The tragedy of Lord Kitchener

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THE TRAGEDY OF LORD KITCHENER
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PREFACE

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No book worth writing pleases everyone. This book has been thought by many of those who admired and loved Lord Kitchener to be not unworthy of him and of his fame. Others have felt differently about it.

The intention of the writer was to anticipate the critical comments of Lord Kitchener's political colleagues upon his character and actions which are certain to create confusion when the correspondence and Memoirs of those engaged in the conduct of the Great War are given to the public. Without an explanation such as this book attempts to furnish, future readers of the history of the two first years of the War will find themselves bewildered by the contrast between the popular enthusiasm which the personality of Lord Kitchener aroused, the successful attempts of his political colleagues to curtail his authority, their unsuccessful attempts to remove him from the War Office, and to transfer him to a Viceroyalty of the Middle East or elsewhere.

Apart from the fact that unqualified eulogy is an insult to the subject of any biography, as well as a reflection upon the good sense of its readers, the main thesis of this book is, that while the greatness and nobility of Lord Kitchener's character stand exemplified by his life and actions looked at as a whole, he was—for reasons which are explained—not in 1915 the "K. of K." of Omdurman any more than the Napoleon of 1815 was the Napoleon of Austerlitz.

On looking again at these pages which it is proposed to re-issue, the writer finds nothing to retract or to alter. In the original edition there was one obvious
misprint of a date. It has been fixed upon for the purpose—a common trick—of throwing doubt upon the author's accuracy and veracity. He is content to leave the matter there.

Among his adverse critics there are only two whose abilities and knowledge entitle their views to his respectful attention. Both, however, were among Lord Kitchener's political colleagues, whose treatment of him is commented upon in certain pages of this book in words which may have caused resentment. Of this the writer does not complain. For some strange reason Mr. Asquith thinks that it displays a want of good taste on the part of the writer to allude to Lord Kitchener's religious opinions. Good taste is so much a matter of environment and atmosphere that upon this criticism the writer is disinclined to question Mr. Asquith's experience.

With the ex-Lord Chancellor's reflections the writer has no fault to find. They are conceived in so warm a spirit of loyalty to Lord Kitchener's memory, and Lord Birkenhead's loyalties to his friends do him such rare credit, that it would be churlish of the writer to take exception to a "point of view" which he honours, but cannot for a moment admit to be fair or justified by the tenour of the book itself, or in accordance with the obvious intention of its author.

Since these lines were written, a book—"The Life and Letters of Walter Page, late Ambassador at the Court of St. James"—has been published. The second volume contains a Memorandum, written by Mr. Page after attending the service at St. Paul's in memory of Lord Kitchener. The Memorandum commences as follows:

"There were two Kitcheners, as every informed person knows—(1) the popular hero, (2) the Cabinet Minister with whom it was impossible for his associates to get along."
The American Ambassador, one of the best and truest friends England ever had, was in close touch with Mr. Asquith and his colleagues. Very few secrets were kept from him. Lord Kitchener, he writes, "made his administrative career as an autocrat dealing with dependent and inferior peoples. This experience fixed his habits and made it impossible for him to do team work, or to delegate work, or even to inform his associates of what he had done or was doing. While, therefore, his name raised a great army, he was, in many ways, a hindrance in the Cabinet. First one thing and then another was taken out of his hands—ordnance, munitions, war plans. When he went to Gallipoli some persons predicted he would never come back."

It is curious. How did the American Ambassador hear of a "hot meeting" of the Cabinet at which Lord Kitchener was asked to go to Russia? Who told Mr. Page that Lord Kitchener had said he was only going because he had been ordered to go, and that "there was a hope and a feeling again that he might not come back till after the War"?

This is very strange. No one reading Mr. Asquith in Pearson's Magazine or Lord Birkenhead's Essay can easily reconcile their eulogistic recollections of that happy family, the Cabinet of 1916, with the thoughts which, according to Mr. Page, "were in everybody's mind while the Funeral Service was said and sung at St. Paul's."

And, he adds, "the Great Hero, who had failed, was celebrated, of course, as a Great Hero—quite truly and yet far from true. For him his death came at a lucky time: his work was done."

Esher.

November, 1922
NOTE

This essay is founded upon a diary which recorded passing events as they appeared to the diarist at the time of their happening.

No attempt has been made to correct first impressions by the doubtful light of subsequent reflection.

The character of Lord Kitchener, sketches of his colleagues and contemporaries, glimpses of the background before which these personages moved, were set down at the time and remain untouched. It is perhaps their only merit.

Lord Kitchener asked me to go to France in September, 1914, and to remain there. His request was subsequently renewed by Mr. Asquith and the present Prime Minister.*

As a Sub-Commissioner of the British Red Cross in France I was, furthermore, brought into contact with many phases of the War.

From these opportunities the journal and correspondence sprang which form the basis of this essay.

If I remain of the same mind, and can obtain the assent of my Co-Trustees of the British Museum, the volumes, together with the correspondence which illustrates and explains them, will be sealed up for sixty years—the period of reticence selected by the author of "Waverley"—after which they may prove of some interest to readers not many of whom have yet reached man's estate, or may possibly prove to be of use to some artist engaged in putting into perspective a picture of the years 1914 to 1918.

August, 1921.       * Mr. Lloyd George.

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“There is
One great society alone on earth:
The noble Living and the noble Dead.”

Wordsworth: Prelude