

John Bellers—Lost and Found

PROMINENT amongst the social reformers of the early days of Quakerism was John Bellers, whose name, though well worthy to be kept in memory, has from time to time during the past two centuries been allowed to remain almost unremembered. Even at Saffron Walden School no portrait, monument, or mural tablet announces to the visitor that the School owes its existence to the proposal of John Bellers, brought before the the Yearly Meeting of 1699, “about the Education and Imployment of Friends’ Children and Imployment of the poor among Friends.” Credit is, however, given to the founder in *Saffron Walden School, a Sketch of Two Hundred Years* [1702-1902], by James Backhouse Crosfield. Happily, during the last twenty years or so, an interest in John Bellers has been aroused, which we hope will be permanent, for we cannot afford to lose touch with the pioneers who have led the way to progress in the great movements for the betterment of mankind. In connection with his name the following is a brief record of slumberings and awakenings.

The active mind of John Bellers by no means worked in a groove, but ranged over a wide area, as is evidenced by the titles of his works, the recital of which occupies about three pages of Joseph Smith’s Catalogue, covering the years 1695 to 1724. Amongst the subjects and titles of these are, Proposals for a College of Industry; An Epistle to Friends on Education; Essays about the Poor, Manufacturers, Trade, Plantations and Immorality; A Caution against Perturbation of Mind, particularly the Passion of Anger; *Watch unto Prayer*, A consideration for all who Profess they believe in the Light; *Some Reasons for an European State proposed to the Powers of Europe . . . with an Abstract of a Scheme form’d by King Henry the Fourth of France upon the same subject; To the Archbishop, Bishops and Clergy of the Province of Canterbury*; On Election of Members of Parliament; On Improvement in Physic in 12 Proposals by which the

lives of many thousands of rich and poor may be saved yearly ; On employment of the poor ; An Abstract of Advice of George Fox to London Magistrates concerning the Poor ; On Prisons and Hospitals.

Only two or three subsequent editions of any of these works appeared in the life-time of the author. He slumbered long. An American edition of *Watch unto Prayer* was issued in 1802, but it was not until 1818 that Robert Owen resuscitated John Bellers by including *Proposals for Raising a Colledge of Industry* in his "New View of Society." Although references to *Le Grand Dessein*, first published in Sully's *Memoirs*, 1662, and to William Penn's *Essay towards the present and future Peace of Europe* are often to be found, John Bellers, as a writer on the same subject, has for some reason been almost completely forgotten.

The way in which John Bellers was introduced to the notice of Owen, though mentioned in his *Life* by himself in 1857, has till recently escaped attention. Francis Place,¹ the socialist, tailor, reformer and writer, when re-arranging his library and putting aside what was deemed worthless, came across the *Proposals for Raising a Colledge of Industry*, 1695. Struck with its contents, and being, as Owen says, "very much interested" in his [Owen's] "New Views," he took the pamphlet to Owen with the remark, "I have made a great discovery of a work advocating your social views a century and a half ago." Owen circulated 1,000 copies of this tract, and included it in the appendices to his *Life*.²

Awakened by Owen, Bellers was allowed to slumber again until Karl Marx, in *Das Kapital*, the first volume of which was published in 1867, described him as "ein wahres Phänomen in der Geschichte der politischen Oekonomie." Yet another but a briefer slumber followed. In 1895 appeared *Die Vorläufer des Neueren Sozialismus* (the pioneers of later Socialism), being the second part of an exhaustive History of Socialism by E. Bernstein and others. In this work some fifty-five pages

¹ See *Life* by Graham Wallas, 1898.

² See THE JOURNAL, 1914, vol. xi. page 93.

are devoted to "Die Quäker bis zu John Bellers," of which a section of some twenty-four pages deals with John Bellers himself. Edward Bernstein, "socialist, politician and writer," member of the Reichstag 1902-1906, for twelve years or so resident in England, made many of his notes for this section in the Office of the Society of Friends at Devonshire House. Having exhausted the Bellers pamphlets at the British Museum, he came to the Reference Library to complete his search.

He calls Bellers' *Abstract of George Fox's Advice and Warning, to the Magistrates of London . . . concerning the Poor, 1724*, his "swansong," adding, a little later on, "In 1725 death snatched from his hand the pen which he had so constantly employed in the interests of the poor."

Since 1895 Bellers has not been allowed to rest. He has a stalwart champion on the other side of the Atlantic in Edwin D. Mead of Boston, well known at the International Peace Congresses. The writer well remembers Mr. Mead's first call upon him at Devonshire House, and his pleasure in finding *at last* someone who knew anything of or cared anything for the memory of John Bellers.

On this side of the Atlantic a champion appeared in the late Joshua Rowntree, who made a study of the life and work of Bellers and lectured upon the subject in various places.

In his Swarthmore Lecture, 1913, he describes John Bellers as "a most interesting link between the high pressure prophets of the first generation of Quakerism and the philanthropists of its quieter period," adding later that "it is hardly to our credit" that his "ingenious writings on our duties to our neighbours have not yet been re-edited—that they have indeed attracted more attention in Germany than in England." After this we may safely assume that the memory of John Bellers will not be allowed to slumber again. As the following pages will show, the chief sources of information have been tapped for all that throws any light on the life and career of this remarkable man.

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