

THE LATE MR. FOOTE

This letter to the Editor originally appeared in the 13 January 1916 edition of *The New Age*.

Sir,—It does not surprise me that Mr. Duncan dislikes irony, seeing that his own invective is apparently unable to rise above a snarl. Doubtless, his is

“The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow.”

With Trade Unionism I am not concerned: I gave a very rough sketch of what I imagine will be the late Mr. Foote's place in history; as Mr. Duncan does not seem to challenge its main accuracy, I take it that he accepts my sketch as a more or less true one. As I have tried to explain, and as Mr. Duncan tries not to understand, Mr. Foote's business was not with Economics, but with Theology. To anyone but a religious carper that would surely be enough.

I know that there are persons who believe that the Golden Age (See Virgil and others) is delayed because the late Queen Victoria was not a vegetarian or the Pope was not a Protestant; but the limit of fanaticism has been reached when it is gravely stated—as an economic tragedy—that Mr. Foote “missed the wage-system.” For once I will be dogmatic: boldly I declare that nothing sillier has been

said in print for a year. No wonder Mr. Duncan thinks "The Freethinker" a comic paper!

I am glad that Mr. Duncan has dropped his nonsense about Ingersoll, or is that only in abeyance? But he must have his little joke, and so I am accused of calling Mr. Blatchford "an arch-priest." I said that he was a popular hero. He is. Are "arch-priest" and "popular hero" synonymous? Or is Mr. Duncan merely being clever again? If he is, he need not trouble to explain: I quite understand. Why it should be "smart" to mention Mr. Blatchford I do not know. Does Mr. Duncan?

It is not for me to define superstition: I did not try to. It is not germane to the discussion. But Mr. Duncan has already defined it as "sticky stuff"; and I have no doubt that the Sir James Murray "of a year hence" will use that definition (it cannot) be meant for an epigram, can it?) adding in parenthesis that it has no connection with almond rock.

I said that Mr. Duncan's remarks on superstition were unworthy of comment. But they were worth ridiculing as is all pretension in the realm of hard and barren intellectualism. Mr. Duncan's annoyance is not astonishing in the circumstances. *Hinc illae lachrymae.*

So Mr. Foote was a man "with a label." Are we not all men with labels? (I dare not think how Mr. Duncan, the sweetness and light specialist, would label me!) "Are we not all stricken men?" Mr. Duncan has an excellent, and even original, label of his own, as I have written above. Is it for him to jibe?

Not for one moment, Mr. Duncan, do I believe that the creator of my Uncle Toby Shandy would have sanctioned spiteful and completely irrelevant attacks upon the newly dead.

I thank Mr. Duncan for his lesson on style, and by way of return I present him with no less than three small, but I trust useful, homilies.

Firstly, as regards clarity of thought. There is no more a necessary connection between Trade Unionism and Atheism than there is between a piano and a banana. The latter may be “based”) or placed) on the former, but the connection—or should be—a purely accidental one. Similarly, Atheism, as I more than hinted in my previous letter, is an admirable basis for any old kind of unionism; if only for the reason that men without connections in the sky are likely to display more enthusiasm for earthly and secular relationships than men whose interests are centred in God and his family. I do not expect Mr. Duncan to see this, because he has “the wage-system” on the brain—common cliché for obsession, and the chief symptom of obsession is that it can never see more than one thing at a time.

Secondly, as regards the value of words. There is a subjective as well as an objective value in words, those useful adjuncts to argument. Mr. Duncan says, with a Christian sneer, that Mr. Foote attacked religious superstition for forty years. Thus he belittles the work of a man who devoted a long and mentally successful life to the cause of human

freedom. The result is a libel. I say the same words with affectionate reverence, and the result is *not* libel. Strange?

Lastly, as regards manners. It is not good form to refer continually to an opponent by his initials. One experiences the same kind of squirm that one feels when a man refers habitually to his wife as "Mrs. K." It is the worst kind of provincialism. Mr. Duncan peppers his column with "V. B. N.s" like a small boy blowing peas at passers-by through a "shooter." As I have sub-edited for the rudest man in London, I am familiar with this sort of thing; but it is vile form.

As Mr. Duncan is flattered by what he is pleased to call my irony, I hope that he will be nothing less than ravished by my plain-speaking.

In conclusion, I wish to assure Mr. Duncan that I am not a Secularist, and that I was not a friend—I regret to say—of the late Mr. Foote. I knew him slightly, and that chiefly as a very occasional and, I fear, unworthy contributor to his excellent journal. May I say also that I never lose my temper in debate? That is one of the things I learnt from the deceased editor of "The Freethinker."

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