

Noel Brailsford

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I AM not greatly interested in conventional obituaries—the quick biographical sketch, the reference to a few books, an anecdote, the neat comment on character. They are, literally, conventional. But I cannot let the death of Noel Brailsford in March pass without a note in a Socialist journal. For Noel was one of the greatest Socialists our movement has produced, because he was a model of what a Socialist should be in his personal behaviour and in his attitude to others. He understood that the making of Socialism did not lie merely in a change in property relations: it lies also in the re-making of personal relations. Therefore he lived as a Socialist even though he lived in a pre-Socialist society.

When I read the history of the British Labour Movement I wonder what some of those who made it were like as human beings, as people who talked, worried, argued, shopped, took days off, did all the routine daily things that get lost in cold print. Some of them, I am sure, would have been difficult characters to know, even more difficult, perhaps, as colleagues. Owen, certainly. O'Connor and O'Brien, too. Some of the early trade unionists were pretty stodgy, and Tom Mann and John Burns were at times impossible. But I am certain that William Morris, for all his quirks, was a man transformed by his Socialist convictions: whichever way you came at him he was the same—sturdy, honest, intensely human, demonstrating by the way he lived how one ought to live. The contrast with Henry Hyndman makes the point: Hyndman was a snob, an arid Socialist who wore a frock-coat, while

Morris was driven to a frenzy by snobbery, and liked nothing better than to get out of his coat and start living. Of all of these, I would have liked to know Morris the most. Thirty years from now, perhaps, someone reading of this generation will say: "I would have liked to know Noel Brailsford." For Noel had this same quality of integrity, the same belief that a Socialist cannot make a distinction between the life he leads and the life he commends others to live.

I stress this human quality rather than Noel's public life. Not that his achievement was small. It was, in fact, immense. But I stress it because for Noel it was the achievement itself that mattered and not the personal kudos that he might win by it: I have known no man so modest, so lacking in self-conceit or self-satisfaction. His life—and it was a long one—reads almost like an outline history of Socialism in the 20th century. He fought in Macedonia as a volunteer: the war, the last flickering of the Eastern Question that had plagued radicals in Britain for half a century, was for him something like Spain was in the Thirties. I have myself met an old man in the Macedonian mountains who spoke of Gladstone, Morris and Brailsford in the same sentence: they were Englishmen who had helped the fight for liberation from the Turks. He had known Lenin in exile, Stepniak, Kropotkin: he had been a leading figure in the movement for women's suffrage; he had first popularized the idea of a League of Nations; he spent himself for the Irish revolution and Indian freedom; and for years, consistently, he wrote some

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of the best radical journalism in the English language. More, he produced two classics of radical literature: *Voltaire* and *Shelley, Godwin and their Circle* are models of the way that Socialists ought to write about literature and philosophy.

All this is in the record, even if most of it was forgotten while Noel spent the last years of his life in retirement, writing against time to finish a book on the English Revolution. But even if the record were not so splendid, I would remember him and ask others to remember. For, when I knew him in the last 15 years, what mattered to me was his personal example. Here was a man who never compromised with truth for some tactical or personal advantage; a man of whom the phrase that he "hated injustice" was exactly true; a man who never wanted causes, but only time to fight for them; a man who cared nothing for money, or rank, or other reward, but only for his fellow-creatures. He had known everyone. He had been in everything. Yet—and this is the point that matters to us—he would have been the same if his talents had not made him one of the outstanding men of our time, and he had spent his life running a local Labour Party, perhaps teaching school somewhere, being one of the anonymous ones on whom any Socialist movement must ultimately rest. That, to me, is the secret of his greatness—the warm courtesy and human kindness and the untiring effort. I shall not forget his gentle voice saying: "We cannot wait for Socialism to live as Socialists, for if we do there will never be a Socialist society."