MEDICAL PRACTICE

Medical History

Aneurin Bevan among the Doctors

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Michael Foot has written a magnificent biography of an outstanding political figure of our time, Aneurin Bevan. That the subject of this penetrating and superbly written book is the author's hero is evident on every page of both volumes of his work, the first of which was published twelve years ago, and the second¹ a few weeks ago.

In this second volume more than a hundred pages are devoted to the birth pangs of the National Health Service, written not by an academic historian or a participant in the events he describes but by a loyal and affectionate friend and supporter of a man he idolizes, a man whose greatness was perceived by many only after his death.

In this part of his book Foot suffered from the melancholy fact that, of the men who were closest to the events of a quarter of a century ago, most died before he began to write and few are still alive today. Foot talked to Sir Guy Dain (who has since died), Lord Moran, Rowland Cockshut, and myself. He quotes Solly Wand, but it is not clear whether he met him while preparing his text. However diligent a man's study of papers and records, however searching his cross-examination of those who were there—Foot has clearly been remarkably diligent—there is no substitute for direct evidence and personal participation. This accounts, no doubt, for my difficulty in recognizing some of his accounts of occasions on which I was present, now recited by him, often with great gusto. For example, in my recollection of some of our meetings with the then Minister of Health, even allowing for the fallibility of memory, Nye's contribution was not quite as

bland and brilliant and the profession's not quite as obstinate and reactionary as Foot would have his readers believe a quarter of a century later. Nor indeed, in my experience, was every public speech of his as brilliantly persuasive as Foot believes. I recall attending, as a visitor, a meeting of the Royal College of Nurses in B.M.A. House which the Minister addressed. All went well until question time. The first question was whether the speaker agreed that, when a Minister sought the views of the nursing profession, he should get it from nurses (meaning not from doctors). Nye replied with a beatific smile, "Of course I agree. I must get nursing advice from nurses, not from matrons." A whistle of astonishment was heard. Most of those present were matrons and Nye had not done his homework.

Inevitably, though not frequently, there were occasions on which tempers flared when the profession's representatives met the Minister. Foot refers to such incidents so innocently: "Occasionally, Bevan's sensitivity failed to span the gulf between the two distant worlds. A witticism designed to smooth might hurt instead," adding for good measure, "The doctors wanted every protection which pedantry could devise and were always ready to escape from immediate business to consider afresh the spectral fears haunting the profession." History may be bunk but this I venture to say is bunkum.

But all this is small beer now. Nye Bevan was a formidable negotiator. As I wrote some ten years ago, he could spot a point or detect a flaw in an argument without waiting for a speaker to finish. He would purr or pounce according to his mood. If a suggestion was unacceptable to him, he would say so at once, never using the comforting formula that "the matter would be considered" when he really meant he rejected it. I do not remember any occasion when he said one thing and meant another—this was part of the trouble at certain moments.

Foot makes some comments on the B.M.A. constitution and the procedures it required in terms which cannot be lightly dismissed. The spokesmen of the profession, despite their

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"negotiating committee," had no power to negotiate. At every significant step they had to consult the Representative Body with all the attendant publicity and the opportunity for "militant outbursts which swept all before them." The spokesmen were followers, not leaders. "The Chairman and Secretary had to exert their influence by continuous argument in the vast number of individual committees appointed to deal with separate matters and before the Council and the Representative Body." All this reminded him, Foot tells us, of 1793 in revolutionary France, when none of the leaders could afford to be outpaced by more extreme orators. He even went so far as to assert that "It was unlucky for the B.M.A. that in their greatest crisis they confronted a man who had studied the art of demagoguery—and scorned it." Dear me!

In reply it could be said that the B.M.A.'s constitution included, to use the words of the Webbs, "all the devices of advanced democracy," that it was incontestably right that policy, in detail as well as in general, should be determined only by elected representatives of the rank and file of the profession. We can agree with Foot that "no trade union leader would have wished to conduct detailed negotiations beneath the glare of publicity" without accepting that the B.M.A. constitution should be adapted to the trade union model.

Looking back, it is undeniable that emotional outbursts in public at critical times, inevitable in a large body at times of crisis, did sometimes embarrass the profession's spokesmen by the headlines they stimulated and the somersaults of policy they encouraged, despite the sturdy courage at critical times by such men as Guy Dain. Furthermore the Representative Body did declare itself—in advance of any Government plans—in favour of many features of a health service which it subsequently rejected. It did tend sometimes to ignore such gains as its representatives had secured and immediately to switch its attention to the points on which it had not won, however important or unimportant they were. Balance sheets of gains and loss are not always judged dispassionately in large assemblies, where oratory and emotion prevail. Tactics are better devised in private by the few than publicly by the many.

On the other hand the case for a completely democratic structure dominated by the elected representatives is very strong. The Representative Body was after all largely based on the parliamentary principle, which Bevan revered. Nowadays I am too far removed from the arena to suggest a solution, if indeed change is needed. But I do recall the lessening of the profession's effectiveness in negotiations which the procedure sometimes caused.

Foot makes a number of references to the divisions within the profession and to Bevan's private contacts with the presidents of the Royal Colleges or *prima donnas* as he called them. The Negotiating Committee was wholly representative of the Royal Colleges and the B.M.A. but the unity was recent and imperfect.

"Less formal and more subtle were the relations Bevan established in other quarters. No special insight was needed to discover that the profession was not united; it was evident for example that the sympathy prevailing between the Royal Colleges and the B.M.A. was far from perfect. Pride, jealousy and divergent interests prevented them from always acting in concert, even though the Royal Colleges were represented on the Negotiating Committee and were supposed to be committed to the same agreed objectives. Bevan sought in turn the advice of the Presidents of the Royal

Colleges. When at first they demurred, he urged them to remember their obligations to the Crown. . . . The discussions of course were innocent. No-one was committed to anything."

Their innocence can of course be accepted. What did surprise me when I read his book was the number and extent of these exchanges with the "*prima donnas*," some of which were quite unknown to the Negotiating Committee. I knew that the sympathy prevailing between the Royal Colleges and the B.M.A. was imperfect. But I did not then realize how imperfect! I hope it is not as imperfect today.

There is a recurring note in Foot's fascinating description of those stormy years which illustrates his partisanship. He fails to appreciate the depth of the profession's underlying fear that Bevan's plan, whether he intended it or not, was the first step to what the profession detested most of all, the creation of a whole-time salaried service. He tells us that when Bevan's main principles were announced the doctors smelt treachery somewhere and asked what guarantees there were that basic salary would not in time become whole-time salary. Of course they did. Was not a whole-time salaried service the declared policy of the Labour Party? And Bevan hardly allayed this fear at a later stage when, asked about this, he said that he did not think that the profession was "ripe for it," adding a day or so later that, "There is all the difference in the world between plucking fruit when it is ripe and plucking it when it is green."

It is not difficult, by that clearer vision which comes with hindsight, to recognize the mistakes of the B.M.A. in those torrid years of controversy. It dallied too long in discussion of detail with Henry Willink in the Coalition days. It was slow to appreciate the wisdom of Bevan's courageous proposals for hospital unification. It fought for the continuance of the custom of buying and selling practices long after it was clear there was no public or political support for its view.

On the other side of the account there were, however, really significant gains. The profession averted the horror of a whole-time salaried service; it sustained the right of free choice of doctor and patient and the freedom of clinical practice without State interference and the right of every general practitioner to take part in the service. Indeed it succeeded in maintaining five of the seven points of principle which it formulated before the publication of Bevan's Bill. And, not least important in view of the debacle of the years immediately before the first world war, the B.M.A. held together reasonably well, keeping in touch with the profession at every stage, despite the awkward and cumbersome process of frequent meetings of the Representative Body and occasional plebiscites.

That Michael Foot, the polemicist, fails to recognize the profession's achievements stems from his transparently honest belief that Aneurin Bevan was almost always right and the medical profession was usually wrong. Yet, even though it may hurt in places, his book is as fascinating as it is distinguished and should be compulsory reading for any budding medical politician.

References

- ¹ *Aneurin Bevan*, Vol. 2, 1945-60. Michael Foot (Pp. 712; £6.50.) London, Davis-Poynter, 1973.