JOHN BRIGHT

English Quaker Statesman
1811 - 1889
Leonard S. Kenworthy

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John Bright: English Quaker Statesman

The number of Quakers who have contributed significantly to the world in the field of government service is fewer than in many other areas. However, two men have been outstanding in applying Quaker ideals in public office. Those two are William Penn and John Bright.

Penn is known by nearly all Friends, as well as by other well-informed individuals; Bright is unknown even by most Quakers. That is unfortunate as he was one of the most able Friends who ever lived. So significant was his life that Rufus Jones wrote about him in these words:

> No other Friend since William Penn has put the Quaker peace position to such a public test and no other Friend has succeeded to the extent that he did in carrying Quaker ideals into practice as the sound and stable basis of public policy.

In domestic affairs in England he was a brilliant proponent of the widening of the franchise to include working people, an effective opponent of the Corn Laws which were so oppressive to the lower class, an ardent champion of religious and racial tolerance, and a strong supporter of the disestablishment of the Church of England.

In foreign affairs he was persistent in his efforts to prevent the Crimean War which pitted England against Russia, insistent as a critic of government policy toward Ireland, unwavering in his demands for more control by the people of India in their destiny, and effective in persuading the workers of England to support the cause of the North in the American Civil War despite the fact that such action ran counter to their own immediate economic interests.

For nearly a half-century he was a member of the House of Commons and twice he was a member of the British Cabinet—under William Gladstone.

At the time of John Bright's death, Gladstone delivered a eulogy on him in the House of Commons, saying:

> We feel that Mr. Bright is entitled to a higher eulogy than any that could be due to intellect or any that could be due to success.
>
> Of mere success he was indeed a conspicuous example; in intellect he may lay claim to a distinguished place. But the character of the man lay deeper than his intellect, deeper than his eloquence, deeper than anything that can be described or seen on the surface, and the supreme eulogy which is his due I apprehend to be this—that he elevated political life to a higher elevation and to a loftier standard and that he has thereby bequeathed to his country the character of a statesman which can be made the subject not only of admiration, and not only of gratitude, but of reverential contemplation.

Surely the life of this 19th century humanitarian and Quaker statesman is worthy of study and of emulation.

His Family Background and Early Years

John Bright's ancestors were respectable, industrious lower and middle class individuals, typical of the strata of society which he championed throughout his life. Some of them had suffered persecution for their beliefs as Quakers. He was a representative of their highest ideals and their finest qualities. For such a background he was eternally thankful, often expressing his gratitude publicly.

He was born at Greenbank, the family home in Rochdale, England, on November 16, 1811. His mother was Martha Bright and his father Jacob Bright, a self-made man who was the owner of the Hanging Road Mill. He was a consultant on business affairs and an adviser on personal matters to many people, and a friend to all.

Some insight into the character of John Bright's mother can be gleaned from these words she once penned:

> I have no wish at all to see my children great or noted characters, neither have I the right to expect that they will be distinguished for any extraordinary talents. But that they may be found filling their station, however humble it may be, with uprightness and integrity, is both at this time and often my humble prayer.

As a baby John's health was poor. But with good medical attention and loving care, he survived.

His formal education was limited to short periods of attendance at the Townhead School in Rochdale, the Penketh School, Ackworth, Newton-in-Bowland, the Haddon School, and what is now known as Bootham. Those schools were good for their day but John Bright maintained that "even in Quakerdom there was room for educational amendment."

Somehow he survived the sadism of some of his teachers and the taunts of some of the older boys. He became adept at cricket and soccer and expert as a fisherman. Often he passed off the pranks of older students with humor—a trait that stood him in good stead throughout his life.

More important in his development than the formal learning in those schools, however, was the atmosphere which pervaded those institutions. The emphasis was upon simplicity, straight-forwardness, and sincerity of living, with high regard for the worth of every individual and the necessity of direct communion with God.

The influence of such an environment was inestimable. According to one biographer:

> His boyhood was passed in the atmosphere of the Society of Friends, that intangible but pervading spirit which instills rather than teaches the doctrine of equality and brotherhood of men and women, of rich and poor . . .

Barred as a Dissenter from the universities, he never attained the thorough classical education considered essential to a well-bred man in 19th century England. However, his lack of grounding in the classics was compensated for by his knowledge of the English language, in which the Bible and the writings of Milton were his chief textbooks.

At 15 he went to work in his father's mill and began his life-long association with the working class of England.

Meanwhile his education was rounded out by many activities. In the Rochdale Literary and Philosophical Society he gained information, knowledge of parliamentary procedure, and experience as a speaker—all of which stood him in good stead later in life. A Mediterranean trip, including Greece, Egypt, Sicily, and Italy, and an extended visit to Ireland, gave him the broadening experience of travel before he was 25.

The Influence of the Society of Friends

His family background and his formal and informal education were crucial factors in shaping his philosophy of life and his character. Of equal or even greater importance were the faith and practices of the Religious Society of Friends—with such central beliefs as the divinity in every individual and the direct availability of the Divine.

There is unanimity among all John Bright's biographers on the importance of such beliefs in his life. For example, Charles A. Vince stated that:

> It is still more important that the student of his career should not for a moment forget that he was a member of the Society of Friends. The discipline of that society has been preeminently successful in promoting both private virtue and a generous sense of public duty. Bright's religion was the foundation of his public as well as of his private character; and the faith he possessed by inheritance and by education was that of a sect whose presentment of Christianity has seduously given to the consecration of daily life priority over observance and doctrine.

George Trevelyan phrased that influence in these words:

> He was also a Friend, and the Friends are a spiritual aristocracy. He practiced the silence of his sect and drew thence the strength of his soul, the purity of his heart, and the quality of his speech.

John Bright himself was the first to acknowledge his debt to Quakerism. Typical of several public comments is this passage from a speech at Rochdale where he said:

> As you know, I am a member of a small but somewhat remarkable religious sect . . . It is of all the religious sects which have ever appeared in the world—certainly since the first corruption of the Christian Church—it is that which of all others has taught the equality and the equal rights of man.
>
> And I venture to say more, that it is remarkable for another thing: that probably more than any other body, within its borders and in its service, personal ambition is practically unknown.
>
> I think that much of my opinions and much of my course has been determined, or at least greatly influenced, by the training I received in that body.
>
> That belief in the equality of all men in the sight of heaven, and in the equal rights of all men before earthly governments, naturally leads to a strong sympathy with the great body of the people. I looked upon the multitude, the millions who form the nation . . . They labor more, they suffer more than the ranks above them . . . I have learned from my earliest youth to feel for these men—to feel for them a sympathy which I have never been able to express in words, and of which I can find no proper exhibition in any outward conduct I can exhibit to them.

In his own home John Bright observed the practice of a daily devotional period and throughout his life he was a regular attender at Quaker Meetings for Worship, although he was not known to speak or pray publicly, perhaps in part because he was not a "recorded" minister.

In addition, he served on local Meeting committees and as an assistant clerk and clerk, as well as on committees of London Yearly Meeting.

If he profited by his contacts with the Society of Friends, the Society also profited by his membership in it. Bracketing him with an entirely different exponent of Quakerism, Rufus Jones once wrote:

> In John Bright and John G. Whittier the ordinary group-level of life was transcended and Quakerism received an interpretation into life through persons who were undoubtedly men of genius.

One reason for his importance to the Society of Friends lies in the fact that he helped to rescue the group from a period of introspection and self-consciousness which was damaging it to a dangerous degree; too often it was engrossed in worrying about its own soul and forgetting the souls of others—and of society.

The impetus he gave to a group which was struggling to free itself from doctrinal disputes and to renew its testimonies in the field of service to humanity is incalculable.

Persistently he opposed the practice of disowning members for minor offenses and insistently he upheld the importance of taking an active part in political and social reforms.

Upon occasion his Quaker views raised difficult problems for him. For example, as a member of the Gladstone Cabinet, he was expected to be presented to the Queen, dressed in gold lace and carrying a sword. But the Queen, realizing his insistence on simple garb, informed him that he could be received in a suit of black velvet, and without a sword.

The major fields of his social concern and outreach will be chronicled in the remainder of this essay. But there were other areas in which he was also concerned. He pled for the passage of laws for the humane care of the insane and of criminals. He fought valiantly for the abolition of capital punishment. He welcomed and supported the establishment of Adult Schools, the formation of Home and Foreign Missionary Association, and the creation of First-Day Schools.

Consequently, coupled with his concern for the development of individual character was his concern for the increase of social consciousness. Thus he combined what George Fox called "the inward" and "the outward" states.

Let us now look now at some of the major movements in which he worked so constructively and creatively.

His Efforts to Repeal the Corn Laws

The first major issue to which John Bright devoted his talents was the repeal of the iniquitous Corn Laws. Passed as protective measures against foreign trade during the French Revolution, they had been modified but never fully relaxed.

Consequently the exclusion of grain from abroad raised the price of bread in England and made life intolerable in the 1830s and 1840s for the working class. It is estimated that the tax on bread consumed a fifth of a family's income. To their entreaties for the easing of that burden, callous suggestions were sometimes made, such as the advice of a protectionist duke who suggested that poor people take an occasional pinch of curry powder with water in order to replace food.

Conditions in the homes of the laboring class were appalling. For example, in one Dorsetshire village an average of 36 people were living in one house and blankets and furniture were luxuries.

Once the populace had purchased what little food their money could buy, there was little left with which to obtain manufactured goods. Thus the middle class was vitally affected by the loss of sales through the diminished purchasing power of the poor.

But there were those who gained perceivably by the Corn Laws. The landlords favored the continuance of that plan so that they could levy high rents. Faced by those levies, the farmers desired high prices for their grain. And the clergy were fellow-conspirators as they received tithes from those who were getting rich.

When an anti-Corn Law Association was formed in 1838, John Bright became a member of it, along with Richard Cobden. But Bright was not particularly active in it

as Cobden turned it into a more powerful organization known as The National Anti-Corn Law League.

Then came John Bright's marriage in 1839 to Elizabeth Priestman and the birth of a daughter in 1840. But his happiness over the marriage came to an end within two years as his wife died of a lung hemorrhage.

Hastening to John Bright's home to offer his condolences, Cobden spoke to him frankly—and persuasively, saying:

> There are thousands of houses in England at this moment where wives, mothers, and children are dying of hunger. Now, when the first paroxysm of your grief is past, I would advise you to come with me and we will never rest till the Corn Law is repealed.

Commenting on that compelling invitation, John Bright wrote:

> I accepted his invitation. I knew that the description he had given of the homes of thousands was not an exaggerated description. I felt in my conscience that there was a work somebody *must* do.

Some reformers felt that the attainment of the vote by the middle and lower classes was the most important issue confronting the country; Cobden and Bright considered the repeal of the Corn Laws even more pressing. So, together, they toured Britain, appealing for support. And what a powerful team they made! According to Margaret Hirst's account of Bright:

> . . . while Cobden won his audiences by moderation and persuasiveness and by clear statements of the Free Trade case, Bright brought eloquence and passion to reinforce the impression made by his friend.

Describing his appearance as a speaker, one writer has said: he presented:

> . . . a fine figure of a man with the broad, thick-set shoulders held erect, his head thrown back, a look of fearless honesty in his eyes and a challenge on his lips.

Their fight was a long one, a lonely one, and often a bitter one. But in the end they were successful in repealing the Corn Laws by 1849.

Curiously their most effective ally proved to be Mother Nature. In 1845 the rains demolished the English crop and a blight in Ireland the same year destroyed the potato crop on which the British laborers were so dependent as a substitute for grain. What human beings had as yet failed to accomplish, nature was able to bring about.

Commenting on their efforts, John Bright said in 1846:

> We have taught the people of this country the value of a great principle. They have learned that there is nothing that can be held out to the intelligent people of this kingdom so calculated to stimulate them to action, and to great and persevering action, as a great and sacred principle like that which the League has espoused. They have learned that there is in public opinion a power much greater than that residing in any particular form of government; . . . and the people have learned something beyond this . . . that the way to freedom henceforth is not through violence or bloodshed.

His Work to Widen the Franchise

The high protective tariff walls had not fallen at the first sound of their trumpets. They had fallen after much tramping around them by Richard Cobden, John Bright, and others. That victory encouraged Bright to use some of the same tactics in extending the vote to millions of men in Great Britain.

It is almost incomprehensible for us today to realize how limited the franchise was in that part of the world in the middle of the 19th century. Actually only one million out of the six million men had that privilege. Furthermore it was the rural areas which were best represented in the House of Commons; it was the cities which were vastly underrepresented. And there was little thought of women being able to vote, although a women's rights movement was beginning to appear—one in which John Bright's sister was active.

Bright was convinced that further reforms would come easier and faster if the franchise was extended further than it had been by the Reform Act of 1832. He was of the opinion that:

> . . . the rich people of a country, invested with power, and speaking generally for rich people alone, cannot sufficiently care for the multitudes and the poor. They are personally kind enough, but they do not care for people in the bulk . . . It is a long distance from castles, and mansions, and great houses, and abounding luxuries, to the condition of the great mass of the people who have no property and too many of whom are always on the verge of poverty.

He was convinced that poverty would not be relieved, suffering alleviated, and justice insured by either the upper or middle classes alone. As proof he cited the history of England and the deplorable conditions which had been remedied only by the insistence of the masses.

John Bright had inherited the family mill and was therefore in comfortable circumstances economically. But he was a firm believer in the rights of the working class, with whom he was repeatedly identified. Over and over he maintained that:

> My sympathies are naturally with the class with which I am connected, and I would infinitely prefer to raise the class of which I am one than by any means whatever to creep above it or out of it.

Such declarations were not campaign verbiage; they were expressions of the sincere convictions of one who has been called "the mouthpiece of a detested minority."

Despite his distrust of the upper class, he believed that progress would be made only as the nation moved forward as a unit. In a famous speech in Glasgow in 1866 he closed with a forceful presentation of that concept of government. Speaking on the administration of justice, he said:

> The class that has hitherto ruled in this country has failed miserably. It revels in power and wealth, while at its feet, a terrible peril for its future, lies the multitude which it has neglected. If a class has failed, let us try the nation. That is our faith, that is our purpose, that is our cry—Let us try the nation.

The entering wedge in breaking the political power of the aristocracy had come in 1832 with the passage of the Reform Bill, which eliminated many of the "rotten boroughs" and increased the number of representatives from the counties and the cities.

The Chartist Movement had cleared the path for those initial changes by defining the issues with which it must deal and in arousing the populace to the need for change. But it had likewise obstructed the path by inadequate leadership and resorts to violence.

Feeling that the Chartist Movement had fallen into disrepute, Bright organized the Commons League in 1849, which was later replaced by the Reform League. In that respect there is a parallel between those two organizations and the two successive groups in the Anti-Corn Law movement.

For a brief period John Bright was on the political sidelines because of his opposition to the Crimean War and a personal illness. But in 1858 he returned to the political field and became the leader of a great movement, championing the need for the ballot as a measure to protect the poor and dependent voters from intimidation and to initiate and push through needed reforms.

The same tactics were used as Cobden and Bright had utilized earlier—effective organization, public education through tracts and mass meetings, and pressure on those in control of the government. Only this time John Bright was the undisputed leader, as Cobden was only lukewarm to this second movement.

As Bright moved from town to town, holding meetings, he became the Tribune of the People—more and more hated by the upper class; more and more loved by the masses. One English journal went so far as to declare that "Mr. Bright governs, although he does not reign."

Eventually it was clear that the franchise would be extended; it was only a question of which party would receive credit for the passage of reform measures.

Actually it was under the leadership of Disraeli that the Reform Bill of 1867 was passed—the second milestone in the extension of democracy in Britain in the 19th century. By it the boroughs gained household suffrage and "ledgers" were allowed to vote. Then, in 1872, the Gladstone government introduced the secret ballot. Next, in 1884, household suffrage was instituted for the counties, thus enfranchising agricultural workers.

Those measures were the crowning triumph of Bright's career—another victory for him as a humanitarian reformer.

Less dramatic and less far-reaching but nevertheless important were several other movements in which John Bright was a leader or the leader. We turn, then, to the story of some of those struggles.

His Opposition to the Crimean War

John Bright's views on international relations complemented his ideas on domestic affairs. Both were cut from the same cloth; both were liberal.

In foreign affairs he upheld free trade, denounced the imperialism of Palmerston and other English exhibitionists who were ready to display their power on the slightest provocation, decried the balance of power idea which led so easily to unwise alliances and conflicts, and opposed war as a means of settling disputes.

A supreme test of his peace principles came in the Crimean War (1853–1856). The immediate cause of that conflict was the dispute between France and Russia over Russia's claim as the guardian of certain holy places in Palestine.

Against the onslaught of his colleagues, the vilification of his opponents, the ridicule of the press, and the desertion of many of his friends, he maintained that the war was a travesty needlessly perpetrated on the British. He would have nothing to do with it except to criticize it and to plead for a peaceful solution to the misunderstandings which had brought it about.

To those who claimed that England was fighting a despot in the person of Nicholas of Russia, John Bright pointed out that despotism had existed for a long time and in many places without England taking action against it. In fact, he said that despotism of the worst sort existed in Turkey, with whom England was allied. To those who asserted that the war was being fought to maintain the balance of power, particularly in southeastern Europe, he declared that alliances were a dangerous device. "It is an alliance with Turkey," he said, "that has drawn us into war. I would not advise alliances with any nation but I would cultivate friendship with all nations,"—a statement very close to the much-quoted warnings of George Washington in his Farewell Address and to Thomas Jefferson's advice in his First Inaugural to cultivate "peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none."

In his now famous Watkin letter, printed in the London *Times,* he raised the question of the costs of the Crimean War—or of any war, saying:

> Many, perhaps fifty millions sterling, in the course of expenditures by this country alone, to be raised from the taxes of a people whose extrication from ignorance and poverty can only be hoped for from the continuance of peace. (In addition, there is) the disturbance of trade throughout the world, the derangement of monetary affairs, and difficulties and ruin to thousands of families. (In addition) there is another year of high prices, notwithstanding a full harvest in England. (Furthermore) war interferes with imports and we have declared our principal foreign food-growers to be our enemies. (Then there is) the enormous loss of human life . . .

But he did not stop there in his condemnation of the Crimean War and of all wars. To him it was clear that such conflicts unleashed all the baser elements in society. In a powerful peroration to one of his addresses, he declared:

> This is war—every crime which human nature can commit or imagine, every horror it can perpetuate or suffer; and this it is which our Christian government recklessly plunges into; and this it is which so many of our countrymen at this moment think it patriotic to applaud!
>
> You must excuse me if I cannot go with you. I will have no part in this terrible crime. My hands shall be unstained with the blood which is being shed. The necessity of maintaining themselves in office may influence an administration; delusions may mislead a people; Vattel may afford you a law and a de-

fense; but no respect for men who form a government, no regard I have for "going with the stream," and no fear of being deemed wanting in patriotism, shall influence me in favor of a policy which, in my conscience, I believe to be as criminal before God as it is destructive to the true interest of my country.

In an entry in his Diary for August 5, 1855, he wrote, "War is the grave of all good."

In 1855 there was some hope of peace. Negotiations were started but the early promise of success turned out to be premature. At that point Bright delivered what has come to be known as his Angel of Death speech in which he used one of the half-dozen must famous phrases that have ever been uttered by any English orator. In part he said:

> I cannot . . . but notice that an uneasy feeling exists as to the news which may arrive by the very next mail from the East.
>
> I do not suppose that your troops will be beaten in actual conflict with the foe, or that they will be driven out to sea. But I am certain that many homes in England in which there exists a fond hope that the distant one may return—many such homes may be rendered desolate when the next mail shall arrive. *The angel of death has been abroad through the land; you may almost hear the beating of is wings.*
>
> There is no one, as when the first-born were slain of old, to sprinkle with blood the lintel and the two sideposts of our doors, that he may spare and pass on; he takes his victims from the castle of the noble, the mansion of the wealthy, and the cottage of the poor and the lowly, and it is on behalf of all these classes that I make this solemn appeal.

At the conclusion of that speech, Disraeli said, "Bright, I would give all that I ever had to have made that speech you made just now." Bright retorted, "Well, you might have made it if you had been honest."

Others also testified to his power as a speaker. Lord Salisbury once declared that John Bright "was the greatest master of English that this generation—I may say of several generations—has seen." According to George Trevelyan, the historian, "Not only were Bright's speeches his one form of perfect achievement; they were his one great political weapon." When asked about the part speech-making played in his life, Bright replied, "My life is in my speeches."

At last peace in the Crimean War was declared in January, 1856. The government and the populace had responded to Bright's indictment of that conflict with the verdict—Not Guilty. But historians have reviewed that war and reversed the decision of people of that day, affirming John Bright's assertion that it was one of the most unjustified wars in the annals of history.

Bright had not been able to prevent that conflict or to shorten it. But he had achieved something of real significance—he had focused men's minds on the horror of war, its toll in lives, in taxes, in property, in suffering, and in the postponement of needed reforms at home.

It is probable that his powerful propaganda for peace helped to create much of the sentiment that kept Britain out of the various struggles which plagued Europe during the latter half of the 19th century.

During the Crimean War he had been caricatured, vilified, and burned in effigy. Typical of the comments of his adversaries was this statement in *The Times* of London:

> Thank Heaven we are not a nation of Brights and Quakers! If we were, there would speedily be an end of us and Russia would be free to possess herself, not of Constantinople only, but of Manchester and London.

At the close of that conflict there were men who still disagreed with Bright and yet admired him for the sincerity of his beliefs, the courage of his convictions, and the earnestness of his panegyrics against war.

His Aid to the North in the Civil War in the U.S.A.

Almost as soon as England had begun to resume its normal activities after the Crimean War, another conflict broke out which claimed its attention. That was the Civil War in the United States.

In England the sympathy of the upper class was overwhelmingly with the South. The wealthy approved of its policy of free trade. They also knew that a victory for the North would furnish evidence of the success of the revolutionary American system and encourage the lower class in England to demand wider participation in their government. The English aristocrats also approved the social amenities practiced in the South as opposed to what they considered the puritanical restraints of New England and the crudities and excesses of the frontier.

However, the fervent champions of democracy in England bestirred themselves to enlist the support of the masses for the cause of the North. Among those men John Bright was an outstanding crusader.

His efforts on behalf of the North were prompted by three considerations—his desire to support the advocates of democratic government, his eagerness to see the freeing of the three million slaves, and his fear that a victory by the South would encourage a worldwide revival of slavery.

The task of winning the support of the working people of Britain for the northern cause was incredibly difficult as the jobs of many of them depended upon the shipment of cotton from the southern part of the U.S.A. If the North could prevent the shipment of cotton to England, many mills there would close.

Therefore alignment with the North

would mean unemployment, suffering, and even starvation for some British workers. Yet the majority of them supported the Northern cause—a remarkable tribute to the influence of John Bright and his cohorts and to the idealism of many lower-class British. Thrown out of work by the lack of cotton from the U.S.A., many of those workers were kept alive only through the generosity of their fellow-countrymen and by the contributions of money and goods from their American sympathizers.

During the early months of the Civil War the South was generally victorious. That worried John Bright but he was nevertheless optimistic about the final result. In a letter to Charles Sumner, the abolitionist leader in Massachusetts, Bright expressed his belief:

> . . . in a higher power . . . (who) watches over the interests of mankind in these great passages of the history of our race, and I will trust that in this supreme hour of your country's being, it will not fail you.

Often Bright's optimism seemed unwarranted. Relations between England and the North were almost severed as a result of the Mason and Slidell and Alabama affairs. But men on both sides of the Atlantic prevented an open break and thus averted the possibility that England would side with the South. Bright was one of the leaders in the formulation of that conciliatory policy.

When Lincoln, through the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, carried out his resolve to free the slaves in those states which were in rebellion against the United States, sentiment in England for the North became much more pronounced.

Bright was jubilant over the issuance of that Proclamation, regarding it as a giant leap in the development of human liberty. He also saw it as a contributing factor in the winning of support in England for the North. And he felt it would likewise bring encouragement to those Englishmen who were fighting for the broadening of the franchise.

When word came of Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Bright was overjoyed. In his diary he wrote:

> This great triumph of the Republic is *the event of our age,* and future generations will confess it for they will be better able than this (age) to estimate the gain to freedom and humanity which will spring from it.

Then, when the news of Lincoln's assassination arrived, Bright was overcome with grief. To Charles Sumner, the Massachusetts abolitionist, he wrote:

> . . . for 50 years, I think, no other event has created such a sensation in this country as the great crime which has robbed you of your President.

When the Civil War was ended, John Bright protested vigorously against the measures proposed by the radical reconstructionists of the North which would prolong the conflict and bring untold suffering and the needless destruction of lives. To Bright the retaliation against those who had been vanquished was repugnant, and intolerable.

Looking back on this important chapter in history, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of John Bright and others in preventing England from siding with the South in the American Civil War, followed by what probbly would have been the eventual aid, also, of France.

His role as an ally of the North was appreciated by many in the U.S.A. and references to him would almost always bring rounds of applause from audiences. One measure of the esteem in which Bright was held was the fact that Horace Greeley dedicated his book on *The American Conflict* to:

> John Bright, British Commoner and Christian Statesman: The Friend of My Country Because The Friend of Mankind

Bright was urged by many to go to the United States but he declined, largely because he did not relish facing the adulation which his friends predicted for him.

His Aid to the Irish

Conflict between the English and the Irish has continued for decades, including tensions and outbreaks of violence in the 19th century.

A series of disturbances resulted from the abolition of the Irish parliament by the Union Act of 1800. Those difficulties were then heightened by the agitation of Daniel O'Connell and intensified by the famines in 1845 and 1846.

The Irish had few champions in England but in John Bright they found a special friend. His concern for their plight had been aroused on a trip he made to Ireland in the 1830s when crowds of beggars gathered round the coach in which he was riding whenever it stopped. His concern had been intensified by his contacts with the many Irish people who had fled to his home district of Lancashire.

Probing into the cause of their plight, he decided that there were two chief causes for it. One was the existence of the Established Church; the other the accepted practice of absentee ownership of the land.

Prime Minister Peel tried to settle the first difficulty by granting money for the education of Irish priests. But to John Bright that was the application of a sedative where a surgical operation was needed. He labelled Peel's grant "hush-money."

To Bright it was immoral that the Irish Anglican Church, which claimed but eight to twelve percent of the population as communicants, should receive tithes and rentals from the entire population. In addition to those sources of revenue was the income from the extensive property and endowments of the Church.

It was John Bright, the Dissenter and Quaker, who inveighed against that situation and used his eloquence and influence to lift those burdens from the backs of the impoverished peasants.

His abhorrence of absentee landlordism was corroborated by what he saw on another visit to Ireland in 1849. He noted with horror "the small and wretched hovels in quarries and nooks in the road in which some wretched families find shelter," the trenches where 6,000 victims of famine, fever, and cholera were buried "in the rags they died in, uncoffined and unknown," and the families which were ready to bind themselves for years in order to secure passage to America to escape the tyranny of the aristocrats and absentee landlords.

Convinced that the initial step was to secure compensation for the peasants for the improvements they made on the houses in which they lived and the land on which they worked, Bright incorporated those ideas into the Tenants' Rights Bill which he introduced in the House of Commons.

Another trip to Ireland in 1852 further intensified his belief in the need for tenant ownership and impressed him anew with the equally distressing conditions caused by the domination of the State Church.

From then on he became a modern Jeremiah lamenting over the sins of the landlords and the church officials. For 25 years he hammered away at the seemingly impregnable wall of resistance erected by the House of Commons. Occasionally a small stone would fall as some slight concession was made to the Irish peasants to avert a serious outbreak on their part. But the basic structure remained intact.

Then, in 1869, the first fundamental change was made when the Irish Anglican Church was placed on a voluntary basis and certain funds were set aside for use in an emergency such as the famine of 1845.

By a curious twist of fate, that measure was enacted when he was temporarily out of the House of Commons because of overwork on behalf of many causes.

A second measure was passed in 1870. Through it the tenants were granted some

minor rights, were accorded compensation for the improvements they made on the houses in which they lived, were given compensation when they were evicted, and were granted small loans with which they might purchase land. That last item was one of the major measures for which John Bright had pressed so long.

Thus some progress was made in righting the wrongs against the Irish. The hand that shaped the final legislation was that of William Gladstone but the voice which had brought it about was the voice of John Bright. Much remained to be done, but he had contributed greatly to the amelioration of the plight of the Irish farmers and peasants.

His Championship of Other Causes

Any one of the foregoing activities would be enough to warrant the inclusion of John Bright in the history of the champions of democracy in the British Isles. The combination of them certainly merits a prominent place for him in any Hall of Fame for freedom-fighters and humanitarians.

But there were other movements and causes in which he was active and to which he lent his substantial support.

Convinced that no people should be subjected to the rule of outsiders, John Bright pressed for increased participation by the people of India in the government of that vast sub-continent. Consequently he could say in 1853 that "no one out of office has paid so much attention to this question (of India) as I have done." And it is important to emphasize that his concern for more self-rule by the Indians was being championed nearly 100 years before India was granted its independence.

His opposition to capital punishment was almost an obsession. In 1868, partly through his efforts, public executions were abolished. Nevertheless, he continued to press publicly and privately against *all* executions.

Discrimination along religious or cultural lines he also abhorred. One of his many famous speeches was delivered on April 15, 1853 on The Admission of Jews, in which he pled for the equality of all people in every phase of the political life of England. Hence a large share of the credit is due to him for the eventual admission of Dissenters to Oxford in 1854 and for recognition of them in 1871 as candidates for teaching positions at Oxford and Cambridge.

It was at Rochdale that the cooperative

movement started; even today it is based on the famous Rochdale Principles. Although John Bright does not appear to have been involved in the start of that movement, it is likely that the general atmosphere prevalent in that community led to its formation. In *The Diaries of John Bright* and in G.D.H. Cole's *A Century of Cooperation,* there are references to his support of that movement and his defense of it in Parliament.

Friends and Foes

Obviously John Bright was a towering figure in 19th century England. He had a vision of his country as a citadel of democracy and worked tirelessly to create such an edifice. He was the enemy of the aristocracy—the landowners, merchants, and others. Conversely, he was the champion of the oppressed, whether it was the disenfranchised workers of England, the slaves of the United States, the Irish or the Indians. He was not a pacifist but he was a lover of peace; hence his opposition of the Crimean War and the later conflict in Egypt.

He was an idealist and he used his many talents to improve the society of his day. But he was also a realist, often arranging his concerns in the light of which could be achieved first. He was intellectually gifted and used his abilities for a variety of causes. He also was energetic to the point of having to withdraw from political work for long periods to recoup his health. Likewise he was a gifted speaker, an ability he used with great success throughout his life. Furthermore he was basically an optimist although he frequently became discouraged and even despondent at the slowness in which reforms were carried out.

One of his biographers, Herman Ausubel, summarized him in these words:

> Poised, commanding in appearance, brimming over with earnestness, enthusiasm, and passion; quick-witted, brief, clear, incredibly articulate, and eminently hearable—he was an orator of orators.

His friends were legion.

Yet he had many bitter foes who accused him of tearing England apart and of subjecting it to the attacks of other countries. For example, *Punch* called him "a pestilent fellow—always ready for a fight." They accused him also of inconsistency—calling

for the widening of the franchise but not always voting for improved conditions in factories because he was a mill-owner himself. They said he was not only self-assured but self-righteous. They claimed, too, that he was an angry young man, an angry middle-aged man, and an angry old man—venting his spleen on those with whom he disagreed. Perhaps some of those charges were valid as he was certainly not a saint.

His Later Years and Death

In 1878 his second wife, Elizabeth Leatham Bright, died, and that was a crushing blow to him as they had had a very happy marriage of 31 years.

Then, in 1882 he resigned from the Gladstone Cabinet over its policy in Egypt and especially over the bombing of Alexandria. Gladstone pled with him to remain in the government, but Bright said that he could not turn his back on policies which he had supported all his life.

In 1888 and 1889 his health was poor and on March 27, 1889 he died. Two days later he was laid to rest in the Friends' Burial Ground in Rochdale with the simplicity which had characterized his life. Over his grave was a simple slab marker which read:

John Bright
Born November 16, 1811.
Died March 27, 1889.

His life had been a continuous testimony to the principles of the Religious Society of Friends, an embodiment of the humanitarian ideals of the 19th century, and a monument to the idealistic strivings of humanity.

Some Questions for Discussion

1. What aspect or aspects of the life of John Bright, as depicted in this booklet, appeal to you most? Why?
2. What other Quakers beside William Penn and John Bright do you regard as important political leaders at any point in our history as a Society?
3. Why do you feel that Quakers have made fewer contributions in the field of government than in many other areas?
4. In what way do you feel that the Friends Committee on National Legislation serves today as an effective spokesperson for Friends in the United States?
5. On what political issues are Friends in the U.S.A. united today?
6. On what political issues are Friends in the U.S.A. not united today? Why not?
7. What Quakers in your community or state are active in governmental work, including public education?