

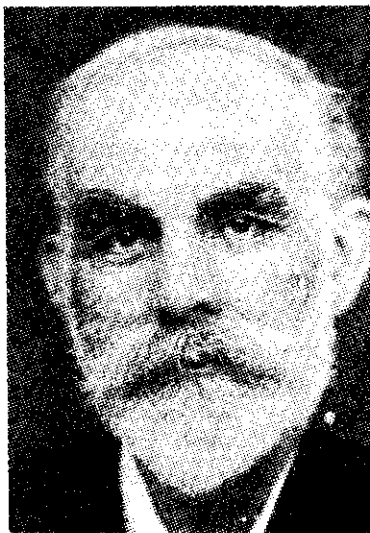
CHAMPIONS OF THE MASSES

(An NBS tribute to John Burns, broadcast recently by 2YA)

JOHN BURNS died the other day at the age of 84. Thirty years ago his passing would have been big news. To-day—well, when a middle-aged New Zealander said yesterday that John Burns was dead, two younger men asked: "Who was he?" In the 'nineties and early nineteen hundreds there wasn't a more widely-known man in England than John Burns. He was as well-known as "W.G." or Joseph Chamberlain. And his fame as a Labour leader spread through the English-speaking world, and his efforts for the wage-earning class in England encouraged workers in the same field in the British Dominions. His name has been forgotten largely because he did not strive to keep it remembered. After he resigned from the British Government at the beginning of the war in 1914, he dropped out of publicity. At the end of that war, he didn't seek re-election, and went into a retirement almost without parallel, when it is contrasted with the place he occupied in the public mind. From year to year one saw no mention of him in the newspapers. He who had been one of the most vigorous and spectacular figures in the Labour movement, a champion whose name was a household word, the first wage earner to be admitted to Cabinet rank, sank so completely out of sight that most people did not realise he was still alive.

Always a Student

John Burns was born in London in 1858, the son of a Scottish engineer. He went to school in Battersea till he was 10, and then took a job in a candle factory. After other jobs, he was apprenticed to an engineer, and worked at his trade on land and on board ship, including six months as a foreman on the West African coast. On his savings he travelled in Europe. John Burns was always a student. He went to night school, read extensively, and practised hard as a public speaker. In adopting Socialism, he was influenced by his general reading, including the works of Robert Owen, John Stuart Mill, Tom Paine, and William Cobbett, but perhaps more by a French fellow-worker who had witnessed the commune in Paris. When quite young, he threw himself into the Labour cause. For this kind of leadership he was splendidly equipped. Physically he was very strong, and his energy was inexhaustible. Cricket and boxing were among his recreations. He neither touched liquor nor smoked. His reading was wide, but not so wide as his knowledge of men. He was interested in everybody and everything, and his mind was stored with facts which he could produce instantly. On the platform he was vigorous, direct, homely and witty, and he became the most popular out-of-door speaker in England. He was one of the most upright men, and became known as "Honest John." With these qualities he plunged into the Socialist and trade union movements. In 1878 he was arrested for addressing an open-air meeting at Clapham, and in



JOHN BURNS—"a glorious, robust, truculent, triumphant, wayward, and lovable personality"

1886, he was mixed up in a march of unemployed men which marched from Trafalgar Square into the West End and broke windows and pillaged shops. Burns was one of the speakers that day, but was acquitted on a charge of inciting the mob to violence. A year later, he was less fortunate, for he spent six weeks in prison for his part in another demonstration in Trafalgar Square. This time the meeting in the square was officially forbidden, and the demonstrators came into conflict with the military as well as with the police.

An Historic Strike

Two years later the London Dock strike made John Burns into a national figure. It was one of the most important strikes in history, because it ended in a victory for an unorganised class of workers, and aroused a lot of sympathy for the strikers among other classes. The condition of the dock workers was deplorable. Fourpence or fivepence an hour was their pay, their employment was casual, and their average earnings not more than seven shillings a week. Led by John Burns and Ben Tillett, the men combined, and went on strike for sixpence an hour and a minimum engagement of four hours. Other workers came out in sympathy, and for some weeks the trade of the port was paralysed. John Burns's control of the strike was masterly. But he might not have carried the strike along to victory without public support. Funds to help to keep the men came from as far as New Zealand and Australia. Among the peace-makers were Cardinal Manning and Bishop Temple of London, afterwards Archbishop of Canterbury. The strikers gained a complete victory, and a Dock Labourers' Union, embracing the whole of Great Britain and Ireland, was immediately formed. The dockers' strike was described by a historian of the time as "the greatest victory ever won for un-

During the past fortnight, the deaths have occurred of two men, John Burns and Ben Tillett, whose names were once household words—particularly in Labour households. On this page and the next, we publish something about them.

skilled labour." It had important effects on the Labour movement at home and in the Dominions.

Into Parliament

By the 'nineties then, John Burns was perhaps the best-known figure in the Labour world in England. When the London County Council was set up at the end of the 'eighties, he was elected as a Progressive by Battersea. He was then working as an engineer in a famous shop that makes printing machines, and wage-earners in his constituency put up £2 a week to help him along. In 1892 he was elected to the House of Commons by Battersea, and he represented this constituency till he left politics in 1918. Burns then called himself an Independent Radical, but eventually moved over to the Liberals. Keir Hardie, elected the same year, was the founder of the Independent Labour Party, and held aloof from the Liberal Party. It was no surprise when John Burns was included in the Liberal Cabinet that Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman formed at the end of 1905, but naturally there was a good deal of comment. He was the first wage earner to become a Cabinet Minister, and his very forcible language on the platform was contrasted not only with the responsibilities of his new office, but with its surroundings. The champion of the masses was now called on to wear a Court uniform. The Radical who had declared that no man was worth more than £500 a year, was now accepting £2,000 a year. When this was put up to him at a meeting, Burns answered it directly. "Sir," he replied, "I am a trade unionist. The trade union wage for Cabinet Ministers is £2,000 a year. Would you have me a black-leg?"

Often in the News

By this time the personality of the man, as well as his work, was well known. Stories were circulated about his habits and his tastes, the breadth of his interests and his extraordinary zest for life. Nothing came amiss to him—art, books, music, games of all kinds. He collected a good library of some thousands of books. His two pet subjects for collecting were London and Sir Thomas More. He loved London, and possibly no man knew the city so well. He delighted to show visitors round London, and used to describe the Thames as "liquid history." Indeed, Burns was called the member for London. Once when a sporting newspaper criticised his knowledge of games, he challenged the staff of the paper to a contest in a long string of games—rowing, cricket, swimming, tennis, skating—anything they liked. The challenge was not taken up. He was in the news as stopping runaway horses, rescuing people from drowning, or carrying casualties to hospital.

In Campbell-Bannerman's and Asquith's Governments, he was president of the Local Government Board, and for a short while in 1914, President of the Board of Trade. With his knowledge of London and his experience as

(Continued on next page)