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LETTERS OF ROBERT BRIFFAULT

ARTHUR SEARLE

ROBERT BRIFFAULT (1873-1948) was a prolific and influential writer in the years between the two world wars. He achieved international fame as a novelist, with the publication of *Europa* in 1935. It was a first novel, portraying the decadence of western European society. In its sequel, *Europa in Limbo* (1937), Briffault took his disillusioned hero from the trenches of Flanders to Russia, to fight with new-found conviction for the revolutionary Red Army.¹ For all but the Russian episodes he drew on his own experience almost to the point of autobiography, incorporating many of his political ideas and beliefs, yet within months of the publication of *Europa* he added this comment to an account of the book's huge sale:

I knew that it would be a success, not because the book is good (I regard it as rubbish) but because it appeals to all sorts of people: the radicals will see that it is radical, and the reactionaries won't, and the liberals will think it is liberal. The intellectuals will find plenty of food, and the sillies plenty of sensation, and the snobs will delight in the snobbery, and everybody will gloat over the eroticism.²

The extract comes from one of some 240 letters presented to the British Library by Mrs. Joan Briffault Hackelberg, Briffault's younger daughter.³ The collection is small but of considerable importance. Briffault published his first book in 1919, and however tongue-in-cheek his description of *Europa* as rubbish might be, he certainly set much more store by the works on anthropology and psychology which he had already written, and continued to write until 1945. It is difficult to define the precise area of this part of Briffault's work, for the range of his learning and imagination was wide, but there is an underlying theme to all he wrote, a concern with what might best be described as cultural evolution, with very distinct political implications. Indeed, if Briffault is not as well known today as he ought to be it is because the lasting values of his work are still obscured by his passionate involvement in the issues of his time.⁴

The key work is his study in social anthropology, *The Mothers*, which appeared in its full three-volume form in 1927. Briffault himself prepared a shorter version, published in New York in 1931, and since his death in 1948 an abridgement of the original by Gordon Rattray Taylor has appeared both in England and in the United States. This work surveys with extraordinary erudition the whole of human civilization, in search of an



Robert Briffault writing *The Mothers* (London, 1926-7); Add. MS. 58443, fol. 5b

explanation of the origins and development of the character of western European society. His view of marriage as a social institution, linked with the possession of property, brought him into direct conflict with the establishment and in particular with established anthropologists, who placed great emphasis on man's natural monogamy. In 1931 Briffault took part in a series of broadcast debates with Malinowski on the subject of marriage, and when the *Listener* printed the talks no mention of *The Mothers* was made. In his introduction to a later published version of the talks M. F. Ashley Montagu recalls that while Briffault and Malinowski had begun on the friendliest of terms, growing differences between them led to the substitution of a summing-up by Malinowski alone instead of the concluding discussion which had been originally planned. Montagu, a pupil of Westermarck, whilst not supporting Briffault's views, describes him as 'one of the most erudite men of his time, and at the same time a man of violent enthusiasms'.⁵ *The Mothers* expounds and develops anthropological ideas which stem from Engels's *Origin of the Family*, and in time Briffault became an avowed communist. At a chance meeting with ex-chancellor Schuschnigg at Rapallo in 1947 he confessed to being 'one of those terrible Communists. [Schuschnigg] remarked very seriously: You are on the winning side, then.'⁶

Even so, Briffault was too much of an individualist ever to participate in an organized political movement. This was perhaps a symptom of the conflict between his cultural experience and the rational progress of his ideas as expounded in his literary output. Briffault's first book was *The Making of Humanity* (1919), followed by *Psyche's Lamp* (1921), 'a revaluation of psychological principles' on materialist lines, tending to assert the priority of society over the individual. He returned to the questions of morality raised in this work, once *The Mothers* had been written, in *Sin and Sex* (1931). At about the same time as the *Europa* novels appeared he produced two works of a more historical, and so more obviously political, nature: *Breakdown: The Collapse of Traditional Civilisation* (New York, 1932, London, 1935) and *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire* (1938). A collection of occasional pieces, *Reasons for Anger*, appeared in London in 1937, and another novel, *Fandango*, in 1939. Briffault was in Paris throughout the Second World War. There he published some historical and political works in French, of which more is said below, and *Les Troubadours et le Sentiment Romanesque* (1945), an extension of the last chapter of *The Mothers*, later published in his own translation as *The Troubadours*, ed. L. F. Koons (Bloomington, Indiana, 1965). His last work was the novel *The New Life of Mr. Martin* (1947).

Robert Briffault's father was a distinguished French diplomat and politician, who had retired in disgust at the ambitions of empire of Napoleon III long before Robert was born. He died when Robert was only thirteen. Briffault's mother, much younger than her husband, was the daughter of a Scottish sea captain. His early life was as varied as these circumstances might suggest: a childhood spent among the international set in Europe ('one of my earliest recollections was to be taken to see the Prince of Wales'), school in Florence and England, marriage and training as a doctor in New Zealand.⁷ The papers which Mrs. Briffault Hackelberg has presented represent something of all this; there are even two letters from Louis Napoleon to Briffault's father, written in 1846 and 1847.⁸ But the most

complete series of letters is that written by Briffault to his two daughters, Joan and her elder sister Muriel, during his service in the British army from 1915.

He served first for three spells of duty in Gallipoli. His letter from the Dardanelles at Christmas 1915⁹ shows a tenacious enjoyment of unwarlike things in the midst of danger: making water-colour drawings of the landscape and excavating mammoth bones in the islands with the help of a fellow officer. Then on to the peninsula itself, visiting 'a pretty little Turkish town . . . all in ruins but still looking very picturesque with its Cypresses and ruined mosque', and finally touring the battle zone at Helles under constant shell-fire to visit friends: 'Wasn't that a funny Bank Holiday?' In fact Briffault, who may well have falsified his age to enter the army at all, had been ill or in conditions of appalling discomfort for much of the time that he was in Gallipoli, and he was not without periods of depression. Even so, there is a great difference between the holiday atmosphere of his exploration of that area and his visit to Ypres in October 1917, 'a shattered mass of ruins, a modern Pompei' where you could pick up fragments of delicate medieval carving among the rubble.¹⁰ These were the bizarre contrasts of war at the European front which Briffault described for his daughters with great vividness, like the wild flowers festooned over the edge of the trenches and the lark 'chirping high up above the hiss of passing shells'.¹¹

Briffault was sent to France in 1916 after recovering from his experience in the Dardanelles in a brief spell of convalescence in England. He served with distinction: he was mentioned in dispatches and twice decorated. In July of 1916 he virtually blackmailed the authorities into sending him to the front rather than serve in a hospital behind the lines.¹² There he found new recruits, some reduced to hysteria by their first experience of gunfire.

I am getting quite a lot of cases of self-inflicted wounds – fellows shooting off one of their fingers, or putting a bullet through their foot – they say, of course, that their rifle went off while they were cleaning it – but until two or three are shot – as they will be – they'll go on playing this game to get off.¹³

His own reaction was very different: ' . . . whenever a thought stabs me in the heart and sends a shudder through me, I quickly turn to something else . . .'¹⁴ In a later letter he sketched out his own psychology of the trenches: 'You couldn't grouse and be miserable over it, so you laugh at it – that is the "smile of victory" which the illustrated papers show you (piffle!!) – it's really a smile of despair.'¹⁵ These letters form an outstanding addition to the autobiographical literature of the First World War; a powerfully direct prose style is linked with that disturbing mixture of bravery and cynical stoicism which is typical of the best of the genre.

In France and Flanders Briffault experienced ever worsening conditions as the war dragged on. Both the horror of the situation and the graphic strength of his writing are in the long letter he wrote to Muriel in October 1917 during the battle of Passchendaele:¹⁶

Although we were alone we advanced at the appointed time with admirable dash – rushed four 'pill-boxes' and carried our objective . . . we were isolated in the midst of the wilderness of mud and shell holes . . . The little bit of a concrete place I was in was soon chock-a-block with wounded . . . The lighter cases had to stay outside and many of them got killed outside the door . . . all but

two of our stretcher-bearers got shot . . . often I had to go and dress the cases as I found them and leave them to be collected later after giving them some food and drink.

After a few days rest out of the line Briffault went back to the front.

. . . Our next battlefield was on another part of the ridge . . . We suffered heavily from intense shell fire on the way and getting there at dark I had some difficulty in finding my quarters. They are the most terrible quarters I have ever occupied . . . the floor was a quagmire a foot deep, a 60% solution of dead Boche. For another compartment of the Pillbox was occupied by three dead Boches separated from us only by a wooden partition open at the bottom – soaking in the same water. We crawled over stepping-stones of Petrol-tins to two boards resting also on Petrol-tins and forming two ledges on which one lay. It was impossible to sit up or to lie full length. There I dwelled for four days and five nights! . . . continuously subjected to the fiercest German bombardment I have experienced . . . On the second night my bearers and my servants were sheltering under the railway sleepers outside – a kind of lean-to we had built up: one shell hit it sideways and wounded my servant in the neck. They all had to be got inside as best possible. We were seven in all. Two hours later a terrific crash took place, our candle went out and there were terrified screams. A shell had landed exactly at the door of the rat-hole and blown right inside. When I had brushed the mud and muck off my face and told everyone to keep perfectly still, I got my flash-light out of my pocket and amid the mass of writhing and groaning humanity ascertained that my Sergeant (who has been my right hand for close on a year) was hit through the body, and a corporal had a compound fracture of the thigh, another man was killed outright . . . That night was beyond comparison the most ghastly night I have ever spent. Cramped in the most back and limb breaking position between two wounded men who were calling constantly on me to hold their hand or give them a pull out of my water bottle, in the impossibility to move a single inch, holding a candle in one hand – as there was no other place to put it, breathing a pestilential atmosphere that turned one's stomach – nothing was wanting to complete the horror of that hell. And the shells came dropping again and again on our heads and we wondered how long the roof would hold out . . . The setting of all these happenings is a waste of shell holes reaching as far as the eye can see in every direction; the whole of it is strewn with corpses – it is difficult enough to look after the wounded, it is out of the question to look after the dead, and consequently they lie everywhere, friend and foe, their mud-stained clothes and poor grey faces and hands blending with the mud of which they seem a part . . .

The roots of Briffault's perception of the cultural dilemma of European civilization lay in his childhood, but the transformation to socialism, and consequently the impetus to put his intellectual heritage to creative use, took place during these war years. Early in 1916 he had described himself as 'a dreamer of dreams – an ineffectual dreamer – living more in the mental world . . . hungering after the choicest of men's thoughts and feelings . . .'¹⁷ But throughout this wartime correspondence there is recurrent evidence of another side to his intellectual character, more realistic, less detached, growing in realism as conditions worsened. It was particularly evident in his attitude to Britain and the British, of whom his own background tended in any case to make him aloofly critical. He was distressed by the inefficient organization of the British army.¹⁸ Resting briefly behind the front line at Christmas 1917 he avoided 'the usual khaki crowded and noisy British patronised places, reeking with whisky and music-hall songs' and instead spent his time with a Belgian officer

and got from him a careful analysis of Belgium's role and Belgian public opinion in the war.¹⁹ His reaction to English society was strengthened by the contrast with conditions at the front. On leave in England Briffault found people 'disgusted and indifferent' as a result of 'the policy of lies and jingoism which the press – ruled by the military – has ceaselessly carried on since the beginning of the war'.²⁰ In 1916 he found Wimbledon 'a masterpiece':

the dwelling-place of a well-to-do smug people suffering from complete atrophy of the brain – there is not a discordant note anywhere, everything speaks of artless English suburbanity undefiled – it appears to be peopled by chambermaids and Sunday-school-teaching shopboys. The girls are rosy-cheeked imbeciles. It is an unpatriotic place, because it makes one pro-German to look at it. Every flame of thought and living feeling is as surely extinguished there as in an atmosphere of carbonic acid.²¹

Towards the end of his service, staying with a family in Devon, again on a brief leave in England, Briffault was appalled by patriotism which consisted only in starving, and by

... the prayers and the talk!! ... 'Oh! isn't it terrible the prospect of all this democracy?' – 'And this dreadful home rule, those terrible Irish.' 'Well', I put in, 'You can't expect not to reap a little whirlwind when you have sown generations of misgovernment.'²²

During that same leave, in January 1918, Briffault managed to spend some time in the British Museum reading-room. When three months later the ill health which had dogged him all through the war finally forced his retirement from the front line, he had already been working in the trenches on his first book. He lingered in England in an attempt to find a secure job to bring his family to, or the promise of employment on his return to New Zealand, but also, as he himself admitted, out of reluctance to leave London's intellectual resources:

I have been wallowing in all sorts of out-of-the-way research at the British Museum. It is my way of 'taking to drink' . . .²³

That first book, *The Making of Humanity*, 'a sort of philosophy of history, causes of progress, of decadence and development',²⁴ was in proof in the summer of 1919. Less than a month before its publication in October Briffault's wife died in New Zealand, a victim of the influenza epidemic. Briffault returned at once, but only for a while. He had begun to work on a second book before he left London and by the autumn of 1920 he was back in Europe for good. He wrote then to Muriel that he felt that he was sacrificing his daughters to what he called his own 'selfish intellectual interests', but went on:

So far as I am concerned the urge is so overpowering that I am ready to sacrifice all without hesitation, to starve, to lie in a garret for that – for the ideas I have to embody; I made up my mind to that long ago.²⁵

Thereafter Briffault never deviated from his chosen literary career. The rest of his life was spent in London and Paris, with brief intervals in New York, the south of France, and Italy. The correspondence is less informative about his later years, but the rich source of

the letters written during the First World War already shows the man's great ability, his character, and his views, together with some of the circumstances which formed them. Besides indicating the direction of his subsequent work they provide a basis for understanding the intensity of the dislike for England which he developed in the growing storm of the late 1930s. He saw England's irresponsibility as the real culprit in the barbarization of Europe and chose during the war to remain in occupied Paris despite a brief period of imprisonment and the other hardships that entailed. He was no friend to Germany: the whole German edition of *Europa* was burned when the Nazis entered Vienna, eliciting the comment 'It is the highest honour I have yet had paid to me'.²⁶ But it is quite consistent with the development of his ideas that he should have published in Paris a study of the strength of French cultural influence in the face of British imperialism (*L'Angleterre et L'Egypte* (1943)) and a revised translation of *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*.²⁷ The revision took account of events after the work's first publication in 1938, but retained the character of the original as a fierce attack on class and capitalism as well as on British policies after 1918.

After the war Briffault, that 'inveterate rolling stone',²⁸ moved ceaselessly round Europe in search of a congenial atmosphere and in an attempt to live as cheaply as possible, for he had little money. But he continued to write. Much of *Mr. Martin*, published in 1947, was written in England, in the east end of London and in rural Essex. He was brought back to England from Paris when taken dangerously ill, and died in Hastings in December 1948.

The collection is arranged as follows:

Add. MS.	Vol.	
58440	I	Briffault's letters to his mother, 1886-1902, and to his daughters, 1915-March 1917.
58441	II	Briffault's letters to his daughters, April 1917-48.
58442	III	Letters to Briffault and personal papers, 1874-1952; papers of Briffault's family, 1799-1906.
58443	IV	Photographs.

1 These two works are discussed by Leonard Goldstein, 'The Revolution through English Eyes' in *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Pädagogischen Hochschule Potsdam*, III (1967), 197-202. This article has benefited greatly from discussion with Professor Goldstein, who had kindly allowed me access to material he has collected on Briffault.

2 Add. MS. 58441, fol. 155.

3 Add. MSS. 58440-58443. The extracts given here appear with Mrs. Briffault Hackelberg's kind permission. The idea that the letters might be presented to the Library was suggested to

Mrs. Briffault Hackelberg by Mrs. Anne Webb of the University of Auckland, who is engaged in research on Briffault.

4 For a critical analysis of Briffault's work see Pat Sloan, 'An "Unknown Soldier" in the Battle of Ideas', *Marxism Today*, VI (1962), 154-9.

5 M. F. Ashley Montagu, *Marriage, Past and Present* (Boston, 1956), pp. 9-10.

6 Add. MS. 58441, fol. 202.

7 Ibid., fol. 188b. A biographical note on Briffault is given in *The Mothers*, abridged G. R. Taylor (1959), pp. 21-5.

8 Add. MS. 58442, fols. 99-101.

- 9 Add. MS. 58440, fols. 64-6.
10 Add. MS. 58441, fol. 68b.
11 Add. MS. 58440, fol. 135.
12 Ibid., fols. 111-13.
13 Ibid., fol. 138; cf. *Europa in Limbo*, p. 186.
14 Add. MS. 58440, fol. 141.
15 Ibid., fol. 204.
16 Add. MS. 58441, fols. 49-52, 57-63; cf. *Europa in Limbo*, pp. 312-17.
17 Add. MS. 58440, fol. 90.
18 Ibid., fol. 194b.
19 Add. MS. 58441, fols. 78b, 79.
20 Ibid., fol. 30.
21 Add. MS. 58440, fol. 107b.
22 Add. MS. 58441, fol. 86.
23 Ibid., fol. 116.
24 Ibid., fol. 115.
25 Ibid., fol. 128b.
26 Ibid., fol. 173.
27 *La Fable Anglaise* (1943). I have not seen Briffault's other works from this period, *La democratie, instrument de la duperie anglaise* (1941) and *L'Inde et l'Angleterre* (1942).
28 Stella Bowen, *Drawn From Life* (1941), p. 234.