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# PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: 'NATIONAL BOUNDARIES AND TREATIES OF PEACE'

By Professor C. Oman, M.A., F.B.A., M.P., President

*Delivered February* 16, 1919

When first in the early autumn of 1918, it begun to occur to me that at some not very remote date I should once more have the duty and pleasure of delivering my annual address to the Society which has given me the honour of its presidential chair, I had intended to speak on a very academic topic—'The Mediæval Conception of History'. But as the months of victory wore on, and the collapse of the enemies of Great Britain became manifest, it grew more and more obvious that the only subject which the Society would wish to discuss at such a moment,—at the end of the greatest War that the world has ever seen,—would be 'Peace and its Consequences'. I acknowledge myself wholly inadequate to take up such a burden: the brain reels when it tries to visualise as a whole the consequences of the triumph of the Allies. Large books might be written even on some of the minor aspects of the crisis. At the most, one can only dare to deal, in the short

allotted space of an afternoon hour, with some one of the thousand problems which lie before us to-day.

Accordingly I have put together a few modest notes on one of the main topics with which the Peace Conference has to deal—that of the right and the wrong way of drawing State boundaries. It has been my duty of late to be very busy with maps and old historical frontiers: hence came the impulse—perhaps a presumptuous one—which leads me to read this short paper on a subject which is at present engaging all the keenest brains of Europe and America. Let us at any rate see what were the methods of the past, and endeavour to learn from them something that may be of use in determining the methods of the present.

What were the leading principles of the statesmen of elder times? It is hardly necessary to say in 1919 that of all the principles on which partition treaties have been drawn up, that of 'compensations'—so dear to the diplomatists of the eighteenth century,—is at once the most iniquitous and the most fruitful of future troubles. We may or we may not believe in the 'Balance of Power' as a practical ideal. But to hold that because one State has received an increase of wealth or territory, all its neighbours or rivals are entitled to similar augmentation, presupposes that there are always available lands or sources of wealth that can be pared or cut away like cheeses, without any moral hindrance. 'Compensations' always meant in practice the mangling or the extinction of small (or weak and misgoverned) neighbours for the benefit of the strong. It may sometimes be the case that small States have continued to exist for no very obvious reason—they may not represent a national unit, or even a rational geographical unit; they may have been called into existence by a lawyerlike partition of heritages, or have been created to serve as an appanage or endowment for some forgotten personage or dynasty. Such is Luxemburg to-day, such were Parma or Lucca the day before yesterday. Nevertheless the principle that States without a *raison*

*d'être* may be swallowed by their greater neighbours, without any reference to their own desires or prejudices, is not only immoral but fraught with ruin for the devourer in the end. Voluntary unions, aggregations by mutual consent, whether of units of the same racial group as in the United Italy of 1860, or of units not racially connected but with closely linked political and geographical connections, like the cantons of Switzerland, or the Walloon and Flemish halves of Belgium, no wise man will discourage. It is the free consent and the will to hold together that matters, not race, or language, or religion—as witness Switzerland. But where the wish to coalesce and to cohere does not exist, the treaty maker draws his boundaries in vain, whether he talks of 'compensations' or of 'natural frontiers,' or of 'strategical necessities'.

The only cases in which annexations on the 'compensation' principle have not been obviously deleterious to the annexer, sooner or later, may be found in cases where the people of the land transferred have no particular preference for their former Status, or loyalty to it, and no particular objection to the power which is taking them over. When there are two or many States in the same large national group, which are competing with each other, it may be a matter of comparative indifference to the inhabitants of a county or a city, whether they are inside the boundaries of one or of another. Take, for example, mediæval Italy—a citizen of Brescia or Vicenza would have undoubtedly preferred independence in a minute city-republic. But if this was impossible, as sad experience showed, it did not much matter to him whether he became a subject of the Duke of Milan or the Doge of Venice. Or similarly, a few centuries later, an inhabitant of Arras or Douai or Lille, felt no enduring resentment when he was taken out of the dead non-national aggregation that we call the Spanish Netherlands, and put inside the limits of the kingdom of France. He