The Battle of Britain, 1940

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THE Battle of Britain, as the famous historian G. M. Trevelyan has said of the reign of Queen Anne, is no parochial theme. Like the age of the soldier-genius Marlborough, with its great victories of Blenheim and Ramillies that were to affect the course of British and European history so long after they were fought, it belongs, because the war itself belongs, to a great period in the history of this island. Like Trafalgar it was not only a victory by sea power; it was a victory that made possible, no less than ten years later, the final triumph of Waterloo. So the Battle of Britain is not only a victory of air power, it is a victory that has made possible the impending defeat of European despotism. It is a great means to a greater end.

It is pretty certain that the Battle of Britain already occupies in the imagination of the British public a first place among the battles of the war. There are good reasons for this. For three hundred years, until 1940, all the important battles fought by this country, whether by land or sea, had been fought securely out of sight of the people left at home. By dispatches, by newspapers, by rumour, by fact, and perhaps not least by imagination, the man in the arm-chair had been able to form his picture, often weeks after the event, of the victories and disasters of Delaware and Trafalgar, Sebastopol and Verdun, Ladysmith and Marne. The citizen never saw the action, with all its glories and its blunders, that was fought to change his destiny. But in 1940 all this was altered; for about three months thousands of British citizens, office workers and farm labourers, school-children and veterans, people of all kinds in all sorts of places, could look up and watch the progress of a decisive battle as it was being fought. To them, the people of Southern and South-Eastern England, that three months was, incontestably, the most exciting and exhilarating of the war.

Another reason lies in the circumstances of the battle. It was a battle fought in adversity. Similes of cricket—bad light, sticky wicket, boob in the first innings, everything depending on second knock—are the easy illustrations of its desperation. Everybody knows now that we had too few aircraft, too few men, and apparently too little time.

Everybody can remember the sickness of morale after Dunkirk, its gradual hardening to a crystal determination of resistance, and the clear understanding that we had no allies and were alone. All this, as we see it in retrospect, was really a good thing. For it is a curious and lucky fact that the British are at their best in adversity, against odds, and when things are going wrong. It is only when things are going right and comfortably that the British need any of those newspaper pep-talks based on such texts, often nicely mixed, such as "We have a long hard row to hoe," and: "We must keep an even keel and pull together." Adversity produces, in the British, its own special kind of courage. It may not be very demonstrative; it may not be very visible; it almost certainly will not be spoken. But it succeeds in being a very formidable thing.

This feeling, later so well expressed by Winston Churchill in the words, "What kind of people do they think we are?" was behind the whole of the Battle of Britain. It had in it, among other qualities, a sort of angry amazement. It seemed to all of us, except a few dangerous half fascist faint-hearts who were promptly clapped in gaol, an incredible thing that a European despot should once again think of invading us, and a still more incredible thing that we, the people who had successively conquered inquisitional and military tyranny in Europe, had opened up the great oceanic trade routes of east and south and west, had given the benefits of our Common Law and Parliament to half a dozen huge democracies in both hemispheres of the world, and had even fought among ourselves to protect the right of that law and of free speech and free worship against the divine despotism of kings, should now be defeated. And it is this that provides a third reason for the memorable quality of the battle. Its purpose was as clear as the high light of summer in which so much of it was fought.

What kind of people do they think we are? From July to October of the year 1940 the Germans had ample opportunity of finding out. It is not quite true that we were alone. Many others were with us. Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, Rhodesians, South Africans, none of whom according to Goebbels were going to fight at all, Poles, Czechs and Norwegians, all of whom had supposedly finished fighting, and even some Irishmen and Americans, who had officially nothing to do with the struggle anyway. The composition of the R.A.F. though largely and basically British, was broadly international. And this was right: for the Battle of Britain, as we now see it four years after it was triumphantly fought, was not a national or an

insular affair. It was international. Like the battle for Magna Charta and the Petition of Right, it affected not only Great Britain but the world; and like them it was not the end of a struggle for something, but only the beginning.

All these are fine words, but none of them could have been written without the actions of too small a handful of fine men. For in the end, however clear its purpose, however abstract and splendid the ideals behind it, a battle has to be fought by the physical pain and skill and determination and courage of man. In the end it is an affair of blood and sacrifice. At the time of the battle we inclined, perhaps, to make it more an affair of figures. This was natural, since it was solely of figures that we could tell how the battle was going. But figures are not everything; and one day no doubt the calm and analysed verdict of statistical historians will correct them to the last decimal for posterity. Before the battle we tended, perhaps, to forget the figures, and, in Churchill's famous words about the few, glorify the glory. How do we see it now?

It is possible for the courage of men to win a battle and the stupidity of men to lose it again. Cromwell fought against the tyranny of kingship and conquered it; in a few years the victory was thrown away. It has been rightly said that "History, from the time of the Roman Senate until the Parliament of our own day, is full of examples of this apparent paradox. Assemblies of men of valiant blood can be made wise by the dangers of war, but the power that armed victory brings, or seems to bring, may deprive them of judgment." It has also been said, and this time by one of those few who fought over the cornfields and orchards and hills and estuaries of Southern England in the electric summer days four years ago:

"If I could do this thing, could talk a little of the lives of these men, I would have justified, at least in some measure, my right to fellowship with my dead, and to the friendship of these with courage and steadfastness who were still living and who would go on fighting until the ideals for which their comrades had died were stamped for ever on the future of civilization."

There is a great deal for us to think about in these statements. For we have in our hand "the power that armed victory brings." That power would not have been possible without the Battle of Britain, and it would be tragic indeed if an opportunity won by the few, many of whom are dead, should now be lost by the many who are still alive.