

SIR JOHN EVELYN LESLIE WRENCH

A TALK GIVEN BY GRAHAM BECKETT PRESIDENT ROSL SA

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Sir John Evelyn Leslie Wrench was born in Brooke borough, County Fermanagh, Ireland, on 29 October 1882. Evelyn by which he was known was named after his god father Field Marshall Sir Evelyn Wood. His mother Charlotte Bellingham was a daughter of a distinguished and powerful Irish family from County Louth and was a suffragette. His father was an Irish Land Commissioner with responsibility for developing the Irish rural economy. His childhood was varied, travelling with his father, being brought up in Killacoona, County Dublin and his mother's home Castle Bellingham (dating from 1660) with a family of distinguished soldiers, naval officers and public officials. A childhood surrounded by Imperial Service, political activity and privilege. He had three siblings, two sisters and a brother.

In 1893 he attended Summer Fields, a preparatory school in Oxford and from there he went on to Eton in 1896. He was an avid reader of British imperialist literature, a middling scholar but popular with his peers. The genesis of "The League" appears to have come to him during his early youth through his admiration of Cecil Rhodes with whom he admits a fascination and a desire to read everything about him. At Eton he had that opportunity to read books from the library on South and Central Africa. He noted that his red letter day at college was a visit by Rhodes' brother. It appears that he was an ascetic and his contemporaries describe him as a man of "intense-almost maniacal-energy coupled with infectious enthusiasm for the matter in hand". He had resolved on a diplomatic or consular career and left Eton early to improve his languages travelling to Turkey, Russia and Germany.

He visited Germany in 1900 where he became aware that there were other views about Rhodes than his. He cites the granddaughter of his host talking about "the naughty Englishmen and the poor Boers". But his admiration of Rhodes was unshaken and after settling in London at the end of 1900 he met with various people who had known Rhodes.

While in Germany Wrench encountered German postcards and noted their superiority to the British ones, he saw a business opportunity. He had cards printed in Dresden and had them shipped to England where they were sold from stands that he provided. Old Etonians helped and arranged for him to have stands at royal palaces. The business prospered, he had 100 employees and a turnover of £60,000 per annum (in today's money £7,773,384). He estimated that he had sold around 50 million cards before unfortunately he over extended the business and it was forcibly closed. This was after he had been given a banquet for his 21st birthday and being lauded as a fine example of a young entrepreneur. The business had been loaned £8,000 secured by a debenture from Amalgamated Press whose proprietor was Alfred Harmsworth and who called it in. In 1901 Harmsworth had amalgamated all his

publications into the company Amalgamated Press and subsequently absorbed The Observer, The Times and The Sunday Times.

However, Harmsworth (later to become Lord Northcliffe) was so impressed with Wrench he offered him a post initially as his private secretary. Wrench became editor of the Overseas Daily Mail and export manager of the export department of Amalgamated Press. It seems that Wrench and Harmsworth were kindred spirits. Wrench was open about his admiration of Baden-Powell and Rhodes and his loyalty to the Empire and overseas Britons. Harmsworth was a passionate supporter of the British Empire and was said to idolise both Chamberlain and Rhodes. According to Harry J Greenwall the author of *Northcliffe: Napoleon of Fleet Street (1957)* Harmsworth and his Daily Mail became the trumpet of British Imperialism.

In 1906 Wrench was sent to Canada by Lord Northcliffe to study newspaper methods there, while there he spent a week with the Governor-General Lord Grey, subsequently in a visit to Ottawa he talked about Rhodes with Lord Grey, who was one of Rhodes Trustees. They also it appears, talked at length about the future of the British Empire. Wrench had already given thought on the Empire and had in 1902 whilst travelling to Morocco by P & O ship he had discussions with Lord Carson about foreign policy, commerce and Consular problems. All of this appears to have led him to consider some form of Imperial Society. Lord Grey had let him read a Statement written by Rhodes in 1875 about Imperialism and the best way to advance the British Empire. Rhodes at that time thought the best way to achieve this would be

“To render myself useful to my country”.

Wrench was taken with the possibilities of the Empire during his stay in Canada and was considering the idea of an “Empire League” aimed at, amongst other things

“Making the self-governing States of the Empire realise they should play their part in Imperial Defence

Installing the principle of home made goods first, British made goods second

Making the visits of Australians, Canadians, etc., to the old country pleasant

By generally teaching the young to respect the flag and making them realise the privilege of British citizenship”

Wrench was first and foremost an Englishman but he was then thinking of a broader spectrum, the British Empire. He was of the opinion that there were too many organisations and leagues, and what was wanted in Britain was one organisation that would work in connection with these other leagues. He was thinking of the way business combines were forming. He cited the German Navy League with 978,000 members and postulated a British

League with royal approval and a membership of 1,000,000 and the objectives of furthering the British Empire, British Institutions, and British Liberty.

In October 1906 he returned to London and resumed duties as editor of the Overseas Daily Mail that had been started in 1904 by Lord Northcliffe as a link between the mother country and its wandering expatriates.

He spent his 1908 Easter Holidays with Lord Northcliffe, the editors of Punch and of The Observer which led to discussions between them about the “need for the establishment of a great non-party society to unite British subjects overseas.

Later the same year again on business in Canada he contracted typhoid fever and was hospitalised. Lord Northcliffe paid all his expenses and sent Wrench’s sister to look after him and then to take him to convalescence in the West Indies. This gave Wrench further opportunity and time to consider linkages between the “man-in-the street and his compatriots in the United Kingdom.

In early 1909 saw the Imperial Press Conference in London which in Wrench’s opinion did more to get differing sections of the Empire to know each other than anything else since the Boer War; later that year he and Lord Northcliffe visited Canada, Newfoundland and the USA in the course of which on the 8th and 9th of October his Lordship opened pulp mills in Newfoundland thereby ensuring newsprint for his UK papers. The company’s records show that Lady Northcliffe pulled the first lever to commence operations. As a matter of course the opening was followed by a 7 course banquet for 425 guests that included the Canadian Governor Prime Minister and leading clergy and their wives.

1910 saw the creation of the Over-seas Club; Wrench agonised over a name for the club and asked his friends for their ideas. The most popular appears to have been The Kinsmen but he was of the opinion that there must be a better name. He also notes he was against the use of League in the name as there were so many “Leagues”. He recalled that a sudden thought was Over-Seas Club

A problem for Wrench was to codify the aims and objectives of the new club; its underlying rationale appears to have been:

“the co-operation between the units of the British Empire in no spirit of antagonism to any nation.”

A further problem was the Clubs financial basis. He initially decided not to charge membership fees as he did not want the Over-Seas club to be thought of as either a money making operation or a newspaper advertising scheme due to his position as the Sales Manager of Amalgamated Press Ltd.

With the approach of the coronation of George V in 1911 Wrench wrote a weekly letter in the Over-Seas Daily Mail talking about the Over-Seas club and looking for members and by

Coronation Day the club had 50,000 associate members worldwide i.e. those interested in its formation.

Wrench had a ceremonial part in the coronation; he was “Gold Stick” to the King George V; a ceremonial position dating from Tudor Times; He was one of two persons placed close to the sovereign to protect him or her from danger. The office is now held by the Colonels of the Life Guards and The Blues and Royals. (Discovering London Ceremonial & Traditions) (Paget, J. 1989).

The Coronation gave Wrench the opportunity to jump start the club; the week after the coronation (27th June 1911) there was a public meeting held at The Memorial Hall Farringdon Street London at which some 300 members from all over the world attended. At that meeting Wrench stated:-

“Has it ever occurred to you how largely the future of the world’s progress lies in the hands of the Anglo-Saxon race? Only by the interchange of dream and idea between the sundered units of one vast Empire can the finest and wildest conception be built up. The Over-Seas Club must serve as the medium for that communication”

During the rest of the year the club grew exponentially and this induced Wrench to travel around the world to visit the clubs (over 100) and discuss the organization with respective members to organize a financial basis and to dispel the idea that the League was a money making concern. (During his travels in New Zealand he gave Robert Falcon Scott RN a clean handkerchief on his departure for the South Pole). He states that the Over-seas League can be said to date from the time he returned to England viz 25th November 1913.

Prosaically it was then unanimously decided to institute an annual subscription of 2/6 (about £16 pounds or approximately A\$32 today).

His trip had highlighted areas where organisation needed to be reconsidered; among them were:-

A central committee, Club rooms’, Membership to be by subscription and a proper financial basis.

Wrench commenced looking for an initial committee and vice presidents from among notable Britain’s such as Lord Grey and Sir Wilfred Laurier (the 7th Prime Minister of Canada) and they met on January 8th 1914

Club rooms were obtained in Aldwych and contributions came from a variety of sources £3,000 from an American friend, £1,200 for the first year £1,000 for the second year then £ 600 for 5 years from Lord Northcliffe plus other amounts from MP’s and Peer’s etc. The official opening was on Empire Day 1914 by the Lord Mayor of London and an impressive list of nobility and Commonwealth High Commissioners.

Wrench wanted the club to be financially sound and in spite of the war it continued to grow rapidly. Members also contributed funds to the war effort and “just on £1,000,000 (£12,294,640) was forwarded. In addition 350 seaplanes and aeroplanes were gifted to the Government. Other contributions by the club during the war included £30,000 (£3,688,392) a year for a hospital for wounded flying officers, 100 plus beds in Red Cross hospitals and “vast quantities of tobacco, hampers and comforts for the Imperial forces.

In August 1914 the club had an income of £250 per annum, and by 1925 £44,000

In March 1917 Wrench was called up for service, commissioned and rising to the rank of Major. He had entered the Royal Flying Corps but was rejected for active service so joined the staff of the Air Board as principal private secretary to Lord Rothermere (brother of Lord Northcliffe) until April 1918. Later he became deputy to Lord Rothermere when controller for the Dominions and United States at the Ministry of Information under Lord Beaverbrook. He was appointed a Commander of St Michael and St George (CMG) for his war service.

As an aside, between wars Lord Rothermere became notorious for his attempted appeasement of Nazi Germany and his championing of the British Union of Fascists apparently as a bulwark against Bolshevism. He was however interested in commercialising aviation and in 1934 acquired a Bristol Type 135 cabin monoplane with a top speed of 307 mph.

Even during the war Wrench was active in both the Empire and other like-minded countries. He founded the English Speaking Union in 1918, a society embracing the Dominions, the United States and Britain with an ethos of “in no narrow attitude of race pride, in no spirit of hostility to any people”.

In December 1915 the club’s magazine “Over-Seas” was first published: Wrench wanted it to be completely independent and not connected with any other organisation in any way. It was to be the connection between the London Office and overseas and between branches and members. At this time Wrench described the Over-Seas movement as a non-sectarian, democratic society of men and women (British Citizens in all parts of the British Commonwealth and in foreign lands who believe in free institution, the just laws and good government responsible for the progress of the British Empire. He further stated that its purpose is to emphasise the tremendous responsibilities imposed by citizenship of the Commonwealth

The League re-located to the St. James area of London on the eastern side of Green Park containing several mansions and extending as far as The Ritz Hotel. The description of the area by Harold P. Clunn in his book “*The face of London*” (London: Simkin Marshall Ltd; 1932) is interesting and I quote

“St James District: - essentially a district of London designed to meet the requirements of bachelors and members of West End clubs and is notable for the comparative absence of

the fair sex and of all shops dealing in feminine requirements. The majority of London's principal clubs are situated in the St. James district. Such as :- Royal Societies Club, the New Universities Club, Brooks Club, Cocoa Tree Club, Arthurs Club, Rumpelmayers, the Conservative Club, Thatched House Club, Sports Club, the British Empire Club, Caledonian Club, Junior Carlton Club and of course Whites and Boodles."

At page 193 he states

"At the top of Park Place is Vernon House, the world headquarters of the Overseas League, adjoining which is the Leagues Club House"

Vernon House was purchased in February 1921 as a war memorial to those from overseas who gave their lives in the war. In 1924 No. 3 Park Place (next to Brooks Club) was acquired for overseas visitors accommodation who paid 10/6d per night for bath, bed and breakfast, Subsequently due to demand Numbers 4 and 5 Park Place were purchased for the exclusive use of male members.

And as you all know opposite this street is of course Jermyn Street that Clunn describes as a "backwater of Piccadilly containing Hotels, RSPCA, restaurants theatres and Turkish Baths"

Although devoted to ROSL he was still a journalist and became the business manager of the *Spectator* the oldest magazine in the United Kingdom and in 1924 he purchased a controlling interest in it. However his initial relationship with his managing editor was rocky; John Atkins his editor complained to his friend Winston Churchill that Wrench "continually wants to interfere and he is very ignorant". But, Wrench's global connections secured interviews with Henry Ford, Mahatma Ghandi and Benito Mussolini. His altruistic nature came to the fore when *The Spectator* campaigned to ease unemployment in the mining town of Aberdare in 1928 raising a relief fund of over £12,000 equivalent today of about £500,000. Wrench retired as editor in 1932 but remained the magazine's managing editor.

Wrench was particularly interested in India, both he and the *Spectator* supported political reform there and particularly political freedom as early as possible. His commentary was so well received in India that when Ghandi was in England he asked to meet Wrench and had dinner with him. Wrench was impressed with Ghandi to the extent that he opposed those who tried to block Indian reform by the British Parliament.

He was a trenchant critic of the Treaty of Versailles and the conditions it imposed on Germany particularly those by the French Government and made visits to Germany. He deplored Nazism but wrote articles for the *Spectator* saying that anti-Jewish feeling in Germany was a "passing phase". He had founded a German Friendship association but after the Nazis took these over he closed them. He continued to promote appeasement both personally and through the *Spectator* up to 1939 when he attempted to obtain a compromise on the Danzig problem.

He was married in May 1937 and caused a minor scandal. His wife was the sister of Field Marshall Lord Alan Brooke; she was a very old friend but his first cousin and only 4 months a widow.

In 1940 he and his wife left for a lecture tour of the USA returning through New Zealand, Australia, Singapore and India. The invasion of Singapore by the Japanese left them stranded in India so he involved himself with the welfare of American servicemen and in 1942 became the Indian Governments American relations officer.

Wrench was both a journalist and a writer of memoirs, after WW11 he spent most of his time writing some 45 works including 20 books and 148 publications. Amazon lists 20 of his works currently held in libraries world wide ranging from *Alfred, Lord Milner, the man of no illusions, 1854-1925* to *The British way: Great Britain's major gifts to freedom, democratic government. Science and society* and *I loved Germany*.

In 1958 he founded and was chair of the Commonwealth Union of Trade to strengthen economic bonds between members. He encouraged literary and historical research in Britain likely to be of interest to both the Commonwealth and the United States and toured extensively. His wife Hilda had died in 1955 and he died on Armistice Day 11 November 1966. He had felt uneasy at the direction the ROSL was taking its now renowned cultural programme in art music and literature.

As mentioned he was probably ascetic, he had in 1910 taken a vow of sexual abstinence and given up tobacco and drinking for both health and religious reasons, but apparently erred once in Amsterdam. But this did not stop him from setting up a tobacco fund for troops at the front. He was idealistic, and practical and certainly businesslike. He was known as being deeply religious and had once thought of becoming a missionary. He was considered a realist, practical and at the same time an idealist. He was considered modest and self-effacing, charming in conversation but with little time for small talk and social gossip. He was advanced to a Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George (KCMG) in 1960 for Commonwealth Services.

He wrote a creed that he felt the overseas brotherhood stood for:-

" I believe in our glorious Empire of Free Peoples.

In the sacredness of our mission.

In the unselfishness of our aims.

In the ultimate triumph of our cause.

I believe in our great past.

And in our greater future.

In the emptiness of riches And the dignity of labour.

I believe in right thinking and pure living, And in the inspirational power of a woman.

I believe in national re-birth.

In a new empire and a new world. I believe in the need for humbleness,

In the vision of mountain-tops,

I believe on God's guidance in the days ahead.

I believe

JOHN EVELYN WRENCH