



LEFT: Mr. Attlee, with President Truman and Marshal Stalin—a photograph taken before the final meeting of the Big Three at Potsdam

THE RESPECTABLE REVOLUTIONARY

by Alan Mulgan

THAT no Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in office has ever visited New Zealand, and that Mr. Clement Attlee is the first ex-Prime Minister to do so, illustrates our geographical remoteness in the Commonwealth, and perhaps reflects relative lack of interest in London. However, the point now is that Mr. Attlee is coming, and New Zealanders will naturally ask what manner of man he is. And all the more so because Clement Attlee is one of the least spectacular of Prime Ministers and party leaders. He was little known when he joined the Churchill coalition, and not substantially better known when he became Prime Minister after the sensational election of 1945. Who is this man who, in the hour of national victory, raced away from the greatest war leader in British history?

Every man is a part of all that he has met, but some show it more clearly to the world than others. Clement Attlee is a concealer. He is one of the most reticent and retiring of men, who, on his own admission, has always been shy. He cannot in any way dramatise himself. In his recent autobiography^{*} there is no colour, no fire, but a remarkable degree of objective reporting. His record does not come easily to the mind. Yet his career has been long, full and varied, and experience must have shaped his policy and strengthened his character.

Born of middle-class parents (his father was a London solicitor), he was educated at Haileybury, one of the great English public schools, and at Oxford. That he took a "Second" in the Oxford "Schools" is significant. A good "Second" is meritorious; a "First" goes to the intellectually élite, and Clement Attlee is not in that class.

He was called to the Bar, and practised for three years. A visit to the club his old school maintained in Stepney, changed the course of his life by giving him interest in the lot of the London poor. Living among them for some years, he was manager of that club, and secretary of Toynbee Hall, the first and best known of the university settlements designed to bring the privileged and under-privileged together. Stepney elected him its youngest mayor, and he represented Limehouse in Parliament from 1922 to 1950. Knowledge of London's mean streets and reading Ruskin, William Morris, and Mill made him a Socialist. He joined the Fabians and the Independent Labour Party in 1908. He was tutor and lecturer in social science at the London School of Economics for ten years, during part of which time the Director of the School was the New Zealander William Pember Reeves. Ambition has been less potent in him than the sense of social service.

In the First War Clement Attlee served on Gallipoli, where he was wounded, and in France; and he rose to be major. Then began his long political service, which, in the thirties, brought him to the leadership of the Labour Party and of the Opposition. Leading that party, which was naturally more turbulent than the others, and was weakened by the formation of the coalition, must have been most difficult, and if we ask how it was that this quiet, shy man, with no outward show of personality, succeeded so well, we raise the question of the qualities needed in democratic leadership.

Brilliance by itself will not suffice; there must be the gift of managing men. In our own short history, there are examples of men serving in Ministries under their intellectual inferiors. As a party leader, the touchy and fastidious

Reeves would not have lasted six months. "The essential and most influential initiative of British statesmanship," says Sir Ernest Barker, "has proceeded, not from genius of the first order, but from the splendid second-rate, which can co-operate with its like." Clement Attlee kept his convictions, but was accommodating in management, a good chairman, patient, self-controlled, understanding—the qualities that Ramsay MacDonald lacked. He had what the British have learned to value above everything—character. His work in the Second War was largely done behind the scenes, but he became Deputy-Prime Minister, and therefore the second figure in the War Cabinet; he filled Mr. Churchill's place when the Prime Minister was absent. To him must go a large share of the credit for the Government's direction to victory.

Long years in office and opposition had prepared Clement Attlee for the 1945 election, when the Labour Party triumphed, with a record number of votes. He had thought out clearly what he would do if he headed a Government. His mildness commended the party to many voters who desired drastic changes, but not an upheaval. A member of the Commons has written that he "presented an attractive, even irresistible, mixture of revolution and respectability."

It is not necessary to dwell here on the nationalisation of certain key industries, and the wide extension of Welfare State activities. Three other points may be made, to show Clement Attlee's vision and strength. He took up the challenge of Korea, and though at one time he had opposed conscription, he introduced it in peace. And he pre-

sided over the gift of independence to India and Burma.

This last, and particularly the end of British rule in India, has a special interest for New Zealand and Australia, for events have drawn these Dominions closer to Asia, and it is of great moment that peoples formerly under British rule should be friendly to us. It was a bold stroke for the British Government to set a date for the British to leave India. The subsequent division of the country was not what Britain wished, but the notification threw the responsibility for the future on to the leaders of the Indian peoples, and convinced India of British sincerity. The result today is that India and Pakistan remain in the Commonwealth (though India's tie is the looser), and Britain and the British people are more popular there than ever before. We in the South Pacific are perhaps better able to estimate the value of this atmosphere of goodwill than the people of Britain. At any rate, we are nearer the scene. Back in opposition, Clement Attlee has met challenge after challenge from his more headstrong followers, with his usual resolute imperturbability. He must be fully conscious that he is now in the seventies. He may be Prime Minister again; or have to pass the leadership of the party to a younger man. Be that as it may, he is visiting New Zealand, and he will be welcomed for what he is and what he has done: an eminent statesman of very long service, "who never sold the truth to serve the hour"; who at the summit helped to guide the fortunes of Britain and the Commonwealth in their gravest peril; who gave Britain her largest measure of State control and benevolence; and who wrote a new chapter in the liberal development of the Commonwealth-Empire.



"THE end of British rule in India has a special interest for Australia and New Zealand."—Here the colours of the 1st Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry, are seen being displayed as the last British troops left Bombay

^{*}As It Happened, by C. R. Attlee, P.C., O.M., C.H.; William Heinemann Ltd., English price 16/.