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The Other Cyrus Eaton

by

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The Other Cyrus Eaton

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For years, Cyrus Eaton the Cleveland industrialist and financier has been a familiar figure to newspaper readers. But there is another, less familiar Eaton—who found philosophy his favorite subject at college, and who very early took a liking to literature, biography and history, and has continued his interest in these fields throughout his life. This Eaton is familiar with the philosophy of John Dewey, who visited him at his Nova Scotia home every summer for many years; and also with A. Eustace Haydon's work in comparative religion. (Dr. Haydon's book, *Biography of the Gods*, was dedicated to Mr. Eaton.) H. L. Mencken too was a close personal friend.

Writing in *The Humanist* in 1945, Mr. Eaton expressed approval of some British liberal writers' view that

... A new synthesis of all our knowledge is needed to bring into proper perspective with the rest of our thinking the discoveries of the last two generations in the fields of biology, psychology, anthropology, chemistry and physics.

But Mr. Eaton parted company with these British liberals at the point where they proposed socialism as the indispensable basis of an equitable social order. He said,

While conceding that socialism has its merits, I personally prefer private property in a true democracy, and further believe that, under whatever system, hard work (mental or manual) and discipline of mind and emotion, not the system itself, lead man to the highest and best of which he is capable.

In a concluding paragraph, Mr. Eaton made a strong plea for freedom of thought and expression in the United States:

Here in America, "the land of the free and the home of the brave," our first task is to strive for the emancipated mind. Clearly, in the United States of today, it is not prudent, particularly for the statesman, the editor and the teacher, to question the prevailing orthodoxy, based though it is on oriental superstitions that cannot much longer sustain the western world. Somehow, we in America must become free enough to seek the truth and brave enough to utter it.

In 1946, Mr. Eaton protested an effort by Clare Booth Luce to perpetuate one of the most commonplace of fallacies: that unbelief is synonymous with Communism. In a letter published in the New York Herald Tribune on November 24, he wrote:

A careful canvass persuades me that 75 per cent of American scholars, scientists and historians do not believe, with Mrs. Luce, that life on this planet is a prelude to heaven or hell or that we are children of a personal heavenly Father. Their

conviction is that we should strive for the abundant life here and now, without reference to the supernatural or to the hypothetical hereafter. Yet, not for a moment do most of them hold that Communism is an ideal or even a desirable form of society. . . . Mrs. Luce is at great pains to point out that members of the Communist party are atheists. From this it does not follow, however, that all Communists have always been atheists, nor that all atheists are always Communists.

For the last ten years, Mr. Eaton has been among the most energetic men on the American and Canadian business scene, and much of his time has been occupied with varied and far-reaching financial and industrial enterprises. Now a director of leading steel, iron ore, coal, and public utility companies, Chairman of the Board of the Chesapeake and Ohio railroad, and a trustee of several universities, he continues a philosopher and a humanist. But now it is a mellowed Eaton, concerned above all for understanding among the peoples of the world. When *Life* magazine began its series on world religions last year, Mr. Eaton's prompt letter of commendation appeared in its correspondence column. At that time he wrote to us,

The first excellent article . . . is written in lucid and lively prose, . . . conforms to the highest standards of scholarship, and . . . its appearance in *Life* is significant. There is nothing that the people of the United States need more than an education in world religions and an emancipation from the superstition and ignorance that prevail among us concerning man's place in the universe.

Last spring the report came that Cyrus Eaton was establishing a summer retreat at his vacation home near his birthplace in Pugwash, Nova Scotia, to which he planned to invite eminent thinkers from many fields and many countries. Among the guests at the first gathering were Cyril James, Principal and Vice Chancellor of McGill University; John Wilson, Egyptologist of the University of Chicago; Julian Boyd, professor of history at Princeton and editor of the Jefferson papers; historian Henry Steele Commager; and Julian Huxley. Much of the time was spent in a holiday spirit at various recreational activities. There were no formal discussions, but conversation was facile and fruitful. Out of it all came plans for several similar sessions this coming summer, conceived in the grand manner as a contribution to the world's greatest need: the need for peace and mutual understanding.

It was to find out more about what had happened at Pugwash and what was planned for summers to come that we sought an interview with Mr. Eaton. He named a time for the appointment in his quiet suite of offices high in the Terminal Tower in Cleveland, and arrived promptly upon the hour. When we asked about plans for Pugwash, we found that the program for 1956 is related to the felt need for world understanding and co-operation. Like his friend, Cleveland attorney Homer H. Johnson (former director of the national Chamber of Commerce, and a War Department official under Woodrow Wilson), Cyrus Eaton believes in the possibility—indeed, the necessity—of “co-

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existence." He believes that no one can win an atomic war, and that survival in a world of alien and opposed philosophies is still possible. He wants to see whether men can find a substitute for dropping bombs on one another. He is curious to learn whether people can learn to respect each other's beliefs when one man's deepest conviction appears to the other as superstition.

We can be quite sure that Mr. Eaton has not changed his earlier views on socialism; few men today can more appropriately be called "capitalists." Nevertheless, as he pointed out to us, "The two great events in my lifetime have been the Russian Revolution and the more recent development of atomic energy. Moreover, it ought to be apparent that war does not accomplish anything. Christianity attempted to destroy the Mohammedans by force, and then learned it had to live in the same world with them. Fighting the 'infidels' only confirmed them in their views; it did not change them."

Asked whether he thinks the present nervousness over possible war will pass, Mr. Eaton replied that the Russians are moving ahead as fast as anyone, with great emphasis on chemistry, physics, engineering and navigation. "It is folly to try to frighten them," he said. "They have no fear."

In this belief, and in the hope of finding another way to resolve the world's dilemma, Mr. Eaton is inviting to Pugwash next summer chosen thinkers from around the globe—not only from America, England and western Europe, but from India, China and Russia as well. His object is to bring people of differing views and backgrounds within talking range of one another, hoping that personal contact among top opinion-makers may spread understanding and help to stem the mounting tide of fear.

Also in the interest of mutual understanding, Mr. Eaton has responded co-operatively to several overtures made by the Russians in the past year. When the Russian agriculturalists who toured the United States last autumn wished to see the herd of Scottish Shorthorn cattle on Mr. Eaton's farm in Northfield, Ohio, the visit was arranged by the State Department and Mr. Eaton received the delegation at his Cleveland offices. The square in front of Terminal Tower was filled with Ukrainian and other anti-Soviet demonstrators, when the Russian group left for his farm at Northfield. Mr. Eaton presented the visitors with a Shorthorn bull from his herd.

Later, again on the Russians' initiative and through the agency of the State Department, Mr. Eaton entertained a visiting group of Russian journalists at Northfield. In his study there, he told us, there are large portraits of Thomas Huxley and Charles Darwin, without names attached to them. One of the visitors, he said, went directly to Darwin's picture and commented, "We think highly of Darwin in Russia." A most interesting remark, in view of recent developments in Soviet genetics.

Perhaps it was in consequence of this visit that, on December 17, there came to Mr. Eaton a cable which read:

The editors of Pravda would highly appreciate your replies to the following questions. How do you estimate the record of the outgoing year in consolidation of peace and development of friendship and co-operation among nations? What are your wishes for the new year? Your answer will be printed in the New Year's issue of Pravda. Thanking you in advance for your kind co-operation.

—Pravda Editorial Board, Moscow.

Ten days later, Mr. Eaton cabled his reply:

The year just concluded has been marked by a welcome advance in understanding between the peoples of the United States and the USSR through the exchange of visits of groups and individuals representing workaday occupations like agriculture, journalism and industry, quite apart from the formal and conventional diplomatic missions whose duties are necessarily confined mainly to official government channels. We Americans were favorably impressed with the ability and personality of our USSR visitors, as I can personally vouch from the visit in my home of distinguished Soviet editors. Similarly, the Soviet people must have gained fuller appreciation of likeable and admirable American characteristics from our countrymen who toured the USSR.

The nations of the world, and of course people within the nations, have always differed widely in their economic, political, philosophical and religious beliefs. The time has come to recognize the stark truth that the irrationality of war cannot settle these differences. In fact, in the atomic age, where warfare may well lead to the annihilation of both aggressor and defender, mankind's only hope lies in the frank exchange of ideas and the sincere respect for one another's convictions.

My wish, not merely for the new year, but for all time to come, is that men the world over may work tolerantly and understandingly, and free of suspicion and fear, to the end that the whole family of mankind may have a full share of the good things of this life.

—Cyrus Eaton.

Some may say that this receptive, positive approach leads to a false sense of security, while others consider it the way to peace through understanding. This editor did not go overboard for friendship with Russia when friendliness was the fashion; nor has he been eager to cry fear and hate during this cold-war period. We have made clear our view that any form of totalitarian or authoritarian government, imposing arbitrary disciplines upon the lives and minds of men, is irreconcilable with humanism as we understand it. But the people of Russia are human beings; and human beings must stay within talking distance of one another if reconciliation is to be achieved. It is at least possible that the way to such reconciliation—to an agreement to live with our differences, as an alternative to war—may be prepared by just such bridges to mutual understanding as Mr. Eaton would build.

We asked whether Mr. Eaton had any other plans for the Pugwash retreat. He told us that, besides attempting to promote international understanding by gathering scholars and eminent men from different countries, he wishes

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also to bring together significant individuals from different sections and social groups in our own country, with a view to increasing mutual tolerance and co-operation in our society.

Before departing, we asked a few more general questions. One was, "What has the young man to look forward to today? Does not the insecurity in today's world present him with a rather gloomy outlook?" Mr. Eaton's answer was: "In view of the hundreds of thousands of years it has taken the human race to get where it is, we should not be impatient if we find we cannot produce an enlightened people in a generation or two."

We wonder whether Mr. Eaton's concern for understanding among people could be traced to his reading habits. "How would you describe the function of reflective thought?" was our rather academic question. He insisted that reading was for him simply recreation—"a source of the enjoyment of life." "It just happens that I get a great deal of pleasure out of the reading of philosophy," he said. "However," he went on, "it may have some practical significance. One must realize there are many practical things to do. One has to earn a living. Moreover, this practical side is what the Russians are putting their emphasis on. . . . However, those Russian editors who came to see me had an immense interest in the cultural side of life. They want to cultivate the mind, and that interest was impressive. Pursuit of the humanities may produce respect for the other man's point of view. It may help us to realize that the human mind is a frail thing."