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Report From Britain, 10 October 1949

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REPORT FROM BRITAIN

James W. Silver

Aberdeen, Scotland
October 10, 1949

As Aberdeen will be my base of operations, I would like to tell you something of this beautiful city of silver granite. At first glance it would appear a poor vantage point for examining Britain but second thought brings to mind the similarity of investigating the problems of America from Memphis or Richmond or New Orleans. London, twelve hours away by train, is not England and, as the Scots never tire of pointing out, England is not Britain.

Aberdeen with its 200,000 people basically depends upon the rich agricultural hinterland, with emphasis on meat and dairy production. Aberdeen Angus cattle are so world famous that farmers come from the United States and the Argentine to secure their choice breeding stock. The valleys of the Dee and the Don remind one of central Tennessee, the Valley of Virginia, and the blue grass area of Kentucky. Milk and eggs are plentiful here (in spite of rationing) but the best beef is exported.

This obviously prosperous city has a tremendous diversification of industry: fishing with its allied small business, shipping and shipbuilding, granite working, engineering (which to an Aberdonian means construction of machinery and supervision of gigantic far-flung projects such as Nile dams, Iraq pipe lines, and rice milling equipment for Burma), paper making and printing, textiles, chemicals, and a very healthy tourist trade. Dozens of minor items, from pneumatic tools to organs and bedwarmers, are manufactured here.

Free enterprise is very much the vogue in Aberdeen but has been tempered with city planning and public housing, and, as far as I can see, a personal sense of public responsibility. Educational opportunities are superb, with Kings College dating back to Columbus and the Grammar School (which my son Billy is attending) boasting a tradition of nearly 700 years. The shops, hotels, cinemas, and trams are full and people in general look as though they were going somewhere. There may be defeatism in Britain but you will be hard put to find it here.

I have already been to cattle and sheep auctions, to a meeting of the Rotary Club, have talked with high school classes and at some length with a Communist who sells the Daily Worker undisturbed on the main street. I have watched the fish market in operation and have seen huge blocks of granite being hoisted 500 feet from a quarry which has been mined for more than two hundred years. I have given the countryside a look and have had long conversations with businessmen, farmers, clerks, city officials, doctors, schoolmen, domestics, politicians, etc. It is my intention to travel throughout Britain as opportunity arises and to give you weekly accounts of my findings.

RECOLLECTIONS OF TWO WEEKS IN SCOTLAND: Feeling of being in another world in the narrow streets of Old Aberdeen, a prosperous town in the Middle Ages.... heavy curtains to protect massive doors from the summer sun -- hotcakes (cold) in the bakery windows public dinners where a toast to the King precedes smoking --- sheep dyed a brilliant orange for show purposes....myriads of children in vari-colored school uniforms on thin-tired British bicycles with hand brakes.... TEA, TEA, TEA, -- long talks with German headmistress from Lubeck and consequent depression regarding immediate immediate future of central Europe.... stories of war bombings of Aberdeen: one night two hundred were killed in the city and the next morning all children showed up at Central School except a girl who apologized to the headmaster (he told me this) for tardiness of thirty minutes. She had been hunting in the ruins of her home until she found an essay she had written the night before....the royal family coming out of Crathie Church across the highway from Balmoral castle -- picturesque street names: Rubislaw Den, Correction Wynd, Chanonry Place, Netherkirkgate.... advertisement of adult education classes in current events which mentioned France and Turkey but neither the United States nor Russia--- collection boxes on streetcars with sign: "Please put uncollected fares here." -- The conviction that individualism is very much alive in Britain.
