

THE PARIS PRESS AND PUBLIC OPINION¹

BY BECKLES WILLSON

AMONG other audacities, Mr. Bernard Shaw has lately been inspired to inform the Parisians, through the columns of *Le Temps*, that Paris is both conservative and provincial. As M. Marcel Prévost was already engaged in demonstrating that the French capital is more moral and dignified than London, there may be no paradox after all. Certainly, with respect to its daily press, Paris is still to a great extent bound to what we consider obsolete forms and methods, and in technical production it is manifestly of an inferior order.

Perhaps, one thinks, if Paris had to invent a journalism for itself, *de nouveau*, the result would be quite different, because the present format and topical incongruity of the bulk of its newspapers are simply an inheritance from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century gazettes and the omnipotent and enduring official *Moniteur*. In consequence, such journals as *Le Temps*, *Le Journal des Débats*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Gaulois*, *L'Action Française*, *L'Eclair*, to name but these out of the twenty which compose the Paris daily press of opinion, are more closely akin to-day to the London critical weeklies than they are to the *Times*, the *Morning Post*, or the *Daily Telegraph*. It is only within the past twenty years or so that an entirely new press, a press of information, has arisen in

Paris, inspired by American models; and this, of course, has not been without its effect on the older organs.

Professedly journals of political opinion, the papers I have named are also chroniclers and critics of literature, the theatre, and the fine arts. One's impression is that only reluctantly have they come to admit 'news,' that is to say, 'reports of the crimes, violences, follies, and misfortunes of mankind,' as being worthy of equal and even superior space in the paper. This explains the mentioned incongruity of the front page, where a brutal murder or a railway accident or some sensational item from an American source is insinuated between a graceful article by an Immortal on 'The Prose of Alfred de Musset' and the 'Love-Letters of Chopin' or the 'Foreign Policy of Guizot,' or perhaps a paper on 'Some Women in the Romances of Pierre Loti.' Close beside it one finds a rhetorical attack on the ministry, an official *communiqué* relating to the taxes, and half a column of amusing persiflage over a famous pseudonym.

Is it surprising that one is occasionally reminded of what might happen, as the result of an amalgamation between the *Spectator* and the *News of the World*? In truth, such a newspaper is a medley from which even the trained reader finds it difficult to extract the intelligence he seeks. I have lately heard this confusion commented upon by French journalists themselves; they ascribe it to the fact that

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Paris journalism is just now in a critical stage of evolution. The conductors of the older papers have not made up their minds what proportion of their readers demand opinion and what proportion require information. They prefer to postpone a more logical journalistic formula.

Meanwhile, the rapidly growing change in the French public taste, habits, and intelligence, and the new activities and interests which have sprung up since the war, serve to make further inroads on the limited space of the paper, which rarely exceeds five pages of reading-matter and is more often less. True, a certain number of new journals devoted to news-pictures and sport and the huge circulations of journals of *Le Petit Parisien* type tend to relieve that pressure which the old-fashioned journalist resents. One of them said to me:—

Murders of insignificant people, burglaries, seductions, thefts, crimes of passion; are interesting if presented interestingly. But they are at bottom conventional, and not really 'news,' inasmuch as they have all happened and been described in detail by Balzac, Poe, Zola, Boissigobey, and a hundred other masters; so that people with a taste for that sort of thing may gratify themselves to repletion at the nearest library. Rochefort once thought of putting the leading crime of the day in the *feuilleton*. On the other hand, the changes and tendencies and discoveries of society are new and of enormous importance. The state of France, its political parties, its immediate future, its foreign relations, ought to be of vital interest to every Frenchman. It is our business as journalists to see that it is made so.

Naturally, this is pure didacticism; and the Paris editor is nothing if not didactic. So he expresses the dislike he feels. He tells the new journals of information that they resemble the Parisian of Gondinet, who was popular because he was noncommittal. 'I

never express any opinion on anybody or anything. I find it useless. *C'est plus commode aussi et moins compromettant.*'

'Reporting, big or little,' observes a writer in *Le Temps*, 'has its interest, which can be considerable and exacts a real talent. But it can only rise to a certain level if the journalist is a man who knows how to write, see, and think, and is not a mere recording instrument. And, besides, it is not enough to note events; he must explain and judge them, and this is the task of the journalist of opinion, who can claim as ancestors Chateaubriand, Paul Louis Courier, and even Voltaire, their authentic patron. . . . Also, there is literary journalism which no more than the other sort is content to be a phonograph.'

The Paris press of opinion, then, continues to be an institution, an establishment, almost a religion, with its high-priests in the line of succession from Prevost-Paradol, Girardin, Weiss, Ranc, Hebrard, Rochefort, Nefftzer, Albert Wolff, Arthur Mayer, Cornély, and the rest, who are looked upon by the people of other countries at least as expressing, by ritual and homily, a large, perhaps the whole, body of French public opinion.

Before inquiring whether this is the case or not, let me note a characteristic of the whole of the press of the capital. You will generally look in vain in the chief newspapers for that documentation upon which a reader may form an independent opinion for himself. *Le Temps* is the only journal that prints the debates in both Chambers in full, though not always punctually. Reports of speeches outside the Chamber are generally very meagre. Official documents, public meetings, legal judgments, are briefly summarized or only mentioned indirectly. All this is inevitable from

sheer lack of space. But the newspaper being primarily an organ of opinion, even the reporters are allowed to express their opinions on facts they know but which the public cannot know. Incidents, big or little, are tintured and transformed by the writer's or his journal's prepossessions. A Canadian habitant is robbed in Montmartre. The episode is narrated by *Le Journal* in the style of Xavier de Montépin; by *Le Figaro* in the mordant vein of Maupassant; the reporter of *Le Matin* converts the victim into a 'gentleman-farmer'; *L'Intransigeant* treats the affair satirically; and *Le Petit Parisien* expresses a doubt whether this wealthy foreigner was really robbed, and, if so, did not merit it by his folly. 'These foreigners!' runs the title of a cartoon. 'Poor Paris, when can she be free of their company and be herself again?'

Now, while some of this is very unlike present-day English journalism, it is a good deal like what English journalism was a century ago, when the editorial 'we' extended to police-court cases. The danger of this style of writing and its free handling of personalities is that innocent people are occasionally libeled or held up to ridicule—a proceeding which with us would very quickly land editor and publisher in the courts. But in Paris there is more latitude, and—dueling being no longer in vogue—the person attacked can always fall back on the Press Law of 1881, which gives him a right of rejoinder equal in space to the length of the attack.

'The Paris press,' declares M. Stéphane Lausanne of *Le Matin*, 'translates public opinion; it does not make it. . . . It resembles Danton on a famous occasion. It summons to it the angry crowds; it harangues them; but it does not dictate their sentiments. It only interprets them. The press

can increase, delimit, or turn aside the torrent; it cannot create it. It has its source in the entrails and conscience.'

Supposing this diagnosis true, the power to increase, delimit, and turn aside public opinion is a very real power. Does the Paris press possess it? I am inclined to be doubtful. From a long-established newspaper, even under the régime of the signed article, one looks for a certain unity of policy and opinion. The name of the *rédacteur en chef* usually printed under the title would seem to guarantee this. Yet the only journals wherein I find this consistency are *L'Action Française*, the Royalist organ, and the Communist journal, *Humanité*.

Too often in leading metropolitan journals, when important events supervene, one is surprised, not so much by a certain tentativeness of treatment, or a certain ambiguity, but by an actual contradictoriness in two writers writing in the same issue, as if the attitude of the paper were not defined or its policy settled. The reader is left wondering which way the cat is going to jump. This trait of opportunism is now quickly recognized by French readers, who, if they belong to a definite group of which this particular newspaper is the organ, have no objection to the editor's handling the subject gingerly until the opinion of the group leaders becomes known.

On the subject of foreign affairs the Paris press is accustomed to consider itself strong. Unquestionably there are writers on *Le Temps*, *Le Matin*, *L'Écho de Paris*, *L'Ère Nouvelle*, and *L'Intransigeant*, to mention a few, who are particularly well informed on foreign affairs. Nevertheless the impression on the mind of the critical reader, and one confirmed by closer scrutiny, is that the journal is itself

by no means well informed. Many of the blunders of these very newspapers are elementary. Two years ago I compiled a list of geographical and political 'howlers' in five of the leading Paris newspapers which would have shamed the rawest novice in Fleet Street. It is not only in simple facts and proper names (it is a trifle, but even as I pen this the current issue of *Le Temps* contains repeated references to Mr. Stanislaus Baldwin and Mr. L. St. Amery!), but in direct statements about foreign governments and institutions that the merest glance at *Whitaker* would have obviated.

When it comes to British, American, Japanese, Indian, and Colonial politics and economics these references are far wilder and wider of the truth than would be tolerated by the readers of any small British provincial newspaper. These are sins in simple ignorance; in propaganda the errors are graver. Legends are repeated and assertions confidently advanced about the British Empire and America, about Germany, Italy, and other foreign countries, which, although appearing in different journals, bear such a strong resemblance to one another that one is forced to credit a common source, and that an official one.

What is singular is, considering the way the Paris press is quoted abroad, that it is apparently worth no one's while to expose these falsities. In London, if a libel concerning Hungary, Lithuania, or the Hejaz appears in any reputable newspaper, the ink is hardly dry before someone conversant, generally at first hand, with the facts, sends a letter to the paper denouncing the libel, and the letter is printed. Or if the importance of the subject warrant, the editor dispatches a representative to interview one, two, or half a dozen experts and the matter is thrashed out promptly. Now, in

such a case, the attitude of the Paris editor would be something like this:—

We printed the statement because it was interesting, made agreeable reading, and accorded with our notions. It is no part of my business to stultify my own journal, and in point of fact, my dear sir, our readers are theorists, logicians, and doctrinaires, when they are not devoted to belles-lettres, and do not care an aluminium sou whether the Imamate of Yemen is governed by an Imam or a Grand Duke, or that our article on 'Ohio Bigotry' was invalidated by the fact of Dayton's being in Tennessee. Whether General Garfield was assassinated in 1881 by a Frenchman, Jules Guiteau, — as you state, — or by a German named Zollgoth, — as we stated, — is void of practical importance, having served its turn and been already forgotten. Even our declaration that the State of Bavaria has, up to date, not paid a single mark on account or reparation, when, as appears from the official figures, she has paid fifty million marks, was merely a rhetorical figure to express our contention that the total receipts from the Reich were inadequate.

A Paris journalist of opinion is, you perceive, no Gradgrind!

'A journalist,' once more observes M. Lauzanne, 'ceases to make journalism when he begins to make diplomacy.' But the trouble is that the French journalist of every grade is nearly always making diplomacy. Propaganda seems to be the very gospel of his trade. Whatever the extent of his real knowledge on any subject, he is forever concealing, restraining, or manipulating it in order to serve some special interest, and, above all, the special interest of his own country. It is this trait which makes it not only difficult for a foreigner to get at the truth of any domestic situation, especially if it has any bearing on external relations, but equally difficult for a Frenchman if he is obliged to rely upon the printed

information vouchsafed him by his own newspaper. The bias of the Paris press, with a single exception, is so intensely national that its every comment is implicit with flattery of the *amour propre* of the nation, by an almost Tibetan instinct to throw dust in the eyes of the foreigner.

Such intensity of patriotism, very admirable in the citizen, more properly belongs to the diplomat than to the journalist, at least in times of peace. The wholesale organized suppressions and secrecies of the classic Dreyfus case were apparently forgotten long before the war. Other nations allow the free air to circulate even in international controversies; a wholesome sense of proportion is maintained. Eminent British and American journalists have occasionally been moved to utter things about national shortcomings and errors of policy and conduct, which, so far from involving them in ostracism, have earned them increased respect. It is unhappily otherwise in France; the example of courage and real patriotism shown by M. Cornély and Anatole France in *Le Figaro* at the time of the Dreyfus affair was all but unprecedented. A quarter of a century has passed, and if one wishes to find a parallel to the outspokenness of those journalists one can only, very reluctantly, point to MM. Marcel Cachin and Doriot of *L'Humanité*.

It is in vain that the much-traveled and now converted M. Lauzanne exhorts his colleagues of the Paris press to remember that they should always be journalists—to see the truth steadily, see it whole.

Do not forget that you cease to be a journalist when you make propaganda, even the most useful and noble of propaganda, the propaganda for your country. You cease, in fact, to make the photograph in order to make the pose. You cease to

listen in order to speak. You cease to be marble in order to play with fire.

M. Lauzanne furnishes us out of his own personal history with a striking illustration of this ruling passion in the Paris journalist. In 1919 he was sent to interview Lord (Robert) Cecil on the subject of the new League of Nations. At the outset Lord Robert asked him how the French viewed the project.

The ordinary rules governing the interview constrained me to listen in silence while Lord Robert Cecil developed his thought. But I had, during two years and a half, been taking a bath of Anglo-Saxon ideology which had rather enervated my Gallic logic. A reaction of my good sense impelled me irresistibly to get up and shake myself, to let myself go. I therefore arose, seized Lord Robert's ideal by the throat and proceeded to maltreat it fiercely. I asked him, with misplaced irony, where were the moral forces which he had declared were 'superior to physical force' when, in 1914, the German hordes were stamping through Belgium and France? What was his 'world-conscience' then doing? And if, in 1918, there had not been the physical force of big guns fabricated wholesale by England and France, if two millions of American boys had not hurried over with the most formidable material of war ever seen, would not Belgium have been suppressed and England subjugated?

'Your English policemen,' I concluded, 'pass for the best in Europe, but permit me to observe that in order to repress misdeeds in the street they have something more than their moral force; they have their herculean bodies, about which there is generally concealed a revolver of the latest model.'

If one reads this whole passage carefully, one begins to perceive the true mentality of the Paris journalist and the Paris press and its special outlook upon war, peace, and the League of Nations. I do not think that to-day M. Lauzanne is really repentant. It would be quite useless

to tell him that the conscience of the world *did* arise in its might in 1914; that it was that and not love of France which brought the British Empire and America into the war; that to-day the conscience of the world is more active and potent than ever and can exact penalties which the most ignorant and brutal aggressor will hesitate to face in future; useless even to remind him that the London policeman, frequently no giant and unarmed, does manage to preserve law and order simply by moral force. Lord Robert saw the futility of further argument with the Paris journalist. 'I thank you for communicating your views,' he remarked with irony, and, rising, courteously dismissed his visitor. And M. Lauzanne records this.

At the last session at Geneva of the League of Nations *Le Matin* was represented by M. Jules Sauerwein, than whom perhaps no writer on the Paris press enjoys a higher reputation for knowledge of foreign affairs. The French people have now become reconciled to the League of Nations, — a reconciliation to which, however, the press has only slightly contributed, — but the defeat of the Protocol seems inexplicable. Yet M. Sauerwein, being particularly well informed, knows why the Protocol was unacceptable to us; he is also perfectly well aware that the British delegation from the beginning entered heart and soul into the adjustment of foreign differences though at the occasional sacrifice of its own interests. He could hardly have doubted the probity of Messrs. Chamberlain and Amery and the rest of the delegation, to whose earnest endeavors the leading French statesmen have paid tribute. Yet M. Sauerwein can report thus to his paper: —

The British delegation acts, in every circumstance, as if it had received the general instruction: Weaken by every means

the League of Nations, at the same time using it adroitly for the defense of British policy in Mosul and elsewhere.

Not content with having demolished the Protocol, England put an obstacle in the way of everything which can give the League efficacy or prestige. France, loyal to its line of conduct, preparing for disarmament while negotiating for security [and so on].

It is amazing to what lengths self-deception and rhetoric can carry the ablest of French journalists. While the Caillaux debt negotiations were pending in Washington some thoughtless publicist or other said, perhaps not unpardonably, 'Don't let us talk about the war. Let us talk business.' The Paris press became at once very scathing toward these 'Yankee salt-pork merchants' whom they had so exalted eight years before. Even the suave M. Léon Bailby, editor of *L'Intransigeant*, joined in the chorus:—

To have supported the heaviest burden of the war, without which American commerce and the American fleet would to-day be at the mercy of Germany — that is nothing. To evoke our million and a half dead is, to the American business man, bad taste. Dead men are not worth reckoning. They are not like the war supplies for which we must to-day pay in dollars at four times their original price.

The famous Dawes Plan! Dawes and Company, bankers, of Chicago — a city half German. Come, let us talk of dollars! Let us have no further talk of a common cause, a common ideal, defended by men having at heart the same holy enthusiasm [and so on].

Does this fustian carry any weight in France? Perhaps not; but it fans the flame of agreeable excitement which most Frenchmen like to find burning in their favorite newspaper. It has become a convention to have their pulses stirred and their resentments aroused. At bottom and in their sober moments I think they envisage inter-

national facts clearly enough — as clearly, indeed, as we do. Every Frenchman knows that, if his Government is poor, France is rich. He knows that every industry in the country is sailing on a high tide of prosperity, that not only every Frenchman, but two million foreigners, are employed at good wages to fill the orders that are coming in from all over the globe. But you would hardly gather this state of affairs from the Paris press.

Similarly, every Frenchman knows of the large fortunes made by contractors in the devastated regions. In fact, in the regions themselves one hears of little else. But do not expect to find in *Le Temps*, *Figaro*, *Le Matin*, or *L'Intransigeant* any allusion to the scandalous profits out of the sums allocated by Government for restoration. The other day the conspiracy of silence was rudely broken. M. Painlevé, the Premier, in a lengthy speech delivered in the South, declared that his Government was on the track of these shameless profiteers of the devastated regions. The whole Paris press was shocked. Not a newspaper — save, of course, the unspeakable *Humanité* — had ever mentioned such a scandal.

'Has M. Painlevé reflected,' asked *Le Temps*, 'on the calumnies that this unlucky speech can produce in Germany, so prompt and so able to exploit our least imprudences? How could the orator appropriate these legends which have been created about the reparation of the ruins caused by the enemy invasion?'

The prosperity, and indeed the rapacity, of the French peasant and the connection of that class with the present cost of living in France is another *secret de Polichinelle*. The comparative failure of the recent domestic loan was due to the refusal of the

paysan, in spite of all the appeals to his patriotism, to support it. But not a word of this in the Paris press, from which you inferred from the reports of enthusiastic provincial meetings that the honest farmers were coming forward nobly with their savings. At last the patience of *Le Figaro*, which in the past has honorably distinguished itself by bursts of candor, became exhausted. It came out with a really terrible article from the pen of M. Gheusi, entitled '*Gobseck aux Champs*.' Gobseck, it may be recalled, was a character in Balzac, a skinflint, a usurer, impervious to patriotism, shrewd and hard as nails. One recognized the type at once in the provincial profiteer who is only thinking of his corn, his swine, his oxen, and the prices he can extort from the townsman.

It was a bitter article; it drew blood. The whole countryside was seized with resentment. Protests poured into the *Figaro* office; but one from the Marquis de Vogüé, who is president of the Société des Agriculteurs de France, and therefore official spokesman of the farmers, settled the matter. M. Gheusi was promptly thrown over by the owner of the paper, M. Coty; and two columns of retraction appeared in the front page, headed, 'The Peasants of France should not be confounded with the Speculators.'

Our collaborator and friend, M. Gheusi, published last Thursday in his journal, on his own initiative and on his own responsibility, an article entitled '*Gobseck of the Fields*,' of which the least we can say is that it represents only the views of its author, so much are the assertions contained in his diatribe against our peasants in obvious opposition to the *Figaro's* doctrine of social conservatism and economic defense.

For days all Paris was laughing; but the laughter of all prudent Frenchmen

was in their sleeve, and no echo was to be found in the Paris press.

In the recent bank strike, again, the sympathy of the public was from first to last with the strikers; but if any looked for any reflection of that sympathy in the press, any exposition of the justice of their demands owing to the prosperity of the banks and the great increase of dividends, they must have been imperfectly informed as to the financial independence of the newspapers of Paris. It is not necessary to press here any charges of venality against these newspapers, which were sufficiently pressed at the time of the *Matin* and *Journal* revelations, or even to mention it save as one source of their loss of prestige and influence. I have been informed that there is not a single Paris journal which is a paying property in the strict economic sense, and it is fair to infer that their staffs and news organization must suffer in consequence. Indeed, the wretched pay of the Paris journalist is a standing temptation to venality, which he is not always able to resist.

Nevertheless, the Paris press continues to command the pens of many talented and forceful writers who accomplish much good and afford literary entertainment of a high order. Others are, however, rather essayists and polemicists than men with a wide outlook and a practical knowledge of affairs. Their provincialism — one dis-

likes to use the word, perhaps 'narrow nationalism' would be better — is at times exasperatingly on a par with that of the late Honorable Jefferson Brick, and the creed of the young gentleman who writes under the pseudonym of 'Pertinax' daily proclaims itself.

The grace, the beauty, the virtues, the genius, the incomparable past, of France give umbrage to the Anglo-Saxons. Their greatest concern, since the Armistice, has been to prevent France from profiting by the greatness of her victory.

The views of such writers on cardinal themes — such as international relations — remain as unilateral and perverse, though less violent, as in the worst days of Rochefort and Drumont, and I find a general reluctance throughout France to consider them representative of French public opinion. That opinion is better reflected in the speeches of the more liberal French statesmen, publicists, and men of affairs, and even in recent French books and popular novels. The truth is, the Paris press needs more light and more air and breadth of view; and these it is now getting through the influence of the cinema, the increased circulation in Paris of foreign newspapers, and the establishment of the new journals of information, which, in the main, are content to give the news and let readers ponder quietly for themselves.

AMERICA'S CUSTOMS INQUISITION¹

BY SENATOR ÉDOUARD NERON

FRENCH exporters are protesting vigorously, and with excellent cause, against the vexatious inquiries that American Treasury agents are making in this country. Their protests find an echo in the press, and have been brought before our Government by our leading commercial and industrial organizations.

The Fordney-McCumber Tariff Law of September 1922, instead of basing ad valorem duties on the value of merchandise in the United States, as had been done for several years, returned to the pre-war practice of basing them on the value of goods in the country of origin. The Law provides that 'if any person manufacturing, producing, selling, shipping, or consigning merchandise to the United States fails, at the request of the Secretary of the Treasury, or an appraiser, or person acting as an appraiser, or a collector, or a general appraiser, or the Board of General Appraisers, as the case may be, to permit a duly accredited officer of the United States to inspect his books, papers, records, accounts, documents, or correspondence, pertaining to the market value or classification of such merchandise, then while such failure continues the Secretary of the Treasury, under regulations prescribed by him, (1) shall prohibit the importation into the United States of merchandise manufactured, produced, sold, shipped, or

consigned by such person, and (2) may instruct the collectors to withhold delivery of merchandise manufactured, produced, sold, shipped, or consigned by such person. If such failure continues for the period of one year from the date of such instructions, the collector shall cause the merchandise, unless previously exported, to be sold at public auction as in case of forfeited merchandise.'

Such investigations are not new so far as the United States is concerned. It maintained a secret service of this kind, with headquarters in the Avenue de l'Opéra, before the war. Indeed, a special commission, established after the Franco-American Commercial Treaty of 1908 was signed to adjust tariff controversies between the two countries, inquired into the activities of these agents, as a result of formal complaints presented to it by French exporters of perfumery, porcelain, lace, and furnishing-goods.

But the inquisition complained of before the war was not expressly provided for by statute. The United States Tariff Act of October 1913 merely imposed a surtax of fifteen per cent ad valorem on merchandise imported into the United States from firms refusing to give the required information; while the present law prohibits such importation and makes goods brought into the country in violation of this prohibition liable to forfeiture.

Nor are these penalties merely Platonic. When a firm of metal-goods

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