

# “THE AEROPLANE SHOULD BE BANNED”

By CYRIL CLEMENS

SOME years before the First World War, in 1911 to be exact, some noted English authors, fearing that the new fangled machine called the aeroplane would add a new horror to modern warfare if it went on being further developed, actually tried to have it banned. Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, had been attracting considerable attention to the aeroplane by using it to go to and fro from his office in London to his country home, narrowly escaping death on several occasions. Although the scheme was wholly impractical and chimerical, it called forth some stimulating and amusing (when viewed in the light of subsequent events) letters which can be read with interest and doubtless some profit even today.

It all started by John Galsworthy writing letters to *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian* strongly urging that the manufacture and use of aeroplanes be forthwith stopped and forbidden under heavy penalty. He stated that if their development continued, they would surely be used by both sides in the first war that broke out, and that the conflict would thus become unbelievably cruel and barbarous. Galsworthy soon received a letter from the Secretary of the International Arbitration League asking if he thought a memorial would do any good. The novelist replied immediately that he felt a memorial signed by important people — other than politicians — and given wide circulation in the press of all countries, would help a great deal.

The novelist Thomas Hardy wrote from Max Gate under date of June 26th, 1911.

Dear Mr. Galsworthy:

I have been away in the north for eight days, no letters being forwarded; and yours came just after I started.

I write a hasty line to say that I will consider the draft protest you send about flying and war. Of course, I quite agree that these machines, if they are ever effectively constructed (which

they are not at present), will make war worse than ever. But does not the appeal tacitly admit that war in other ways will have to go on? Now, I am one of the extremists about this, and think it is an insanity that people in the twentieth century should suppose force to be a moral argument.

Perhaps the addition after the first sentence of some words about "adding a new hideousness to the present hideousness of war" might remove the objection.

However, of late years I have almost despaired of civilization making any big step forward. Possibly in the year 4000 we shall be nearly as barbarous as we are now in belligerency, marriage, treatment of animals, etc. etc.

Sincerely yours

THOMAS HARDY

Gilbert K. Chesterton wrote under date of July 1st, 1911, from his home "Top Meadow", Beaconsfield, not far from London:

Dear Mr. Galsworthy:

In clearing up old papers, it distresses me very much to find that (as far as I can make out) I have neglected to acknowledge an appeal from you—in connection with aeroplanes in war. I am horribly sorry; but I was born unbusinesslike, and my wild orders to an efficient secretary seem to make things worse. Please forgive me if you can. Frankly, I will not pretend that the delay has lost you a signature; for I doubt if I could have signed the paper. I am against all these attempts to attack war on its material outskirts. If you suddenly forbid some special weapon, the club or crossbow or culverin or whatnot, you enter the business so abruptly and at so irrational an angle that you are very likely to be helping the person who is in the wrong against the person who is in the right. In this case, for instance, to stop aeroplanes would simply be to help the Prussians against the French who have the best aeroplanes; and who surely require the sympathies of all who care for freedom and civilization as against a solemn barbarism.

Yours, in some haste,

G. K. CHESTERTON

P.S. This brief note does not lessen my annoyance at having neglected you, whom I have to thank for many splendid strokes against the deceit and cruelty of our society.

The novelist Arnold Bennett wrote from Anon-Fontainebleau, where he was spending a French vacation, July 22, 1911:

My dear Galsworthy:

My first instinct was to sign the thing on the strength of your recommendation. But on reflection I feel you would not like me to do this. My objection to signing it is that it is absolutely unpractical—in my opinion. All the European armies are busy in the air, and there is not the slightest chance of them abandoning the air. Why should they? On the contrary, a really first-class horror caused by the use of *air vessels* might do more than anything to bring home to the public the extreme criminal stupidity of war. For me a war means the abandonment of all rules, as in any real fight when the blood is up. I would sign any protest against war in general, but to try to limit the field of war seems to me to be both impossible and against nature. Do not be angry with me. . . . .

Yours sincerely

ARNOLD BENNETT

And last, but by no means least, comes the genial Bernard Shaw, who once wrote Cyril Clemens about war:

"I am a thinker, not a fighter. When the shooting begins I shall get under the bed, and not emerge until we come to real constructive business," and,

"War breaks out when interest on capital falls below 2 per cent and peace comes when it rises to 5 per cent."

London, July 14, 1911

Dear Galsworthy:

I can't sign that absurdity: I might as well revive Fielding's suggestion that armies should fight with their fists. All this about "the burden of armaments" is rubbish: the cost of the biggest armies at present is not worth counting beside the cost of idle property holding. We know perfectly well that aerial warfare will *not* be ruled out, any more than (virtually) explosive bullets have been ruled out, no matter what pious wishes we express. It may be horrible; but horror is the whole point of war; the newspapers will be really jolly when showers of shells alternate with showers of mangled aeronauts on crowded cities.

The really interesting question is how far the new development will make an international combination against war irresistible. Nations will not stop fighting until the police makes them: the difficulty is to organize and effectively arm your European-North American police, if you get it.

Meanwhile, "burdens of armaments," etc. etc. is all pious piffle.

Cordially

G. BERNARD SHAW

Shaw's mock-serious prediction that "newspapers would become really jolly. . . with showers of mangled aeronauts on crowded cities" became only too true in the Second, if not in the First, World War. Let us hope that modern attempts to ban the atom bomb prove more successful.

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## VANCOUVER STREET

*By* PETER WAITE

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A shuddered line of frame and lath  
Gasps in the sun,  
Flaunts its cracked paint and teetering porches  
To the calvin charity of an unforgiving world.  
Nearby tall, clean, exclusive windows  
Tower upward;  
Winnowed from the chaff and ruck of toil  
These, by brokerage, reach a superior heaven.