

# **THE BRITISH COAL INDUSTRY**

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The British coal industry by Gilbert Stone

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**GILBERT STONE**

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# THE BRITISH COAL INDUSTRY

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## PREFACE

**A**T a recent conference at the Coal Mines' Department the Right Honourable William Brace, M.P., the South Wales miners' leader and lately Under Secretary for Home Affairs, used the following words: "The real dying need of the world in general, and of this nation in particular at this moment, is production." This sentence may form the text of this book which is not concerned to support this or that theory of management, and does not adventure into technical details, but is intended to place before the reader well-ascertained facts from which he may form his own conclusions as to the financial and industrial future of this country if present conditions relative to this industry do not improve.

It is probable that, even as in the past so also in the future, this country will surmount all difficulties and win her way through her present trials. It is not to be expected, however, that the numerous grave and perplexing troubles of to-day will be overcome if we merely throw up our hands in despair. Nor shall we accomplish anything of service by burying our heads in the sand, ostrich-

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like, and refusing to see. We must see and we must act or the war that is won will be lost.

Knowing as I do most of the leaders on both the coal owners' and the miners' side, and entertaining for them the highest regard, it is to me very regrettable to have perpetually to refer to the shortcomings of the industry. This, however, seems to be unavoidable when we have to deal with an industry which is at present the battleground for a great and fundamental change.

To quote a particular instance we have seen this industry held up to public criticism on account of the housing of its workers. Deplorable conditions have been shown to exist in some cases. This has earned the industry a bad name in many quarters. Yet, if we look at the matter fairly, should we not say that this is an evil no more peculiar to the coal industry than to any other? Have we not our slums? That such things should be is indefensible and every effort is being made to-day to abolish this last remnant of a by-gone age, but they show that the coal owners are in no worse case than the generality of those responsible for the housing of the working classes.

We say this as a prelude to asking the reader not to approach the question from the point of view either that the owners are tyrants or that the miners' leaders are revolutionaries of the Bolshevik type. It simply is not so. Throughout the war, when the very fate of our country depended in no slight measure upon the proper working of our

mines, both master and miner and miners' leader made stupendous efforts to cope with the immense difficulties which lack of man-power, lack of material and war nerves created.

There is, indeed, underlying the present coal situation, a deep psychological and sociological problem which, though it has manifested itself in relation to this industry, is in existence equally in the case of other industries. Upon the solution of this problem depends the existence or elimination of the present system whereby capital employs labour. It is obvious that we have here one of the Grand Disputes, full of combustible material, full of intellectual difficulties, full of importance, pregnant with possibilities and impossibilities.

Yet though this is so, though we have reached perhaps one of the turning-points in the industrial history of our country, we must realize that of those who will have the decision in the last resort only a very small fraction have any clear idea either of the problem or the industry.

In such circumstances it is always desirable to sweep away personalities and permit facts to take the place of prejudices. This is the second purpose of this book.

As the problem is so largely a psychological and so little a material one, I have, after much consideration, decided to include two short chapters on the history of the industry. My doubt as to the propriety of this course was due to the fact that the past history of the coal trade shows many grave