

# "THIS DECENT, DAUNTLESS PEOPLE"

## An American Looks At Britain

(A talk from the BBC on December 8, 1940, by PROFESSOR ARTHUR NEWALL, chairman of the American in Britain Outpost of the William Allen White Committee, in the series "An American Looks at Britain")

**T**HIS talk is called "An American Looks at Britain." Now I'm sure the title doesn't mean to leave out the important point. We may look, but the point is, what do we see, and what do we learn? Indeed, my chief complaint about many of my fellow country-men since September, 1939, is that they have done so little except look; open mouthed spectatorship of an absorbing show far removed from their shores. We must look with the seeing eye. Will you be patient then, while I tell you with all humility what I have tried to see and what I've tried to learn?

In July, 1939, two months before war broke, I stood on the deck of the new Mauretania in mid-ocean on the first east-bound trip from New York. I looked back toward my own country, that rough and tumble, excitable, slightly neurotic civilisation, my people who had so blithely dedicated their great New York Fair to the world of to-morrow. And then I looked to the old land we were approaching, Britain, asking itself, on that July day, if western civilisation was to have any to-morrow at all. Yet a Britain that I knew would be steady, balanced with a settled outlook, perhaps a trifle too settled, all of it born of heavy crises faced in a thousand years of history.

### I Begin to Know These People

I've lived in the midst of this people for many years, lived here, not toured and dashed home to write a book; in their homes, their offices, their clubs, their workers' discussions, their cocktail parties, coffee around the open fire; in Scotland and Wales, in England from Northumberland to the Isle of Wight, from the West Country to East Anglia. I think I begin to know these people. What then have I seen?

Well, let's go back a bit and look at the autumn of 1938. I'd been in America during Munich time, and had heard the thunderings of American denunciation that Democracy had been sold down the river. I got back to find a Britain itself sharply divided. Those who, like the Americans, were in a fine frenzy of indignation; those who, even if not profoundly convinced about peace for our time, were at least thankful for the breathing space to get ready, and watching a European continent in which the Nazis had no more territorial ambitions. And Hitler pressed forward. In March, 1939, he entered Prague. Britain changed overnight. In many I saw disillusion, in all determination. It was an angry Britain that saw the mask of Nazi-ism torn away. Now for the worst. Meanwhile, for three months in America again, I listened to shrill and earnest academic distinctions between German and British Imperialism, from which we happier Americans were providentially immune.

If Europe must make a spectacle of herself in petty bickerings, "well let 'em stoo in their own juice."

### Remember Last Winter

So little did the ordinary American discern the slowly gathering omens of deeper issues. Catastrophe came bursting upon us in September. I saw the British people grim, calm, unemotional, ready to stand up to the evil things. And then, came the dreary winter. Remember only last winter, so many centuries ago! What did we see? I must try to be truthful. People everywhere lulled by easy reliance upon French military assurances, the Maginot line which turned out to be only half a line, no relaxing of determination, no doubts whatever about the rightness of the cause, nor the ultimate victory, but a settling down, Government and people alike, into a leisurely three years' war to be conducted for us, quite competently, by the military authorities, ably seconded by the civil servants. Business as usual, or as nearly as possible, of course. Airy talk about the cost of A.R.P., order in the black-out, letters to the "Times" on the new world after the war, when the Germans had worn themselves out against the French defences and our blockade.

### And then the Awakening

Too little attention to what the Germans were scheming with might and main during those long winter weeks. It was what the Americans lightly called "this phoney war." They were desperately wrong, but was there a tinge of truth to it all? Then sudden blitz; Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, France in rapid succession, until the world began to topple. I saw the British people stunned, their Government fall, and then an electric current shooting through the length and breadth of this Island in a revolution that was not merely political. It plumbed the depths of the very life of the whole people, awake to the danger, backs to the wall, strong new men in the Government, changes in the High Command, speed up in production all along the line, the Home Guard, the beaches at Dunkirk, the little pleasure steamers chugging into hell and coming back glorious. These were but the dramatic highlights of hidden strength daily gathering power. The scope and direction of this revolution will not be known for many a long day, but this we could see; new steel entering into an ancient heritage of resolution, fit to stand the unprecedented strain of fresh trials that descended from the sky in August and September by day, then by night, still going on and extending to the convoys in the Channel and to the lifeline of supplies off the neutralised coasts of Ireland.

### "The British can go on Winning"

My compatriot, Ralph Ingersoll, after a month's investigation, has announced with that sure, shall I say cocksure, touch of American journalistic omni-

ence, that Hitler had London in his power, if he had only known it. Ingersoll misread his Britain—he looked, but did not see the power that was striking out from the spirit of the R.A.F., and the people. I suspect he may see this now, for he said in his paper three days ago: "The moral I drew from the great air battle was not that it had left England weak, but that it was the first major defeat administered to Hitler in eight years. Emphatically, I think the British can go on winning." Well then, leave it at that.

### Some Dark Spots

So we come to this December Sunday in 1940. As we look at this people — this decent, dauntless people, as Henry James, an American, called them — what do we see to-day, and what can we Americans learn? Again, because I want to be truthful, there are some lines in the picture that are dark. They're bound to be. The Nazi airmen are licked by day, but the relentless night attacks continue, and the nights will be long for weeks to come. The losses by sea tell their own solemn tale. And has the last full measure of productive drive been achieved? But I think Herbert Morrison spoke sound sense when he reminded us that we must yield neither to feather-headed optimism nor leaden-footed pessimism, for there's still the R.A.F. ever growing, the steady, stabbing pressure of the Navy, the Army in the Near East, and the new forces at home, and not least, the exploits of the redoubtable Greeks recalling the classic age. And in addition to all these bright patches, I see two things to-day that fill me with solid confidence.

### They're Tough

The first is this. These British are tough. I've just been up in the north. We Americans expect the Scots and the north country men to be tough, dour, hard headed, clear thinking; well, I found them so, and then some. I was in the Hoem Valley in Yorkshire. No defeatism there, no anxious foreboding, just the everlasting "stick to my job — our work benches can win this war." That's what they assured me — they're

tough. But believe me, when I went down into the Coventry district it was the same. The Midlander can take it too in his native black country. No need to speak of the Londoner. Whether Mayfair, or Cockney East End, his story is epic; and now Southampton and Bristol. I have a special affection for the soft spoken west country men, for my own two ancestors sailed out of Bristol Harbour 300 years ago for the little new village of Boston. The same blood must be in the Bristol men of to-day that was in those merchant venturers of old. They're tough, too, like the rest.

The other day I took my nine-year-old boy to look at London, and we found ourselves on a cloudy day in the midst of an air scrap over Oxford Street. From a doorway Richard watched the trail of smoke of bombs, then he looked around and remarked with an insight born of a moment's experience: "Daddy, nobody seems to be scrambling for shelter." Yes, they're all the same breed.

### The Same in America

I hope my friends on the other side of the Atlantic won't have to look up that way over Forty-Second Street in New York, or Tremont Street in Boston or La Salle Street in Chicago, but if they ever do—well, that leads me to the second conviction borne in upon me. May I speak of it with all due modesty as an American? It's this: The more I see of the texture of the British people to-day, the more I am sure it's of the same stuff as my own people at their best. Oh, I know the pattern is quite different. We go in for somewhat louder stripes and checks, somewhat more vivid colouring. That's as the eye catches the externals, but I believe the feel of the cloth is the same. The same warp and weft that I saw being put into the woollen fabric in a Yorkshire mill. The fabric that's the same in you Australians, you New Zealanders, you South Africans, you Canadians and you scattered Britishers in Istanbul and Cairo, and Bombay and Singapore and Hong Kong. I hope you will let me — an old Bristolian by descent — claim for my people kinship with that common stuff of which you other English-speaking people are woven? That's one reason why I want not only to see, but also to learn, and want my fellow Americans to learn, the full meaning of what we're seeing in you these days. They are learning, perhaps not quite fast enough to suit me, but still miraculously fast.

### America's Cause as Well

I rub my eyes at every letter I get nowadays from those same Americans who in their knowing, self-satisfied way, were talking so easily twelve months ago about the phoney war between rival imperialisms. They have gone a long

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### GULLS AS GUIDE

Since mass air raids on Great Britain started, Britons have learned to watch the flight of sea birds. Gulls flying inland means that raiders are coming. But the war has been hard on sea gulls. Diving for fish killed by exploding mines, depth charges and torpedoes, they land on a surface of oil spread by sunken ships, bog down, can fly no more. Mrs. Yglesias, on the Cornish coast, went into the business of cleaning gulls. With the assistance of her two daughters she was able to de-oil 700 per day.