

THE FREETHINKER

• EDITED BY CHAPMAN COHEN •

Vol. LXI.—No. 24

Sunday, June 15, 1941

Price Threepence

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VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Sir James Frazer

I AM rather late in paying my tribute to Sir James Frazer, but for several weeks I have been living in a wild rush, with a hundred and one things demanding attention and worries innumerable waiting on opportunity. Fortunately, the great anthropologist was and is one who will not easily or quickly be forgotten by scientifically minded men and women. His influence on modern thought has been too powerful for that. He did not write for either the educated or uneducated crowd, although he wrote with such simplicity of phrasing that even Meredith's "sucking curate" could, if he dared, have studied him with profit and understanding. His works will serve as a lasting monument to their begetter; and those who really honoured him did not need a scanty newspaper notice to tell them that a great man had "passed."

Nor does his death at the age of 84 call for expressions of sorrow. In conventional language we might say that we have lost a great man. I prefer to say that a great man has lived with us: that he gave us liberally of his greatness and that what he gave is still ours. Nothing can rob the world of that. Most of us may be no more than figures in a shadow show; but James Frazer belonged to that select body of men and women whose work lives on as a decisive factor in shaping the intellectual life of the race. His really important works—those by which he will live—dealt with what the vast majority profess to believe but few really understand: religion. Only in the pulpit can his contribution to the origins of religion be ignored. Even the criticisms that have been brought by fellow anthropologists against some of his conclusions rebound to his credit: for he belongs to that superior type which incites pupils to profitable differences. Frazer—the real Frazer—will live in his work. He has marked a trail that others must follow, even though they broaden and lengthen the road.

Dying at the age he did, good fortune had it that his wife should follow his decease within a few hours. It was an ideal end to an ideal married life. His wife worked with him and shared his views. Their lengthy intimacy made the union of the gifted pair complete. There must have occurred a fusion of ideas, of tastes and feelings that would have made the survival of one for years after the other a drawn-out emptiness. From his writings we can rest

assured that Frazer had no belief in a future life. Neither husband nor wife could have any use for an aimless immortality presided over by an impossible god. Frazer knew the beginnings of all gods and could with safety predict their ultimate fate.

* * *

A Great Pioneer

The notices of Frazer's death, with the exception of a few specialised higher-class magazines, were very scanty. Newspapers found their chief interest in the fact that he had written about fourscore books and that husband and wife died within a few hours of each other. Those items were "news." So would have been the information that one had poisoned the other. The nature and quality of the work done was not of "display" importance. That figure of fun, the ex-Kaiser, was given columns. But as I glance at my shelves and see there—really adorning them—over a score of Frazer's volumes, my respect and admiration is for the man who has done so much to enlighten humanity. My readers know that I am very fond of referring to Frazer. I do so for two reasons. First to advertise the quality of the work done, and second because I believe it is impossible really to understand social and religious evolution without a knowledge of Frazer's work. The man who is familiar with the main teachings of the eleven volumes of the "Golden Bough," the three volumes of "Folk Lore in the Old Testament," the three volumes of "The Belief in Immortality" and a run through four volumes of "Totemism and Exogamy" will be sufficiently equipped to at least understand many of the problems life offers him. Since Tylor and Spencer there has been none with the same sweep of view, the richness and pertinence of illustration, or has expressed his researches with the same simplicity and gracefulness. But genius is always simple. It is the man of muddled mind and lack of generalising power who transmits his want of understanding to his unfortunate readers.

I have not the space to quote much from Frazer to show the value of his work, so I cite the opinion of one who stands high in the same field as himself. Malinowski says:—

"Literally half the subjects of modern anthropological argument and controversy have been submitted by Frazer for discussion: totemism, problems of the taboo, origins of kingship and chieftainship, primitive conceptions of the soul and spiritual life—the list could be drawn out indefinitely by going into more detail."

And he gives a list of well-known writers on anthropology who are, he says, "more or less dependent on Frazer,"

* * *

Superstition or Religion?

What was Frazer's attitude towards religion? Some of the papers moved very gingerly. One—the "News Chronicle," I think (I have mislaid my clipping)—headed a leading article with "An Historian of Superstition." That was not exactly a lie, but it was a Christian truth; and between the two it is often difficult to distinguish. To be quite just, one

must confess that we owe to the Churches the first drawn distinction between ordinary truth and Christian truth by stressing belief in the latter as being necessary to salvation. And most historians have been forced to recognise the need of separating the two.

But if Frazer's work had been merely a history of superstition, its value would have been little greater or of more scientific value than a collection of fairy tales. The importance of Frazer's work lies in the fact that he has given the world a history of the origin of religion. No one after reading him can honestly doubt that when dealing with the history of superstition he knew, and wished his readers to know, that he was laying bare the bases on which all religions stand.

With regard to this point, I remember a letter which J. M. Wheeler (for many years sub-editor of the "Freethinker") showed me which he had received from Frazer concerning the first edition of the "Golden Bough." Wheeler had written thanking and congratulating him on the work, but had regretted that, with so many others, he had stopped short just where it should have emphasised its relation to Christianity and other existing religions. Frazer admitted that this was the important aspect of his work, but on the ground of certain family relationships he had left that aspect to be stressed by others. And readers may remember that in the second edition of the "Bough" he has the following significant summary of his work:—

"It is indeed a melancholy and in some respects thankless task to strike at the foundations of beliefs in which, as in a strong tower, the hopes and aspirations of humanity through long ages have sought a refuge from the storm and stress of life, yet sooner or later that the battery of the comparative method should breach those venerable walls, mantled over with the ivy and mosses and wild flowers of a thousand tender and sacred associations. At present we are only dragging the guns into position; they have hardly yet begun to speak."

The italics are mine. But what other interpretation can any honest mind put on these passages than that the author believed that his work did explain the origin of all religions as a result of illusion, delusion and misinterpretation of natural facts. Unfortunately, it has been the common practice of scientists and publicists in this country to refrain from expressing in plain language their real opinions of the dominant religious system, and by inventing a new interpretation of religion and of "god" to taint public opinion at its source. We had this in the case of Darwin, who, having referred to the "creator" in the closing words of his "Origin of Species," had to confess later that he meant by the word nothing more than "happened from some unknown cause."

Two other points may be noted in connection with Frazer. In his "Psyche's Task," in which he played the part of Devil's advocate by arguing that in early stages of culture "superstition" played a useful part in protecting social institutions that otherwise might not have flourished as strongly, it is quite evident that his argument really applies to both the early forms of religion (superstition) and to the later form of superstition (religion). The more strictly scientific view here is, of course, that social institutions persist because they are favourable to the survival of the group. The reasons given for perpetuating them is quite another and a different question. Man is a rationalising animal, whether we take him in the primitive stage or in a more civilised one, and the reason he gives for doing certain things are not always the cause of his doing them. One need not believe

that those clergymen who are at present reviving the very primitive notion that the only foundation for human decency is the belief in a God would, if they outgrew the belief, indulge in immorality. Most of the clergy are not as good as they think they are, nor as bad as they might be.

Yet one more disproof of the thesis that Frazer was detailing the origin of superstition, and not that of religion. "I believe," he said, "that in the evolution of thought, magic, as representing a lower intellectual stratum, has probably everywhere preceded religion." He meant that man began by trying to coerce the forces of nature by what civilised people would call "Magic." But at some time or other it was borne in upon many that this method of "controlling spirits" was not efficacious enough. So from coercion he proceeded to petition, and in petition religion was born. This view is not generally accepted by present-day anthropologists, but whether it is not it is quite clear that Frazer believed that religion arises out of magic, and without that religion would never have existed.

There seems little doubt that whether we take "magic" or "religion" we are dealing with nothing but two phases of the same thing; for both rest upon the belief that the forces of nature are living forces or are controlled by beings akin to man himself. Suppose Frazer is correct when he assumes that it was man's discovery of the uncertainty of magical operations and that this led to petition and a sense of obedience to "higher" (other) powers; it is still true that both forms are interlocked in the historic religions. What else but magic is the transformation of a wafer and wine into flesh and blood, and the saving from sickness by prayer?

Unless Frazer was giving an account of the origin of religion, and finding the beginnings in the fear and ignorance of primitive mankind, and unless his many volumes hold the key to the understanding of religion as a whole, his life's work has only an antiquarian value.

There are other views of Frazer to be noted with which I will deal next week.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

INTERCESSION

Call on God, yea, call upon him!
 Ask and seek and ye shall find—
 Tears and prayers all unavailing
 With a God, deaf, dumb and blind!
 Intercession and Thanksgiving
 Through unending nights and days,
 Gods are thirsty creatures living
 On loud pæans of ceaseless praise!
 Shell projected, God directed,
 Nazi bomber takes his aim—
 Through the steeple, on the people—
 Praising God's most glorious name!
 Praise, applaud him, loudly laud him,
 'Neath his banner bravely led;
 Loud thanksgiving from the living—
 Silence from the Glorious Dead!
 Praise eternal, he can "take it"
 Have no fear upon that score;
 "Use a trowel"! Though it break it—
 He will "take it"! Then some more!
 Tragic waste! Vain, vain obsession!
 Supplicating wails of woe!
 Stand erect and face aggression
 On your feet—your knees won't do!
 Banish fear and stand defiant—
 Gods are stuff for scorn and scoff!
 Steadfast stand and self-reliant
 Tell these Gods where they get off!

A. HANSON

A God worthy of worship would not desire it!
 A God who desires it should not inspire it!

A. H.

SIXPENNY MASTERPIECE

FOR sixpence in the "Big Ben" series one can now buy Llewelyn Powys's novel "Apples be Ripe"; and one could hardly spend sixpence in modern fiction to better advantage of the mind. Nothing that this author ever wrote could be insignificant, or badly written, or uncharacteristic; and this novel, because of the significance with which it is so dynamically charged, because it is simple and direct in style and because it bears in every chapter the impress of its creator's genius, is likely to outlast more popular and even better novels.

This is not a great novel, but it may well belong to the class of Wilde's "Picture of Dorian Grey" in being one likely to outlast better novels and, secondly, in its attractiveness to the young. The plot is pedestrian, the characters not noteworthy; lesser writers can give us better fiction. Yet this novel lives because it has something to say and says it insistently; sometimes beautifully, but always convincingly. And what is the message of this book? Merely that life is made to be lived for itself and is sufficient for itself: that "apples be ripe and nuts be brown." Happiness is the aim, not duties nor obligations nor wealth; and the first duty of man is to be aware, not half-aware, of the joy and glory of being alive. Not to live fully, not to embrace all experiences—that is the cardinal sin according to Llewelyn Powys. It is, of course, the doctrine of Epicurus and Aristippus made modern.

On the green cover of the book is printed the following bawdy verse:—

" Apples be ripe
And nuts be brown;
Petticoats up
And trousers down."

This is a little to be regretted: not because the verse is a cheap trifle, but because it may repel some serious readers who should read the book and attract the wrong type of reader who may be disappointed. It is a book needing to be read by the world's Adelas and Rev. Mr. Hinnys, whose prototypes are sketched within its pages, and not for youthful seekers after salacity. But "nice girls" and "worthy clergymen" perhaps will remove the cover—and benefit by the interior. Let us, at any rate, hope so.

The story traces the life of Chris Holbech from childhood in his father's West Country vicarage to his death from exposure as an unemployed farm labourer, and all the emphasis is upon his love affairs. Brief vignettes of public school and university days lead us to his career as a history teacher in a conventional private school at Eastbourne. Here he falls in love with, and marries, Adela, the daughter of the clergyman-schoolmaster, Mr. Hinney. She is the typical—too typical to be real—conventional "nice" girl, and the childless marriage of these incompatibles is, of course, a failure from the start.

From the dreadful threefold prison of a conventional occupation, a conventional home and a conventional marriage Christopher escapes in novel fashion. One of the young servant girls at the school, Lucy Collet, is "in trouble" by a bounder of the town, and Chris, from pure compassion, enters her bedroom to comfort the girl on her affliction and disgrace. His clerical father-in-law comes up and Chris is caught hiding under the girl's bed. This scene is delicious comedy and one of the best in the book. (It would be excellent upon the stage.) The parson-schoolmaster is willing to hide his son-in-law's "shame," but Chris, disgusted at such hypocrisy, announces his intention of leaving and squiring the distressed damsel to her

humble home. This he does, and, leaving her there, gives up his income and home to Adela and becomes a farm labourer, to his soul's peace. As a farm labourer he has a love affair with Eleanor Giles, daughter of a farmer, and another with a squire's wife, Flora Husting, whom he first knew as a little girl, who, equally oppressed by a conventional environment, runs away with the fascinating Chris in winter. A fall into a river en route and a night à deux in a hayrick brings on death from pneumonia and rheumatic fever. But Eleanor will bear his child and Flora is content.

The end of the story is worthy of Flaubert and worth transcribing for its simple truth, its fidelity to reality, and its ability to purge the heart by pity and terror. Here it is:—

"She (Eleanor) bent down to kiss the chilled forehead, and as her tears fell upon the impassive mask in the coffin there came to her nostrils the ancient, unmistakable odour that rises from a dead man."

That ending reminds one, too, of the writing in "Esther Waters" and "A Mummer's Wife," but Llewelyn Powys is an honest writer than George Moore. His interest, too, is not in literature so much as in life and in his stark gospel of life, namely, its "lack of ulterior significance," its futility, its value for and in its own self. The aim of most people, as he well says, is "to forget the dangerous background on which the drama of life is played" because they are afraid to face the reality of eternal death. But perhaps that forgetfulness is Nature's provision intended as anodyne for us all, as for the animals. Unfortunately for himself, man is a thinking animal and must bear the penalty of thought, which is mental suffering.

It is impossible for Llewelyn Powys not to say penetrating and significant asides in telling his story. Here are a few of them:—

"Thinking purged of preconceptions, philosophic thinking—only through its power could salvation come to the world."

"To forget the futility of life was to misunderstand life."

"That alone counted—the capacity for experiencing with ever-increasing discrimination the few moments of allotted consciousness."

"Life was a series of sensations devoid of ulterior significance and should never be regarded as anything else. All troubles came from not recognising that fact and from not frankly acknowledging the simple fact that there was no immortality."

"We listen to advice only when we want to."

"Experience was everything: experience through a highly developed and heightened consciousness."

"A cloyed spirit covered with the dust of carpeted interiors."

These few quotations will give some measure of the quality of the mind that gave birth to them: a mind courageous direct and clear; a mind resolute to break through the torturing and tortuous complexities and complications of conventional existence to the ultimate simplicities of human life. Such minds are rare. And if many readers will declare that there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in the philosophies of Epicurus, Aristippus and Llewelyn Powys we can retort that there is no certainty of that, but that we are at least certain of the ripening and rotting qualities of apples and mankind.

"Thereby hangs a tale," as Shakespeare perceived; and thereby hangs this tale—a tale not to be missed by the discerning.

These are days of war, and much is made of the loss of a battle or a battleship. By the death of Llewelyn Powys, England lost something more than a battle or a battleship: she lost something that cannot be replaced by building or buying or by material "victory." She lost a writer of truth. His was one of the rarer spirits that steer humanity—and when will come another to take his vacant place?

C. G. L. DU CANN

THE "MAN" JESUS IV.

AS I have not read Dr. Eisler's "The Messiah Jesus" I do not know exactly how much of the Talmud he refers to or how many of the stories therein relating to Jesus he discusses. One of my critics, however, triumphantly quotes him dealing with one of the references—a dispute the teacher of the famous Rabbi Akiba, whose name was Eliezer, had with Jacob of Kephah Sekhanjah over a text in Deuteronomy. The point is that Jacob is made to quote a saying "of his master Jesus"—that is, that Jesus himself spoke to Jacob.

This story is not found in the earlier Mishna, but in the much later compiled Gemara, as the commentaries on the Mishna are called; and it is found in two forms almost identical with each other, though in the first Jesus is called "Jeschu-ha-Notzri," while in the second he is called "Jeschu ben Pandira," a very important difference in the name. If Akiba was talking to his master about the year 130 A.D., then Eliezer must have been a very old man, for he had to recall a conversation with someone who was discussing a text with a Jesus in the year 30 A.D. It is, of course, possible; though I wonder whether we could find anybody now who remembers talking to someone who saw in adult age Queen Victoria's coronation.

Unfortunately for the theory, we have two more stories of this same Jacob in the Talmud. In one of these he is recognised as a healer in the name of "Jeschu Pandira," and he comes forward to heal the nephew of Rabbi Ishmael who had been bitten by a serpent. This Ishmael would not allow, and the nephew died. Now the interesting thing about Ishmael is that we can give him a date, for he was a contemporary of Akiba—that is, about 130 A.D. And that settles the question of a date for Jacob also, for he could not possibly have wanted to cure anybody of a snake bite in the year 130 A.D. and also in adult age had discussed Deuteronomy with a Jesus in the year 30 A.D. To quote this passage, or rather these four passages, for they are all connected with each other, as "evidence" for the existence of a real man called Jesus Christ, seems to me to prove conclusively how desperate are the protagonists of the "man" Jesus theory. And they prove another thing, also, and that is, the hope that statements regarding the Talmud by a "learned" Jew will not be looked at too closely. On this question I mistrust nearly all statements emanating from the "man" Jesus believers, I shall give another notable instance of this when we come to Tacitus.

What about the other stories regarding "a Jesus" which are found in the Gemara? They are characterised by Baring-Gould in his "Lost and Hostile Gospels" "as untrustworthy because so late. Had they occurred in the Mishna, they might have

deserved attention." I hope it will be recognised that Baring-Gould was a Church of England clergyman and an absolute believer in Jesus Christ as "our Lord." His opinion is therefore all the more valuable as it does not come from such an "extremist" as I am.

There is still another point, however. Have we the Talmud as compiled in the year 500 A.D.? It is extremely difficult to say. We do know that thousands of the copies were destroyed by Christians during the Dark and Middle Ages, as they were supposed to contain insulting references to Jesus. It is, in fact, almost undeniable that in the ultimate the Jews had to make drastic alterations to insure the survival of the work; and as far as I can find out it simply is not known—or, if known, not allowed to be definitely said—whether the first printed copies of the Talmud contain the "insulting" references or the revised ones. Be that as it may, one of the most famous stories of "a Jesus" is that placed in the reign of Jannai or Jannaeus (John), the son of John Hyrcanus I., and who reigned over the Jews from 104 to 78 B.C. This Jannaeus persecuted some of the Rabbis (or teachers), one of them, Jehoshua, fleeing to Egypt with his disciple Jesus, or, as the word is sometimes spelt, Jeschu. Jesus seems to have looked with favour on the comely hostess of an inn where they stayed, which roused the ire of Jehoshua, who cursed his pupil, a curse which caused Jesus to leave his master and devote himself to the study of magic. It is indeed one of the later Jewish traditions that Jesus (Christ) learnt his magic in Egypt.

But what are we to do with the date assigned to the event—about 90 or 100 B.C.? Is this Jesus, living about 100 years before the Christian Jesus the same, and the difference in dates merely a stupid anachronism? Well, Baring-Gould says: "That this Jeschu is our blessed Lord is by no means evident. On the contrary, the balance of probability is that the pupil of Jehoshua was an entirely different person." Speculation can naturally have a high old game here, but, as I once before remarked, speculation is not evidence. In any case, even Jewish authorities agree with Baring Gould.

There is another story in which Akiba is supposed to meet Mary (or Miriam as she is often called) and to ask her why her son is a bastard. Neither Mary nor Jesus is named, but no one doubts that "a Jesus" is meant by the word "bastard." This places the reference as in about the year 130 A.D., and gives those who believe in the "man" Jesus a wide choice in the Talmud—one hundred years *before* the accepted date or one hundred years *after*.

Mary or Miriam figures quite a lot in the Jesus stories in the Talmud. She is generally described as a woman's hair-dresser, and she seems to have had love adventures told by the Rabbis in various ways resulting in "a Jesus" who was spoken of in most uncomplimentary terms by the rabbinical writers. As their dates and the details of their stories vary considerably, I cannot see how they can possibly refer to a "man" Jesus going about Jerusalem—or is it Galilee?—doing good in the year 30 A.D.

The well-known Jewish life of Jesus, the "Sepher Toldoth Jeschu," which J. M. Wheeler edited, and which, while containing something of the stories in the Talmud, is probably a 12th century production, is sometimes brought forward as proof that there really lived a man called Jesus. Nowadays authorities prefer to base their case on more respectable "evidence" as this "Life" (there are actually two versions) is about as much value as evidence as the silliest Apocryphal Gospel.

In his dialogue with Trypho the Jew, Justin Martyr tried hard to convince his young opponent that Jesus was the Messiah. Trypho calmly tells Justin that if "Christ" or the Messiah had ever been born or existed anywhere he was quite "unknown." I cannot see how any Jew about the year 150 A.D. could have spoken like that if there had ever been a Jesus, whether as a man or as a God, who had been crucified in Jerusalem, and whose followers were becoming more powerful and numerous every day. Still, there are other opinions; and if what I have said does not convince any reader that the Talmud does not give us any real evidence as to a man called Jesus, who was the Jesus of the Gospels, he is quite within his rights to assert otherwise.

H. CUTNER.

BURNS AND RELIGION

THIS article is intended to enlarge upon one by Mr. George Wallace, which appeared in a January number of this paper, the difference being that this one is intended to only show the poet's attitude to religion.

THANKSGIVING FOR A NATIONAL VICTORY.

Ye hypocrites! are these your pranks?
To murder men and give God thanks!
Desist for shame! proceed no further;
God won't accept your thanks for murder!

This is interesting, in view of present days of National Prayer.

EPITAPH ON HIS FRIEND, WM. MUIR.

If there's another world, he lives in bliss;
If there is none, he made the best of this.

EPITAPH ON A SCOTTISH LAIRD.

Here lies Boghead among the dead
In hopes to get salvation;
But if such as he in Heav'n may be,
Then welcome, hail! damnation.

EPITAPH ON A PARISH SCHOOLMASTER.

Here lie Willie Michie's bones:
O Satan, when you tak him,
Gie him the schuling o' your weans,
For clever deils he'll mak them!

KIRK AND STATE EXCISEMEN.

Nay, what are Priests? (those seeming godly wise-men)
What are they, pray, but Spiritual Excisemen!

INSCRIPTION FOR AN ALTAR OF INDEPENDENCE.

Thou of an independent mind,
With soul resolved, with soul resigned;
Prepared Power's proudest frown to brave,
Who wilt not be, nor have a slave;
Virtue alone who dost revere,
Thy own reproach alone dost fear—
Approach this shrine, and worship here.

DEATH AND DR. HORN BROOK (first verse).

Some books are lies frae end to end,
And some great lies were never penned;
Ev'n ministers they hae been kenned,*

In holy rapture,

A rousing whid at times to vend,†

And nail't wi' Scripture.‡

* Kenned—down.

† Whid—lie.

‡ Nail—prove.

HOLY WILLIE'S PRAYER.

O Thou, that in the heavens does dwell,
Wha, as it pleases best Thysel',
Sends ane to heaven an' ten to hell,
'A for thy glory,
And no for onie guid or ill
They've done afore Thee!

What was I, or my generation,
That I should get sic exultation,
I wha deserv'd most just damnation
For broken laws,
Six thousand years ere my creation,
Thro' Adam's cause.

EPISTLE TO JOHN GOLDIE, author of the Gospel recovered.

Poor gapin' glowin' Superstition!
Wae's me she's in a sad condition:
P'ye, bring Black Jock, her state physician,
To see her water:
Alas, there's ground for great suspicion
She'll ne'er get better.
Auld Orthodoxy lang did grapple,
For every hole to get a stapple*;
But now she reaches at the thrapple†,
An' fights for breath;
Haste, gie her name up in the chapel,
Near unto death.

* Stapple—stopper.

† Thrapple—throat.

EPISTLE TO THE REV. JOHN MCMATH.

God knows, I'm no the thing I should be,
Nor am I even the thing I could be,
But twenty times I rather would be
An atheist clean,
Than under gospel colours hid be
Just for a screen.

THE COTTER'S SATURDAY NIGHT.

In that most moving of his poems, after describing the events of the evening, and its simple joys, the poet continues:—

Compared with this, how poor Religion's pride,
In all the pomp of method, and of art;
When men display to congregations wide
Devotion's ev'ry grace, except the heart!

EPISTLE TO A YOUNG FRIEND.

The fear o' hell's a hangman's whip,
To haud* the wretch in order;
But where ye feel your honour grip,
Let that aye be your border.

* Haud—hold.

The above are a few of the poet's references to Religion and the Priesthood, and show in no uncertain form in what light he regarded them.

For those unacquainted with the works of Burns, if they will dip into his pages they will find refreshment in his glorious clear-cut style, and his simple philosophy of life.

There is an excellent edition of his poems in the Everyman Library, with an instructive and interesting introduction by James Douglas.

ANDREW GLENCOE.

DOUBTING IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

Though Truth and Falsehood be
Near twins, yet Truth, a little elder is.
Be busy to seek her; believe me this,
He's not of none, nor worst, that seeks the best.
To adore or scorn an image, or protest,
May all be bad. Doubt wisely; in strange way,
To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;
To sleep, or run wrong, is. On a huge hill,
Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
Reach her, about must and about must go,
And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so.
Yet strive so, that before age, death's twilight,
Thy soul rest, for none can work in that night.

—JOHN DONNE (1573-1631).

ACID DROPS

WE suppose it is due to the unique species of intelligence manifested by our Minister of Information, but we observe that when a German plane gets over this country unobserved and drops a bomb, it is a "sneak" plane. Should our own planes do the same trick in Germany, that must be taken as an example of the daring and effective strategy of our airmen. We fancy our airmen must have many a laugh at the distinction. We also notice that the British forces always "withdraw"; the German troops "retreat" or are driven back. There are many amusing things in even this war.

Another curious use of terms. One paper described the bombing of Westminster Abbey as "obscene." We are puzzled to discover why the bombing of a church is "obscene," while the destruction of a home, with the killing or maiming of its inhabitants, is not.

The new rationing of clothing order offers to create distress, serious distress, in religious circles. A writer in a religious journal asks what is to be done without the voluminous robes worn by cardinals, bishops, priests, etc. That really is a serious question. How can one tell that the man just crossing is or is not a "godly" man? More, how can we be sure that he really does represent God at any time, or anywhere if he does not of necessity look differently from other men? He is not wiser than other men; he is not more truthful than other men; he does not escape diseases to which other men are subject; he does not even live longer than other men. In short, one can only decide that he is God's representative by the cut of his collar, the sobriety of his dress, or the pantomimic costumes that he wears on state occasions. Even if the priest wore a big billboard bearing in large letters, "I am a man of God, inspired by God, called to my job by God," it would not do. People would only laugh. We think that the clothes controller will have to let the parsonic dress alone. He should be forced to read "Sartor Resartus." In all probability he would miss the satire underlying and, above all, its humour, a quality by which Carlyle will live.

The Catholic papers are upset because at a recent congress of students held at Cambridge, of which there were about 1,100 present, the vast majority were opposed to religion. There was a Roman Catholic section of the students, and they reported this "terrible" situation. Much as we should like to do so, we can hardly expect, without stronger evidence than a Roman Catholic paper, that the majority was made up of those who did not believe in God. We cannot believe that the majority of our university students are sufficiently intellectually advanced to be Atheists. Probably the statement illustrates what Cardinal Hinsley calls the "sword of the Spirit." The "Catholic Times" attributes the unbelief of the students to "a hundred years of secularised education." "It is a mistake to demand intellectual proofs of God's existence," says the Rev. L. B. Ashby, "it is by spiritual experience, and not by intellectual experience, that we are made most certain of his Reality." That throws some light on the history of religion in civilised periods. For while, say, at the period of the Renaissance, and periods where the foremost scholars and thinkers were all either convinced unbelievers or partial sceptics, it was those who were not affected by the most advanced culture who were open to the charge of scepticism. It was left for the fools to show the way to God. And the fools are still the most certain of his existence. Wise men, educated men, may see difficulties in the way of complete belief. But not the fools. They remain the most faithful of God's followers. With the wise there is always a "perhaps." All the same, we should like to know how it is we can make certain that we are right in anything unless we indulge in the religiously dangerous practice of appealing to our own intellect or the intelligence of other people. What, for instance, is Mr. Ashby doing but appealing to the intelligence of his readers—or, we should say, the less intelligent of his

readers—when he writes to them that they must persuade themselves by reasoning that reason is not to be trusted? And what is reasoning against reasoning but using the very argument that underlies the verdict of the Court to which we appeal? To tell a man that he must not trust reason is surely to tell him not to trust his decision when he reaches one. But we suspect that Mr. Ashby knows his audience. And when they get the familiar words rolled off they fall into a condition of mental somnolence not unlike the taking of sleeping mixture by a restless infant.

Rev. R. W. Wallis scents a Nazi plot in the Army, or perhaps in the Government. He writes to the "Guardian" protesting against the time taken up on Sundays by marching and parading on Sunday when the Home Guard and the regular soldiers should be marched off to church. He reminds us that this is the way the Nazis undermined Christianity in Germany. They kept the "youth" organisations marching instead of praying. But from their point of view they did not do badly, for they gained considerable successes. Now if doing the same thing—that is, leading the young soldiers, and the old ones, to parades and exercises instead of listening to preachers—will give us the same run that it has given Hitler, we feel sure no one will complain. After all, looking at our aim as the liberation of Europe, God hasn't done as much for it as one would expect. Of course, we all hope that things will soon change, but we advertise the fact that we are waiting on Roosevelt. Perhaps that is why God has done so little. One cannot expect God almighty to put up with being placed second to even the President of the United States. There are limits to God's patience.

The "Church Times," which represents mostly the Anglo-Catholic group, is pleased that the Upper House of Canterbury Convocation "showed a wide measure of agreement . . . for a more thorough establishment of Christian teaching—in the schools of the country." We are not surprised. It merely emphasises the fact that we have our own Hitler movement in this country and, if we are not careful, may find that when we have finished fighting the Hitlerism without, we shall have to fight the Hitlerism within. In the social and political sphere there is a party who have, and always will have, a sneaking love for totalitarianism. As we have said scores of times, it is embedded in historic Christianity, and there are many vested interests that would welcome a good dose of it at home. For the moment these are silent, but silence does not always give consent.

Of course, there remains within the Established Church some of the old hatred of dissenters. The Bishop of Oxford, for example, warned Convocation to be on its guard against giving "Cowper-Templeism" a permanent place in the schools—that is, teaching a form of Christianity that is not distinctive of any particular Christian sect. That is the snag in the situation. For we may rest assured that if and when this plot matures, there will be a devil of a row between the Churches as to which is getting the proper share of the booty—in this case, the minds of children. The proper place for Christianity is a museum. There it may be a useful educative exhibit.

We are indebted to the "Church Times" for an explanation of what is the function of that mysterious personage the "Holy Ghost." It, or he, or she, is the "inspirer and guide of souls." That seems very clear—and would be if we only knew what a "soul" is. As it runs it sounds like a "what-you-may-call-it" is something that inspires and guides a "thingamajig." A little light is thrown on the question by the information that the "Holy Ghost" has "always guided and directed the Church." Now we know who, or what, is accountable for the wonderful unanimity that is found among Christians as to what is Christianity. They have been guided by the "Holy Ghost." Well, we defy anyone to prove that they have not. We should add that the "Church Times" is published for adult reading.

TO CORRESPONDENTS

"THE FREETHINKER,"

(Temporary Address),
68, FARRINGTON STREET,
LONDON, E.C.4.

S. MANNING.—Thanks for what you say. Two new readers in a week is capital. We are keeping well; too busy to be otherwise. Illness must wait for more leisured times.

WAR DAMAGE FUND.—C. W. Hollingham, 10s.; J. S. Key, 5s.

V. I. MITCHELL.—We have read your letter with great interest and hope to hear better news of your health soon. We have tried to get into touch with person named, but have not succeeded. He was not a member of the N.S.S.

J. R. WOOD.—We have been trying to get into touch with the party concerned. If he got our letter we have had had no reply. May try again. Have you any other information?

H. BLYTHE.—Your cheery letter is a tonic. It is the fact that we have the full confidence of readers that helps us to carry on with unbroken confidence.

Lecture notices must reach 68, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4, by the first post on Monday, or they will not be inserted.

SUGAR PLUMS

WE are not concerned with politics in this journal, and we are therefore infringing no rule when we say that the powerful, plainly phrased address of President Roosevelt might be taken as a model by our own statesmen. It stated the truth of the war situation. It did not hide the seriousness of the position, nor falter in the belief that we could, with America's help, overcome it. It was a lesson in honest, direct speaking which our own statesmen might well take as a model. We believe that in politics, as in religion, the people would be the better for hearing the truth. Of course, we are in a minority in this respect, but that is not an unusual thing with us.

We have one bit of good news for our readers. We have secured new premises and hope to move in within the next week or two. The new home will enable the offices of the "Freethinker," the National Secular Society and the Secular Society Limited to be under one roof. That, we hope, will prove convenient to all concerned. Once settled we shall have to do less running about than has been the case during the past few weeks. Next week we hope to give fuller particulars.

Mr. Palmer's articles on Erasmus reminded us of how much we owe to the Dutch, and not merely "us," but others. We were also reminded of the following passage from Thorold Rogers' "Economic Interpretation of History," a work we commend to those of our readers who are not tied down to current summaries of books, but who have the leisure and the inclination to read books for themselves. Here is the passage:—

"The debt which modern civilisation owes the Dutch cannot be overrated. They taught Europe the art of agriculture; for it is to their example that the agriculture, which we adopted tardily in the eighteenth century, was due. They instructed Europe in the mystery of commercial credit, and the Bank of Amsterdam, what was virtually the earliest practical lessons in mercantile finance. They taught the world the whole of the scientific navigation which they knew for centuries; they were the pioneers of international law, of physics, of mechanical science, of a rational medicine, of scholarship, of jurisprudence. The geographical discoveries of Holland were the basis of the first real maps. But, above all things, they instructed during their long struggle after independence modern financiers in the art of taxation, for the exigencies of their

position forced them to try by every expedient for the discoveries of ways and means by which the little republic could make head against the colossal armies and, as was believed, the inexhaustible wealth of Spain."

Professor Rogers misses one thing as great, if not greater, than anything he names. The Dutch also led the way in the establishment of intellectual toleration. For this we cite from the famous Sir William Temple's "Observation Upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands." Temple was Ambassador to Holland in the last quarter of the 17th century:—

"In this commonwealth no man having reason to complain of oppression in conscience; and no man having hopes by advancing his religion to form a party or break into the State, the differences in opinion make none in affection and little in conversation, where it serves for entertainment and variety. They argue without interest or anger; they differ without enmity or scorn; and they agree without confederacy; men live together like citizens of the world, associated by the common ties of humanity and bonds of peace under the impartial protection of indifferent laws, with equal encouragement of all art and industry and equal freedom of speculation and inquiry. The power of religion . . . has not so much of the hypocrisy and nothing at all of that fierceness as elsewhere. But rather is like a piece of Humanity, by which everyone falls most into the company or conversation of those, whose customs, whose talk and disposition they like best. And as in other places, it is in every man's choice with whom he will eat or lodge, with whom he will go to market or court; so 'tis here with whom he will pray or go to church or associate in the service or worship of God, nor is any more notice taken or more censure passed of what everyone chooses in these cases than in the other."

And it must be remembered that at that date England had just passed a law against the priest-made crime of blasphemy, so brutally outrageous in character that no one has dared to enforce it. "Blasphemy" had been taken into the common law; Freethinkers, Jews and Catholics were denied equal political rights and subject to punishment for their opinions on religion. And even to-day politicians and public men are afraid to avow their real opinions on religion. It looks as though we might well go back to 17th century Holland for a lesson in liberality.

Mr. A. H. Deacon sends us a cheery and encouraging letter in which he says, *apropos* of our article on the "blitz," "The hand that can pen 'After all, most of us need a tonic now and again,' when one knows of the irreparable loss sustained, is one that will bring the ship safely to harbour—in other words, a damn good captain." If we were waiting for encouragement the many inspiring letters we have received would give it. We are proud of our cause, proud also of being counted its leader, and proudest of all in the confidence of men and women whose devotion to freethought is free from self-seeking or the desire for personal gain.

We regret to record the fact that among the sufferers from the "blitz" of May 10 was the Union of Ethical Societies, whose offices are situated in Palmer Street, Westminster. This is also the office of the Secular Education League. The R.P.A. has also lost heavily by stock being burned, but their main building is safe. They all have our sympathy. We wrote the above a fortnight ago, but owing to the cramped conditions in which we have been working, and the constant rushing about on one errand or another, it would not be surprising if we had overlooked much more.

We should like to thank the many readers who have forwarded to us particulars of their subscription date; they have certainly helped a great deal to ease the difficulty of compiling a new book. But we are still awaiting a few others to send information to bring our records right up to date.

THE DUTCH APOSTLE OF LIBERAL CULTURE

(Continued from page 268)

ERASMUS introduced discerning literary criticisms into his notes, most of which have been accepted by modern scholars. The Old Testament to Erasmus was markedly inferior to the New. The former, he urged, contains fables and fictions. Some of his questionings are thus summarised by Dr. Smith: "How could all the animals get into the ark? What are we to think of the story of Creation, of Samson, of the threats of Deuteronomy xxvii., of the minute regulations about leprosy and food—conducive to superstition more than to true piety."

Despite his alleged timidity, Erasmus, in his "Adages," asserted that "If in the Old Testament you see nothing but history, and read that Adam was made from mud, that his little wife was unobtrusively drawn from his side while he slept, that the serpent tempted the little woman with forbidden fruit, that God walked in the cool of the evening, and that a guard was placed at the gates of Paradise to prevent the fugitives returning, would you not think the whole thing a fable from Homer's workshop? If you read of the incest of Lot, the whole story of Samson, the adultery of David, and how the senile king was cherished by a maiden, would not that be to chaste ears repulsively obscene? But under these wrappings, good Heavens! what splendid wisdom lies concealed." Presumably, the concluding sentence of this passage was intended to safeguard the critic from his enemies.

Erasmus urged that, were the humanitarian teachings of Christ really put into practice, they might serve to regenerate the wicked world. Upon the monastic orders, however, he was untiring in pouring pitiless scorn. Their cherished text, "Some have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake," greatly incensed the humanist. "In this class [the regulars] we include those who by fraud or intimidation have been thrust into that life of celibacy where they are allowed to fornicate but not to marry, so that if they openly keep a concubine they are Christian priests, but if they take a wife they are burned. In my opinion, parents would be much kinder to castrate their children than to expose them whole against their will to this temptation to lust."

The humanist ridiculed those prelates who treated the plain passage in Timothy that ordains that a bishop should wed one wife as allegorical, on the ground that the word rendered "bishop" really means the Church. J. A. Froude himself could hardly have been more condemnatory of the monastic clergy than Erasmus. "If anyone will consider our present condition," he wrote, "how large a part of mankind is included in the herds of monks and colleges and priests, and will then observe how few of these are chaste, into what various lusts countless numbers deviate, how shamelessly and openly and impudently they flaunt their vices, he will perhaps think it more expedient that those who cannot be continent should be allowed to marry."

Erasmus sagaciously dedicated his Greek Testament to Pope Leo X., and he took pains to secure a Papal breve sanctioning publication. When given to the world, the work was accorded a very mixed reception. The obscurantists were naturally enraged, and one benighted zealot deplored the Pope's approval of a production containing adverse comments on confession, excommunication, indulgences and other thorny themes which, he said, "Luther had only to take over—save that Erasmus's poison is much more dangerous than Luther's." Ultimately, however, the

Council of Trent declared the Vulgate authoritative and condemned the teachings of Erasmus.

Fisher, Colet and More, who were still on the side of the humanists, welcomed the work as a solid contribution to scholarship; yet opposition in England was sufficiently strong to secure its suppression at Cambridge. Very venomous attacks also appeared in the more benighted Catholic States. John Eck, also, was shocked at Erasmus' suggestion that the Greek of the Gospels—canine Greek, as Swinburne subsequently called it—was inferior to that of Demosthenes and that the inspired writers sometimes blundered.

A bright intellectual light to his age, the evangel of Erasmus was anathematised after his death. In several Catholic communities his books were burned and banned. After his severe condemnation by the Council of Trent as an odious heretic, his writings were officially prohibited. It was made a crime in Spain to even read his "Folly," "Epistles" and other compositions; and in the Expurgatorial Index of 1640 the errors enumerated in his writings filled 59 double-columned folio pages, while Rome soon followed the evil example of the Spanish sacerdotalists in reprobating Erasmus' teachings.

T. F. PALMER

BOOKS WORTH WHILE

"Very Free Speech," by W. J. Brown. (Publisher, Andrew Dakers; 7s. 6d.)

THIS book was written by Mr. W. J. Brown during a voyage round the world that he made in 1939, and in it the author deals interestingly with many places he visited, giving his views on all sorts of subjects thought out during the spell at sea, when he had plenty of time. Mr. Brown is a successful Civil Servant and Trade Union Secretary and an ex-Labour Member of Parliament. In the 273 pages he has dealt with politics, doctors, medicine, women, the Church, cocktail parties, the human mind, Australian Aborigines, H. G. Wells, Neolithic remains, etc. He says: "All my life I have been a rebel. Now in middle age I have reached the stage of becoming a rebel against the rebels, for I perceive that they embody in their outlook, their teaching and their practice, precisely those evils against which they are nominally in revolt."

But why should Mr. Brown include in this category the Freethought Movement? He writes: "This Movement, which was to free us from superstition, has itself become a superstition. Its thought has never passed the age of Darwin. It offers us in place of the prison of outworn theologies, the prison of equally out-of-date scientific conceptions."

It is evident that the author knows nothing at all of the findings and researches of modern science when he makes a statement of this kind. Science is out to explore and investigate and to demolish every so-called truth when that truth can no longer stand the light of scientific investigation. The true scientist welcomes change, whereas religion is founded on belief, and forbids the use of reason in doing anything to shatter that belief.

Having demolished Freethought in one sentence, Mr. Brown goes on to say: "How noble, in comparison as the churches have made it, is Buddhism. In Buddhism there is no room for angry and jealous gods; no room for servile propitiation, no room for vicarious atonements, no room for whipping boys to appease the Almighty's wrath. . . . To-day there are only two religions or philosophies that make, it seems to me, any serious pretence at covering all the phenomena of life. Marxism is one—whether you

like it or detest it as I do, Buddhism is the other. Christianity is only a broken fragment—one facet of the whole, that claims to be the whole."

Having thus voted in favour of Buddhism, the author goes back again and again to a plea for the teachings of Jesus as giving humanity something to live and work for. One would have thought that he would have suggested Buddhism as an alternative to something that he himself describes as "only a broken fragment that claims to be the whole." But it is evident that, despite this little excursion into the open highway, the author is still imbued with the Christian teachings of his youth, because he trots out the old gag that Churchianity is not Christianity. When one asks a man who solemnly utters this hackneyed phrase: "Are you then in favour of closing the churches and telling men to find Christ in their own way (if they can)?" he will immediately wriggle; and when one pursues the investigation still further it is usual to find that he is in favour of closing all the churches except the particular joss he admires.

It is when the author writes on the mundane matters of this world instead of philosophising upon another one about which none of us know anything, that his book is "worth while." In politics he deals especially with the Labour Party and displays a fearlessness which is very rare and refreshing amongst Trade Union Leaders. Mr. Brown's criticism of the Labour Party and the Trade Unions is delightful. He says: "Just as the Labour Party has, in effect, kept the Tories in power the last twenty years, so it bids fair to keep them in office in the future. To-day the Labour Party is more under the control of the Trade Unions than ever before. So far then from the Labour Party being the instrument that would lead the working classes to power, it acts as an effective barrier against any such thing," and then he points out that the Labour Party is the most illiberal and undemocratic party in politics, and where only men of mediocre intelligence can rise to the top. A party in which any man with ability and courage has either to stifle his real opinions or be dragged before the "leaders" to explain why he has dared to advocate Socialism! It is the only Party in politics that requires a candidate to sign an undertaking that he will never vote against the decision promulgated by the Party.

As the writer of this book truly remarks: "Who save a robot, who save a man either of no principle or of no conscience, could give so far-reaching a pledge to any Party machine?" The result is, as we all know, Labour leaders who are not leaders—professional place-hunters who, having a good job, are firmly resolved to stick to it. Nor is the author any more complimentary about the Trade Union Movement. He says: "I am inclined to say sometimes that it would be better for the working masses in Britain if there were no T.U. Movement—the existence of a Trade Union Movement prevents spontaneous Radical Movement." He points out that the Trade Unions are just as much an institution as the Church, and the Archbishops of Canterbury and York are represented in the persons of Mr. Ernest Bevin and Sir Walter Citrine, and that there is just as little in common between the ordinary workman and these two Labour bosses as there is between him and the Archbishops. Perhaps the most sweeping statement in the book is—that if the Trade Unions did not exist, the employer would have to invent them, and that they do a good work for the employer by driving out of the ranks of the unions any man who has character and

independence. He says: "If Lenin had been surrounded by Labour leaders of British type, nurtured in compromise, there could have been no Russian Revolution beyond a purely political one."

F. A. HORNIBROOK.

RUSSIAN LITERATURE

(Continued from page 267)

IF that ubiquitous hero of the circulating libraries and the bookstalls, the detective, may be said to have Sherlock Holmes for father, he may also be said to have Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin and Dostoevsky's Porphyrius Petrovitch for grandfathers. Dupin, clearly the paternal grandfather, bequeathed to his heirs the jigsaw-puzzle solving faculty, while Porphyrius supplied psychological insight.

Psychological: that word recurs to the mind again and again when one is thinking of "Crime and Punishment," the novel in which Porphyrius is a character—a Petersburgian magistrate. Dostoevsky was interested in minds; he himself had a magnificent one; one, too, that had had unusual and terrible experiences to contend with, the chief being condemnation to death, followed by an eleventh-hour reprieve when the firing party had already taken up its position. And his pen was adept at description. Working therefore on the theme of a murderer's efforts to evade his twin pursuers, Law and Insanity, Dostoevsky had little difficulty in producing what is probably one of the world's finest novels.

Raskolnikov, the protagonist of the book, is a member of that swollen class of literary characters, the ambitious but penniless students. In his case impecuniosity is jeopardising the completion of his university career, despite the ruthless self-sacrifice of his widowed mother and his sister. Being paranoic, the young man deprecates the possession of wealth by social undesirables—wealth which, in his view, could be better employed educating himself for a life of social benefaction. Eventually, enraged by his sister's intention to marry an unscrupulous man of property for his, Raskolnikov's sake, and horrified by an encounter with a particularly wretched case of gentility reduced to want, he steels himself to kill and rob an obnoxious old woman usurer, and is also circumstantially forced to butcher the woman's sister. The double murder, described in words that freeze as they fascinate, takes place about one-seventh of the way through the book; the remaining pages are devoted to Raskolnikov's pathetic endeavour to conceal his guilt.

Immediately after the murder Raskolnikov is plunged into such agony of mind that he becomes seriously ill. And he commits a series of egrotious blunders: he openly revisits the scene of the crime, goes out of his way to champion two suspects, boasts of his interest in the case, jokes with a police official about the possibility of his own complicity and omits until the last moment to reveal that he had pledged goods with the old woman. This last action brings him in contact with Porphyrius.

In a number of interviews, each of which is a delight to read, that connoisseur of criminology slowly entombs Raskolnikov in his own web of guilt. From the very beginning Porphyrius, who in this connection is best described as being what the psychologists call **empathetic**, is sure of his victim and, cat-like, plays with him, alternately stimulating and smoothing away his fears. The scene in which the two of them discuss an essay of Raskolnikov's "On Crime," wherein it is argued, in effect, that "an extraordinary man has a right—not officially, be it understood, but from and by his very individuality—to permit his conscience to overstep certain bounds. . . ." is superb. And the final interview! It is closed by Porphyrius, who has just **told** Raskolnikov that he is the murderer, with these words: "I must, however, at all costs, ask a small favour of you; it is a delicate one, but has an importance of its own; assuming, although I would view such a contingency as an improbable one—assuming during the next 48 hours, the fancy were to come upon you to put an end to your life (excuse my foolish supposition), would you mind leaving behind you something in the shape of a note—a line or so—

pointing to the spot where the stone is?—that would be very considerate. Well, au revoir! May God send you good thoughts!" Raskolnikov had hidden his almost forgotten plunder under a stone.

I hope I have given suitable evidence, fragmentary though it must necessarily be, of the excellence of this truly great novel. It must be added that only the main theme is touched upon here; the multiplicity of important ancillary themes cannot be discussed. And also, that not the least commendable aspect of "Crime and Punishment" is the portrayal of low-life in Petersburg. Dostoevsky's knowledge and skill in this direction are comparable to those of Dekker where seventeenth century London is concerned and Joyce where Edwardian Dublin is concerned.

N. T. GRIDGEMAN

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY Executive's Annual Report

By THE PRESIDENT.

IT may prevent misunderstanding if it is borne in mind that this report deals with the activities of the Executive and only incidentally with the work of the Society as a whole. The same is true of the balance sheet that is laid before the Conference. Each branch of the Society manages its own affairs, raises its own funds and administers them. A further thing to be borne in mind is that the larger part of the work of the Executive can only be described in general terms. A great deal of its work consists in a very large correspondence, with advice given on all kinds of subjects that arise among branches and private members. This forms a very large amount of work, details of which prove tedious in a report of this kind. In the midst of the dislocations and preoccupations of a world war, involving issues greater and more complex than any previous conflict, it is not surprising that the number of meetings for which your Executive has been directly responsible is smaller than that of previous years, even though these rise to the respectable figure of 454. But this must not be taken to imply any lack of interest in our propaganda. The chief difficulties that we have had to face have been the impossibility of hiring suitable halls for indoor meetings, the "black-out" that has prevented meetings being held after daylight, the number of our active workers who have been either "evacuated" or are engaged in one of the three Armed Services. But the number of inquiries for our literature, or for information about the N.S.S. has increased, not diminished, and this alone promises recruits, when this war is ended, to another kind of warfare which leaves behind it no ruined lives, destroyed homes or bleeding hearts.

Some evidence of this is seen in the fact that our membership has increased, as also has the income from the very nominal fees demanded from those who join our ranks. The income from members' fees has always been more of a token contribution than a method of paying our way.

Where possible, branches have continued their work. Among these one may name Glasgow and Edinburgh, while Mr. Brighton has continued his successful work in the North of England, and Mr. Clayton in part of the Lancashire area. In the metropolis, the West London, the North London and the Kingston Branches have been active, and Mr. Ebury appears to have done some very useful work in connection with the North London Branch. The other two branches also send cheerful news of work done and of future prospects. There will, of course, be greater activities in the open air during the fine weather season.

One form of propaganda has been very fruitful in results. At the suggestion of your secretary a plan was adopted whereby, on the receipt of a note from a member of one of the Forces, the "Freethinker" was sent free to anyone in the three Services whom it was thought would appreciate it. This is continued indefinitely, provided the recipient writes once each month for the paper to be sent. Most of those to whom the "Freethinker" is sent write in warm terms of appreciation of the paper, and in some cases the request comes that their name be taken off the free list and placed on that of the regular subscribers. In addition,

it may safely be taken that the discussions arising from the circulation of the "Freethinker" must ultimately make for more supporters of our cause.

While on the subject of the Forces, it may be noted that the Executive receives many complaints concerning the difficulty placed in the way of recruits concerning the substitution of an affirmation for the oath, and also in securing a truthful description of their position with regard to their statements concerning religion as entered on their attestation papers. Once again, then, the Executive has to emphasise the fact that any person joining the Army, Navy or Air Force has a legal right, under military, as under civil law, to make an affirmation where an oath is usually required, and that the description of a man as an Atheist, Freethinker, Rationalist or anything else must be taken exactly as given. Further, even when it may happen that one of the Armed Forces has undergone a change of opinion on religion, he is entitled to have his altered point of view registered. It is high time that attestation officers were instructed by their superiors that the impudent and insulting, "You must have some religion," should be abolished. A recruit should refuse to sign any document that does not state his position with regard to religion exactly as he gives it.

It is only fair to state that protests sent by the Executive to the authorities concerning specific instances have in every case secured all that was asked for. The most recent communication from the Air Force has brought the assurance that instructions on the matter will be given to all attestation officers. It is hoped that this form of religious bigotry will cease, and it will if those concerned firmly and respectfully insist on their rights. None of the Services can be any the worse for having in its ranks men with moral courage and intellectual self-respect.

While on this matter it may be noted that the Executive has been paying some attention to the increasing use of broadcasting machinery in the service of the churches. This has now grown to such dimensions as to become little short of a public scandal. We hope that all interested will continue to express their disgust with this cowardly and unfair policy of the B.B.C. in whatever manner they may. Some attempt to organise the feeling against the unfair, and often lying, policy of the B.B.C. is being made by the creation of a "Radio Freedom League," which aims at securing a representation of all forms of opinion so long as the "warfare of opinion" continues "on the air." To this end a "Radio Freedom League" is in process of formation, and your President and Secretary are on the committee of that body.

It is noticeable that since the war the use of the B.B.C. machinery by the clergy has increased to a much greater extent. There has been a large increase in the number of religious services and talks on sociology and ethics arranged and which are plainly intended as vehicles for the preaching of the Christian religion. Even the children's hour usually closes with a religious lesson that is often an insult to educated intelligence. This exploitation of children with a view to obtaining recruits for the Churches must be stopped if we are to make good our claim that this war is being fought on behalf of liberty. With the praise of the United States in the mouths of our leading politicians, it would not be amiss if we showed our sincerity by giving the people of this country at least the same degree of freedom on the "radio" that Americans enjoy. Liberty of expression should be at least as useful in England as it would be in Germany.

In common with thousands of others, the Executive records with all sympathy the disaster that has overtaken the "Freethinker" in the complete destruction, after much damage done in a previous raid, of the plant and stock of the "Freethinker" offices. Nothing was left, save the determination of those immediately concerned to go ahead. It is good to note that in spite of many difficulties the journal, so important to our cause, appeared in its usual form and at the usual time. The Executive also registers its sympathy with the personal loss to the Editor of a valuable collection of scarce books dealing with the history of the Freethought Movement. Many of these volumes will be most difficult to replace.

The Executive felt it would only be expressing the feelings of all concerned in offering the Editor of the "Freethinker," and your President, substantial monetary assistance in this grave situation. It was at his own request that the Executive voted no more than the sum of £75.

The Executive feels that its sympathy with the "Freethinker" in such trying conditions, and its congratulation on the energy with which the difficulties were met, and so far overcome, are expressions with which this Conference would like to be associated.

The National Secular Society and the Secular Society Limited were also sufferers from the same cause and on the same date. But in their case it was in the shape of damage done by water to a stock of books and pamphlets. The damage was done in extinguishing incendiary bombs.

Since the disaster the "Freethinker" has been carrying on in the same offices as the two sister organisations. But the offices are very crowded and not comfortable in their dilapidated condition, and the Conference will be pleased to learn that within a few weeks it is hoped that better premises will be secured large enough to accommodate both societies and the "Freethinker" in the same building. Negotiations are now going on to that end.

During the year covered by this report we have to regret the death of many valued members and workers. The first of these, due to "enemy" action, are the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Meerloo, members of the South London Branch, as a consequence of the total destruction of the house in which they resided. Both were very ardent Freethinkers, unobtrusive, but ready to do what lay within their power for the cause they both loved. The second death by enemy action was that of A. G. Dunn (West London Branch), well known to London Freethinkers and also as an occasional contributor to the "Freethinker." Nothing was too much or too little for him to do where the interests of Freethought were concerned. George Bedborough was known over a wider area. His name was familiar both in this country and in the United States. He was well known both as a writer and speaker, a character without a trace of self-seeking, and giving to human nature at large a much greater capacity for graciousness than many people would grant. Neither self-seeking nor self-advertising, he had few enemies and many friends. He leaves a widow who helped in the work they both loved. C. Tuson (West London Branch) was well known to London audiences, both as a ready worker and as an acceptable speaker. He leaves behind him a sure certainty of survival in the mind of all who knew him intimately enough to appreciate generosity of temper and honesty of thought and act. David Mapp and C. McCall were both long-standing members of the Manchester Branch. Both were hard workers, both unobtrusive in character, both were always ready to do what they could in the work of the branch to which they belonged and for the Movement to which they belonged. Substitutes for such men and women are not easily found. E. Anderson, of West Ham, was better known to the last generation than to the present one. Fifty years ago he was a very hard worker in the West Ham Branch, in which he held high office. He has not taken an active part in the work of the Society for many years, but his loyalty to the Movement never wavered.

To those and to many others who have joined the Great Majority during the past year we pay the respect which they richly deserve. They were loyal members of a movement which holds out no bribe of social distinction or financial gain. They gave of their best, and what they did has become part of that stream of progress which does so much to make life better than it would have been had they never lived. We might well write their epitaph in the words of George Eliot: "The world would not be as well for you and me were it not for those men and women who have lived unknown lives and sleep in unknown graves."

It will be remembered that the conduct of the Birkenhead Branch in relation to the Executive was brought before last year's Conference. After a full discussion the Executive was authorised to insist on an apology, and if this was not forthcoming to act in the prescribed legal manner.

But the committee of the branch ignored both the Conference and the Executive and there was nothing left but to declare the branch dissolved. Since then some of the late branch members have joined headquarters. When peace again comes to this country, the branch will probably be reconstituted.

During the period covered by this report the Society has received a legacy of £181 from the estate of the late J. R. Hill (South London), £200 from the estate of the late Joseph Hughes (Altringham) and £75 from the estate of the late W. J. W. Easterbrook. The N.S.S. is one of the residuaries of this estate, and a substantial sum will be forthcoming when the estate is wound up. Your President is one of the executors.

Turning to more general matters and wider issues, the latest developed move on the part of the Churches goes a long way towards demonstrating the truth of the thesis that the only good religion is a dead one. Robbed of much of their power by the better education given in the schools and the influence of the secularisation of life, the war has presented the clergy—established and nonconformist—with an opportunity of bringing to a head the long-standing fight for the control of the schools. Nonconformists and Episcopalians, Roman Catholics and Protestants, while they can agree on little else, are all alive to the fact that if they do not ram religion into the child they stand no chance whatever of "converting" the adult. These warring sects have seen in the nation's distress an opportunity of establishing control over the schools.

Led by the Archbishops of Canterbury, York and Wales, and fortified, one suspects, with private promises of support from some members of the Government, a plan has been drawn up which threatens, not merely the rights of non-Christians, but also reduces the teacher to the position of a catspaw of the clergy. The teaching of Christianity is to be compulsory instead of, as at present, optional on the part of local authorities. The schools are to be saturated with a religious atmosphere in place of religious lessons at the beginning and end of the school day only. Religious instruction is to become one of the qualifying subjects for a teacher's certificate, and it may be taken for granted that inefficiency in other directions will be atoned for by religious zeal. The teaching of religion is to be in the hands of those who accept Christianity. There are plenty of teachers, even under the present regime, who are afraid to let their definitely non-Christian or anti-Christian opinion be known and, if this new regime arrives, the hypocrisy will be deeper and more widely spread. Inspectors are to examine the quality of the religious instruction given (religion at present lies beyond their scope), so that every inspector will become, *ipso facto*, a representative of the clergy.

It is worth while recording that this campaign in favour of handing the schools over to clerical control has been accompanied by a nation-wide campaign such as never before has been achieved. Led by that champion of Democracy, "The Times," leading articles have appeared in the majority of newspapers, big and little, even in those which function as local advertising sheets. And the tone and make-up of these articles prove that they have been inspired from the same source. What money has been spent on this campaign it is, of course, impossible to say, and no balance sheet is likely to be issued. But no Hitlerian "fifth column" ever worked more truly to the German pattern than the clergy have done to gain their ends.

All that is left of the old Education Act, so far as religion is concerned, is the Conscience clause, which gives parents the right to withdraw their children from religious instruction. And that will last just about as long as the freedom of Germany's conquered people if this plot against our educational system succeeds.

The whole plan means not merely clerical control. It means a poorer type of teacher and a lower standard of education. For the great offence of the present system is not that the teachers have been inefficient and the education defective, but that both have been too good to suit the Churches and their backers.

Freethinking propagandists have hitherto generally confined their attack on Christianity to those who were beyond the elementary school age. It looks as though that policy will have to be changed. If the elementary schools are to be converted into breeding grounds for clients for the Churches, in sheer self-defence Freethinkers will seriously have to reconsider their position and extend their campaign further than it does to-day. Our aim has been to respect the intellectual integrity of the child. It will be in defence of that integrity that we may have to appeal directly to children as well as to those of mature years. Those who have refrained from withdrawing their children from religious instruction should do so without delay. If this were done, not merely in the case of avowed Freethinkers, but also in the case of those who wish to save the schools from becoming a platform for the clergy of this country, and who wish to not only keep the schools at their present level, but to raise it still higher, their numbers would go a long way towards checking the united clergy in one of the most serious attacks on the efficiency of our educational system that has occurred since 1871.

But there is light behind the dark foreground we have drawn. This is the growing consciousness of the clergy that their religion makes no real appeal to large numbers of adult men and women. In every direction the secularisation of life proceeds, and it is ludicrous for anyone to assume that our advances in art, in science, the development of a wider and deeper social sense, can be maintained without its having a disastrous reaction on current religious beliefs. The various moves of the clergy now being made, and their backing by those who have viewed with dislike the growth of a real democracy, are evidence of the decline of religious beliefs and also of the power of religious institutions. The clergy recognise that their position is a precarious one, and that it gets more desperate with the growth of humanity. Our cause is still on the upward grade, even though the advance is not as rapid as we could wish. But the great movements of humanity grow but slowly. Still, they do grow. Moreover, we cannot measure the value or the strength of a movement by either its wealth or its numbers. Genuinely forward movements must always represent a minority, for these cannot always pause to count their gains. That, history must ultimately decide. They can never be content to say "Our work is done." Our work will never be done. The need for Freethought will always exist. The pioneer corps must be in front, breaking new trails which those who follow may tread with security as a consequence of what has been done by devoted men and women who ask for no other reward than that of hastening a little the onward march of humanity.

SUNDAY LECTURE NOTICES, Etc.

LONDON

Outdoor

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead): 11.0, Mr. L. EBURY. Parliament Hill Fields, 3.0, Mr. L. EBURY.

West London Branch N.S.S. (Hyde Park): 7.30, Thursday, Mr. E. C. SAPHIN. Sunday, 6.0, Mr. L. EBURY.

Indoor

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1): 11.0 a.m., C. E. M. JOAD, M.A., D. Lit. "Education in the New World."

COUNTRY

Outdoor

Edinburgh Branch N.S.S. (Mound): 7.30, Mr. F. SMITHIES.

Kingston Branch N.S.S. (Market Place): 7.30, Mr. J. W. BARKER.

BRIDGE END (Chester-le-Street): 11.0 p.m., Sunday, 15th June.

NEWCASTLE-ON-TYNE (Bigg Market): 7.30 p.m.

BLYTH (The Fountain): 7.0 p.m., Monday, 16th June.

DARLINGTON (Market Steps): Wednesday, 18th June.

THE BEGINNINGS OF RELIGION

(THE verbal nonsense that is current regarding an assumed need of man for religion can be appreciated only when one makes acquaintance with the mental habits of uncivilised people. Study these and one can see religion emerging in its infancy, not fundamentally different from religion among the more advanced races, but freed from the disguises that it of necessity assumes when it is in contact with the more enlightened views of man and nature. It is not **always** a case of want of capacity any more than a dull-edged knife must be due to the quality of the steel. It may be due to a need for sharpening. This statement is, of course, not contrary to the assumption that capacity differences do not exist with all human beings. But the great thing is the social environment which lacks the accumulated knowledge and experience that civilised man has at his service. Proof of this will be found in what follows.)

The capacity of the Bantu peoples of the Lower Congo for the intellectual acts of perception, recognition, memory and so forth, is well developed and appears early in childhood. In this respect the natives are much on a par with the civilised races; but the limit is reached early in life and but little mental progress is observable after adolescence is reached. The ideas are mostly of the simpler form, seldom passing the concretes of actual experience, generalisations being, as a rule, beyond their power. Association of ideas, though good as implied by good memory, only takes place in the concrete form of contiguity in time and space as actually already perceived; analogies are confined to the very crudest forms, and a very simple figure of speech is apt to be unintelligible. . . .

An accompanying trait is the absence of rational surprise. On seeing something new a vacant wonder is all that is observable—and this very transient—and the new experience is classified as "white man's fashion." It almost follows as a matter of course that there is no curiosity, no wish to inquire into the nature of a novel experience; it never occurs to the native that there is a cause of the novelty or an explanation required. In fact, the relation of cause and effect in all but the most patent and mechanical is said to be beyond his grasp.

The natural result is a vagueness on all religious and metaphysical subjects. This is a characteristic of savages all over the world. Nor is it limited by any means to them. Recent investigations have established the evolution of some of the majestic figures of the Olympian Pantheon from not merely rude, but vague and nameless personalities. . . .

The fact is that on these subjects the majority of the human race, whether savage or civilised, think little. Their minds are seldom excited to the point of reasoning on their beliefs. They accept what they are told, and do not even know whether they believe or not, because they have never reflected upon it. One has only to talk to a peasant at home to find out how narrow the border of his knowledge is, how misty and uncertain is everything beyond the border of his daily life. . . . Nor does he differ in this respect from people who are looked upon as his social superiors. . . . It would be making too strenuous a demand upon their intellectual life to expect them to rise above the markets, the newspaper, the latest novel, the county cricket score and the problems of golf and bridge. All the rest they are content to leave to their professional advisers, who in nine cases out of ten, if the truth must be told, have as little taste or capacity as themselves for metaphysical speculation, historic research or theological inquiry, and are bound as tightly in the cords of tradition as the far more imaginative Zulu medicine-man or the Eskimo wizard. For the average man in civilisation appraises the subjects of thought no otherwise than does his brother in savagery.

From "Ritual and Belief," by

EDWIN SYDNEY HARTLAND

As the greatest liar tells more truth than falsehoods, so may it be said of the worst man, than he does more good than evil.—DR. JOUNSON.