

POPULATION WARNING BY FAMILY PLANNING ORGANISATIONS

"The only way of stopping population increase, unless we are all prepared to turn into nuns and monks, is by increasing the use of birth control", Alastair Service, chairman of the Birth Control Campaign, said in London last week. Mr Service, who was speaking at a lunch-time meeting organised by the Family Planning Association, recalled that the FPA advocated a Government policy for the stabilisation of the population of Britain, and that this should not affect the right of individuals to have as many, or as few, children as they want. The BBC also has a population aim which is to persuade the Government to study the problem of Britain's population growth. Mr Service outlined three basic reasons for increasing the use of birth control. First, there was the humane reason of freeing women from the threat of unwanted pregnancies. Secondly, it is demonstrably a saving for the taxpayer, and a benefit for the individual family, if the only children that are born are those who are wanted. And thirdly, all the evidence available demonstrates that the quality of life in this country will be seriously affected if the population continues to grow at the present rate.

More Starving People

Alastair Service went on to say that we should try to see Britain's population problem in a world context. Although it is obvious that our difficulties are likely to be quite different from those of the world as a whole, it is equally clear that the world situation is highly relevant for this country. We import most of our food and raw materials which have become essential to our form of civilised life.

Basically, the world population consists of nearly 500 million well fed, and nearly 2,500 million undernourished, malnourished or actually starving people. In spite of agricultural advances, which have produced increases as high as 25 per cent in some parts of the world, population has overtaken food production increases everywhere. There are today many more starving people in the world than there have ever been before, and, in addition, the known world reserves of raw materials which can be mined or are recoverable will not last beyond the end of this century, even if there increase in their present rate of use.

Let us look at Britain against this world background. Early population figures are very vague estimates, but historians think there were perhaps over a million people in Britain at the time of the Norman conquest. It reached ten million about the time of the first census in 1801. It then doubled in 50 years, and doubled again in 60 years, bringing us up to 40 million in 1911. Since then it has slowed down, and is doubling every 130 years.

So what is all the worry about the British population? First of all there is the question of density. By doubling its population almost twice in the nineteenth century, Britain got a head start on most other countries. The result is that the United Kingdom is one of the most densely populated countries in the world—very roughly twice as thickly peopled as France, Germany or China—while if we take England alone, it is the most densely populated country of any size in Europe. Although the British are not multiplying as fast as they were a century ago, we are still increasing at a rate of nearly a third of a million every year. We will be singularly vulnerable in a world that seems likely to get hungrier.

We shall have ten million more people to house by the end of the century. But where are we going to put all this new housing, particularly in the crowded South East? Three years ago *The Times* reported a speech by Sir Henry Wells, then chairman of the Land Commission. He warned that "pressure on building land would burst through into the green belt and the best agricultural land like a tidal wave; the total needed being of the order of 36,000 acres every year over the next seven years".

Pressure on Land

Thousands of acres are hard to visualise, but what it means is that in the South East we shall have to build over countryside two and a half times the area of Surrey by the end of the century. A few more simple calculations show that the whole country would be one continuous urban area in about 350 years. Any conceivable road network would long before then be jammed solid, and that our diet and the whole way of life would have to be changed beyond recognition.

I am not one of those who look on the situation with despair and foresee either inevitable war or famine, or nightmarish measures by government to enforce a controlled population policy with breeding by licence only. Coercion in this field is abhorrent to me and I feel convinced it is unnecessary. The trend can be halted voluntarily within ten years in Britain, though the problems of most other countries are graver. And it will be the problem of the family planning and birth control organisations to change the present trend.

Mr Service concluded: "I am convinced that we can bring down the birth rate to the replacement level of about 570,000 live births per year, and an average family size of about 2.1. To achieve this we must put across two simplified messages: 'Every child a wanted child' and 'Stop at two'. If these become nationally accepted, and the tendency continues for many women to find satisfaction in their work rather than only in the role of mother, I believe the basic problem of Britain's population increase may be overcome within the next decade".

THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS: EDUCATION OF AN ELITE

MERLE TOLFREE

According to the Report of the Public Schools Commission there are 288 of these super private schools in existence, plus over 1,000 other independent schools and 1850 preparatory schools associated with them. Nearly half a million pupils are in these schools, out of a total school population of 8.3 million. They are of course all fee-paying, except in a very few instances where places are bought by the local education authority for a few children. The fees at Harrow are £762 a year. These top schools are well staffed, the ratio being one teacher to 12 pupils. In State schools it is one to 23. These figures are however to some extent misleading, as classes in secondary schools are sometimes 30 to 40 pupils, the head teacher and other non-teaching members of staff being included in the reckoning.

Eton, with its 1,200 pupils, has 200 staff, i.e. one teacher for every six boys. It would not make much difference to the total picture here if the head teacher were included. A few years ago, a report appeared in the local paper claiming 50 teachers in the music department alone at Harrow School. This was at a time when ordinary State schools were hard put to find one. Many of the 50 were probably part-timers, coming in to take the occasional lesson, but even if the school had only one tenth of that number as full-time teachers, the disproportion would still be extravagant. The public schools can call on highly qualified staff, since they pay them at a higher rate than State teachers. However, according to a recent book on Eton, written by a House Master, although the staff have degrees and doctorates in plenty, they do not seem to have teacher training. Perhaps it isn't necessary. Many of these teachers are themselves public school educated, progressing (if that is the word) from Eton to Oxbridge and back to Eton (or Harrow). They do not mix with teachers from other types of school. The staff and pupils of a public school form a self-contained community.

Sphere of Privilege

The existence of these schools has been worrying the democratic conscience for years. In a period when education for the great majority became free, it was a gross anomaly that wealthy parents should still be able to buy for their offspring a privileged education and an easy way to a top job. Shaw and Wells called for the abolition of these schools as citadels of privilege. The Fleming Committee was set up in 1944, the same year as the Act which regulated State education. This Committee on "The Public Schools and the General Education System" recommended a certain dilution of intake—that 25 per cent of their places should be offered to children from State schools. This was never implemented nationally, and local authorities felt that they would rather spend their money improving the State sector than in sending a tiny minority to these élitist schools where they might learn to despise their fellows.

The Public Schools Commission was initiated by Anthony Crosland in 1965 with the expressed aim of finding a national plan for the integration of the independent schools with the State system. This Commission examined the whole structure and ethos of the system, agreed about its divisive nature, but rejected the idea of complete take-over on the grounds of expense, which they reckoned would have been in the region of £60 million annually. So they came down, like the Fleming Committee, for a policy of gradual evolution over a number of years, sug-

gesting for a start an intake of 50 per cent from the State sector, fee-paying to remain for the rest. In fact, nothing was done to implement this report either, except that it was made more difficult for parents to get tax relief for their sons at school. These schools still enjoy what we are pleased to call charity status, which means that they get remission of half their rates, the tax they should pay on endowed incomes and by their right to regain money covenanted to them. In this way the nation is losing some £6.5 million a year.

Signposts for the Sixties, the Labour Party policy statement, promised to end this sphere of privilege, which Crosland condemned also in his book, *The Future of Socialism*. But action was constantly postponed on the plea of more urgent business. Nevertheless the existence of these schools makes a mockery of the aims of comprehensive education. Moreover they represent a mode of conditioning that helps to cement the stratification of society.

Mystique

J. C. Dancy, the Master of Marlborough and former Headmaster of Lancing, in his book, *The Public Schools and the Future*, says: "Entry to the public schools is still, in a socio-economic sense, exclusive . . . Their segregation is an anachronism and a frivolity which the country cannot afford". The boys themselves, collected together in these semi-monastic institutions, are hardly ever allowed to rub shoulders with children of other classes. Often they do not even play games with them. Eton plays against Harrow, or against Eton Old Boys, but not with the local secondary-mod. The schools are invariably single-sex, and they continue the practice, seemingly accepted by the staff, of "fagging", with its encouragement of domineering, and the use of corporal punishment by the prefects. (Westminster reports that they have abolished punishments of this kind, but this must be unique.) Strange dress customs distinguish the pupils, and the cadets, a preparation for a life of command, are still a feature. The encouragement of the public school mystique goes almost as far as worship, in some cases.

On the question of religion, one must remember that many of these schools have a religious foundation. The Fleming Report says: "Of the 89 Public Schools in England and Wales, all but 12 have definite links with a particular denomination: 63 with the Church of England, six with the Roman Catholic Church, three with the Methodist Conference, three with the Society of Friends, one with Protestant Dissenters and one with the Church of Wales. In 41 schools it is laid down in Statutes or Regulations that the Headmaster shall be a member of the Church of England". (The difference in the total number, 89 here and 288 in the PS Commission Report shows only a difference of categorisation. There is a hierarchy here also.)

Top Jobs

Compulsory religion may be bad enough in State schools. It is much worse in the public schools, with compulsory chapel every day and church twice on Sundays. Moreover the Chaplain is an important figure, preparing the boys

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THE PINNACLE OF ACHIEVEMENT

HYMAN LEVY

Professor Levy, who will soon be 83, had two major operations prior to the illness about which he writes. He is well again, and is working on a new book.

"I have to take down some particulars, Professor", she said gently. "Could you give me your Christian name?" I was in hospital, paralysed from the neck down, but I could think, speak and grin.

"I haven't got one", I replied looking blank.

She looked back in surprise: "You haven't got a Christian name? Then what do they call you?"

"Oh, I see. Chayyim ben Melech Ha'Levy. That's the Hebrew for 'Life the Son of King, the Levite'. It's a mouthful—write just Hyman Levy."

"Ah, so you're a Jew, are you?", and she put pencil to paper.

"Stop, if you're entering my religion, I'm a Methusalite." Again she looked surprised.

"How do you spell it", she asked. I spelt it out for her.

"Do you believe in Jesus?" she enquired gently, as she folded her notes.

"D'you mean that Jewish chap? Do you?"

"Yes", she replied firmly, "I do."

"Ah, then you'll know a good deal about him. You're the very person I'm looking for. What language did he speak? Hebrew or Aramaic? He was a Jew. Did he eat pork or bacon? Tell me. You must know that surely."

"I-I-don't know", she stammered, "you're terribly matter of fact . . ."

The following day as I lay rigid and immobile, and she fed me with a spoon, she asked: "Could you tell me what a Methusalite is?"

"Oh yes", I answered between horizontal gulps. "A Methusalite is a person who tries to live as long as possible. That's why I am here. You are my High Priest. If I survive, a great part of the credit for anything I do after this, is yours. Multiply the number of people you have helped to save, by their later achievements, and take your fraction. That is your contribution to Mankind. Now go and demand a decent salary for your labours, and don't waste your efforts on an old man who isn't likely to survive. You're too valuable."

Cats and Kosher Food

I was a child before the days of electric light and gas mantles. One evening my mother sent me into the sitting room to fetch her "boa", which was lying on the sofa—in the dark. I groped my way towards the spot and at last grasped something soft and fleecy. There was an immediate squawk, and it leapt out of my hands. It was a cat. Utterly shocked, I could not touch a cat for years. When one of my own children later wanted our cat moved from one place to another, before lifting it I covered it with a newspaper. I could have said sharply to myself: "Don't

be a fool, lift the cat". I didn't. The same thing applies to eating pork, bacon, or shell-fish. I could have said to myself: "Don't be a fool. Throw off these old Jewish prejudices, just a you don't mind now boarding a bus on Saturday, or lighting a fire, or tearing paper, or drinking milk after eating non-kosher meat, I've even watched you hesitate about eating buttered bread at the same meal at which you have that non-kosher meat. Don't be a fool, swallow it." And I do.

Except in anger or in panic, reason can bully feelings into submission. Years ago I was a heavy smoker. On one occasion after a bout of coughing I automatically drew the cigarette packet from my pocket, and popped a cigarette into my mouth. With the lighted match in my hand I drew the cigarette out of my mouth and looked at it thoughtfully . . . "No", I said firmly, "Don't be a fool. Don't kid yourself you're going to cut it down, and give it up next week. You'll keep on giving it up." It was Abraham sacrificing his favourite son Isaac, as I, with set jaw, took the whole packet and laid it deliberately on the fire. Reason dictated action, and my desire for smoking was drowned. Reason had again become dominant.

There are certain myths however that are so closely interwoven with our reasoning powers that people slip easily into their acceptance. I could easily illustrate it in connection with so-called *a priori* knowledge in mathematics, but let us take a simpler case. We live in the *now*—always. Our memories are our *now*-thoughts about the past. Our hopes and fears are our *now*-feelings about what the future may reveal. *Nowness* persists and enshrines our identity. We may change, we may learn a nasty lesson, we may become wiser, yet we know inwardly that we are the same person—the same but different. This is a fact about ourselves which we must assimilate. In a way we are a walking contradiction.

"The Miracle"

This sheet of paper has a similar contradiction, but being non-conscious, it need not face it. It is a sheet of paper that will later disintegrate and be transformed to some kind of ash. It remains a sheet of changing paper until that stage. It is we who see its sameness and its difference. We are very conscious of our own sameness, our identity, and only dimly aware of the differences we show. "I'm getting rather absentminded", we admit as we search for the pen we laid down a moment ago when we were writing that vivid story of our childhood. "Perhaps my memory will come back again." How we would laugh if the paper told us that while its physical and chemical make-up might change, its "sheetiness" would go marching on. *Our* feelings are not entangled with its identity as a sheet. It has no brain that can master its non-existent feelings, and say "don't be a fool". But we have. So far all the evidence points to a simple fact that all living matter stems from living matter, and that its next phase is the non-conscious stage. That is a truth about one's identity that one must absorb, just as one accepts gravity. A child has to learn to walk by using many muscles to manipulate gravity. It later forgets gravity and its muscles, and walks in a controlled world. So with the transformation of our identity from the conscious to the non-conscious stage.

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EVENTS

Ashurstwood Abbey Secular Humanism Centre (founded by Jean Straker), between East Grinstead and Forest Row, Sussex. Telephone Forest Row 2589. Meeting every Sunday, 3 p.m.

Humanist Holidays. Annual General Meeting and Reunion, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1, Friday, 7 January, 6.30 p.m.—9 p.m. Refreshments; admission 20p. Ski party to Norway, 26 February for two weeks. Easter at Bristol (no single rooms left). Whitby, Yorkshire, 19 August—2 September. Details: Marjorie Mepham, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey. Telephone 01-642 8796.

The Room, 5 Nelson Road, Greenwich, until 9 January. An exhibition of Paintings by Oswell Blakeston.

London Young Humanists, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London, W8, Sunday, 2 January, 7.30 p.m. A discussion on the future of LYH.

South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1, Sunday, 2 January, 11 a.m. David Tribe: "Humanism and Poetry". Tuesday, 4 January, 7 p.m. Peter Fenwick: "Illusion, Education and the Real World".

NEWS

THE NATIVITY MYTH

On 17 December, at the sixth of the current series of public meetings in London sponsored jointly by the National Secular Society and the *Freethinker*, R. J. Condon spoke on The Nativity Myth.

The word "Christmas", he said, was a contraction of "Christ's Mass", the principal High Mass of the Church in the third century. At that time it did not occur on 25 December, nor was it concerned with the birth of Christ. There was no birth-date for Jesus in the New Testament, a deficiency which the early fathers of the Church did their best to rectify, for at some time or another a date in every month of the year had been put forward. The present date was decreed in the fourth century, mainly with the object of converting the pagans, whose own saviours had all been born on or near 25 December.

"This great holiday had been celebrated for thousands of years before the coming of Christianity", said Mr Condon. "In the calendars of ancient Rome 25 December was called the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun. To early man the sun was the most important object in the universe, for he knew his food supply depended on its continuing to give light and warmth. The sun's decline in late summer and autumn was a time of fear and apprehension. But at last the decline was halted; on 25 December the sun's motion was reversed and it began to climb again. There was no doubt about it, the sun had been reborn and the human race would survive. And thus in every land the sun-god was born on or about 25 December.

"The cult of Isis was the most magnificent and awe-inspiring of all the ancient mysteries. On 25 December there would be featured in the temple of Isis a crib or manger, with a figure of the infant god Horus lying in it, and a statue of his virgin mother Isis standing alongside, rather like the Nativity tableau in a Christian Church. Today the figures have other names, but what is celebrated is still the birth of the sun, symbolised as a baby.

"The Greeks worshiped Isis under the name of Kore. Her great festival was on 6 January, when she gave birth to Dionysus, one of whose names was Ies or Jesus. For 400 years the Greek Church celebrated the Nativity on 6 January, as the Armenian Church still does.

"Another powerful religion was that of the Persian god Mithra, said to have been born of a virgin on 25 December. Shepherds were the first to learn of his birth, just as shepherds were first told of the birth of Jesus. In the Mithraic temple, at sunrise on 25 December, the priest would announce: "The god is born". Then came rejoicing, followed by a meal representing the Last Supper which Mithra ate with his disciples before ascending into heaven.

"All these forms of sun-worship were represented in Rome, where they fitted in well with the Saturnalia, which lasted from 17 to 24 December. During this period slaves and their masters exchanged places, and all manner of licence was permitted. The holiday concluded with a great feast on 25 December, the Brumalia, when presents were exchanged".

Mr Condon showed the audience a copy of an Egyptian Nativity scene dating from about 1700 BC. Found in the Temple of Amen at Luxor, its four sections depict the Annunciation, the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the Birth, and the Adoration of the Magi. At that period the story

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was being told of the first-born sons of the Pharaohs, who were regarded as the incarnate sun. The Persian Zend Avesta, written about 700 BC, also had a tale about wise men being led by a star to the birthplace of a divine king. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were the traditional gifts to the sun-god in Persia. The Magi or Three Kings were actually the stars forming the "belt" of Orion, and the star they saw in the east was Sirius, known as the Herald of the Sun.

In keeping with the general notion of a lowly birthplace for the sun-god, Jesus was born in a stable. This too could be explained astronomically. At one period, the constellation directly under the earth at the winter solstice was Capricorn, the Goat, also known as the Stable of Augeas, whose cleansing was one of the twelve zodiacal Labours of Hercules. Hence the sun was said to have risen from the Stable. The second century Christian father Justin Martyr remarked that Christ was born when the sun had its birth in the Augean Stable, Jesus coming as a second Hercules to cleanse a foul world.

Dealing with Jesus' parentage, Mr Condon said that Mary was both a mother and a virgin, impossible in nature but a familiar idea in mythology. It was probably the Egyptian Isis who most influenced the portrayal of the Virgin Mary in gospel and tradition. The qualities which endeared Mary to the Catholics were the ones which made Isis so popular in Egypt. Both goddesses, as gentle mothers, could intercede with the all-powerful Creator and stern Judge more effectively than their sons. Isis was styled "Our Lady", "Mother of God", "Immaculate Virgin", and other epithets later applied to her Christian counterpart. She was even said to have appeared to her worshippers on rare occasions. In fourth century Alexandria the Temple of Isis and the Church of St Mary stood side by side. The pagans and the Christians used to attend each others services; they knew they were worshipping the same goddess.

"Isis was actually called Meri", said Mr Condon. "The Egyptian counterpart of Joseph, Jesus' foster-father, was Seb, the earth-god. Isis was said to have suckled Horus in the house of Seb. It was Seb who accompanied Isis and the infant Horus when they hid in the marshes until the threat of the serpent Herut was past. Here we have the origin of the unhistorical Massacre of Innocents. Evidently the gospel writer took advantage of the similarity in sound between Herod and Herut to work in this piece of Egyptian mythology. If we prefix "Seb" with "Jo", meaning "god", we get something not far removed from "Joseph".

"Jesus' name has been spelt in numerous ways down the ages. One form, in use as late as the ninth century, was Iu. That was how the Egyptians spelt the name of the god we know as Imhotep. Iu was celebrated for his miraculous cures, and a book of teachings circulated under his name. He was the son of Ptah, called "Father of Fathers", or as we would say, "God the Father". So we find a Jesus, son of God the Father, was known in Egypt long before his namesake turned up in Palestine. It would be an oversimplification to say that the Jesus, Mary and Joseph of the gospels are copies, names and all, of Egyptian deities, but it does appear that the earlier mythology had a greater influence on their shaping than is usually suspected".

Christmas, concluded Mr Condon, was a festival in which everyone Christian or not, could properly join. "At bottom, Christianity is sun-worship, and we are all in one sense or another sun-worshippers".

THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS: EDUCATION OF AN ELITE

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for confirmation, and generally making sure that a Christian outlook is maintained. All this helps in the building up of the school ethos, with its cult of the stiff upper lip, obedience, the glorification of the school and a general lack of a spirit of enquiry. These are the men who, after all, directed the Empire, but when the Empire broke down they found sufficient consolation in the Conservative Party, the judges' bench and big business directorships.

The percentages of top jobs held by public school men are given by Glennerster and Pryke in a Young Fabian pamphlet: 87 per cent of the 1964 Conservative Cabinet; 77 per cent of the 1971 Conservative Cabinet; 70 per cent of ambassadors; 67 per cent of governors of the Bank of England; 75 per cent of Anglican bishops and 77 per cent of directors of large firms.

Moreover nearly half of the last Labour Cabinet were educated at public school, which shows an increase from the 17 per cent of 1924 and 1931. We may be glad that public school men are showing an increasing interest in Labour politics, but this invasion may also account for the incredibly slow progress we make in certain directions. Some people, hearing about what goes on in these schools have wondered why parents should want to subject their children to so much unhappiness, but they must think that the benefits reaped in after years make it all worth while. Unfortunately all these benefits are won at the expense of other people.

The policy of the present administration is to protect these schools. The Direct Grant schools, which are a sort of half-way house to the public schools, have already had the cut in their annual grants restored from £32 to £62 per pupil, which means a cost to public funds of some £2 million. Margaret Thatcher, whose son goes to Harrow, thinks it a wrong principle to interfere with the independence of these schools. Tax relief for parents is again to be introduced.

There is a case for keeping some boarding schools to help children from broken homes, or maladjusted children, or others in need, and there is a case for experimental schools like Summerhill. What is wrong with the present system is that wealth should be able to buy not only a privileged education, but also a place in society. As the latest Fabian pamphlet, *Aspects of Education*, by Harris, Holmes and Wynn, says, "This injustice should be brought to an end and a more equal opportunity given to all".

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Besides abducting her sister from a miserable marriage, flinging herself at the phantom-stocked head of Henry Fuseli (and proposing a *ménage-à-trois* to Mrs Fuseli, who declined), passing the first phase of the French Revolution in central political circles at Paris and then taking refuge from the Terror under the United States nationality of her lover, to whom she meanwhile bore a daughter, travelling rough through Scandinavia, attempting suicide, charming and being charmed by William (*Political Justice*) Godwin, becoming pregnant by Godwin, then marrying him, setting up a sympathetic household in which neither partner would speak severely enough to the landlord to get the sink unstopped, and dying at 38 in giving birth to her second daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft was a more interesting thinker than received opinion allows.

About women she was as trenchant as any latterday women's libertiggibbet. She compared women to officers of the regular army, on the grounds that both were classes of able-bodied people kept in affluent idleness, which, she maintained, produced in both cases the same results: a lack of "any depth of understanding" plus the habit of being "attentive to their persons" and "fond of dancing, crowded rooms, adventures, and ridicule".

Posterity wrongs her, however, if it remembers only *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which she published in 1792, and forgets that in the preceding year she published her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*. She championed women not because she was one but because she was universally on the side of reason and justice. Present-day liberationists are often in no position to think her naïve in declaring that she wrote *The Rights of Woman* through "an affection for the whole human race". At least she wasn't gulled into wasting reformist impetus, negating the justice of her cause and generally serving the Establishment's purposes by playing the Sex-War-Game. She was clear that the enemy was not the male class but those prejudices in "the whole human race" which invent and sustain all class barriers, social or sexual.

It was as a more consistent reasoner and a more radical revolutionist than he that she checkily dedicated *The Rights of Woman* to Talleyrand, pointing out in her preface that the Revolution, having accused the *ancien régime* of unjustly excluding half the population from government on the irrational grounds of social class, framed a new constitution which excluded a different half on grounds of sexual class.

The Terror destroyed, as well as much human life, the Enlightenment's equivalent to the Eden myth, the belief, which still hangs about some humanist discussions, that man needed only to be liberated to prove himself naturally benevolent. Liberating monsters, the Terror put paid to the gigantic act of repression which the Enlightenment had been performing on the irrational content of the human unconscious. While she was suffering this communal disillusionment, Mary Wollstonecraft was also receiving a personal and particular demonstration of the conscious

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reason's impotence to control unconscious forces. Her American lover was tiring of her and was unworthy of her, both of which facts she knew. Obsessively, she plucked at him to draw him back. She was disgusted by her own dependency, but she couldn't argue it away.

She did not live to write formally about her experience on two fronts of the confrontation between rationalism and irrationality. Indeed, the problem was formally insoluble in the absence of an evolutionary theory and its extension, psychoanalysis. But her personality and history bear witness to the response of her energetic imagination. (Imagination is what makes her more interesting than routine Enlightened thinkers; and it was perhaps in sympathy with his imagination that she was infatuated with Fuseli, an artist who, instead of joining in the period's repression of unconscious monstrosities, painted them.) On discovering the inherent destructiveness and obstinacy of human wishes, her first response was the honourable one of obstinately trying (twice) to destroy herself. Surviving, she managed to take the yet more honourable course of remaining susceptible to love and progressive in politics without believing tales on either subject.

On a life so adventurous, ironic and exemplary for the present time, and a personality so generous and attractive, it should be impossible to write a dull book. This new biography is, however, dull enough to be "worthy", without in fact being even "worthy". Its historical perspective is shallow, and it natters at the figure in its foreground. It mentions the ricketiness of Mary Wollstonecraft's syntax but makes blunders on its own account ("this man who . . . they soon detected coming towards them"); it quotes Mary Wollstonecraft's idiosyncratic grammar without comment but adds an unnecessary "*sic*" to spellings of hers, like "desart" for "desert", which were quite orthodox at the time. With a curious incuriosity, it reports that the abducted sister was so terrified during the journey that she "bit her wedding ring to pieces" and fails to speculate whether eighteenth century wedding rings were particularly weak or Wollstonecraft teeth particularly strong. It records without remark that the other sister was called Everina, a name unlisted in the *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Names*. (She was born before Fanny Burney's novel made Evelina popular, so I don't think her name can be a mistake like that whereby Scott created Cedric by probably misreading Cerdic.)

In the pages of this book Mary Wollstonecraft lives only in the quotations. "Now I take all my Gods to witness", Godwin engagingly wrote to her, "that your company infinitely delights me, that I love your imagination, your delicate epicurism, the malicious leer of your eye, in short everything that constitutes the bewitching tout ensemble of the celebrated Mary". Freethinkers must hope for a better memorial to the person who incidentally defined a freethinker (and herself) when she wrote: "The mind must be strong that resolutely forms its own principles: for a kind of intellectual cowardice prevails which makes many men shrink from the task, or only do it by halves".

BRIGID BROPHY

REVIEWS

THE LATE GREAT PLANET EARTH

by Hal Lindsey. Lakeland, 50p.

Relating the apocalyptic content of the Bible to one's own time has been a favourite exegetic guessing-game ever since the best-seller first appeared. *The Late Great Planet Earth*, like all works of this kind, is written from a strictly fundamentalist viewpoint, curtly dismissing the well-established findings of scientific Bible criticism. Much of what purports to be prophesy has been shown from internal evidence to have been written after the events referred to, but Mr Lindsey knows better. He prefers, for example, to believe that Isiah foretold Cyrus of Persia by name some 200 years before that monarch's appearance. With perverse ingenuity, past, present and future events are fitted to selected Bible passages. His book has an air of authority which simple souls will find convincing, particularly where he undertakes to prove that the nations now interesting themselves in the Israeli-Arab conflict are descended from tribes named in prophesy as future belligerents in this area. One detects a fair amount of wishful-thinking here, an assertiveness in marked contrast to the judicious scholarship one finds in the *Encyclopaedia Biblica*.

Every prophesy in the Bible must be literally fulfilled, says the author. And we are going to see some strange happenings. Thus Ezekiel 38 is said to portend an imminent Russian invasion of Israel. But the invaders will all be on horseback (verse 15). One's astonishment is in no way dispelled by Mr Lindsey's assurance that the God-chosen battlefield is ideal cavalry country! Daniel 11 and 12 also foreshadow this, the final world war or Armageddon when, says our author, Jesus Christ will return to earth and save the Israelis by assuming command of their armed forces. All very plausible, only Mr Lindsey has overlooked Daniel 12:1, which names the archangel Michael as the deliverer. The attentive reader will note other examples of the author's eclecticism, particularly in Revelation, here related to modern times in defiance of St John's emphatic and repeated declaration that the fulfilment of his prophecies was already at hand. Language becomes meaningless when "shortly" and "quickly" are made to imply a delay of nearly 2,000 years.

Armageddon is described in all its horrible detail, with a couple of battle plans thrown in for good measure. Like all Christians of his type, Mr Lindsay is utterly incapable of realising the monstrous character he gives his God. In fact he goes out of his way to emphasis that God not only foresaw World War Three, he will make sure it happens. "God will see to it that the river (Euphrates) is dried up so that a trap is set for triggering the last great war of mankind." The drying up will be done by "four vicious, depraved angelic beings" placed there for the purpose by God. A Chinese army of 200 millions will then cross the river, and in the resulting holocaust a third of the world's population will be wiped out. "Man's fate is controlled by God alone".

If Mr Lindsey's thesis is valid, God planned the whole wicked enterprise and boasted about it in his Book. Rationalism, in denying that God ever said or did anything, at least avoids that blasphemy.

R. J. CONDON

THE PINNACLE OF ACHIEVEMENT

(Continued from page 411)

I stress this because I have just had a unique experience. I have risen from the dead—nearly. Doctors had given me up. My brain remained active but I couldn't move a finger or a toe—complete paralysis. Streams of visitors came to see me off! I couldn't shake hands, but I could wink, and I could talk. I even had a long argument about Descartes' philosophy with one of them. I could tell from the length of some faces, and from those I could openly laugh with, which saw the end of consciousness as the pinnacle of life's achievement, and which as a mystical movement of a vanished identity in a terrifying unknown, a ghost groping in nothingness. The latter had not yet mastered gravity, not yet adjusted their feelings to their thinking. They thought they had resolved their contradiction by the word *After-life*, and so they were worried by their own shadow.

Suddenly a "miracle" happened, as one doctor said jocularly. The little finger of my right hand moved. Next morning the other followed suit. In a few days I could grip. In a week I was learning to write, then to walk. Finally, as I waved to the nurses, and tripped warily out of hospital some time later, I suggested to the doctor that if they discovered how to repeat the "miracle" it would become a bit of science, enriched. "Um", he growled, "You're obviously your old self".

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CONSERVATIVE LAWYERS AND OBSCENITY

NIGEL SINNOTT

The recent and much publicised recommendations of the Society of Conservative Lawyers in their report on obscenity and violence, will not, I imagine find much sympathy with readers of the *Freethinker*.

In place of the present obscenity law, which defines obscenity as "tending to deprave and corrupt", the report advocates the creation of two new categories of legal offence: "public indecency", for "material displayed in a public place" that is considered to be "grossly offensive to the public at large", and "obscenity", for less public material, such as books, that either "grossly affronts contemporary standards of decency" or whose dominant, overall theme "appeals to a lewd or filthy interest in sex" or is "repellent". Allowance is made for material produced for the public good, or in the interests of science, art, learning, or of "other matters of general concern".

The most surprising feature of these proposals is that they should come as the opinions of minds trained in law. The existing law is woolly enough, and the report describes it as "virtually unworkable", but the proposed changes strike this writer as being either completely unworkable or very unjust. The imprecision of "tending to deprave and corrupt" is bad enough law, but it does require at least some proof of potential harm. The proposed law may either allow prosecutions to proceed because some extremist pecksniff claims to be "offended", or on the other hand allow the machinery of justice to rest on the fickle and shifting sands of trendy public taste—hardly good law.

The Society of Conservative Lawyers forestall these objections to their proposals by allowing for actions to be brought only with the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions or of a committee appointed by the Home Secretary, and by insisting upon trial by jury where a plea of "Not guilty" is lodged. In the first case it is hard to see how the DPP will have any easier a task in deciding to prosecute under the new law than under the present one, and in the second case, juries in Hampstead and Solihull will tend to have differing tastes, individually and collectively.

The most retrograde step that the report suggests is a proposal to clamp down on private cinema clubs. If tired middle-aged men, and others, want to fork out a subscription to watch "blue films" away from the public gaze, it ill befits the Law to intervene.

Frankly, I am of the opinion that being "affronted" and "offended" is part of the routine inconvenience of being an adult in a civilised democracy, and that private citizens should not expect to be legally blinkered from these emotions, within reason. "One man's meat is another man's poison", and one man's beautiful erotica is another's idea of utter obscenity. The law should leave well alone, except where exploitation is involved, as in the case of actors, who, facing the prospect of increased unemployment, are under tremendous pressures to take on nude scenes against their own preferences.

It is to be hoped that the recommendations of this report will not reach the Statute Book. If they do, the Law will be left holding a tar-baby from which it will only be able to disentangle itself by the expenditure of considerable dignity and public respect.

LETTER

The Road to Peace

I read David Tribe's report on the nuclear disarmament conference (*Freethinker*, 4 December) with interest. The organisers had pressed me to attend but I had refused to do so. The once meaningful and massive peace movement of the 1958-63 days has degenerated into a sad superannuated tea-party for a strange mixture of Marxists and pacifists who have quite lost touch with the realities of their own subject.

When David Tribe writes "the Great Deterrent has in fact deterred" he hits the nail on the head. Essentially the danger of nuclear war passed in 1958 when the Russians put up their first sputnik, but this was not clear until the test case of the Cuban crisis in 1962. The landslide of the nuclear disarmament movement then took place and it disappeared from the political map. The task of trying to recreate it is quite hopeless because the danger has passed. Since 1962 both sides, all sides, have been committed to wars of insurgency and counter-insurgency with new combinations and permutations of conventional weapons and the Great Powers export their militarism to the Third World to provide some *raison d'être* for their armed forces. The last war has been fought in Europe.

In this situation the peace movement either dies out or rethinks its foundations. The present war between India and Pakistan is being waged almost entirely with weapons produced elsewhere and this is true of the war in Vietnam as well. We can't solve the problems of Africa and Asia and they are not, or ought not to be, our business; but at least we could take steps not to make them worse. If world-wide concern was to be expressed and organised to compel a condition of total military withdrawal (men, supplies and training) from the affairs of other countries then we should once again be on the road to peace. If all the Russian, American and British troops were to be pulled out of western continental Europe; if the Americans were to complete their withdrawal from Vietnam; if all government-aided programmes of arms exports were to be stopped and all military training of the nationals of other countries terminated then we should be in a quite different and vastly more hopeful situation.

I think we have to face it that there will be wars and threats of wars for at least a generation in Africa and Asia. Scores of new nation-states have been created in the last few years and they all have military foundations. They will have to suffer the consequences of that, as Europe has done for the last 500 years.

It needs a new kind of association to say this kind of thing. Marxists cannot do it because they believe in power and armies, especially those of the Soviet Union and China. Pacifists put themselves out of court by their all-or-nothing position. Peace will be made by the calculated step-by-step process now made possible for the first time in history by the very development of military technology itself. The weapons of mass destruction now make war unwinnable (because mutually suicidal) between the Great Powers. This provides us with an entirely new basis on which to start our thinking and activity.

What we need now is a new kind of peace movement based on new ideas and new people.

PETER CADOGAN.

LAST WORDS

This is the last issue of the *Freethinker* I shall be editing. I am most grateful to those readers, contributors and others whose patience and kindness have helped me enormously. *Freethinker* editors have to contend with many problems, but are extremely fortunate in two respects: they can rely on the loyal support of the paper's friends, and they can get on with the job without interference from the Board of Secular Society Ltd. and G. W. Foote & Co. My successor, Nigel Sinnott, is very worthy of your support and appreciation. I hope to maintain contact with you through the National Secular Society, and will do everything possible to ensure that every NSS member becomes a *Freethinker* reader.—W.M.