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"The People of the Potteries"

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I

The stranger, unless he enters the district by night, cannot be absolutely carried away by his first sight of the Potteries. At night, with its furnace fires leaping upwards amid vast clouds of tinted vapour and smoke, and reflecting themselves in the black water of mysterious canals, the Potteries may claim a beauty and a majesty of its own. But in the daytime its most determined admirer could not call it pretty, or even tidy, and certainly not clean. When the Manchester express sets you down at Stoke-on-Trent Station, which is the traffic centre of the district, you can within five minutes feel the dirt of the Potteries sticking to your skin. You see about you a determined and perhaps (to you) somewhat brusque population, which eyes you with provincial cautiousness, as if to say: "What are you doing here?" You may leave the station and travel through miles and miles and yet miles of streets

(chiefly muddy with a black mud), and see nothing but tramcars whizzing up and down between endless buildings obviously not designed by Christopher Wren or Inigo Jones and rearing up behind the buildings ten thousand chimneys, each trying to send black smoke to Paradise — and not succeeding. You will be so preoccupied by the dirt, the noise, the self-centred bustle, and the sordid monotony of the architecture that probably you will miss that glimpse of green which signalises a new municipal park. If you escape from the streets you will fall into huge cinder-wastes, or lose yourself among artificial mountain ranges of mine-refuse; and when you do get a view of a distant horizon, that horizon will surely be crowned by a pithead and a scarf of smoke, and the intervening rural country will have the colour, not of grass, but of dried peas. Struggling back into the streets you will search afresh but in vain for the magnificent thoroughfares, the imp osing squares, the noble edifices which mark a city of a quarter of a million inhabitants, which is the total of the Potteries. In the largest of the Pottery towns the town hail looks like a fairly big hotel (and used to be one), whereas a diminutive building that has some resemblance to a town hall (and used to be one) is nothing but a bank and lawyers' offices. And you will find everywhere the same bland spirit of Making-it-do. It is conceivable that in the end you will exclaim in your wrath and your disgust:

"They told me this was the twelfth largest city in the United Kingdom. I came to see it, and I've got nothing for my pains but a

coat of dirt, a headache, and a nightmarish impression of chimneys and rows of windows and everlasting smoke. As for the people, they seem a stern race, and they seem to suspect one of some nefarious design. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but—"

Do not be afraid. You will not hurt our feelings. We sympathise with you. We ourselves, the natives, on some wet day of autumn or spring, have stood in our main streets and beheld the foul prospect, "Where all but man is vile," and have said to ourselves: "It is absolutely astounding that we can live in such a spot and enjoy it". Yet we do, unless the weather goes to extremes. We do and the reason is that we understand. You don't understand. Aware that you don't understand, we permit not our feelings to be hurt. Indeed, far from blaming you, we rather have pity for you.

II

To understand the Potteries it is necessary to dip into geology and geography — these two sciences being, in fact, the key to nearly all human history. If you look at a geological map of Staffordshire, you will see at the northern end of this county, amid expanses of brown (which means sandstone) and blue (which means limestone) a solitary little triangular patch of dark grey (which means coal). The Potteries is in the middle of that patch. Geology has set it apart. And if you look at an ordinary map of Staffordshire, you will see that the Potteries is cut off from the rest of England on the north by wild and hilly

moorlands, and on the south by the remains of ancient forests. You will see also that there is no navigable river anywhere near it; in brief, it has got lost in the very middle of the island. And if you looked at ancient maps you would see that the roads to it were few, and that in particular Watling Street passed far to the south of it on the way to Chester and far to the north of it on the way to York.

The Potteries is the Potteries because on that precise spot of the surface of the British Empire there were deposits of clay and of quick-burning coal close to the surface. If this was not an invitation on the part of Nature to make pots, what was it? Wherever the clay and the coal were found close together, there a town sprang up. It was only a tiny town, because nine or ten centuries ago the demand for pots was limited and the processes of manufacture primitive. And each tiny town kept itself to itself, because the landscape was hilly and irregular; it was not a smooth plain; and the roads were naught but mule-tracks. Cut off from the surrounding country in spirit by the peculiarity of its manufacture and in body by the difficulty of access and its wild environment, the Potteries was indeed isolated. It acquired through centuries the habit of solitude. It was an island in an island. And even when, in the eighteenth century, the canals of England were dug, the Potteries had difficulty in connecting itself with the outer world. Newcastle-under-Lyme objected to canals. I have not yet mentioned Newcastle-under-Lyme, which is a very ancient town lying just to the west of the Potteries on a piece of ground where there is a "fault" in

the coal-deposits. A clean town, aristocratic! It was sending two members to Parliament in the fourteenth century. The Potteries had to fight hard with its old-fashioned neighbour before it could possess itself of such a new-fashioned convenience as a canal. The same with railways! The main line (now the London and North-Western) that runs from London through Stafford to the north ought to have gone right through the Potteries on its way to Crewe. But it didn't. The stronger influences were against railways, and the line was diverted through fields and villages that had no special need of it. Hence the Potteries had to construct a railway of its own. It did construct a railway of its own, the North Staffordshire, which gradually became so important that the North-Western had to run its expresses over it. And to-day, when you return from your visit, the express will rush you without a stop over the 146 miles between Stoke and Euston in three hours or less. This is travelling! This is a sign of the Great Change!

III

But great changes do not happen suddenly. Now that you understand, you will not be surprised that the architecture of the twelfth largest town is like the architecture of a small town. The Potteries, despite its extent and its numbers, is in origin a scattering of small towns whose tentacles have spread and joined and interlaced. Now that you understand, you will not be surprised that there was so much local opposition to the federation of the small towns into one big one.

During centuries each town had been nursing its individuality in the isolated remoteness of its valley or its hill, and one cannot undo the work of seven hundred years in seven. Now that you understand, you will not be surprised that the inhabitants regard you, the obvious stranger, with a preliminary cautiousness. To do so is the profound instinct of withdrawn communities. Nor will you be surprised later, at the extraordinary heartiness of their hospitality. Such hospitality is the profound instinct of withdrawn communities.

And I hope that you will not be surprised at the dirt and the large slatternliness of the district's physiognomy. I hope that you will drop that attitude of disgust and blame, which is so foolishly characteristic of the people who come from an agricultural or a bureaucratic community into an industrial one. Ruskin gorgeously inveighed against the spectacular horrors of industrialism. But he would probably have been very cross if he had had to drink his tea out of the hollow of his hand, in default of a cup and to keep himself warm with a skipping-rope, in default of coal. Yet neither cups nor coals can be produced without a great deal of dirt. You use coal; you want coal, you are very glad to have coal and a number of other things which cannot exist without coal; and then you have the audacity to come into a coaly and clayey district and turn up your nose and say: "Really this is very dirty and untidy!"

My good sir, *what did you expect*? How would you remedy it? Why, you can't even fetch a hundredweight of coal out of the cellar without soiling your lily-white hands! You as much as anybody are responsible for the external look of things in the Potteries. Forswear coal, forswear cups and saucers, and persuade others to do so, and the Potteries will rapidly take on the purity of Tooting Bec.

You observe here, perhaps, a slight heat and vivacity in our demeanour towards you. Well, the fact is that, conscious as we are of our manifold sins, we really do not expect to be blamed for our soot. In the matter of our soot, we expect, from intelligent and benignant persons, a sympathetic comprehension, and no arrogance of reproof... Yes, we are careless of appearances, but this is one of the faults that enforced dirt invariably engenders. And we did not choose our occupations. Geological strata are responsible for our occupations and our little peculiarities.

IV

Evolution in the Potteries has been quite remarkably dramatic during the Victorian and Edwardian eras. And, of course, it has marched with the improvement in the means of communication. Long after the death of Josiah Wedgwood, its supreme hero, the Potteries retained the primitive characteristics of a district cut off by Nature from the rest of the world. Josiah Wedgwood was a great man and did much, but his impress was left far more deeply on the manufacture of pottery

than on the habits of the potters. A great-uncle of my own used often to tell me stories of bear and dog fights at which he assisted as a boy. At that time Burslem, the "Mother" of the other towns Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent, Longton, and Tunstall, had its municipal bear, and Sunday was the day of battles. "But what about the law" I asked him. "Bless ye!" he would reply, "there was no law in the Potteries in those days." The statement was exaggerated, but it had some truth. Hundreds of men still alive in the Potteries can remember a period when, during the annual "wakes" [local holidays], the public-houses kept open day and night for a week, and the sole ambition of the population seemed to be to get drunk and to remain drunk. In my youth the population of the Potteries was at least a hundred and thirty thousand, and the towns were even then merged into one another, and yet there existed less than two miles of tram line in the entire district, and only two trams — drawn by horses and travelling between Hanley and Burslem — twice an hour.

Now, electric cars in scores run about everywhere, from Longton in the south to Tunstall in the north, and from Newcastle in the west to Smallthorn in the east. And it was precisely these rapid cars which at last broke down the stubborn individualism of the separate towns and brought about their federation and the triumph of Hanley, the central and the largest town. Another case of geography influencing history! Hanley was in the middle. These cars were always flying to Hanley; and the large shops and places of amusement were very tempting.

And so the large shops and other establishments grew larger and more numerous, and they are still growing and increasing, and Hanley will soon have a population of a hundred thousand. Inevitably the retail trade of the other towns languished. Useless for the other towns to complain. Useless to fight against the temptation of those cars! For a penny or twopence, in a quarter of an hour, the man or woman with money to spend could be in Hanley, and not all his love for his native town would keep that man or woman out of Hanley. Thus a smaller patriotism was gradually over-come by a greater patriotism, and the tendency of the potters to think of themselves as one single community instead of half a dozen different communities was strengthened. And though each town still protests against losing its identity, its identity will undoubtedly have to go. The loss is part of the price paid for progress and for breadth of mind. Even Hanley, the victor, has had to sacrifice something. It would have liked the federated Potteries to be baptised with its own name; but in the struggle for nomenclature, Stoke-on-Trent has won, and rightly, for it is the centre of the railway system and of the postal system. To the outside world of travellers and addressers of envelopes the Potteries has always been associated with Stoke-on-Trent, and the association will properly remain.

But this formal federation, this solemn announcement to the rest of Britain that Britain is henceforth adorned with a new city of formidable dimensions, is only the outward sign and crown of the movement that steadily but unfussily has been transforming the Potteries during the last thirty years. [1880-1910] All things considered, the Potteries has learnt very quickly its lesson of closer contact with the world. It has not yet shed the whole of its primitive temperament, and in all probability it never will — at any rate I hope not, but its progress has been remarkable. Little by little it has become studded with municipal institutions and organisations of amenity, of all kinds; its public life has quickened and developed activities as complicated as may be found in any of your swagger municipalities. Most important of all, perhaps, it has grown conscious of its own ugliness, and has seriously set about to titivate itself. Municipal parks flourish and blossom now in every quarter of it. There are at least half a dozen. A municipal park may seem to you a very little thing, but I tell you that in a district martyrised by smoke and fumes, a municipal park is a very great thing indeed, an achievement that approaches the heroic. And if you who sniff at our municipal parks could only compare their appearance with the original appearance of the ground which they occupy, you would agree with me. Swards do not grow of their own accord in the Potteries. The municipal gardeners will tell you that each blade of grass has to be brought up, as it were, by hand.

And, in the matter of titivation and beautifying, there is now even a movement for abating the smoke nuisance. Just as some years ago a small band of enthusiasts convinced themselves that federation must come, and federation did come, in the teeth of intense instinctive opposition, so now a small band of enthusiasts have convinced themselves that smoke must go. And though the project seems a dream, and though people inured to dirt will cling to dirt, yet I believe that smoke ultimately will go; for it has been proved that earthenware can be fired better by gas than by coal.

VI

The racial character of the potters is just about what a thoughtful person would expect it to be. It is a mixture. The old and the new are mingled in it. It has the downrightness and simplicity of a withdrawn and relatively small community, and also the marked provincial shrewdness and suspiciousness of such a community. It has the energy of its situation and bracing climate. It has the fierceness and the external harshness of a people engaged in hard bodily labour under conditions which are more frequently inclement than soft. It still has that carelessness of appearances which is the inevitable result of enforced trafficking with coal and clay. But on the other hand in no district in the world will you see more advertisements of soap than in the Potteries. The potters look askance out of their secular isolation at new movements and ideals, but when once they have persuaded

themselves of the value of such movements, all their passionate force is thrown into them — and things move! Some day the Potteries will awake even to the importance of technical education and the organisation of its staple trade [of ceramics] — and then miracles will be seen in the land. That desired day has tarried too long.

A people may be judged by its amusements and diversions. And the Potteries may well allow itself to be so judged. Gone are bear-baiting, cock-fighting, and rabbit-coursing. Even prison-bars have gone — that violent and almost prehistoric game in which the players would throw themselves into canals in order to avoid defeat. Grown men no longer play at marbles, as they used to do when I went to school. Of the more ancient diversions pigeon-flying alone remains, a very harmless hobby. Football now reigns and has no serious rival. The Potteries was one of the first centres of football and in the history of the Association game the name of Stoke-on-Trent is glorious. Football has characteristics of force and violence and spectacular bigness which could not fail to appeal to such a race as the potters. Cricket is much practised, and golf waxes yearly, but there is nothing like football in North Staffordshire. The publication of the Saturday evening Football edition of the *Staffordshire Sentinel*, the great, the wealthy, and the only daily paper in the Potteries, is a weekly event that sends a thrill through the entire population.

"Yes", you say, in your haste, and your facile superiority. "But they don't *play* football, they pay to see it played." You are quite wrong. This is a notion which you have picked up ready-made from pessimistic opponents of the professionalisation of sport — persons who see the ruin of British manhood in the vision of ten thousand people gathered round a field to watch twenty-two young men knock a ball about with their feet — and with their heads. Football is tremendously played in North Staffordshire, where there are scores, and I dare say hundreds of football clubs as completely unprofessional as the Corinthians themselves. Look at the crowded pages of results in the *Sentinel* on a Saturday night. There could indeed be no professional football without a vast substructure of amateur football. But those watching, idle thousands. Well, if you know anything about football, you must know that it is a game which cannot be played after a certain age. Its demands on the physical frame are too exacting. Few men can play football after thirty, and practically none after thirty-five. Men don't, as a rule, die at thirty-five. At thirty-five they still have the right to amuse themselves. Most of them cannot buy golf balls at a florin apiece, nor pay guinea subscriptions to golf clubs. What then are they to do? Loll gossiping against bars in stuffy interiors, or shout themselves hoarse under the fresh and stimulating smoke of football grounds? Which is better? A vast deal too much nonsense is talked about football.

VII

Nevertheless, let us admit for argument's sake that football is a violent and even a ferocious pastime. Let us admit all the evils that have ever been debited against it. What is the other great outstanding diversion of the Potteries? Well, it happens to be music. There you have the mixture of the Pottery character symbolised: Football and Music!

In the Potteries music is practised in its most genuinely popular form, that of chorus-singing. The people pay to hear, but it is the people also who sing. They are entertained, but they also entertain. Just as North Staffordshire was one of the first centres of football, so it was one of the first centres of really ambitious chorus-singing. The late Josiah Powell, in the intervals of his work as town clerk of the "Mother of the Potteries", found time to be a pioneer of the Tonic Sol-fa movement. He digged and cultivated a fruitful soil, and the choirs which directly or indirectly owe their existence to his enthusiasm are known wherever Eisteddfods and other musical competitions occur. Yea, they are known even in London and at Windsor. The Potteries sings because it is racially musical. It rushes away from the factory gates to the rehearsal room because it does veritably love music. It takes a special train to London, gives a concert there, and comes home again the same night because it knows what it can do. This is the other side of its energy. And this is amateurism at its best. I do not know how many choral associations there may be in

the Potteries; but when recently its favourite conductor died, five choirs and ten thousand people attended his funeral.

For the rest, the intellectual elite of the Potteries are not to be distinguished from the intellectual elite of any other district, except, perhaps, by the vivacity with which they express their opinions.

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