

Edward Johns Urwick
1867-1945

Harold A. Innis

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Edward Johns Urwick, 1867-1945

By HAROLD A. INNIS

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Professor Edward Johns Urwick was born in Cheshire, England in 1867. He was educated at Uppingham and Oxford, taking a first class in *Literae Humaniores* in 1890. He was a poor law guardian from 1900 to 1905, a member of the Port of London immigration board from 1897 to 1903, sub-warden of Toynbee Hall from 1899 to 1902, director of the London School of Sociology and Social Economics from 1904 to 1910, professor of Economic Science at King's College, London from 1907 to 1914, professor of Social Philosophy at the University of London from 1914 to 1924, President of Morley Memorial College from 1903 to 1923 and director of the department of Social Science and Administration in the London School of Economics from 1910 to 1923. He became head of the department of Political Economy in the University of Toronto in 1927 and acting director of the department of Social Science (now the School of Social Work) in 1928. He retired in 1937 though he continued to give lectures in Sociology and served as chairman of the Welfare Council of Toronto until his retirement to Vancouver in 1940. From 1934 to 1936 he was vice-chairman of the Toronto Housing Centre. In 1930 he delivered the Loch Memorial lecture at Lincoln's Inn. He published *Studies of Boy Life in Great Cities* (1905), *Luxury and Waste* (1906), *A Philosophy of Social Progress* (1912), *The Message of Plato* (1920), *The Social Good* (1927), as well as numerous articles and reviews. As President of the Canadian Political Science Association in 1932-3 he gave an address on "Freedom in our Time." He wrote an article for the first number of the *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* in 1935 on "The Role of Intelligence in the Social Process," a review of F. H. Knight, *Ethics of Competition* in 1937, and of R. M. MacIver, *Society, a Textbook of Sociology* in 1938.

His published work and a manuscript entitled "Values True and False" left at his death, which it is hoped will be published as part of a memorial volume, elaborated the philosophical approach which he advanced in *A Philosophy of Social Progress*. He wrote "no social science of any

department of social phenomena is decisive in the sense of being in a position to dictate to us the necessary or the best lines of conduct.” (p. 5) “No two human beings see the same social fact.” (p. 272) “It is a defect of all citizens . . . to think a great deal about rights, and a very little about the correlative duties.” (p. 189) “No aim is true which is not spiritual—that is, which is not consciously directed to bringing nearer the attainment of the only absolutely good end, the realization of the true individual as supreme over both society and self.” (p. 247) “We cannot help elaborating beautiful paper schemes; the tendency is an inveterate one, and perhaps ineradicable now, so great is the encouragement it has received from our successes in dealing with the forces of inorganic nature by means of elaborate calculation, which, in that field, are entirely justified. And so we find every one, from individual faddists to sober county councils and even governments, preparing all kinds of schemes of wholesale improvement in the firm belief that they will ‘work’. But they never work. They may grow into a valuable part of the social tissue; or they may die away after causing some temporary discomfort. The only quite certain thing is that they will not act as a well-devised piece of mechanism would: they will operate in ways and produce effects unexpected and unforeseen by their inventors.” (p. 87) In *The Message of Plato* he traced the influence of Indian philosophy on Plato and in turn on Christianity. “All religion is one—in its central message.” (p. 235) He wrote in the tradition of English deism as a philosopher attempting to reconcile religious thought. *The Social Good* rounded out his argument. “I have tried to show that, after all, the individual citizen is the *causa causans* of all change, and ultimately of all social weal and woe.” In the struggle between Greek philosophy and the Hebraic tradition and Roman law, between religion and philosophy, and science and force which has torn Western society into fragments, he was on the side of the former as a Hellenist and a Platonist. “One of the mysteries which I have never found explained is that Plato’s works disappeared for a thousand years after the fifth or sixth centuries, and his influence was therefore lost both on the church and on the universities. Aristotle of course survived, and was indeed a second bible of the Schoolmen; but that rather closed their minds than opened them, as bibles so often do.” Throughout his writing there ran a humorous note of which an example must suffice, “We just hope to awake on the other side of the grave very much as we now are—only considerably improved in condition and surrounded by our friends, and a few of our relatives,—also very much as they now are, only vastly improved in temper.” (*The Message of Plato*, p. 212.) He was fond of quoting—

“I never cared for literature as such.
The spondee, dactyl, trochee, anapaest
Do not inflame my passions in the least,
And cultured people do not please me much.

“One man above all else is dear to me,
Who . . . tired by word and deed
Against the world, and sitting back to write
Sets forth his paternoster and his creed.”

He did more than write. Inspired by Plato he was one of those released from the cave who returned to those still in chains and tried to persuade them to see the light. His untiring zeal in the interest of social reform was shown on every hand. His life illustrated the ideals described in his work.

After retiring to the Pacific coast he found it more difficult to strike new roots. In a letter dated November 18, 1940, he wrote “I came here to escape, but I begin to see that there is no escape. V — — is not just a single peculiar place. I am afraid the inhabitants of that otherwise pleasant city are only a type,—or rather an exaggerated sub-species—of a very common and worldwide order. They are doubtless quite virtuous people; but their one obvious virtue is blind loyalty, or better, a swarm of blind loyalties instilled into them by school and college and club and social class—the loyalties of which the old school tie is the symbol, and whose influence successfully petrifies their minds for the rest of time. They never think or have thought about the objects of their loyalties—Empire, Religion, the British way of life, the Upper Classes, the importance of being a Gentleman, and all the other idols of blind class interest. With this equipment of principle, they go through life clad in the triple brass of ignorance, arrogance, and obstinacy, incapable of doing anything except obstruct progress and poison thought.

“But of course these dear people are everywhere; and they don’t all come from England! They have slightly different spots in Canada and the States, and they are perhaps less obviously offensive. But we breed them or manufacture them successfully, both men and women. We too have our eternally damned old gentlemen (and ladies), our intolerable snobs in the professions and in business, our breeding grounds of fraternities and societies and junior leagues and political clubs—and Senates. And our — — and — — and — —, and all the retired fire-eaters are quite passable imitations of the Halifaxes and Duff-Coopers and Hannons of England.

“I have to confess that I have been associated with these people and almost one of them for much of my life. No foe so bitter as a renegade! I

have been gradually awaking during the last dozen years. After — — I am pretty fully awake, and for the moment rather hopeless. I seem to see a world bound tight by lies in respectable letters of guilt for so long. Worst of all perhaps, I see many good people, shocked by the discovery that these gilded falsehoods really are false, turning in despair to an even more dangerous set of falsehoods. ‘After all, democracy is a bit of a fraud and a failure. An authoritarian State need not be so bad: it could be managed by the best people. It would certainly be far more efficient and perhaps not really inimical to reasonable liberty.’ In other words, let us return to the Middle Ages.

“We talk of war aims, and the new order after the war—of democracy and liberty and really free enterprise. But do the people in charge, from Churchill downwards, ever want anything except manipulated democracy (government of the people by a few of the people for the benefit of some groups of the people, with the deluded consent of many of the people), and liberty incorporated in the hands of the privileged, but with freedom unlimited for the enterprising grabbers and determined keepers of humanity’s best goods?” He sent marked quotations from G. A. Dorsey, *Why We Behave Like Human Beings*, “Are our parents and teachers setting examples of rational and intellectual living, and are they getting into the rising generation such an outlook on life, such a conception of the possibilities of life, and such a comprehension of the unlimited capacities for life, that the next generation will inevitably live a broader, saner, sounder, and more intellectual life than we are living?” “We assume that compulsory education makes for intelligence. But does it? What has the boy or girl of intelligent behaviour on leaving school? To say that they have a smattering of this and of that is to say what everybody knows and what has been said thousands of times: that they have added a few hundred words to their vocabulary, have memorized a few facts and formulae, have dissected a fishworm (possibly) and a flower, and have read several hundred pages of history and polite literature. That may be education, but it is not life; nor is it hitched to human lives or human society; nor is it intelligence.” “Curricula change and lists of ‘electives’ grow like weeds, but the human nature in the professors and in the pupils remains the same. The school merely demands that a certain amount of specified number of courses be absorbed; the success of a course is measured by the number that take it. The curriculum itself reads like a mail-order catalogue. No conceivable course is omitted, except one on life and how to get more out of it with less friction to others and less lost motion to the liver.” On December 30, 1942, he wrote “We talk about the militarism of Germany and Japan, but is it not the case that the real

enemy of human progress is the militarism in the hearts of men of all nations? The exaltation of the profession of a soldier, the worship of military pomp and glitter, the respect for a military caste, the unconfessed belief that there can be no order without a military organization at the top—all these things make one rather hopeless about the future. And there is of course, the persistent desire of most of our oligarchs to get *all* the younger generation under their control, in peacetime as well as in war. I am afraid the academic mind (which is often snobbish) harbours these wrong attitudes almost as much as financiers and exploiters in the market-place.” In one of his later letters he wrote: “I despair of a return to the sane atmosphere in which Adam Smith quite naturally combined the moral sentiments with his scientific thought about economic forces. The whole trend today is to exalt the rationalist scientific approach and to discard the philosophical. I am not thinking only of the worship of the physical and mechanical sciences, but rather of the attempt to make ethics, philosophy, sociology, etc. conform in method and language to the physical sciences—with disastrous results. Specialization runs mad, and when it does so, *never* leads to understanding. Its natural result is strife and violent dogmatism. I wonder whether we shall get into a saner atmosphere within the next two or three generations.”

His was a great life. He contributed much to London and in turn to Toronto. The writer remembers a comment by him that he had spent much of his life encouraging emigration from the poorer districts of London only to find them in the slums of Canadian cities. But in his efforts in their behalf in both centres he showed his profound belief in the individual. As an administrator, as a teacher, as a scholar, as a philosopher, and as a colleague and friend there burned through those piercing eyes of his the life about which he wrote and told.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Edward Johns Urwick* by Harold A. Innis]