
**MRA:
HOW
IT ALL
BEGAN**

told by
**LOUDON
HAMILTON**



AFTER SERVICE with the Indian Army in France in the First World War, when he was awarded the Military Cross, London Hamilton went up to Oxford and took a two-year philosophy course.

Towards the end of that time, in May 1921, Dr Frank Buchman paid his first visit to Oxford. One evening he was a guest in London Hamilton's rooms in Christ Church at a meeting of the Beef and Beer Club. Out of this grew the Oxford Group, now known as Moral Re-Armament.

I MET FRANK BUCHMAN in Oxford in 1921 through an American friend, Alec Barton—a student at Christ Church and a fellow footballer. Alec was much admired for his courage in learning to play English Rugby. He was so keen that on his first day he tackled the only man he could see with the ball, who turned out to be the referee.

One afternoon in late May, Alec called to me across the college Quad-rangle: ‘Care to meet an American professor visiting Oxford?’ Being a student I was not anxious to meet more professors than was strictly necessary. But because Alec was a friend I said, ‘All right, bring him along to my rooms tonight. We’re having a meeting of the Beef and Beer Club.’

This was one of those debating societies where we solved all the world’s problems by drinking long beers, smoking long pipes and having long philosophical arguments. The only trouble was the world’s problems seemed to get slightly worse. Luckily for me I did not then know who Frank Buchman was. Had I known I would certainly not have asked him to the Beef and Beer Club. We used the name of God often enough—but not quite in the way Frank Buchman did.

Alec brought in a man approaching middle age, of medium height, somewhat stout, whose clothes and accent revealed his transatlantic origin. His eyes were large and alert. No attempt was made at general introductions. The room held not more than twenty men. Buchman modestly took a seat towards the back.

Picture the crowd. Ninety per cent ex-officer undergraduates from majors downwards, veterans of twenty-three or twenty-four, with decorations never seen or referred to. They were men of influence in the college. Most of them played games, some really well. Many of them have since held important posts in the world.

On Sundays a few would go to the Cathedral, which served also as our college chapel. Normally these services were compulsory for all undergraduates. This rule was relaxed for ex-servicemen. I never knew why. Either we didn't need it or we were past praying for. Probably the latter. The popular pose was cynicism and sophistication mixed. For our post-war generation Noel Coward's ' Twentieth Century Blues' summed up the mood exactly:

In this strange illusion,
Chaos and confusion,
People seem to lose their way.
What is there to strive for,
Love or keep alive for ?
Hey, hey, call it a day.

Among the Beef and Beer Club was a sprinkling of men like myself studying philosophy. As has been wittily said, 'We tried to be philosophers, but cheerfulness kept breaking through.'

That evening in my rooms, deep in armchairs, the air blue with tobacco smoke, we had another furious debate on how to put the world right. As was our custom, four papers were read, two on one side and two on the other. The meeting was thrown open for general discussion. In the Beef and Beer Club we didn't always stop talking when we had finished what we had to say. So it was well on eleven o'clock before I had a chance to ask our American visitor what he thought.

Buchman began with the somewhat surprising statement that he agreed with everything that had been said that night, in spite of the fact that violently contradictory opinions had been freely exchanged all evening. He added, 'Of course there has got to be a change in the world, but that change might begin with people. Now for instance...', and he proceeded to tell us of two students he had met in Cambridge who had decided to change their ways. Naturally it aroused our interest in Oxford that Cambridge men were changing.

Frank was too polite to tell us we in Oxford had to change, but the fellows he told us about were so like ourselves, that he left us to draw

our own conclusions. My conclusions were highly uncomfortable and long overdue. I had been brought up in a strict Scots home. This did not prevent me from committing sin. It only prevented me from enjoying it.

After Frank finished, a silence fell. Some silences are dead. This one was very much alive. The atmosphere had somehow changed. Up till then it had been comfortable, academic and theoretical. Now it had become real and personal. You could almost hear people's brains ticking over. We did as might be expected—took another puff at our pipes, looked at our boots and said nothing. Although Buchman had used none of the conventional religious phrases, every man in that room knew exactly what he was talking about. The clock struck midnight. Time to break up. I fully expected that my room-mate, Sandy, a convinced atheist, would not like this kind of thing. To my surprise he suggested we invite Buchman to breakfast next morning.

I was afraid Frank would try and change me at breakfast—a bit early in the morning for such an operation. So I ordered a large breakfast to keep him busy eating and stop him from asking any awkward questions. Next morning I stood at our window waiting for our guest. As he crossed the Quadrangle I saw him approach a group of young men of the definitely fast set on their way to an early bath. They laughed happily together. The ease and naturalness with which he, a complete stranger, made even that brief contact much impressed me.

In a few minutes the three of us were sitting at breakfast, Frank opposite Sandy and myself. In those days breakfast parties in Oxford in the summer term were a regular feature of social life. The meal was served in our private rooms by our scout, as the college men-servants were called.

Usually these occasions were thoroughly enjoyable. This time I was not sure it was going to be merely enjoyable.

We began with strawberries, then cereal, fish, bacon and eggs, with, of course the inevitable toast, marmalade and coffee.

The conventional topics of conversation were soon exhausted.

Somehow they seemed more than usually irrelevant. I wondered apprehensively, what next? Frank was entirely at his ease. He told how on his recent travels in India and the Far East, the principal of an important school had called him in and asked him what he would do with a pupil who had stolen money. By way of a disarming reply, Frank asked the principal, 'When did you steal last?' The principal recalled taking money as a child. So Frank said, 'Will you tell that to your pupil?' The principal had then done so, with happy results all round.

As Frank was telling this story, I wondered why he should tell it to us. I didn't have to wonder long. As soon as Frank finished, Sandy looked up from his bacon and eggs and said to Frank, 'I have not always been honest about money.'

This shook me. For one thing coming from Scotland I feel deeply about money. Also, I well knew Sandy would never have made such an admission to me. Then suddenly I remembered having gone to a college ball without paying for the ticket. There was a girl I very much wanted to dance with. So did a lot of other fellows. I was determined to get there early. I dressed as carefully as possible and got in at the waiters' entrance. Up till that moment it had not occurred to me this was dishonest. So I spent the rest of breakfast wondering who I could borrow the money from, supposing I did decide to pay it back. That breakfast proved to be expensive. It was a first step in honesty. There were many more to come.

The following weekend Frank returned to Oxford bringing with him the two Cambridge men he had told us about. I asked half-a-dozen friends to meet them in my rooms. I was a bit doubtful how many would turn up.

To my surprise at least a dozen came, some of whom had not hitherto been suspected of any interest in such matters. A few were known churchgoers, but their way of life otherwise seemed no different from the rest of us.

In an entirely natural way our Cambridge friends told us what had happened when they met Frank. They immediately won everyone's

confidence. It was obvious they were speaking of something very real to them, though new to us. Their honesty made controversy irrelevant. Their facts carried conviction. Bob, an athlete of international rank and a winning personality, seemed to me to have everything I wanted—friends, popularity, success. I wondered why he had to change. His story, told with humour and restraint, left us in no doubt.

The other Cambridge man, Murray, was a different type. He came from a well-known religious family. It so happened he had been an officer in my own regiment. He was the sort of Christian we could not make drunk on guest nights, but he could not keep us sober. A man to respect, but avoid.

After our visitors had spoken, the discussion became general. I asked Murray privately why he spoke of having to change since he had always been a Christian. He said, ‘Yes, I have always had a faith in Christ but I was never able to help people who were going to the devil like you.’ I didn’t ask him any more questions. The meeting had broken up into animated groups. Bob was walking round the Quad with an Oxford man on either side. He seemed to get to know them better in one evening than I had in two years.

News of what was happening spread rapidly. An air of expectancy was abroad, in the college, and beyond. Men I hardly knew would come to my rooms to ask what it was all about. Underneath a carefully assumed air of neutrality, or even of unassumed hostility, there lurked more than idle curiosity. All of us had been compelled to think, even to face things we would have preferred to forget. After all, no one likes to be made to think, least of all in a university where you have to learn what other people have thought. We prided ourselves that as would-be philosophers we made no assumptions. In actual fact we assumed much: that there was no God, that human nature could not be changed, and that it was impossible to live moral standards anyway. How did we know? We had never tried.

We had many theories. In Oxford a tragedy has been defined as ‘a beautiful theory killed by an ugly fact.’ Buchman faced us with facts. We

saw people, sometimes the most unlikely (so we thought), who were definitely very different and were even prepared to say so.

For myself the weeks following were among the most disturbed of my whole life. I had to admit that such efforts as I had made, all too spasmodic, to find a satisfying philosophy of life had, after all, proved largely fruitless. Going from school of thought to school of thought, I had found each to be a floating island. Already the noise of the cataract was sounding in my ears. The cataract for me meant the abandonment of all attempt to solve the riddle of life and finally to accept a cynical materialism as the only solution.

For too long we had been caught up in the clouds of philosophic abstractions and intellectual finesse but our fundamental questions remain unanswered: What really mattered? What to live for bigger than self-interest? Had we really to let go all the high hopes and comradeship of wartime and admit that victory must be left unfinished after all? It seemed a sad prospect. Having no answer to it all, we took refuge in cynicism and flippancy. By habit and training you learn to maintain a 'front' and hope your friends will not see through it. A poet has written of English society:

They talk and move about me as a shadow, With everything correct and nothing clear.

The fashion was to pose as 'uncommitted' and 'open to any truth.' This was in fact totally dishonest.

The real truth was that we were wholly committed to doing as we pleased. This we called 'freedom'. Our real gods were sex, success and security. These gods we worshipped slavishly in whatever way opportunity offered. The rugby field and the dance floor were the place where I most sought to shine. So far as religion was concerned (and that was not very far) I claimed quite sincerely that I had no faith, but used that as an excuse for not changing.

I was brought up to believe in God in the conventional way, without ever expecting God to be a real force in daily life. The test came in the

First World War. It seemed to me that then, if ever, some divine intervention was needed. But God did not seem to care.

I was just nineteen at the first battle of the Somme (July to November, 1916). Twenty at Passchendaele (July to November 1917). In twenty-one weeks on the Somme, British casualties exceeded four hundred and ten thousand men, an average of almost twenty thousand a week. In fifteen weeks at Passchendaele our casualties were just under two hundred and forty-five thousand men, an average of sixteen thousand a week.

Often it was the best men who were killed. Countless lives were needlessly wasted. The suffering, at times the savagery, and the boredom seemed endless. I tried my best to see the hand of God in it all. I tried but failed.

One night during the Battle of Passchendaele, I shook my fist at the stars and cursed God heart and soul for allowing these things to happen. Faith died that night, I thought for ever.

Only years later did I come to realise that these things were the inevitable result of man's stubborn refusal to live God's way. This simple fact dawned on me soon after meeting Frank Buchman. It was only then that for the first time the pattern of an answer to the prevailing cynicism and apathy began to take shape. It happened in this way.

By mid-June, 1921, final exams were over and our university careers ended. In September I was due to begin teaching at Eton.

Meantime an invitation came from our two Cambridge friends Bob and Murray to spend a weekend in a Cambridge college with Frank Buchman and his friends. The invitation was to a house-party. This roused my curiosity. What would Frank Buchman be doing at a house-party—a word usually associated with a particular society set? How could that be combined with what I already knew of Frank Buchman? It would be interesting to see.

It is sometimes hard to know your true motives in a decision which has important consequences. Curiosity yes, confidence certainly. Buchman's

sincerity was entirely convincing. So were the naturalness and comradeship of those around him. It had nothing of the artificial heartiness usually associated with religious enthusiasts at a university. I deeply longed for such comradeship. Somehow it had always eluded me. Soon I was to find the secret and much else besides.

Sometimes important decisions are influenced by apparently trivial circumstances. It was so in this case.

I could not afford the money for a weekend at Cambridge. By the same post that brought the invitation, £5 arrived unexpectedly from an aunt for whom £5 was a lot of money— something that had never happened before and never since. Nor did my aunt know anything of the circumstances. This gift decided me to accept the Cambridge invitation for the first weekend of August, 1921. Little did I know what would result.

There was an air of expectancy, if not of mystery, as we gathered for dinner that first evening in Trinity Hall. There seemed to be none of that usual British hesitancy to speak to people you did not know.

Most of us were of an age—early or middle twenties. In numbers, about thirty, and others dropped in as the weekend progressed. Present were men who had represented their universities at major sports, Eton rowing men, a President of the Oxford Union, First Class Honours men, some naval officers, Indians and a Chinese.

Of the three older men, one was a colonel from the War Office, one a British MP and one an American international lawyer. These last two had been somewhat over-celebrating in London the lawyer's recent success in important international negotiations. On arrival at Cambridge that evening they made straight for the Buttery (where they do not serve butter), so our two friends were in a thoroughly jovial mood by the time dinner ended.

After dinner we adjourned to the Common Room, sitting informally in deep armchairs in a large circle, waiting. Buchman took the bold step of having us all say our names and where we came from. Most were characteristically brief. Last came the MP and the American lawyer.

They were more forthcoming. The MP said he had come because he had ‘dropped a stitch’ somewhere and knew he would have to go back and pick it up again before he could get anywhere. Then the lawyer launched into a somewhat prolonged panegyric about the glories of America. ‘Why, over there we have mountains so high you can stand on the top and tickle the feet of the angels.’ Just what was to be achieved by this exercise was not made clear. At least it added to the sense of informality.

Buchman then told the story of his friend Bill Pickle—once a bootlegger at State College, Pennsylvania, where Buchman had been seven years on the faculty. Morale had been low, scholarship poor, drinking rife and the football team consistently defeated. Bill’s change had evidently led to a change in the whole college.

The humour and naturalness of the story made the hour and a half seem like ten minutes. We were gripped by the many points of similarity to our own experiences. For the first time goodness seemed attractive, even effective. We went off happily to bed. All except one man, the lawyer.

Three new arrivals had just come in from America. One of them, Bill, had been the best friend of the lawyer’s son who had been killed in France. When the lawyer caught sight of Bill, it was as if he had come face to face with his dead son. He went as white as a sheet. That night he and the MP sat up late, each telling the other how much he needed to be changed.

Next morning we re-assembled, not quite knowing what to expect. Those who had known Buchman before did most of the talking. Buchman himself said little. In answer to the many questions, he usually got others to tell of their own experience on the point in question. No one theorised or preached. Arguments were met by evidence. The ball had a way of landing back pretty smartly in the questioner’s court. It was fascinating.

The basic theme was: What could happen to our world if people changed. It provoked lively discussion, punctuated by bursts of laughter.

Also by pregnant silences. At such times one usually feels self-conscious and wishes to goodness someone would say something. This time silences did not seem to matter. There was plenty to think about.

Towards the end of the first morning, Murray, one of those who had come over to Oxford with Buchman, talked about how change could come to the individual. I was annoyed with myself for feeling vaguely uncomfortable and not knowing why.

There was a new spirit somehow at work. Conversations at table were different. Apathy had totally disappeared. Cynicism just looked cheap. Familiar arguments no longer held water. Excuses began to be seen for what they really were. Our habitual defences had crumbled. People seemed at ease with one another.

As the weekend progressed, one thing became abundantly clear. A decision had to be made. It was impossible to deny the reality of what we had seen. Now its implication for ourselves had to be faced.

No one had tried to tell us what to do. We were free to choose. I had the uneasy feeling it might well be the most important choice of my life. Time and again that weekend I had seen myself mirrored in the experiences others had shared. And what I saw I did not like one little bit.

By this time I had heard enough to know that a new way of life was possible. I was quite determined not to go back to the way I had been living. But I was not sure I wanted to go all out Buchman's way—yet. It was a dilemma.

The climax came that Sunday afternoon. We were playing tennis, four of us. I made up my mind that when the game was over, I would be absolutely honest with my three friends about the things I had always most wanted to hide. I greatly feared what they would think of me. I was quite sure they would never speak to me again.

To my surprise and relief I found I was not alone. Each in turn was honest about himself. We discovered we were all in need of the same change and clean-up. There was just one thing to do. We got down on our knees. That was the first real prayer I ever made. God flooded in. A huge load

was lifted. No more doubts or hesitations. The only question now was how quickly and effectively to spread this new spirit.

It had been an honest experiment such as any scientist makes. The result was a miracle.

For instance, I had long since ceased to believe I could ever again live a pure life. This lay at the root of my cynicism and apathy. Now in two short days the habits of years fell off. To my surprise I found I had been given a clean mind and a clean tongue—something I could never possibly have achieved by my own efforts. Life had taken on a totally new meaning and purpose.

To most of us in our different ways that weekend brought a thorough-going Christian experience. For the first time in my life Christ became a living reality, in fact, an absolute necessity. Truths I had heard from childhood became personal possessions. I knew what forgiveness meant as all its fresh power and conviction reached every corner and lifted life up to a new level. The barrier between myself and God which had come to seem insurmountable was no longer there. ‘He ever lives to make intercession for us.’ That was the key. I knew I was free. There was no personal merit in such an experience. It was a sheer gift. If an old hulk long stuck in the mud at low water is lifted by the incoming tide and set free to sail the oceans, what merit is that? The only thing to do was to set sail and go.

Others found similar experiences. Soon we had a group of men like-minded and ready to do battle, no matter what anyone else might think, say or do. True, it had begun with us as individuals, but it did not stop there. In the post-war conditions of our time, the need for a new spirit was all too evident. Here was something of universal application. It was clear that nations had to find this answer or they were done for. The need now was to multiply the fighters.

So much had happened in Oxford that prayer was publicly offered from an Oxford pulpit thanking God for the new illumination which had come to the University. Some time later the principal of a college there asked me to come back to continue the work that Dr Buchman had started.

The principal's letter offered a bed, three meals a day and no salary. Guidance said go, so I went. Others came to help.

For the next fifteen years Oxford was our world centre. Interest spread. Invitations came from many countries. It was not long before we had as many as ten thousand people in a summer come to Oxford in vacation time. We would have had more, had there been room. We became known throughout the world as the Oxford Group, later as Moral Re-Armament.

I am seventy now and once more I see a cynical and rebellious generation. But there is this difference in the world today. Although cynicism abounds (no new phenomenon) there is another factor which existed only in embryo fifty years ago. What started with one or two of us in the twenties has now spread around the world and is both overtaking and overcoming the elements of destruction.

Frank Buchman used to quote a Chinese proverb to us, 'If you want to plan for a year, plant corn. If you want to plan for thirty years, plant trees. If you want to plan for a hundred years, plant men.' It is with these men and women that the future lies. They are on the march and their numbers are increasing.

The programme has been the same from the beginning. It is best summed up in Dr Buchman's last words: 'I want to see the world governed by men governed by God. Why not let God run the whole world?'

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