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A BACK VIEW AT CHRISTMAS-TIME

THE FREETHINKER 1882-1972

If, in its long and curious career, this paper is remembered for nothing else, it will at least earn its place in the footnotes of history for the famous—or infamous—Christmas Number of ninety years ago that cost our founder and first editor a year's imprisonment in Holloway for the dreadful crime of blasphemy. Among other delights, the 1882 Christmas Number of *The Freethinker* offered readers a rather clumsy comic strip entitled "A New Life of Christ" (which secured G. W. Foote's conviction), and a somewhat better cartoon, by the same artist, of "Moses Getting a Back View", based, of course, upon Exodus 33: 22-23.—"And it shall come to pass that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and I shall take away my hand, and thou shalt see my back parts." It depicted a rather dozey, gnome-like Moses gazing blearily at a large and heavily patched trousers seat in the sky, with a piece of divine shirt-tail hanging through yet another rent at the base. No doubt a modern cartoonist would be somewhat less decorous!

Outrageous

The Christmas Number of 1882 was *par excellence* the Victorian equivalent of a publication that grossly outraged "contemporary standards of decency accepted by the public at large," a legalism devised not by Foote's prosecutors nor by the Christian bigots who tried their best to suppress *The Freethinker* in its infancy, but by their 'spiritual' heirs and successors, the prime movers of the Longford 'Report' on pornography ninety years later. Times change; but though the weapons and the tactics alter, the lines are still drawn between those who stand for freedom and moral relativism, and those who, whenever they can find the opportunity, will enforce their will upon society at large by suppression and the muzzle.

"Tyranny," said Thomas Paine, "like Hell, is not easily conquered." And it is a liberal superstition to suppose that democracy, freedom and enlightenment, once attained, are self-sustaining and will automatically lead to the promised land on earth. Our own century has witnessed only too many instances of hard-won freedoms swept away overnight by the advent of modern tyrants and totalitarian states.

Prisoners of conscience today

G. W. Foote, in many ways, was fortunate; he rather enjoyed his 'martyrdom' for the causes of rationalist propaganda and the freedom of the press. Others, however, were not so lucky. Thirty years later, the Spanish freethinker Francisco Ferrer was arrested on a trumped-up charge and shot for his opinions. Today, one looks at the state of the world and sees men and women not merely imprisoned for the 'crime' of disagreeing with the received opinions of their governments—left-wingers in Brazil, South Africa, Greece and Turkey; Buddhists in Soviet Central Asia; 'dissident' writers and Zionists in Russia; conscientious objectors in Spain—but often tortured as well.

One of the founding fathers of the United States once said to Thomas Paine: "Where freedom is, there is my

country." Paine thought for a moment, then gave a reply that was characteristic of the man and his outlook: "Where freedom is not, there is mine." That is the spirit upon which this paper was founded, and which it behoves us, who enjoy the right to dissent in Britain today, to remember as we relax, well fed, during the coming bank holiday.

Pioneer of the 'permissive society'

It is tempting to exaggerate the significance of Foote and the 1883 blasphemy trial; nevertheless, his was a worthy shot in a fusillade whose overall effect has been to secure a large measure of freedom for the press and civil rights for atheists, and to create a more humane and rational climate of opinion in this country. Foote and his contemporaries helped pave the way for what is now called, for better or worse, the 'permissive society.' However, whilst we should honour the memory of George William Foote this Christmas, this, in itself, is not enough. The cause of liberty and enlightenment is not advanced by their supporters merely preening themselves on past glories. It is necessary to contend for the future, drawing upon the past for inspiration if need be.

At this time of year the unctuous spokesmen for Universal Love and Absolute Truth will be pronouncing upon this being the season of universal goodwill. Freethinkers, however, should remember that there should, at any time of year, always be two exceptions to the objects of their benevolence: Big Daddy and Big Brother. For Paine also said this: "Where opinions are free, I believe that in the end truth will finally and powerfully prevail." But in the imperfect world of reality tyranny, superstition, cowardice and human stupidity do not evaporate at the touch of a magic wand, and unless those who believe in freedom (in its widest possible sense) are prepared—as were the stalwarts of old—to stand up and be counted, whatever the cost, real truth will not prevail (nor will real love), and our future will retrogress to the nightmare envisaged by Orwell's 1984.

THE FREETHINKER

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The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Editor or the Board.

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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.

Promenade Gallery, Hornsey Central Library, Crouch End, London N8. 16 December—6 January (Sundays excepted): Exhibition of paintings by Oswell Blakeston.

EVENTS

Leicester Secular Society and South Place Ethical Society: no meetings.

Welwyn Garden City Humanist Group. Saturday, 30 December: New Year Party (for details ring Julia van Someren, Welwyn Garden 25901).

AN INTRODUCTION TO SECULAR HUMANISM

by KIT MOUAT

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NEWS

"Let all men speak what they think without being ever branded or punished but for wicked practices, and leaving their speculative opinions to be confuted or approved by whoever pleases; then you are sure to hear the whole truth, and till then but very scantily, or obscurely, if at all."

—John Toland (1670-1722)

THE PRESIDENT'S WITCHDOCTOR

A report in *The Guardian* (12 December) has cast some doubt on President Amin's story that he expelled the Asians from Uganda because God had appeared to him in a dream and told him to do so. Rather, it appears that Idi Amin has been consulting the oracle according to a Ghanaian spiritualist, the Reverend John Obiri Yeboka ("Prophet John"), the founder of the Redeemed Church of Uganda. Even more chilling is the fact that this evangelist apparently has the ear of a number of African heads of state.

It would appear that many African presidents retain the services of a witchdoctor or "big ju-ju man"; nor is this practice confined to that continent. In the New World, for example, President Nixon has the benefit of the personal services of Dr. Billy Graham. There appears to be little evidence, however, that these "spiritual advisers" are of any benefit to humanity at large, and, in the case of Idi Amin, the reverse is very probably the case.

ANCIENT SINS AGAINST GOD

The Catholic Bishop of Salford has recently issued a jeremiad of a pastoral letter entitled "In the Service of Life," which denounces the sins and iniquities of our faithless age. "It seems we cannot learn," says the Bishop. "The catalogue of ancient sins against God must be relived from the womb to the tomb; sterilisation, vasectomy, contraceptives, abortion, violence, drugs and the final indignity of euthanasia."

As might be expected, the Bishop goes gunning for the Abortion Act. "In our own country a law has been passed which sanctions the killing of human life in the womb. Well over 100,000 innocent lives are being sacrificed each year. This is a monstrous sin calling to Heaven for vengeance . . . This evil is only one front of the wide attack on life which advances with paganism. It is the most devastating. It devastates nurses and doctors, violates maternal instincts and turns our best joy bitter."

We like the bit about "calling to Heaven for vengeance." In the old days, of course, Church elders did indeed teach that earthquakes and other natural catastrophes were manifestations of divine punishment. (The Lord's Day Observance Society still does!)

Elsewhere in his pastoral letter the Bishop of Salford says that "Others attack life claiming to save the human family from all sorts of dangers and inconveniences . . . We must use our God-given intelligence to found good families, healthy constitutions, wise economies and the best possible care for the sick, the aged and the lonely. But the fact that we have a degree of intelligence does not mean that God has abdicated His overall care and left us to do what we like with life. The muddle we make of our own affairs should keep us from such blasphemy. So should the

S AND NOTES

memory of Belsen. Any defence of the human family which attacks innocent life is nonsense."

It is all very well for the Bishop to complain of other people's muddlies; but where does one begin with his? Why should a god who (presumably) created the plague bacillus object to man-made horrors? "Sins against God" largely depend on the current fashion in interpretation by capricious believers. At one time the Lord was supposed to object to anaesthetics, but he has subsequently been overruled by commonsense humanity.

We are not impressed, either, by the Bishop shouting "Belsen" as if to lay this atrocity at the feet of unbelievers. The architect of Belsen, Corporal Hitler, was a devout theist, and wrote that when he heard of the declaration of war in 1914, "... in a transport of enthusiasm, I sank down on my knees and thanked Heaven with an overflowing heart."

The official Zagreb Catholic paper *Nedelja* had this to say, without the wisdom of hindsight, on 27 April 1941:

God, who directs the destiny of nations and controls the heart of kings, has given us Ante Pavelic [the Croation Ustashi leader] and moved the leader of a friendly and allied people, Adolf Hitler, to use his victorious troops to disperse our oppressors. . . . Glory be to God, our gratitude to Adolf Hitler, and infinite loyalty to our Poglavnik ["Fuchrer"], Ante Pavelic.

We hate to labour the point further, but in Hitler's Germany abortion (if carried out upon an 'Aryan', at any rate) was a capital offence.

God, in other words, does not provide a realistic answer to any of the practical moral problems that face a struggling humanity, and largely confuses the issue. Contraception, for instance, has immeasurably improved the quality of personal and family life in many countries; the world is a much better place for it unless one believes the theological nonsense about it depriving millions of potential "souls" of arriving to weigh down further the ark of planet Earth, already overloaded with *Homo sapiens*. Unless humanity controls its birth rate and its consumption rate, with planning, rationality and insight, then the forces of nature will remorselessly take over and deprive man of the extraordinary control which he has come to exercise over his death rate. The parable of the loaves and fishes is all very well in the Bible, but in the world of reality we cannot have our cake and eat it.

The Osborn (Missionary) Foundation Ltd., whose praises have so often been sounded in these columns, is now being "investigated" by the Birmingham and Luton police.

THE MAGICAL MIDLANDS

According to Captain Barry Irons of the Church Army, who seems to be worried by the fact, there would appear to be about two dozen witches' covens in the Midlands area around Birmingham. According to the *Church Times* (8 December) a council has been formed under the chairmanship of the Bishop of Aston to cover different forms of social work; also, "It will assist Captain Irons in his fight against witchcraft and black magic." That will have the occultists of Solihull running screaming for the shelter of their pentagrams, to be sure!

Witchcraft will doubtless continue to have an allure for perennial adolescents with a taste for melodrama and exhibitionism, and their suggestible acolytes; but the churches, of course, can also be relied upon to take the whole thing seriously. In their "good old days" the Christians were able to indulge in their charitable hobby of witch-hunting, egged on by unimpeachable scriptural authority: "Thou shall not suffer a witch to live." The fact that they also tortured and put to death a number of "innocent" people in the process has never (as far we are aware) been the subject of any act of public apology or atonement. Now that witchcraft is no longer illegal in this country, all the churches can do is to mutter about evil spirits and rattle their exorcists in the face of this monumental non-problem.

However, we do not wish to be churlish. Having no preference in respect of the claims of either witchcraft or Christianity, we would be pleased to adjudicate at a trial of strength to be held between seven witches and seven exorcists representative of the Christian churches. Cannock Chase at the new moon would be a splendid venue. The rules would be simple: no lethal incantations, all spells to be neutralised after the contest, and no turning the referee into a toad. (On second thoughts, we can forget the last rule: the Editor must be immune to most spells and curses by now.)

TELEVISION APPEARANCE

On a recent visit to Northern Ireland the Ulster-born Vice-President of the National Secular Society, Mr. William Shannon, took part in the television programme *UTV Reports* together with a Catholic priest and a Protestant clergyman.

The Supreme Court of the state of California has ruled that indecent exposure is no more than an "annoyance" and "a public nuisance" and that therefore life imprisonment is both a cruel and unconstitutional punishment for it. (One poor devil has already spent five years in jail for a second offence of this nature!)

FIFTY YEARS AGO

Long before Christianity, as such, saw the light, men worshipped the sun as the god of life. . . . Primitive men saw and felt the sun and recognised its power. They saw him dying at the approach of winter, and watched fearfully his re-appearance at the turn of the year. His victory over the winter cold meant so much to them, there is small wonder that in their ignorance they resorted to charms and spells to help the sun in its recovery to strength, and in their spring, summer, and autumn festivals, celebrated the annual drama that was for ever being performed. There was in all this a germ of poetry and the veiled expression of a truth. But when Christianity came along, and, taking this primitive myth, converted it into a sober account of an alleged historical occurrence, it made the whole thing supremely ridiculous. A god who is literally born as a human baby, who passes through all the phases of babyhood, to be petted, fondled, and even smacked, and then to rise again from the dead in a surreptitious manner, when he might so easily have openly confounded his enemies and proven his power, is an indication of the pitiful level of intellectuality at which Christianity took its rise. No wonder the Christian legislators took steps to prevent by law people laughing at their creed. Those with clear intellects and a sense of humour must laugh at such a creed—unless they are driven to tears at so great a degradation of the human mind.

—Chapman Cohen in *The Freethinker*, 24 December 1922.

FOLLOWING YONDER STAR

R. J. CONDON

The stable of Bethlehem, with its Holy Family, its ox and ass, the adoring Magi and their shining star, has always been the most appealing feature of the gospel story, appreciated as poetry even when its historical truth is no longer acceptable. So far as the Star in the East is concerned, theologians have proved more ready than astronomers to concede its unreality. In 1605 the great Kepler announced that a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn had occurred in 7 B.C., and this was widely accepted as the wonderful star. In 1892 an astronomer named Stockwell argued in favour of the conjunction of Jupiter and Venus in 6 B.C. More recently Biela's Comet has been proposed; with an unusually short periodicity of seven years it could well have been visible at the time of the Nativity, assuming there was such an event. Believing astronomers have never thought it odd that the Star, after travelling westwards to Jerusalem, turned south to Bethlehem and then stood still!

Borrowings from earlier mythology?

Stars heralding the births of gods and great men were a mythological commonplace. The birth of Buddha was said to have been announced in the heavens by the rising of an unusual star, by which wise men known as "holy rishis" were informed of the event. Stars signalled the births of Krishna and Lao-Tsze, and of Moses and Abraham in Jewish legend. The Persian Zend-Avesta, compiled long before the Christian era, attributes a remarkable prophecy to Zoroaster. It reads: "You, my children, shall be the first honoured by the manifestation of that divine person who is to appear in the world. A star shall go before you to conduct you to the place of his nativity, and when you shall find him, present to him your oblations and sacrifices, for he is indeed your lord and an everlasting king."

That the gospel writer knew of this prophecy and applied it to Jesus is likely enough, but there is a parallel to the story of the Magi in Roman history which may have suggested some of the details in the Matthew version of the legend. Pliny, in his *Natural History*, mentions that the Parthian king Tiridates, attended by Magi, paid a visit to Nero. Dio Cassius, writing about 220 A.D., adds the following: "Tiridates . . . was driven in the chariot which Nero had sent to him . . . And bending his knee to the earth and lifting his hands, he called him [Nero] his lord and worshipped him . . . For he spoke thus: 'I, my lord, . . . am thy slave. And I am come to thee as to my God, worshipping thee, even as Mithras . . .' But Tiridates did not travel back by the way he had come . . ." (compare Matthew 2 : 1-12). Since the first two chapters of Matthew are generally acknowledged to be late additions to the gospel, direct borrowing from Dio Cassius cannot be ruled out; more probably both the historian and deuterom-Matthew drew from an earlier account no longer extant.

The Massacre of the Innocents

When the Magi arrived, neither Herod nor "all Jerusalem" knew anything of the birth of Jesus, although according to Luke 2 : 15-17 shepherds from Bethlehem, five miles away, had been busy spreading the news. Herod's reaction to the inquiry: "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" was to order the killing of all the infants—of both sexes apparently—in and around Bethlehem, an atrocity which would have been avoided had the Star conducted the Magi directly to the birthplace. Josephus, who records the many misdeeds of Herod, omits this, by far the worst of them. The Massacre of Innocents is of

course unhistorical; its Old Testament prototype is Exodus 1 : 15-22. The gospel writer may also have known the tradition preserved in Josephus (*Antiquities* 2 : 9 : 2) that Pharaoh gave the command to kill the Israelites' male children after a scribe had predicted the birth of a boy who would one day become dangerous to him. Both 'massacres' are variations of what has been termed "the myth of the dangerous child." Krishna and Jason survived similar holocausts, and tradition has it that the life of the infant Abraham was sought by King Nimrod, who had all the children of Babylonia slaughtered as the result of a prophecy that a rival would be born there.

Roman history records a threatened "massacre of innocents" shortly before the Christian era. Suetonius, in his *Life of Augustus*, says: "Julius Marathus tells us that a few months before the birth of Augustus a prodigy occurred in a public place at Rome, whereby the announcement was made that Nature was to present the Roman people with a king, whereupon the Senate, being alarmed, decided that no child born in this year might be brought up. But those whose wives were with child, since each one of them applied the hope to his own case, took care that the Senate's decision should not acquire the force of law." Suetonius also relates that Augustus's mother Atia, before conceiving him, dreamed she was visited by Apollo in the shape of a serpent, as a result of which Augustus was reputed to be a son of the god.

The 'saviour' Augustus

There is a strong presumption that whoever inserted the birth story in Luke's gospel—like Matthew it originally began with the third chapter—made use of phrases from inscriptions announcing the salvation brought to the world by the birth of Augustus, during whose reign Jesus is said to have been born. One, from Prieune in Asia Minor, reads: "Now, when that Providence which guides all things in our life reawakened emulation and zeal, and conferred on our life the most perfect ornament by granting to us Augustus, and for the well-being of mankind (to men a good pleasure) filled him with virtue and sent him to us and to our offspring to be a saviour, destined to make every war to cease . . . the birthday of this god is become the beginning of glad tidings regarding him for the world . . ." Many such inscriptions have been found, and the wording is much the same in all. One from Halicarnassus calls Augustus "the saviour of the whole human race . . . for peace prevails on earth . . ."

Fortunately for biblical research, the Church Fathers, relying on human credulity, never thought it necessary to destroy this damning historical material.

THE LONGFORD THREAT TO FREEDOM

by BRIGID BROPHY

FOREWORD: Barbara Smoker

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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

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THE DICKENSIAN CHRISTMAS

PETER CROMMELIN

For more than a hundred years the genial humour and humanism of Charles Dickens (1812-1870) has contributed much to the festivity of an English Christmas. It is for this reason that I have selected 25 December as the best day in the year for celebrating the coming of Dickens into the world. Having recently read *The Misery of Christianity* (a plea for a humanity without God) by Joachim Kahl, I have come to the conclusion that the coming of Dickens is worthy of joyful celebration.

The joy of Christmas may come to be associated more with the death of the Christian faith rather than with its apparent survival in an unbelieving world. The Dickensian point of view is essentially that of a good-tempered humanist living in what purports to be a Christian community and making the best of it, without much inner conviction that Christianity is really contributing anything worth having to the better distribution of health and happiness here on earth. The strategic genius of Dickens enabled him to avoid any direct confrontation either with science or theology, but he demonstrates fairly convincingly that the human individual can and must be able to live his or her own life without too much dependence on any external. As science and theology must inevitably be external to the individual, they only appear as shadows from the Dickensian point of view.

Dickens makes no attempt to see anything from a purely scientific or from a purely theological point of view. He always tries to see things from the human point of view, and that means in fact from the point of view of a specific individual in one particular and well defined set of circumstances. If there is a god in Dickens it is not the God of Christian theology; and if there is atheism in Dickens it is not the kind of atheism that might result from over-absorption in physics or chemistry.

Natural genius

Dickens was no philanthropist; he was a professional writer who achieved wealth and fame in the full exploitation of his natural genius. More than a hundred years after his death, a multitude of readers have cause to be glad that he did not fail in his self-appointed task of making a genuine contribution to the literature of humanity. I do not say that this is more important than the literature of science or the literature of philosophy, but it is *equally* important.

Dickens was the greatest comic writer of all times, but like all masters of comedy was well aware that life is not all fun and games. Even now, Dickensian poverty has not been totally extinguished by Social Security. The nastier characters created by Dickens can still be found from time to time in public positions and institutions; they may be a bit of a joke, but rather a poor joke as far as their victims are concerned. The "Guilty Governments" who contributed to the conversion of Scrooge were not perhaps entirely figments of the Dickensian imagination.

As a secular humanist, however, Dickens was not infallible. He makes Scrooge celebrate his conversion to humanity by going to church on Christmas morning: that was a mistake. In vulgar parlance, "He didn't ought to 've done that." Going to church as a duty creates an unpleasant smell of cant, hypocrisy, and humbug. Dickens and Scrooge shared the same hatred of "humbug". So going to church is certainly not necessary to the celebration of a Dickens Christmas.

Nor is the eating of meat. When one thinks of the millions of living organisms that are maltreated from the moment of birth to the moment of death simply to provide nourishment for the human species, one begins to feel that far more encouragement should be given to the vegetarian habit. By eating meat I deprive myself to some extent of the right to protest against the vicious cruelty of those who spend their working life in torturing living organisms for the cause of scientific research. The end desired is excellent; the means employed are a disgrace to human nature, and are for this reason a crime against humanity. A similar crime against humanity is committed by those who torture the human organism in order to induce total submission to some form of military or political dictatorship. If by eating meat we place ourselves on the same moral level as cannibals, torturers or murderers, then it is high time that we all became vegetarians.

I am very glad that the ethical objections to the eating of meat do not apply to the drinking of alcohol. Beers, wines and spirits are all much more conducive to human happiness than the eating of meat, and are much less costly in terms of animal suffering. It would be difficult to imagine the celebration of a Dickens festival with nothing stronger to drink than milk and water.

Dickens, the Bible and Shakespeare

The greatness of Charles Dickens can only be measured by comparison and contrast with such literary entities as the Bible and Shakespeare. The Bible is sometimes called "The Good Book": it presents the human race as something which, apart from a Chosen Few, is fit only for eternal damnation. God, we are assured again and again, will have no mercy on his enemies.

The morality of Shakespeare is better than that of the Bible but not so good as Dickens. For Shakespeare, all the world is a stage, and men and women are merely acting out a play that is not of their own making. This really is a most unsatisfactory concept of the real world. A good man is something much more important than a good actor, and a bad man is something infinitely worse than a bad actor. A novel, no doubt, is a sort of stage but is one in which the author can be much more true to life and down to earth than one who works within the narrow conventions of the theatre. Certainly the novels of Dickens have done much more to stimulate the social conscience than the plays of Shakespeare.

The works of Dickens (not excluding his history of England for children) are the written record of his own personal genius. They also provide a unique course of study in the art and science of being human. That I take to be the essence of all that we call secular humanism.

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BOOKS

LEWD, BLASPHEMOUS AND OBSCENE

by Arthur Calder-Marshall. Hutchinson, £2.75.

In the wake of the Oz trial, Mr. Calder-Marshall has attempted to set out a few of the historical precedents both for the boldness of the martyrs and the folly of the prosecution. He does so not because he agrees with the sentiments expressed but because he believes in the right of all men to publish their views irrespective of social, political, or police restraint.

The gallery of martyrs chosen contains William Hone (tried for his blasphemous *Parodies* in 1817), Richard Carlile (imprisoned for publishing Paine's *Age of Reason* in 1819), G. J. Holyoake (accused of wishing to put God on half-pay in 1842), G. W. Foote (goaled for his comic "Bible Sketches" in *The Freethinker*, 1883) and George Bedborough (convicted of selling Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion*, 1898). Charles Bradlaugh is also thrown in for good measure.

Undoubtedly the final chapter on Ellis is the best, and the earlier sections on Carlile, Holyoake and Foote seem shallow in comparison. One theme runs throughout. The author has little sympathy for the characters he is writing about: Ellis is a coward; Hone, a bore whose trial was enlivened only by the folly of his judges; Carlile appears as a rather despicable self-made martyr who sought importance through imprisonment; Holyoake is a stubborn prig, led astray by Carlile; Foote is a schemer, courting prison as the qualification to succeed Bradlaugh at the National Secular Society.

These interpretations are interesting, to say the least, and bring out one aspect of the heroes of freethought which has sometimes been neglected. In this respect the book is of value and Mr. Calder-Marshall is as entitled to his opinions as anyone else, but we might allow more weight to his assessment if his scholarship were more sound. The Havelock Ellis chapter is the best because it is based on a thorough study of the historical materials, which the author undertook *after* he had written his earlier *Life of Havelock Ellis* because a producer was interested in making a film about Ellis. The lack of original research is readily apparent in the rest of the book, particularly in the treatment of Carlile, Holyoake and Foote.

Because there are few source references one cannot check the details Mr. Calder-Marshall has supplied, but often they are at variance with what is plainly set out in other evidence not, apparently, consulted for this book. Like G. J. Holyoake, Mr. Calder-Marshall is better for a good story than for good history, and like his worthy subject he sometimes cannot tell the difference between the two: Edward Aveling did not leave the N.S.S.—Bradlaugh gave him Hobson's Choice; Holyoake did not publish the Knowlton Pamphlet—he sold it for James Watson, and the plates passed directly to Charles Watts in 1874 on Watson's death; Holyoake and M. Q. Ryall were not in on the *Oracle of Reason* from the beginning, as a glance at the Holyoake Papers will show; the London Secular Society was founded under the presidency of James Watson in 1853, not Holyoake in 1855; the word Secularist was coined in 1851, not 1846. So one might go on.

The errors which can be detected throw the soundness of the whole book into question, added to which are a more-than-permissible number of careless errors: Carlile becomes Carlisle at one point; Frederick Hollick appears as Hollins throughout; and Bradlaugh's Northampton is

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miraculously moved to Nottingham. All this is a pity. The book is a good idea, marred by poor scholarship and presentation. The general reader is entitled to historical works which he can trust, but he would have to know of all the pitfalls in advance before he could make use of this one.

EDWARD ROYLE

THE DESCENT OF WOMAN by Elaine Morgan.
Souvenir Press, £2.50.

Mankind differs from the living apes in a number of essential ways. A few of these are physical, such as the upright posture, striding gait, increase of brain and decrease of dependence on teeth and muscle to make a success of living. Some others—relative hairlessness (and then what there is of it mainly confined to the head), the possession of large breasts, more ventrally-situated genitalia and their more highly-developed subcutaneous fat-layer in the females, while equally distinctive, are much less obviously adaptive to a terrestrial way of life, as opposed to the arboreal. Added to these are the relatively more carnivorous food-habits, the ability to make and use tools and the development of articulate speech, instead of gesture and signs, for communication.

Mrs. Morgan complains that all previous theories about the process of human evolution have been androcentric—regarding man (to the exclusion of woman) as the sole innovator. Without herself flying to the opposite extreme of gynaeocentricity, she would here set the account straight by assigning to womankind (as if it were perfectly obvious!) a fair share in evolutionary steps towards our common humanity.

To do so, she adopts a hypothetical aquatic stage representing an early stage in our differentiation from the apes—a possibility first proposed by Sir Alister Hardy in 1960, which has since been largely ignored by specialists in the study of human evolution. This hypothesis proposes that, faced with some millions of years of continental aridity in the Pliocene, which greatly reduced the availability of forest habitats for developing African apes, some direct lineal ancestors of the Hominidae took to beachcombing and a shallow-water marine refuge from predators. This environment would favour an erect posture (to keep the head above water) an adipose layer (for streamlining and insulation), hair on the head only and prominent breasts (to afford handholds for young dependent on their mother while immersed). She similarly cites the secretion of salt tears (for osmotic adjustment), the development of speech in a situation where bodily gestures and facial expression would be inadequate for communication and improved manipulation and pebble-tool manufacture in the preparation of shellfish and crustaceans for consumption. The features of hairless skin, prominent breasts and even tool-using to break clam-shells are shared, among mammals, only by those (whale, sea-cows and sea-otters, respectively) which have once turned from the land to a marine habitat. According to Mrs. Morgan, only man (and woman!) seem to have *re-turned*, after such an episode, to a land-life.

The amassing of so many well-researched comparisons (of which the above are only a selection) makes out an astonishingly convincing case for the pioneering enterprise

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of woman. Enticing as is the idea, however, the evidence adduced is all circumstantial. The known fossil record affords no single positive clue to its truth—nor, indeed, any conclusive negative! For scientists depending upon concrete evidence, anything as yet so little susceptible whether to proof or to disproof must inevitably remain, practically unregarded, in the 'suspense-account.' It need not so remain for ever. A single find in a sea-cave, with evidence of tool-making and remains of sea-food, of a primitive Hominoid of pre-Australopithecine morphology and Pliocene date would put this theory firmly into the field of probabilities, instead of its remaining only an attractive, but unproven, possibility. One thinks, in comparison, of Wegener's Continental Drift theory, propounded in 1915 but only rendered generally acceptable in 1964 by refinements on palaeomagnetic studies and improved radiometric dating-techniques. So far the Pliocene environments of Africa are too little known to afford much support.

This well-argued case, skilfully and wittily—indeed, racily—presented, deserves to provoke considerable thought and discussion among specialists, particularly on its behavioural side. Like the works of Desmond Morris, Konrad Lorenz and Robert Ardrey it will additionally entertain a wide general public. Mrs. Morgan has faithfully 'done her homework' in reading an enormous specialist literature before introducing her own pet theories, so that there are none of the glaring inconsistencies with known facts which 'amateur' theories so often exhibit. She is, in fact, no mere amateur, but a considerable scholar, and deserves scholars' serious consideration.

As she herself admits, the picture may change almost overnight, with new discoveries being announced faster than they can properly be studied. *Australopithecus*, in Ethiopia and northern Kenya, is now known to occur as early as 4 million years before present, well back in the Pliocene and a long way inland! Who knows what may next emerge?

I. W. CORNWALL

BEYOND SCIENCE by Denis Alexander.
Lion Publishing, £1.95.

The first chapter of this book gives the impression that it is a serious work concerned with exploring the extent to which both scientists and laymen are becoming alarmed by some of the more radical trends in research. However, turn to the last chapter and it will be found that a remarkable transformation has taken place, and a work which commenced life on a high note has descended to the depths of the crudest of evangelical Christian apologetics.

There is an artificial quality about *Beyond Science* which gives to the title rather a different meaning than than envisaged by the author; for soon after the first chapter he is found to be not so much concerned with science as with making an effort to drag in the terms god, soul, free will and "the biblical concept of God" (this phrase he really likes and frequently has resort to it), none of which have anything to do with science, as the author is eventually forced to admit, although quickly going on to claim that science can provide no data bearing on the existence or otherwise of a deity. But science does provide information on this, in fact a branch of science known as

anthropology shows us how the god theory arose, and indicates that it was nothing more than a product of the imagination of primitive men which later philosophers and theologians have sought to clothe with sophisticated but superficial arguments. Put another way, the god concept began life as a "scientific" explanation to account for man and his world, but which later research has shown to be false; however, like a number of other discredited theories it still has some supporters.

When it comes to Christianity, Dr. Alexander writes as though no one had ever criticised the New Testament; but in case his uncritical attitude is not accepted at face value he refers to a book on the New Testament by an obscure theological professor as having all the answers; however, anyone who reads the book in question will find it possibly the most poorly researched work of its type and without question the most misleading. In fact the impression this part of *Beyond Science* gives is that of one of those little tracts so loved by evangelicals, except in this case that it is rather more padded out.

Dr. Alexander informs us that science has its roots in Christianity and is also nourished from that source. It almost goes without saying that no mention is made of the long series of disputes between science and the Church, nor does Dr. Alexander consider it worthy of recalling that the era in which the Royal Society was founded was one in which scepticism was rife, and the history of science since then shows it to have flourished best when religion became weak. You will search in vain in this work for references to the treatment of Galileo and Buffon, Bruno and Servetus: these scientists found to their cost just what the encouragement given by the Church to science really meant in practice. It was never the sceptic and unbeliever who persecuted the scientist or made him interpret his discoveries in accordance with biblical claims, and Dr. Alexander knows this is true; it is a great pity that he lacks the courage to admit it. As a serious contribution to the discussion on the impact of science on society, and society's reaction, this book has little if any value.

R. W. MORRELL

LETTERS

Commercialised Carols

Carolling at Christmas is remembered by many as a friendly act, bringing much pleasure and good cheer. Lately it has become something entirely different here, owing to the greedy activity of a religious sect which uses it strictly for profit.

After dark, a sound truck is parked in the better neighbourhoods, usually where it is not too conspicuous. At a given signal, Christmas carols of young voices on tapes or records ring out loud and clear. As this loudspeaker music begins, well-dressed and personable young men and women at both ends of the block hurry from house to house ringing doorbells.

When occupants answer the bell they are greeted by some such phrase as "Would you like to contribute to our Christmas music?" or, "Will you please contribute to our church? We only ask once each year." Full of the Christmas spirit, and thinking there really are young carollers in the vicinity, housewives may donate generously. The sound truck is then quickly moved to another block, the music started again, and the money-collecting process repeated as quickly as possible.

This deceptive carolling-and-begging racket has been worked each year by members of the Seventh-Day Adventist organisation. They are the ones who have continually prayed for, hoped for, and falsely predicted the "soon coming" of the end of the world for the last 125 years! I have personally witnessed this carolling act in three different cities, and Protestant ministers have told me that the Adventists work it all over the world. They have averaged well over \$7 million from such campaigns each year.

Honolulu, Hawaii, U.S.A.

WILLARD E. EDWARDS.

Plymouth Secularists?

What Michael Lloyd-Jones is really saying in his review (9 December) of *Wider Horizons* is that he wants to deny the Christian minority in our state schools today—it is a minority, and a shrinking one—any opportunity to express their point of view. This, to me, is authoritarianism, not humanism.

The dishonesty of compulsory religious education and assembly is no argument against openness in the way a school is run. Of course, worship is 'out' in assembly as it is an intolerable attempt to foist ideas on young minds—it does not work in this but it does produce moral confusion.

I am sometimes struck by the chilling thought that some secularists want compulsory secularism. If that is so, then the rigid righteousness among secularists will end up as socially insignificant as the Plymouth Brethren. The future lies with openness, and the struggle for a valid consensus, not with narrowness and overweening 'certainty'.
JAMES HEMMING.

Sexual Exploitation of Young People

It is correct to say, as Mr. Parker does (letters, 9 December), that Colin Wilson does not believe that it is worth doing anything to try to arrest pornography. However, at least I have got him to admit that it is "infantile, nasty and vicious", and also that it can possibly cause harm. He even admits that a book of his own, which was found in the den of a murderer, may have contributed to this man's impulses to act out his unconscious phantasies.

To admit that something is harmful, but to refuse to do anything about it, would seem to me a contradiction in terms, especially if, as Colin Wilson does, one adopts an existentialist position, concerned with man's freedom and intentionality. For one man to exploit the deepest emotions of another, or to degrade a woman by sexual exhibitionism of a 'visual rape' kind, seems to me to be a gross abuse of freedom, in Roger Poole's terms ("to insult the body is to insult the freedom within it"). Not to act against such dehumanisation is to fall into 'anomie', yet *anomie* has now overtaken the humanist and rationalist movement in Britain today.

As usual, you are on the wrong side over the dirty-minded 'pop' song "My Ding-a-Ling". I heard from a distinguished ex-B.B.C. producer, Mrs. Eileen Molony, that she was appalled to see the television cameramen pan the lens on to the faces of the less sophisticated girls, who were encouraged to sing, somewhat unwillingly, the verse about "I want you to play with my ding-a-ling"—the implication being that if you do not want to, you must be playing with your own.

Adolescents are most sensitive about masturbation, and it is cruel to submit them to such public humiliation. Mrs. Molony said she felt "Here was corruption going on in front of me", as young people were persuaded to utter crudities by a kind of blackmail; for if they did not, they would be thought prudish. Yet the impulse behind this is money-making: how foul! As William and Claire Russell say in their book *Human Behaviour*, "The best way to cramp another person's sexual style is to arouse their masturbation phantasies." Yet *The Freethinker* does not attack the crude brutes of television, but those who protest against it. We are not to have anything 'inflicted on us' by the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association; but anything the 'pop' merchant wants to sell youth is sacrosanct, from the sounds of orgasm in "Je t'aime", to titillating songs about masturbation.

I have little time for Mrs. Whitehouse; but the posture among 'progressives' of approval of the exploitation of sex, at any cost, among young people would sicken even the men with whom I spent time in the barrack-room during the war. They would be enraged, despite their own flow of language, at the present corruption of youth. Why in heaven's name should 'rationalism' and 'secularism' approve of getting at poor embarrassed girls in such painful ways in public? Mrs. Molony saw it as yet another attack on the dignity of woman, and so do I.

DAVID HOLBROOK.

The Editor comments:

As I did not see the television show to which Mr. Holbrook alludes, I offer no opinion upon it at this stage. My objection (*Freethinker*, 9 December) was to the *song* being taken off by the B.B.C.; I was not giving blanket approval of any way in which it may have been presented visually.

Censorship and Pornography

Throughout the recent argument about censorship, one vital distinction has continually been blurred. It is, on the face of it,

likely that pornography will encourage its readers to indulge in the practices it describes. Sexual pornography may therefore lead to more sexual freedom. Who, as a freethinker, would be worried by that? But the pornography of violence may similarly induce its readers to commit acts of violence, which, of course, are almost bound to be anti-social. It is notable how those against censorship tend to skate clear of this subject, while some of those for censorship quickly bring the question round to the subject of violence, as it is obviously one where they can anticipate considerable support.

It may be that books or other media which give lurid descriptions of people enjoying beating-up or torturing others, do not in fact tempt anyone to do the same. (I refer, for instance, to books like *Skinhead* and *Suedehead*, which are clearly aimed at that sort of teenager.) But while we do not know whether they have this effect, would it not be more honest for those against censorship to admit that it is a difficulty in their case?
NICHOLAS REED.

This reader of *The Freethinker* is far from tired of David Holbrook. He is not only the sole anti-'porn' crusader to take an interest in this paper, but at the same time is that movement's most articulate spokesman. I disagree with nearly everything he says on this subject, but at least he relieves the incestuous atmosphere of the correspondence columns without being a drivelling fanatic.

Mr. Holbrook's letter of 25 November is concerned with two questions: is pornography harmful? And if so, should harmful literature be banned? His quotations affirm that pornography is "nasty, infantile and vicious" (Colin Wilson) and "could damage health" (*B.M.J.*); and he says that he has tried to demonstrate that it "has elements in it of sadism, and a schizoid reduction of human attitudes which menaces healthy sexuality with distortion and even forms of crippled limitation." These are all opinions, and incidentally have all been held about Christianity; and after reading Alex Comfort's *The Anxiety Makers* I have small confidence in the *B.M.J.*'s observations on sexual matters.

I like 'porn', and it fulfils a legitimate function in my life as an occasional entertainment. I cannot make much sense of distinctions between pornography and eroticism, or healthy and unhealthy sex, and I believe that the distinctions are drawn only to have an identifiable target. 'Porn' will continue to be a target until enough people raise their voices in its defence. Take homosexuality: it arouses furious disgust. Every argument of social hygiene (based on a heterosexual bias) militates against it; but once enough people have the courage to demand the right to live and love freely in any way (in the absence of proof of harm to others) the disgust ebbs and the arguments are exposed as flimsy rationalisations.

If pornography is harmful, should it be banned? Holbrook asks who would give *Der Stuermer* complete freedom.—I would. If Streicher was dangerous it could only be because he exploited real fears and desires; and the right response to a *Stuermer* would not be to suppress it, but to counter it with a programme of public education. The harm—and good—that any publication does can never be more than probable; and how much has pornography ever been tested for its good effects? How many people have been forced by *Der Stuermer* to face their own anti-Semitism and disown it? How many people have had my experience, during that extraordinary film, *The Wild Bunch*, of revulsion against blood and destruction enjoyed for their own sakes.

Pornography lacks friends because to admit that you like it brands you as a pervert and rules your evidence out of court, so that even its consumers deny it thrice, and try to pretend that it is something else, while its half-hearted liberal defenders make obligatory disavowals of personal interest. However, 'porn' will always survive, in spite of prohibition, because if you cannot buy it you can always think it up yourself; I have seen few productions which did not already exist in my imagination. The shock of pornography is the shock of recognition.

MARTIN CAVENDISH.

Many Forms of Exploitation

David Holbrook (letters, 9 December) seems unable to appreciate that one can be concerned about the harmful exploitation of both sex and censorship in our culture. Does Mr. Holbrook not see the need to preserve a freedom which allows publication of his passionate writings against the exploiters and in defence of the exploited? Are there not many forms of exploitation in our society? Surely, freethinkers have good reason to campaign for free criticism, rather than censorship, as the way to cultural, and individual, freedom.
CHARLES BYASS.