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## ROBERT HENRY ROSETTI

**Born, February 11, 1880—Died, December 2, 1951**

[The following memorial article to the late R. H. Rosetti, written by his son, Mr. Vernon Rosetti, is printed in place of our usual editorial, "Views and Opinions."—EDITOR.]

ON Sunday the Second of December, The National Secular Society lost by sudden death its fourth great president, a man who represented in every possible way the highest practices and ideals of a Society dedicated to human freedom, happiness and responsible thought. In the same person was lost an active, progressive and versatile Secretary with unusual powers of organisation, a great humanist with a fine sense of balance and judgment, a scholar whose essential modesty revealed the depths of his knowledge, and a trustworthy leader who knew that happiness could be found only in unselfish, tireless work on behalf of other people.

Robert Henry Rosetti was the finest kind of recruit that any cause could have. He examined shrewdly and assessed accurately the real standards of men and of movements, and was never deceived by facile pretensions. Several causes attracted him, but only one claimed him. He chose deliberately, and he chose the National Secular Society because it was, like himself, uncompromising, thorough and unambiguous, and he happily determined to devote his life to it, giving up opportunities for rapid success in other fields, in order to efface himself where the need was greatest and the deeds most worthy.

In 1908, a few years after joining the West Ham Branch, he gave his first lecture—thoroughly prepared, logical, humorous, incisive—in Stratford, East London. This was about two years after he had first been asked to lecture; he had spent the interim in making sure that he was worthy of what he considered an exceptional honour. He continued to discipline and criticise himself tirelessly; he studied continually, fresh in understanding and clear in deduction, he developed unusual judgment and a deep sense of culture. He came to a decision only after a thorough and patient consideration of every point of view; having made his decision, nothing would make him turn from it except reasoning better than his own. He considered a lecture as a work of art in which success could be gained only by taking infinite pains; he never underestimated his audiences, never treated a serious question lightly, nor considered a foolish question seriously. The knowledge that he gained, his ability, energy, patience and optimism were devoted unreservedly to humanity wherever and however it called upon him. These were years of meetings in dusty schoolrooms, ill-lit Workmen's Institutes, noisy street corners and dim provincial cafés; he welcomed them all, and sought all the difficulties he could find, in order to practise overcoming them. Nothing at any time could persuade him to lower his standards by a fraction, or to present slipshod thought.

When he became President of the West Ham Branch, he found it a sickly child, but within a few years it had become prosperous, powerful and effective, thanks to his thoroughness and enterprise, his courtesy and zeal, his gift for finding and deserving trustworthy allies—and to the total devotion of his talented and loyal wife. Their partnership was a model of all that a man and woman can achieve when working together in trust, respect and joy. These middle years, when many men would have been satisfied with their achievements, were the years which he used in demanding more and more from himself, spreading delicate fingers of thought into a vast range of artistic and scientific subjects wherever he felt that more could be learned of the infinite study of man.

In 1927 he made further personal sacrifices to become General Secretary at a time when wide-scale reorganisation was required, when devotion to the needs of the Society alone was his inducement. The weaknesses and wounds were quickly healed; he worked ceaselessly and unobtrusively, extending and increasing the strength of the Society even in the years of the War, creating enthusiasm everywhere around him, lecturing all over Great Britain, writing regularly and usually anonymously, assuming increasing responsibility, suffering setbacks and private tragedy with dignity, sympathising, guiding, encouraging, responding to anger with calm, answering bitterness with courtesy, folly with forbearance, stupidity with tolerance. During his short Presidency, he brought more and more effective power to the Society; branches increased in strength and number; world-wide contacts were made; respect and trust were earned, which he turned, as always, to the credit of others. At his death, he had taken the Society to the highest point of influence it had ever reached. With its ideals untarnished and a reputation for fearless integrity, it had attained the highest stature of which its founder could have dreamed, guided by a brilliant man who treasured above all the simple qualities of honesty, simplicity and love.

Mankind can be thankful that such men arise from time to time to cut out a path, to bear a light, to symbolise an ideal, and to combine all this with humility and kindness so that others feel bold enough to follow them along the exploratory paths of progress which in time become the highroads of civilisation. In a small band they stand between us and anarchy, their strength resisting a flood of ignorance, their courage challenging dark forces of greed and hate, their foresight keeping us from pitfalls. They have been, are and will be, very few; we know how precious they are; any lifetime is enriched by having known one of them; our gratitude can never be spoken; there is no expressing our sense of poverty when they are gone. They die always before their work is completed, for their work is never completed. We are left with a challenge, in a sudden awe-struck silence, hoping that we have, what they would like us to have above all, sincerity enough to follow them.

VERNON ROSETTI.



## ON DEFINING ATHEISM

"Gods are words and words are gods."—F. MAUTHNER. THE present state of affairs regarding the definition of Atheism has clearly become highly unsatisfactory. Ought not a Rationalist journal to be able to do something to clear up the muddle?

My complaint is this. While, originally and fundamentally, Atheism, as a denial of the existence of gods (see, e.g., Cicero, *On The Nature of Gods*), means a statement of objective (negative) facts outside man, a tendency has been manifest recently to limit the definition to indicating nothing more than the existence of a psychological fact inside the Atheist's mind, viz., the lack of belief. By this new development I mean Bertrand Russell and another Rationalist authority, Joseph McCabe (article on *Atheism*, in his *Rationalist Encyclopedia*).

Bertrand Russell, who of all men should have known better, avows (in the *London Literary Guide*, July 1949) that he never quite knows whether he should label himself "Agnostic" or "Atheist." Actually, he diluted the meaning of "Atheist" into that of "Agnostic" when he waveringly declared himself to be "Atheist" solely because he *does not* believe the existence of the Christian god Yahweh or of the Homeric gods to be *sufficiently* probable to him to be worth serious consideration.

McCabe expressly departs from the usual British and Continental usage of defining the Atheist as "one who denies or disbelieves the existence of God"—and confines the meaning to "the absence of belief in God," that is to say, to exclusively stating a psychological fact of the Atheist's mentality. This is plainly inadequate as any Atheist means by his Atheism much more than merely a state of his own mind, even if this state of "lack of belief" had resulted from "having examined and rejected as invalid all evidence for God," as McCabe says (p. 250).

Now what are McCabe's reasons for such a self-stultifying subjectionism?

He says there that (1) the definition of the Atheist as one who *denies* the existence of God is usually a controversial device of the religious writer to maintain the odium which often attaches to the word—and so is unacceptable to Atheists; and (2) that it would be difficult to quote more than one or two Atheist writers in all literature who deny such existence (of God).

Well, my obvious comment to (1) and (2) is that the religious writer (odium or no odium) rightly means by "God" one of his own Christian gods, Yahweh or Jeshua or the Ghost; these are, of course, only his chief deities, and we need not so enumerate all the other minor "elohim" (gods) of the Mosaic books and their further celestial descendents, both benign and malign, swarming in the New Testament tracts. What is relevant here is that, quite certainly, any Atheist *denies* the existence of, at least, Yahweh and the other "elohim," if not also that of the dove-like Ghost or of Yahweh's son, Jesus. Actually, it would be difficult to quote an Atheist who would *not* deny the existence of Yahweh. So McCabe's reasons for his rejection of the denial appear to be singularly mistaken.

But what, precisely, could have misled him so? "A good philosophical argument not only exposes an error, but also explains how it arose, and puts the matter in a way which prevents the error being repeated" (C. A. Mace). So I surmise that McCabe has, in this instance, mixed up the two possible senses of "God," those of a personal and an impersonal God. While being mistakenly anxious to avoid his, Atheist's, committal to the formal

denial of an impersonal "God," he seems to have forgotten that it is generally the personal god Yahweh that is being *denied*, on valid and conclusive anthropological and zoological grounds, by Atheists and even liberal theologians.

But is there really any ground for McCabe's avoidance of the denial even of his "impersonal God?" which word he rightly suspects to be a mere generic name (p. 577). No, there is no justification any more for such a self-defeating limitation to merely disbelieving even this "impersonal God."

The means to make out an unimpeachable logical case for the Atheist's *denial* of the existence of any "supreme Being" connoted by the expression "impersonal God" are now furnished by the modern development of mathematical logic. According to Professor Heinrich Sholz, the noted German mathematical logician and historian of logic, the principle of the excluded contradiction, in its new logistical form, states precisely that THERE EXISTS NO ENTITY X TO WHICH A DEFINED PROPERTY F BOTH APPLIES AND DOES NOT APPLY (*Archiv für Philosophie*, No. 1, p. 49). This basic logical axiom conclusively quashes the theological pattern of definition of (impersonal) God as "something that is both omnipresent (=in all space) and (as 'spirit') immaterial (=in no space)." It is obvious that the theological definition thus involves a denial of the principle of excluded contradiction and so is to be, once for all, rejected as a logically false expression (a self-contradiction). As the new form of the principle exactly shows, a contradictory (logically false) expression excludes logically, *with the absolute certainty*, any question of possible existence (of a referent) in the world (see Prof. R. Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity*, p. 21). This, I repeat, means the second *valid* denial of "God" (impersonal), and both denials with their reasons together make the whole argument as *conclusive* as ever an argument, empirical and logical, can be. Even the intimidated University professors occasionally revolt against the obscurantisms and admit the new truth publicly. Says the British Professor J. N. Findlay: "From which it follows that our *modern* denial of necessity or rational evidence for such an existence amounts to a *demonstration* that there cannot be a God. We may accordingly deny that *modern* approaches allow us to remain *agnostically* poised in regard to God: they force us to come down on the *Atheistic* side." (*Can God's Existence Be Disproved? Mind*, April, 1948, p. 176, 182.)

Well, as an immediate upshot of my argument, I propose the following modification of the definition of a *modern* disbeliever:—

ATHEIST (Modern): *One who denies both the existence of all personal (anthropomorphic or man-like) gods on valid empirical grounds and that of any impersonal (theoretical) God or Supreme Being on valid logical grounds.*

This definition is, in my opinion, wholly adequate as it comprehensively and exactly states what the (negative) facts and strict logic require, viz., that *no* Gods *whatsoever* exist. The definition has further the advantage of actually making Atheism, in all of its senses, a truism; and, incidentally, of dispensing with Bertrand Russell's self-styled "philosophical (but really irrational) agnosticism" as both a psychological monstrosity in regard to the mythical gods and a logical impossibility in regard to the contradictory "Supreme Being."

Now the ultimate upshot of such an argument as mine is, I suppose, that the problem of the relation between



reason and religion ceases to be a subject of philosophy; it is solved by completely eliminating "God" and other primitive survivals like soul and spirit. It is C. E. M. Joad who admits lately (in his *Decadence*, 1949) that philosophers themselves are beginning to doubt, under the impact of the Logical Positivism (see on the latter Prof. P. Frank's *Modern Science and Its Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, 1949) whether their former main business, metaphysics, is possible at all! This, however, comes naturally after the metaphysics have been retreating from the exact sciences. Says Prof. Max Bense, another noted German mathematical logician, in winding up his recent summary of the natural philosophy (*Moderne Naturphilosophie*, 1949): "Our concept of nature has, on the whole, gained in logical and mathematical perspicuity which means *the advance of the logical and rational point of view*; and it has lost in perceptual representation which means a retreat of the transcendental and phenomenological point of view. The question whether the events of nature are to be interpreted idealistically or realistically, has become a secondary question. *The question of the compatibility of modern natural sciences with Christian dogmas is of no interest to the science itself and, ultimately, is an obsolete question.*"

GREGORY S. SMELTERS.

#### ON THE SHELF

THE terms "spinster" and "old maid" have long been employed as terms of reproach and contempt, and those to whom the epithets are applied are generally regarded as physically inferior to their married sisters and mentally inferior to men. This attitude may not be quite so apparent to-day as it was before the First World War when George Gissing published his book, *The Odd Women*, dealing with the fate of spinsters in the Victorian Age who were expected to keep quiet and bear their discreditable lot in silence. But the single women of to-day who are considered to have "missed the bus" are still all too often regarded as a class apart, possessed of inherent defects which debar them from entering into competition with their more fortunately endowed sisters in the struggle for a mate and the achievement of most women's ambition, to become a wife, a mother, and the mistress of a home.

That there are no grounds for such radical distinctions is ably argued by M. B. Smith (herself a single woman) in *The Single Woman of To-day*.\* "The single women of to-day," she says, "are by no means inadequate or inferior to their married sisters. In most cases their single-ness has been determined by their environment and upbringing and more often than not they are women of superior calibre to the men they meet." When due weight is given to the arguments of Miss Smith, there can be little doubt of her contention that many single women are better fitted for the position of wife than many who are already married, nor can it be denied that these superior single women constitute a grave threat to the stability of existing marriages.

Miss Smith is of the opinion that this state of affairs could be remedied to a large extent if there were a more informed taste in mating. "As things are," says Miss Smith, "we know—everyone knows—that among the 1,607,243 (1936 figure) surplus women in England and Wales, a fantastically large number are biologically desirable, either overlooked by the poor male taste of the time, or else deliberately avoiding marriage because of the lamentable degeneracy of the average male." With a more

informed taste in mating the surplus women would be co-extensive with the least marriageable of the female sex. Consequently, the need for substitutes for married life and the outlet of sexual impulses would not be so acute. This remedy, which in no way flouts the conventions of a monogamous state, is apparently the only one which Miss Smith openly advocates.

Miss Smith, speaking of extra-marital relations, has very little to say in their favour. As she points out it is no longer necessary to choose between marriage and prostitution. Sex is available on a friendly and amateur basis, in infinite gradations and without responsibility. But marriage is still the recognised pattern of life for a woman, and to be outside the pattern is still an implied degradation, however much one may point towards career and freedom, equality with men, and so forth. Free love can never be more than a palliative. To tell a single woman who is normal biologically and mentally to face any trial or privation in order to secure the satisfaction of her woman's needs and to delude her with the idea that she can lead a full life as a man's mistress, or in secret harlotry without any hope of motherhood, and with the organic idleness which constant use of contraceptives would bring, is cruel and heartless.

"The Last Letter to a Married Lover" (pp. 40-43) should help to take some of the glamour out of the so-called romance of the love of a single girl for a married man and emphasise the inadequacy of such relationships in a monogamous society such as ours. When Miss Smith says that "Sexual experiment before marriage is obviously not the answer to better selection by the male or female" (p. 53) we enter on debatable ground. It is true that many men come to look with nausea upon a woman who gives herself easily before marriage, but there can be no doubt that many hopeless marriages would have been avoided had such a course been pursued. In such cases it is the intention that counts. This is about the only legitimate criticism that can be made of a well-balanced and interesting book which is a pleasing contrast to much of the rubbish that is being written on the present-day all-absorbing topic of "Sex."

FRANK KENYON.

\* Watts & Co. 6s.

#### CASUALTY CLEARING STATION

For some time he lay with darkened eyes,  
Drained of all thought, all knowledge ebb'd away,  
Sightless and void, a bundle in the dark,  
Shelved and forgotten in the clamouring day.  
For some time then he wished that he was dead,  
Wished for the dousing of the wicked spark  
That burned its flame into his bandaged head.

And he was lost to all the changing skies,  
Colour and light avoided his retreat,  
Only the dark and blackness neighboured him,  
Only the night was at his beggared feet.  
Captured he was by death's admiring spell,  
Skewered by pain through each unyielding limb,  
And then aware that Dante knew no Hell.

JOHN O'HARE.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE PAPACY. By F. A. Ridley. Price 1s. 3d.; postage 1½d.

WHAT IS THE SABBATH DAY? By H. Cutner. Price 1s. 3d.; postage 2d.



### ACID DROPS

**Attention!** We have discovered a Christian who takes Our Lords commands seriously. We quote verbatim: "He threw £1,200 in the river." Clad in a long, violet robe, the Rev. Jean Stern, of the Church of the Angels, solemnly cast into the River Seine the whole silver and gold collection of his father, an antique dealer. When questioned by the police, the Rev. Stern replied: "I wanted to show my followers how vain are earthly treasures." We think that Jesus and His apostles would have thoroughly approved of this answer, which is in line with the Master's commandments. But we doubt if the police will take a similarly favourable view.

**Papal Infallibility**, which, as we all know, extends to "Faith and Morals," does not, unfortunately, extend to horse-racing. So, with empty pockets and sad hearts, must the trustful congregation of "Our Lady and All Saints" R.C. Church in New Road, Stourbridge, conclude. For their Reverend Father in Christ, Fr. O'Dowd, ran a tipping-service to raise funds for his church. For a time things went pretty well. Finally, however, the current tip, "Old Glory," failed to deliver the goods, and £5,000 "went west" into the bookie's pockets, to the spiritual and temporal loss of the R.C. population of Stourbridge. Very sad. However, we hope that they will recoup their losses on Fr. O'Dwyer's current football pool, of which we have a specimen card in this office. "Their thoughts are on the next world, but they miss nothing in this one."

**Melancholy news** comes from Dorking, Surrey. For an ancient Mansion in the vicinity was, we learn, persistently haunted by a "poltergeist," one of those spirits of the air who have a passion for smashing crockery regardless of rising prices and the need for increased production. Upon this occasion, the rumbustious spook was duly exorcised with all the appropriate rites. But, strange to relate, *after* the exorcism, the owner's cigarettes disappeared. Are there chain smokers in the spirit world? Or did the "poltergeist" merely take them as a souvenir of a pleasant spell of house—and furniture—breaking?

**Passing along** the Clerkenwell Road the other day, we were rather astonished to see a foreign flag, presumably the Papal banner, flying outside the well-known Italian Roman Catholic Church in that area. Since the Pope's "Lateran Treaty" with Mussolini in 1929, the Vatican ranks, officially, as a sovereign State and is, therefore, legally a foreign power in this country. Those people who are always talking about foreign "fifth columns," might occasionally note this one which has so often plotted and waged war against this country. We hope that the Law Officers of the Crown will duly note this insolent display by a foreign power on English soil.

**The Pope has at last** made a pontifical announcement that he has, with his own holy eyes, seen "the sun plunge across the sky" while he was walking in the Vatican Gardens last year, in full confirmation of the Fatima miracle—which, as is well known, all Catholic converts believe more thoroughly than true-born Catholics. There may have been a teeny-weeny doubt about the sun and the stars careering all over the sky when vouched for by some Portuguese children—but who can doubt a real, live Pope? And why was this glorious sign of the majesty and munificence of God Almighty vouchsafed the Pope? Why, to show "the Divine Sovereign Pleasure at the definition of the dogma of the Assumption." Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven!

The "Pope, Mother and Baby" discussion is still going on, but it would prove a most interesting case at law if a Roman Catholic doctor, faced with the choice of saving a mother or her child, deliberately allowed the mother to die—at the behest of a foreign power. In English law, it is the mother who has to be saved. We wonder how a judge would act in maintaining English law? And we wonder how a Roman Catholic judge would act? Is it not a fact that most Roman Catholics say, to Hell with England, we follow one Leader only, the Pope, for his will is ours?

**Recently**, we came across a pamphlet bearing the unusual title of *Jesus the Atheist*. Upon perusing the work containing this remarkable description of the Second Person of the Trinity, we discovered, to our astonishment we must admit, that Jesus was the greatest Atheist who ever lived. Naturally, where Jesus is concerned, "greatest" is always the operative word. Jesus was, also, the greatest Jew and, of course, the greatest Christian. In addition to which He was the greatest socialist and the greatest capitalist and, since He was a working carpenter, presumably the greatest trade unionist as well. In short, from whatever angle one regards him, Jesus was It!

**Congratulations** to the World Union of Freethinkers! To the propaganda activities of its Dutch branches, particularly. For our contemporary, *The Catholic Herald*, reports the following sad news to its pious readers. For the benefit of our readers who may be sometimes inclined to take a pessimistic view of the progress of Secularism, we quote in full:—

"The number of Dutch people professing no religion has increased seven-fold during the past half-century, according to a survey released by the 'Catholic Institute for Social Research' at the Hague. In 1899, only 2.3 per cent. of the people professed no religion, the survey states. To-day more than 17 per cent. do so." The article bears the title: "Dutch Pagans Increase." As Galileo said long ago: "*E pur si muovo*"—"It keeps on moving."

**According to** a newspaper report, the Pope said science had discovered the existence of God. That may be, according to the Pope's science which must not be confused with Science. The Pope's science will be acceptable to Roman Catholics, and mislead some who are not, but will only amuse intelligent people who understand Science, its teachings, objects, and the reason why the Roman Catholic Church has been its most bitter enemy for centuries.

**The Pope**, our Holy Father Pius the Eleventh, has made a momentous discovery; the world—our world—is some five billion years old. Yet the Pope also stated only last year that the Book of Genesis was divinely inspired and, as is well known, the Holy Book categorically declares that the world was made in six days, neither more nor less. These theologians are surely capable of working mathematical miracles: Five billion years equals seven days; three persons equal one God and, of course, in theology, two and two always make five!

**More news about the sea-serpent.** The B.B.C. has just informed us that discoveries on the floor of the Pacific Ocean indicate the existence of eels ninety feet long. Another tall story?



# "THE FREETHINKER"

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## TO CORRESPONDENTS

WE have received numerous letters with reference to the late Mr. R. H. Rosetti. We hope to be able to commence the publication of these next week.—EDITOR.

THE FREETHINKER will be forwarded direct from the Publishing Office at the following rates (Home and Abroad): One year, 19s. 2d.; half-year, 9s. 7d.; three months, 4s. 11d.

Orders for literature should be sent to the Business Manager of the Pioneer Press, 41, Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C. 1, and not to the Editor.

Correspondents are requested to write on one side of the paper only and to make their letters as brief as possible.

## SUGAR PLUM

The West London Branch, N.S.S., held its usual Sunday meeting at the "Laurie Arms," Edgware Road, London, W. Mr. Bonar Thompson, well known to London audiences as orator, wit, and Shakespearian reciter, spoke on "Shakespeare or Shaw?" Whilst admitting the many brilliant qualities of Mr. Bernard Shaw, the lecturer held that he was too much of a controversialist and too much preoccupied with the problems of his own time, to be regarded as one of the immortals of literature. He dealt largely in secondhand and second-rate ideas, and his work would probably be regarded by historians of literature as "period pieces," of interest chiefly to specialists.

Shaw's influence upon his own age had been much greater than Shakespeare's on his, but he lacked the universal character of the Stratford genius, who belongs to all time. The lecturer's unorthodox estimate of Shaw naturally aroused much discussion, including considerable criticism, to which Mr. Thompson replied. Mr. F. A. Hornibrook presided. Next Sunday, Mr. F. A. Ridley, Editor of *The Freethinker*, will lecture on "Has Religion a Future?" A question of profound significance for secularists and, indeed, for all serious social students.

## A NOVEL TO MY LIKING

THROUGH a recent number of *The Freethinker* I came to know of the Icelandic author Halldor Kilyan Laxness whose novel, *Independent People* (George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London) I found in my local public library in an admirable translation by J. A. Thompson. I want to report back that I have been somewhat puzzled how such a proud, un-Christian book succeeded in coming into one of our public libraries at all!

Bjartur, an indomitable farm labourer, has saved some money to buy from his master a plot on a knoll in the marshes. This spot is said to be haunted: for centuries settlements of lone workers have been destroyed by spectres; but Bjartur is afraid of no spectres, be they ghosts or gods. As he passed the cairn of the witch, he spat, and ground out vindictively: "Damn the stone you'll ever get from me, old bitch" and refused to appease her by laying a stone onto the cairn.

He builds a little croft and gets married. The minister is a practical man, a much admired breeder of stocks. The crofters have no time for church and do not heed much the parson's preachings, yet they never fail to admit how much good he did by introducing his breed of sheep.

## CREMATION OF R. H. ROSETTI

The Cremation of Mr. R. H. Rosetti, late President of the N.S.S., took place on Friday, December 7, at 11 a.m., at the Mortlake Crematorium. The service was conducted by Mr. Vernon Rosetti, only son of the deceased, in the presence of relatives, friends, members of the N.S.S., and representatives of other Rationalist organisations.

## OBITUARY

Glasgow Secular Society has had many active and loyal women members in its ranks, and so it is with deep regret that we have to record the death of a fine old lady, Mrs. C. M. Harley, whose interest in the work goes back for nearly forty years.

Her desire for a Secular funeral was observed by her family, and at their request Mr. R. M. Hamilton duly carried out this Service. Our sympathy goes out to her surviving sons and daughters, all of whom are Freethinkers.

R. M. H.

## "THE FREETHINKER" FUND

Donations for the week ended Saturday, December 8, 1951: Frank Terry, £5; J. Bell, £2; J. W., 5s.; H. Beck, 5s.; Fred. A. Hornibrook, £2; T. Walmsley, 10s.; W. Collins, £1.

Total for week: £11.

Total received to date: £368 7s. 5d.

The marriage of Bjartur is a quick job with little service for little money.

"... The women wiped the tears from their eyes, the minister delved into an inside pocket and fished out his watch under the noses of the bridal couple. Then he married them from the prayer book. No hymn was sung after the ceremony but the minister wished the couple happiness in accordance with official requirements and asked the bridegroom whether his hacks were ready; he had no more time to spare for weddings."

This old pastor, who never meddles into his flock's personal opinions, dies, and his young successor calls on Bjartur to have his children educated in the scriptures.

"I can't say that I have much faith in this modern religion," says Bjartur who knows by heart the rimes of old. "But we had a grand pastor here once—his breed will perpetuate his name in this district. I am a free man and owe nothing, not to men nor God."

"There is no freedom but the freedom of the one true Redemption of Our Lord Jesus Christ," intoned the minister in the colourless gabble of an impatient shop assistant explaining to some insignificant customer that the only material for sale here is the canvas named after the master Hessian. (p. 134.)

The new Reverend is asked by another crofter whether he really believes in every word—for instance that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead after he had begun to rot in the grave.

Bjartur's children are taught that "God once came, attended by two angels, to visit a famous man abroad," but the narrative was in other respects rather vague, what did God look like? "Oh, I expect He would have a beard," replied the teacher. . . . Then it occurred to little Nonni to ask "whether God had any clothes on—or was He naked?" (p. 368.)

Bjartur's eldest daughter has not yet been confirmed. "At home here there's always peace and quiet, you see. And as for religion itself, I can't say that I've ever done much to encourage her in such-like studies, and if the truth be told, I've always felt that all this Christianity was really rather a nuisance in the community, though the late Reverend Gudmundur was, of course, a great expert with sheep." (p. 410).

Then war began in Europe after the shooting of some



Ferdinand or other, and the "death of this Ferdinand was taken so much to heart by various ill-disposed citizens that they kept on hacking each other to pieces like suet in a trough, for four consecutive years and more." One crofter explains that it may be done out of idealism—an expression the others have never heard. When it is explained to them, they consider: ". . . if you look at the war with one eye upon the ideals that lie behind it, and the other on all those thousands of men and women whom it robs of life and limb, then you can't help wondering whether it wouldn't be better to lay more store upon preserving people's lives than upon fulfilling a set of ideals. For if ideals aim not at improving the lot of mankind on earth, but at slaughtering men by the million, one may well ask whether it wouldn't be more praiseworthy to be wholly devoid of ideals. . . ."

Finally one of the old men lifted up his piping voice:

"When ten million men murder each other in bad will," he said, "I for one don't give a damn whether it's from no reason at all, or because of a dirty little cock-sparrow like this chap Ferdinand. It's just as Bjartur says: why can't they have leave to be as idiotic as they please? Now, one idiot is a curiosity, as everyone knows who has seen an idiot; their jowls stick out beyond their shoulders and they slaver at the mouth. But what is one to say of ten million idiots? Let us imagine that these ten million idiots murder one another, possibly because of a dirty little cock-sparrow, possible for no reason at all, it's matterless to me. Let us take it mathematically and say that five million of each are killed, for twice five are ten, as everybody knows. Suppose now that all these idiots go to heaven, for even if I believed in hell I would never wish anyone so ill as to send him there. Suppose further that they meet each other in heaven on the same day as they murdered each other on earth—it's matterless to me whether it was out of imbecility, it doesn't affect the question at issue, as I said before, because murder is murder.

. . . Now then, here are three questions which I ponder over night and day, and which, since this seems a favourable opportunity, I intend to put to you also. In the first place, do they forgive one another in heaven for having murdered each other? It's matterless to me whether it was out of stupidity. In the second place, do they perhaps thank one another in heaven for having murdered one another and thus helped one another on the way to heaven? Or, in the third place, do they go on fighting with undiminished imbecility in heaven, and if so for how long? And if they murder each other afresh, where do they land then? Will there eventually arrive a time when the whole universe will be too small to accommodate people who want to murder each other in stupidity, for no reason and to no purpose to the end of all eternity?"

Laxness, born in 1902 as the son of a farmer, started writing in the pious vein of Strindberg or Undset and steeped himself in Catholicism in a monastery in Luxembourg. Extensive travels, however, succeeded in dispelling this unhealthy trend: in 1927 his Catholic period comes to an end with *The Great Weaver from Kashmir*, a book which is the milestone of a new age in Icelandic novel writing.

*Independent People* (Sjálfstætt fólk, 1934/5), *Salka Valka* and his later writings are characteristic through great brilliance of style, atheistic views and fierce social criticism which he has maintained despite the fact that by this bold writing he has alienated many conservative-minded people at home and abroad.

P. G. R.

## 1851-1951

ONE hundred years ago the industrial population of England was in a parlous condition. The workers in mining, agriculture, and the workers in factories were little better than slaves, and long working hours with low wages was the order of the day. There were few schools but plenty of churches and chapels. The clergy as a body never did anything to better the conditions of the working class but they never tired of telling those "slaves" that if they suffered and sacrificed themselves whilst on earth as believers in Christianity, they would be rewarded—after they were dead—with a golden crown in glory. Such fairy stories satisfied the ignorant, but there were men in those troublous times who preached a very different doctrine and believed in elevating mankind so that they would become useful citizens of the State. Such were Robert Owen, George Jacob and Austin Holyoake, Robert Cooper, Charles Southwell and others, all Freethinkers who tried to spread amidst many obstacles the Gospel of Freethought. Freethinkers of that period were looked upon by Christians as outcasts, blackguards, loose-livers and guilty of every crime in the calendar from pitch-and-toss up to manslaughter. The Bible was held as a Fetish and although little read it was regarded as the Book of Books and to criticise it and say it was not true such persons deserved to be put in prison; and they were. Compared with 1851 we are living in a paradise on earth.

What a revolution has been caused. In my opinion the greatest since "God said, let there be light, and there was light." In the mid-fifties arose the redoubtable Charles Bradlaugh with the courage of a lion. He had no veneration for old mistakes, no admiration for ancient lies. He loved the truth for truth's sake. He saw injustice everywhere. Hypocrisy at the altar, tyranny on the throne, and with a splendid courage he espoused the cause of the weak against the strong and of the enslaved many against the titled few. His activities were many and varied and all young Freethinkers should read the life of Charles Bradlaugh by his daughter Hypatia. Also a very informative one by J. M. Robertson, and the Centenary edition, *Champion of Liberty*, published by Watts and Company, Johnson's Court, Fleet Street, London, E.C., and The Pioneer Press, 61, Farringdon Street, London, E.C., and 41, Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C. Here you will find a great part cleverly written by our ex-President, Chapman Cohen and many others who contribute to the worth of that great man. Bradlaugh held 101 debates, mostly on the Christian religion, and never knew defeat. He was always master of the situation and loved to meet university men who had a first-class education, as it was a waste of time talking to Tom, Dick or Harry on historical or metaphysical questions, and in his great debates Charles Bradlaugh, like an armed warrior, stepped into the arena and shattered the shield and shivered the lance of the Christian superstition. In the eighties of last century he gathered around him many talented men and women who became prominent in their day and should never be forgotten. G. W. Foote, Charles Watts, Joseph Symes, Chapman Cohen and many others who rendered great service to "the best of causes" according to George Meredith the well-known novelist. All gods and devils, ghosts and spirits, heaven and hell, are only a figment of man's imagination and do not have any real existence. They arose in primitive times thousands of years ago when man in his ignorance did not understand his surroundings. He was afraid of thunder and lightning, storms and flood, and terrified of



dreams and earthquakes, volcanoes and tidal waves. Poor fellow; he must have suffered agony in his distress.

Slowly and painfully has advanced the Freethought army of deliverance, and it behoves every Freethinker to do his duty and try to abolish the Christian superstition, whenever possible. A good slogan should be in this case: "Don't depend on other Freethinkers. Other Freethinkers may depend on you."

JOSEPH CLOSE.

## CORRESPONDENCE

### BIBLE AND A FLAT EARTH

SIR.—The Bible certainly implies a flat earth in such phrases as its "two ends" and "four corners." The earth was envisaged by the Hebrews as a *flat circular* plane, and the much quoted phrase "he sitteth on the circle of the earth" refers to the *circular* horizon; it has no reference to the *spherical* shape of the earth, for a circle is not a sphere. As to the "earth being suspended on nothing," there is no commitment here to any particular shape. I am not aware of any words of God to Job describing the earth's turning on an axis. Neither do any of Christ's words that I can discover imply a round or a spherical earth; further, it is possible to have night in one part of the earth, day in another, and afternoon in another, and still have a FLAT EARTH!—Yours, etc.,

RUBY TA'BOIS.

### THE SYME CASE

SIR.—It is a pity that Mr. McHattie has no sense of proportion. We can all agree that Syme was very badly treated—but he was by no means the only one. Young Archer-Shee was just as foully treated, but both he and Syme were eventually rehabilitated, and Syme received compensation. But even after that, he never ceased his attacks and, if I remember aright, lost his reason, and became a public nuisance. There is no more sense in attacking John M. Robertson than in attacking the other 600 Members of Parliament for not also becoming public nuisances. As for "the late John Syme's character" bearing "favourable comparison" with that of "the Rt. Hon. John Robertson's," this is the kind of thing which is so utterly irrelevant that I can only wonder any reader of this paper writing it. Syme never did a thing for anybody except himself; Robertson has bequeathed some of the finest Freethought literature ever written to posterity. What nonsense a "phobia" can make some people write!—Yours, etc.,

H. CUTNER.

## "THE FREETHINKER"

### Increase in Price

Most of those who have sent donations to *The Freethinker* Fund added comments on the situation. An affection for the paper, compliments to those responsible for its maintenance, and a determination that it shall live, were foremost among the comments.

Quite a number raised the perfectly sound, economic point that a paper carrying a loss every year could hardly hope to escape toeing the line with all publications by raising its price to meet the heavy all-round increases in costs. The new Board felt that would have to come but that the first step was to explore every channel for economy in order to get the exact measure of the whole position, and that revealed the weekly loss of £40 as recently stated.

The Board of Directors have now decided to take that step and commencing with the issue to be dated January 6, 1952, the price of *The Freethinker* will be fourpence per copy.

Subscribers at present in credit beyond that date will continue to receive their copies without any extra charge, but renewals after the expiration of their credits will be at the new rates which will be announced in due course.

The extra penny per copy will help but not meet the weekly loss on the paper, so *The Freethinker* Fund must be continued. Some readers suggested a much larger increase in the price, but it is questionable if that would be wise. *The Freethinker* is a formidable advocate of Freethought principles and teachings and the wider it is spread the greater publicity is given to those principles and teachings; a much higher cost may discourage a likely new reader from buying his or her first copy.

Those who subsidise the paper by donations to *The Freethinker* Fund are taking an active and useful part in the Freethought Movement. One thing is as certain as daylight: if Freethinkers do not keep our Movement going then organised Freethought will collapse.

Every donation to *The Freethinker* Fund is a blow in support of Freethought.

W. GRIFFITHS  
(Chairman, G. W. Foote Co. Ltd.)

## NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

### Report of Executive Meeting, December 4, 1951

Present: Messrs. Griffiths, Ridley, Ebury, Hornibrook, Morris, Woodley, Barker, Shaw, Corstophine, Johnson, Mrs. Venton. Mr. Cleaver was unavoidably absent.

One account of the tragically sudden death of the late President, Mr. R. H. Rosetti, the Vice-President, N.S.S., Mr. L. Ebury, was called upon to take the chair.

The minutes of the previous meeting were read, discussed, agreed upon, and signed by the Chairman.

On the suggestion of Mr. Ridley, the E.C. stood in silence in respect to the memory of its late President, Mr. R. H. Rosetti, and the late General Secretary, John Seibert. Business relating to Blackburn Branch and correspondence with the Lord Chancellor's office was then discussed.

After considerable discussion, Mr. P. V. Morris, a member of the Executive and an active Secularist of many years standing, was appointed General Secretary, N.S.S., upon a motion moved by Mr. Hornibrook and seconded by Mr. Shaw, beginning from January 1, 1952.

The E.C. then discussed at length the question of appointing an Acting President or a Chairman until Annual Conference, when the branches will have had time to send in nominations. A resolution was eventually proposed by Mrs. Venton and seconded by Mr. Barker that Mr. F. A. Ridley be appointed Chairman *pro tem* and that there should be further discussion of the matter at the next E.C.

A sub-committee consisting of Messrs. Morris, Johnson and Griffiths was appointed to supervise the arrangements for the Annual Dinner on January 26.

The Treasurer reported that on account of the emergency nature of the E.C. meeting he had had no time to prepare a financial statement. A resolution was moved by Mr. Johnson and seconded by Mr. Shaw that the Acting President or Chairman, the Treasurer, and the General Secretary be empowered to sign cheques on behalf of the N.S.S.—any two signatures of the above officials being sufficient at any time.

It was moved by Mr. Griffiths and seconded by Mr. Barker that Mr. Ridley, as Chairman of the E.C., should send a letter of condolence to Mr. Rosetti's son.

New members were admitted to the parent branch.

On the motion of Mr. Woodley, seconded by Mrs. Venton, a vote of thanks was passed to the Treasurer, Mr. Griffiths, and to Mrs. Seibert for their voluntary assistance at the office during the confusion after Mr. Rosetti's death.

The roll was called and the proceedings then terminated.

The next meeting of the Executive is arranged for Tuesday, December 18.

F. A. RIDLEY  
(Chairman of the E.C.)

## LECTURE NOTICES, ETC.

### OUTDOOR

Kingston-on-Thames Branch N.S.S. (Castle Street).—Sunday, 7-30 p.m.: J. W. BARKER.

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (St. Mary's Gate, Blitzed Site).—Lunch-hour Lectures every weekday, 1 p.m. Speaker: G. WOODCOCK.

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead Heath).—Sunday, 12 noon: L. EBURY and W. G. FRASER.

Sheffield Branch N.S.S. (Barker's Pool).—Sunday, 7 p.m.: Mr. A. SAMMS.

### INDOOR

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Mechanics' Institute).—Sunday, 6-45 p.m.: Mr. J. BACKHOUSE: A Lecture.

Conway Discussion Circle (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Tuesday, December 18, 7 p.m.: Mrs. DORA RUSSELL, "Soviet Women To-day."

Leicester Secular Society (Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, 6-30 p.m.: Mr. GORDON SCHAFFER, "Religion on the Other Side of the Iron Curtain."

Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Technical College, Shakespeare Street).—Sunday, 2-30 p.m.: Mr. FRANK LOVELL, "Wit and Humour."

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, December 16, 11 a.m.: ARCHIBALD ROBERTSON, M.A., "Atheism and Ethics."

West London Branch N.S.S. (Laurie Arms, Crawford Place, Edgware Road, W.1).—Sunday, 7-15 p.m.: Mr. F. A. RIDLEY (Editor of *The Freethinker*), "Has Religion a Future?"



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