

Caroline E. Playne

*Society in the First
World War*

*The Pre-War Mind in Britain
Society at War 1914-1916
Britain Holds On 1917, 1918
The Neuroses of the Nations*

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BACK COVER

Caroline Playne

Foreword: Caroline Playne, Pacifist and Social Anthropologist

A Tetralogy on the First World War

A general history of the Great War¹ written by Marc Ferro about fifty years ago contains a reference to Caroline Playne, called “an American then living in London”: an incorrect description, because the person we speak of was certainly English. Caroline Playne had written some books in which she described the early twentieth century society as pervaded by a sort of collective neurosis that prevented the problems of the present from being considered from a realistic point of view and led to building a very precise mythical representation, according to which in the near future an inevitable war would grant a general liberation of latent energies and accumulated frustrations. “The phenomenon is the same in Berlin or London”: the root of the phenomenon was entirely in the social structure of the present industrial societies, and the consequence, in all the nations of Europe, was that the possible war was obsessively represented as necessary and as an end in itself, and at the same time as wantonly willed by an adversary, until this obsession became tragically a reality. The hint of Marc Ferro suggests that we are in the presence of a figure not to be neglected: an author who was able to watch the First World War in an anthropological perspective consonant with the sensitivity of the twentieth century, a perspective that revolved around the concept of the social structure of the industrial society, without resorting to the set of stereotypes about nationalities and their presumed characters, including biological ones, that filled the literature of the late nineteenth century. Playne seems to have left behind the *Psychology of crowds* by Le Bon, the ambiguous and widespread nineteenth-century text through which we began to focus on the characteristic problems of mass society. Or perhaps, of the society labelled as “mass”, and in fact qualified by an exuberance of lived experiences with respect to the ability to metabolize them, which characterized the whole twentieth century, which extends into our

¹ Marc Ferro, *La Grande Guerre*, Gallimard, 1969, p. 22.

present, and which does not concern only the “masses”, but also and above all the elites, the privileged of every kind and the individuals in their solitude. Playne was aware of the necessity to innovate a literature, that of collective psychology, in which²: “It is unfortunate that a flood of ill-conceived books on psychological subjects have appeared”.

Who is this author we speak of? Caroline Playne was born in England in 1857, to an English father and a Dutch mother (there is no reason to attribute the American nationality mentioned by Marc Ferro), and we know little of what she did in the first half of her long life. She wrote and published two novels, *The Romance of a Lonely Woman* (1904) and *The Terror of the Macdurgotts* (1907), the latter of which seems to contain an embryonic study of the dynamics of wars and conflicts, as we learn from a contemporary review, which we quote entirely because it gives us an idea of the evolution of Playne’s vision³:

The scene of this story is located in the Northern Isles of Great Britain, the childhood home of a young woman returned after her mother’s death from civilized London with a mind ready to contrast the conditions under which she has lived with those she is now to take up. It is the account of an unhappy experience with a fortunate outcome; an undercurrent of romance runs through the book ending in a wedding. The object of the author is to teach the principles of peace by the use of local characters and their conflicts. He portrays effectively the life of the natives: on the one hand, the class to which the heroine belongs, the knightly families who live in castles, but are obliged to spend their substance in paying guards to keep off invaders; then the common folk, with all their hatreds, feuds, inflammatory speeches, hooting onslaughts and murders.

It is a relief after reading all this to come to an era of sensible conciliation and goodwill. The story of the “Christ of the Andes” is cleverly used as a means of persuasion. The moral, the hope of the writer, is well summed up in a toast drunk by one of the characters in the closing chapter, in which he has a vision of universal peace. The speaker says: “The spirit of the present, which reigns at last in the Isles of the North as well as in the rest of Europe, is good. Small, personal strife is over; men live busy, useful lives – they no

² PW, Introduction.

³ The review is in *The Advocate of Peace* (1894-1920), Vol. 70, No. 5 (May, 1908), p. 116.

longer injure the bodies and properties of their fellows in small ways. No; when they fight, it is on a grand and ‘glorious’ scale. No longer is every man’s hand against every man; it is every nation’s cannon against every nation’s cannon. But the present carries hidden in itself the seed of the future, just as the past had in it the seed of the present.

“In the future it will be every man’s hand with every man, and every nation agreeing quickly with every other nation, and reason ruling over all.”

In the same years, Playne also wrote an essay about “the evolution of peace”, in which she argued against the ideological aggressiveness, scientifically disguised, of social Darwinism⁴. We know that in 1904 she became a founding member of Britain’s National Peace Council, and that in 1908 she participated in the International Peace Congress that was held in London, acquainting herself with Bertha von Suttner, of whom she wrote a biography many years later. During the war, Playne continued her pacifist militancy by doing all she could to alleviate the suffering of everyone, including of German prisoners or foreigners interned because they had been sojourning in England at the outbreak of the war. She worked hard to keep in touch with the German pacifists, but above all she intensified the solitary intellectual activity she had already undertaken in the previous years: the observation of the social behaviour of the English population of every class, in search of an explanation for the consensus of all to the war. This was the applied method⁵:

Almost every communication, even casual notes and current advertisements, told of something which characterized war time. So I specialized on the aspect which I held to be most important and to be receiving least attention. This was the psychology of social life, the state of men’s minds under the influence of the stress and excitement of war.

Playne took note of all that could shed light on this fundamental problem, and after the war she arranged the collected materials in four volumes representing an exceptional organized account of social history and social anthropology, rather than psychology. These are the four books:

⁴ Information collected by Sybille Oldfield, see Bibliography.

⁵ SW, Introduction.

- *The Neuroses of the Nations*, published in 1925 (in the following abbreviated NN). It is an account of the events of the most renowned nationalist movements, that of the Pan-Germanists and that of the Action Française, both studied as the result of a loss of sense of reality. The key word is “neurosis”, but we will see that it is a “neurosis” that can legitimately be attributed to a collective subject: it is a neurosis that manifested itself in the behavioural dynamics and that we can observe empirically without resorting to any hypothesis of difficult plausibility. There was no naive idea of collective psyche in Playne’s work, and the use of psychological concepts is often only a metaphor imposed by the lack of more adequate anthropological notions, which did not exist or were not yet current at the Playne’s time.
- *The Pre-War Mind in Britain*, published in 1928 (abbreviated PW). The “neurosis” of nations is studied in the frame of English society, where extremist nationalist movements were a minority, but where an irrational belief had arisen of the inevitability of enmity with Germany: and this phenomenon involved the whole of society, in which many were perplexed, but very few had the ability to think against the current and to reach the extreme logical consequences of their perplexity.
- *Society at War, 1914–16*, published in 1931 (abbreviated SW).
- *Britain Holds on, 1917, 1918*, published in 1933 (abbreviated BH). In the third and fourth volume the English “neurosis” became a well-established conceptual background, and the mind of the average English who endured the war (which he did not want and wants) was placed on the anatomical table and dissected by a hand who had become expert in this work.

Finally, in 1936, Playne published *Bertha von Suttner and the Struggle to Avert the World War*, a biography of her much more famous Austrian pacifist colleague.

The four volumes of the Tetralogy on war had no editions beyond the first, and we do not know how many readers they had and how they were received in their day. In 1938 Caroline Playne (who died ten years later) deposited the documents she had collected at the Senate House

Library in London, after checking them and discarding the materials she considered useless. She did so with clear intentions: she knew she had collected a heterogeneous documentation, including books, press cuttings, pamphlets, political speeches, and manuscript notes (from which she had carefully erased all that was merely personal) not following random criterion, but trying to achieve a well-defined goal: to bring to consciousness the dark background that had determined the behaviour of European society in the Great War. And this being the goal, Playne donated her papers to the library with the confidence they would be useful to the scholars of tomorrow, those who would miss the opportunity to live in the mood of the years of war. So in this library there is a “Playne collection”, and from an archivist’s blog⁶ we learn more about Caroline Playne, including that the books on the war had wide-ranging reviews, from fulsome praise to excoriating criticism of Playne as a dilettante. At that time it could not have happened differently, as we shall see shortly, given the way in which the Tetralogy presents itself to the reader.

The four volumes on the war present to the reader two sharply distinct tones, and we must immediately distinguish two types of content. Most tell well-known stories, the stories of nationalist movements and those of diplomatic and international political affairs from the late nineteenth century to the war. Another part tells us how the English society lived in the years when the war was looming, and during the war years. The history of nationalism and diplomatic events is redundant: Playne narrated events on which there is a vast bibliography, and it is difficult to find reasons for originality in the way she treated the subject, nor was there a particular personality that justifies repetition. The history of English society, on the other hand, is astonishing, original, and infinitely interesting. Playne told what she had seen, and told it because she saw it and therefore could testify to it, but in a way that is anything but candid: she told the story knowing that she belonged to the small minority of those who had the gift of preserving the capacity to look within themselves and within others while the world around them defended

⁶ <http://www.senatehouselibrary.ac.uk/blog/caroline-playne-campaigning-life>

itself from ruin and mourning with the illusion that events had a necessity and a purpose.

Playne described the English society because she knew it, but with the certainty that if she had lived everywhere, and especially in Germany, she would have seen things happen the same way: the Great War was the consequence of an anthropological mutation of mature industrial societies, with little or nothing to do with national histories, because indeed it was a consequence of the loss of the sense of the institutions of our past, not of their memory. This was the assumption and certainty underlying all of Playne's work. While writing, Playne was not only looking for a method to better describe the life she had observed, but also for a theory that could give us something more than a description: an explanation. And since at the beginning the road is all to be covered, the reader perceives that along the way a maturation of the author taking place. The first volume of the Tetralogy, which Playne considered very important, *The Neuroses of the Nations* (NN), first catches our attention for the intentions of psychological analysis (or better, anthropological, even if Playne did not know this term) that are expressed in the long Introduction, in which a strong theory of collective thinking and acting is promised, but then it disappoints us, dwelling on the well-known or predictable events of the Pan-Germanic movement and the Action Française. The second book, *The Pre-War Mind in Britain* (PW), is a bit unbalanced: we find long accounts of well known events as the crisis of Fashoda of 1898 or the international tensions for the protectorate over Morocco, but together we find, among other subjects, an unusual and original description of the metamorphosis of the early English colonialism into the aggressive imperialism of the end of the century, and this metamorphosis is no longer seen as a merely political affair, but as a cultural mutation of the whole society. The political history narrated by Playne repeats familiar things, while the cultural one is open to a whole new perspective. In the same key we find described the completely irrational phenomenon that transforms the competition with Germany into certainty of German aggression: a purely imaginary phenomenon, which became commonplace in England and which in Germany happened in a perfectly reciprocal way to England (even if, as all the non-ideological pacifists, Playne had a very strong sense of the fragility of imperial Germany, under the nationalist ostentation). Finally

in *Society at War, 1914-16* (SW) and in *Britain Holds on, 1917, 1918* (BH), Playne found her way and could show what is at stake: she makes us live again the infinite stratagems with which the English society deceived itself to endure the catastrophe in which each one was an accomplice, and which each one believed not to have wanted. Here is an example of this ambiguity, an image of the frailty of the elderly⁷:

Some explanation of the alacrity with which Society settled that the best among them were doomed to fight and be slain may be found in the megalomaniac character of war madness. The thing was so great, men were honoured by being sacrificed. It always came back to this, that we were living in the greatest crisis of history. Old ladies, dowagers and the grandmothers of families, thanked God that they had lived to see the Great War, it was all so interesting. It singled them out, too, at a time when they were going down towards the grave from all the other generations who had only slipped off in the usual course, whilst for all Society people who were in the heyday of life, their self-consciousness could be enhanced by heading war activities. Each had a finger at least in the vast concern, they were personally in it and of it. Other people less in the swim had their particular chance of being important. Older professional men gloried in being sworn in as special constables. Ladies were proud of their Red Cross workers' badges. These things made life tolerable. (...) War work and war workers' efforts were marvellously sublimated so that in the midst of their unending tasks no one breathed a whisper of the tortures which necessitated the making, the production of medical stores on a vast scale.

In the two volumes on England at war, the political history of institutional events still has room: but now Playne became able to talk about political facts, correlating them with coherence and completeness to the cultural mutation that gave the war a purpose and a value. For example, the great tax burden imposed during the war, is described in a way that is no longer anecdotal, but part of the theory taking shape. The interesting fact is not that the taxes became very high, but that society wanted to pay them, because it recognized that the burden was functional for the war⁸:

What interests us especially is the fact that these heavy burdens were

⁷ SW, 7.1.

⁸ SW, 9.3.

actually welcomed. The Chancellor of the Exchequer could say, with truth, that the nation only asked to be taxed. Formerly, if one or two pennies were added to the income tax, the country seethed with discontent. Now the demand for unspecified amounts was welcomed. It meant “getting on with the war”. This gives the measure of Society’s fixed determination to carry on the war at all costs.

In general, when it comes to the properly political events, whether those of explicitly nationalist movements, or those of foreign policy, Playne tried to write this part of history in light of the other, of the cultural history of war, which was the important one. In the first two volumes of the Tetralogy the intention was present, but we cannot say that the result was realized. In the third and fourth volumes we perceive a much greater consistency of the whole. But, whatever our overall judgment is on the parts of the Tetralogy that concern the institutional history, it is certain that the reader who intends to read the text of Playne to meditate on the war will choose to privilege the cultural history and give it maximum attention. For this reason we have laid out the Tetralogy violating the original chronological order, proposing to the readers first PW, then SW and BH, and finally NN. Perhaps it would be advisable to even begin with the third volume, *Society at War, 1914-16*, which has a striking effect, and from the beginning presents a very matured vision of things to the reader that comes from PW; but starting with SW would have violated too much the chronology of events, and therefore the choice was just to put NN at the end. So in this edition then the reader will first find the story of the entire English vicissitudes until the “nominal victory”⁹ of 1918, and then the volume on the Neuroses of Nations, which read last will fully show its provisional character.

The Vision of the Problem of War

It is advisable to read the Tetralogy starting from a definite idea of the overall political and philosophical vision of Playne, which is easy to reconstruct given the extent of the work.

First of all, Playne was an intransigent, especially with herself, but she was not an extremist of pacifism, and even less so in politics in general.

⁹ PW, III.

Intransigence is perceived by the way she spoke of herself and her fellow militant pacifists: for very rare hints, without any shadow of narcissism, as of people who only did their duty. Not that it was easy¹⁰:

We have already said that no one who did not live through the period will ever be able to realize the fearful burden it was to have a conscience during the recent reign of irresponsibility on earth.

A section of SW¹¹ was dedicated to the only fruit of war, the birth of the idea of conscientious objection:

A new movement, which has since spread, and which, in course of time, may have a direct influence on world history, started in Britain and other countries during the war. At all times, in many countries, single individuals or small groups of men and women have declared that war is evil and that they would have nothing to do with it.

But on this topic only a few pages of essential information were reported, without any emphasis on the heroism of the objectors, who also had the courage of a desperate cause, that of invoking rational arguments in a context where listening skills were extinguished¹²:

In a society obsessed with the idea of obtaining national ends, national interests, by force of arms, there is no possibility of the exercise of intellectual reason.

Playne was not at all an extremist because she was a rationalist, and therefore what she did not transact about, is only the minimum requirements of rationality and decency that can be claimed by any human person. For the rest, there was no rigidity. The absence of any extremism and ideological rigidity was underlying the whole Tetralogy: the judgment on English society as it actually was (and as it could be if it gave its best), which emerges above all from PW, is that of an obviously democratic person, obviously without authoritarian silly ideas, obviously open to the ideas of social reform that were currently discussed in her time; a person who was inclined to the rational solution of problems through dialectics and mediations, very far from ideology and from any

¹⁰ SW, 9.2.

¹¹ SW, 8.5.

¹² SW, 8.5.

political mythology. This is understood everywhere given the judgments that Playne gave of every open issue, but a particularly interesting detail is the testimony we find in PW and SW about the suffragist movement. There is no reason to think that Playne (a mind of extraordinarily independent judgment, and therefore an implicitly emancipated person and woman) was not in favour of extending the electoral right to women and any other instance of female emancipation. But the suffragist movement was recognized as something that used the objective of electoral right and other concrete objectives to express an obscure existential discomfort that transcended those goals, and which then used them as a pretext. The proof was that at the outbreak of the war the suffragists immediately turned into violent nationalist and warmongers by abandoning the idea of a supranational solidarity among women (and thus probably surprising today's readers), and Playne took up this theme several times, thus witnessing also a little known and not obvious aspect of the their story, without ever marvelling too much, because she had perceived even before the war how many specious and ideological aspects were present in the suffragist movement¹³:

Their abhorrence of masculinity, which had among certain groups become pathological, was transmuted into an abhorrence of Germans, enemy aliens, that was pathological too. Indeed, the suffrage anger, plus nationalist ardour, burnt so furiously that women contributed not a little to the reign of unreason throughout the war period.

It is possible that Playne was particularly hurt by the betrayal of supranational solidarity that women could have exercised. This is particularly noticeable in the judgment given on a story of female participation in the war. The story is that of a testimony book, *Women Wanted*¹⁴:

Women Wanted is by an American woman journalist. Mrs. Mabel Potter Dadgett was sent to Europe by the editor of the *Pictorial Review* to find out "just what this terrible cataclysm of civilization means to the women's cause". This was before America came into the war, and Mrs. Dadgett had many adventures trying to do impossible things. One sees the amazing

¹³ SW, 3.4.

¹⁴ SW, 4.3.

attraction of war time adventure in her remarks. She often exclaims that history is at its greatest crisis. She is very attractive, judging by her portrait. She manages to get out to France.

The following judgment is very severe: this was a story of moral falsity, and the fact that someone who lived and wrote it was a woman does not redeem it. In expressing the judgment Playne showed at the same time her usual critical sensitivity towards the media and their specific rhetorical forms:

But there is a false glamour, a meretricious colouring, cast over everything in her narrative, from the terror of passing “steel lines”—rows of fully armed officials who view passports and withhold permissions from adventurous women journalists—to the aching excitement of shipwreck drill whilst sailing through seas infested by enemy submarines.

And the severe judgment on those who wrote and published these adventurous memories, which transformed the tragedy into farce, did not spare those who demanded them to consume them superficially:

The narrative skips and hops along from stimulating thrills of horror to throbs of snobbish admiration, all calculated to make every woman who reads her articles long to take her share in the tasks of topsy-turvydom, right in the midst of the most thrilling occurrences in world history.

As she was aware of the role of media, Playne was aware of the particular character assumed in the age of mass society by the new religions, which are born to satisfy subjective needs through the artificial appeal to the external characteristics of traditional forms of which concrete memory is lost. Remarkable is the adjective “unhistorical” with which the new religions are qualified as a whole¹⁵:

Religion as an elevating redemptive factor seemed to be worn out, and composite, unhistorical churches existed to satisfy the craving for something fresh, for *some new thing*. Fresh developments of the Higher Thought Movement were the New Thought School, the Church of the New Age, the New Order of Mediation, New Civilization Church, with its sub-title Higher Psychology and Mysticism. There was quite a revival of Astrology, or perhaps it should be said, a cult of the New Astrology.

¹⁵ PW, I.

The specific forms of twentieth century society – media, mass culture, new tribes dedicated to specific mythologies in which the modern subject seeks the identity that he or she does not find in the culture of his or her time – seemed to be perfectly clear to Playne, who anticipated much later sociology in a quite natural way. The hint to “unhistorical” religions is completed with a few lines in which we find a theory we could completely share¹⁶:

The adherents to one or other of these “religions” often get very absorbed by the particular doctrines professed. Such absorption not infrequently amounts to something like fixture on one notion, or complex of notions, so that the mental life of the individual or group is alienated from current social life to an unhealthy and disturbing extent.

It would be interesting to reconstruct how these statements by Playne sounded in the ears of those who read them around 1930, with much more tenuous sensibility than our present to the specific character of mass culture.

Although a pacifist militant, Playne was not a true radical of pacifism, she was not incapable of political realism: of the war considered in general she did not deal, and it was the single war of the concrete present, the Great War, which was an intolerable event against which everybody should have expended his or her energy to the last effort. This present war appeared to her as the result of a generalized loss of sense of reality in European society, devoid of arguments of legitimacy that were not pretexts, completely disproportionate to the small objective conflicting motives, and therefore devoid of any reason for being. Thus the Great War was to be rejected with a radical opposition, but maintaining a rationalist and pragmatic attitude: we never find, even once, in the Tetralogy the characteristic way of expressing itself of sentimental pacifism, and we find only in very rare passages the didascalical tone of the militant. In general, the Tetralogy was written to seek and to know, with the certainty that this knowledge would have value, because the war arose from the inability of society to attain an objective image of the reasons for its discomfort¹⁷: “Knowledge of the

¹⁶ PW, I.

¹⁷ PW, Preface.

nature of disaster must precede the prevention of its recurrence”. The ultimate aim was related to the practical and political sphere, but the means to achieve it can be only a strictly theoretical attitude, to which Playne kept herself generally faithful, so that when while reading we come across the very few passages that have the tone of allocution, of the speech of the militant, of the naive connection with praxis, we feel them just as small nuances. But this proves that by reading the Tetralogy we gradually become more convinced of its value as a work of knowledge.

On other wars that occurred in the past, the judgment of Playne could be different and more nuanced; this is clear from how she saw the history of British colonialism before it was transformed into the season of imperialism, already dominated by irrationality. In that remote age, which ended at the time of her childhood, colonialism was seen as something ineluctable given the state of the world in the first season of industrial society and globalization, and adequate to its times. The old imperial England was beneficial, and basically she administered rationally and correctly the need to create previously nonexistent relationships between parts of the world of heterogeneous culture such as Europe, Africa, and Asia. The fourth chapter of PW, “The earlier imperialism”, is dedicated to analyzing the idea that “the distinction between genuine colonialism and imperialism [is] a vital distinction”, and that the metamorphosis of colonialism into imperialism depended on “the neglect to tackle [...] real difficulties at home”, i.e. on the impasse condition in which society has become “a neurotic society”.

It is clear that Playne’s judgment about the nineteenth-century colonialism, even if before imperialism, is not consonant with the judgment of our present. But what matters is that Playne was a strenuous rationalist who, formed in the culture of the nineteenth century, preserved its humanism, being able to escape with her individualist force and temper from the fall into the irrational that accompanied the new century involving all European society.

Some Implicit Postulates

The basic vision of the Tetralogy testifies to a vast culture of Playne (we do not know which schools she attended) and a great mental

openness, full of curiosity for the most disparate dimensions of life, but rigorously coherent in interpreting them. Given the rationality of the whole, in the background of the Tetralogy some precise theoretical postulates are easily recognizable, which perhaps are not perfect solutions, but nevertheless are plausible assumptions about the problems opened by the Great War.

The first postulate, the first non renounceable hypothesis, is that the war was the result of a recent evolution of European industrial societies given the specific phenomena of economic and cultural life of the late nineteenth century, and that specific national factors played no role. Not that there were no differences in culture and institutions among the nations of Europe: they existed and continue to exist, but in relation to the war we have no reason to invoke them. The war had nothing specific in the different countries, and in each of them it was lived in the same way by public opinion, by the political and military world. National differences were reduced to folklore¹⁸:

It is true that Germans speak in a much more positive way than we do concerning the possession of power and might and ability. But the fact is, that after the German military machine had shown its liability to failure, it still to the British mind seemed supernaturally equipped.

And elsewhere, quoting another author, the universality of the phenomenon was confirmed¹⁹:

Dr. Orchard says: "The truth is that Europe has been going radically wrong; there is a fever in her blood. It is almost accidental that it should be in Germany that the worst symptoms have developed."

And more, on the same subject, we see that we could easily describe specifically the different and well-known forms of national and nationalist rhetoric, if we wanted to, but it is not in this work that the research energies are worth spending²⁰:

This may be noticed in wider aspects, although perversions took different

¹⁸ SW, 11.3.

¹⁹ SW, 6.2.

²⁰ PW, Introduction.

complexions in different lands, just as the collective mind of the people of one nation differs superficially, although not fundamentally, from the collective mind of men of another country. In Germany perversion showed itself as belief in and exaltation of captious, brutal power; in England, as an unenlightened proud, disdainful, imperialist spirit; in France, as a deification of national interest as the sole aim of citizens—indeed, as the sole reality in life.

The many “ill-conceived books on psychological subjects” that have been written are precisely those that place the folkloric variety of national rhetorics at the centre of attention without realizing the underlying problem: what had been common to the whole European society of our time, that led to the general self-destructive drive of the Great War, so hard to explain?

A second postulate is that the European society as a whole was responsible for the war, because the war was the result of the structural complexity achieved by society. There were no instigators, no plots, no guilty or innocent, or at least, the problem of all this was marginal. The subject of war was society as a whole, which had not elaborated a culture capable of solving the problems generated by its growing complexity²¹:

“But as communities become larger and the necessary internal adjustments grow more complex, social equilibrium can be maintained only on condition that the units of the community undergo a like evolution. The growing complexity of the aggregate must be accompanied by a corresponding growth of complexity and of the essentially social qualities in the units.”

We must remark on an important thing about this last quotation, which is in quotation marks: the words quoted are not of Playne, but of an author used by her, Richard Austin Freeman (1862-1943), who wrote in 1921 an essay titled *Social Decay and Regeneration*, and that, similarly to Playne, is a forgotten author. A certain part of the interest in the Tetralogy is that through it we could identify a not insignificant number of English, German, and French authors all forgotten, who probably could speak to those who today are looking for light on the mystery of

²¹ PW, Conclusion.

the general consensus of the European society in the Great War, and in general on political anthropology of the early twentieth century. The Tetralogy gives us access to a great mass of documents in which the consensus to the war is expressed, but also to a certain number of forgotten attempts to create a theory of nationalism and bellicism of the early twentieth century, among which Playne had probably been able to choose the most interesting. She judged that a “flood of ill-conceived books” had been published, but with exceptions: many of the authors she credited as authoritative and to whom she recognized that she was in debt, seem promising, given the quotations we find in the Tetralogy. A forgotten book (but of an author not forgotten) that receives some mention in each of the four volumes is *Satan the Waster—A Philosophic War Trilogy* by Vernon Lee: a pacifist essay in the form of a farce philosophically commented, intense and full of diabolical intelligence, published in 1920 and almost ignored because in total contrast with the enthusiasm for the ‘nominal’ victory from which everyone was pervaded. Playne stated that²² “like many books that are highly charged intellectually, has received less attention than it deserves”. And indeed, it is a book that, if read after reading Playne’s, presents a remarkable complementarity.

If the war was produced by the unmetabolized complexity in itself, defense from war can only be found in self-knowledge, in the formation of culture institutions suited to complexity. Looking at things from such an ambitious and vast point of view, Playne did not give particular attention to those who exploited the war because that happened to be their job. If society falls into a state of irrationality so that it globally pursues a self-destructive goal, it is clear that there will be people in many categories who will exploit the situation, but for Playne it was not worth carrying on any special polemics against those who usually are referred to as responsible: the political class, the popular press (especially the openly nationalist one), the industrials who live on orders, and the smug intellectuals. Of these we find continuous mentions in the Tetralogy, because political and media events are the life of society: but the protagonists of those events were executors of what was

²² NN, General Introduction.

the product of the social structure in the complex, and the founder of the *Daily Mail*, Alfred Harmsworth (later Lord Northcliffe) was described as “one of the most characteristic men of the pre-war years”, that is, one who shared the fundamental tendencies of his time, and thereby contributed for his part to determine them, but only because his mind was consonant with everyone’s expectations. A virulent nationalist writer represented as a marionette at the mercy of events²³:

Another violent person among those who conceived it to be their duty to cultivate fear and suspicion for the sake of the national cause is Arnold White. In the book he published called *The Hidden Hand*, his object is to reveal the working of this “Hand” in its deadly portent. The book is the book of a man, clever to a limited extent, but whose mentality, warped before the war by the growing stress and perversions current among men, became quite incoherent in war time.

Let us observe that the qualification of this man as a person “clever to a limited extent”, and therefore destined to give the worst of himself in wartime, is neither injurious nor polemical. Playne was talking about the mediocrity of this man because even mediocrity is a fact of reality, and sometimes we need to take it into account and refer to it while we describe the complex of events. The limited intelligence, overwhelmed by catastrophe, becomes useless, unable to be coherent, and completes the premises previously constructed: the writer wrote a treatise on the “hidden hand” of destiny that before being violent was objectively stupid.

The third premise of Playne is that as individual behaviour exists, so does social behaviour, and that social behaviour can be studied as structurally analogous to individual behaviour without the need to resort to unverifiable hypotheses regarding the collective psyche. But the collective psyche is not a mere metaphor: it is simply the social behaviour which we can observe in the life of ourselves and of those who live with us²⁴:

²³ SW, 8.2.

²⁴ PW, Introduction.

The existence of a collective or group mind is constantly implied in ordinary life. The skilled hostess helps mould the collective mind of her particular circle; she pays due regard to its traits, its eccentricities, its likes and dislikes, its special qualities and tastes. She tries to excite and develop its collective taste, to turn its qualities to account, to indulge and increase its pleasure. She creates a contagion of delight, which reigns throughout the assembly.

So in the Tetralogy we do not have a strong and articulated theory of the collective psyche and its dynamics; on the contrary, we have a generic and minimal theory, as simple as the considerations of the lines quoted above are simple, but which has the advantage of being perfectly plausible, and sufficient for the primary purpose of the work, which was to preserve the memory of social life during the Great War, and learn to read it without falling into the delusions of that era. What Playne called “Neurosis” is nothing but the dynamics of every action of a subject (individual or collective) that does not know how to attain an objective knowledge its own desires and needs, and that therefore sets substitute goals. The underlying unconscious sphere was cognitive, not necessarily Freudian, and what was Freudian in Playne’s work was basically only the borrowed terminology. The society as a whole comes to certain configurations of things that have certain consequences, and the individuals who compose it can only share the collective choices²⁵:

But as there is no such thing as a national mind, it is more enlightening to conceive what is meant by national psychology as a collective psychic state. Such states may be said to be neurotic or mad when mad adventures are furiously engaged in; a neurotic gamble such as the war. Or, they may be characterized by lethargy when vital energy is absent and progress is blocked. After the war the state of the collective temper has been lethargic. It is almost impossible for individuals in a nation to keep clear of the collective psychic state surrounding them. The reflection constantly arises: Who am I that I should think differently from almost everyone around me?

So the concept of social “neurosis” is made legitimate by the simple fact that human behaviour is social, and “neurotic” behaviour is manifested when one is unable, in a cognitive sense, to find solutions for

²⁵ SW, Introduction.

the real difficulties that are experienced. Then the goals are replaced neurotically²⁶:

The temper of Europe was, we have seen, neurotic. It is characteristic of neurotic individuals to shirk the real difficulties which confront them, whilst they invent false difficulties over which they worry exceedingly.

We are not assuming any collective psyche, difficult or impossible to trace. We are assuming that men act socially and place themselves in a reciprocal relationship as is possible, given the conditions of life and culture in which they live.

A fourth fundamental certitude in the Tetralogy is that the economic sphere of existence is not necessarily rational, and that the economic sphere of decisions is commonly subordinated to the ideological, cultural, and identity sphere. This is not a usual point of view; on the contrary, there is nothing more consolidated than economicism, today as in the time of Playne. Of English colonialism, she said²⁷:

It seems when reading the story of the expansion of England as though she won colonies as a kind of sport, whereas in later times her appropriations are motivated by stubborn imperialist aims. Undisguised greed comes in; there is an unholy scramble for monopolies of such products as palm-oil, rubber and mineral oils.

Strange as it may seem to many, what Playne learned to see beneath the surface, is that men construct images of themselves with which to face the burden of existence, and as a consequence of such self-images they create economic objectives: not the opposite. Only where survival in the absolute sense is at stake, only where the needs to be met are basic, human behaviour is (sometimes) purely economic. Just outside the sphere of basic necessities, economic behaviour becomes a cultural construction, and the ideology of greed of the age of imperialism gives us an example of this in a striking way. A very interesting example was taken from a 1909 novel, *Tono-Bungay* by H.G. Wells. It was the story of a fraudulent speculation against the public through the marketing of

²⁶ SW, Introduction.

²⁷ PW, IV.

an ineffective tonic drug called Tono-Bungay, whose actors were motivated by the need to feel in tune with a general tension towards hyperactivity and enrichment that was the underlying character of their age and generation, and was a cultural invention before being a means of satisfying utilitarian economic necessities. Playne realized this dimension, but also showed that she had a prescient ability to read a popular and entertainment narrative as a document of cultural history: and this capacity is increasingly manifested in the course of the Tetralogy.

Finally, a fifth underlying motive of the Tetralogy is what we might call the still open problem of social consensus to the Great War. Playne said: the modern society came to the war looking for a release from something unbearable that was in everyone's life²⁸:

Multitudes in all the European countries accepted the outbreak of war in 1914, multitudes welcomed it, as a licensed break-up of detestable lives.

But had this background, so unbearable as to generate such a radical break as the Great War, a unitary reason, common to the whole modern society, or was it composed of a set of distinct and competing factors? There is no answer to this question, and what we know is just that in the behaviour of society there was something not described by the usual and consolidated concepts²⁹:

The balance of men's minds was upset. Something more general, more deep-seated than the characteristic instability of crowds, was induced.

Sometimes Playne attempted to gather the answer in one word, "complexity"³⁰:

... the war was a psychological reaction to the compelling stress and unsatisfactory complexity of life in the decade before the war, which reaction induced a longing to smash up things and simplify the conditions of human society ...

²⁸ PW, Introduction.

²⁹ PW, Introduction.

³⁰ SW, 7.2.

The new form of social complexity, in which many had recently abandoned the habits of mainly oral popular culture and had come to political citizenship, sometimes seemed to be sufficient to explain events, at least partially³¹:

The exceeding complexity of life—as compared with life previously experienced—had produced an overstrained generation. Men’s patience failed them in facing the great tasks of organization necessitated by new conditions. (Chief among these was the emergence of the masses from the twilight of illiteracy and unmitigated hard labour to self-conscious citizenship.)

But there is no real, definite answer in this. There is the fact that European society had wanted, almost unanimously, to trigger a destructive event of immense proportions, feeling it as a justified end in itself, and had disguised the desire to do this with appearances of motivation, sometimes with declared irrationality, sometimes claiming to restore the violated rationality, but in any case by lying to itself. Why? Playne did not know, but a hundred years later we too know little more about this. If we hope to penetrate this mystery, we must reconstruct in detail the mindset of the man of the time of the Great War: and Playne, in heroic solitude, has left us these four books full of testimonies, full of reality, and perhaps organized in the best way to help us take a step towards solving the riddle of social consensus to the Great War.

Alberto Palazzi

March, 2018

Sources on Caroline Playne

This introduction was written to give the reader a first orientation in reading the Tetralogy, without repeating the available data about the person of Caroline Playne, which can be found in:

Caroline Playne: a campaigning life, Senate House Library,
<http://www.senatehouselibrary.ac.uk/blog/caroline-playne-campaigning-life>

³¹ SW, Introduction.

Oldfield, Sybil, “Playne, Caroline Elizabeth (1857–1948), pacifist and historian” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/38530>

Oldfield, Sybil, “Caroline Playne (1858-1940)” [sic], in *Thinking Against the Current. Literature and Political Resistance*, Chapter 12, Sussex Academic Press, 2014 pp. 126 -129

The Neuroses of the Nations by C. E. Playne, *Review by: E. E. Sperry, The American Historical Review*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Oct., 1925), pp. 137-138

Caroline Playne’s short essay *German Pacifism During The War* (11 pages) is included in *Voices of German Pacifism*, Garland Publishing, New York & London, 1927

Some other mentions of Caroline Playne can be found here:

Adrian Gregory, *Evidence, History, and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914-18*

Clive Barrett, *Subversive Peacemakers: War-Resistance 1914-1918: An Anglican Perspective*

The Spectator, 25 April 1908, Page 39, contains a hint to one of Playne’s novels: “*The Terror of the Macdurghotts*. By C. E. Playne. (T. Fisher Unwin. Os.) —The story of a modern feud as bitter as that of Capulet and Montague. The description of scenery in the islands of the North is picturesquely done.”

Note to the 2018 electronic edition

The Tetralogy has been composed on the basis of the original and unique printed edition available until now. The scanned text was carefully controlled, in order to make available to the public a good quality electronic version of Playne’s work.

The Tetralogy contains over 1200 footnotes giving references of quotations. About fifty notes contain remarks that add something to the main discourse, and these have been integrated into the text [*between square brackets and in italics*], to facilitate the reading of the electronic

edition. Therefore the remaining notes should be consulted only by those who have an interest in identifying Playne's sources.

PW - THE PRE-WAR MIND IN BRITAIN

PW - Original title page

THE PRE-WAR MIND IN BRITAIN
AN HISTORICAL REVIEW
BY CAROLINE E. PLAYNE

LONDON
GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD.
MUSEUM STREET

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Neuroses of the Nations

The Neuroses of Germany and France before the War, *Demy 8vo 16s.*

“A remarkable book.... Shows not only profound thought, but clearness of vision and admirable powers of exposition.”—*Foreign Affairs.*

“We can congratulate the author on his book, and recommend it to our readers.”—*Church Times.*

This striking volume deserves wide notice for its learning, insight and impartiality.”—*Contemporary Review.*

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This book is dedicated to the affectionate remembrance of my grandfather,
I. G. J. Van Den Bosch, who taught one to think on large and purposeful
lines.

PW - PREFACE

THIS is not a history of war origins, neither is it an examination of war guilt. It is a study of the direction taken by men's minds before the great upheaval of life in 1914. An attempt is made to get behind the flow of political events and to study the temperament and mentality of the troupe of human actors who occupied the crowded stage and took part in its ample, rich but disordered scenes. It is the tendencies of men as totalled among groups, the mind and the passions of the multitude, which come under review.

The reason of this study is the belief that there was a strange failure in the reaction of men to the vast accession of knowledge and power which conjured up a period of rapid material and mechanical development and change. Instead of being able to adjust themselves, to fashion their minds, to strengthen their nerves in order to meet the constant fresh developments which their attainments achieved, the human reaction was inconsequent, over-indulgent, lopsided and therefore disastrous.

In the vast number of books dealing with the question, How did the Great War of 1914 come about?, diplomatic and historical occurrences have received, naturally enough, preponderating attention; social developments have been taken less into account, psychological factors have received scant attention.

No doubt the failure of men's minds to meet the changes crowding on them during the pre-war period, to adjust themselves to transformations in their social environment, is recognized. It is constantly exclaimed that collectivities of men were overstrained, disordered, abnormal, even mad, insane at the time, but the nature of the mental malady implied and its bearing on the shaping of events is not investigated. To quote an example of this, J. A. Farrer, writing about Count von Bülow, the German Chancellor, says: "He (Bülow) assigned to a popular lunacy, both in his own country and in ours, the cause of our embittered relations. Nor, indeed, is it improbable that epidemics of mental delusion pass, like physical epidemics, over whole populations, from time to time, under the stimulus of a raging Press propaganda which fans into flame countless slumbering animosities, just as a strong wind drives a fierce

fire before it over a grouse moor.”³²

Probably the time has not come for *full account* to be taken of the psycho-neurotic character of the mentality exhibited during the years before and after the turn of the century.

The pursuit and the achievements of the science of psychology lag far behind those of the physical sciences. Especially is this the case with regard to social psychology, group psychology, the psychology of men in collectivity. This is rarely treated seriously. There are too few collected data to be dealt with. It is with a view to placing on record more data concerning the psychology prevailing at a specially momentous time that this book and the companion volume, *The Neuroses of the Nations, the Neuroses of Germany and France before the War*, have been written. It is certain that these data will be wanted if, and when, the psychology of men combined in groups and nations receives the attention demanded by its supreme importance in the evolution of human affairs. The task requires the attention of a contemporary, for it will be difficult for those belonging to another generation to realize the tendencies and tempers of the mentality and moods we have experienced. Indeed, the right judgment and valuation of psychological motions comes far more easily to one who has experienced them than to those who must reconstruct the whole situation.

Little need be said here in explanation of the view taken that the nations suffered from a veritable group neurosis under the influence of which they approached, hovered round and finally flung themselves into the great catastrophe of the war, much as moths come to grief over a burning light.

In the companion volume to this, the strange obsessions induced by the spirit of exaggerated nationalism, chauvinism and militarism, which seized hold of the public mind with disastrous consequences, have been investigated and recorded especially with reference to Germany and France.

It was found impossible to include the history of similar obsessions in

³² *England under Edward VII*, p. 250.

Great Britain in the same volume, so this is now attempted. The lines laid down concerning the cause of the neurosis—namely, the wear and tear to men's nervous make-up caused by the increased pressure, complication and the fullness of life generally—are given in the Preface to the first book.

The troubles that descended on Europe did incalculable harm, set back the hands of the clock marking the progress of civilization. Their psychological nature is further discussed in the following Introduction and in the last chapter of this volume. The intervening chapters deal with the effects of neurosis traced in historical situations and individual character in Britain.

Care has been taken not to recapitulate the history of events told of late many times over. At the same time the course of events in Britain has of necessity been indicated, for these events are naturally exciting factors in producing a condition of inflammation and tension. This, in its turn, caused the conduct of affairs to be characterized by the irritation, pride, fear, ruthless egoism and mental instability consequent on the prevalence of neurotic temperament.

A good deal of attention is paid to the characters of leading men, for, in the degree in which they suffered from the prevailing mood, they, through their influence, furthered existing disruption. Current obsessions seized hold of independent intellects as well as of the men who absorbed the temper of the commercialized Press and shouted with the crowd. Even the statesmen who stand most aloof from public opinion, as, for example, Sir Edward Grey stood aloof from opinions both at home and abroad, must of necessity be subconsciously influenced by current conceptions, moods, passions. At times when the tenor of life is disrupted, as in the period under review, current manias may more especially subjugate independent intellects. It is clear that the fear of Germany, a bogey fear (not, however, without foundation in fact), was taken to heart by Sir Edward Grey. Could France have involved him deeply in secret commitments if this had not been the case?

Much of the comment on war events and history has been marred by the violent expression of the special emotional tendencies of authors. This has been the case whether these tendencies were fiercely nationalistic or hotly and indignantly critical of the ruling spirit of the

time and its manifestations.

The time has come when the events that led up to the war—indeed, the whole war cycle—may be discussed critically but with dispassion. It is extremely urgent that the different aspects which contributed to what is now agreed to have been one of the greatest disasters that have ever occurred should be examined.

Knowledge of the nature of disaster must precede the prevention of its recurrence.

In his time Lord Loreburn urged this necessity in his examination of *How the War Came*. He wrote:—

“Unless the people of this country are prepared to examine these things and take them into their own hands, the same methods of secrecy, the same restlessness and irresolution in policy, the same blindness alike to foreign conditions and to our own true interests that preceded the war, may herald us into another.”

An effort has been made to treat the subject of the aberration of men’s minds in Britain with the same impartiality as the subject of the neurosis which prevailed in Germany and France was treated. If it seems that the failure of men’s minds and morals in England has been examined more at length or pronounced on with greater emphasis, it is because many of the events are more familiar and because material is more abundant. Indeed, the very abundance of histories, revelations, reviews—and memoirs, written by leaders themselves—testifies to the dissatisfaction of men who now repent them at leisure of the folly with which they embarked on the war.

Although some historical points still await further disclosures, the state of mind of the chief actors in the drama, the mentality prevailing among the different national groups, all this is much more clearly exposed than has usually been the case so short a time after a great social upheaval—in the lifetime, indeed, of most of the people involved.

It may appear that among the many authors consulted and quoted less well-known authors have occasionally been chosen rather than others better known. When this has been done, it is because those preferred are specially illuminating concerning psychological aspects of character or social bearings of conduct.

CAROLINE E. PLAYNE.

PW - INTRODUCTION

Speaking of the civilized peoples of Western Europe and of the United States, J. A. Hobson says: “Their education has, among the better classes, been instrumental largely in producing scepticism and fluctuating dilettantism, while among the masses it has produced a low curiosity and indiscriminate receptivity. This general unsettlement of habits and principles implies in individuals a collapse of standards of thought and feeling, a weakening of individual responsibility in the formation of opinions, and a correspondingly increased susceptibility to Jingoism and other popular passions in the several shapes which they from time to time assume.”

J. A. HOBSON, *The Psychology of Jingoism*, pp. 13, 14.

Militarism obtained as great expansion and extension in the age of machines as the power of the Church did in the Middle Ages.

BERTHA VON SUTTNER, *The Age of Machines*.

The analyst of public opinion must begin, then, by recognizing the triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action.

WALTER LIPPMANN, *Public Opinion*, p. 17.

IT is a difficult task to sort out from the general story the human reactions to the tale of history. But as these reactions profoundly affect its course, the attempt is not only deeply interesting but one that it is essentially necessary to undertake. All kinds of questions concerning the origins of the war of 1914 have been repeatedly examined from different points of view; the story of this aspect and the other of the Great War has been told; the anarchy and chaos of European affairs have been closely analysed. But the general state of mind, certain marked characteristics of “the combined operation of numerous individual minds,” have received much less attention. Yet it is among these that the profounder causes of disturbance may be traced.

... End of Preview ...

Back cover

This volume contains four essays by Caroline Playne on the anthropology and social psychology of the First World War:

The Pre-War Mind in Britain (1928)

Society at War, 1914–16 (1931)

Britain Holds on, 1917, 1918 (1933)

The Neuroses of the Nations (1925)

During the Great War, by constant and solitary observation, Playne gathered a great mass of documents on the English social life and on the phenomenon of the general consensus to the war. These observations merged into the four books collected here, in which we find a pioneering cultural history of the war that is both astonishing and infinitely interesting. Playne told what she had seen because she witnessed it, but in a way that is anything but candid. She wrote with high analytic skill, knowing she belonged to the small minority who maintained mental lucidity and independent judgment while the world around them defended itself from ruin and mourning with the illusion that events had a need and a purpose.

Playne described the English society she knew, but with the certainty that if she had lived everywhere, and especially in Germany, she would have seen things happen the same way. The Great War was the consequence of an anthropological mutation of mature industrial societies, which had little or nothing to do with national histories because it was a consequence of the loss of the sense of the institutions of our past, not of their memory. This was the assumption and certainty underlying all her work.

European society had wanted, unanimously, to trigger a destructive event of immense proportions, feeling it as a justified end in itself, and had disguised the desire to do this with appearances of motivation, sometimes with declared irrationality, sometimes pretending to restore the violated rationality, but in any case lying to itself. Why? Playne did not know, but we know little more a hundred years later. We need to reconstruct in detail the mindset of the man of the time of the Great War: and Playne, in heroic solitude, has left us these four books full of

testimonies, full of reality, and organized to help us to take a step towards solving the enigma of social consensus in the Great War.

Caroline Playne

Carolyne Playne (1857-1948) was a militant English pacifist. During the First World War she gathered a mass of unprejudiced observations about the consensus to war in British and European society, which she then poured into an extraordinary pioneering work in cultural history and social psychology of the Great War.