THE "INTELLECTUAL BACKBONE TO BRITISH SOCIALISM"[1]

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Royden J. Harrison. *The Life and Times of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, 1858–1905: the Formative Years*. London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. Pp. xii, 397. us$85.00.

In his significant and long-awaited first volume of the biography of the Webbs, Royden Harrison concludes that their marital association was "the most fruitful partnership in the history of the British intellect" (p. 348). This assessment is certainly persuasive by the standards of achievement Harrison has demonstrated as their legacies. His book is written with concise analysis, revelatory insights into their personalities, a finely tuned sense of irony and humour, as well as a lapidary prose style. It places in the shade all other scholarship on the Webbs up to 1905, the cutoff year for this first volume. Unfortunately, Professor Harrison died in 2002 before he could complete the second volume. Hence, the Passfield Trustees, who commissioned this biography, have had to find another historian to complete the work.

A distinguished scholar of Victorian and twentieth-century Britain, Harrison has illuminated the Webbs' accomplishments, and failures, by setting their lives within the context of British intellectual and political history generally. With his gifts as a political theorist as well as his prowess as a historian, we are given careful analyses of the persistent influence of Positivism in Britain, the impact, however brief, of Herbert Spencer and William Morris on British thought, the uneasy, ambivalent reception of Marxism in British intellectual life, and the roots and development of Fabian Socialism within the British Left with compelling reasons for its ultimate ascendancy over other forms of socialism in the United Kingdom. Along the way, readers are presented with fresh insights into a number of oft-studied dominant people in this time of the emergence and

[1] The phrase is from Russell's portrait of the Webbs (*PfM*, p. 102).

development of Sidney Webb and Beatrice Potter as individuals and as a partnership. Notable among those upon whom Harrison casts fresh light are Joseph Chamberlain, George Bernard Shaw, Richard Haldane and, not least, Bertrand Russell. For his part, Russell gave Harrison "the most helpful of all interviews" (p. x) of the many who provided their personal recollections of the Webbs. Professor Harrison deposited the typescript of this interview in the Russell Archives at McMaster in 1983 when he visited the Russell Editorial Project as an historical advisor.[2] While Harrison probes Sidney without the direct assistance of anyone else, so that A. J. P. Taylor's verdict, that he is "a door that can never be unlocked" (p. 80), is shown to be manifestly incorrect, the author uses a critical insight from Russell to "unlock" the conflicted nature of Beatrice.

Harrison's "life and times" is particularly timely, for Fabianism, and the role and values of the Webbs especially, have come under severe attack over the past 30 years from historians of the "New Liberalism", notably Peter Clarke and Michael Freeden in their path-breaking studies, respectively, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (1978) and *The New Liberalism* (1978). For Clarke and Freeden and those of their persuasion and following, J. A. Hobson and Leonard Hobhouse, especially, were the important thinkers and advisors of the Liberal politicians who established the social reforms between 1906 and 1914. They presented their ideas through books, through articles in H. W. Massingham's *The Nation*, and through occasional meetings with politicians, notably David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. Moreover, the votaries of the New Liberalism transformed Gladstonian Liberalism by advocating collectivist reforms which increased personal liberty and were informed by democratic ideals. By contrast, Clarke and Freeden saw the Webbs' Fabian claim that the "expert" was essential to guide the masses and their emphasis on permeating existing, often Conservative, elites, as undemocratic, sometimes authoritarian. Harrison concludes that a "certain distrust of the masses" was present, as with the earlier Utilitarians and even the Positivists (p. 66). But as we shall see, the Webbs had a more complex and libertarian concept of democracy than these critics have given them credit for. The "litmus test" that Liberals of the time and their historians afterwards created for determining "genuine" democratic/reformist credentials was how public figures responded to the Boer War. The Fabians, by their support of the British action, stood condemned. Further to the Left, the leading British Marxist historian, Eric Hobsbawm, belittles the Fabian accomplishments, comparing them unfavourably to those reforms enacted under the Liberal administrations of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, 1906–08, and H. H. Asquith, 1908–14.[3]

[2] Royden Harrison, "Bertrand Russell and the Webbs: an Interview", *Russell*, n.s. 5 (1985): 44–9.

[3] Eric Hobsbawm, "The Fabians Reconsidered", in Hobsbawm, ed., *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1967), p. 299.

And the distinguished biographer of John Maynard Keynes, Sir Robert Skidelsky, also gave the Fabians short shrift. He claims that the post-1945 "consensus" on the Welfare State and full-employment policy was based exclusively on ideas from Oxford and Cambridge, for "the Fabian contribution to social, political and economic policy seems meagre".[4] Presumably, Skidelsky is concerned to minimize the socialist ideas of the Webbs, G. B. Shaw and others that emanated primarily from the London world and not that of the ancient universities. His antithesis is valid on one level, for the Webbs, like Bertrand Russell, came to be intensely critical of what they saw as the "classical, literary and aristocratic cultural traditions of Oxford and Cambridge" (p. 12). While Russell, when he went down from Cambridge in 1894, found his university massively behind in the mathematical and scientific thinking discussed among some German, Austrian and Italian scholars, Sidney Webb in particular stood as the exemplar of a "new race" of professionals "imbued with the traditions of scientific, provincial, bourgeois culture" (*ibid.*).

Harrison is not concerned with tracing uncertain or implied connections between the New Liberals and the Liberal Party's Edwardian social reforms or with critiquing Clarke and Freeden. Moreover, while he reflects on the enduring accomplishments of the Webbs, Harrison's substantive analysis stops at 1905 with only hints of later achievements, such as Sidney's formulation, with Arthur Henderson, of Clause Four of the Labour Party Constitution. He alludes, notably, to the Webbs' willingness to excuse some of the terrible excesses of Stalin's Russia in the 1930s. And Harrison was never one to deny that Keynes's ideas had a pivotal place in the minds of those policy-makers who fashioned the post-1945 "consensus". What is clear from this book is that comparisons with the Fabians, the Webbs in particular, such as New Liberal historians and the biographer of Keynes make, are beside the point; they posit a difference, or a partial analogy, that is largely irrelevant. The Webbs and their other Fabian allies accomplished quite enough in the way of social reform, education, and public administration to warrant Harrison's verdict that they "were not merely practitioners within the English reformist tradition; they must be numbered among the makers of it" (p. 349). Royden Harrison, it will be recalled, has arrived at this conclusion both as an historian and lifelong member of the British Left, as well as a long-time colleague of Eric Hobsbawm, however much he may have come to disagree with many of Hobsbawm's Marxist conclusions. Harrison has advanced ideas and conclusions in this book that are sufficiently bold, far-reaching and rigorously thought out as to initiate fresh debates and

[4] Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes: a Biography*, Vol. 1: *Hopes Betrayed, 1883–1920* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 29.

reappraisals of the Fabians and of the Webbs especially.

Harrison's method has been to divide his book into five parts. The first part, consisting of two chapters, initially traces the "shaping" of Sidney Webb as a "Professional Man, 1859–85" and, secondly, explains his development as "the Prevailing Fabian, 1885–90" under the general rubric of "The Man With No Inside, 1859–90". Part Two is devoted to Beatrice Potter, with the general theme "The Divided Self", where she is depicted in her initial chapter through deploying the concept of "The Making of a Gilded Spinster, 1858–85", an analytical expression well suited to discuss a variety of philanthropically involved late Victorian women, while the second chapter traces her evolution from social investigator to socialist (1885–90). Part Three develops "The Early Years of the Partnership, 1890–1902" and deals at length with its complicated formation. Part Four, the chapters most concerned with the Webbs' insights and achievements, their limitations and accomplishments, commences with a discussion of "Democracy and the Labour Movement, 1892–8". The second chapter of Part Four assesses what Harrison calls their "Heroic Opportunism, 1893–1905" regarding their conception of a "Third Culture" and their dominant role in "Education in London" in which they played the critical role in creating the London School of Economics (LSE) and where Sidney became a dynamic force on the London County Council (LCC). The third chapter closes on a critical note concerning their decision to descend to "Squalid Opportunism: Fabianism and Empire, 1893–1903" where support for the Boer War and their policy of attempting to bring about their socialist aims by "permeating" the Conservative and Liberal Imperialist elites brought them both into disrepute and suspicion within the ranks of organized Labour. Part Five, the Epilogue, labelled "An Ideal Marriage?" explores, among other issues, what can be known, or at least sensibly inferred, about the degree of sexual intimacy in their conjugal state.

Sidney Webb was born in 1859, the same year that John Stuart Mill published his famous *Essay on Liberty* and Charles Darwin his *Origin of Species*. Webb was to acknowledge all his life his intellectual debts to both men, for all that he was to become an astringent critic of what he came to argue was Mill's limited concept of liberty. Sidney was born in lower-middle-class London, the son of a freelance accountant whose primary income came from hairdressing and a resourceful and intelligent mother. As a schoolboy he exhibited his prodigious capacity for learning, mastering at an early age both French and German. (Yet later neither he, nor Beatrice, became what could be described as highly cultured, for they both failed to develop any significant sense of art or music, much less poetry.) Following the example of J. S. Mill, Sidney entered the Civil Service where he eventually advanced to the Colonial Office. While there, he embarked at the City of London College and the Birkbeck Literary and Scien-

tific Institution upon a voracious reading programme, earning innumerable educational prizes in a wide variety of disciplines. As a first division clerk in the Colonial Office by 1881, he started at a salary of £250 a year, which he supplemented by £450 from scholarships while also studying for the Bar. He earned in addition the Whewell scholarship in international law awarded by Trinity College, Cambridge, but was unable to take it up because he could not fulfil the condition, which Trinity could have waived, that he reside in College.

Thus, as an exemplar of the Victorian doctrine of work, Sidney made his way intellectually through London institutions and evening classes and "other establishments which had been created for 'practical' purposes". If omission from the ancient universities meant that he was less assured in his "manners and tastes" than that small minority of men who went to Oxford and Cambridge, he was not daunted. At seventeen he presented his first lecture at Birkbeck College where he spoke on "The Existence of Evil" and soon after on "The Service of God", in which, as Harrison remarks, "he swiftly dispatched the Almighty" (p. 13).

Despite these achievements, Sidney, like many of the ablest young professional men of the Great Depression who explored Positivism and Socialism, was afflicted, until at least 1891, by pessimism. Some cause of this preoccupation Harrison puts down to the impact of Schopenauer, whose writings had appeared in an English translation early in the 1880s. Yet the German's warnings against utopian dreams did not produce misanthropy or despair. Quite the contrary. Along with the Positivists' message to live for others, to work for the good of humanity, Sidney and men and women like him were stimulated to embrace their social duties. They were also were directly distressed by the paradox of increasing prosperity for many accompanied by the crisis of late Victorian capitalism in Britain as manifested in the high unemployment, desperate urban poverty in British cities, and workers' unrest, most dramatically by the London Dock Strike of 1889. For Sidney, and Beatrice independently, since they did not meet until 1890, the 1880s were marked as the decade defined by the idea of the "the rediscovery of poverty".

It was as these conditions were developing that Sidney first met George Bernard Shaw at a meeting in 1879 at the Zetetical Society, a gathering place of "the radically progressive" in London, including Helen Taylor, Mill's stepdaughter, and Richard Congreve who had inaugurated organized Positivism in Britain in the year of Sidney's birth. Then in 1882 Sidney began what were to become close friendships with Sidney Olivier and Graham Wallas, both of whom were to aid Webb in making up for limitations in his liberal education. Together with Shaw, they were to form a powerful intellectual quartet seeking to improve society, first tackling the challenge posed by the land reformer Henry George and soon after by confronting the works of Karl Marx, whose

ideas they debated in prolonged discussions from 1883 through 1886. Sidney led the debates, for he translated the German, partly in an attempt to parry Shaw who had fallen "under the spell of Marx" (p. 28).

Sidney had a respectful attitude towards Marx as a theorist of great learning and powerful intelligence whose "summary of exploitation was a 'marvel of forcible exposition'" (p. 30). But Webb could not accept Marx's labour theory of value that Sidney saw primarily as "a mere prop to an ethical conclusion". Marx, he claimed, gave no economic function to the middle classes and especially to the professional wing, part of which worked by hand and brain in the processes of distribution, another managed the functions of modern business, yet another part performed the function of saving and, finally, the last group operated as the professional people who created laws and letters, engineering and education and administration (p. 33 and *passim*). Influenced increasingly by the English economists David Ricardo, with his concept of landlord and entrepreneurial rents, and Alfred Marshall and Stanley Jevons with their marginal utility analysis, Webb attempted a new socialist explanation of exploitation. He argued for the expropriation of the rents of the landlords and the entrepreneurs for the workers, while developing the idea of a rent of ability, from which professional men would become rent receivers because they were useful, as managers, as experts, and were not idlers. Webb demonstrated by 1887 that almost all the national income went to those who received the "surplus value", the landlords with their rents and the producers with their profits and interest, and that the subsequent inequality and miserable poverty were the results. For Webb, socialist conclusions could be derived from the premisses of traditional classical economics, superseding the old Radicalism, Utopian Socialism and building upon but surpassing Utilitarianism.

By 1889, with the publication of *Fabian Essays*, Fabian economic ideas were in place. Harrison has tracked these developments with exceptional care and insight, and no review can set forth fully his extended analysis of the victory of Fabianism, with all its theoretical and practical difficulties, over Marxism, Ethical Socialism, and all other forms of socialist doctrines then fiercely debated in Britain. Fabianism was an economic doctrine that sought a "convergence of radicalism and socialism"; that concentrated on consumption rather than distribution and, in so doing, shifted attention away from "dynamic" towards "static relationships"; that promoted socialism by gradual, parliamentary not revolutionary means; that saw collectivism arising through incremental institutional reforms brought about by persuasion, the Radical inheritance, and not by revolution. Perhaps Fabian characteristics were influenced, and Marxist importance diminished, by the absence of a mass workers' party and a tradition that went back to the Philosophical Radicals, was extended by the Positivists and had some recourse to classical British political economy, with its towering giant,

Ricardo. Among Fabian limitations was a complete inability to account for capitalist crises of over-production. For Webb and his comrades, socialism was not the outcome of a class struggle but, instead, the development of a consensus as to the ongoing penetration of existing administrative institutions and the creation of new ones. Indeed, Harrison concludes that their main achievement was not in economic theory *per se*, for they did not replace one socialist economic theory by another, but in transforming institutional arrangements (p. 68 and *passim*).

As for Webb's contributions to these critical intellectual developments, Harrison's conclusion needs to be quoted, for in all the Society's characteristics

> Webb clearly emerges as the prevailing Fabian.… No other Fabian could claim … to be so immersed in the relevant tradition—to have had Bentham for his first teacher, J. S. Mill for his model, and the [Comtean] moralisation of the capitalist as his earliest social ideal. Shaw introduced Sidney to Marx, but it was Sidney, the most professional of Fabian economists, who led the way in wrestling with the German and in supplanting him. (P. 69)

By 1890 Sidney was also known as a "gifted … lecturer and writer" and a "potentially formidable political organiser" and as a man "respected and sought after" by members of the Labour Movement (pp. 69 and 72). In later years Sidney was to become viewed and to portray himself as self-assured and an extrovert. In fact, Harrison reveals that Webb was an introvert "whose pugnacious self-assurance in public life concealed his profound sense of personal inadequacy" (p. 79). He felt small and ugly, insignificant and unlovable. For all his self-pity at this time, he was, like Darwin, an "anaesthetized" man, caused by a "too acute sensibility". The vacant place in his life was evident in his letters to women friends in which he expressed his longing for a marital partnership, an association that would permit him to develop his desire to work for humanity in a happy, rather than a forced, rapport with others.

Harrison proceeds to develop the career and personality of Beatrice Potter once he has established the nature and intellectual capacities of Sidney Webb. Despite Sidney's assertion, in their prolonged and often strained courtship, that "whatever might distance them, they were not separated by the barriers of class", he could scarcely have been more wildly incorrect. Beatrice was the eighth of nine daughters of the railway magnate and lumber merchant Richard Potter. The four family residences, mainly the ones in Gloucestershire and London, were a far cry from Sidney's family's hairdressing and millinery shop in Peckham. Beatrice grew up primarily in their Gloucestershire house surrounded by governesses, butlers, upper-floor servants and lower-floor servants and day and night nurseries. All her sisters save one married before she did and all but one married into their social class, with distinguished husbands in shipping,

industry, the law and the House of Commons. One brother-in-law was the able parliamentarian Leonard Courtney and another came to be the father of the famous politician, Sir Stafford Cripps. Beatrice was educated at home with no thought, apparently, of her being sent to university. Instead she often became the companion of her father on his trips. She also became the friend and pupil of Herbert Spencer, her father's old friend from University College, London. Both men were successful representatives of the ascending, reforming, non-conformist middle classes from the Midlands and the North.

Spencer was at the height of his intellectual eminence during the 1860s and 1870s when Beatrice was a girl. He was the "prophet of Evolution and Progress, admired by Darwin" and the doyen of middle-class Radicalism, insisting, as had Bentham, that all knowledge must be useful and systematic. Although he was one of the last significant British minds to argue for full-blown *laissez-faire*, his attacks on privilege, on organized religion and his conception of society as an organism whose functional institutions could be adapted, converted many young people to socialism. Beatrice came to socialism another way, but she did turn to Spencer for advice on the spiritual doubts that afflicted her as a young woman and which were to afflict her all her life. But Spencer, like Christianity, was of little assistance, in helping Beatrice to find "the Absolute, to know the Unknowable", and so she could never reconcile "the conflicting claims of intelligence and sensibility" and all her life was forced to live with these "conflicting imperatives" (pp. 101–2). Sidney, by contrast, had none of this spiritual unease, for all of his self-doubts during the 1880s, and his sympathy for Beatrice's plight played a significant part in the sustenance of their marriage.

Guided intellectually by Spencer in social matters and acutely aware of poverty, Beatrice in her twenties developed into a member of what Harrison describes as the "rise of the Glorified Spinster", a "distinctive feature of English society in the 1880s" (p. 89). Fearing that they were going to be classified as among the "superfluous" women, many also rebelled in the sense of striking out as social investigators, librarians and journalists who gave commands to working-class females. They began to professionalize caring for the poor. Many, however, had what Harrison describes as "a precarious hold" on their "own identity" (p. 90). They were characterized by inadequate educational preparation, an unwillingness entirely to renounce marriage and instability of employment, a factor that did not pertain to Beatrice. After all, an essential aspect of Beatrice's lifelong snobbery was her awareness that she came from the class that gave orders but did not receive them. Yet Beatrice, casting about for greater meaning in life, became close friends with a number of these earnest women, joining some of them in the Charity Organisation Society (COS) where they tried to turn philanthropy into a profession.

It was at this time of significant personal insecurity, in 1883 specifically, that

Beatrice met Joseph Chamberlain, then the Liberal Party Radical who was traversing the country speaking in incendiary language about the necessity for far-reaching reforms and employing the threat of class war with such statements as "what ransom will property pay for the security it enjoys?" (quoted on p. 119). Chamberlain's ambitions were not on a small scale, for he was anxious to push the Whigs out of the Liberal Party and to assume the leadership from the elderly Gladstone, if only he would retire. Chamberlain at this time was a widower, having seen his first two wives die in childbirth. He was most intrigued by this intelligent, beautiful woman who was 25 when they met. At the peak of his energy and immense will-power, he overwhelmed Beatrice, for as they continued to meet, she felt herself unable to think about anything other than this Birmingham Radical. By 1884 Chamberlain was exploring the possibility of marriage to a by now feverishly infatuated Beatrice. Alas, his clear demand that he be her master, that he would brook no "division of opinion" in his household, doomed the relationship, for Beatrice refused to become his subordinate. Yet for some years after, until he married again in 1888, Chamberlain tried to revive their acquaintance.

The outline of this story of the ill-fated relationship between Beatrice and Chamberlain is well known, and Beatrice wrote about her distress over the failure both in her *Diary* and in *My Apprenticeship* (1926). However, no historian until Harrison has uncovered the depths of Beatrice's distress, the passion that she felt for Chamberlain and the lengthy duration of her emotional need for him.[5] Although after the summer of 1887 they had no more emotional encounters, she could reflect in 1889, that "God knows celibacy is as painful to a woman (even from the physical standpoint) as it is to a man" (p. 142).

While Beatrice lived with her unhappy memories of the failure of her association with Chamberlain, she involved herself increasingly as a social investigator with the ideology of a COS worker, having little but personal kindness and harsh government measures to offer to the unemployed. By 1887, she was beginning to grasp that organization of the labour market might be more critical than the organization of charity. Still the cause of the trouble among unemployed dock workers in London's East End, she averred, lay primarily in "the mental and physical shortcomings of the human material" (p. 145). However, as she worked more with Canon Barnett in Whitechapel and Charles Booth on "sweated trades" in the East End, the limitations of the COS mentality and approach to poverty and unemployment became more obvious. Yet by the end of the 1880s she never described herself as a socialist, for she did not see public

[5] The best account still from Chamberlain's point of view is Peter Fraser, "Chamberlain and Beatrice Webb", in *Joseph Chamberlain: Radicalism and Empire* (London: Cassell, 1966), pp. 112–29.

ownership as superior to private. This state of mind was obvious in her evidence presented before the Select Committee of the House of Lords that was inquiring into the sweating system. There she refused to yield to sentimentality by recommending legislation as a remedy for the worst evils of the "system".

By 1890 Beatrice appeared to have developed into a confirmed, virginal spinster, for all that she had romantic approaches from a number of men, notably the eccentric anarchist Auberon Herbert and the economist Professor Edgeworth, and was to receive in the midst of Sidney's courting of her a proposal from Richard Haldane, the Liberal Imperialist politician and follower of Hegel. The advances of all three men were turned aside with extreme haste. (In Haldane's case, his devotion to the pleasures of the dinner-table would have been deeply repugnant to Beatrice, for political luncheons hosted by the Webbs were notorious for their austere limitations.)

By early 1890, however, she began to revise her views of individualism, for the ideas and work of such men as Tom Mann, John Burns and Ben Tillett during the London dock strike demonstrated for her the dynamism of the new world of labour. She started to hear, with deepening sympathy, the voices of "the wrecks, the waifs and the strays of civilisation echo off the walls of the luxurious homes of her relatives" (p. 159). In January 1890 Beatrice met Sidney, after which she declared herself a socialist. He convinced her that thoroughgoing control both of the landlord and the capitalist could be established. It was not just a matter of ending capitalist competition, which had concerned her as she worked in the East End. This conjunction of the "New Unionism" and the arguments of Sidney convinced her of the values and possibilities of transforming the economy on humane, equitable grounds.

With the advent of her relationship with Sidney, Harrison digresses briefly to suggest the key to understanding Beatrice's complex nature. He quotes Russell, from the interview he had in 1967, as saying: "If you set down a list of Beatrice's leading characteristics you would say—'What a dreadful woman!' But in fact she was very nice. I had a great liking and respect for her. I was always delighted by a chance of meeting her" (p. 160). However he "declined to enlarge upon this paradox" or explain it. Others who were told of this paradox were convinced that Russell had made an insightful comment, but they did not understand, Harrison states, what he meant.

For Harrison, this "paradox" may be best explained by the concept, which he takes from the psychiatrist R. D. Laing, of the "divided self". That is, Beatrice had a nasty, snobbish, sometimes cruel "false self" which "concealed a second self which was "nicer and more real" than the other. This psychic split was not caused by the conflict between caring for her widowed father and her aspiration for an independent life. Nor was it the result of her ambivalence over the material conclusions of science and her religious and moral anxieties. Bea-

trice spoke of her "hardness", her occasional "mercilessness and her "philistinism", her inner debate as to how working-class democracy could be reconciled with professional experts and managers, a conjunction such as the Fabians envisioned. She was, after all, an acutely self-aware woman. Ultimately, she explained the conflict as between "the ego that affirms and the ego that denies". Harrison, however, sees her "aggravating, half-emancipated character" as coming from a deeper source. These less attractive character traits could superficially result merely from her class position. But he thinks Russell saw Beatrice's divided self as inhabiting worlds "below the cerebral one". Russell, Harrison reflects, must have been alluding, in some fashion, to Beatrice's 'divided self' ". "Otherwise, he [Russell] was talking nonsense and just the sort of nonsense that he—beyond any other Englishman—was least likely to talk" (p. 162). The irony of positing Russell, "the greatest modern British philosopher, the heroic defender of common sense, [finding] a reality beyond appearance" does not elude Harrison (p. 169). Having arrived at this hypothesis, Harrison then explains Beatrice's conflict as follows: "The need to satisfy her strong sexual desires and to make a marriage as socially distinguished as her elder sisters was in conflict with her pursuit of intellectual independence and intellectual distinction. Which was it to be?" (pp. 164–5).

Harrison reminds readers, however, that whatever Beatrice's faults they seldom "enjoyed security of tenure", as she relentlessly subjected herself to intense self-scrutiny. Yet, she remained divided. If two is company, Harrison remarks, quoting the old "saw", then three is a crowd. Hence, her marriage had to be a partnership where her husband had to have "no internal life", and could preside over their conjugal state as a "intelligent, helpful and disinterested chairman". For when Beatrice agreed to marry Sidney, all his earlier self-doubts and self-consciousness disappeared. On her part she admired his learning and devotion to work. Still, marriage to Sidney did not come easily to Beatrice. Sidney lacked the arresting appearance and sexual magnetism of Chamberlain. Most of her family were disquieted by the courtship, finding Sidney below her class, relatively untutored in table manners and very ambitious. When Beatrice also complained that she still felt the loss of Chamberlain, Sidney reminded her of Shaw's saying that "grief of two-years standing is nothing but a bad habit" (quoted on p. 190). Eventually, they were drawn together by Sidney's absolute integrity and their joint realization that her belief in the voluntary associations of cooperation and trade unionism needed to be complemented by Sidney's advocacy of socialist policies for local and central government. Moreover, both agreed, for many years, that socialism did not require a working-class party, a Labour Party. Beatrice, especially, had little trust in the political abilities of the working class. Hence, both were to distance themselves, lamentably in Harrison's opinion, from the Independent Labour Party (ILP), formed in 1893, large-

ly by the efforts of Keir Hardie, and from the Labour Representative Committee in 1900 (LRC), fashioned partly through the work of Ramsay MacDonald. (Only in 1912, upon their return from the Orient, did they finally realize the maturity of the ILP and become members. They carried this commitment further by establishing *The New Statesman* in 1913. But their antipathy to MacDonald was such that they would not, as yet, join the Labour Party.)

The Webbs' aversion to working with organized labour parties led to their policy of "permeation" as their chosen path of trying to bring about political change. Intense debates resulted within the Fabian Society, for influential members were impatient with the "politics of influence" that permeation implied. Fabians such as Hubert Bland and other younger members saw in the Webb policy endless "compromises and equivocations" and ultimate futility. They were correct, for the Webbs' attempt to bring about social policy changes first by trying to infiltrate the Liberal Party, and then, after 1893, to persuade Conservatives such as Arthur Balfour at their political luncheons, failed miserably. For Harrison, the debate within Fabianism between permeation and independence, and within the British labour movement as a whole, reflected "a dispute about the nature of socialism itself" (p. 208). Many British socialists, notably William Morris, did not believe that socialism could be limited to an indefinite extension of "state ownership, regulation and control" (p. 208). Morris wanted a new form of men and women, transformed aesthetically and morally, and did not believe this could be accomplished by the mere reduction of the existing inequities of wealth and classes (p. 209). To the Webbs, the failure to embrace the opportunity to enlarge the realm of social control and material improvement in order to "retain the purity of … [a] socialist vision of a new human society" was an act "of grotesque inhumanity and folly" (p. 209). The Webbs' socialism, Sidney stated, was "the truest opportunism" (*ibid.*). So the debate continued and continues.

By marrying Beatrice, Sidney was to gain an entrée to upper-class social circles in which he could attempt through persuasion to convince influential people of the importance of his ideas. Moreover, he was "boundlessly" happy in the marriage, even if Beatrice was on occasion disturbed by doubt. Yet her affection for Sidney must not be underestimated. On the occasion of his candidacy for the LCC in January 1892 at Deptford, just before they were married in July of that year, Beatrice wrote to him promising "to spend all Sunday consoling him with kisses if he lost" (p. 212). Sidney had left the Colonial Office determined to devote himself to journalism and politics, and his LCC candidacy was his initial foray into major electoral politics. Marriage was to give him a financial security he had never known.

In the event, Sidney won the election, thereby beginning many years of productive leadership on the left wing of the "Progressive Party" of the LCC as

a leader on committees advocating and enacting reforms in housing, sanitation and the securing of a proper water supply for many Londoners. Through his influence, Webb became known as the country's most successful practitioner of "municipal socialism". Sidney's "natural habitat", Harrison emphasizes, lay in working through committees. He was instrumental also in establishing scholarships for many poor children through the Technical Education Board of the LCC, however much some working-class leaders—notably John Burns and Keir Hardie—grumbled that the petit bourgeoisie was the dominant beneficiary and that working-class children were being imbued with middle-class standards and competitiveness, while feminists complained that only a third of the scholarships were for girls and that many of their study courses confirmed them in their position as "little housewives" (p. 280). Sidney dealt with these charges as best he could, but there was truth in accusations that his successes merely accommodated the existing order. Yet, he also had to contend with labour men such as Will Crooks who decried the "worthless character of the university man".

The Webbs achieved their most significant educational success thorough their efforts in establishing in 1895 the London School of Economics (LSE). In 1894 an eccentric gentleman, sympathetic to the Fabians, died, leaving some £10,000 for the propagation of Fabian ideals. Beatrice immediately urged that the money be employed to establish a school in London on the lines of the Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques in Paris. This suited Sidney and some other leading Fabians very well, for they aspired to an institution of higher learning not modelled on Oxford and Cambridge but having as its ideal aspects of what Sidney had admired in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). It would not be thought of as a workers' educational institution but as a research and teaching place, not to compete with the ancient universities, but primarily for Londoners. Undergraduate courses would include economics, foreign languages, medicine and the experimental sciences. As well, there would a graduate programme that would draw students from all over the world. Despite all the disputes within the Fabians, the financial needs and other issues, the Webbsian arguments won out. For all that it was no easy triumph. That Russell approved of their approach was evident in his donation of his Trinity College Prize Fellowship honorarium of £210 for six years to provide for five research studentships at the LSE and his decision to present his lectures on German Social Democracy, published as his first book (1896), to members of the new academic institution (*Papers* 1: 307). Concluding his assessment of Sidney's work on education, including his efforts on behalf of the Education Act of 1902, Harrison judges that "the history of English education can show no comparable achievement by one man, neither before nor since … " (p. 304).

Just before they were married Sidney and Beatrice commenced work on

what became in 1894 the *History of Trade Unionism*. Its companion was *Industrial Democracy* published in 1897. Together these works "laid the foundations of labour history and opened the way to the systematic study of labour institutions and of industrial relations" (p. 217). For Harrison, they "still stand as the greatest achievements in the fields of study that they inaugurated" (p. 218). In addition, Harrison maintains, their accomplishments as historians has largely hidden their significance as political theorists, especially about the nature of democracy. Their influence was by no means confined merely to Britain, as both Eduard Bernstein and Lenin used their work on socialism and the labour movement to introduce aspects of both topics to the German and Russian publics respectively. Even so the Webbs fell short of their ultimate aspirations, for they failed in their attempt to write for their own age a work as "influential and definitive as Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*".

What the Webbs did do was to argue effectively that on their own the working classes were most unlikely to advance beyond sectional trade union consciousness to socialist class-consciousness spontaneously and without the aid of an intellectual elite. They appreciated, much more than Walter Bagehot, the importance of a permanent civil service. Anticipating Roberto Michels, they delineated many of the oligarchical tendencies in the sociology of working-class leadership, but without his pessimistic conclusion. The Webbs realized that many administrative and psychological influences led trade-union officials to acquire powers that their members never intended to confer upon them.

A full-time leadership position, moreover, often changed the social outlook and status of the leaders, leading to differences between those leaders and the rank and file (pp. 217–20). As for their ideas on democracy, they argued that the ideal of Lincoln—a government of the people, by the people and for the people—was certain to break down. This was so because the salaried official would always "run rings around inexperienced lay executives and [would] use referenda to legitimise what were, in reality, his personal decisions" (pp. 236–8). The way out of this "iron law of oligarchy" was representative assemblies both of rank-and-file members and salaried officers of the districts. They had seen this form of democracy operate well both in the federal parliament of the cotton-spinners and the coal-miners.

Harrison describes the way in which the Webbs collaborated. "Broadly speaking, Beatrice began their books and Sidney finished them. Beatrice was unusually strong as an interviewer, easily gaining the confidence of her interviewees. But she found serious writing difficult and wearying and was daunted by Sidney's apparently endless capacity for work. In other terms, she was the mistress of the 'spoken word' and he was the master of the 'written one'." While his knowledge seemed encyclopedic and his memory extraordinarily retentive, he also possessed a creative spark. It was Beatrice who then reflected

on their compositions, demonstrating a keen eye for gaps and essential detail.

The book ends on a somewhat pessimistic note. Harrison believes that the Webbs' policy of permeation meant that they missed their opportunities to work fully with the labour movement before 1914. Moreover, in 1893, depressed by the dismal progress of the last Gladstone Liberal Government, Sidney joined with Shaw in unleashing a manifesto, *To Your Tents, O Israel*, disavowing co-operation with the Liberal Party but creating no agency for the advance of socialism. Too often the Webbs' attempts at persuasion came to be viewed, even by old friends such as Graham Wallas, as manipulative, and, in Sidney's case, as "wirepulling". Even more harmful to their causes was their support after 1896 for British late-Victorian imperialism, whether advanced by the Liberal Imperialists led by Lord Rosebery or the Unionists whose imperial spokesman was the erstwhile Radical Joseph Chamberlain. Harrison argues that they drifted into imperialism, for their somewhat detached attitude towards the Boer War meant that their home at Grosvenor Road became "a haven open to the warmongering and the pacifist brother-in-law alike" (p. 334). Like Shaw, however, the Webbs inclined more to support the British effort, for they believed that progress "consisted in the submission of the more backward to the more advanced civilisation" (p. 322). Yet Harrison refuses to class the Webbs as racists. They distinguished between "adult" and "non-adult races" in a way that was "condescending, patronising and opportunist", but not a concession to the prejudices of Gobineau or to those that were to be identified with Hitler (p. 340). (Ironically, it was Beatrice's brother-in-law, Leonard Courtney, who became the moral force behind the British pro-Boer movement.) Then in 1902, the Webbs proceeded further along their imperial path by establishing the dining club called the Coefficients which was "to discuss Imperial Efficiency at home and abroad" (p. 327). The Coefficients achieved nothing of any value. But the discussions in the summer of 1903 caused Russell, whom the Webbs had recruited as "a coming man", to resign in anger, thereby bringing about a distinct cooling in their association that was not healed for many years. Russell's appearance as a women's suffrage candidate in 1907 worsened their relationship, for Beatrice opposed that reform.

In summary, the Webbs, unfortunately, from the 1890s to 1905, cultivated those who were swept aside by a loose coalition of Radical Liberals, Nonconformists and trade unionists in the famous Liberal general election of 1906. Nevertheless, the Webbs, Royden Harrison demonstrates decisively, had achieved much by 1905. From 1906 to their deaths in the 1940s they were to set about abolishing the Poor Law and diminishing destitution and immersing themselves in creating a new post-World War I constitution for the Labour Party. We can only hope that Volume II of this distinguished biography will be on the same magisterial level as Dr. Harrison's contribution.