

MEMORIES OF T. M. KETTLE.

IT is all but four years since Kettle met his death, on September 9th, 1916, at the head of his company of Dublin Fusiliers between the capture of Guillemont and the assault on Ginchy, and already his memory seems to have faded out of the minds of his contemporaries. He was a great talker, and oblivion must be the fate of any talker who is not fortunate enough to have found a Boswell. Certainly no man in our time would have justified the devotion of another Boswell so fully. Whatever chance of achieving immortality may yet remain to this, the most lavishly gifted Irishman of his own generation, must depend on one book of essays called *The Day's Burden*, which was originally published in 1910 by Messrs. Maunsell, of Dublin, and has since been reprinted by the same firm for the very modest price of five shillings, in a greatly enlarged edition, which includes a number of later papers. It is too much to presume that there is still anyone who will trouble to read war books, and his *Ways of War*, published by Messrs. Constable, is not likely to survive the others. And if Kettle's passionate enthusiasm for what appeared to him as "the last crusade" has lost all power to evoke a responsive echo, his own burning faith in the political value of Ireland's contribution in men for the overthrow of Germany has proved the emptiest of all illusions. The awful sacrifice of the Irish Divisions has been utterly without influence in the achievement of Ireland's freedom.

It would be hard to find in the history of any country a more tragic instance of wasted genius. Kettle said himself somewhere that Dublin focuses the failure and the arrested development of the whole of Ireland. His own life, ending violently at the age of thirty-six, might be taken as a symbol of the appalling lack of scope and frustration of energy that has

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affected every succeeding generation of young men in Ireland since the Union. Whether as a barrister, a politician, a journalist, or a professor of economics, he might have found ample opportunity for his extraordinary gifts in almost any other country under the sun. In Ireland he was not only without any sufficient occupation, but could scarcely earn even a moderately comfortable income. With his powers of rapid work, his vehement and restless temperament, he invariably came to the end of his capacity for usefulness almost as soon as his first enthusiasm for his work began to slacken; and his activities in one movement after another fizzled out from the impossibility of generating sufficient momentum to keep alive his interest in them. For a man with his eager impulses and without strong powers of self-discipline, the conditions of the Ireland in which he lived were fatal to any permanent achievement. But it was not any personal failing merely that thus thwarted him at every turn. No one has given a better expression to the effects of the economic and political stagnation which has oppressed Ireland since the Union than is to be found in his preface to the translation of M. Paul-Dubois's book on *Contemporary Ireland*. "If, as a great Shakespearean critic has said, tragedy is simply waste, the history of Ireland is essentially tragedy indeed."

"For this is, in last analysis, what M. Paul-Dubois takes to be the deep malady of Ireland: she has not gained the whole world, but she has come perilously near losing her own soul. A certain laxity of will, a certain mystical scepticism in face of the material world, an eloquence which, in depicting Utopias, exhausts the energy that might better be spent in creating them, a continual tendency to fall back on the alibi of the inner life, make Ireland the Hamlet or, still more, the Rudin of the nations. Is this to say that she is unfit for modern, economic civilization? By no means. . . .

If Ireland is to realize herself, she must become mistress of her own hearth, her own purse, and her own cupboard.

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She does assuredly stand in urgent need of peace from politics, and so far her Unionist critics are right. There is indubitably a deep sense in which a nation's life begins where her politics end. . . .

But that peace from the purely political struggle, which is so indispensable if Ireland is to develop character and create material wealth, can come to her only as a result of political autonomy. Until autonomy is won—carrying with it a readjustment of taxation—‘on the cause must go.’ And the politicians who keep it going, whatever their special party tactics, are playing the part of economic realists quite as effectively as any worker on the land or at the loom.”

It was in politics alone that Kettle found that un-failing stimulus to his imagination and intellectual agility which his restless temperament craved. His friend, Mr. Arthur Clery, in an extremely sympathetic essay,* has pointed out that he cared less for Irish politics as an end in themselves than for their wider interest as part of the life of Europe. The fact is not altogether surprising. Outside of the Irish Parliamentary Party there was no political activity whatever in Ireland, for Sinn Fein in those days amounted to no more than interminable private discussions about the probable failure of Mr. Redmond's negotiations with the Liberal Party, or attending earnest weekly classes in the Irish language. The Parliamentary Party did, at any rate, involve constant contact with the people who were making Irish history, and his success at Westminster, although he was little more than twenty-five when he went there, was as immediate as it was remarkable. Few young men have ever made reputations quickly in the House of Commons, and those who have done so have most frequently owed their success, like the present Lord Chancellor, to gifts of invective which can be extremely useful to a party that is in need of effective speakers. But Kettle's success was of a much more serious and enviable kind.

* *Dublin Essays*. (Maunsel, Dublin.)

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In the Irish debates before the Home Rule Bill was introduced, his talent for stating a case tersely and from a new point of view, combined with his real grasp of financial problems, made him the spokesman of the Irish Parliamentary Party, whom formidable opponents like Mr. Balfour recognized and challenged at once. Mr. Balfour, indeed, was one of the earliest to appreciate and admire his gifts as a debater, and one of Kettle's most successful repartees was at his expense in a debate on Free Trade. Mr. Bonar Law had finished a glowing peroration with the assertion that as a Tariff Reformer he would nail his colours to the mast, to which Kettle retorted that his real ambition and difficulty was to nail his leader to the mast.

Yet even in his duties as a member of the Irish Party he was subjected to restrictions that often became intolerable, although none of its members was more consciously loyal to the pledge to vote, act, and speak in conformity with the Party's decisions. In the framing of those decisions he had no voice whatever, for the whole policy of the Party was decided by a cabinet consisting of Mr. Redmond and Messrs Dillon, Devlin, and T. P. O'Connor. Moreover, Redmond, as the leader of the party, always distrusted anyone whose temperament might conceivably cause trouble or lead to indiscretions, and he always regarded Kettle as the *enfant terrible* of the Party.

There is, indeed, some justification for the view that puts the blame for the frustration of Kettle's career upon the Irish Party. He accepted the professorship of National Economics in the new University which he had helped to found, and, as his new duties occupied a great deal of his time, he soon afterwards offered to resign his seat in Parliament. Whether he expected it or not, his resignation was accepted, and it is not unfair to suggest that the old men who were then in charge of the Nationalist movement felt that they had

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been relieved of one of the few embarrassments that ever threatened to disturb the leisure of their unchallenged dictatorship. In throwing himself wholeheartedly into his work as a professor in the National University, Kettle found for a time at least—while the subject was still new to him, and until the number of his students dwindled to less than half a dozen—work as interesting and as varied as he might have desired.

I had the good fortune to be one of his few students for two years. It was due to no failing on his part that his lectures were so sparsely attended; the subject was so specialized that only those who took their degrees in pure economics had time to attend them. A more brilliant or fascinating lecturer it would have been impossible to find in any University in Europe. His lectures could only have been described as conversations which ranged over every conceivable subject, and at times, it must be confessed, strayed very far from Irish economics. His qualifications would, indeed, have fitted him as well for a chair of literature as economics; but as a professor of literature his lectures would certainly have had a great deal to say to political economy. Some of his friends refused to take his economics seriously, and spoke as though the chair was an ingenious invention to provide him with a place on the college staff. But he was, in fact, a very notable economist who made as remarkable and original a contribution to modern economics as anyone else in his own time. The extent of his reading was amazing. His library was crammed with treatises, Blue books, and technical periodicals—German, French, and American as well as Irish and English—and the quotations from unfamiliar foreign economists or unusual sources of information that are scattered through all his writings were no sign of affectation, but the result of his insatiable desire to keep in touch

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with everything that was being written. He read too much, and there is something pathetic in the statement in one of his essays that "the twentieth century, which cuts such a fine figure in encyclopædias, is most familiarly known to the majority of its children as a new sort of headache"; and he says somewhere else, "How can anything be true enough to withstand the assault of a twelve and sixpenny book?"

It is a very shallow cynicism that tries to explain his insistence upon Nationalism as a vital factor in economics as a mere endeavour to justify the establishment of his own professorship. It was a highly important contribution to modern economic teaching to formulate, as he did, the definite axiom that what is good practical economics in one country may be extremely bad economics in another, so that, for instance, a policy of Free Trade may be very advantageous to a highly organized industrial country like England, especially if it has obtained a long start over its rivals in trade, whereas the case for protective tariffs has to be approached from a different standpoint in a backward country. The idea crops up at intervals as a disturbing factor in the theories of scores of authoritative economists, but no one before Kettle—apart from the tentative theories of Friedrich List—insisted upon it as a key that gives a new and clearer perspective of the chaotic mass of conflicting economic evidence.

This theory of nationalism in economics was, of course, only the application of his general philosophy of politics, in which the claims of nationality were as fundamental as those of individual liberty. All his hopes for Ireland rested on the assumption that she must come to realize her position as an integral part of Europe. "My only programme for Ireland," he wrote in his original preface, "consists, in equal parts, of Home Rule and the Ten Commandments. My only

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counsel to Ireland is that in order to become deeply Irish, she must become European ”; and elsewhere he declares passionately that “ the whole tradition of Europe is for Nationalism and against Socialism.”

“ This humanity, to the worship of which you are to butcher Nationalism, is too vast, too vague, too bloodless an abstraction. Our arms are not long enough to fold it in an embrace. Ireland I feel equal to, and Dublin, and that windy Atlantic cliff, straining out against the ocean and the sunset, and that publican in Tyrone, and the labourers spoiled by unemployment, who come to me at my house nearly every day, and for whom I can get no work. But as for the world as a whole, even its geography is too large for my head, to say nothing of its problems, and its emotions are too large for my heart. What is humanity? You and I and the man round the corner, or over the sea, are humanity. And if it is the nature of us all to come to amplest self-expression by living our lives here and now, for a community which is small enough to know and to love, then by ‘ transcending ’ national categories you do not enrich, you impoverish, humanity.”

Such was the burden of all his teaching, and it is tragic that he never completed what he had conceived as a *magnum opus* on National Economics. But the gist of it is set down succinctly and with all his characteristic powers of incisive analysis in a paper he delivered in Maynooth College in 1912. It contains the following description of his own conception of economics, in which he insists that nationality has to be considered as one of the fundamental “ principles of organization.”

“ The slice of life, with which economics has to deal, vibrates and, so to say, bleeds with human actuality. All science, all exploration, all history in its material factors, the whole epic of man’s effort to subdue the earth and establish himself on it, fall within the domain of the economist. His material consists of the ordinary man in the ordinary business of mundane life, that, namely, of getting

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a living. This means more than food, clothes, and shelter. The highest activities of art and religion can function only under material forms. Churches have to be paid for as well as factories; you can no more get a bar of Caruso for nothing than you can get a bar of soap for nothing. Economics, moreover, is committed to an analysis not only of the production, but also of the distribution of wealth. In other words, it has to face formally the vast and dismaying problem of poverty. In the accomplishment of these tasks, moreover, the economist, preoccupied with one mode of organization among mankind, must necessarily consider the influence on it of other modes devised or evolved for other ends. Politics imposes itself on him. He can evade the political aspect of his material only by evading reality."

In his lectures he had a happy faculty of bringing almost any manifestation of human activity into its perspective in economics. He was constantly making allowances for the play of all sorts of whimsical human instincts in their bearing upon economic questions. He used to insist, for instance, that one of the root problems in any attempt to remedy the overcrowding of the Dublin slums was expressed in the Irish proverb that "it is better to be quarrelsome than lonely," and that tenement houses had some of their most enthusiastic supporters among their own inhabitants. Socialism he used to describe in a typically vivid phrase as "that mirage of hunger." I remember, too, his delight in telling us, as an illustration of the complex working of the laws of supply and demand, his own experience in the House of Commons when he was helping to pilot through a Bill which would have prohibited the sale of margarine unless it was dyed some easily recognizable colour. He had himself argued in a speech in support of the Bill that if margarine was in fact as admirable and nutritious a food as its advocates wished the public to believe, there could be no reasonable objection to letting it be sold on its own merits; and he suggested that the real

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cause of the opposition to the Bill lay in that form of hypocrisy which made people desire to persuade themselves and their neighbours that they were eating a more expensive luxury than they could afford. The debate was continued by a Lancashire cotton spinner, who admitted the truth of Kettle's criticism, and asserted that he himself made his living by exploiting that sort of hypocrisy, since he manufactured a kind of cheap imitation silk which no fastidious person would ever have mistaken as real silk, but which would pass for it at a distance. But the most interesting and convincing opposition to the Bill came later from one of the Labour M.P.'s, who explained that he and his colleagues frequently found themselves obliged, as Members of Parliament, to entertain people whose standard of living was more expensive than their own, and that, while they could offer their richer acquaintances margarine with some hope of escaping detection, this would be impossible if it were coloured pink or blue !

For several years Kettle worked hard at making his professorship a success, reading economics voraciously in every language, and his good humour and unending conversations gave a unique distinction and vivacity to the Professor's common-room. But his habitual restlessness began to assert itself, and there were times when he found life in Dublin irksome and trivial. Those who knew him best had no doubt of his growing desire to enter Parliament again ; but the Irish Party, having already got rid of him, considered that he ought to be well satisfied with his position, which gave him scope and prestige with comparatively little work, and had no intention of inviting him back to break in upon their unruffled peace. Kettle was in great demand as a public speaker at all sorts of meetings in Dublin, and for a time he accepted most of his invitations. He was always interesting and original, no matter on what

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subject he had to speak, and his gift of epigram and imaginative phrasing was inexhaustible. I remember one speech he made at a St. Patrick's Day dinner, in which he described the national festival as being for all Irishmen as "at once Nation day and Empire day." He used to cram into five minutes more witty and incisive sayings than most speakers would think of in their whole public career.

An opportunity of practical public service came to him in the great strike in Dublin in 1913, when Jim Larkin and the Transport Workers' Union became engaged in a fight to a finish with the Dublin employers, led by the late W. M. Murphy. Kettle's unfailing appreciation of the drama of conflict was kindled at once, and he rushed into action. He succeeded in persuading many of the most influential men in Dublin to form a Citizens' Peace Committee which tried to mediate between the employers and Liberty Hall. His efforts came to nothing, but the *Day's Burden* contains a series of intensely vivid papers written by him at the time.

While the Dublin strike was still in progress the political situation was becoming very acute, and he was too much of a realist to fail to see that power was rapidly slipping out of Redmond's hands and that Sir Edward Carson's policy of direct action in Ulster, aided and abetted and heavily financed by the English Conservatives under Mr. Bonar Law, was going to defeat the constitutional agitation, even though the Home Rule Bill might reach the Statute Book. It was in the closing months of 1913, and in the spring and summer of the following year, that he performed the greatest service ever given to him to do for Ireland, and what perhaps no other man could have done so well. He had watched the growth of the Ulster Volunteers until they came to dominate the whole political situation, and he saw earlier than anyone else

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in Ireland that if Redmond's constitutional victory was not to be rendered vain, the Irish Nationalists must raise a volunteer army of their own to stand against the threat of armed resistance in Ulster which would otherwise have wrecked the Home Rule Bill. The idea of organizing such a force appealed to his imagination and, after a few months of eager discussion, the new movement was launched, with Kettle's brother, an extremely able electrical engineer, and his friend, Professor Eoin Macneill, now Vice-President of Sinn Féin, as its joint secretaries. The movement spread like wildfire all over the country, and especially in the Ulster counties, and to its spontaneous organization is to be traced the growth of that new political courage in Ireland, which has been converted by broken pledges and coercion on the part of the British Government into the present Sinn Féin movement. Kettle threw himself heart and soul into organizing the volunteers. They were at first viewed with jealousy and distrust by the Irish Parliamentary Party, but eventually the movement assumed such proportions that Mr. Redmond found himself obliged to place himself at its head. The work of organization proceeded swiftly and steadily, and the dangerous business of smuggling rifles into the country, which the Ulstermen had been allowed to conduct with impunity at Larne, gave Kettle a great opportunity. He went to Belgium to negotiate the purchase of a large consignment of rifles, and so came to be in Belgium in the fateful weeks of August, 1914, when it was invaded by the Germans. He was one of the few Irishmen who realized the wider significance of the Ulster rebellion, and I remember his arguing in June, 1914, that the Curragh mutiny had for the time being ruled out England from the reckoning of the other military powers in Europe.

What he saw in Belgium made him forget all other

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questions in face of the tremendous realities of war, and he sent home lurid despatches from Louvain and Termonde and the other ruined towns. Redmond had made his dramatic speech in the House of Commons while he was abroad, and Kettle was carried away by a passionate enthusiasm. On his return to Ireland he took a leading part in the recruiting campaign to raise an Irish division. The last time I saw him was at a public meeting which I had helped to organize, in celebration of the centenary of Thomas Davis, which was to have been held in Trinity College, but was banned by the Provost, Dr. Mahaffy, because he had heard that Patrick Pearse—who was later to lead the Dublin rebellion of Easter, 1916—had been invited to attend. The Students' National Literary Society then organized a meeting so that Mr. W. B. Yeats should have a platform to deliver his memorial oration, and I telephoned to Kettle, who was then in a nursing home, to ask him if he would come and speak. I remember his characteristic answer down the telephone: "For me to be asked to such a meeting and to refuse would be perfectly ridiculous." We had a stormy meeting, for it was attended by an excited crowd of Pearse's followers, who had heard that Kettle was going to be present and were determined to shout him down, for he had a few days before announced that he had accepted a commission in the Army. I have never seen any man face a hostile and angry crowd with so much courage and subdue it so completely with his personal magnetism and crushing repartee.

My most vivid memory of him is on another occasion, a little earlier in the same year, when he put in a belated appearance at some celebration of a students' society at the end of the summer session. Ill-health was telling upon him terribly, and disappointment at his ostracism by the Irish Party had reduced him to a

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mood of almost continual despondency. I can still see his large figure rising heavily from a low chair as he announced, in response to persistent calls for a speech, his intention of reciting to us a poem which he had recently composed and which he declared that no one but himself could be old enough to understand. He called it—

A BALLADE AUTUMNAL

(In which any Old Fool suffering from idealistic tendencies explains to any other Old Fool afflicted with the same disease, the failure of their lives, hopes, and ambitions, and the triumph of the wise of this world.)

Hair greying, ashen eyes, uncomely ridges,
Autumn of things ill-done and things undone,
How all that water slipped beneath the bridges
Chills the adieux of our defeated sun.
What paltry unresisted jettison
Of hopes dear held, and there the graveyard west,
With mud, miasma, mastless hulks, and midges,
We have not lived as wisely as the rest.

That wasteful trick of yours, that gust prodigious
Of dreams too great for their comparison
Blew stars ablaze, but left us in the ditches,
Poor, valiant, generous, tired ephemeron !
Had we but coined the vision when it shone
We too had ruled and mocked the dispossessed.
Well, we have rags, the prudent have the riches,
We have not lived as wisely as the rest.

They squeezed us and forgot. Your *je m'en fiche's*
Struck in too bloodily to pass for fun.
Our bread was nibbled by the water-witches,
All that we had is given and is gone.
Some penny wheedled for a currant-bun,
Some soapless, shirtless starveling uncaressed
Still thanks us for, but not your fed ambitions,
We have not lived as wisely as the rest.

ENVOI

Prince, lift your heart up out of Acheron,
Death bows us gravely to that cleaner test.
Yea, when all books are closed, all races run,
We may have lived as wisely as the rest.

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I have heard somewhere that Kettle composed an epitaph for himself when he was in training with the Irish Division near Fermoy, but I doubt if it was ever written down. He could not have improved upon the last line of that ballade. Little remains of all that "gust prodigious" of his astonishing and versatile genius, and although no one could forget him who ever heard him speak or spoke to him, yet perhaps even his memory will scarcely outlive those who came into personal contact with him during his short and meteoric life. But perhaps the last word that has to be said of him is contained in an *obiter dictum* of his own: "It is with ideas as with umbrellas; if left lying about, they are peculiarly liable to change ownership." No man was ever more extravagantly generous in making a present of his ideas to other people. And perhaps some mood of prophecy was upon him when he wrote in one of his earliest papers on *The Philosophy of Politics*:

"You would do well to study the novitiate through which an idea passes before it becomes a law. It arises out of the misery, and contains in it the salvation, of a countryside; the State welcomes it with a policeman's baton. It recovers; the State puts it in jail, on a plank bed, and feeds it on skilly. It becomes articulate in Parliament: a statesman from the moral altitude of £5000 a year denounces it as the devilish device of a hired demagogue. It grows old, almost obsolete, no longer adequate; the statesman steals it, embodies it in an Act, and goes down to British history as a daring reformer."

DENIS GWYNN.

