

The Freethinker

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HAVING BARELY RECOVERED from the carousals of Hogmanay, many of the inhabitants of North Britain set about each year towards the end of January doing further damage to their stomach linings and pockets by celebrating the birthday of their national bard with haggis, whisky and oration. Unfortunately, it is only too clear that but a handful of such worshippers have any true appreciation of the implications of their hero's revolutionary ideas. The

respectable comfortably-off business-men and parsons who pour forth vapid sentimentalities annually concerning Scotia's grandeur and religious heritage at Burns' suppers throughout the land, bear precious little resemblance to the humble ploughman who praised

"The Jolly Beggars" in immortal and bawdy verse and who castigated the pious hypocrites of his day in lines of withering scorn. Even more than most geniuses, Burns sorely needs to be saved from some of his most fervent lip-servers. The adulation will no doubt reach its consummation next year, when the 200th anniversary of Burns' birth occurs. I hope, if the Editor will allow it, to contribute then my own small pæan of praise. But meanwhile I think we would do well to remember the often overlooked fact that the great poet's work did not arise in a vacuum. He had his predecessors in Scottish literature, without whose influence and example he might never have developed as he did. The most important of these was undoubtedly Robert Fergusson.

Neglected

While only a minority of modern Scots have more than a nodding acquaintance with Burns' poetry, few have even heard of Fergusson. To his native city Edinburgh's undying shame, there is no statue of Fergusson (though Princes Street abounds with ugly memorials to nonentities) and he is commemorated only by a headstone in the Canongate Kirkyard, erected by Burns at his own expense. Burns never ceased to acknowledge his debt to Fergusson—

My elder brother in Misfortune,

By far my elder brother in the Muse,

—and he thus castigated the contemporary neglect of his idol—

My curse upon your whunstane! hearts,

Ye Edinbro' gentry,

The tithe o' what you waste at cartes²

Wa'd³ stow'd his pantry.

And yet, ironically, it is Burns' own fame which has almost totally eclipsed the memory of his "elder brother."

Robert Fergusson was born in 1750 of poor parents. He attended the High School and then obtained a bursary which took him eventually to St. Andrews University, where he studied Divinity. But, like many a cheerful spirit before and since, he found Calvinistic theology sadly at variance with his happy pagan temperament and did not regret having to leave his unfinished studies owing to his father's death in 1767. After a short spell in Aberdeenshire, he obtained a post in a lawyer's office back in Edin-

burgh. He remained in the capital until his tragic death in the local madhouse at the age of 24.

It has been well pointed out that had Burns died at this early age, he would have been remembered for only four poems of any consequence. Yet Fergusson left at least a dozen poems which are in the finest tradition of Scottish verse, and one ("Auld Reekie")⁴ which is a work of genius. Many of his themes were similar to those of his great

successor. Unquestionably Burns modelled some of his greatest works on Fergusson's verse, and he did not always improve on his inspirer's efforts. Most critics, for example, consider that Fergusson's "Farmer's Ingle"⁵ is superior to "The Cottar's Saturday

Night," free as it is from the pious sentimentality which mars the latter overrated work. The fine opening of Fergusson's poem—

When gloaming⁶ grey out o'er the welkin keeks⁷. . .
is followed by a succulent image of homely Scottish fare—

Wi' buttered bannocks⁸ now the girdle⁹ reeks¹⁰. . .
and then, replete, we have grandma's evening tale to the bairns by the fire—

O' warlocks loupin¹¹ round the Wirrikow¹². . .
and finally the magnificent description of the busy day's ending, beginning—

Then a' the house for sleep begin to grien¹³

Their joints to slack frae industry a while . . .

Much of Fergusson's work is powerfully satirical—again and again he flays the self-righteous gentry of Edinburgh who fatten on the labour of the poor on weekdays and mouth religious platitudes at kirk on the Sabbath—

Ane wad maist trow¹⁴ some people choose

To change their faces wi' their clo'es

And fain would gar¹⁵ ilk¹⁶ neighbour think

They thirst for goodness as for drink.

("Auld Reekie.")

He exposed the seamier side of the city's life in unforgettable lines of harsh realism, yet touched with a deep pity—

Near some lamp-post wi' dowy¹⁷ face,

Wi' heavy een¹⁸ and sour grimace

Stands she that beauty lang had ken'd¹⁹

Whoredom her trade and vice her end.

Yet in spite of this, Fergusson's character was fundamentally a merry one, and eighteenth century Edinburgh suited him well. As Henley says, the capital was in that age "A city of clubs and talk and good fellowship, a city of harlotry and high jinks, a city, above all, of drink." In short, in spite of all its abuses, a grand place to be alive in. Fergusson never tired of praising its gaiety—

Auld Reekie!⁴ Thou'rt the canty²⁰ hole,

A bield²¹ for mony caldrife²² soul . . .

He is no poet for prudes, Puritans and teetotallers.

Fergusson, of course, has his faults and limitations. He is no lyricist, and his range is small, though there is no telling what he might have accomplished had he lived longer and

loved a lass. Nevertheless, we need only read the opening lines of "The Daft Days"—

Now mirk²³ December's dowy¹⁷ face
Glours²⁴ o'ur the rigs wi' sour grimace . . .

or the impassioned protest against caging wild birds in the "Ode to the Gowdspink"²⁵—

Like Tantalus they hing you here
To spy the glories of the year . . .

- | | | |
|------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| 1. Flinty | 5. Fireside | 9. Baking-plate |
| 2. Playing cards | 6. Sunset | 10. Smokes |
| 3. Would | 7. Peeps | 11. Leaping |
| 4. Edinburgh | 8. Soft cakes | 12. Hobgoblin |

or, above all, the wonderful expression of "multum in parvo" in "The Farmer's Ingle,"²⁶ perhaps the finest line in all his work—

The mind's aye²⁶ cradled when the grave is near . . .
to realise that we are in the presence of a poet who, in his own peculiarly Scottish sphere, can challenge comparison with the greatest.

- | | | |
|----------------|---------------|---------------|
| 13. Yearn | 18. Eyes | 23. Dark |
| 14. Think | 19. Known | 24. Stares |
| 15. Make | 20. Merriest | 25. Goldfinch |
| 16. Each | 21. Shelter | 26. Always |
| 17. Melancholy | 22. Shivering | |

CONTROVERSY

Positivism

PRO.

G. H. TAYLOR, usually well balanced in his criticisms, has given an unjustifiable slant to his article, "A Positivist Centenary." A few comments:

(1) Positivism, besides being called "Roman Catholicism minus Christianity," has also been called "Roman Catholicism minus Christianity *plus science*. Both, however, are inaccurate.

(2) Fetishism is an historical and necessary element, or phase, in the total development of man's mind and is, therefore, included in positive philosophy which explains such development.

(3) The many outstanding individuals of Comte's calendar are given an historic setting not because of their own individual accomplishments but because they represent some particular attribute or characteristic of the historic development of Humanity.

(4) As to who first used the expression the "Religion of Humanity" is neither here nor there. What is important is that "Humanity," to Comte, meant "all those forces which converge to one centre in the interest of the welfare of mankind." This was not what Paine meant when he used the term. To Paine, "Humanity" meant no more than "Mankind."

(5) Similarly, Paine's conception of Religion was not Comte's conception. To Comte, Religion (not to be confused with ritual) meant "a life in which all the elements are in harmony." Thus, to the degree that the individual's thoughts, feelings and actions are in harmony, they are in accordance with the positive religion and the extension of this conception to the whole of mankind completes the ideal.

(6) The basis of Comte's religion of Humanity is science, for it is only in conformity to scientific law that the end, harmony, can be achieved.

(7) The "law of the three stages," first noted by Turgot and developed by Comte, is only one of the laws in the hierarchy of the seven abstract sciences which Comte classified and related. To be able to discover the only logical classification in which all phenomena are arranged in accordance with their degree of complexity, concreteness and dependence, and the order in which they should be studied, was a feat which alone marked out Comte as the greatest mind of the nineteenth century.

It is to be regretted that Mr. Taylor in his myopic criticism of the Religion of Humanity has assumed that the Religion of Humanity necessarily involves the ritual practised by some positivists in Brazil. The essential core of the Religion of Humanity is, briefly: Love for principle, order for basis, progress for aim, live for others, live openly.

J. C. HORUS.

CON.

FIRST, I thank our correspondent for his active interest.

Fetishism, he says, is an historical and necessary element in the development of man's mind. Similarly, I suppose a baby's rattle may provide a normal activity for a six months old child; I imagine it plays no part in his adult activity later on.

Science, we are told, provides the basis for Positivism. Where does Science prove it is necessary to have a Calendar of Saints or a Festival of All the Dead, or the rest of the ritualistic rigmarole? I am not merely basing my comments on something I have read about that happens in Brazil, but on what I have actually experienced in England (to be precise, at the old Temple of Humanity which was in Parliament Street, Liverpool).

If Religion means "a life in which the individual's thoughts, feelings and actions are in harmony," then Hitler and many criminals come into the category, as well as decent members of the race.

I am aware that Comte poured a good deal of feeling into his construction of the Religion of Humanity, the pathetic remnant after his sexual designs on Clothilde had come to nothing.

The rest of the criticism made by our correspondent is not factual, but merely tells us that he admires Comte. He is entitled to admire him. And I am entitled to point out that this admiration leads him to make the breath-taking statement that Comte was "the greatest mind of the nineteenth century." Frankly, one gasps. Thirty or forty great names of this great century come to mind and Comte is still in the distance. In the scientific world of today one looks in vain for something useful started by Comte—some tool, some method, some discovery. He was by way of being a sociologist, which, so far as nineteenth century science is concerned, rather relegates him to the border lines of science. Did he ever make a controlled experiment? Did he ever see the inside of a laboratory? But let his scientific contribution be as large as Positivists imagine: it was his religion rather than his science which I criticised.

In the social field some of the English Positivists, such as Bridges and Beesley, did progressive work. They would have done it just the same had they been atheists.

G. H. TAYLOR.

NEXT WEEK

THE BLACK CHRIST

By F. A. RIDLEY

Exit the Whale

By F. A. RIDLEY

ON DECEMBER 8TH, last year, ITV's "About Religion" took for its subject none other than our old friend, the prophet Jonah—complete with whale! Now, Jonah—or, more precisely, the whale who not only saved Jonah from drowning but actually gave him board and lodging for the week-end—was the object of much of the secularist attack against fundamentalism in the 19th century. As a centre of controversy, the whale ranked with Balaam's talking ass, the Gadarene swine, and Daniel and his "pride" of obliging lions. Whilst this type of controversy has died down in this country, it flourished in the U.S.A. until recently. It was in 1925 that—in the celebrated "monkey trial" in Tennessee—the famous American orator, W. J. Bryan, testified to his unshaken belief in the credibility of the Jonah episode. When asked by the American Rationalist, Clarence Darrow, whether he believed that the whale actually swallowed Jonah, Bryan went on record with the historic affirmation that he would be prepared to believe that Jonah swallowed the whale, had the Holy Scriptures required him to do so. When asked by Darrow if it was not true that the theory of evolution was not supported by the ascertainable age of the geological strata in the rocks, Bryan (who, incidentally, only missed being elected President of the U.S.A. by the proverbial hair's breadth) triumphantly replied that he "would rather trust in the Rock of Ages than in the age of the rocks!"

However, returning to Jonah as seen on ITV last month: a very different story from that told to our Victorian grandparents. The serpent of Biblical criticism has evidently been permeating the ITV studios as—so long ago—he did in the Garden of Eden. For the clerical speaker was some kind of modernist, and showed some acquaintance with works of criticism, if not yet with *The Bible Handbook* published by the Pioneer Press. The Book of Jonah—he said to the "honest doubter" whom he was supposed to be converting—is an oriental allegory, the object of which was to "debunk" the narrow ideas of Jewish orthodoxy. For the theme is the refusal of the prophet to preach to the inhabitants of the Gentile city of Nineveh, capital of Assyria, the great enemy of the Old Testament Jews. The whale, presumably, was also an allegory, but on this point the reverend speaker on ITV seemed a little vague. It was not quite clear whether the whale swallowed Jonah physically or "spiritually." (What does a prophet taste like when swallowed "spiritually"?) Having passed through the ITV critical mill, Jonah has become "small beer," whilst the whale appears to have been liquidated!

The fact is that the heated controversies over Jonah and the whale, which caused a hullabaloo among our Victorian forebears and which still probably agitate Billy Graham, represent a misunderstanding of one literature and language by people accustomed to writing and thinking in a wholly different manner. The ITV cleric was correct in calling Jonah an allegory, though fairy tale would be more correct, if less reverent. The original writer (perhaps about 400 B.C.) used an ancient oriental tongue that habitually confused symbols with the things intended to be symbolised. As in Chinese picture-writing today, instead of saying in a straightforward manner that Jonah went to Nineveh for three days and then quitted the enemy capital in a hurry, the author spun out the rigmarole of the swallowing and disgorging by a "great fish"—not a whale, which seems a mistranslation. Who or what was the "great fish"? Obviously Nineveh or, perhaps more precisely, the

Assyrian Empire. Why the great fish? For the simple reason known to orientalist but not, apparently, to fundamentalists, that the Assyrian capital was dedicated to the fish god, Ea—or Oannes, who also figured prominently in the Babylonian original of the Flood story. To cut an involved explanation short; when the author of the Book of Jonah tells us that the prophet on his way to Nineveh was swallowed by a great fish for three days, all he meant to say to his ancient Jewish readers was that Jonah went to Nineveh for the week-end and got—as was to be expected at that period—a pretty rough reception. The whale stood—one might say—for the coat of arms, or effective symbol of Nineveh.

One cannot resist the comment that some knowledge of the language and religion of ancient Mesopotamia would have saved a lot of modern Anglo-Saxon ink!

In debunking the whale, I have no desire to debunk the Book of Jonah itself. On the whole, I agree with the ITV cleric that the unknown author was, in the terms of his own day, international and even a bit of a humanist. He thought that even the Assyrians were human beings and that Jehovah ought not to wipe them out *en masse* merely because they didn't happen to belong to the Chosen Race—not a very common view, one imagines, among the Chosen. Even today, Israel will not permit Jews of mixed ancestry to be buried with the orthodox, 100% Jews! In standing up for the Gentiles, the author of the Book of Jonah was perhaps in one respect ahead of present day Israel. But it was the whale that made Jonah famous; and now, alas, the whale is no more. In becoming literature he has ceased to be as large as life! But, if not a *bona fide* whale, he started a whale of a story!

Catholic Strength in Britain

THE *Catholic Directory*, 1958 (Burns and Oates, 18s.) is the official yearbook of the R.C. Church and contains interesting statistical information. Figures given were collected during 1957, and are compiled from returns covering the year ending December 1956.

The estimated R.C. population of England and Wales (including the Channel Islands) is now 3,343,000 (51,000 more than the previous year). Conversions in England and Wales during 1956 total a record figure of 14,077 (1955 conversions, 13,291; 1954, 11,920).

The R.C. population of Scotland is estimated at 757,000 and that of Northern Ireland at 476,000. The total R.C. population of Great Britain and Northern Ireland tops 4½ millions and the inclusion of Eire would raise the figure to 7,362,000.

The archdiocese with the most R.C.s is Liverpool with 488,000. Next are Westminster, Salford and Southwark. The smallest is Menevia (which covers 11 Welsh counties) with 27,300 R.C.s. Churches number 3,085 (an increase of 47), chapels 1,064 (20 increase) and converts 1,163 (4 increase). Secular priests decreased a little to 4,538, but regular clergy increased by 60 to 2,677.

Infant baptisms advanced from 92,000 to 100,000, and marriages from 40,000 to 43,000 approximately. Schools listed are 55 Direct Grant Schools with 27,000 pupils; 599 Independent Schools with 96,000 pupils, and 1,359 primary and all-age schools with 414,000 pupils. The R.C. slogan of "Once a Catholic, always a Catholic," should, of course, be borne in mind.

D.S.

This Believing World

Headed by the Rev. C. Day, a number of "workers" discussed the "Lord's Prayer" and what it can do for you, on the TV programme the other Sunday. Every word of it came directly from "our Lord," of course, and they all agreed what a wonderful prayer it was. Mr. Day strenuously advised everybody to recite it at least three times a day—like a doctor's prescription, only it was better. No wonder some of our more intelligent Christians view with dismay this kind of ignorant Fundamentalism—which, in any case, has the radio as well as TV in its stranglehold grip.

★

The four workers who thus helped the Rev. C. Day in his wonderful eulogy of the Lord's Prayer came back the week after and gave their experiences in reciting it three or more times every day. One of them enthusiastically pointed out how wonderful was "Thy will be done"—and actually cited the case of the captain of a fishing vessel who in the storm of the week was washed overboard and drowned as an example of God's will! But this particular "Meeting Point" was altogether so silly that words fail us.

★

As every good Christian knows—though millions of them take no notice of it—the Churches of Christ are bitterly opposed to gambling. In fact, we are sure that there must be many thousands of good Methodists (in particular) who look upon Jesus as the Greatest Anti-Gambler that ever lived. In spite of this, it is with the deepest regret we have to record that the Entertainments Committee of St. John's Parish, Eastbourne, invested £40 in Premium Bonds and, horror of horrors! one of the Bonds won £1,000! All good Methodists would immediately have thrown, not only the £1,000 but also the whole of the Premium Bonds, into the fire; but then, thank God, St. John's Parish is not Methodist.

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The money could, of course, be given to the Church Fund, but how can any church profit by such devilish gambling? It would be violently opposed by the wealthier parishioners, who might well refuse to support the church in the future. On the other hand, the money could boost up rock 'n' roll dances in the vestry or church hall, or similar sport direct from the Devil—to say nothing of encouraging the more elderly worshippers in diabolical card-playing, or putting on wicked plays. We could suggest ways of spending the money, but in spite of Jesus as an anti-gambler, we feel that the Committee will hang on to that £1,000 like grim death—and so they ought to.

★

Writing on "Faith in the Future" in the Manchester Guardian for January 1, Mr. Roger Lloyd filled his article with quite a lot about God—what God did, what He thinks, or might do, and so on. It all depends in the ultimate on "the presence of God" which so profoundly moves him. Yet in the same breath he actually talks about "the Biblical legend of the Flood." And not only that—he tells us that the author of Genesis chose "from all the beasts of mythology a snake to deliver the temptation;" thus exposing to his readers almost the unbelief of a blatant Atheist.

★

The truth is that the Flood story was copied from Babylonian fairy tales, and the story of Eve and the Serpent was, as Prof. Fiske pointed out in his *Myths and Myth Makers*, composed "after the Jews had come into close contact with Persian ideas." In any case, it is never again

referred to in the Old Testament—though of course serpents are often mentioned. Mr. Lloyd is a typical example of a man who, throwing overboard key stories in the Bible, still sticks to the Bible God.

★

Whether the Church can or cannot "understand itself" is the theme of a book *The Church's Understanding of Itself* by R. H. T. Thompson, a kind of survey, made in Birmingham, dealing with a Roman Catholic and a Protestant church and two others—one in a middle-class district, the other on a housing estate. The reviewer in the *Times Educational Supplement* finds his "discoveries" very "depressing." It appears that the congregations "are imperfectly acquainted with what they are supposed to believe and still less with the particular qualities of the Christian life." This is bad enough, but they also have "little sense of the fellowship of the Church, of the value of sanctity, and of the more religious aspects of the clergy's task."

★

All this seems incredible considering the way the Churches domineer our daily life, not only in our schools but on the radio and on TV to an enormous extent. But there it is, and the book is not published by addle-headed Free-thinkers, but by the S.C.M. Press, a very Christian body. But Christians can find one fact encouraging—it is that, however little these people know of the Churches themselves, they all do believe in God Almighty and His Saviour Son Christ Jesus. That at least is one comfort to the clergy. If they didn't... but there, we must not dwell on such a dismal, lugubrious, jaundiced, speculation!

Christian Convictions

AFTER a Baptist congregation sponsored a Billy Graham film show at Horfield Prison, Bristol, a convict (John Bernard James Townshend) wrote to them telling of his wondrous conversion to Christ, and 30 of the Baptists decided to become his "pen-pals" for the duration of the sentence assured that their letters and prayers would keep the convert firm in his new-found faith.

Later he was transferred to Dartmoor and explained by letter that this was "because I shall be a good influence and help to break up the Dartmoor prison gangs."

A later letter proved the efficacy of prayer: "I am to be promoted next week to No. 1 waiter. I asked in my prayers that if I was worthy and had pleased Him, that I might be given a chance. And we know the power of prayer, don't we?" Three days after his release he was speaking in Bristol's Whitfield Tabernacle and informing his eager listeners: "I am a brand snatched from the burning. The power of your prayers has helped me to bury my horrible past." Duly impressed at this living testimony of the power of their prayers, the congregation rallied to give the repentant sinner a new start in life. One family gave him lodgings, and the son of the house (Anthony Willmott) spent his life savings to set the convert up in business as a travelling salesman, buying a car and £180 worth of haberdashery.

To prove the worth of Christian redemption, the ex-prisoner lived up to his (Christian) convictions, sold the car and goods and absconded to Ireland—exactly 11 days after his release.

When brought back, a kindly magistrate allowed him a further eight years (preventive detention) in which to further his biblical studies, Lucky man! Who knows what the miraculous power of Christianity might do this time? In eleven days it transposed a convicted convert to a converted convict and back again.

THE FREETHINKER

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Orders for literature should be sent to the Business Manager of the Pioneer Press, 41 Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1.

Details of membership of the National Secular Society may be obtained from the General Secretary, 41 Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C.1. Members and visitors are welcome during normal office hours.

TO CORRESPONDENTS

A. T. GRAHAM.—The age-long dealings of Rome with the Jews is expressed pointedly in the declamation of Anatole France's Colonel: "Wretched men, you have killed my God and now I am going to kill you."

H. GUNASEKERA.—Although only one eleventh of the population, the Catholics already hold one eighth of the schools in Ceylon.

R. WALTER MAYES.—You can join the N.S.S. either directly at Headquarters or through your nearest branch. In either case you have the choice of being as active as you wish, or simply of being a member on the books.

F. BAILEY.—We recognise the unknown but not the Unknowable.

K. O'DARE.—The belief in a "moral purpose" in the universe is a distillate of the supernatural.

Lecture Notices, Etc.

INDOOR

Birmingham Branch N.S.S. (Room 4, 83 Suffolk Street).—Sunday, January 26th, 7 p.m.: D. SHIPPER, "The International Free-thought Scene."

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (Mechanics Institute).—Sunday, January 26th, 7 p.m.: A Lecture.

Bristol Rationalist Group (Co-operative Centre, Prewitt Street).—Wednesday, January 29th, 7.30 p.m.: COLIN MCCALL, "Irrational Intellectuals."

Central London Branch N.S.S. (Laurie Arms, Crawford Place, 5 minutes Edgware Road Tube).—Sunday, January 26th, 7.15 p.m.: A Lecture.

Conway Discussions (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Tuesday, January 28th, 7.15 p.m.: T. S. BOTTOMORE, M.SC., "Law and Order in Society."

Glasgow Secular Society (N.S.S.), (Room 7, Cental Halls, 25 Bath Street).—Sunday, January 26th, 3 p.m.: G. STONE (Editor *Socialist Leader*), "The Decline of Politics."

Leicester Secular Society (75 Humberstone Gate).—Sunday, January 26th, 6.30 p.m.: M. HOOKHAM, "New Classes."

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Wheatshaf Hotel, High Street).—Sunday, January 26th, 7 p.m.: A. BOOSEY, "Faith or Reason?"

Nottingham Cosmopolitan Debating Society (Co-operative Hall, Upper Parliament Street).—Sunday, January 26th, 2.30 p.m.: A. J. BURKETT, "Is the Liberal Party a Fraud?"

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1).—Sunday, January 26th, 11 a.m.: India Independence Day: VADAKKAN V. ALEXANDER, B.A., "Religion and the Secular State in India."

Wales and Western Branch N.S.S. (Bute Town Community Centre, Cardiff).—Tuesday, January 28th, 7 p.m.: COLIN MCCALL, "The Lure of the Mysterious."

OUTDOOR

Edinburgh Branch N.S.S. (The Mound).—Every Sunday afternoon and evening: Messrs. CRONAN, MURRAY and SLEMEN.

London (Tower Hill).—Thursday, 12-2 p.m.: L. EBURY.

Manchester Branch N.S.S. (Deansgate Blitzed Site).—Every weekday, 1 p.m.: Messrs. WOODCOCK, FINKEL, SMITH or CORSAIR.

Sunday, 8 p.m.: Messrs. MILLS, WOODCOCK, SMITH or WOOD.

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead).—Every Sunday, noon: Messrs. L. EBURY and A. ARTHUR.

Nottingham Branch N.S.S. (Old Market Square).—Friday, 1 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

West London Branch N.S.S.—Every Sunday, at the Marble Arch, from 4 p.m.: Messrs. L. EBURY and A. ARTHUR.

The Freethinker Sustentation Fund

PREVIOUSLY acknowledged, £291 3s. 9d.; A. Hancock, 3s.; I. Barr, £1; J. W. M. Ward, 15s.; G. Jekyll (South Africa), 8s.; H. Derrett, 10s.; Wm. Mawhinney, 4s.; Mrs. F. Flanders, 10s.; B. Beckford (Australia), £1 1s.; M. F. Marchlewski, 10s.; Miss L. Pye, 10s.; Robert H. Scott (U.S.A.), £5 10s.; D. Davies, £1; A. D. Hodgkinson, 12s.; R. Stuart, 5s.—Total to date, January 17th, 1958, £304 1s. 9d.

N.S.S. NEW YEAR STATEMENT

THROUGHOUT ITS LONG HISTORY, the National Secular Society has constantly championed the cause of Science and tried to promote the application of scientific principles and habits of thought to every phase of human life.

It therefore acclaims the recent Russian successes in rocket engineering as a magnificent scientific achievement, and as yet one more proof that, when human intelligence is guided by the disciplines of modern scientific method allied to rationally-used material resources and techniques, advances can be made in knowledge which could never attend the religious methods. Prayer and superstition have retarded mankind in the past, and the religious way of thinking, "Only God can make a planet," indefensible on other grounds, now begins to look even empirically false.

We look forward to this year as one of perhaps epoch-making scientific progress, which we trust will be directed to the well-being of mankind.

Notes and News

THOSE who receive letters from the U.S.A. will have noticed the franking marks bearing the words, "Pray for Peace." Praying for peace is a good deal easier than working for it, and one of the great obstacles that workers for peace are meeting at the present time was recently mentioned by Mr. Aneurin Bevan. When in the States, he told us, he was disturbed by the religious approach to politics of Mr. John Foster Dulles and others. So long as leading American politicians think they are engaged in a crusade for Christianity, so long will they endanger peace. What the world wants from its statesmen is a sensible, secular attitude to international problems. It is one of the tragedies of our time that religiosity has overtaken the U.S.A. when its liberal secular heritage was most urgently needed.

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THE General Secretary of the National Secular Society is to take part in a debate at Guy's Hospital on Friday, January 24th, at 5.30 p.m. Mr. McCall will speak to the motion that "This House deplores the power and influence of the Roman Catholic Church." The motion will be opposed by a Jesuit speaker, Father Crehan.

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ANOTHER member of the N.S.S., Mr. James Radford, debated that "The Christian Churches are the enemies of progress" at Slough Public Library on January 3rd. Local papers carried good reports of this debate and a person who was present confirms the view that Mr. Radford gave a very good account of himself. "The Bible"—he said—"was compiled by ignorant and savage people" and "It was amusing to watch Christians of today attempting to apply Christ's 'rigid' preachings to the advances made by science." The motion was defeated, but we are sure that what the *Slough Observer* called "his strongly worded attack on the Churches" will have impressed a good many who read the reports.

My "Curious Capers"

By H. CUTNER

(Concluded from page 23)

WHEN MR. BARBANEL wants to impress us with some miraculous "phenomena," he always says they were done under "strict test conditions," though I have never yet discovered what he means by this. He never tells us. When he wants some wonderful "testimony," he makes big play that this comes from non-Spiritualists. For example, to bolster up his completely untrue statements about Houdini being "psychic," he quotes from a book by Ernst and Carrington, "neither of them Spiritualists," he tells us. Carrington was the sponsor of Eusapia Palladino, one of the most famous of all mediums, and one of the biggest frauds. Hereward Carrington certainly *believed* in spirits and Spiritualism though, of course, he knew a good deal of the fraud behind the "phenomena." Houdini was, according to these writers, "psychic" because he told them he had seen an apparition of his mother when she died. It is a pity that Houdini himself did not clearly tell us that he was "psychic" somewhere in his own numerous books and articles. As I pointed out in my previous article, he had nothing but contempt for all things "psychic," and I have the greatest suspicion of anything emanating from Carrington for reasons clearly given in Joseph Rinn's book, *Sixty Years of Psychical Research*. For at least ten years before his death, Houdini did his utmost to expose not only fraudulent mediums, but also the "genuine" ones, and the reader should get Rinn's book and learn from Houdini's greatest friend what they both discovered in the Spiritualistic world. It is riddled with fraud.

Twenty years or so ago, I had a debate with Mr. Barbanel, and since then he has never ceased to bluster about his great victory over me. I thought his own show so poor that Chapman Cohen decided not to give a notice of it space in these columns—and this still rankles my opponent furiously. One of the statements I made in the debate was that the Fox sisters, the great Pioneers of Modern Spiritualism, were unmitigated frauds; and in Rinn's book will be found their full confessions that this is so. The only way in which these confessions can be met by people like Mr. Barbanel is by claiming that they were got at by priests, or that they were drunk when they confessed. No evidence for this is ever brought forward, of course. But no one who reads the account of the Fox sisters by Frank Podmore in his classic, *Modern Spiritualism*, can fail to see that it did not require any confession to prove how well they bamboozled everybody for over forty years.

In that old debate, I pointed out that one of the "proofs" of "spirits" made by the Fox sisters was that they said a pedlar had been murdered, and his bones could be found in the cellar. Some bones were afterwards found, and I said they were not at all those of a man but probably of a pig; and that no pedlar had ever been murdered, for he turned up very much alive afterwards. Mr. Barbanel could hardly contain his anger at the time and challenged me to prove it—and as he insists that a pedlar was murdered, and his bones were discovered by "raps" in his wonderful "exposé" of me in *Two Worlds*, I am very happy to do so.

First of all, note that the story, as Podmore points out, is *not* mentioned in one of the first accounts of the Fox sisters written by Capron and Barron in 1850, only two years after the alleged murder and just a little bit nearer the time of the Fox sisters than any angry bluster by Mr. Barbanel. Secondly, Podmore says that "the authority alike for the discovery and for the identification of the

teeth and bones appears again to be the Fox family alone." And Podmore adds:

Further, no corroborative evidence of the supposed murder, or even of the existence of the man supposed to have been murdered, was ever obtained. Even Capron, the sympathetic historian of the movement, can only say (in 1855) that the (alleged) discovery of the (possibly) human teeth and bones affords "a shade of circumstantial evidence" for the story.

But, please note, Capron knew nothing of the story in 1850.

The late J. N. Maskelyne, in his book, *The Supernatural* (1891), however, quoting *Humbugs of the World*, said that the Fox story was that the spirit of the murdered man said his murderer was a J. C. Bell, who eventually heard about it, and he "came from a distant part of the country" and swore "that he knew nothing whatever about it." And eventually, "it must have been a terrible blow to the Fox family when the murdered pedlar turned up again alive and well" with "a new assortment of wares to sell." Maskelyne gives more details of these great Pioneers of Spiritualism—but these will, I am certain, never be reproduced, if possible, by Mr. Barbanel for the edification of his readers. What I said in my lecture is very mild stuff in comparison with the contempt the great illusionist poured out on the whole of Spiritualism.

Needless to say, when Mr. Barbanel came to the most fraudulent of modern cases, the notorious R101 airship case, he managed to dismiss it in a few lines with "there are none so blind as those who do not wish to see." I went into the whole question in many articles in these columns, and I assert as strongly as I can, that Mrs. Garrett, the medium, never said anything whatever of "technical information," that all she is *alleged* to have said was "made up" by Harry Price; and that Price himself contemptuously dismissed it later in his book, *In Search for Truth*, with "There is no evidence that it was the discarnate Irwin speaking." (Irwin was the unfortunate commander of the airship, who was killed in the crash.)

Mr. Barbanel ends his fifth article against me with the classic "If this is the best, or the worst, that an arch-enemy of Spiritualism can do, it shows we have nothing to fear." It reminds me of a Spiritualist reviewer of Joseph Rinn's book, who called it "a Damp Squib," the truth being that it is easily one of the most damning attacks on credulity and humbug ever written. This particular reviewer had about as much chance of answering Rinn as Mr. Barbanel would have of answering J. M. Robertson on the problem of Jesus.

Just one more word. My knowledge of Spiritualism is not based entirely on reading about it, but on first-hand experience. I have more than once challenged spirit photographers to take "spirits" with my camera but it was always most instructive to see what they thought when I said it was a modern miniature camera taking 36 negatives on a special film; and that to provide against any "switching," a dozen or so of the frames would be exposed first, and I myself would do the developing, etc.

My lecture to the Marylebone Spiritualist Association proved one thing—that in an ordinary audience of Spiritualists, very few of them know more than a little of the history of their movement, and fewer still appear to have met "an arch-enemy," or could answer him.

And this goes for Mr. Barbanel. In the whole of his blustering in the five articles devoted to "exposing" me, there is not a line disproving my contention that all claims of "survival" are fraudulent.

Further Humanitarian Considerations

By G. I. BENNETT

IN HIS THOUGHTFUL LETTER TO THE FREETHINKER on my article, "A Humanitarian View on Space Travel," Mr. John Thomson, junr., disagrees with me in that, while, as he says, he is opposed to all forms of blood sport, he does condone the experiment of sending a dog up into space. He then proceeds to put three questions to me not very easy to answer, but which I must meet squarely and as honestly as I can. They are (I quote his actual words): "Just how far should one's feeling of compassion for life be allowed to decide whether a person is a humanitarian or no? Must I think it evil to kill a mouse, a rat, or even a house-fly?" And, "Would Mr. Bennett sanction painful experiments on, say, fifty dogs if he was guaranteed a cure for cancer?"

As to the first, I think the best answer I can give is that humanitarianism is not to be defined in hard-and-fast terms. Any person who has qualms about taking life, who is unhappy in the unhappiness of others, who is in anguish in the anguish of others, who feels pain in another's pain, who is moved to pity and succour in the physical or mental distress of another—that person is a humanitarian, greater or lesser according as he or she vicariously suffers, and does something about it where the opportunity for useful action exists. It is really a matter of degree.

Somewhat defectively, I think, humanitarian feeling may be confined to one's fellow-men. I say "somewhat defectively," because such a sympathy for life seems to me to be incomplete, to be lacking in wholeness. Schopenhauer long ago contended that "compassion for animals is intimately connected with goodness of character... and he who is cruel to living creatures cannot be a good man." But it is here that our difficulties begin, because once one admits the claim of life other than human to our consideration, where is one to call a halt to the promptings of—if I may so put it—the humane inner voice?

We have all met the sentimentalist who has inordinate fondness for cats or dogs or horses (or perhaps for them all), but whose sympathies do not extend to less likeable, less aesthetically pleasing creatures, and who possibly cares nothing for his fellow-men. That person is not a humanitarian. A humanitarian cannot be thus partial in his sympathies; he faces the fact that creatures not necessarily likeable, such as the tortoise, the frog, or the humble garden snail, are at least entitled to our humane regard. Thus a Francis of Assisi will move a worm from the path to prevent its getting trodden on; and an Albert Schweitzer will close his window, even though it is warm and airless in the African evening, rather than allow flies to burn themselves against his lamp. And thus—going yet further—a John Cowper Powys will be fearful of reclining on the meadow grass lest he crushes thereby countless minute and unobserved insects. Thus, to an Albert Schweitzer will occur the thought—somehow unwelcome to him—that, in performing his duties as a physician, he is always under the compulsion to destroy wholesale the tiny living organisms or microbes that attack the bodies of his patients. Thus, a Jainist devotee, in obedience to the teaching of his religion, will refrain as far as possible from sexual intercourse with his wife, seeing that with each seminal emission millions of spermatozoa must inevitably perish.

So may compassion for life, pushed to logically inmoderate limits, pass into a sort of mystical reverence, and end in absurdity. I think a sense of proportion is called for. And this is where there arises an important principle enun-

ciated by Schweitzer, which saves even his ethical hypersensitivity from becoming a hopeless impediment to useful living and effective action.

One must never lightly kill or do injury to any living thing, he argues, but one may with justification, where circumstances dictate, sacrifice lower life for the sake of higher life. It therefore becomes legitimate to shoot the tiger that attacks the man; to destroy rabbits that endanger precious food supplies; to fish and shoot in order to support human life, if an alternative adequate vegetarian diet is not available; even (he seems to say) to carry out certain scientific experiments on living animals if there appears no other way of getting at the knowledge that will save human life and health. (Schweitzer, it is to be noted, is at one with his great contemporary, the late Albert Einstein, in being in full sympathy with vegetarianism, although circumstances, he says, have prevented him, as apparently they prevented Einstein, from adhering to it exclusively.)

Having from time to time had occasion to think about the philosophy of compassion for life and its implications, I cannot doubt the soundness of Schweitzer's principle justifying the taking of lower life for higher life. And were necessity to make the unconditional demand, then I would, I believe, sacrifice the less complex to the more complex forms of life. I would kill "a mouse, a rat, or even a house-fly" if I were forced to do by circumstances. I would take the life of an animal, or a number of animals, if regard for human well-being left me no choice. (This, of course, rules out for me space dog experiments, if I may hark back to the subject for a moment, since regard for human well-being in no way dictates them.) But (although this is a question everyone must decide for himself) I personally should feel I was wrong, if not evil, in injuring or destroying the life of anything outside this justification—apart, of course, from putting a suffering creature, beyond human aid, out of its misery: a quite different matter. And I could not support killing merely for sport, such as grouse-shooting, angling, and (worst of all) hare-coursing or hunting of fox, deer, or otter.

This brings me to Mr. Thomson's last question, which perhaps I have answered already by implication. Would I approve of fifty dogs being subjected to painful experiments if I know that this were a certain means of finding a cure for cancer? In a difficult case like this, I think I should be constrained, despite my misgivings (for I should be unhappy to make a decision on the terms that the experiments would be painful), to uphold those experiments. But that question assumes far more certainty of a successful outcome than we are ever likely to feel about such laboratory experiments. It is true I write as a layman with no technical knowledge in these matters; but my reading of the pros and cons of vivisection leads me to suppose that at least half the experiments made on living animals in the biological research laboratories could be dispensed with without any loss or detriment to science. I have in my possession factual literature on the subject which, on a most restrained and moderate estimate, cannot be described as other than disturbing. For my part I should very much like to see a disinterested official inquiry into the practices of vivisection and would favour the suspension of further experiments meanwhile.

But I am, as I say, simply a layman; and although I am genuinely sceptical about the value and usefulness of vivi-

section, I recognise that this is a subject for investigation and report by experts in the physiological field, and by men in full possession of the facts, or with full facilities for obtaining them. I would just add my personal view that many of the ills and ailments that afflict modern man, which after so many years of trials and experiments with vaccines and drugs still seem so insoluble, will finally yield to adjustments in our mode of living and tempo of life, to changes in our environmental conditions, and—perhaps most important of all—to reform in our diet and eating habits.

CORRESPONDENCE

ON CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS

While I agree with A. R. Williams *in principle*, I fail to see how he, or we, can act as he suggests.

The celebration of Christmas is not only the continuation of old pagan customs—it has become a national holiday in our country, and “to avoid it as we should the plague—which it is,” we should have to bury ourselves alive in huts or caves out of the sight or hearing of the rest of our countrymen!

Surely, we Freethinkers can take part and enjoy the annual national festival in a congenial secular atmosphere, unclouded by religious rites and ceremonies.

All my friends are Freethinkers; most of them send cards or gifts or both and I send them some too—why not? Let us make the most of our national holiday without worrying over its mythical name. The names of the days of the months and weeks are equally mythical, but we do not worry over them.

ELLA TWYNAM.

BERKELEY

In his extremely interesting article, “The Problem of Perception,” the Rev. J. L. Broom does not make it all clear what exactly is the position of Berkeley. He lumps Berkeley with Hume and Locke as a “subjective idealist,” and appears to make Berkeley agree with Locke “that we never perceive actual physical objects but only ‘representations’ of them.” If this is so, would he give the exact paragraph from Berkeley which maintains this, with title of work from which it is taken?

H. CUTNER.

RIDICULOUS

Many years ago a popular weekly had for its front cover a cartoon depicting God and Peter at heaven's gate. God, with a large bulbous nose, outside in beards and in a long nightgown, was frowning at Peter, who was of similar appearance. The gate was unhinged and the caption (Peter speaking) read: “It was a woman driver, she knocked it off coming in.”

Mr. Cohen appreciatively referred to this at the time as a sign of the times. It will be an evil day for THE FREETHINKER if it has to play second fiddle to the popular press in matters of this kind at the behest of people like Mr. Thurston. For me to put the words “For the love of Michael” into God's mouth is a good deal less indecorous than His showing his back parts to Moses. The words are infinitely less potentially evil than His injunction “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” I refer Mr. Thurston to Samuel I, Chap. 18, v. 25, and remind him that the Bible is still referred to in a million pulpits as God's Holy Word.

I agree with Mr. Thurston that a function of criticism is elucidation. To this we are indebted for our complete comprehension of the Holy Trinity. I note Mr. Thurston, despite his censure, approves ridicule provided it be ever so polite and dignified,

Mid-Victorian-Parlourish, so to speak! I think in this atomic age the time is past for that in discussing the fraud which is dogmatic Christianity.

Mr. Thurston is curious about my age. I am curious as to his place of residence. Is it in the remains of the Ark, on Mount Ararat? Finally, I suggest he re-read his Nietzsche with due attention to the meaning of words.

G. S. BROWN.

NOISES IN THE DARK

Re the Brains Trust on BBC television on December 29th. I was impressed by the way the Very Reverend Archbishop answered questions put to him. He spoke on the “divinity of Christ,” beliefs held by scientists, and on the origin of the earth. The skill with which he tackled these questions without throwing any light on them was remarkable. Viewers will have been quick to notice that he avoided any reference to the scriptural account of creation. Possibly he thinks that ordinary members of the public do not have such a large capacity for swallowing as Jonah's whale.

A. L. BROWNE.

OBITUARY

WE are deeply sorry to announce the deaths within a few days of each other of Mr. and Mrs. George Royle, of New Zealand, formerly of London, and very good friends of the late Chapman Cohen, THE FREETHINKER and the N.S.S. In New Zealand Mr. Royle did much to combat Roman Catholic claims to educational privileges. He was a lecturer and broadcaster and often wrote Freethought articles and letters to the press. He was—writes Mr. C. E. Ratcliffe—“one of the finest Freethinkers I was fortunate to meet.”

WE regret to report the death at the end of last year of Jack Sharples of Blackburn. Former Secretary of Blackburn Branch N.S.S., he was a well-known and well-liked figure in Lancashire secularism and he was still active when in his 80's. Lately he had been ill and he died at the age of 85.

We send our sincere sympathy to his daughter.

WE have received many letters of tribute to J. F. (Jim) Kirkham, of Toronto, whose murder we reported a few weeks ago. His correspondents were numerous and they revelled in his letters which—as one writer said—bubbled over with wit and humour. All will miss him. But let one of them, Mr. F. E. Papps of Redditch, speak for them all:

“I was deeply shocked and grieved when I read the tragic news of Jim Kirkham. I had had one of his characteristic letters during Christmas week and I was about to reply. I had been in regular and lengthy correspondence with him for a little under a year, and we had discovered that we had much in common. His life as a poor boy and later as a man was closely paralleled by my own. Like myself, he was an old soldier, full of barrack room lore. His education, like mine, had been gained without benefit of schoolteacher, but rather in the realms of literature and the harsh school of experience. His letters, breezy and forthright, and couched in language reminiscent of tough men in tough places, were a joy to read. I shall miss him sorely, although we had never met in the flesh.”

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