

**REITH LECTURES 1949:
Britain in Europe: Reflections on the Development of a European Society**

Robert Birley

Lecture 2: The Meeting of Britain and Europe

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As I shall have to say something in this lecture of England during the Middle Ages, it would perhaps be as well to point out first that during that period this country was not very important and not very well known. In fact, it was quite commonly believed on the Continent that Englishmen had tails. In spite of that England then felt herself to be part of Europe. With the development of English trade and the slow creation of an Empire, England came to need Europe less than she had before. This does not mean that we were politically disinterested in Europe. It always mattered to us what happened in that part of Europe which is now Holland and Belgium, and we were constantly concerned lest any one power on the Continent should become so strong that Europe became a menace to us. It was our policy, therefore, to prevent any one power uniting Europe. On two occasions it appeared that France might become so strong that she would control, even if she did not actually rule over, Western Europe, and on each occasion our intervention was decisive in preventing her from doing so. More recently, although we entered the war in 1914 because Germany invaded Belgium, we very soon felt that we were fighting to stop Germany doing what France had twice before come near to accomplishing. In 1939 we were from the first conscious that a German victory would mean the union of Europe under the Nazis.

Our Historical Interventions in Europe

There have been many strands in our foreign policy, but we can say that one of them has been our determination to prevent European unity. We have no cause to regret this. Each time that we intervened, the unity that was being created was one contrary to the essential principle of western European civilisation, that of the value of diversity. The France of Louis XIV and of Napoleon, the Germany of Kaiser William II and of Hitler, all had this in common, that the unity they offered Europe was to be secured by the subjection of other nations to a single Great Power.

Our policy now will be not to prevent, but to promote the unity of Europe. This involves a revolutionary change in our foreign policy with regard to Europe: it will have to become positive- instead of negative. It is true that we have at times before now felt that the answer to the threat created by the supremacy of one power was for us to bring other' nations together rather than to divide them or ignore them. Thus, after the defeat of Napoleon, Lord Castlereagh, perhaps our greatest Foreign Secretary, held that it was the duty of Great Britain to keep the powers of Europe 'grouped' by which he meant to encourage them to form one group, in which all the members were friendly to one another, and not divided into separate alliances. But before he died, Castlereagh himself was to feel that this policy was impracticable. After the First World War we supported the League of Nations, but when the idea of a European Union was advanced by the great French statesman, Aristide Briand, few

Englishmen took him seriously. Our present decision to join Western Union, therefore, though faintly foreshadowed in the past, can indeed be called a revolutionary one. It is bound to affect profoundly our relations with other European countries, and not only in the sphere of international politics. As long as our political relationship with Europe was essentially negative, our cultural relationship with it did not seem to matter much. We shall now be concerned, as we have not been before, with the nature of their institutions and of their social development.

France, we must allow, has always been in an exceptional position. For centuries after the Norman Conquest our relations with France were naturally very-close. After we had finally abandoned our attempts to conquer it, attempts which now seem very unreal and which were doomed to failure when Joan of Arc roused the French people against us, we can only speak of the relationship between our two countries as a consciously complementary one. We have both been well aware of our differences, but have constantly felt that we could gain something from each other just because we were so different. A close cultural relationship between the two nations has thus been quite compatible with intense political rivalry. It is worth noting that during the nineteenth century, in spite of the gradual dying away of our traditional enmity, the cultural ties between England and France became weaker. A great English thinker, like John Stuart Mill, or a great French one, like de Tocqueville, had a good deal less influence on the other country than had been exercised by the philosophers and writers of the previous century. We have evidence here of the fact, which we shall have to bear in mind, that during the Victorian era Britain became more separated from Europe than ever before.

There were two periods in our history when England had undoubtedly a great influence on Europe, the eighth and the eighteenth centuries. The former time seems to us very remote and it may appear hardly possible that we should learn anything from it. England had only been converted to Christianity about a hundred years before and it was still divided into several separate kingdoms. But, in fact, this period can certainly teach us something. We should remember that England was then herself subjected to very strong influences from the Continent. This may be seen clearly if we examine the art of the period, such masterpieces as the great Cross that stands in the lonely churchyard of Bewcastle in the fells of Northumberland or the superb Lindisfame Gospels, now in the British Museum, which some would claim to be the most beautiful book ever produced. We find in them an extraordinary mingling of artistic traditions, Ancient British or Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and those from the Mediterranean lands. We have every reason to be proud of them this was the only time when England has led the rest of Europe in the art of sculpture. We have even more reason to be proud of the way in which we repaid our debt to Europe. England, in this period, had an extraordinary influence on the Continent. It sprang from a missionary zeal to spread Christianity in heathen lands. The outstanding figure in this movement was St. Boniface, or, to give him his English name, Wynfrith, who, coming from Crediton in Devonshire, was chiefly responsible for the conversion of the German tribes to Christianity, and, moreover, through his organisation of the church, began the very slow process of uniting Germany.

It is a remarkable experience for an Englishman working in Germany continually to be reminded of the close connection between England and Europe in those distant days. For instance, I lived for some time not far from the city of Munster, the capital

of Westphalia, now in the British zone of Germany. Its first bishop came to England to be educated at York in the middle of the eighth century. His teacher was Alcuin, who was summoned to Aachen by Charlemagne, the only ruler since the Romans to unite Western Europe. Charlemagne wished him to lead his splendid attempt to create a common literary culture for his Empire, an attempt which meant more to him than all his military conquests or administrative triumphs.

Two Great Englishmen

Men like Boniface and Alcuin were great Englishmen and also European figures. They receive more honour now on the Continent than they do in this country, a fact which is in itself significant. We have to pass through a thousand years of our history, before we find England having once more so great an influence on European life and thought. This time, in the eighteenth century, it was of a very different kind. It arose now, not from any missionary movement, but from the fact that England had evolved a society founded on certain principles which Europe felt would meet its own needs.

Fortunately there is a very striking incident, which can show us just what it meant when Europe met Britain in the eighteenth century. In the year 1726 the young French writer, Voltaire, came to England. He had quarrelled with a great nobleman and, in consequence, had been imprisoned in the Bastille and then exiled. He found himself in a country which seemed to him very eccentric and in some ways almost barbarous, but, for all that, a Utopia. Here people were not persecuted for their religious beliefs. As there were a hundred ways of getting to heaven, no one minded much which way you chose. If he had been treated here by some nobleman as he had been in France, he would have had a remedy in a writ of Habeas Corpus, and, far from remaining in arbitrary imprisonment, he would have been- immediately released and granted heavy damages. Voltaire's letters from England, which were published in France in 1734, brought country forcibly to the notice of Europe. The eighteenth century, it is true, is often called the French century and French influence certainly seemed to be dominant. All over central Europe every ruler of every little principality was building himself a palace on the model of Versailles and organising a court on the lines of that of, the French king. But the original ideas, which changed men's views on politics and social relationships and were to cause the great revolutions at the end of the century, came for the most part from this country. These ideas were visible in British society, with its tolerance and intellectual freedom, its insistence on the principle that all men were equal before the law as the best defence against tyranny, and its remarkable parliamentary system of government. And they were expressed by great writers such as Locke and Adam Smith, who were read all over the Continent and were regarded as European figures.

Scottish Influences

Adam Smith was, of course, a Scotsman and perhaps I should add that I have spoken of England when dealing with the eighteenth century because Voltaire in his letters never refers once to Scotland, except in a brief and very superficial chapter on the Presbyterians. But he was to live to say, 'It is an admirable result of the progress of the human spirit that at the present time it is from Scotland we receive the rules of taste in all the arts from the epic poem to gardening'. His examples were not very well chosen, perhaps. Better instances of the way in which Scotland influenced

Europe at this time could be found in philosophy, political economy or science. Thus the French scientist, Lavoisier, the greatest name in the early history of chemistry, was glad to acknowledge himself to be the disciple of an Edinburgh doctor, Joseph Black, and when Sismondi, one of the first socialists, spoke of England as 'that astonishing country which seems to offer its great experience for the instruction of the rest of the world he was really thinking of the Scotsman, Adam Smith, and of the Scottish school of political economists.

What we can gain from history is the wisdom of experience, rather than any easy guide to the future. If we remember this, we can learn a good deal from these two periods to which I have just referred. In both, our country had much to offer. In the eighth century we had a confident Christian culture, closely linked with Europe because it was derived from it. Saint Boniface united Germany by organising its church: exactly the same had been accomplished in England not long before by an Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore, who had been sent to us by the Pope from the eastern Mediterranean. In the eighteenth century we had a way of life which suited the needs of Europe, its economic needs, created by the rise of a commercial and industrial society, its political needs created by the growing influence of the middle-classes, and its intellectual needs, which became apparent when scientific thought began to demand freedom from old dogmas and traditions. And we had writers who could express the underlying ideas of our society, enabling them to be assimilated by other nations.

There is one clear contrast between the two periods. In the earlier one our influence was made possible by the readiness of Englishmen to go to Europe and propagate their ideas far from their own homes. In the eighteenth century it was rather Europe that found Britain. But we can learn from this study of two widely separated periods in history that if we have a successful and confident society, based on principles which meet the needs of Europe, we should certainly be able to play a part now in creating a common way of thought among the member states of the Union. But we shall also need to have thinkers and writers who can express the principles of our society; men who will feel themselves to be members also of a European society and so will be able to transmit their experiences and their ideas to other peoples.

We must recognise, however, that developments during the last century have made it more difficult for us to understand Europe. The nineteenth century was the most successful in our history, but our successes served to cut us off from the Continent. They were due largely to our prosperity. In 1814 the writer and artist, Benjamin Robert Haydon, was at the Louvre in Paris when it was full of tourists, with the Scottish painter, Wilkie. 'Now, Wilkie' he said, 'suppose you did not know any nation present, what would be your impression from the look of the English?' 'Wilkie', Haydon wrote, 'looked a minute and contemplating their sedate, respectable, monied look by the side of the Russians- and the French, said, "Dear, dear, they look just as if they had a balance at their bankers"'. The different look a successful man has does not make it easy to be in close touch with him. But our successes were due also to our political skill. The year of revolutions, 1848, was our crowning triumph, just because we did not have a revolution ourselves. We were skilful and farseeing enough to avoid one. But, as a result, we were quite unable to understand what had happened in Europe. We thought that the year 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, was going to introduce a long era of peace. We never realised that in

Europe the middle-classes had only been able to defeat the revolt of the working-classes by calling in the army, and that, in consequence, in many states the army had gained a new prestige and importance as the one element in society which could preserve stability and security. The army at home seemed to us quite unimportant. We thought of it as something to be sent abroad to fight battles in other continents. Britain in the course of the nineteenth century attained an equilibrium in society which seemed to make force almost unnecessary. If we read the lives of the great English statesmen of this period we feel that, although they understood the diplomatic scene in Europe, they were entirely oblivious of the great revolt from liberal ideas and the new belief in the use of force, which were developing in the minds of European thinkers. The future historian will probably say that no country was ever so completely taken by surprise as was Britain by the revolutionary movements of the present century.

We can find a remarkable example of the separation of Britain from Europe during the nineteenth century if we compare the rise of the Labour Party in this country with that of Social Democracy on the Continent. Much the strongest influence on Social Democracy was that of Marxism, and its philosophy has, therefore, been based on the materialist view of history. Marxism played only a small part, on the other hand, in the rise of the Labour Party. This had its roots rather in early nineteenth-century radicalism, and this, in turn, derived largely from the radical traditions of the nonconformists. They had been excluded from all share in the government of the country until nearly a third of the way through the century, and it was natural that they entered politics as ardent supporters of reform. The strength of nonconformity was to be found largely in 'the lower middle-classes', to use the phrase employed in Gilbert and Sullivan's opera, 'Iolanthe' a work which tells us a good deal about the Victorian political scene. We may recall the lines,

*Bow, bow, ye lower middle-classes!
Bow, bow, ye tradesmen, bow ye masses.*

The word 'masses' had a very different significance on the Continent, where you would not have been likely to find it associated with 'tradesmen'. The Labour Party, then, far from being opposed to Christianity, as social democracy inevitably was, drew much of its strength from the most openly Christian of all political movements in Britain.

Europe Uninterested in Britain's Example

I do not mean to suggest that this development was an unfortunate one because it happened to be so different from the parallel one on the Continent. The mingling of different influences, which created the Labour Party, is typical of British society in the nineteenth century and this tendency for contrasting political and social trends to combine in spite of their varying origins was one of our greatest sources of strength. All I am concerned with here is the effect of the difference. One might have thought that the example of our country would have been of great value to other states in Europe. It is not surprising that Englishmen in 1848 believed that the ridiculous failure of the Chartists in that year would have a steadying effect on Europe. After the great Chartist demonstration had come to nothing, Lord John Russell, the Prime Minister, wrote to Queen Victoria to say that he thought that 'the example of Great

Britain' might 'secure an interval of reflection for Europe'. It did nothing of the kind: Europe was not interested.

It would be as well at this point to sum up what we may have learnt from these reflections on our history. In the eighth century England took the lead in creating a European culture out of the chaos of the Dark Ages. The work of St. Boniface and his followers made possible the political unity of Europe under the Emperor Charlemagne at the end of the century. Frenchmen and Germans together became members of a single Christian Church, with its organisation in their countries largely due to these English missionaries. The work of Alcuin made Charlemagne's Empire something more than a merely political structure, so that, when that Empire broke up, the tradition of a common civilisation in Western Europe did not disappear with it. In the eighteenth century Britain stimulated Europe with the spectacle of a lively, confident society and with the works of great philosophers, economists and scientists, who expressed its underlying principles. The famous French political writer, Montesquieu, said then that England was the country to go to if one wanted to think. This enabled us to play a prominent part in creating the traditions of freedom and democracy which we are now trying to preserve by forming a Western European Union. But during the nineteenth century Britain, though she was very successful and greatly respected, became more isolated from Europe and her influence on European ways of thought became weaker. 'England', said the younger Pitt at the crisis of the struggle with Napoleon, 'has saved herself by her exertions and Europe by her example'. That was true enough during the Napoleonic Wars, but England's example meant comparatively little during the century which followed them.

Lessons from Germany

Those of us who have been working in Germany cannot help sometimes being very aware of this separation between Britain and Europe. Some of us who have had to deal with German education, for instance, have come to the conclusion that it is almost impossible for an Englishman to understand the problem of the conflict in that country between the churches and the social democrats in the educational field. We have had to do all we can to learn to understand it and to feel it. The same difficulty that we experienced there was obvious also in certain discussions in the Assembly of Europe held recently at Strasbourg on the clause dealing with the rights of parents' in education. Some of the British delegates seemed to think that this was mainly a question as to how far the parent should have the right to decide on the kind of education his child should receive. They were thinking in terms of grammar, technical and modern schools. This is an important problem, but in Europe today it is an almost completely irrelevant one. The vital question there is that of the right of the parent to send his child to the school of his own church and those who question this right are to be found mainly in the ranks of social democracy. I used to make a private list of the facts about my own country which caused the greatest bewilderment when I spoke of them in Germany and I came to the conclusion that the one that seemed most baffling was the fact that many Roman Catholics voted for the Labour Party at the last general election. It is impossible to tell, of course, how many, but the number must have been considerable. What made this seem so astonishing to my audiences was their assumption that the Labour Party would certainly be opposed, as part of its official party policy, to the existence of Roman Catholic church schools.

We in England have had our own difficulties about the relationships between the churches and the schools. The dispute has been mainly between the Established Church of England on one side and the Nonconformists on the other. The settlement reached in the Education Act of 1944 was the result of long negotiations between the interested parties, conducted under the aegis of the Ministry of Education. Even then some of the various clauses in the Act dealing with church schools were strongly opposed by certain members in the House of Commons of both parties, because they did not feel that the financial arrangements for these schools were generous enough. In spite of that the Act was finally passed by a unanimous vote, strong evidence in itself that we have not lost all of the political genius which was so triumphant during the last century.

But the problem in many countries of Western Europe is an entirely different one. The struggle there is between the churches, who wish to retain control of their schools, and the social democrats, by whatever name they are called in various countries, who regard the church schools as politically reactionary and socially undesirable. I am not saying that this is at all a fair description of them, though I do not think that any European church leader has ever gone as far as Archbishop Temple, who said in 1943, 'Above all let us not give the impression that our concern as church-people is only with the adjustment of the dual system [he meant, of course, the problem of the church schools]; we ought as Christians to be concerned about the whole of educational progress'. These words were, I believe, decisive. Probably, the very nature of the struggle on the Continent would make it impossible for a church leader to use them there. For the issue is a very serious one. It has caused cabinet crises, during the last two years, both in France and Belgium, and it came near to wrecking the attempts to draw up a constitution for western Germany at Bonn. I myself first realised just how serious it is when a very eminent German ecclesiastic of the Roman Catholic Church said to me, not long ago, that he regarded the social democrats rather than the communists as the real enemy. He was thinking, I know quite well, of his schools.

But, if there is a great gulf here between England and Europe, it does not follow that we have not a great deal to offer. Very shortly before I left Germany I visited one day the chief Roman Catholic youth training centre for the Rhineland, a place with a fine influence in Germany, and they spoke there with enthusiasm of their good relations with the social democrat youth organisations. They were insistent that this did not involve any compromises on matters of principle. They made no secret of the fact that these good relations had been made possible by their experiences at a place called Vlotho. At this little town in Westphalia there is a youth centre, which was started by the British and is still guided by them. There youth leaders of all denominations and political parties are constantly meeting one another. It was there that I had one of my most startling and encouraging experiences in Germany. In the course of a discussion a prominent leader of the Roman Catholic youth organisations said that he had been talking things over for some time with the leader of the social democrat youth, whom he, had come to know well 'from their meetings there, and that they had decided in principle that when one of their organisations asked down some speaker they would invite social democrat young men and women to attend the meeting. He said also that they would even try to arrange for him to be put up for the night by the other organisation.. The social democrat leader cordially agreed. I can say without any doubt at all that this would have been impossible without our British influence, and,

further, that it was only made possible by the fact that there were Englishmen there who had really come to understand the problem and did not only look at it through English eyes. In fact, there were several occasions when I was in Germany, of which this was one, when I began to feel that, perhaps, there was more to be learnt than one would expect from England in the eighth century. The conditions in occupied Germany are, of course, unique and we may hope that they will never arise again. But perhaps, if we are to make our proper contribution to the creation of a European Union, some Englishmen will have to be prepared not only to visit Europe but to live in it, as Boniface and Alcuin did long ago.

In any case we have to face the fact that, while our past history shows that we can contribute to the formation of a common civilisation in western Europe, we are in many ways not fitted to do so now. Before we start thinking about any contributions we can make, we must consider what we have to learn. And the first thing we have to learn is how to learn. We shall have to rediscover the technique of understanding Europe. With some of the ways in which this will affect our education in this country I shall deal in the next lecture.