

S.C.A.P.A. Why it Exists : What it may Hope to do.

HARDLY any one now-a-days pretends to be satisfied with the aspect of out-of-door England. We claim to be more enlightened than our grandfathers and to be more cultured than other nations that have not had our advantages. Yet when we compare a London street to-day with a London street as it was even at the beginning of the century, we feel that there has been a grievous change for the worse, and those who travel by rail or road have little reason to congratulate themselves, as regards many of the objects presented to their view, on the march of civilization. At intervals a cry goes up in the newspapers. Ejaculations more or less forcible, attest the frequent sorrow of the wayfarer or passenger. Yet still the practice which destroys beauty and repose continues to grow. Some resign themselves to despair and say that the instinct of advertising is irresistible, and that there is nothing for it but to endure. It is an industrial age, we are told ; and the assumption is that the wholesale destruction of the pleasure to be derived from rural sights or from the varied interests of every day scenes is a price we must resign ourselves to pay as a sop to the beneficent demon of Trade Competition. That is not the view of those for whom I speak. They hold that the productiveness of industry depends no more upon these glaring advertisements than the growth of roses does upon the existence of the aphid. People would get the useful commodities they want as easily and at least as cheaply if these

eyesores were not scattered broadcast over the face of the land. They hold further that the best part of the wealth of the country is the goodliness of its aspect; that it is absurd to talk of English freedom and prosperity, and the greatness of our Imperial mission, if no regard be paid to the beauty of landscape, to dignity and propriety in the common round. We advocate common sense, consistency, public spirit. We are proud of our fatherland, and refuse to accept the caprice of the advertising contractor as the arbiter of its Fate. We care for our countrymen, and wish, as far as we can, to make the national domain pleasant and worthy of a great people. We hold that the community, in its use of public places, should not be forced to accept the standard of taste adopted by the least sensitive or scrupulous of its members.

But we feel, too, that if we are to effect any real good, we must devote thought and attention to the controversial aspects of the subject and must be prepared to exercise a spirit of rational compromise. We have, in brief, to treat the matter as seriously as we do other social and political questions of a more immediately exciting character, though perhaps of less lasting moment.

A good deal of harm, I am convinced, has been done by the disdain felt or affected by people of taste for anything that is not in itself positively admirable. The English language, unfortunately, is deficient in terms to denote the conditions which lie midway between beauty and repulsiveness. Thus, in the literature of our Society, we have fallen back upon such phrases as "dignity," "decency," "comeliness," "propriety," "interest," "congruity," "repose." For myself I feel that everything in nature pleases, and that the most ignoble street—yes, even when it is flanked by rows of builders' cottages—may be harmless in itself and even pleasant as a background for the daily incidents of human life. I do not admit that a railway station is intrinsically dull or ugly. Every scene has in it some element that may be "spoilt" by wanton intrusions of the advertising category, and there is nothing so hopeless as not to be susceptible of improvement, if

only the thing be absent which kills all possibility of picturesque effect. It is because the community did not in good time keep the practice under due control in towns, that it has possession now of the fields and woods and river banks. The modern advertiser does not discriminate. The contractor to whom he resigns the office of distributing his placards has not the faculty of nice distinction between what is fine and what is common-place.

The question now is whether anything can be done to stay the plague.

Different temperaments appear to be unequally affected by the various forms of advertising disfigurements. Some feel what they call the profanation of scenery, others lament the extinction of dignity and picturesque possibilities in towns. To these, the poster, to those, the metal plaque or field board, is the peculiar object of abhorrence. One school of feeling resents the personal annoyance involved in the pitiless iteration of a puff; another dislikes the vulgarity or impropriety of certain classes of pictorial advertisements. In one quarter the things are detested as intrinsically eyesores; in others, there is a tolerance, if not an appreciation, of the medley of colours, and it is only on the score of violent incongruity with the surroundings that repugnance is expressed.

I find that in considering the question of remedy, each of the classes I have roughly indicated is apt to treat its own grievance as the only one that practical philosophy should take note of, and that each looks for the immediate and direct mitigation of its own sufferings. Unless this be promised, there is a tendency to say dogmatically that "nothing can be done."

My object in this paper is to sketch my own conclusions as to what is within the scope of reasonable effort. I hope that what I set down will find a large acceptance amongst those who have tried to think the subject out. Nor do I believe that any members will find in it very much to dissent from.

We must, I think, dismiss the hope of diminishing at

any very early period, or to any serious extent, the practice of "catching the eye" by a more or less flaring device; but we may arrest the spread of the evil, and we may start scattered oases of blissful repose which, little by little, will extend their borders or their influence, till, at last, a reasonable standard of propriety in this matter becomes habitual.

As to method, we must be content to act on the lines followed by the pioneers in other great movements of our time. I say "other great movements," for surely to save from destruction that national wealth which consists in beauty or dignity of aspect is a patriotic duty. We are striving to add to the happiness of the lives of all who are in any degree sensitive to the charms of unspoilt nature, and to whom deformity and vulgar incongruity cause distress. We are trying to lessen the disadvantages of life in cities by saving the country and the avenues of access to it from the worst features of the town. We want to make the daily journey from home to office or workshop, which forms a large part of the out-door life of so many of our people, as refreshing and as little irksome as the necessary conditions of modern society permit. To appreciate the fundamental importance of our efforts is to guarantee their ultimate success. But those who feel the excellence of the end must themselves be unselfish enough to contribute by personal exertion to its attainment. It will not be enough (though it is much) to send a yearly half-crown to our Society and leave the rest to chance and the Council. We can only act through our members, who, if they wish to help, must give some serious thought to the practical philosophy of the subject. Only thus can they effectively propagate the sound faith.

As encouraging and suggestive illustrations of what has been done in the past, I may select, out of many, two: the progress of sanitation and the growth of a sound popular sentiment regarding cruelty to children and to animals. (A comforting example in a cognate sphere is to be found in the victory achieved by the Commons Preservation Society over early prejudices and prognostics.)

In the cases I have named, a certain amount of legislation was necessary ; and some of the provisions may even be described as inquisitorial. In the main, the appeal was to common-sense, to enlightened self-interest, and to good feeling. Yet, without some little infusion of authoritative regulation, the appeal would have been in vain. The improvement in public feeling led to Acts of Parliament ; the Acts of Parliament in turn sanctioned and stimulated the development of the better ideas. The result is that, whereas in Italy regard for animals is laughed at as "impracticable sentimentality," it is accepted with us as a fundamental instinct. So, as to public hygiene, the wise people fifty years ago demonstrated to their own satisfaction that only crack-brained folly could imagine that English people would stand "dictation" in such matters. Yet now every one takes for granted the need of municipal supervision. The pertinence of such facts of history as these to the problem whether advertising disfigurement can or cannot be controlled is obvious.

The conditions of success, in my judgment, are to base every claim for legislative or administrative relief on broad public grounds, to assert courageously and consistently the fundamental doctrine that the protection of the amenities of aspect in our country is a public interest, in exactly the same sense as the defence of our shores from invasion, or the increase of the forms of wealth that admit of a money valuation. To help us in securing acceptance for this neglected truism, we have the circumstance that every year considerable sums are spent by the State for the purpose of training the eye to see and the hand to minister to the delight of the eye ; in maintaining museums and picture galleries ; in providing parks and gardens, and securing architectural effect in public buildings.

We should accept the propagation of this principle, not in the hope of obtaining personal deliverance from the particular nuisance that touches us most nearly, but on large grounds of patriotic duty.

Also, we have to recognise the real nature of the evil.

Analysis pushed to the last will, I think, show that it is the abuse of the privilege of using the Letters of the Alphabet or other emblems with a view to attracting the notice of passers-by that threatens landscape and architecture with eclipse. We need not, I think, vex our souls overmuch in denouncing the "greed" which prompts the showmen. It is the loss to the people in general that should affect us. We have to acknowledge that advertising in the strict sense is not the sole enemy. The things with which a good many opulent traders in the Cities of London and Westminster plaster their own premises are quite as much to be deplored as the many ill-placed and worse decorated hoardings. I certainly do not contemplate as immediately practicable any interference with the use an owner may make of his own house front with a view to catching custom. But I have argued elsewhere that some day municipalities will be forced to limit by rigid bye-laws the dimensions of signboards, the size of letters to be employed, and the height above the ground at which they may be affixed. The present competition in stupendousness and aggressiveness cannot go on for ever. The shopkeepers will need regulation to protect them from each other, and people who want to buy will insist on being allowed to find the shop they are in search of. At present identity is lost in the chaos of catchpenny inscriptions.

If, in a crowded room, every one talks gently to his neighbour, there is a chance that all the groups will be able to converse; but if the speakers go on competitively raising their pitch, no one will be able to hear in the babel of shouts. Is it necessary to point the meaning of the parable?

But while I thus plead for uncompromising breath in the assertion of the ultimate Ideal, I am, I believe, infinitely more humble in my requirements and expectations—for the passing hour—than the reader, who has perhaps already made up his mind that I am extravagant and visionary. I set no limit to what may be achieved in the future. I am content with the assertion of sound principle on the most minute scale in the present.

Let me illustrate my conception of the mode in which reform will slowly evolve itself by a reference to the Rural Advertisements Bill which Mr. Boulnois introduced in the Session of 1894.

Briefly, the measure gives County Councils power to regulate advertising in non-urban districts. They may prohibit absolutely, or may impose conditions, or may allow things to remain as they are. Personally, I should have preferred to make District Councils the authority, or (had the exigencies of drafting permitted) to make (by more explicit provisions) the power of control flexible, allowing the public authority to interfere in the particular instances where there is a practical consensus of local opinion that advertising is an intolerable eyesore or a grievous impairment of the amenities of the spot. But, taking the Bill as it stands, the provisions would no doubt be administered in conformity with this conception.

Assuming that the proposal becomes law, it must be the first object of the members of our Society to induce their several County Councillors to avail themselves of its provisions. A bye-law, for example, might be proposed whereby advertising would be allowed only in places and in forms sanctioned by the Council. What places and forms should the Council sanction? In other words, what places and forms should it refuse to approve? The painted boards in fields, the sporadic poster, the reiterated metal plaque, will occur at once to many as appropriate objects for repression. But surrounding circumstances, and, above all, the state of local opinion, would appear to be the better criterion. An object might be comparatively blameless in one place that is an outrage in another. The great point is to concentrate effort at first on lines which will attract support rather than challenge violent opposition. Let me indicate a few cases in which possibly there may be a firm basis for invoking authority to interfere.

Any very glaring advertising eyesore in a prominent position in a fashionable seaside resort.

The bills stuck on walls and cliffs.

Bills stuck, against the will of the owner, on the gates or palings of private grounds.

The peculiarly odious quack advertisements that are found so often by the rural roadsides.

Sky signs and painted boards in places which, to the eye of the average cyclist are of singular beauty, and which the amateur photographer would consider it wicked to spoil.

Any grossly offensive display in the immediate neighbourhood of buildings or sites of particular architectural interest, or of national importance.

Residents and house owners in a quiet suburban road would often value greatly any means of preventing the erection on a vacant spot of a hoarding which mars or bars the view.

Some who profess to have the well-being of the farmer at heart have pleaded that in these hard times it is unkind to deprive the agricultural interest of the subsidy it receives from the pill proprietors. Many things may be said in reply, but here I care to meet the objectors on their own ground. (1) The number of persons who receive even the miserable doles in question is inconsiderable in comparison with the whole body of agriculturists. (2) The destruction of the calm of English scenery tends to drive well-to-do holiday folk to the continent ; it diminishes the inducement to live in the country ; thus the farmers lose excellent local customers for dairy produce, and owners of property lose their rents, owners of vehicles their fares, and so on. Travellers do not always analyse their motives, but there is no doubt that the foreign pleasure resorts benefit at the expense of English towns and villages, because they are decidedly freer from these affronts to the eye. (3) The distressed farmers, by identifying themselves with the disfigurers would estrange that large class of nature-lovers who are peculiarly disposed to favour measures for keeping a prosperous population on the soil.

There is no reason why the better organised bill-posting interest should be hostile to restraint in cases of

recognised abuse. It is not contemplated to limit materially the use of posters—in proper places. Even if the available wall space were reduced, the result would be to secure a better type of poster, and to lead to their being changed more frequently. This would be good for the new order of artists and craftsmen who produce the æsthetic poster. The wielders of the paste-brush would not be impoverished, and the respectable employers would gain by the extinction of their traditional enemy—the “flying bill-sticker.”¹

We are often reminded of the number of persons who are interested directly or indirectly in the practice which we condemn. No doubt this is an element of difficulty, for business men are generally reluctant to be disturbed in any line to which they are accustomed. But we ought not to forget that the balance even of self-regarding feeling is in our favour. To say nothing of the members of the community who have not the remotest connection with any trade in which spectacular advertising has become usual, but who have a very direct interest in the quiet enjoyment of the world around them, there are :—

The firms who do not advertise by placard, who do not wish to do so, and yet may at any time be forced to throw away their capital as a measure of self-defence against some pushing competitor.

The old-fashioned shopkeeper, who takes a pride in selling good things and exercising his judgment in select-

¹ It may be useful to indicate here our suggestions as to the rightful order in railway stations.

Nothing to be displayed which seen from outside would add to the disfiguring effect of the station.

Within the precincts, the parts where shrubs are growing, or gardens such as those with which the Directors of the North-Eastern Railway have refreshed their stations, to be wholly spared. For the rest all advertising announcements to be carefully arranged with regard to the architectural features. The station buildings to be designed with a view to affording the appropriate spaces for concentrated display. Paper posters to be encouraged in preference to the eternal plaque or frame.

ing the best and in finding that his customers depend upon his honour and experience.

The commercial traveller, who naturally feels chagrin at the substitution of mechanical puffery for intelligent business methods.

Cyclists and photographers : two classes which include many enthusiastic lovers of the unspoilt picturesque, and whose routes are now the mark for the spoilers' unceasing assault. Cyclists are most unjustly blamed as the profaners of rural sanctities. They are, in truth, the first victims of the persecution.

Everybody interested in a locality which is frequented because fresh and pretty, has an obvious inducement to protect the features which attract visitors or residents. Hotel proprietors, drivers, boatmen, and others of this class often fail to see this as individuals, but it may be impressed upon them as a class. In a tourist district, simplicity is the most valuable commercial asset.

We may take it that though those who are peculiarly sensitive to the annoyance, or alive to the harm done, are comparatively few, the majority of the nation are at the worst only apathetic or indolent. The modern highwayman has no real friends. If we are a minority we are at least in every element of strength not inferior to many interests whose victories are recorded in the Statute Book. Most reforms have been carried by minorities ; the essential point is the energy of the opposition, not the numbers of the attacking force.

Experience only can disclose how far the powers of control to be given by Mr. Boulnois's Bill will be utilised. But however modest may be the area of operation in the beginning, I, for one, can cheerfully and confidently leave the aftergrowth to the gentle fosterage of Time. The process of ameliorative change—as I conceive its working—may be compared to the action of beneficent microbes in the soil. If the first colony be once planted, the minute organisms will gradually subdue and convert the medium in which they multiply.

If advertising (in the monstrous forms with which our

Society alone has to do) had any necessary connection with the well-being of trade or production, we should have simply to submit to its extension as inevitable. But even from the point of view of the present race of advertisers, it has no inherent efficacy. What they each want is relative publicity. There are modes enough by which they can attain their end without devoting themselves to the progressive obliteration of the country. But in the absence of authoritative limitation, each tries to get the advantage over his competitors by using huger letters, and making a bigger blaze, and by emitting a vaster swarm of horrors. Many of those who have been drawn into the miserable struggle, consent with loathing, and only in desperate self-defence. They know that, at the best, they are simply neutralising the effect of their competitors' puffs,¹ and we have distinct assurance that most business men would welcome any regulation which would save them from the ruinous waste of capital. Consumers, it need not be added, would gain also in not having to pay, in the price of the goods, for the expense of the discomfort.

In anticipating that exercise of the power of regulation will spread gradually from the places in which bye-laws are first enforced to larger areas, I rely only on the instinct of imitation and of hand-to-mouth expediency, which, next to reverence for "what is usual," dominate the souls of, I fear, most of our municipal worthies. Let us assume that Bournemouth takes the initiative in common-sense regard for its amenities, and that it keeps its pier and its sea front generally free from anything that is exasperating. Torquay, meanwhile, allows the distributors of enamelled plates to work their wicked will. What will happen? Among those on whose patronage the prosperity of these health resorts depends, is unquestionably an appreciable percentage of persons to whom the resulting difference of aspect would be a material consideration. Year by year a larger number of those who were wrest-

¹ An exception ought perhaps to be allowed as regards specifics and other preparations, which depend on public credulity for their vogue.

ling with the problem of winter quarters would decide for Bournemouth. This is the sort of thing that even the Town Councillors of Torquay would in the long-run understand. If they have not foresight, they can at all events, see what is in front of their eyes, and very soon there would be a notice of motion to prohibit the things that "keep away the visitors, and give the place a bad name." Other aspiring watering places would follow suit.

What applies to health resorts would apply *mutatis mutandis* to the residential districts round our great towns. The foolish competition between tradesmen has led to the mischief. The sagacious competition between localities will, by degrees, narrow its range. Every assertion in practice of the rights of the seeing eye would propagate the doctrine that the eye *has* rights, and in the end, it may be, public opinion will be energetic enough to deal with forms of the evil that at present appear impregnably intrenched in general apathy or desponding resignation. The love of respectability is the ruling passion of the Briton, and the toleration of promiscuous placarding would shrink rapidly as soon as in a few centres of fashion it had been authoritatively pronounced "vulgar."

I do not suggest for one moment that there is ever likely to be a wholesale disappearance of useless or offensive *affiches*. No one prays for universal drab. There are bills and notices that we could ill spare, and a margin must be allowed for waste. As a Society we do not preach a wholesale crusade against hoardings or posters. Some tastes would really prefer the London streets as they are to what they might be, or were in the time when goods depended for their sale on the judgment of customers or the recommendations of respectable shopkeepers. I do not believe, but I am not in a position to deny, that what offends us positively brightens the life of some in the crowd, and that there are British artisans who love to be reminded as they walk along their homeward way that half a dozen different soaps and cocoas are respectively the only articles deserving the confidence of the people. Assume, for argument's sake, that human

nature has been perverted to this extent. That is no reason why we should not have a little variety—regions that are exempt, as well as those that are blessed with the emblazonments of the puffing dealers.

The working of the principle affirmed in the Rural Advertisements Act, will enable the doubt to be solved by experiment. We shall arrive at the scientific equilibrium between the two orders of taste. Where licence is preferred the licence will run riot, and there will be regulation where anarchy is felt to be a grievance. It is certainly not unduly sanguine to hope that the expanse where trade disfigurement is permitted will soon be diversified by many a spot where the quiet eye can count on repose.

But while there must be some little legal machinery of restraint, much may be done and must be done by the exercise of moral influence. To teach young people, and indeed old people, to appreciate and value all that is beautiful or interesting in their surroundings is the best way to arrest the march of defacement. I learn from an American sympathiser that in the United States, Village Improvement Societies are an institution. Now I have long wished to see Local Patriotic Associations established in English districts, which should have as their object to encourage the study of Botany and Zoology, of History and Biography, and of Literature in strict relation to the locality. There would be a library of books on subjects connected with the place, a collection of old engravings and pictures, a museum. But above all the association should be the guardian genius of the region, encouraging tree-planting (if desirable, and not otherwise), cottage gardening, and so on; and taking an interest in all sorts of things that would increase outdoor happiness, and have no pernicious effect upon the rates or the temper of local politicians.

In buying at shops; in looking for houses; or in taking lodgings, there are infinite opportunities for suggesting, in the most emphatic way, that quietness of aspect is a quality in a place that has even a commercial value.

Shareholders in railway, hotel, and trading companies, landowners and all who have concern with the letting of houses or sites are in a position to do much. If everyone who resents the catchpenny alphabetification of the visible universe would refuse to purchase the article puffed, the effect would be most wholesome. It is not merely the direct discouragement to the maker that would be beneficial; though the most hardened advertisers would not, I think, treat with entire indifference the prospect of losing the margin of custom represented by "the sentimentalists." But the chief advantage would be educational. The idea would be borne in on the mind of the shopkeepers affected that there really and truly is, among perfectly sane people who pay cash, a very robust feeling of opposition to practices which, in the absence of such indications, the excellent retailer might suppose to be applauded or condoned by the community at large.

Persistent protest in this practical form would, I am convinced, affect the attitude of many who now accept trade disfigurement as an iron law of modern life. From personal experience I can say that a sympathetic chord will often be awakened in the classes which are wrongly supposed to be devoid of sensibilities on this score. The cleavage of taste, according to my experience of life, runs through all the social strata. There are coarse and sensitive natures in every grade. A poor neighbour of my own once (to my knowledge) banished a certain card from the window of her little establishment, because, as she said, she did not want it "to look like a rag and bone shop." Would that all the noble directors of trading companies had the same refined scruples! I think much may be done to enlist the goodwill of the many for our effort, and I am strongly in favour of the use of every form of propaganda which is consistent with rigid adherence to truth, charity and right feeling. A method may be homely and yet honourable. Need I enlarge on the truth that the desecration of the country is, in a peculiar degree, a wrong to those who are least blessed with health and leisure and opportunities of distant travel? The common round is the poor man's sole domain.

Taxation is often advocated, and with good reason. Any impost would undoubtedly reduce the volume of spectacular advertisement, and in this way would do sensible good. But it would not give necessarily any protection against the grossest cases of specific outrage.

One word as to the provisions of the Rural Advertisements Bill in their relation to the doctrine of individualism and liberty. If ever a measure was imperatively needed to vindicate both these principles, ours is that measure. It enables a community to save its members from attacks on their personal rights which they are individually incapable of repelling. If the erections of the pill-men were outside the pale of the law, there would be no difficulty about settling the question. *Solvitur comburendo*. But so long as the law protects the woodwork and the paint from the just vengeance of the aggrieved traveller, so long it must defend the traveller from the woodwork and the paint.

It has long been made penal by Statute to solicit money by personal application in the thoroughfares. Why should the attempt to attract custom by placards claim exemption from all restraint?

There is no suggestion of interfering with the nostrum-mongers in the conduct of their own affairs. They can set up as many of their field boards as they please in their own parks, and tapestry their Elizabethan dining halls with their bills. But when they multiply these objects with the sole purpose of practising on the eyes of those who are using a public thoroughfare, the wayfarers are entitled to decide what the bounds of endurance shall be.

Our method is not rightly described as "compulsion." Rather we seek to have a standard defined to which people will conform as readily as they now do to the thousand and one rules on which the general convenience depends, and to which obedience becomes an instinct.

Let it be said, in conclusion, as a spur to patriotic ardour, that we should think not only of the condition of our own streets and fields to-day under the hands of the advertisers, but of the future which their insensate

struggle to outblazon each other ordains for England in the next decade.

RICHARDSON EVANS, *Hon. Sec.*

NOTE.

The following is the text of the Rural Advertisements Bill :—

(1) The power of a County Council to make bye-laws conferred by Section 16 of the Local Government Act, 1888, shall, subject to the provisions of that section, extend to bye-laws :—

(a) For regulating or prohibiting the erection or placing of advertisements in or upon any arable or pasture land, woodland, garden, public park, common, or waste land, foreshore, or any inland or tidal water.

(b) For enforcing the removal of advertisements erected or placed in contravention of the bye-laws.

(c) For enforcing the removal, within a prescribed time—not being less than one year after the bye-laws come into operation—of any advertisements erected or placed before the making of the bye-laws in such a manner as would be in contravention of the bye-laws, if the same had been previously made.

(2) Nothing in any bye-law to be made under this Act shall affect any advertisement erected or placed either before or after the passing of this Act, upon any premises and relating solely to any trade, business, or business transaction carried on, or proposed to be carried on, or any entertainment or meeting held or to be held, upon or in relation to the said premises or to any property thereon.

(3) This Act shall not apply to or have any effect in the administrative County of London or in any [municipal] borough.

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