

The life of H.N. Brailsford

by Kirk Willis

F.M. Leventhal. *The Last Dissenter: H.N. Brailsford and His World*. New York: Oxford University Press; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985. Pp. x, 326. US\$34.50.

“THE TRAGEDY OF journalism,” lamented Vera Brittain in her biography of her great friend Winifred Holtby, “lies in its impermanence; the very topicality which gives it brilliance condemns it to an early death.”¹ Few careers in modern British journalism illustrate the wisdom of Brittain’s judgment more acutely than that of H.N. Brailsford. For the half century stretching from the Boer War to the Suez crisis, Brailsford was a prolific, influential, and admired observer of domestic and international affairs whose thousands of leading articles and full

score of books won him international celebrity as one of the finest of British journalists. Writing regularly for such prestigious Liberal and Labour newspapers and magazines as the *Manchester Guardian*, *New Statesman*, *Nation*, *Daily News*, and *New Republic*, he stood as a major figure on the British Left, and his shrewd analyses of foreign and domestic politics and discerning accounts of imperial and national crises were familiar to two generations of British and American readers.

Today, scarcely twenty-eight years after his death, Noel Brailsford is all but forgotten—his writings having vanished as the mist with the morn. That a lifetime of distinction and a body of work should have proven so evanescent is, as Brittain lamented, as deplorable as it is predictable. It is, therefore, to rescue Brailsford’s reputation and to recapture his influence that F.M. Leventhal has offered his excellent new biography, *The Last Dissenter: H.N. Brailsford and His World*. Enviably lucid in style and impressively thorough in research, it succeeds splendidly in describing Brailsford’s life, in explicating his thought, in tracing his influence, and in assessing his career. Balanced in judgment and rich in context, it is unlikely to be superseded as the standard biography of this singular and estimable man.

Born Christmas Day of 1873, Brailsford was reared in the provincial “Liberal-Nonconformist” tradition of the English north (p. 257). Son of a strict and domineering Methodist clergyman and his compliant wife, he endured a puritanical upbringing supervised by an underindulgent and distant father and an indifferent and intimidated mother. In common with so many other similarly circumstanced late Victorians, the adolescent Brailsford both retreated into a world of books and study and rebelled against his father’s humourless and inflexible faith—a revolt that was as much emotional and psychological as it was intellectual and theological in impulse. Sent to boarding-school in Dundee and to university at Glasgow, Brailsford was a brilliant student; indeed, under the tutelage of Gilbert Murray, A.C. Bradley, and Edward Caird he won rare double honours in classics and philosophy at Glasgow and seemed for a time destined for an academic career. Such was not, however, to be Brailsford’s fate. Inspired by Murray’s humane Liberalism and electrified by Keir Hardie’s moralistic socialism, he turned his attention to political organizing and socialist agitation and helped to found the Glasgow University chapters of both the Independent Labour Party and the Fabian Society. And by way of a final lure towards a life of political activism, the rebellion of Greek nationalists against their Turkish overlords in early 1897 fired Brailsford’s imagination. Aroused by the resonances of his classical education and emboldened by the examples of Shelley and Byron in an earlier age, Brailsford

¹ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Friendship: The Story of Winifred Holtby* (London: Macmillan, 1940), p. 250.

enlisted in the Philhellenic Legion and joined the rebel forces in Macedonia in the late spring of 1897. Although the experience of war proved more inglorious than sublime and Brailsford was soon invalided home with a serious injury, his time there had provided him with both a deep determination to pursue a career as a journalist and a "permanent distaste for the excesses of patriotism and the brutalities of war" (p. 32).

Brailsford's passionate devotion to a life of politically committed journalism—and one focussing on foreign rather than domestic affairs—coincided with the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899. Well-connected (through Murray and Caird) with the world of Liberal journalism and already experienced (through articles he had filed from Greece) with the demands of daily reporting, he was able—in 1899—to land a job as leader-writer for the *Morning Leader*, then "the only London morning paper with pro-Boer sympathies" (p. 43). His blistering attacks on the foreign and military policies of the Salisbury ministry and his searching analyses of the underlying impulses behind late-Victorian imperialism quickly won him a wide reputation, and he soon joined the exclusive coterie of Liberal writers and intellectuals who dominated so much of the journalism of Edwardian London—the world of Massingham, Hammond, Nevinson, Hobson, Hobhouse, Gardiner, Hirst, and Ensor. Indeed, so unflagging was his energy, so fluent his prose, and so expert his grasp of foreign affairs, that Brailsford became one of the commanding figures of British journalism, and his contributions to such newspapers and magazines as the *Nation*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Speaker*, and *Daily News* reached a wide audience and won him immense notoriety. Such were his energies and ambitions, moreover, that—not content with the grind of daily journalism—he also found time in the years before 1914 to travel abroad (to Greece, Egypt, Russia, and the Balkans), to join innumerable committees concerned with foreign and imperial issues (from the League of Liberals against Aggression and Militarism, to the Macedonian Relief Committee, to the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom), to become an outspoken advocate and busy activist on behalf of female suffrage (through the Conciliation Committee), and to write several widely acclaimed books on politics, literature, and foreign policy (most famously *Macedonia: Its Races and Their Future* [1906], *Shelley, Godwin and Their Circle* [1913], and *The War of Steel and Gold* [1914]).

For Brailsford, as for most of his contemporaries, the First World War stood as the central event of his life. Despite his expertise in foreign affairs and his intimate knowledge of conditions in the Balkans, Brailsford was caught completely unawares by the outbreak of war in the summer of 1914. He did not, however, experience even the faintest

of doubts concerning either the folly of British involvement in that war or the necessity of his opposition to it. In tones reminiscent of his earlier criticism of British policy in the South African War, he thundered against British participation in print, lectures, and public debates. As Brailsford soon discovered to his dismay, however, such opposition was received very differently in 1914 than it had been in 1899. Compared to the earlier experience, the passions aroused were far more extreme and the stakes at issue far more valuable; friendships were not just strained but broken, motives not simply questioned but condemned, and loyalties no longer assumed but impugned. Brailsford therefore found both the pages of many periodicals and the doors of many friends closed to him, and he was driven to expand his circle of associates and to cherish allies wherever he could find them. In particular, he found himself drawn more and more to the Labour movement and to such avowedly socialist publications as the *Labour Leader*, *Herald*, and *Call*, as well as to those organizations—chiefly the Union of Democratic Control and the League of Nations Union—which were attempting to suggest cures for the pathologies of foreign and military policy which had brought Europe to its present suicidal state. To this end, he published articles and books on the serpentine course of pre-war European diplomacy, outlined strategies for post-war reconstruction and readjustment, and organized UDC and LNU chapters all over Britain.

Ironically, but in common with other such anti-war activists as Clifford Allen, E.D. Morel, Ramsay MacDonald, and Bertrand Russell, Brailsford's strident opposition to the war served to heighten his reputation in the years immediately after 1918. Admired as one of the few individuals in Britain who had had both the wisdom to fear the war and the courage to oppose it, he found a clamouring demand by editors for his articles, an eager readership for his journalism, and a growing market for his books. In the inter-war years, he therefore wrote for such prestigious journals as the *Nation*, *New Statesman*, *New Republic*, *Reynolds' Illustrated News*, and *New Leader* (which he edited from 1922 to 1926). Focussed as always on problems of foreign affairs and preoccupied not unnaturally with matters of disarmament, decolonization, and peace, Brailsford travelled extensively in Europe and Africa, worked incessantly on the committees to which he was a compulsive joiner, developed a theoretical critique of imperialism on Hobsonian lines, outlined the tenets of a consistent anti-fascist foreign policy, forged plans for World Government or—failing that—European Federation, and managed to find the time to write superb studies of Voltaire and Paine.

The outbreak of the Second World War found Brailsford in the unfa-

miliar role of fervent supporter and public defender of British foreign and defence policy, and he concentrated his still considerable energies on assisting Kingsley Martin with the writing and editing of the *New Statesman* and on planning schemes of World Government and strategies of decolonization. Aging rather rapidly in the years after 1945, Brailsford nonetheless lived on until 1958, enjoying the respect of the Labour Party as one of its great “old men”, the admiration of his journalistic proteges in the UK and US as a model of professional behaviour, and the esteem of wide segments of the British reading public as a sagacious and articulate pundit.

As Mr. Leventhal’s title makes plain, he views the essential unity of Brailsford’s life and opinions as resting on the latter’s indisputable membership in and loyalty to the tradition of British Dissent. “Dissent” is, of course, a peculiarly English word. Serving as both a verb and a collective noun, it is in this second sense that it has long served as a term of political description in Britain. Born in the revolutions of the seventeenth century and continued uninterrupted into the twentieth, Dissent was at once a political programme, a religious category, an intellectual tradition, a sociological description, and a social attitude. At the height of their influence in the late nineteenth century, the forces of organized Dissent not only challenged the governing institutions, prevailing values, and presiding elite of Britain, but also succeeded in chipping away at the many forms of religious, political, and social privilege which pervaded the universities, army, Parliament, civil service, local governments, and schools.

By birth, temperament, and confession, Brailsford was a proud member of this tradition. Indeed, as Mr. Leventhal makes plain, Brailsford was a natural successor to Paine, Cobbett, and Bright—in his scepticism concerning the wisdom of Foreign Office mandarins, in his opposition to militarism and imperialism, in his hatred of religious and political oppression at home or abroad, in his commitment to the maintenance of civil liberties in Britain under any and all circumstances, and in his sense of being a social, political, intellectual, and religious outsider.

But if Brailsford’s membership in the Dissenting tradition thus locates him on the British political spectrum, it also differentiates him from many of his closest political allies and associates—men such as Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, Walter Lippmann, and, of course, Bertrand Russell. That Russell and Brailsford shared a wide range of political opinions as well as a considerable mutual regard is well known, and Mr. Leventhal’s account of their long—albeit intermittent—association is an excellent one. Although the two men were never teamed in harness

together for any sort of close working relationship, both found themselves cooperating in indirect ways in a number of controversial campaigns—in favour of female suffrage, against British participation in the First World War, against the Bolshevik and Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union, in support of the League of Nations Union and other internationalist organizations, and in support of Britain’s involvement in the war against Germany and Italy after 1939.

Despite this impressive—if partial—list of shared opinions, however, there were several important differences between the two men, their interests, and their impulses to political involvement. The distinction which most struck contemporaries, and which modern historians must not overlook or undervalue, was that of class. Not merely was Russell an aristocrat and a member of one of the best-known families of the Whig elite, but he had—largely as a consequence of that heritage—been sent to one of the two ancient English universities and had there made social and intellectual connections which helped to define the limits of his social world for most of his life. Despite his own distinguished academic performance, Brailsford, by contrast, made no connections with the intellectual and political world of London while at Glasgow, and he was never able, therefore, to meet the Prime Minister casually at a country home, to appeal directly to Cabinet ministers on behalf of war resisters, or to contact old friends at the Treasury or Foreign Office to track down the location and condition of an Austrian prisoner in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp. In a society permeated by invisible yet invincible class barriers, Russell thus remained—by choice, breeding, and education—at least on the fringe of what must be called the social, intellectual, and political “establishment”. To be sure, he was in many ways a renegade, a deserter to his class. But that is precisely the point: to desert one must first belong.

Differences in political and intellectual orientation also divided the two men. In the language of late-Victorian and Edwardian politics, Russell was the Cobdenite and Brailsford the Gladstonian—the former aligned with the non-interventionist tradition of Little England and the latter loyal to the Grand Old Man’s insistence that British foreign policy be “moral” and, if necessary, interventionist. Although such labels are notoriously slippery, Russell may also be described as more of a Lockean and Millite in his political and social thought, more concerned with questions of domestic politics and more convinced that genuine social reform can only be achieved through substantial changes in education, living conditions, and expectations. Brailsford, by contrast, paid scant attention to domestic politics and, in his suggestions for reform in British foreign and imperial affairs, was more indebted to the teachings of

Paine and Cobbett and preferred to blame the failings of British policy on the evil machinations of financial, industrial, and aristocratic elites. In the years after 1914, therefore, Russell worried over rival theories of socialism, articulated schemes of education and childrearing, puzzled over questions of the role of “possessive” and “creative” impulses in determining human behaviour, and explored the roles of power and science in modern society. Brailsford, in his turn, devoted his attention to implementing the League of Nations, to elaborating strategies of disarmament and decolonization, and to constructing an intellectually coherent and politically acceptable anti-fascist foreign policy. Russell, that is, believed that the world could not be reborn until human behaviour was transformed and human nature understood and modified; Brailsford, by contrast, took men and women much as he found them and sought only to change their views concerning foreign policy and international relations. And despite their defections to the Labour Party in the years after 1914, Russell remained always the Liberal social reformer and Brailsford, despite his incantatory obeisance to “Socialism”, remained always the Radical critic. Russell was thus a dissenter, but it was Brailsford who was the Dissenter—and there is a world of British social and political history in the distinction.

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