

Randolph Bourne

Nobody asked but ...

This morning I listened to Jeff Riggerbach's podcast, *The Libertarian Tradition*. In particular, I heard the episode covering Randolph Bourne's life and his contribution to the cause of individualism. The text of Riggerbach's presentation is also found at the Randolph Bourne Institute's web pages. I realized, too late, that I had failed to mark the 100th year since Bourne's untimely* death in December 1918.

Bourne packed a lot of ideas into his short life, and did much writing for someone who was repeatedly canned for being so forthright with his ideas. Today, his legacy includes the Randolph Bourne Institute and its instrument, *Antiwar.com*. Furthermore, Bourne is famous for the very durable quote, "War is the health of the State." I urge you to read Wendy McElroy's exploration of this phrase.

But we would be remiss in ignoring others of Bourne's observations. To wit:

The American intellectuals, in their preoccupation with reality, seem to have forgotten that the real enemy is War rather than imperial Germany. There is work to be done to prevent this war of ours from passing into popular mythology as a holy crusade.

The ironist is ironical not because he does not care, but because he cares too much.

Really to believe in human nature while striving to know the thousand forces that warp it from its ideal development-to call for and expect much from men and women, and not to be disappointed and embittered if they fall short- to try to do good with people rather than to them- this is my religion on its human side.

For we do not do what we want to do, but what is easiest and most natural for us to do, and if it is easy for us to do the wrong thing, it is that that we will do.

In America our radicalism is still simply amateurish and incompetent.

In your reaction to an imagined attack on your country or an insult to its government, you draw closer to the herd for protection, you conform in word and deed, and you insist vehemently that everybody else shall think, speak, and act together. And you fix your adoring gaze upon the State, with a truly filial look, as upon the Father of the flock.

The State is not the nation, and the State can be modified and even abolished in its present form, without harming the nation. On the contrary, with the passing of the dominance of the State, the genuine life-enhancing forces of the nation will be liberated.

We can easily become as much slaves to precaution as we can to fear.

With the shock of war the state comes into its own again.

I had nearly let Randolph Bourne slip into obscurity. I now make it one of my life's purposes to keep that from happening. I heartily commend Bourne to your attention in that spirit.

— Kilgore Forelle

* *Bourne was only 32 when he died in 1918's flu epidemic.*