

Literature

Cross-Sections

Carven from the Laurel Tree. By Theodore Maynard. Robert M. McBride and Company.

John Stuyvesant Ancestor. By Alvin Johnson. Harcourt, Brace and Howe.

Books and Things. By Philip Littell. Harcourt, Brace and Howe.

Books in General. By Solomon Eagle. Alfred A. Knopf.

Literature with a Large L. By MacGregor Jenkins. Houghton Mifflin Company.

Prejudices. By H. L. Mencken. Alfred A. Knopf.

A PILGRIMAGE through half a dozen volumes of recent essays affords as interesting sidelights on tendencies and attitudes of mind characteristic of the times as Chaucer found in the conversation of his nine and twenty companions. For the essay best expresses the small talk of an age of reason. Invented by two men of distinctively modern type, Montaigne the psychologist and Bacon the scientist, the essay has continued to reflect the dominant impulses of the period they inaugurated—the desire to explore unknown corners of the brain, and the will to make of the intellect an all-efficient tool. These impulses the essay shows as practices incompletely realized, as aspirations struggling with human fallibility. If there is any significance in the gossip of recent essayists, it would seem as though human fallibility were having the best of the struggle, as though “sweet reasonableness” were losing its charms with age, and the house-cleaning of the brain were raising a fine thick cloud of dust.

In “Carven from the Laurel Tree,” for example, Mr. Theodore Maynard would show us how the ground of reason is crumbling beneath our feet. But it is not into some unknown gulf of the future that he would have us slide. Rather he reassures us that the perils of a forward plunge may be avoided if we will but let ourselves down a gentle backward declivity into the arms of the old Faith. His title, drawn from the couplet,

How the crucifix may be
Carven from the laurel tree,

implies that genuine poetic expression is but an outpouring of Catholic piety. It is in the art of Alice Meynell and Francis Thompson that he finds inspiration. His essays on Sanctity and the Sanitary Inspector and on The Guild Idea suggest that all phases of human endeavor will be futile until founded on the same sure basis. Readers who cannot agree with the Catholic bias which he readily confesses, may nevertheless delight in his repudiation of mysticism as an æsthetic exercise, laugh with him at the humor of the saints, and enjoy meeting in his pages a cloistered spirit who knows no perplexities.

Such poise as Mr. Maynard's is needful when we open “John Stuyvesant Ancestor” and survey the world of perplexities into which Mr. Alvin Johnson introduces us. His book of people is a book of cases keenly observed in the sociological clinic: the brilliant girl marooned at an Arizona water-tank by marriage to an ineffectual man; the mother whose life is empty after her children have grown up; the inventor kept from being a benefit to society by high financiers; the bachelor experiencing the illusions of his grand climacteric; the alumnus of an up-to-date jail seeking to improve a backward community by propagating ideals learned in the penitentiary; the futile revolt of farmers against a village “ring”; the Victorian liberal betrayed into a moment of illiberal malice. All are warped, twisted, bewildered, impotent in their several stations. The picture of their wintry discontents, however, is redeemed for the reader by Mr. Johnson's grim but pungent irony, by his faithful delineation of sharp outlines, and by his freedom from preconceptions. He is a professor of sociology skeptical even of his own laboratory methods and quick to show us, as

in his title story, the futility of amateurish applications of social psychology. There is a saving twinkle in the professor's eyes. He may choose to regard men and women as cases, but he is not himself one.

Belief in the desirability of a free mind is also the creed of another editor of *The New Republic*, Mr. Philip Littell. With something of the irresponsibility of Montaigne and the disillusionment of Anatole France, he is yet in full cry on the trail of realities. His dread of the insincere and the sentimental makes him amusingly distrustful of high motives, and a little wistful in the presence of “those spiritual moods to which nowadays we do not rise by accident, nor yet by will, nor at all without the help of strong hands.” If in speaking of men and women he is apt to dilate their failings of pomposity, affectation, and absurdity for the sheer pleasure of pricking the bubbles he has blown, when he talks of books he is alert, penetrating, unprejudiced. His sense of realities keeps a perfect balance wherever, as in literary criticism, it can work with all the evidence before it. Nor does it yield only negative results. It makes him aware of limitations of vision in the doctrinaire Shaw, of a certain fatiguing sameness in Swinburne's celebrations of sin. But it also guards him from a shallow depreciation of Tennyson and Browning. He is ready to shake hands with both, if only the former will confine his conversation to the landscape and the latter will not insist on passing the Pippa with too God-almighty, world-alrighty an air. Fear of insincerity and banality, moreover, leads to positive virtues of style. Mr. Littell's integrity and freshness of language are evident on every page. His reputation might safely rest on a single sentence like his characterization of “In the Cage”: “Reading it was like watching Henry James watching through a knot-hole somebody who was watching somebody else through a knot-hole.” If Mr. Littell has caught from abroad a trick of letting the eyelids look a little weary, as though overweighted by too heavy a burden of human experience, he has not yet lost his broad American grin. The grin is the more contagious.

The difference between Mr. Littell's essays and the *causeries* of Solomon Eagle (J. C. Squire) of *The New Statesman* is similar to that between Queen Victoria and the Empress Eugénie in seating themselves. The latter simply sank backward into the chair; Queen Victoria always looked behind first. That nervous dread of flatness which both keys up Mr. Littell's style and gives his writings the air of brilliant set pieces, is notably absent from the pages of Solomon Eagle. His tone is that of easy intimacy, his pace not too fast for delightful companionship. His personality is illuminating but not dazzling, whimsical in tastes, erudite in odd information, fond of hoaxes, given to breaking spontaneously into light verse. His titles may serve to indicate the flavor of his remarks: Was Cromwell an Alligator? The Muse in Liquor, Shakespeare's Women and Mr. George Moore, The Bible as Raw Material, The Beauties of Badness, Wordsworth's Personal Dullness. These headings, however, are merely excuses for desultory chat on any subjects that come to mind. Though mainly occupied with books, the talk frequently reverts to gossip about people. Here, for instance, is a little vignette of a fellow-passenger on a continental train, a German lady with a canary: “At frequent intervals his mistress lifted the green curtain, looked him in the eyes with a bewitching smile, and piped ‘Peep, Peep.’ The bird never replied, though perhaps he looked his response. The lady then turned to me and said, ‘Is 'e not a nice bird? Is 'e not goot?’ and common politeness—leaving gallantry out of the question—compelled me to reply always, ‘Yes, a beautiful little bird.’ About twice an hour she retired to the dining-car and came back exuding smiles and sighs. ‘I haf joost 'ad a bifsteck. I dawn't like steck.’ How true it is that in life we have to be content with second bests!” Only the sure-footed essayist can risk a comic banality like the last sentence. “Books in General” is what ideal *causeries* ought to be, the relaxation of a powerful mind.

Recreation in good measure with a modicum of elevating

thoughts is supplied by Mr. MacGregor Jenkins in "Literature with a Large L." The title essay is a plea for a closer human companionship with books; the accompanying paper called Fellow Travellers urges a similar openness of heart in the contact of one person with others. These are mellow subjects and they are ripely treated. The accents of the after-dinner speaker vibrate behind the cold type. Mr. Jenkins is always prepared to turn aside from his subject for the sake of a witty saying or a good story, and his stock of these commodities, accumulated during a long career as a publisher, would enliven any theme. His book is a reminder of what speaking we used to enjoy after dinner in the days when a certain mellowness was not thought inappropriate or illegal.

If we would end our pilgrimage in good Canterbury style with a sermon, it can be found in Mr. Mencken's "Prejudices." It is not, to be sure, a sermon of the ordinary kind, for one of Mr. Mencken's complexes is a hatred of the "Messianic delusion" among authors. Still he has no objection to assuming the rôle of an æsthetic evangelist or a Billy Sunday of the beautiful, seeking to infuse loveliness into our cruder lives by vociferation. An abnormally developed sensitiveness to style is his qualification for the rôle. On any other matter his opinions may best be covered by a garland of terms from his critical vocabulary, as bosh, tosh, flubdub, rumble-bumble, pishposh, flapdoodle, balderdash, poppycock, slobber. Such, for instance, are his efforts to convince us that America has a "peasantry" and needs an aristocracy. A sense for style, however, distinguishes his judgment of books. It may best be seen in isolation in his comment on Howell's, that "industrious and inoffensive man," whose novels as far as content goes he would dismiss as "a long row of uninspired and hollow books, with no more ideas in them than so many volumes of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and no more deep and contagious feeling than so many reports of autopsies, and no more glow and gusto than so many tables of bond prices." Yet by sheer virtue of style Howells "loosened the tightness of English, and let a blast of Elizabethan air into it." Here, indeed, is a paradoxical separation of matter and form for Croceans to chew upon. In discussing the books of Professor Veblen, Mr. Mencken's analysis of substance and his feeling for style unite in the triumphant conviction that the "Great Thinker" is a "geyser of pishposh," on which theme he introduces some pleasing harmonic variations. Mr. Mencken is the Post-Impressionist of critics. Where such writers as Mr. Alvin Johnson and Solomon Eagle prefer clear line, perspective, depth, he does not shrink from laying on masses of gorgeous color. Is this that "barbaric yawp" which Whitman hailed as the language of the future?

GEORGE F. WHICHER

Labor in the Commonwealth

Labour in the Commonwealth. By G. D. H. Cole. B. W. Huebsch.

IF you had chanced to be in England in those dim and hazy days before the Deluge of 1914 you might have heard vague rumors of a new brand of socialism that was beginning to make some headway. If you had then inquired more particularly concerning it you would probably have been told that you should buy *The New Age* weekly and that would keep you *au courant*. You, being a discerning person, would recognize that you had made a very precious find; for though you might not agree with *The New Age* or quite grasp all at once what it was driving at, you would discover that you were in the counsels of a very live and able company of men. You would become familiar with Orage, S. G. Hobson, Cole, Mellor, and some others, and you would duly appreciate them; but you would hardly have guessed that you were looking on the birth and infancy of a doctrine of economic change and reconstruction which was presently to become the most powerful influence in British economic thought.

But so it has turned out. The National Guild Movement has become a factor of the first importance, not alone in that it has gained the adhesion of people of the calibre of Bertrand Russell and J. A. Hobson, but also in that it has profoundly affected all progressive social thinking in Great Britain. It is impossible to read the memorandum of the British Labor party on "Labour and the Social Order" without realizing that its bias is toward such a social synthesis as that for which the Guildsmen have been looking; and it would be difficult to estimate how much of the impulse toward democratic control in industry which found expression in the Whitley scheme and the Garton Foundation Report is due to the early work of the Guildsmen. Its literature is steadily growing, and it is safe to say that no movement of our time has been more ably served by its advocates than has that of National Guilds.

This rapid progress is, of course, due in great part to the war. But pre-war conditions were favorable to the development of the National Guild idea. On the one hand, the criticism which orthodox socialism invited by reason of its dangerous exaltation of the state, and on the other, the distrust provoked by the syndicalist repudiation of the state left the field open for a social gospel which would avoid both the socialist apotheosis and the syndicalist denial. The strength of the National Guild doctrine lay in that it deposed the state from the paramountcy assigned to it in the socialist philosophy while it retained it for such purposes as it was fitted and needed to discharge. The Guildsmen destroyed the socialist state by accepting the syndicalist doctrine of democratic functional controls while it preserved the state as the organ of the community in its capacity as consumer and user, and in the non-economic aspects of its life. Then the war provided a very formidable stimulus to the Guild movement. The performances of the state as employer completed the process of disqualifying it for the central and omniscient position assigned to it in the earlier socialism, while the plain business success of certain experiments in industrial democratic control gave a signal endorsement to the contention of the Guildsmen.

Mr. Cole shares with Mr. S. G. Hobson the main credit for the rapid diffusion and acceptance of the Guild principle. Mr. Hobson is a good economist, but his special distinction is that he is the humanist of the movement, while Mr. Cole has been preëminently its political and economic expositor. Since he wrote "The World of Labour" Mr. Cole has produced a stream of strongly reasoned advocacy of the Guild principle in its political and economic aspects; and his work has steadily improved in quality. In "Labour in the Commonwealth" he gives us a systematic discussion of the whole problem of industry; and while in this volume he says little directly about National Guilds, the whole argument leads directly to the brief concluding exposition of the Guild idea.

As a whole, "Labour in the Commonwealth" is a very good book; and it should be read as an able exposition of the general tendency of progressive economic thought in England. Here Mr. Cole though he speaks in the first person does not speak for himself alone; he is the mouthpiece of an influential and growing school of thought. We could wish that Mr. Cole would confine himself more rigorously to plain and straightforward explanation. His excursions into satire and humor are unfortunate. He is as yet too bitter to be successfully satirical and too vehement a controversialist to be happy as a humorist. Mr. Cole's natural controversial weapons are the club and the broadsword, not the foil and the rapier.

This criticism must not, however, be allowed to detract from our appreciation of the substance of the book. We do not expect the choicest English from Mr. Cole; but he always succeeds in making himself perfectly clear. His exposition marches from point to point in an orderly, logical movement; and whether he convinces you or not, he does lay out his whole mind before you with the most complete precision. "Labour in the Commonwealth" is professedly "a book for the Younger Generation," and as it is a statement of Mr. Cole's entire industrial