Manuscript: All in the Day's Work, Chapter 20, Nothing New Under the Sun

Tarbell, Ida M.

http://hdl.handle.net/10456/34852

©Allegheny College. All rights reserved.

All materials in the Allegheny College DSpace Repository are subject to college policies and Title 17 of the U.S. Code.
CHAPTER XX

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

Here then is the record of my day's work still unfinished at eighty. I began it that I might be free to find answers to questions which life was asking me. After long floundering I blundered into man's old struggle for the betterment of his life.

My point of attack has always been that of a journalist after the fact, rarely that of a reformer, the advocate of a cause or a system. If I was tempted from the straight and narrow path of the one who seeks for that which is so and why it is so, I sooner or later returned. This was partly because of the humor and common sense of my associates on McClure's and The American Magazines, and partly because the habit of accepting without question the teachings and conventions of my world was shattered when in girlhood I discovered that the world was not created in six days of twenty four hours each. That experience aroused me to questioning, qualifying, even what I advocated, as no first class crusader can afford to do.

I have worked steadily and for the most part honestly - there have been slips - at the problems I tackled,
but I have never had illusions about the value of my individual contributions. I realized early that what a man or a woman does is built on what those who have gone before have done, that its real value depends on making the matter in hand a little clearer, a little sounder for those who come after. We are time builders. Nobody begins or ends anything. He is a link, weak or strong, in an endless chain. One of our gravest mistakes is persuading ourselves that nobody has passed this way before.

In our eagerness to prove we have found the true solution we fail to inquire why this same solution failed to work when tried before for it always has been tried before, even if we in our self-confidence do not know it.

There are certain exhibits of the eighty years I have lived which particularly impress me. Perhaps the first of these is the cyclical character of man's nature and activities. The generations repeat all that is essential in them. If I separate my eighty years - 1857 to 1937 - into four generations, examine them, compare my findings, I find startling similarities in essentials. Take the effort to create, distribute and use wealth. How alike are the ups and downs that have marked that effort.

I was born in 1857 in the year of a major panic. The depression which followed it was smothered in war. That war over quickly there followed in 1866 a serious
The state, not the individual, is the end.

[Handwritten text partially legible]
explained by the fact that the work of each generation has been carried on by an increasingly large number of people handling the increasingly large wealth produced by their inventiveness, energy, genius for business. Each generation of my four has made a sad exhibit of itself by repeating panics and depressions traceable to similar causes and each seems to have learned little or nothing from its predecessor.

Side by side with these discouraging exhibits have gone magnificent attempts to correct abuses, to make man's life in the Republic freer, safer, more just, efforts to carry out the avowed purpose of the government we started a hundred and fifty years ago. And these efforts are alike in essentials - the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt's, the New Freedom of Woodrow Wilson, the Square Deal of Theodore Roosevelt, the fight for a larger freedom of opportunity of Grover Cleveland, the struggle to wipe out slavery of Abraham Lincoln.

Generations repeat their leaders. Side by side in each generation men endowed with superior brains and inspired by love of power and possession launch their selfish schemes. In each generation we have our Carnegies, our Rockefellers, our Goulds, and if each of them has left something sinister behind each has also left something fine. The public without whom they could not have lived a day has seen behind
their greedy grandiose undertakings something for its benefit, and have taken that while they have ordered their government to control whatever was sinister.

And while they built and served and exploited other men endowed with an idealism as great as their practical ability planned new forms of government, new laws, advertised panaceas, all guaranteed to produce security and justice. Each generation has had its Henry George, its Bellamy, its Bryan, intent on persuading mankind that he had found the way, could lead men to the good life.

In each generation employer and employee have faced the decision — war or cooperation. If war has been the answer in the majority of cases there have always been those who have gone ahead building up a great mass of evidence of what men can do in industry by patient cooperative experiments when inspired by goodwill, rather than suspicion and self-interest.

Again and again in these generations have we seen the great ship of democracy lift from the ground, stagger, gather itself together, soar, sail, while those who had chosen the pilot and loaded in his cargo watched the flight with confidence and exultation. This time their dream had come true.

But the ship has come back, its journey unfinished and doubters have jeered at those who believed in it.
cried out that it would never run, that freedom, equal
opportunity were only foolish fancies; men, they gloated,
function only under strong single rulers. Dictator-
ship alone makes efficient government - national power
and glory. The state, not the individual, is the end.

There is no denying that these repeated
failures or half successes made cynics of many of us who
had had a hand in the flights, at least been sympathetic
watchers.

It has been sickening to see hopes grow dim
as I have again and again under the hammering of reality,
a generation losing its first grand fire sinking into apathy,
cynicism. One asks himself if man has the staying power
ever to realize his ideals and he is very inclined when this
hour of futility comes to agree with Arthur Balfour that
human life is but a disreputable episode on one of the minor
planets. As far as I am concerned that smart and cynical
estimate never could stand a good night's sleep.
If I find little satisfaction or hope in examining and comparing one by one my four successive generations I find considerable in looking at them as a whole. When I do that I see not a group of cycles rolling one after another along a rocky and uneven road but a spiral - the group moves upward. To be sure it is not a very steady spiral, but I am convinced that is the real movement.

Could there be greater reason that this is true than that the world as a whole has today come to conscious grips over that most fundamental of problems: in Shall all men cooperate in an effort to make a free, peaceful, orderly world, or shall we consent that strong men make a world to their liking, forcing us to live in it. More than that train us to carry it on.

It is well that the issue should be clear, so clear that each of us must be forced to choose.
Even more hopeful, if not so clear to so many people, are the demonstrations the last two decades particularly have given us, that the kind of world those who choose democracy want can never be made by force. It is no time for recrimination but it is a time for taking stock. What have we today out of our appeals to force in the name of democracy? Wars, revolutions, strikes. We launched a magnificent plane when we put up the League of Nations, but into its making went greed, fear, hate, a desire to punish, as well as to re-make and run a peaceful world. The seeds of force have germinated as all human experience warned they would, and the guardians of peace did not uproot them when they appeared, did not replace them with the seeds of conciliation, understanding, humanity.

We will never get the kind of world I am convinced the great mass of men and women want through force. They want a world which will give them a spot where they can work together in peace with one another. They are not after riches, but security of their own making, freedom to build in the way they like. The job for those who would protect, develop civilization, is not writing new Constitutions, training armies or devising automatic cures, it is disciplining and training common men and women the world over to honest labor, to cooperation with their fellows, to sacrifice when
necessary, keeping alive in them their natural spark of freedom. How are we going to do it? That is the gravest question we face. Our planes fall because we have never satisfactorily answered it. We have thought the plane was enough.

In 1921 I went to Washington to report Secretary Hughes' Conference on the Limitation of Armaments. It seemed to me that I better do some preliminary reading on the problems, so I went to a wise man at the Carnegie Peace Foundation for advice. He turned out to be a philosopher.

"First," said he, "read Don Quixote. He will tell you what they cannot do. Then read Aesop's Fables, that will tell you what they can do. But above all read the St. James version of the Bible which tells you that peace on earth is promised only to men of good will."

There you have it. If we want peace we must make men of common sense, knowing what can be done and what cannot be done, also men of good will.

How are we to do it? I see no more promising path than each person sticking faithfully to the work which comes his way. The nature of the work, its seeming size and importance matters far less than that its relation to the place where he finds himself is right. If the need at the moment is digging a ditch or washing the dishes that is the greatest thing in the world for the moment. The time, the place,
the need, the relation, is what decides the value of the act.

It is our following this natural path that
new and broader roads open, moments of illumination come.

Madame Curie so saw it. Asked what a woman's
contribution to a better world should be she replied that
it began at home, then spread to those immediately connected,
one's immediate friends, then the community in which one lived,
and if it so happened that the work turned out to meet a need
of the world at large let it spread there. But the
important thing was the beginning, and that beginning, Madame
Curie insisted, was the home, the center of small things.

William James saw the world re-made by small
things. "As for me," he wrote in his fifty seventh year,
"my bed is made: I am against bigness and greatness in all
their forms, and with the invisible molecular moral forces that
work from individual to individual, stealing in through the
crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets, or like
the capillary oozing of water, and yet rending the hardest
monuments of man's pride, if you give them time. The bigger
the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more brutal, the
more mendacious is the life displayed. So I am against all
big organizations as such, national ones first and foremost;
against all big successes and big results; and in favor of the
eternal forces of truth which always work in the individual and
immediately unsuccessful way, under-dogs always, till
history comes, after they are long dead, and puts them
on the top."

There is the truth, I am convinced, the only
reliable hope of the world. It takes in all of us but puts
it up hard to each of us to fit the day's work into the
place where we stand, not crowding into another's place,
no imitation - no hurry - growth always - knowing that light
and power come only with growth, slow as it is.

Work backed by such a faith makes life endurable.
I doubt if I could have come into my '30's with anything like
the confidence I feel in the ultimate conquest of freedom,
the ultimate conquest of man's self-respect if I had not
groped my way into some such faith in the power of small things.

Nobody can be more surprised than I am that I
am at work at eighty. As a matter of fact I am counting
it as one of my blessings that I must work to make sure of that
security on which I have so long based my freedom. Looking
forward at life at twenty five, at thirty, forty, fifty,
sixty, generally finding myself tired and a little
discouraged, having always taken on things for which I was
unprepared, things which were really too big for me, I
consoled myself by saying, "At seventy you can stop."
I planned for it. I would burrow into the country, have
a microscope - my old love. I knew by this time that that
was not the way to find God, but I expected to have a lot of fun watching the Protozoa and less anguish than watching men and women.

But I discovered when seventy came that I still had security to look after. I could make it by seventy five, I thought. But I did not. And I have come into eighty with a consciousness that so long as my head holds out I shall work. The amazing part of it is that in spite of all the old notions that had been instilled into me that the place of the aged was in the corner resignedly waiting to die, that there was no place for their day's work in the scheme of things, that they no longer would have either the desire or the power to carry on, I find things to do which belong to me and nobody else.

It is an exciting discovery that this can be so. Old age need not be what all the text books assured it to be. Shakespeare is wrong. Cicero, dull as he is in comparison, is more nearly right. More, it can be an adventure. My young friends laugh at me when I tell them I am finding my eighties an adventure, that in spite of creaking joints and a tremulous hand, there are satisfactions peculiar to the period, satisfactions different from those of youth, of middle life, even of that decade of the '70's which I supposed ended it all.
No one can imagine what a satisfaction it is to me to find that I need not go to conferences and conventions and big dinners. That job belongs to youth. It alone has the appetite, the digestion, the resilience for the endless talk of these functions, also the confidence that salvation is to be reached through them.

Still more satisfactory is the acceptance of the fact that I have not the strength to run about on trains and give lectures. That, too, is the job of youth, and the in carrying it on best I can hope for them is that they learn as much about people as I think I did. The humility that will engender will be all to their good.

A discovery which has given me joy and which had something of the incredible about it is the durability of friendship born at any period in one's life. I have enlarged in this narrative only on professional friendships, those that belong legitimately to my day's work, but this all discovery does not cover them alone but the range from childhood to now.

Circumstances, time, separations, may have completely broken communication. The break may have been caused by complete divergence of opinion, differences as grave as those which caused the breaking up of our old McClure crowd, as grave as the ghastly separations that war brings,
but you pick up at the day when the friendship was not broken but interrupted.

One of the most beautiful personal demonstrations I have had of this unbreakable quality in friendship was a birthday party which S. S. McClure gave Viola Roseboro, John Phillips and myself when he was seventy-five years old, and I close to it. We sat down together as once we had sat down in the old St. Denis, the old Astor, the old Holland House - lunching places marking the stage by which McClure's worked itself successively into better quarters, went up town. And we talked only of the things of today, as we always had done. We sat enthralled as in the old years while Mr. McClure enlarged on his latest enthusiasm, marvelling as he did it as we always had done, at the eternal youthfulness in the man, the failure of life to quench him.

One of my greatest satisfactions has been a revival of curiosity. I lost it in the 1920's and early 1930's. Human affairs seemed to me to be headed for collapse. The war was not over and men were taking it for granted it was. The failure of the hopes of previous generations had taught us nothing. The sense of disaster was strong in me. What I most feared was that we were raising our standard of living at the expense of our standard of character. If you
believe as I do that permanent human betterment must
rest on a sound moral basis then our house would collapse
sooner or later. New economic laws, good intentions,
fine plans were not enough.

It was at taking a longer view, looking at my
fifty years as a whole that revived me. I thought I saw a
spiral, was eager to prove it.

Once more I am curious, but it is an armchair
curiosity. No longer can I go out and see for myself, but
that has its advantages. It compels longer reflection,
intensifies the conviction that taking time, having patience,
doing one thing at a time, are the essentials for solid
improvement, essential to finding answers. Perhaps, I tell
myself, I may from an armchair find better answers than I
have yet to those questions which set me at my day's work,
the still unanswered questions of the most fruitful life
for women in civilization, the true nature of revolutions,
even the mystery of God. It is the last of the three which
disturbs me least. The greatest of mysteries, it has become
for me the greatest of realities.