, near Liphook (first acquired in 1923) remember her saying—while she was still strongly opposed to the Russian Communist Party and all its works—that if Socialism were to make real progress and a real appeal to the British people it would somehow have to evolve a dedicated Order, something resembling the Society of Jesus, which should exact a high standard of training, discipline and self-control among its members, and which would furnish, therefore, a leadership of the *élite* to guide the mass of the citizens to a Socialist State. She did not feel that the Labour Party—with whose organisation, it must be remembered, she had not the day-to-day contact which Sidney had—either wanted to be or could be the nucleus of such an Order, and thus, though she remained a perfectly loyal member and M.P.'s wife, she was becoming, if not disillusioned, at least slightly bored, and was developing gradually to the point at which, moved by the Labour collapse of 1931 and the spectacle of Soviet Russia forging ahead, she impatiently told a Fabian audience that 'the inevitability of gradualism is dead.'

I do not mean to imply that there was any fundamental disagreement within the partnership; there was not. There was only a slight difference of emphasis, increased, possibly, by the fact that as Beatrice grew older she found the physical strain of living in London, with its crowds, its cars, and its noise, increasingly difficult to endure, and tended to retreat more and more often to Passfield Corner, 'with no dogs or cocks within hearing', as the advertisement ran, and to stay there in meditation while Sidney went through his political grind. This spelt some loneliness to her, but to the world much advantage, for it was in that retreat that her remarkable and unique autobiography, *My Apprenticeship*, was written.

Of *My Apprenticeship* (1926), the book about which Beatrice was more nervous than she had been about any of her own work since her youthful appearances before the Anti-Sweating Committee—perhaps because in it she had to forego entirely the help from Sidney which had been so readily forthcoming on the public documents which bore her name, and had to stand on her own unaided feet—much could be written if there were space. Here it must suffice to say that as well as being an astonishingly interesting, candid, and well-written book, it is much more than a mere autobiography. Its purpose is to tell the story of a fine mind of the late Victorian era searching at once for a profession and a faith to live by; it does this in a series of historical essays into which are woven pieces of vital contemporary description quoted directly from the author's own *Diaries*. It is thus indispensable reading for the student of society; and it may be added that anyone who wants to get a picture of the character, purpose, and personal idiosyncracies of the Webbs and who finds the massive style of their long books—for which Sidney must take the main responsibility—rather hard to get along with, cannot do better than begin by reading *My Apprenticeship*, followed by the posthumous *Our Partnership* and the *Diary* volumes and, for good measure, by *Methods of Social Study* (1932), quoted above, which was based on a series of broadcast talks given by her.

10

MP and Minister

BEFORE *Methods of Social Study* was published Sidney had become, and had ceased to be, a Cabinet Minister; he had resigned his Seaham seat (to MacDonald) with the simple words 'It is too much for me, and in two years' time it will be very much too much for me.' They had given up their house in Grosvenor Road and retired—or so they thought—permanently to the country; they had completed the last of their great Local Government volumes, that on the history of the New Poor Law, had visited the exiled Trotsky on Lake Prinkipo, and thought very little either of him or of the government which had expelled him; after the election of 1929 they had reluctantly, at MacDonald's request, sent Sidney back into harness, as a peer in charge of the Colonial Office, and seen the ignominious collapse of the second Labour Government and written its epitaph. One might well have thought that this second retirement was final, though, as everyone knows, their last great venture, and their last great book, was yet to come, and their disappointments over British politics were to be amply compensated by what they saw in Soviet Russia.

On Sidney's record as a Cabinet Minister, as on his record in Parliament, it is not necessary to dwell at any great length. He was not, at either, an outstanding success, partly, as I have said, because he was too old when he began, and partly, as it seems to me in retrospect, because he undertook them not eagerly, but as a duty he owed to the Labour movement. His enthusiasm was never deeply engaged, as in the days of the London County Council and the Technical Education Committee; and one could detect no trace of regret when his period of service came to an end.

It went without saying, of course, in view of his position in the Party that if and when it was invited to form a Government he would be offered Cabinet rank. When this happened, rather sooner than anyone had expected, he took the Board of Trade, an unspectacular office in which a good deal of his time was occupied in handling tiresome issues left over from the war. As would have been expected, he carried out all his duties with great competence and won the confidence both of his permanent officials and the business executives with whom he had dealings; but the principal event of his tenure of the Board of Trade was the setting-up by him of the Balfour Committee on Trade and Industry which reported so voluminously over a number of years. He played no part in the events which led to the downfall of the first Labour Government, and so deep had he dug himself into the hearts of the voters of Seaham that the ensuing election showed a reduction of less than a thousand in his majority. Returning as an Opposition member, he played a prominent part in the debates on Neville Chamberlain's Local Government Act, the subject of which was of course peculiarly his own; and while fiercely criticising its derating proposals he nevertheless rejoiced that, twenty

years after Beatrice's *Minority Report*, the hated Guardians of the Poor, if not the Poor Law itself, were to be abolished.

The Colonial Secretaryship, which he took on in 1929, was a different matter, and far less smooth going than the Board of Trade. It was the Department in which he had himself served as a young civil servant; he knew its ramifications and its problems of old; he was pleased—and slightly amused—to find himself in charge of such dozens of separate territories, with so many differing forms of government; he liked his staff and got on with them, and he looked forward to being able to do good work in the establishment of greater amenities in the Colonies and the promotion of native welfare. In fact, he did do a good deal, most of a rather unspectacular though useful kind. He started Ceylon on the road to self-government, and saw Iraq made into an independent State; he abolished the system of Mui Tsai (child slave-labour) in Hong Kong, and set on foot enquiries into education, health services, factory acts, juvenile delinquency and a host of other subjects, and the White Paper he wrote on *Native Policy in East Africa* was a good Liberal State Paper—as was shown by the hullabaloo it called forth from white settlers in Kenya and South African leaders who believed that the proper policy towards natives was to keep them well under. But 'enlightened' as was his attitude towards Africans in tutelage, he was not really up-to-date in the changes in the outlook of colonials and colonial reformers in forty years, and he quickly gained the reputation of a reactionary among those champions of the Africans who wanted to proceed faster and farther than the white settlers or the Colonial Governors were prepared to go. Webb's lifelong respect for the expert, the man, be he civil servant or bricklayer, who really knew his job, in this situation served him ill; he did not seem to realise, as he would have realised when he was younger, that his official advisers, whether in the Colonial Office or in Kenya or Tanganyika, might be perfectly competent and perfectly wrong.

What overshadowed all his period of office, however, was the problem which has whitened the hairs of many another Colonial Secretary, the problem of Palestine—which one may here add, should never have been put on the shoulders of Colonial Secretaries at all; as a matter of high strategy it was controlled by the Foreign Office and the military authorities. Webb had barely taken office when the troubles between Jew and Arab began, with the riots at the Wailing Wall, and subsequent reports and commissions only made things worse. There is no need to go into details about the propaganda, the wranglings and tergiversations which only foreshadowed the much more tragic happenings that subsequent years had in store; the upshot was that in 1930, after a Cabinet White Paper had aroused a violent Parliamentary storm, the Colonial Secretary was in effect removed from control of the Palestinian question, which was handed over to a committee presided over by the Foreign Secretary.

It was a colossal snub. Anyone else but Webb would have promptly resigned, and some of his friends regretted that he did not do so, but he acquiesced in his own supersession. One of the reasons was undoubtedly his own genuine personal humility; he would always have strongly dis-

liked taking overt action on a question of personal prestige. Another, however, was that when it came to the point he did not really greatly care; he was not on the side of either Jew or Arab and was inclined to think, if not to say, 'a plague on both of your houses', and would not have regarded a difference of opinion over Palestine as a reason for resignation, for breaking up the Labour team. I am inclined to think, also, that by that date—the winter of 1930, when the bankruptcy of Labour policy with regard to increasing unemployment was already painfully apparent—that he was already coming nearer to Beatrice's state of doubt and disillusionment with the Labour Party, and beginning to share her increasing interests in Russia. But this is conjecture.

Whatever the truth, his confidence in MacDonald, never very great, was by no means increased by that statesman's treatment of him; and he—and Beatrice—received with hardly a tremor of surprise the events of the following summer, when MacDonald, having presented his Cabinet with a programme of cuts in the pay of Government servants and the unemployed which they refused to accept, tendered their and his own resignation, and reappeared next day as head of a Government composed almost entirely of their enemies; one would almost have imagined that they had expected nothing else. They were rather astonished by the thumping majority secured by MacDonald in the election, therein, as more than once before, completely misjudging popular emotional reactions; but they were not much moved. Their faces were set eastwards.

The Soviet Union

FOR a good many years the Webbs had nothing good to say of the Soviet State. When the Bolsheviki first took command they regarded them as a new and unpleasing variety of anarchists or syndicalists such as had made up the various oppositions within the pre-war Fabian Society; and so long as they were trying to make the Labour Party into a workable instrument of Socialism they had no use for anyone who called its leaders 'social traitors.' Neither the enlightened labour laws, the social reforms set on foot, the sex equality of the new Russia, nor the panegyrics of visitors like George Lansbury, moved them at all; they thought it all merely revolutionary romanticism. Even the start, in 1928, of the first Five-Year Plan, which might have been expected to excite their interest, did not do so: they were not looking in that direction.

But in the middle of 1930, when Sidney was in the Cabinet and Beatrice alone at Passfield Corner, she began to read books about the Soviet Union, and what she read gradually excited her more and more. Could it be that there, in the most backward part of Europe, was developing a really Socialist society, a society based on production for use and not for profit, a society where the people collectively owned the means of production and their exploitation was collectively planned, a society which had abolished unemployment and was putting into effect, as fast as conditions allowed, a programme of social services which might have been taken straight from Fabian Tracts, a society which fostered, and encouraged Trade Unions, Co-operative Societies, and municipal enterprise, a society which denied supernatural religion and replaced its values by a Religion of Scientific Humanism, a society, finally, which was effectively run by a trained and dedicated Order—the Communist Party? Could such things be? The Russian Ambassador said they were, and produced consular reports; foreign observers of trained intelligence said they were; soon the Webbs' old friend Bernard Shaw, went on a trip to Russia and came back bubbling with excitement. The western countries, in the icy grip of unemployment, falling production, and reaction—almost of Fascism—seemed to prove clearly the utter bankruptcy and hopelessness of the capitalist world. They would go to Russia themselves and see whether there was really a Socialist sun rising in the East.

In May, 1932 they landed in Leningrad—two people well over seventy years old—and were received with almost regal honours, as befitted the authors whose *History of Trade Unionism* Lenin had translated in jail. In August they returned—after Beatrice had fallen ill and tested the Soviet health services from the consumer angle—and set to work on their *Soviet Communism*, the most enormous political guide-book in history; and it is no exaggeration to say that, from the moment they set foot on Russian soil, the rest of the political world, even in-

cluding Nazi Germany, for them had thenceforward only a comparatively shadowy existence.

For those of us who have lived on after their death, and have watched the changes which Fascism and world-war have worked upon the Soviet political system which they hailed so joyfully, it is easy enough to feel superior and to smile a rueful pitying smile at the aged Webbs falling so passionately in love (as they always readily admitted) with the institutions of the country which has altered so much from what they thought they found. But it is important not to be too wise after the event. Russia was in 1932, and for many years afterwards remained, literally the hope of the world for the working classes—witness the leap-up in British war production which took place after June 22nd, 1941, when Hitler made the Russian workers into allies of the British; it is at least worth noting that in *Soviet Communism*, the most uncritical of all their books, the Webbs came nearer to the heart of the ordinary worker than in all their major works and their political efforts put together; it is of some significance that a taxi-driver who took them, long afterwards, to a dinner at the Soviet Embassy kept them waiting while he expressed his admiration of that book.

The book itself, moreover, was not as uncritical as some who have not taken the pains to read it through have imagined. Granted that in the Soviet Union the Webbs thought they had found something very like the perfect Fabian State, and so advertised it, they did not swallow the whole apparatus: they observed and permitted themselves publicly to criticise aspects of the regime which they thought bad—the occasional outbursts of chauvinism against the west, for example, the enforcement of Marxist orthodoxy, the hostile policy of the Comintern to the outside world, and the repressive remains of the Tsarist police state. Where they went wrong, and many with them, was in taking at face value the time-honoured Marxist assertions that these inevitable concomitants of a proletarian revolution achieved by violence would in a comparatively brief while 'wither away' and disappear. As Beatrice told an interviewer¹:

'Even in our casual contact with members of the Communist Party, the repression of free thought and free expression, in all that concerns the structure of human society, was obvious; it was in fact openly defended as a necessary "war measure" to ensure national unity in the presence of a powerful enemy at home and abroad. More sensational, but I think, *more likely to disappear*, is the occasional physical terrorism, the trapdoor disappearance of unwanted personalities; the ostracism and persecution of innocent but inconvenient workers.'

They did not disappear, the power of the State has not 'withered away', in Moscow or anywhere else. But that was in the future.

As the above extract, which is only one of several which might have been selected, shows quite clearly, the Webbs did not travel through the Soviet Union in blinkers. As honoured guests, they were naturally shown the best the country had to display; but its failures were not con-

¹ *Clarion*. October 8, 1932.

cealed from them, and they did their best to keep their eyes open, though on a matter of agriculture, which in 1932 was paying very heavily for the first ill-considered experiments in collectivisation, they were no experts and did not see what was happening. The most that can be alleged against them is, having all their lives—however little they realised it—cared more for equality and efficiency than for personal freedom, they took much too lightly the threat of the Communist system to the human liberties of individuals. Here again, though, they erred in very good company—in 1932.

The criticisms they originally made, however, were considerably less emphasised as the years went on. The first edition of *Soviet Communism* bore the sub-title *A New Civilisation?*: it is significant that in subsequent editions the query disappeared and polemical prefaces were added defending the Soviet Union root-and-branch. This is not really surprising, for the march of events was steadily hardening capitalist and liberal opposition. The great Russian treason trials began the year after the book was published; then came the long drawn-out failure of east and west to come together over foreign policy, culminating in the Soviet-German Pact, Russian neutrality in the war and the attack on Finland. Throughout the period, the Webbs held stoutly to their faith—Sidney rather more stoutly than Beatrice, who was obviously perturbed both by the circumstances of the trials and by the Russian language of friendship to Hitler. But she never seriously wavered, and she never allowed any misgivings she may have had to find public utterance. The more the outside world vilified Soviet Russia, the more stoutly she defended it, so that visitors to Passfield during the late 'thirties were sometimes inclined to feel that they had been fed entirely on information about things Russian. But it is certain that she was as relieved at heart as the bulk of the British working class when Russia became an ally; and she lived long enough to learn of the triumphant defence of Stalingrad.

12

Conclusion

THE rest is epilogue—a happy, tranquil, interested old age at Passfield Corner, cared for by faithful Scottish maidservants. Beatrice's last public position was that of President of the revived Fabian Society, which she held from 1939 until 1941, when the blitz finally made visits to London an impossibility; she did not think, of course, that it was the dedicated Socialist Society of her dreams, but she regarded it as the most hopeful political venture in the Britain of '39. 'Long live the Fabian Society,' she wrote in her last presidential message, and she continued to take interest in it and its doings until her death. Sidney, after a serious illness in 1938, retired completely from public life.

This did not mean, however, that they took no further interest in politics and society; far otherwise. Apart from the absorbing delights of Soviet Communism, they read and discussed incessantly, wrote articles and reviews, and took holidays at home and abroad (trying air travel in 1937, to their great pleasure!). Beatrice had broadcast with some success, and more than one University saluted her with honorary degrees. Later, as their physical energies waned, they tended more and more to remain at Passfield Corner and to be visited by streams of persons, small and great, who were either bidden to talk and to be questioned or came to pay their homage—on one occasion over a hundred of the descendants of Beatrice's sisters attended a tea-party on her lawn. The most vivid memory, indeed, which most of the present generation have of the Webbs is of week-end visits to Passfield Corner, of Beatrice's tall figure welcoming them at the open door, of walks over the rough grass and heather of the common-land, of long regulated sessions of talk in the lounge, Sidney reclining with his feet up, and Beatrice on a low stool, with skirt drawn up and hands stretched out to the fire, discoursing about 'holism', Toynbee's philosophy of history, 'modern' novels, and what not, canvassing the merits of present and prospective leaders of Labour, or simply gossiping, in her amusingly acid manner, about Asquith and Haldane and other figures of her prime.

Beatrice died in the spring of 1943 after a very short illness; Sidney in the autumn of 1947. After her death the Order of Merit was conferred on him in explicit recognition of the work of the Partnership; in December 1947 the ashes of both were laid in Westminster Abbey.

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There is no space, even if it were not something of an impertinence, to evaluate here the work of the Partnership. A few things, however, must be said. The greatest concrete contribution of the Webbs to British political life is to be found in research and in the building of institutions. As research workers they were original, purposeful, and magnificently thorough; they had a remarkable sense of what, from the social angle, needed to be undertaken; they blazed many trails, and were

untiring in the pursuit of facts and extremely scrupulous in both verifying and giving their references. Not everyone, naturally, would agree with all their conclusions, but there is not the faintest likelihood that the work they did upon local government and Trade Unions, to take only two examples, will ever be upset.

The same is the case with institutions; as *founders* they were almost uniquely successful. They knew exactly how to do it; they knew how to make plans, how to obtain initial support, and—by careful and thoughtful study—how to enlist others, from the millionaire to the small Trade Union branch, and how to keep them interested. They were experts in all organisational devices, and never too proud to learn from others. Moreover, they possessed two very valuable qualities not always found in brilliant organisers; they could recognise a failure and cut their losses, and, in the much more frequent case of a success, they knew when to sit back and let it alone. They never fussed over their spiritual children or attempted to keep them in tutelage; and the London system of higher education, the London School of Economics, the *New Statesman*, and the Fabian Society stand as monuments to their foresight and self-restraint.

In the realm of politics direct they were less successful, mainly because of a certain failure to understand and appreciate the irrational emotions of men—not merely of men in the mass, but of individual men whom they hoped to influence. Most of their general political agitations, whether ‘permeation’ or nationwide campaign, failed in the short run, and the Utopia they wrote struck a spark in nobody’s heart; when the purposes of their agitation were eventually achieved, it was through other agencies than theirs. It was this lack of emotional understanding, this blind spot in their remarkable mental equipment, which caused them to be taken by surprise by outbursts of popular feeling, over the South African War, for example, or in 1931. It also accounted, in part, for the bitterness shown by a few who disagreed with them and who cried out, with obvious sincerity, that the Webbs were not democratic at all, but illiberal old bureaucrats without a spark of humanity; it may, as I have suggested, have played a part in their uncritical advocacy of Soviet Communism.

But if that is admitted, it must also be admitted that to accuse them of lacking common human kindness is stark nonsense. Not merely did they devote their lives to disinterested service for the public good, and swallow—and forgive!—attacks and insults, even from their fellow-workers, which lesser spirits would have furiously resented; they were also, personally among the kindest people in the world. They cast off no friends, nor spared themselves trouble to help them in difficulty; they were endlessly interested in younger workers in the same field, and often regarded them with real affection that looked for no return. Furthermore, they never displayed either arrogance or any conviction that they had said the last word, even upon the subjects they had made peculiarly their own, or that the truth would die with them; even in their ‘eighties they never posed as Great Persons who ought not to be contradicted—and of how many Great Persons in our history could this have been said?

They combined personal modesty of this kind with a deep conviction that on the whole they were right. This conviction, by and large, has been supported by events. On particular issues, no doubt, they made mistakes, like other human beings. But—and this is the final word—on general principles and the future of the modern world, the shape they gave to political thought, the demand for Socialist planning and organisation, for an essential minimum of civilised existence, for standards of measurement and publicity in human affairs, for tolerance, accuracy, and devotion among servants of the community, has never been seriously called in question; and among architects of British society in the mid-twentieth century two of the names which most unmistakably stand out are those of Beatrice and Sidney Webb.



For
Further Reading

My Apprenticeship by Beatrice Webb 18/-

Our Partnership by Beatrice Webb 25/-

Beatrice Webb's Diaries edited by
1912-24 Margaret Cole 24/-

The Webb's and Their Work edited by Margaret Cole 15/-

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