‘NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO BE HAPPY IN THIS BRUTAL WORLD’

JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN’S FIRST FORTY YEARS

Peter T. Marsh

Joseph Chamberlain was bred for business and was brilliant at it. Descended from generations of cordwainers or manufacturers of leather shoes, he was brought up, educated and apprenticed to follow in their footsteps. In view of the distinction he later acquired in public life and politics, it is tempting to look for influences in his early life that prepared him for that career and to suspect that at least subconsciously he was grooming himself for it. But that was not the objective. He received an education fitted to the rising industrial economy, and it fully excited his imagination. He might ultimately have made an even greater, more durable mark as one of the titans of modern industry – as a Carnegie, say, or a Siemens – than he did in British and imperial politics. But he was driven to choose otherwise as much by bereavement and remarriage as by his worried recognition of the socio-economic consequences of his industrial success.

The young Joseph Chamberlain was a highly educated, ambitious individual from a well-established manufacturing family.

Joseph Chamberlain was educated in schools that stressed modern subjects appropriate for commerce and industry rather than the classical subjects in which the ruling elite took pride. He followed a curriculum that stressed mathematics, science and French as well as Latin. When his understanding of mathematics exceeded that of his schoolmaster, young Joseph was sent to University College School, a distinguished unsectarian academy in London, where he carried away prizes in mathematics, hydrostatics and French. During school vacations he attended lectures on chemistry and electricity at the Polytechnic Institution, and he loved the scientific exhibits that actually worked.

However utilitarian, the outlook that his family and education instilled in him was not narrow. His cordwaining forebears were as alert to the political interests of their business as was the landed elite. The cultural concerns of his Unitarian family, with its connections to rationalist admirers of Joseph Priestley and the more Romantic school of James and Harriet Martineau, were wider than was common among the landed classes. Joseph Chamberlain was given a taste for foreign travel at a younger age than most aristocrats on the Grand Tour. He saw the Continent as a market as well as the scene of violent political turmoil.

John Sutton Nettlefold's discovery of an American patent for the mass production of wood screws at the Great Exhibition of 1851 was the catalyst for the establishment of his phenomenally successful partnership with Joseph Chamberlain.

When his formal education came to an end at the age of sixteen customary in the business community, he was apprenticed to the family cordwaining business on Milk Street in the City of London. He began at a bench to familiarise himself with the craft of shoemaking. His father then transferred him to the bookkeeping office to master the practices of accountancy that lay at the heart of the family's enterprise. This apprenticeship was cut short after little more than a year when he was despatched to look after the large investment that his father had just made in the wood-screw making business of his maternal uncle, John Sutton Nettlefold, in Birmingham. It was there that Joseph Chamberlain would display his brilliance as an industrialist.

Screw Making

The timing of his debut in business could scarcely have been better. Chamberlain and Britain's industrial revolution reached prosperous maturity together. Both stories began with the exhibition of the world's industrial achievements at the Crystal Palace in 1851. Both stories reached their climax twenty years later with the Franco-Prussian War which carried the metal manufacturing of the West Midlands to fever pitch. Chamberlain terminated his business career in 1874 just before the Great Depression took hold.

The mortality rate among businesses in this era of opportunity ran nonetheless high. Enterprises like the one that Chamberlain embarked upon needed some degree of monopoly power, some crucial advance in industrial technology to take advantage of these times. John Sutton Nettlefold had discovered such a breakthrough at the Crystal Palace in an American patent for the mass production of improved wood screws at lower prices. But the price for exclusive rights to the patent in Britain and enough machines to exploit its potential was set at £30,000, beyond Nettlefold's means. And even that sum would not be enough. Nettlefold realised that mass production also required construction of a large factory of advanced design of which there were as yet few in Birmingham to house big steam-powered machinery safely without risk to the machine minders.

Nettlefold and Chamberlain

After lengthy deliberation, he asked his brother-in-law in London, young Joseph's father also called Joseph, for £10,000 to finance the plant and machinery. Unimpressed by the prospects for continued growth in cordwaining, Joseph Chamberlain senior agreed, and he later assumed an equal share with Nettlefold in their screw making enterprise, now called Nettlefold and Chamberlain. Young Joseph

was despatched to look after the initial investment in Birmingham and remained manager on the spot until joined by his father nine years later.

After familiarising himself with the bookkeeping of the business, young Joseph involved himself with the wholesaling. He worked closely with John Sutton Nettlefold's son, another Joseph, young Chamberlain taking charge of marketing while young Nettlefold, trained as an engineer, took over the production. These four men, fathers and sons, took a set of decisions in the early 1860s which gave them monopolistic dominance in their industry.

To take advantage of Britain's low raw material costs, they extended their production vertically to include ironworks, the drawing of wire from which screws were made, and eventually the production of steel rods. These extensions of their mass production enabled them to slash their prices and thus force their main local rivals to sell out to them.

Chamberlain's Business Skills

Meanwhile young Joseph Chamberlain took a lead in the committee that turned Lloyds of Birmingham from a private into a public bank. He joined the central core of its board of directors and thus enhanced Nettlefold and Chamberlain's access to capital. Now producing nearly seventy per cent of Birmingham's output of screws at a tenth of their cost price at the beginning of the century, he extended their market all over the British Isles and then across the Channel. He negotiated with the Midland Railway, the Great Western Railway and the Shropshire Union Canal Company for special rates for his goods in return for his employment of their facilities.

Still in his twenties and working from the central offices of Nettlefold and Chamberlain on Broad Street in Birmingham, he also dealt with a steady succession of provincial and foreign agents and independent middlemen who marketed the wares of the firm. In these conversations he established the discounting arrangements and percentage scales that were to dominate the worldwide screw making industry for the next hundred years. The percentage scales were twofold. One concerned the percentage off full list price, in other words the wholesale discount that Joseph would offer the middleman. The other percentage specified the terms of credit that the middleman could expect. The near monopoly which Nettlefold and Chamberlain built up depended as much upon these marketing arrangements as upon superiority in production. Joseph also scrutinised the costs of every item, stage and location in the processes of production and marketing to maximise the firm's economies of scale.

Overseas Business Success

He secured some of his most remarkable marketing successes overseas. Overcoming what was meant to be a prohibitive tariff around the American home of the original patent, he sustained a volume of sales to the United States large enough to make the American manufacturer pay Nettlefold and Chamberlain a large

As this 1883 *Punch* cartoon shows, Chamberlain never forgot - and was never allowed to forget - his middle-class manufacturing background.

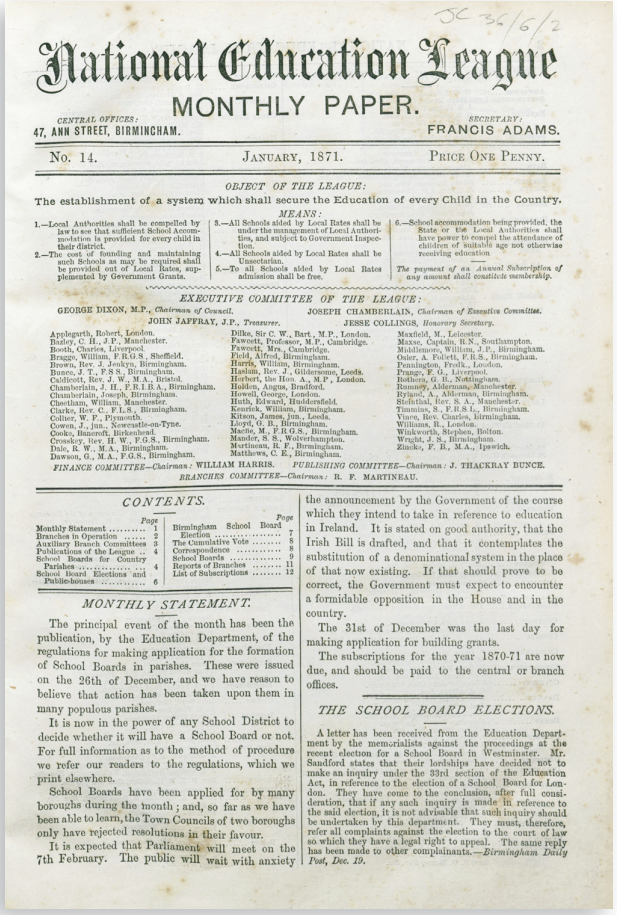
annual sum simply to stay away. Stiffer competition in the lucrative Continental market came from two French firms. With the lesser of the two, Chamberlain negotiated for a grand division of the Continent into spheres of influence, Nettlefold and Chamberlain taking the markets washed by the sea, leaving landlocked countries to the French firm. He could not, however, make headway against the great Parisian firm Jappy Frères until German forces in the Franco-Prussian War surrounded Paris, cutting Jappy Frères off from its customers. Exploiting this opportunity to the full, Nettlefold produced and Chamberlain marketed furiously throughout the siege of Paris, expanding their factory for the purpose. Joseph Chamberlain could rightly boast that Nettlefold and Chamberlain were the 'Screw Kings'.

Marriage and the Death of his First Wife

But that achievement no longer satisfied him. Nettlefold and Chamberlain had achieved dominance in their industry by 1867 and were piling up increasing profits, more than enough to confirm the industrial aspirations of Joseph Chamberlain, now thirty. But he had lost heart and been bereft of his sense of direction four years earlier when his wife Harriet née Kenrick died in childbirth. Just the right partner for the young industrialist, Harriet was the

daughter of a flourishing hollow-ware manufacturer in West Bromwich. The marriage was blissfully happy, moving Joseph after seven years in solitary lodgings into a spacious house where he also discovered the delights of gardening. Harriet's brother William became Joseph's closest friend, closer even than his own brothers; and William married Joseph's eldest sister Mary, further interweaving the network of families. Harriet gave birth to a daughter, Beatrice, and a year later a son, Austen, both deliveries proceeding smoothly. But after the birth of Austen she lapsed into puerperal fever and died.

Her death left Joseph distraught. 'There is nothing in which I was engaged,' he wrote to her sister, 'none of my actions, hardly any of my thoughts that she did not share & that have not lost with her all present hold & interest.' He fled from the house that Harriet and he had loved, and took refuge with his infants in the home of her parents. Abandoning the societies whose activities he had enjoyed, he threw himself with desperate concentration into his business.



National Education League

MONTHLY PAPER.

CENTRAL OFFICES: 47, ANN STREET, BIRMINGHAM. SECRETARY: FRANCIS ADAMS.

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OBJECT OF THE LEAGUE:

The establishment of a system which shall secure the Education of every Child in the Country.

MEANS:

1.—Local Authorities shall be compelled by law to see that sufficient School Accommodation is provided for every child in their district.

2.—The cost of founding and maintaining such Schools as may be required shall be provided out of Local Rates, supplemented by Government Grants.

3.—All Schools aided by Local Rates shall be under the management of Local Authorities, and subject to Government Inspection.

4.—All Schools aided by Local Rates shall be Unsectarian.

5.—To all Schools aided by Local Rates admission shall be free.

6.—School accommodation being provided, the State or the Local Authorities shall have power to compel the attendance of children of suitable age not otherwise receiving education

The payment of an Annual Subscription of any amount shall constitute membership.

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CONTENTS.

MONTHLY STATEMENT.

The principal event of the month has been the publication, by the Education Department, of the regulations for making application for the formation of School Boards in parishes. These were issued on the 26th of December, and we have reason to believe that action has been taken upon them in many populous parishes.

It is now in the power of any School District to decide whether it will have a School Board or not. For full information as to the method of procedure we refer our readers to the regulations, which we print elsewhere.

School Boards have been applied for by many boroughs during the month; and, so far as we have been able to learn, the Town Councils of two boroughs only have rejected resolutions in their favour.

It is expected that Parliament will meet on the 7th February. The public will wait with anxiety the announcement by the Government of the course which they intend to take in reference to education in Ireland. It is stated on good authority, that the Irish Bill is drafted, and that it contemplates the substitution of a denominational system in the place of that now existing. If that should prove to be correct, the Government must expect to encounter a formidable opposition in the House and in the country.

The 31st of December was the last day for making application for building grants.

The subscriptions for the year 1870-71 are now due, and should be paid to the central or branch offices.

THE SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS.

A letter has been received from the Education Department by the memorialists against the proceedings at the recent election for a School Board in Westminster. Mr. Sandford states that their lordships have decided not to make an inquiry under the 33rd section of the Education Act, in reference to the election of a School Board for London. They have come to the conclusion, after full consideration, that if any such inquiry is made in reference to the said election, it is not advisable that such inquiry should be undertaken by this department. They must, therefore, refer all complaints against the election to the court of law to which they have a legal right to appeal. The same reply has been made to other complainants.—*Birmingham Daily Post, Dec. 19.*

Page from the *National Education League's Monthly Paper*, January 1871.

Chamberlain and Public Affairs

But the rewards of industry no longer satisfied his restless spirit – and he became aware of its social costs. Mid-nineteenth-century Birmingham was admired for the social cohesion produced by its host of small workshops which brought small masters and skilled labour together more effectively than in the great factory-based textile industries of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Joseph Chamberlain was the first businessman to notice that large industries like his own undermined that cohesion. He told the British Association, when it came to Birmingham in 1866, that a 'revolution … is taking place in the principal hardware trades, and … is assimilating the town to the great seats of manufacture in the North, and depriving it of its special characteristic, viz., the number of its small manufactures, which has hitherto materially influenced its social and commercial prosperity as well as its politics.'

The following year the newly elected mayor of Birmingham, George Dixon, invited Chamberlain to a discussion on the dearth of provision for elementary education in Birmingham. Dixon and Chamberlain had toyed with the idea of giving employees in responsible positions a share in the profits of the businesses for which they worked. They had, however, concluded that their purpose would be served more comprehensively by provision of elementary schooling for the working class. Dixon and Chamberlain set to work organising the National Education League (NEL), with Dixon as president and Chamberlain chair of the executive committee.

His Second Marriage and Radical Campaigning

That summer, four years after Harriet's death, Chamberlain met and later married her first cousin, Florence Kenrick. At nineteen much younger than Joseph, and quiet and diffident where he was brash and impulsive, Florence would nonetheless confirm and intensify his burgeoning social concerns. During her teenage years she had become, as her sister later recalled, 'a favourite companion of her elder brothers & father for she had read so much & thought so deeply on what she read [that] it was a pleasure for people with minds much more mature to talk with her'. Gently but firmly Florence helped to transform Joseph from a socially aware industrialist into an industrially knowledgeable Radical politician. In 1869, when leading spirits in the NEL urged him to stand for election to the town council, she encouraged him to do so. She clipped out, bound and indexed press reports of his subsequent speeches and other extracts for speaking purposes. Continuing her education through night classes, she was committed to the advancement of women. She edited the manifestos of the new Radicalism which Joseph issued in the *Fortnightly Review*. The two of them discussed each step in his unfolding campaign.

Meanwhile Joseph's cost accounting at Nettlefold and Chamberlain sharpened his perception of the benefits that capital and labour could derive from cooperating with each other. Since 1864 he had been compiling an abstract of how the wages paid at his firm's main mill affected the cost per unit of its products. Over the next six years, the productivity of this workforce rose. But there was a slight deterioration in 1871 when the mill hands worked through many a night to fill the orders the Franco-Prussian War brought in. That deterioration was instructive: productivity lessened as the working day lengthened. Accordingly, the following year Nettlefold and Chamberlain reduced the working day at their main mill to nine hours, though still for a six-day week. The productivity of their work force was subsequently further improved.

Mayor of Birmingham and the Death of his Second Wife

By 1873 Joseph's political concerns as an advanced Radical were swallowing up his industrial interests. The civic reformers of Birmingham put him forward as their candidate for mayor, and he sought election to Parliament at Sheffield as 'a working man's representative'. Later that year he was elected as mayor and handed the records of his commercial transactions over to Joseph Nettlefold. Chamberlain was defeated at Sheffield in the New Year but, ever the fighter, defeat only confirmed his commitment to politics. The following summer he and his family sold their half of their industrial partnership to the Nettlefolds, giving Chamberlain enough to maintain himself in affluence for the rest of his life.

A tragic twist in this change of career lay ahead, however. Re-elected mayor of Birmingham for another year, he secured consent from the council early in 1875 for civic acquisition of the company that provided the town with water, a measure that brought his accomplishment as mayor to a height that has commanded admiration in Birmingham from that day to this. But suddenly and unexpectedly, Florence like Harriet died in childbirth. She had given birth to a child every year or two since her marriage, but her health, though never robust, had not been particularly threatened in these deliveries. This time, after giving birth to twins, minutes after the doctor reported that all was well, she fainted and died.

Secretary, editor, hostess and counsellor, she had grown closer to Joseph than anyone had before or would do after. Ever more interested in the advancement of women, she had encouraged him to support women's suffrage. She hoped that he would secure election to the House of Commons and looked forward to political life in London.

Chamberlain's Changing Personality

Ripped up from his roots, Joseph fled the country without knowing where he was going. Upon his eventual return he attempted, as after the death of Harriet, to save himself through frantic work, this time in public service rather than industry. But he reacted to his personal loss with anger slow to cool, and it left him hard. He no longer responded sympathetically to individual misfortunes: as he exclaimed to a friend: 'No one has the right to be happy in this brutal world.' He turned against the women's movement. And his Radicalism lost the moral warmth with which Florence might have invested it.

Peter T. Marsh is Honorary Professor of History at the University of Birmingham.

Further Reading

E.P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth-Century Urban Government* (Edward Arnold, 1973).

Peter T. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain, Entrepreneur in Politics* (Yale University Press, 1994).

Peter T. Marsh, *The Chamberlain Litany: Letters within a Governing Family from Empire to Appeasement* (Haus Books, 2010).

Chamberlain giving a speech at Bingley Hall, Birmingham in 1903. The two loaves reveal his focus upon the cost of bread. The image is a graphical representation of his local support.