

The Human Adventure

FROM Herodotus and Thucydides to the modern historian is a long span both in time and historical method. The purpose and technique of the new school are discussed by Mr. C. K. Ogden in this review of *The Human Adventure, being The Conquest of Civilization* by James H. Breasted and *The Ordeal of Civilization* by James Harvey Robinson (Harper's, \$5.00 each, two volumes boxed, \$10.00).

IN attempting to account for the influence of outworn beliefs in modern life, Professor James Harvey Robinson reflects that it would have required a very shrewd prophet half a million years ago (when certain of our social traditions were being established) to have suspected that the most characteristic feature of civilization A.D. 1927 would be its victimization by the magic of words. How could it have been foreseen "that man, being a sort of ex-animal, would tend to sanctify the habits he happened to acquire"? For the crudest survivals of our savage beliefs we have the finest names, and around the names with which we endow these cherished anachronisms cluster the tenderest emotions. Or as the greatest of American neo-historians puts it: "When we realize that this and that notion of ours is 'sacred', we may be sure that it is a childish impression which we have never carefully scrutinized."

He takes it as an instance of our so called religious beliefs, such as belief in witchcraft, or in supernatural beings, or in the Bible, and points out that though secularization, — the reduction of human affairs to earthly standards, — is one of the most important modern trends, we still have a long way to go. This suggests his final question: "Is not the moral overrating of the past our besetting danger?"

History, in fact, which should have been the great deliverer, has hitherto been used chiefly to hold the human mind in bondage. By focusing attention on the details of religious and political strife, it has contrived to make the issues of past centuries seem important to a world which requires new adjustments and new valuations. By echoing the prejudices of historians the modern journalist, who has usually been trained in their schools, continues to foster these same untoward interests. The magazines follow suit, because writing month

by month is a profession, and efficient writers tend to rise from the ranks of the historico-literary group more naturally than from those of the working scientists. And so the vicious circle is completed.

Meanwhile there is a new world growing up beside the old, the creation of science, — of chemistry and engineering, of biology and psychology, — and to this new world the "new history" is making its appeal. *Ancient Greece at Work*, by Professor Glotz of the Sorbonne, is in some respects the most notable achievement of the new method; but writers like Eileen Power, M. Dorothy George, E. A. Burtt, Montague Summers, and H. E. Barnes are, each in a different way, helping to break down barriers and undermine traditional solidifications.

History, for Professor Robinson, should become "the sovereign solvent of prejudices", a sort of *aqua regia* which loosens things up, gives our thinking its necessary freedom, and enables us to attain intellectual and moral majority. To many, his seven hundred and fifty pages will seem too full of information in the orthodox sense, — too full of wars and the intrigues of governments which led up to them, — to justify the appeal to a general public. But the essentials are there too, and in the final chapter even the more belligerent sections are partly justified. For they can be regarded as serving to point a moral: "the doom of war may possibly be near at hand." But it may be that those who have not read history aright will need one more lesson!

Perhaps if New York, London, Paris, Berlin, and Rome could be shattered by means now in hand and their peaceful inhabitants suffocated, it might bring the rest of mankind into a chastened frame of mind suitable to an honest reconsideration of the implications of war as now practiced.

It was the great Chinese thinker, Lao Tze, who said, "Comprehend the ways of

the past wherewith to master the things of the present." Apparently, however, he was a lazy man, for he also held that "the world may be known without ever crossing one's gate; the farther one goes the less one knows." With Breasted and Robinson at his elbow he might have been a trifle nonplussed, for with them we can both go farther and know more. With their aid we obtain a Pisgah-view of that living past whose epic epitome is our only guide.

In fact, the secret of the new historians as a body lies in their application of one of Lao Tze's most famous maxims: "Contemplate a difficulty when it is easy; manage a great thing when it is small." They show us our present difficulties in less complicated settings. We begin with the simplest forms of human ineptitude, and at the end it is our own fault if we do not realize quite clearly that we are still inevitably inept. At any rate we shall not flatter ourselves unduly on our heritage, however greatly we admire the faith which kept our ancestors battling with the darkness. For the children of this generation who claim also to be the children of light, the historian is gradually rising from the rôle of recorder to that of teacher, and it was also a Chinese sage, Confucius, who remarked: "He, only, who familiarizes himself with the old and thereby understands the new is fit to be a teacher." This was in the early part of the fifth century B.C., well before history itself began for most American teachers of the last hundred years.

The new historians are certainly ready to face facts, and to examine the ex-animal without undue sentiment. That is the most notable impression with which we emerge from Professor Robinson's study of the story of civilization from the decline and disintegration of the Roman Empire, though it is only fair to add that, in substance, it is merely a reprint of his text-book, *Mediaeval and Modern Times*. For the earlier ages the publishers have provided a uniform survey by a revision of Professor Breasted's *Ancient Times*, also originally designed as a text-book, though recognized, explicitly by President Roose-

velt and incidentally by subsequent historians, as excellent reading for adults.

No European authority has improved on Professor Breasted's record of the hundreds of thousands of years of pre-history, or of the first four thousand years of civilized history; nor would it be easy to name anyone competent to do so. An alternative approach is, however, provided by M. Rostovtzeff's brilliant *HISTORY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD*, Volume I of which has just been translated by Mr. J. D. Duff, a distinguished classical scholar of Trinity College, Cambridge (Oxford University Press, American Branch, \$5.00). It is profusely illustrated with admirable examples of Egyptian, Babylonian, Hittite, and Greek art. Scholars will certainly demur, but the general reader may be thankful to the Russian Revolution, which drove Professor Rostovtzeff from his special Scythian studies and enabled him to use the period of his exile, first at Madison, Wisconsin, and then at Yale, for setting forth his wide views.

It is gratifying to find that none of these authors lends any support to such attempts at grandiloquent generalizations as those with which Spengler and others have seduced hasty reviewers. Only two of Professor Breasted's thirty chapters, less than a hundred pages, are devoted to what the public has come to regard as his specialty, Egypt. But this can be forgiven by all who reach page 705. For there we have an illustration, a "scene" showing "the condition of Europe" when man first began to regard himself as an ex-animal, and proving that the orientalist who cooperated with him in 1914 in a similar historical venture was still the right man to supplement Professor Harvey Robinson's summary in 1926. For without a sense of humor, however grim, the historian will remain the lost soul whom the new history is endeavoring to displace. In education and in public esteem, perhaps even in the research which goes before the writing of history, nothing is so necessary as the encouragement of the school to which these two masters of modern technique belong.

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