

His fancy played about the place in a kind of 'inspired silliness':

Last night Jones was walking down with me from Staple Inn to Clifford's Inn about 10 o'clock, and we saw the Great Bear standing upright on the tip of his tail, which was coming out of a chimneypot. Jones said it wanted attending to. I said: 'Yes, but to attend to it properly, we ought to sit up with it all night, and if the Great Bear thinks that I am going to sit up by his bedside all night and give him a spoonful of barley water every ten minutes, he is very much mistaken.'

How many a time must the Inn have echoed to such and much better things, and the laughter born of them — forgotten now, or perhaps latent in that overdue biography. One day the Inn will be as famous as Bolt Court or Cheyne Walk, when Butler has entered into that immortality, so obviously his birthright, so long withheld, which he longed for, but never courted, 'Where breath breathes most in mouths of living men.'

The Atheneum

## WHAT IS EVIDENCE?

EVERY now and then one meets a man anxiously in search of evidence. In nine cases out of ten he means by evidence something that will make evident the truth of what he believes already. Evidence is for most people an afterthought. We collect it not for ourselves, but to persuade our neighbors. Few of us are impartial investigators of the truth. We jump to conclusions arbitrarily, and we are egoistic enough to think that, because we have jumped to them, the conclusions must be right. When once we have arrived at them, we stick to them as to an annexed territory. We buy papers and books to strengthen our hold on them. We choose our friends largely among those who share them. We rejoice at every story we read, how-

ever ill-authenticated, which supports our view. We hurry away from or explain away every fact, however well-authenticated, that seems to show we were wrong. It would be absurd to suggest that the human mind is capable of resisting an overwhelming mass of evidence forever and ever. To believe this would be to despair of the destiny of mankind. It is clear enough, however, that evidence is for the most part merely ammunition in a battle between opposing interests or principles. It may decide the result of the battle, but the causes of the battle must be sought elsewhere. We choose our sides unreasonably, and afterwards find reasons for defending them. That is why the writing of history should be handed over to the humorists. The incongruity between the causes of human actions and the pretexts for these actions requires at least a Gibbon to do justice to it.

It cannot be maintained, however, that the human being, having chosen his side, is indifferent to moral considerations. He must have a moral pretext at almost any cost. He is unhappy till he has discovered enough evidence to prove that he is right. It may not be very good evidence, but the average sense of evidence is so slight that this does not matter. A rumor, a well-rounded anecdote, a few impressive statistics, something that an old woman says an old woman told her — almost anything will serve. Bad evidence is just as effective as good if you set it out in big print with an air of authority and without hesitation. If you are carrying on a campaign against the natives of Timbuctoo, a telegram from Melbourne to the effect that a New York correspondent has just learned from a well-informed quarter in the Fiji Islands that the people of Timbuctoo have set up a bacon-curing establishment in which

children are slaughtered for human food will send a thrill of conviction round a sensation-loving world. To-day we learn what is happening in Russia from almost every part of the world except Russia. Geneva and New York, Stockholm and Helsingfors, Paris and Rome — anything that is said about Russia in any of these cities is apparently to be accepted as evidence, if it tells on one's own side. Now almost everyone has had experience during the war of the difficulty of collecting evidence even about one's own city or even about one's own street. There were men living within fifty yards of the area of a Zeppelin raid who would tell one of the falsest and most fantastic stories. We remember talking to a man in an East London suburb who pointed to a house not six doors from his own, that had been wrecked the previous night by a bomb, and who assured us not merely that a whole family had perished in it, but that the family had only migrated into it a few days earlier from Southend in order to escape Zeppelin raids. He was obviously speaking in good faith; but, as further inquiry showed, there was not a word of truth in his story. No one had been killed in the house, and no one in the house had come from Southend. The story was simply one of those emotional myths that fly from mouth to mouth during times of excitement. Similarly, Liverpool Street Station was wrecked by public rumor long before a bomb had touched it. One would meet a man within a mile of it who would relate a circumstantial story of how nothing was left of it but a mass of ruins. Most men relate not what they have seen, but what they have heard. And yet if a man of this sort had crossed to America and been interviewed by an American paper, the ordinary reader would have regarded his story almost

as that of an eye-witness. How many of the stories that created the greatest sensation during the war rested on the evidence of eye-witnesses — eye-witnesses, we mean, whose good faith and accuracy as observers had been subjected to proof? Did the story of the German corpse factory? Did even the story of the crucified Canadian soldier? We should say that three fourths of the most startling sensations of the war have been either disproved or at least had doubt cast on them by the event. It is almost impossible to invent any story so wild that it cannot be believed by intelligent men. In the Middle Ages it was believed that in one part of England the people had tails like monkeys. We laugh at people who accepted the travelers' tales of those days, and look back on them as incurably superstitious. But do we ourselves show no signs of greed for a good story? What critical apparatus do we bring to bear on the mass of current myths that happen to support our prejudices? We have passed beyond the Middle Ages in the exact sciences; but most of our beliefs in politics, morals, and religion have nothing to do with the exact sciences. Here we are still at the mercy of fancy and prepossession. That is why we do not ask our newspapers to give us sifted evidence. We are content if they supply us with stories in tune with our prejudices.

The *Times* recently contained a description of life in Petrograd which was an excellent example of evidence that is no evidence. It was sent by 'our special correspondent' at Helsingfors, and was frankly not the narrative of an eye-witness, but the account at second hand of a Russian who had escaped from Petrograd, and who, therefore, would impress many people as having an eye-witness's authority. The correspondent began

with an appeal not to our reason, but to our sympathy. 'I have seen a man,' he declared, 'who is not a man, but an image of decrepitude.' Few men can resist the appeal of so sad a figure — at least, if he is going to support one in argument. Most of us, even if we are impartial, feel that it would be behaving too like a heartless lawyer if we began to cross-examine him instead of listening assentingly to his story. And yet what is this story? Does it contain a single incident seen by the witness's own eye? Does it contain a single fact or figure for which any authority is offered? A thing is not necessarily false because it is hearsay; and we fear that the general picture given of the misery of life in Petrograd is true enough. But, if a man offers us details, he must not only convince us of his personal veracity and intelligence, but must give us the sources of his information in so far as his story is not a narrative of what he saw with his own eyes.

The aim of a newspaper should be to collect the news, and the news must no doubt contain the opinions and hearsays of men as well as the story of things seen and proved. To report hearsays and opinions, however, as though they were indubitable facts, is to mistake the nature of evidence. It is to become an irresponsible propagandist instead of a reputable historian of contemporary events.

It is not that one wants an inhuman colorlessness in newspaper narratives. We have no objection whatever to a story being colored by the writer's prejudices, so long as it contains a clear record of the facts. The basis of a report, however, should be tested fact, and not hearsay. If the journalist gives us the facts, he may add to them what gloss he will.

The New Statesman

## THE CIVILIAN WAR-MIND

WHEN a schoolboy on first reading Homer finds his heroes on the battlefield bragging before gods and men of their personal prowess and courage and the righteousness of their cause, and heaping abusive epithets upon the enemy, it seems to him 'bad form' and a bit ridiculous as well. As he grows more familiar and sympathetic with the *naïveté* of the primitive mind this feeling passes away, and a certain charm attaches to these simple utterances of natural emotion. It is only in the third move that we appreciate the essential humor of the situation. It consists in the unconscious and confident parade of our secret passions as authentic and disinterested standards of objective values. This is everywhere and always the staple of the human comedy. It has grown with civilization, and is bred of its bone. For civilization has been continually engaged in repressing this natural tendency of a strong personal bias to usurp the throne of judgment and to pose as objective truth. It is partly for the sake of peace and order that civilized society forbids us openly to dilate upon our own merits and the defects of those whom we dislike, and partly out of a growing regard for stricter and juster judgments than are thus provided.

This social censorship of naïve emotional confessions is, as Freud has well indicated, a condition of the play of the comic spirit in the fields of wit and humor. Chaff, satire, badinage, in particular, are ingenious modes of dodging the censor and winning outlets for our suppressed personal feelings about ourselves and other people. But the very ingenuity of such displays, by introducing an element of self-consciousness, impairs the simple self-deception which is the deeper