

THE
PRESS CENSORSHIP

INTERVIEW

GIVEN BY

SIR EDWARD T. COOK

to the Associated Press.

London:

BURRUP, MATHIESON & SPRAGUE Ltd.

1916.

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“ You propose, I understand, to write something about the British Press Bureau, and you wish me to give you some information. Sir Frank Swettenham and I have no objection, but we must make one condition.”

“ I suppose you mean that I must submit what I write to be censored ? ”
—“ No, I was not thinking of that. We never censor articles or telegrams criticising the censorship. The condition I want to make is that you should not, in kindness or for any other reason, speak too much good of our censorship. I don't suppose you are likely to do so, but it would really be a terrible blow if you did. The enterprising newspaper or news

agency and an efficient censorship are natural enemies ; and if the day should ever come when the newspapers, British and Neutral, conspired to praise the Press Bureau, it would be a catastrophe for one or other of us ; it would mean either that the journalists had lost their ' go,' or that our Censors here had been neglecting their duty."

" So, then, your condition comes to the instruction which the Editor of the ' Dictionary of National Biography ' is said to have given to his contributors: *No flowers, by request ?* "—" Quite so. The only bouquet we can accept with a good conscience has already been laid at our feet." " What was that ? " " It came from Count Bernstorff, and was not meant to reach us at all. You will find it in a copy of a letter, addressed to your Secretary of State, which was entrusted to Mr. Archibald. In this Count Bernstorff described this Office as ' a Press Bureau that in its efficiency and imaginative powers has never had its equal in the history of the world.' That is probably higher praise than we deserve, but I think it is pretty good evidence that

we have prevented some things that the enemy would have liked and done other things which he has disliked. That is a real compliment, for the Press Bureau is a war department.”

“ But we Neutrals are not at war.”——
“ I know, and neutral journalists always resent anything in the nature of Press censorship. I came across a very good instance of this when I was writing a little book about the great English editor, Delane. In private correspondence he was generally a very good-natured man and loyal to his friends ; but on one occasion, at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, he fairly let himself go. Of course, as he said, he wrote more in sorrow than in anger (you know how Their High Mightinesses of the Press always do that) ; but he felt bound to declare that on this occasion his political friends were a set of wretched clerks, a mean-spirited, white-livered lot. All this was because the British Government, fearing to offend one belligerent or the other, had declined to allow British officers to double the parts of military attachés and correspondents of the *Times*.

What offended Delane (according to his own account) was that the Government did not seem to share, or hold sacred, the British love of publicity. That is even more an American love; and as the censorship exists to restrict publicity, you, and we, are bound to differ sometimes.

“ This is no reason, however, why we should not understand each other, and I am very glad of the opportunity of putting our case to you. It is sometimes asked what right the British Government and its servant the Press Bureau have to interfere with telegraphic messages. The answer is very simple, but it is not so generally known as it should be. Acting in accordance with powers reserved in the International Telegraph Convention, the British Government issued a notification, upon the outbreak of war, that the telegraphic and radio-telegraphic services throughout the Empire would be suspended; but, added the notification, ‘ With a view to minimise inconvenience to the public His Britannic Majesty’s Government will, until further notice, and as an act of grace, permit the transmission of such telegrams and radio-telegrams in plain language as foreign

Governments or the public choose to send, provided that such telegrams and radio-telegrams are written in English or French, and on the understanding that they are accepted at the sender's risk and subject to censorship by the British Authorities ; that is, that they may be stopped, delayed or otherwise dealt with in all respects at the discretion of those authorities and without notice to the senders ; and that no claims in respect of them, whether for the reimbursement of the sums paid for transmission or otherwise, will be considered by His Majesty's Government in any circumstances whatever.' Everybody thus knew, or ought to have known, the conditions under which telegrams would be sent. I sometimes wonder whether it is realised that instead of regarding every instance of a stopped cable as an act of wrong, you ought, by the letter of the law, to recognise every passed cable as an act of grace. I am quite glad you don't, for if you did we should be simply smothered by your thanks, since the number of messages which we 'stop, delay or otherwise deal with' is negligible compared with those which we pass right away."

“ Then you are replete with ‘ grace ’ ? ”
—“ In citing the British Government Notification I was only dealing with rights. In interpreting the Notification in practice, we never forget the words ‘ With a view to minimise inconvenience to the public.’ When a message is put up to us, we do not say, I assure you, ‘ Here is an American message ; come, let us kill it ; we have the right.’ What we actually say to ourselves is, ‘ Let us see if this cannot be passed as it stands,’ and if it cannot, ‘ Let us see how little need be taken out.’ ”

“ And on what grounds do you stop or cut messages ? ”—“ Our censorship is governed by the Defence of the Realm Act, by the Regulations made under it by Order in Council, and by Instructions, explanatory in detail, which are issued from time to time by this Office or at the request of various Departments of State. You will not want me to go into details, but speaking generally, I may put the case thus : The first object of the censorship is to prevent the British Press, or cables over which the British Government has control, from being used (a) to

disseminate information likely to be of use to the enemy, or (b) otherwise to give assistance to him. Would you not think us great fools if we did not take such steps ?

“ Under the first head comes Naval and Military information ; including air-raids. We have had to turn down many good stories for Naval and Military reasons, and there has been much criticism of the Government (and of the Bureau, which is its agent) for the restrictions imposed in the matter of raids. But, surely, it is obviously desirable not to present the enemy with information as to his route, as to the exact places where he hit and where he missed, and so forth. Even about military articles, there is sometimes the most absurd misunderstanding of the case. I read a criticism of the Bureau the other day (an English criticism) in which it was complained that a certain American war-story had been refused by a censor blind to all literary merit. As if literary merit had anything to do with the case ! I remember the story, and agree that it was nicely written, and written too with obvious goodwill to the

Allies ; but the point was that the writer had, in heedlessness, given information which, if it reached the enemy, might have endangered many lives. The Press Bureau is a place where it is not well to have cold feet and sensitive nerves ; but if I should ever fail to sleep of nights, I shall be haunted not by any of the criticisms actually levelled at us, but by fear lest in a moment of inadvertence the office should pass out something which might place our sailors and soldiers in jeopardy, or interfere with the success of some British operation.”

“ But what about your second category ? What sort of things do you censor on the ground that, otherwise than by disclosing military information, they give assistance to your enemy ? ”——“ That is a difficult question to answer shortly because every case is judged on its merits, but there is great variety of cases. But will you let me ask you a question ? We are engaged, as you know, in a life and death struggle with a very powerful and a very resourceful foe. Now, put yourself, please, in our place, and imagine the following case which we will call hypothe-

tical :—Suppose you found that your cables were being used to send reports which, when not absolutely untrue, are intended to magnify German victories, to preach the doctrine of German all-powerfulness, to depreciate this country and her Allies, and to do everything that is possible to influence Germans throughout the world, and Neutrals wherever they may be found, to sympathise with Germany and her Allies, to push her propaganda, advance her cause, vilify England and our Allies, and to stir up hatred against us in every corner of the globe where it seems possible to embarrass us !—Suppose you found this to be going on, what would you do ?

“ One more question since you are so kind as to allow me to turn the tables and become interviewer. Many of the American newspapers and news agencies have very enterprising correspondents in Berlin. Why, I wonder, do they tell us so little about what goes on in the Reichstag and generally about political discussions in Germany ? I think you will agree that the British Press Bureau concedes a very large measure of freedom

to American and other correspondents in reporting things of a similar kind that go on in London. Why is your American enterprise, that is apt to carry everything before it, unable to tell us more of what goes on in Germany ?

“ Do not forget, lastly, that while on one side this office is destructive, on the other it is the means of supplying to the Press of this country and to neutral agencies and correspondents, a great deal of information, which has not only a public interest but a commercial value. I think it can be said that every naval and military event of importance which has been reported in the last twenty months has gone to the Press through this office, and though in criticising us it may be convenient to forget that fact, it still remains a fact. The only credit we claim is that we issue all news with strict impartiality and without delay, and we think it is doubtful whether the Press would receive it so regularly or so quickly if there were no Press Bureau.”



