

[*The English Review*]

THE RIGHTS OF YOUTH

BY EDWARD CECIL

It was generally supposed that the post-war period would be a period of reconstruction and progress. But many acute observers prophesied that it might be a period of reaction. There has been a great deal too much talk about reconstruction, for reconstruction postulates destruction, and there is not here, at home, anything like the destruction of the social fabric which some people suppose. It is, therefore, not at all surprising that while many platitudes are spoken about reconstructing a society which has not been destroyed, there is the danger that the forces of reaction may be secretly very successfully at work. And there are evidences that there is a pronounced tendency toward reaction in the present post-war period.

The people who will suffer if progress is stayed are the young people of the rising generation. And the forces of reaction which are actively at work at the present time are engaged in fighting what they consider to be the dangerous tendencies of Youth. That there are many vested interests in the country which at the present time desperately need every weapon which can be found to protect them cannot be denied, and it is not at all surprising that there is a pronounced reactionary movement in almost every sphere of life. And it is not in the least remarkable that we hear on all sides attempts to vilify, to depreciate, and even to ridicule Youth.

It is perfectly well known, of course, that Youth won the war. The young

men were the men who really mattered in the army and in the navy. And the young women who were munition workers were the young women who really mattered at home. The war, however, is now over, and on all sides we find interested people seeking to muzzle and thwart the efforts of Youth.

Let us just examine a few indications of this movement.

First of all, it is being extensively asserted by old women of both sexes that the Youth of this country is immoral. What, of course, is really happening is that the Youth of this country is quite determined to destroy the old-fashioned immorality which was decked out in the clothes of Respectability.

At the same time, the churches are actively preaching, as the churches do, so frequently, that there is a wholesale disregard of Christianity. This presupposes, of course, that the churches are truly Christian, whereas the truth is that the churches have lost the spirit of Christianity. And the real fact which we have to take into account is, not that, owing to the war, the people have lost hold of Christianity, but that they have grown tired of the false representation of Christianity which is given to them in the accredited channels of Christian teaching.

Again, in government departments and in many big businesses, to say nothing of the government itself, there is a pronounced tendency to be over-cautious, over-fond of compromise, and over-nervous of taking risks. This

is peculiarly lamentable at a time when it must be perfectly obvious that there should be enterprise, courage, and that sane and well-founded optimism which is nothing more or less than belief in the future of the country and the Empire.

I have said enough, now, to indicate that Youth at the present time has rights in the present, and interests in the future, which have to be safeguarded. It has always been a drawback to this country that Youth is checked and muzzled. In our great rival, America, there is not the same tendency to depreciate the importance and the worth, the enterprise, the energy, and the divine insight of those who are young.

Now, let us examine certain fields in which at the present time Youth has a right to be heard. Surely, the present House of Commons is one of these fields. Here, we have an assembly of middle-aged and elderly men, where Youth is in a hopeless minority. I can think at once of two or three members of the House of Commons who are, perhaps, somewhat extravagantly young. But they must be very miserable men, for they cannot, possibly, find in the lobbies or in the smoking room much of the spirit of Youth which, doubtless, exists in their own lives. I see as a great danger for the young men who are the representatives of Youth in the House of Commons that their own Youth may be injuriously affected by the atmosphere into which it has been plunged. We are represented almost entirely in the House of Commons by middle-aged and elderly men, most of whom are full of old-fashioned, middle-class notions. And the sole representative of the women of the country, present in the House of Commons, has recently delivered herself of the profound observation that the present time, being a time of unrest, is not a time for taking steps

in the dark, and that, at any rate, one important reform which was under discussion at the time when she made the observation should not be considered seriously, at any rate for five years, 'until things had settled down.' This is, emphatically, not the right spirit at the present time, and the rights of Youth to have a better world to live in are being frequently disregarded by the present House of Commons, where we need all the Youth, and all the spirit of Youth, which we can bring to the saving of our present very imperfect social structure.

But, after all, the House of Commons is not by any means the only field where at the present time Youth is needed. Take the government departments. If there is any place where Youth is profoundly needed, it is in the government departments in this country. The government departments of this country are responsible for a large amount of the misery we are suffering at the present time, most of which need not be suffered at all. The ponderous stupidity of the middle-aged mind, which finds its greatest embodiment in the typical permanent official of this country, is nothing more or less than a national calamity. There is not a single department in which Youth is not needed. All the waste which is going on, all the ponderous circumlocution, all the vast mass of utterly useless work, and all the tangle of formality and incompetence which encumbers the performance of necessary work must seem strangely laughable to the mind of intelligent Youth. We want a flood of Youth in our government departments, where it ought to be demonstrated that the incompetence of Youth is nothing, compared with the incompetence of middle age.

Youth demands a right to be heard, also, in the industry and commerce of the country. The spirit of enterprise,

and the spirit of hope in the future are essential to the trade and industry of the country. New methods, new ideas, new fields for development are necessary if the wealth and prosperity of the Empire are to be built up quickly. It is necessary to build them up quickly. We have got to pay for the war, and we must do so as rapidly as possible. The longer we delay doing so, the longer we will be burdened with debt. We have therefore, in trade and commerce, to be up and doing, and it is our young men to whom we must look.

Youth has a right to be heard on boards of directors, and in business offices. The same kindness toward incompetence, and the same sleepy encouragement to those who shirk responsibility, and the same fondness for making safe small things rather than taking any risk to gain great things — which have been the root causes of waste, extravagance, and failure in government departments, also threaten many industries and big enterprises. It is true, of course, that the healthy power of competition and the necessity to make a business pay, save most businesses from the lethargy and stupidity which paralyze the Civil Service, but it is still true that the trade and the industry of this country must be extremely enterprising and progressive if they are to hold their own in the economic struggle upon which we are now entering, if we have not already entered, with America, a resuscitated Germany, and Japan. Our trade and industry need all the life of Youth which can be put into them.

I will not say much at the present moment about the rights of Youth to be heard in moral and social questions. But the same necessity for giving a hearing to Youth exists in these spheres

as exists in the spheres of government and industry, of which I have already spoken.

There is, in fact, a great danger that in the next few years the voice of Youth will not be given an adequate hearing in this country. In all spheres of activity, political, social, and moral, Youth has a right to be heard. It would be wise to encourage Youth and to educate Youth in every way possible. It would be wise to give the young men and the young women of the country ample opportunities of hearing every side of every question. And the opinions formed should be listened to. Youth won the war, and the future of the world belongs to Youth.

Youth has, therefore, a right to be heard, and the present tendency in so many quarters to depreciate and vilify Youth should be steadfastly snubbed and discouraged. There should be young men and young women in Parliament, not merely middle-aged men and middle-aged women. There should be young men and young women on boards of directors, and in church councils. There should be young men and young women in every sphere of authority, management, and enterprise. These young men and these young women will make mistakes, but the mistakes they make will not be any worse than the mistakes which are being made by those who pretend at the present time to possess a monopoly of wisdom.

We have suffered quite enough from the futilities of the middle-aged mind, and the stupidity of the middle-class standpoint. We want the clearer vision of Youth to purify our outlook upon the future, in order that we may the better believe in ourselves.

[*The Athenæum*]

THE IMMORTAL WHITE WHALE*

BY AUGUSTINE BIRRELL

Where the sea beasts ranged all round,
 Feed in the ooze of their pasture ground,
 Where the sea snakes coil and twine,
 Dry their mail and bask in the brine;
 Where great whales come sailing by,
 Sail and sail with unshut eye
 Round the world for ever and aye.

Matthew Arnold.

AND among these great whales, first, foremost, and immortal, is *Moby Dick*, the Great White Whale.

It is seventy years, just the measure of my own lifetime, since the white head and hump of *Moby Dick* suddenly loomed out of the blue water not very far to leeward. 'There she blows, there she blows, a hump like a snow-hill. It is *Moby Dick*.'

Earlier in the same year *The Whale* had been published in New York, and at once, as indeed might have been expected, aroused the enthusiasm of Nathaniel Hawthorne, but, though *Moby Dick* has been reprinted in England three or four times since 1851, none of these reprints has attracted sufficient attention.

Books have their fates, and it must not for one moment be supposed that this masterpiece of eloquence, character, and adventure, despite a small circulation, hard to explain even in the year of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, fell flat. It did nothing of the kind, for from the very first it numbered good intellects among the 'grown-ups,' and excited the same enchanted admiration among a limited number of fortunate children as then did, and do now, the books of that kindred spirit, though of the earth and not the sea, George Borrow.

* *Moby Dick; or The Whale*. By Herman Melville. With an introduction by Viola Meynell. 'The World's Classics.' (Oxford University Press. 2s. 6d. net.)

Among those lucky youngsters, the godchildren of Apollo, were included some, subsequently, celebrated writers who, having been allowed to feed their infant genius on the quintessential oils and the delectable blubber of this incomparable beast, have risen into fame and attained a circulation quite beyond the dreams of the New Yorker, who, born in 1819, of (so Miss Meynell tells us), mixed Dutch and English stock, went to sea as a cabin boy on a vessel trading to Liverpool, and wrote *Moby Dick* in his thirty-second year. The sea remained Melville's element through a life which ended in 1891. The ocean he loved best was the Pacific, which 'rolls the midmost waters of the world.'

But, though there is no need to commiserate Herman Melville on his limited 'sales,' it was none the less a deprivation to a man of my age never to have encountered in the days of his youth, amid his various book adventures, the *Great White Whale*, the ship *Pequod*, the monomaniacal and crippled Captain Ahab forever pursuing *Moby Dick* round the world, the tattooed, lovable cannibal, Queequeq, with his pocket idol, the mysterious stranger Fedallah, the unaccountable Elijah, Starbuck, Stubbs, and Flask, and the rest of the crew of the doomed whaler.

How this came about I cannot guess, for the house was otherwise well-stored with masterpieces, but so it was; nor was it until I was some years older than Melville when he wrote *Moby Dick*, that I first heard his name. I owed my introduction to *Omoo*, *Typee*, and *The Whale* to that exquisite judge of a good book, Sir Alfred Lyall, who was shocked at my ignorance, and most emphatically urged me to read *Omoo* and *Typee*; but, as ill luck would have it, he did not specially dwell upon *The Whale*. To hear was, in those days, to obey, and a second-hand bookseller almost at once