

**A SYSTEM OF MEASURES  
OF LENGTH,  
AREA, BULK, WEIGHT,  
VALUE, FORCE, &C.**

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A system of measures of length, area, bulk, weight, value, force, &c. by Wordsworth  
Donisthorpe

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**WORDSWORTH DONISTHORPE**

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# SYSTEM OF MEASURES

OF

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VALUE, FORCE, &c.

BY

WORDSWORTH DONISTHORPE

AUTHOR OF

'INDIVIDUALISM' 'PRINCIPLES OF PLUTOLOGY' 'LAW IN A FREE COUNTRY' ETC.

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## PREFACE

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EVER since the middle of the present century a strong feeling has prevailed of the immense importance, if not of the absolute necessity, of introducing into England a decimal system of measures of length, area, bulk, weight, and value in place of the tangled and inconsistent medley which now flourishes. Royal Commissions, one after the other, have pronounced emphatically in favour of such a uniform decimal system, and more especially of the metric system used by the French. These reports bear the honoured names of Sabine, Herschel, Airy, and many others. And yet nothing has been done beyond making the use of the metric system permissive in contracts. 'We are of opinion,' runs the Report of the 1868 Commissioners, 'that it is inexpedient that any legislation should take place with respect to the metric system until the whole subject of the weights and measures of this kingdom be brought before Parliament in one Bill.' Good; but successive Governments have been invariably debarred from carrying out these reiterated recommendations by the fact that no single and complete system has ever yet been laid before Parliament. Various schemes dealing with the coinage or with weights, or with other measures have, it is true, been submitted, but nothing approaching to a complete and systematic whole covering the whole field of measurement.

For example, the pound-and-mil scheme was recommended by the

Select Committee of the House of Commons on Decimal Coinage in 1853. The avoirdupois pound has also been put forward as the best unit for a decimal system of weight. Again, for length and area measures the foot has been preferred to the yard as the unit. And so on. Nothing need be said against any of these suggestions beyond the fact that if any one of them is right the others must be wrong, because there is no clear, simple, and finite relation between the foot and the pound avoirdupois, or between the pound avoirdupois and the pound sterling, or between the pound sterling and the foot. It is generally admitted that piecemeal legislation would do more harm than good. Our present chaos of systems is now at its worst. Slight improvements in any branch of it would only have the effect of strengthening the opposition to reform. For instance, if the pound-and-mil system of coinage were in full working order, the worshippers of the 'fixed star'—our wonderful pound sterling of 123·27448 grains of gold  $1\frac{1}{2}$  fine—would have more to urge in favour of their fetish than they now have. Let us, then, bring forward a complete system of measures before half-hearted reformers have improved their defences.

It is commonly asserted that the English nation is incapable of thoroughness, that it loves compromises and half-measures, that it hates general principles. Surely this is a mistake. When once the doctrine of Free Trade came to be understood, what other nation carried it out so logically and thoroughly as England? When the immorality of slavery received recognition, what nation was so quick or so generously earnest in eradicating the abuse? Was not England at one time alone clinging to the single monetary standard? Where is the principle of free speech and a free Press more consistently adhered to than in this so-called country of compromises? It would almost seem that England, so far from being the least likely, is of all countries the most likely to carry out a great reform in the

face of every obstacle, when once the grand principle upon which it is based has become generally recognised. Reverting to the question under discussion, it is probable that England's backwardness in the matter of rational measures is due, not to her inability to realise the advantages and beauties of the metric system, but to her ability to appreciate its real and manifold defects. Let us remove these, and we may safely predict that England will be quick to adopt a system based on principles wider and deeper than those which underlie the systems of any other country. Why legislate in haste and repent at leisure?

It is in the hope of presenting the public with such a complete system of measures that I have undertaken the present work, the labour involved in which cannot fairly be measured by its bulk. When it comes to be seen that this system is complete, that it covers the whole field of measures, that it is suited for an international system, and that it is of all systems the easiest to comprehend and the simplest to work, I have little doubt of its being carried into law with as little delay as possible.

Perhaps I should offer some apology for undertaking what, at first sight, appears to be the business of the Government itself; but it cannot be too often reiterated that, whatever be the merits of democratic government—and they are great and manifold—there are certain tasks which it is utterly incompetent to perform. The very house in which Parliament dwells could hardly have been constructed by our legislators themselves. Suppose a picture to be painted by all our Royal Academicians, each putting in a little bit of his own workmanship, it may be doubted whether, as a work of art, it would command a high price in the market, though possibly as a curiosity—a shocking example of the results of committee work and a fine illustration of the ancient proverb about too many cooks—it would possess considerable value. Similarly, no



system of measures produced piecemeal and on the patchwork system by various Royal Commissions (one on currency and monetary standards, another on weights, a third on land measures, and a fourth on gas-meters) can in the nature of things be other than inferior to the production of a single mind.

It would probably be wiser for the present to leave things as they are than to adopt the recommendations of the 1853 Commission, and to decimalise our measures of length, weight, and value from the units yard, pound avoirdupois, and pound sterling respectively. These units are unco-ordinated, arbitrary, and meaningless. My objects in the present work are, first, to show the defects of the existing English arrangement—a not very difficult task; secondly, to show the defects of the French system, for it is far from faultless; and thirdly, to propose a complete system embodying all the merits of the metric system without any of its drawbacks. In addition to this, an attempt has been made to restore the ancient Gothic system—a system which was in many ways superior even to the metric, and in most respects admirable, but the *débris* of which is no more fitted to modern requirements than the lovely ruins of Bolton Priory are suited to the domestic needs of the nineteenth-century householder.

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