

Lionel Curtis—Prophet of Federal Union

By CLARENCE STREIT

THE DEATH OF LIONEL CURTIS on November 24 cost the cause of Federal Union of the Free another of its greatest leaders in 1955. He was a modest, retiring man of astonishing world-wide influence, a profoundly good man, an enduringly great man.

He was indeed the "prophet" of international free federation, as his devoted disciple, Colonel H. Nugent Head, was fond of calling him. Deeply religious himself, he brought out, as no one else has, the spiritual roots of federation. To him it meant above all *Civitas Dei*—The Commonwealth of God. He had the fire of the ancient Hebrew prophets combined with the virtues of the gentler, wiser Christian saints.

Dean of Federal Union's Leaders

Lionel Curtis was the grand old man of federalism not only in Britain and its Commonwealth, but in the world—the oldest of our leaders both in age and in years of service. He was three years older than Justice Roberts, founder of the Atlantic Union Committee, who died May 17, at the age of 80. The Justice became interested in our cause in 1941; Lionel Curtis, much earlier. After many years of correspondence, they met for the first and only time in 1951 when the Justice went to Oxford University to receive its honorary degree. Lionel Curtis, longtime fellow of All Souls College there, presided when the Justice gave his principal address.

I remember vividly and gratefully when I first met Lionel Curtis. It was in early 1939, through Dr. Frank Ayde-lotte. I learned then for the first time that in the period 1933-38, while I was writing *Union Now* in Geneva, Lionel Curtis was working in the same field in Oxford, writing—and getting published—the three books of his greatest work, *World Order (Civitas Dei)*, which appeared in England in 1934-37. The Oxford University Press published them in 1938 in a one-volume edition entitled *The Commonwealth of God*.

In this truly monumerital and enlightening "Attempt to Show How the

Past [from ancient times on through] Has Led to the Present Position in World Affairs," Lionel Curtis traced the history of the idea of a free world republic from its earliest origins. Facing the Nazi threat as he wrote, he concluded that the hope of humanity lay in its passing from the national to the federal international state. In closing Book II he wrote in 1936:

"In the story told in these pages I can point to no time which appears so fraught with disaster to the human race as a whole as the present. . . We have now reached a stage in the growth of civilization which cannot go further, and is doomed to go back, until we discover the means of passing from the national to the international state. . . Human nature has made immeasurable strides since our Lord showed in His own person how divine it can be. But it cannot advance further till men learn to think of the scheme of human relations which He conceived as one to be brought from the realm of dreams to the

earth in which they live, to be made incarnate in the flesh and blood of a living society."

Lionel Curtis well understood that this great transformation could not be achieved with all the world at once, that it must start with a few nations, and that they must be democracies. Indeed, he was so persuaded of this that in Book III he held that "the first international commonwealth in the real sense of that word must spring from the federal union of two or more nations versed in the art of self-government." And he held that the most hopeful way to begin lay in Australia and New Zealand forming the "nucleus" by uniting. He concluded in 1937:

"The task of initiating the first international commonwealth will, I believe, rest with them. If and when its stability was proved and also its capacity to include other democracies—those even of northern Europe—Canada would, I think, follow suit, **and by** so doing pave the way for its ultimate



A Clear, Positive View

Justice Roberts on Curtis . . .

The prevention of world war has become the first essential for our survival. War, as one of our most distinguished soldiers has said, has become like a fire—you cannot win a fire, but you can prevent a fire. And this is what we have got to do. This book tells how it can be done, and in my opinion the only way it can be done. Moreover, no one other than its author is in my opinion better qualified to write it. . . .

One of the most important principles which Mr. Curtis' wide experience prompts him to stress ... is this: when confronted with a problem of peculiar complexity, the first essential to its solution is to form a clear and positive view of the primary object to be attained. Then, if this object is continually kept in mind while decisions are sought in lesser matters, real progress will be made. . . . And the more people keep that object in mind the more rapid will the progress become. . . .

I find this book an outstanding definition of the course we must follow if we are safely to cross this abyss. And if, as I hope it will be, it is read and discussed throughout the length and breadth of this country, it will be an outstanding contribution to the cause of peace. —Justice Owen J. Roberts in his foreword to Lionel Curtis' World Revolution in the Cause of Peace.

fusion with the great American Commonwealth. And whenever the peoples of North America add their strength to an international commonwealth the epoch of world wars in which we are living will be finally closed."

To put this thinking to the test, and try to get action started, Lionel Curtis then went to Australia and New Zealand in 1938. Disappointed by the reception his ideas got there, he returned to England by way of the United States in early 1939. There his old friend, Frank Aydelotte, told him of *Union Now*, which was then about to be published, and told me of *The Commonwealth of God*. He brought us together in New York City the night before Curtis sailed for England.

I was overwhelmed and deeply moved by the utter selflessness and warm enthusiasm with which this veteran British statesman and federalist—23 years my senior—immediately threw his great weight behind *Union Now*, whose proposal was broader than his own but whose basic thought was similar. That very night he invited me to go with him to a dinner in his honor at the Council for Foreign Relations—and he used his speech to center attention on *Union Now*, rather than his own plan.

On his way across the Atlantic, he read a copy I gave him of the private edition of *Union Now* which I had had

printed in Geneva in October 1938, when no publisher would print it. He sent back a powerful endorsement of it, and fell to work pushing energetically the English edition, which was to appear in early March 1939. When it came out, he mailed copies by air to his friends throughout the Commonwealth. It was thus that I came to appreciate first-hand his immense and far-flung influence.

No author could have done more for his own book than Lionel Curtis did for mine. The swift rise of *Union Now* in public consideration throughout the free world owes much more to his generous efforts than I can say. I give these personal details as my best way of showing how rare a man our cause lost in Lionel Curtis . . . and how good a friend I mourn.

The son of an Anglican vicar, Lionel Curtis was educated at New College, Oxford, and served in the Boer War. He started on his long career as a federalist about that time by reading *The Federalist* while facing the problem of making enduring peace between the British and the Boers. Together with Philip Kerr (the late Lord Lothian) he led in the application of Hamilton's principles to that problem, which resulted in the Union of South Africa in 1909. Later he founded the Royal Institute of Foreign Affairs in London, and served



Lionel Curtis, 1872-1955

on the British delegation to the Paris Peace Conference after World War I. He was Secretary of the Irish Conference and the Commission to carry out the settlement between Britain and the Irish Free State, and suggested the series of reforms in India that were adopted in the Montagu-Chelmsford report. He is survived by his widow.

His later publications were a series of booklets and pamphlets devoted to federal union and peace. They include *The Way to Peace* (1944), *World War: Its Cause and Cure* (1945), *War or Peace* (1946)—all three published by the Oxford Press; *World Revolution in the Cause of Peace*, with a foreword by Justice Roberts, (1949, Macmillan, N. Y.); *The Open Road to Freedom* (1950, Blackwell, Oxford), and *Windows of Freedom* (1952, Blackwell). This latter began with the title-page quotation:

"Still nursing the unconquerable hope."

In its conclusion Lionel Curtis ridiculed that favorite of his countrymen, the "functional" approach to organization, saying: "This adding of gadget to gadget will lead us no nearer to solving the real problem, which is to end once for all the fear of war."

In coming issues FREEDOM & UNION will reprint excerpts from the writings of Lionel Curtis that will keep him advancing, with us, his "one and only cause." So great a soul cannot help but go marching on ... to final victory.

—C. K. S.

The Presence of Greatness

Arnold Toynbee on Curtis . . .



One could not meet Lionel Curtis without feeling oneself in the presence of greatness. One might sometimes be on the defensive against the personal magnetism that threatened to draw one, willy-nilly, into serving the one and only cause. . . . But the recognition of greatness remained unshaken. Curtis . . . was both transparently sincere in pursuing his ideal and impressively successful in getting things done. . . .

The Union of South Africa, comprising all provinces and giving full union-wide self-government to both the European nationalities in the country, could hardly have been achieved before the outbreak of the first World War if Curtis had not conceived the audacious idea of Union and immediately put his indomitable shoulder to the wheel. . . .

Curtis held doggedly that national self-government was incomplete without supranational federation. . . . He pointed out, unanswerably, that nothing short of federation can exorcise the possibility of war. . . . His dream of federation may well come true after his death, in an age when the cobalt-bomb is counselling mankind to opt for world-government as the sole sure alternative to annihilation.—*Arnold Toynbee in the London Observer, Nov. 27, 1955.*