

OUR HISTORY - 69

H N Brailsford - Socialism For To-Day (1925)

Henry Brailsford was a journalist and leader writer for a number of Liberal and socialist newspapers. A friend of republican exiles, he volunteered to fight in the Greek army against Turkey in 1897, with his experiences novelised in *The Broom of the War-God*, before leading a relief mission for the Balkan committee in 1903, leading to a second book *Macedonia*. A member of the Friends of Russian Freedom, he was convicted of supplying passports to Russian exiles. Brailsford joined the ILP in 1907; in 1922 he became editor of the ILP paper, the *New Leader*, and *Socialism for To-Day*, published by the ILP, was based on articles published in the paper. In 1914, Brailsford published his critique of economic imperialism and military rivalry – *The War of Steel and Gold*. He was an active member of the Union for Democratic Control and promoted international government and published a book advocating a *League of Nations* in 1917. Failing to be elected to parliament, he visited post-war Europe and became a critic of the Versailles treaty, publishing *Across the Blockade* (1919) and *After the Peace* (1920). He then visited the Soviet Union, being sympathetic to the revolution but critical of the Bolsheviks in *The Russian Workers Republic* (1921) and *How the Soviets Work* (1927). He was an active member of the Labour Party's Advisory Committee on International Affairs. A critic of imperialism, he visited India and published *Rebel India* in 1931. When the ILP disaffiliated from the Labour Party in 1932, Brailsford helped to set up the Socialist League and in 1937 signed the Unity Manifesto. He helped found *Tribune*, contributed to *Reynolds News* and became leader writer of the *New Statesman*. He wrote a number of further books and pamphlets and in 1944 argued for a magnanimous peace with Germany. He also wrote a detailed study of the Levellers which

was edited by Christopher Hill and published in 1961 after his death three years earlier. He is the subject of an excellent biography by F M Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter*, which was published in 2000.

“Socialism does mean a new challenge to human nature, a call to us to adapt ourselves, and to fit ourselves for a new and progressive society.... Change the outward social conditions, and the mind of man, his response to different motives, his morals, his attitude to society, his ‘human nature’ will change, as certainly as his ape-like body changed, when he ceased to live in trees and took to hunting on the ground. We change with our tools, with our houses, with the organisation of our work. Every student of history knows that the slow transition from flints to electric dynamos, from cave-dwellings to skyscrapers, from hunting to capitalist industry, has profoundly modified ‘human nature’; it is only in the heat of political discussion that we forget it.”

“We believe that the change we advocate is an inevitable step in the destined march of history. Our hope is to accomplish it without violence or bloodshed. It is not our action which may hurry society into catastrophe – the danger lies in the obstructive delays of men and parties, who will not read the signs of the times. When, year after year, miners and engineers must scan the horizon without hope, when the figure of a million unemployed becomes a normal fact of daily life, when the industries which are the basis of our national wealth must confess themselves unable to pay a living wage – then, at length, the capitalist system admits its bankruptcy. Its evident collapse is a summons to Socialists to act with sincerity and resolution. It is not enough to oppose violence. We can prevent it and frustrate it, only if our own energy and determination give to our peaceful methods an impetus which carries us through crisis to fundamental change.”