



Francis Neilson

THE CULTURAL TRADITION AND OTHER ESSAYS, by Francis Neilson, Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, New York. 1957. 228 pages. \$4.00

Reviewed by MARSHALL CRANE

IT is much too late to introduce the author of this little volume to the readers of *The Henry George News* but, not too late to call one of his works to their attention.

We have here a collection of fifteen essays of average length but decidedly more than average quality. As always the casual reader of a work of Mr. Neilson's will be charmed by the easy beauty of his literary style as well as by the perfect clarity, simplicity and strength of his analyses. The serious, curious student will find hardly one of these treatises which does not, by reference and suggestion, open the door of an entire course of collateral reading and study.

The first, and title, essay presents the general theme. "Culture," "education," and "civilization" appear, not as vaguely marked bands in a much too confusing spectrum of intellectual development, but as separate and sur-

Book Reviews

prisingly different concepts. I think that a good many readers will want to read this chapter again right away, as I did. If the subject of the meaning and purpose of a way of life in which "making a living" is more important somehow than living itself has become a familiar one to you, you may expect to meet your old acquaintance again, but you should not be surprised to find that he has put on weight, and that he wears a new coat in rather new surroundings.

One of our favorite villains, Niccolò Machiavelli, rides through the second, a very interesting, essay in a government limousine. Notice particularly how many times the license plates on the car must be changed to suit the ever changing political jurisdictions. Machiavelli is treated as the author of *The Prince*, of course, but we see his fine, Italian hand in a host of modern laws, treaties and government policies as well. Very occasionally we glimpse him as the meditative, pedestrian writer of the *Discourses*.

The relation of culture to natural law and to property is discussed in a chapter on John Locke's treatises on civil government. Locke was certainly not the first, nor the last, thinker who has mulled over this subject. From Socrates to Henry George many have been struck by this essential connection. But it is not easy to recall even one who has been as well acquainted with what has been thought and said

in regard to it as Mr. Neilson himself.

The concept of freedom is the theme of an essay on Immanuel Kant. Readers who have found the trip through the *Kritik* a pretty tough one will welcome the author's recommendation of the *Lecture on Ethics* as a sort of "Introduction to Kant."

No work on our cultural heritage which ignores Goethe can ever be complete. Although Goethe is primarily a philosopher and poet to most of us, his genius was manifested in so many other fields of endeavor that it is no great surprise when Mr. Neilson presents him to us as an economist. He analyzes the philosophic and economic implications in *Faust*, particularly in its less familiar second part, and makes them take on a rather new significance.

Two very interesting essays recall an English historian who is much too seldom spoken of nowadays. To most of us who know Lord Acton at all he is just a rather vaguely recalled name. This may be partly explained, if not excused, by the fact that his only published works are posthumous collections of essays, lectures and letters. Nevertheless there are many men still living who remember when he was regarded as one of the most brilliant scholars in the world. He is usually spoken of as a historian. His work in historical research, as a teacher, and as a writer of historical papers and articles, surely mark him as one of the few to whom this word may be applied in its very highest sense. But the breadth and range of his erudition, as well as his influence upon many other learned men, have surely earned him a place of honor in any work on the cultural life of his time.

What is humanism? Ask any three of your friends this question, without any coaching. No matter what their answers may be, they will not give you a "majority decision" in favor of anything, no matter what. Mr. Neilson's essay on this subject quotes many of

the humanists and so-called humanists who have lived during the past three or four millennia. It is very evident that the confusion as to the meaning of this word is anything but a new one.

It is always a joy to me to read Francis Neilson when he goes to work on communism, statism, socialism, and more or less related doctrines. There are very few who are able, so easily and so convincingly, to eliminate the usual double-talk and to bring the argument down to the essential, basic issues.

The first of four essays on this theme examines it theoretically, and demonstrates plainly that, so far as this world is concerned, redemption must be by works rather than by faith. We see in the second that Marxism carries in its own bosom the virus which must eventually destroy it. Of special interest to the thoughtful American is the third, on state control. Few will read it without seriously wondering just how far the "benefits" of the welfare state commit them to control by the same state of their entire lives, material and spiritual.

In the fourth section of this tractate sub-complex the author surveys the real breeding ground of communism. The direct relationship between war and social, political and economic upheaval has, of course, been recognized for many, many centuries, but seldom has it been more convincingly demonstrated than in this essay.

In the two final chapters the light of Henry George's political philosophy is cast on the concepts of equality and justice. How little we actually know of either is something we think of much too seldom.

In closing, it is hard for me to think of anything to say which is more to the point than that I cannot imagine anyone, regardless of his political or economic creed, finishing this little book without resolving to read it again.