

INSTITUTION & RELATED ACTIVITIES

Sir John Monash. ENGINEER.

The death of Sir John Monash brought to the Engineers of Australia (as it did to the returned soldiers of the A.I.F.) a deep emotion peculiar to themselves. With the rest of the community, they realized the loss of a great Citizen and a great Soldier; and, further, of an Engineer who had brought distinction and dignity to their profession—

But there was something more than this—Monash, being an engineer, did not become one of the World's greatest soldiers in the World's greatest conflict merely by the accident of circumstance. Rather was it that he played this mighty role because he was in fact a great engineer, looked at in the big sense. The greatness of Monash's engineering consisted not so much in the magnitude of his works—although he carried out numerous enterprises of notable importance, and one would hesitate to place any technical undertaking outside the scope of his powers; it consisted rather in the quality and type of his engineer's mind.

Notwithstanding a popular impression to the contrary, "engines," and all such things produced by him, are not the chief characteristic of the engineer. There were engineers long before there were engines. In a very literal sense, engineering is a mode of looking at things, a way of doing things. The engineer is the man with the genius first to recognise the real conditions of the technical problem before him, and then by skilful effort to discover its adequate solution.

Monash possessed this type of mind in a masterful degree. It served him equally well, whether the problem were to direct an Army Corps in fierce and prolonged battle or to distribute electric power over the length and breadth of the State: in each of these enterprises he displayed the same engineering knowledge, the same profound executive power, and the same striking capacity for business.

In this very connection, it is significant to recall that the University of Melbourne, in 1920, accepted Monash's book *The Australian Victories in France* as a formal thesis for an academic degree, and in virtue of it awarded its author the Doctorate in Engineering. By doing so, the University not only made fitting recognition of distinguished intellectual achievement, but proved itself to possess a clear and very uncommon perception of what it is that constitutes the higher planes of engineering thought and effort.

The opinion has been seriously expressed that, had some curious turn of events put Monash in command of the entire British or of the Allied Forces, he would have courageously faced the problem and would have been found equal to the task. Many of those who knew him best and longest would have awaited the result with genuine confidence.

One further reflection in this regard. Australia has not thought it desirable, or at any time practicable, to follow the example of many other countries and appoint a Dictator to solve its post-war problems, but it is interesting to speculate on the outcome had Monash—and no other name would have been on people's lips—been charged with the management of this entire Continent for a period of years after his return from the War. Opinions might differ as to the particular direction of our progress, but no one will doubt that the Country would have moved.

A life history of Monash must some day be written. This is not the occasion even to sketch in outline the story



Sir John Monash.
1865—1931.

it was indeed only last year that our Institution of Engineers conferred on him its highest honour when the Council selected him for the award of the Peter Nicol Russell Memorial Medal in recognition of the notable contribution his life's work had made to the science and practice of Engineering.

of his progress. For it was a progress, and nothing in it seemed accidental. Each performance appeared the outcome of what preceded it; every achievement was the starting point for the next objective. To use the military phrase, he "made good" each position as he occupied it in his forward march. Watch his academic career from his Freshman days at the University through the most amazing series of studies in Arts, Law, Engineering, Science, and even Medicine, till he is Vice-Chancellor of his University and possessed of a mind magnificently "furnished" for all occasions. Or, observe him in his progress from the engineering pupil, through a vast range of technical and constructional experience, till he is the executive head of the most important industrial undertaking in the state where he was born and bred.

Or again, and most dramatic of all, see him as a private in the University Company of the State Militia, proceeding through every grade of non-commissioned and commissioned rank, learning the duties of nearly every branch of the Civilian Forces, till more than 30 years later he appears as the Lieut.-General in command of what was, in sober fact, the most homogeneous, the most high-spirited and the most effective Army Corps the World has ever known.

It is a dramatic story. But Monash himself was not dramatic. Anything theatrical in a man's demeanour, his sober mind abhorred. Instinctively he avoided the "lime-light," although he confidently enough took up any task that seemed his. He had no craving for the leading role, but, if put upon him, no false modesty prevented him playing out the part with complete conviction and absorbing energy.

Curiously enough, public and official recognition of Monash's amazing performances has been a thing of slow growth in Australia. This was possibly due, in part, to his long delay in Europe after the end of the War, dealing with the heavy task of repatriating the soldiers, and in part, no doubt, it was due to the unostentatious way in which he returned and quietly resumed his ordinary duties as a citizen. Had he possessed a greater sense of, a greater liking for, the dramatic, had there been a little pandering to public emotions, Monash might have been acclaimed and feted as a public hero throughout the land. But such was not his manner of mind. It has been the more interesting, therefore, to notice how each year public appreciation of him has steadily grown, until, when he was sent to India to represent the Commonwealth at the Delhi Celebrations, there was a sudden and general sense of the complete fitness of the appointment, a realization that no other man could have appropriately replaced him, and now, with his death, the Country knows that its Great Citizen has gone, and it is poor.

It is impossible to doubt that centuries hence Monash and his Mighty Men will have become legendary heroes in Australian History. The schoolboys of those generations will learn of their deeds of valour as we and our fathers for many generations back have learnt of Caesar and his legions. Two thousand years apart, these great commanders, these famous troops, have followed the same routes, have shown the same high courage, have bridged the same rivers (for Monash too, was a mighty Bridge Builder) and they will share the same glory.

Did space permit, there would be a temptation to pursue this parallel. And, indeed, to contrast not only the doings of these man of valour but also their writings. To compare Caesar's vivid and simply told chronicles of his doings in Gaul with the records and reports of Monash, some of

which already occupy a high place in military authorship. That task is not for now, and must wait an abler pen.

This, however, can be said with confidence, that for clear and vivid description of military movements, for lucid exposition of military plans, even Caesar himself might have envied our great Australian Commander's power of speech when it was part of his duty to *explain*. Testimony is uniform on Monash's skill in this direction.

The writer had an unusual and memorable illustration of it towards the middle of 1918, a period when matters were going badly in France.

Calling early one morning on Monash with a brother Engineer-Officer, both of us being old friends of his, we transacted our small piece of business, and were delighted when Monash offered, under a strict bond of military secrecy, to give us his estimate of the situation.

He opened his plans on the table and proceeded to describe, without reference to a note or pause for a word, the entire European Fighting Line, as he judged it, when looked at from both sides. It was a fascinating and absorbing story. When he had finished, he turned to us and said:—"So you see, it is inevitable. The enemy is beaten and the Allied Forces will shortly win the War." It was as if we had listened to a mathematical demonstration.

It was a military topic that had been expounded to us, but one, at least, of his visitors felt, as we left him, that it was the essential engineer in Monash who had been speaking and not the soldier as popularly conceived.

With us, his brothers in the fraternity of engineers—one of the most ancient crafts in the World—his memory is established on a secure foundation. We are not greatly concerned to award him a particular place on some scale of engineering eminence, to put him above or below this man or that in the engineering hierarchy. It is something other. His mind, his work, his way of life, his mode of effecting things, embody a subtle aspect of our calling, which we recognise to be fundamental.

In some profound fashion, Monash for us symbolises
—ENGINEERING.

S.H.E.B.