

## The Essence of Nationalism

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In recent times surely more books have been published on nationalism and its horrid implications than on any other subject that affects the destiny of man. A combine of sovereign states to lead and police the world (the dominant-Anglo-Saxon concept); federalism, with its abrogation of certain sovereign rights; a United States of Europe; international Marxism; and so on. Running through the variegated theme is the curse of nationalism, until the ordinary man has begun to yearn towards some vague brotherhood or common-wealth that he hopes may somehow be attained somewhere, and thus a little peace be granted in our time, O Stalin, or O Churchill, or O Roosevelt.

It is all really becoming very confusing. For whereas we read about these grand concepts or pious aspirations on the one hand, on the other we come sharply up against the desperate situation of those who have been dispossessed of their nationhood. For the dispossessed we have immediate and profound sympathy. In Atlantic charters we vow that the disinherited shall once more possess their earthly kingdom.

The trouble with a great deal of this aspirational writing is its essentially idealistic nature. The longer I live the more I mistrust idealism, not for what may be genuinely implicit in it, but for the lengths to which history has shown me human nature will go in order, as we say, to implement it. Let an idealism, with power, once get the bit in its mouth and nothing will stop it. It becomes capable of cruelty and slaughter on a gargantuan scale. Take the Christian religion, with its concepts of brotherhood and charity and non-violence and tenderness, and then consider what man made of it, how the Inquisitor lit the faggots round the trussed-up heretic or the Calvinist uttered his battle-cry of 'Jesus and no quarter'. There you had devastating and most bloody wars, not for declared nationalisms or systems of economics, but for spiritual subjugation or conformity. Christ's non-violence was turned into active violence by that simple process of logic which declared that if all heretics were destroyed Christ's church on earth would be

assured, whereas, if heretics were allowed to multiply, manifestly Christ's church would be destroyed. It is the logic that sits in the heart of such apparently fool-proof reasoning that is so very deadly to man.

Even the most cynical materialist, with the strongest aversion for any form or kind of religion, does not attack Christ's teaching as a cause of barbarity and war. What sardonically amuses him is the way man can in words affirm the holiness of such teaching and in practice deny it in order to achieve his own temporal ends, and always with a righteous show of reason.

If this can happen in the spiritual realm, where all our human divisions should presumably be transcended, is it not even more likely to happen in our ordinary working world? In a word, is it nationalism that is to blame for the condition of the world to-day, or is it the interpretation we care to put upon that word when we refuse, perhaps subconsciously, to face up to quite other factors?

Is it not, for example, just a little bit suspicious that most of the grandiose schemes for federalism and what not emanate from America or this country? When you are sitting pretty on top of the world very naturally you don't want things unduly disturbed. How obvious all that has been in a personal way in the ordinary social sphere! The squire's lady sends a jelly to the sick poor or a pair of rabbits to the local hospital. The squire sits on the bench. The laird does his bit in local government. The landlord, in fact, may presently be at the stage where he will hesitate to prosecute a poverty-stricken peasant for poaching a pheasant. If I had land and folk poached my game I am quite sure I should be very annoyed about it. But I might hesitate to go to extremes, if I felt that I might thereby endanger my possession. It is better to concede certain small privileges than to lose the main substance.

Grandiose schemes do not emanate from the peoples of the Continent who have been dispossessed. They have seen 'a new order' at work. All they want is their own country back, their own land, where they may be allowed to labour and produce in peace. They are not theoretical about this or grandiose. They know what they have endured, and they are either passionate in their attitude or bitterly apathetic.

Ah yes, it may be said, but as nationalism is the root cause of all the trouble, something must be done about it or our whole world will come to an end. Someone must do a lot of thinking about it now.

The dispossessed, both in the national and the personal sense, are beginning to question this whole assumption. They have grown tired of theories and want concrete facts. And the biggest concrete fact they can look at is the emergence of Russia.

Now from the Russian point of view war is brought about not by nationalism but by economics. That, we may say, is merely another theory. But at least Russia put the theory to the test within an area covering one-sixth of the earth. She deliberately set about encouraging her nationalisms, and she had a great number

of them, different races and different tongues. In this country, for instance, we found Gaelic one tongue too many and authoritatively set about its destruction. We felt it had been and might again be a disruptive element. In Russia different languages were authoritatively encouraged, grammars being specially written for those that had none, and the folk-life in each case was deepened and enriched. Where we saw that nationalism might be a disruptive and violent factor in the whole body politic, Russia saw that it would be a cohering factor, making for peace and harmony. And, whether we secretly like it or not, Russia has proved herself right to a degree that continues to admonish us.

Now this is no veiled plea for communism or any Russian interpretation of it. It is an effort to look straight at this somewhat baffling affair we call nationalism. Whether wars result from basic economic causes we may debate. That some of our bloodiest wars did not result from national rivalries we know. (Consider the recent war in Spain or the religious wars that cut across all nations.) True, nations are used as instruments in war, but then so are scientific research and pulped poetry books and glycerine.

Let me pause to look at this matter in a personal way, for ultimately if we are going to understand anything we must apprehend it not as a verbal theory external to us but as something internally felt and comprehended.

Some time ago I listened in to a programme of music by Sibelius, broadcast at intervals by the BBC. I had not heard any of the Sibelius symphonies before and the effect upon me was something that I could not have anticipated, for it was as if the whole Northland of forest and loch and legend came alive before me, evoked out of the blood. I am neither musician nor musical critic, and could not have been led away by any technical considerations. All I know is that the music had for me an evocative power, some extraordinary element of intimacy. I naturally, I suppose, put this down to some degree of affinity between our Scottish Northland and the Scandinavian, to both a personal and traditional apprehension of these northern lands and seas and the legends or myths bred out of them.

Now the next thing that happened, quite involuntarily, was the thought, flashing across the mind: If only we had a composer who could do for Gaelic folk music and our Highlands what Sibelius did for Finland, how supreme a realm of musical delight would be there! For I happen to know the Gaelic folk music as a natural inheritance and find in it movements of the spirit that no other music can provide, that indeed in some unconditional way make me think are extra-musical, penetrating into that ultimate region where myth is born.

And so the mind came critically alive and I said to myself: What a tragedy that the whole creative musical impulse of the Highlands, as exhibited in our folk songs, should have been crushed and inhibited by certain definite historical happenings! What a tragedy, what a sheer meaningless waste!

In that moment of regret, primarily for my own loss and then for the loss to the world, I touched what is for me the whole essence of nationalism; and, I am

convinced, not only for me, but for every normal man who looks into his own mind and refuses to be bedevilled by theories or the power-lust which corrupts. To love your own land, from which you draw your deepest inspiration, is as natural as to love the sunlight or a woman, is to understand what moves in the heart of a Pole or a Czech, is to salute Sibelius not in envy or hate but in admiration and gratitude.

Again, recently, I found myself listening-in to one of Edwin Muir's broadcasts, dramatising Scottish history. He was dealing with Burns and the citations he put into the mouths of the actors were spoken in a Scots that had no slightest suggestion of the comic parochial, but that on the contrary came out of a rich tradition, intellectual, metaphysical, aristocratic in quality and humanly profound. Here was the accent of the ballads, of the Court poetry, of the genius of Burns, of a small but great people making their distinctive contribution to a native culture that in its turn enriched world culture.

It is not my purpose in this short article to discuss origins of war. All I am suggesting is that there are forces at work in the world, of many kinds and of different intentions, directing our thoughts to what are called the evils of nationalism in order that our sight and our reason may get suitably befogged. In times past, as has been clearly documented, private armament manufacturers found little difficulty in promoting a war for their own purposes. That is the simplest kind of illustration.

And just as nationalism could be used by armament manufacturers so it can be, and is being, used by power perverts in an effort at world domination. But they also use pageantry and music and science and every fine element that ever the human spirit has produced to further their ends. But the wise man does not become ashamed of the scriptures and throw them over because the devil quotes them.

## Nationalism and Internationalism

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The other day I happened to meet a Scottish painter and etcher who was kind enough to invite me to a private view of some of his recent work. It was distinguished work, full of vision, and aware of all the ways of the moderns, but by no means the least interesting part of my visit was the artist's own ideas and experiences elicited by, let me hope, natural questions. For example, a couple of his canvasses were concerned with ploughed fields. The serpentine furrow was the motif in a bare Scottish landscape. Not, possibly, what would popularly be called a 'picture'. Yet the artist had been intimately attracted by the subject, and, though believing that the attraction was peculiar and personal, had nonetheless had it included in a group of subjects from different parts of the world for a one-man show. Consider his surprise when the bare furrows caught the particular attention of the metropolitan dealers. It was almost enough to make him conclude that trips to North Africa may be fascinating, but not necessarily essential for the production of masterpieces! And if this theme provided a nearly endless one for speculation at least the one fact had emerged, namely, that by the artist's doing what he knew intimately, and what had appealed to him deeply in his own country, he had attracted the closest attention of art lovers in other countries.

I mention this experience because it happens to be the most recent of many that have, from time to time, seemed to explain to me the relationship of nationalism to internationalism. Nationalism creates that which inter-nationalism enjoys. The more varied and multiple your nationalism, the richer and profounder your internationalism. Conversely, were the nation to disappear and the world become a single body governed by the same machinery of laws and ideas, the common stock of culture would tend to become uniform and static. For cosmopolitanism does not readily breed the intense vision or rebellion of the native or individual spirit. On the contrary, its natural attitude is to deplore it as being unnecessary, often wasteful, and nearly always in bad form. Cosmopolitanism working through this man-of-the-world conception might out of an ultimate logic create

its own ideal, but it would be the deathly or neutral idea of the perfection of the beehive.

Now the question arises here:—Why, then, is there in the world of affairs to-day the idea of antagonism between nationalism and internationalism? If internationalism is nationality's flower, why war? And it is precisely in this awful region of war that so many of us lose our bearings. For nationalism breeds patriotism; patriotism, it is asserted, breeds antagonism; and antagonism needs the mailed fist.

But patriotism, as a true emotion, is full of life; it has kinship with poetry and music and none with destruction and death. From the earliest times it has been the world's singing subject. In the history of each nation it has been a unifying and precious possession. Each nation has been prepared to fight for it, when it would not quite have been prepared to fight for its music and poetry, or, indeed, for any other of the mind's preoccupations except religion. Patriotism, indeed, fed such arts as poetry and music. Possibly no other single emotion is more responsible for the creation of the world's culture.

But that sort of patriotism has as little to do with jingoism as music has with a factory siren. And it would be almost as reasonable to suggest that we could get rid of the unwelcome noise of our machine age by first of all abolishing musical scales and musical instruments as it would be to suggest that we could get rid of jingoism by first of all abolishing patriotism. There is no philosophic basis here, and the reasoning is of the kind that has been prolific of so much action, or rather restriction, in recent world legislation. What interferes with our natural love of country to-day may regulate our drink to-morrow, our clothes the day after, and our conjugal relations next year. Patriotism may yet keep us from being slaves—if only of the Wellsian aseptic city-honeycombs.

Patriotism (even already the word is beginning to have a false note) is founded in tradition, and we can no more get away from tradition than from ourselves. Indeed, immediately we get away from tradition we do get away from ourselves. A nation's traditions are the natural inspirations of its people. How much the child is the product of heredity and how much of environment may be a debatable point, but that he is the product of both is unquestionable. Out of his environment, acted upon by a traditional or national unity, he creates most profoundly. And to create is to cause or give delight. In the pure conception of patriotism there is pure pleasure just as there is in any true function of the arts. And it is only when a man is moved by the traditions and music and poetry of his own land that he is in a position to comprehend those of any other land, for already he has the eyes of sympathy and the ears of understanding.

How then has patriotism in idea got debauched by war? Simply because in time of war patriotism is so strongly roused to protect its frontiers that it has been confounded with the cause of war. Nations are the natural units in the war game, just as the family is the natural unit in the nation. But it would be as ridiculous to

destroy our natural unities in the hope of destroying the war game as it would be to remove our teeth in the hope of getting rid of a pain caused by our stomachs. For, as has been said, patriotism is never a cause of war, but is merely used by war, just as other emotions are, only more profoundly. For even when nations group into compact empires or into scattered commonwealths, when they lose their nationhood and traditions, war can still use them. War can use them without patriotism. War can enjoy the spectacle of patriots of the same nation fighting each other. War is insatiable, and in the last resort cares nothing for nations. It cares only for destruction, and the earth laid waste would be its final triumph.

Why then blame this creative emotion of love of country as causing war, when we have at long last been forced to learn that war is caused by emotions quite other in origin and aim? We know something now of the appallingly defective system of producing and distributing the goods of life that obtains in the world to-day. Men of goodwill and of all political faiths are being staggered at the dreadful paradox of unemployment, hunger, disease, slums—as a result of over-production. Because we have produced more than we need, we are in danger of starvation! At least the spate of war books has made one thing clear (and particularly the German books), that the peoples themselves had no desire for war, that they feared and hated it as it continued, and that in the largest countries in Europe they smashed their own governing machines in the hope of getting some sanity, some food, and a little peace in their time.

Internationalism carried to its logical conclusion of a single centralisation of all power—arms, finance, law-making—could result in the greatest tyranny the mind of man is capable of conceiving. While the nation is still the unit (and history has shown the small unit to be singularly important—consider Greece and Palestine) the individual factor comes into play, and in a myriad personal contacts the finer elements of humanism are retained and tyranny suffered briefly, if at all. But when the governing machine becomes single in control, remote in place, and absolute in power, then hope of reform or progress—which generally means the breaking of an existing mould—would not have the heart to become articulate. Standardisation would be the keyword not only in the material things of life, but also in the spiritual. And whenever conditions got too desperate it would mean revolution, or world war on a basis of class hatred.

The small nation has always been humanity's last bulwark for the individual against that machine, for personal expression against impersonal tyranny, for the quick freedom of the spirit against the flattening steam-roller of mass. It is concerned for the intangible things called its heritage, its beliefs and arts, its distinctive institutions, for everything, in fact, that expresses it. And expression finally implies spirit in an act of creation, which is to say, culture.

Culture thus emerges in the nation, is the nation's flower. Each nation cultivates its own natural flower. The more varieties, the more surprise and pleasure for all. For nationalism in the only sense that matters is not jealous, any more than music

is jealous. On the contrary, if we are gardeners or musicians we are anxious to meet gardeners or musicians of other lands and rejoice when their blooms are exquisitely different from our own. In this way life becomes enriched, and contrast is set up as a delight and an inspiration. To have no longer these means for discrimination, to lose the charm that unending variety gives, to miss the spur in the shadow of difference, “is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening”.