

## Mr. Nibb and the Oracle

By E. P. MIDDLETON.

"*Man—the Madman,*" by John Nibb, published by Elliot Stock, London, price 2s.

THIS is a stimulating, if a little over-weighted, contribution to the literature of social and political criticism, consisting of satirical observations on current British life, customs and shibboleths, presented in the form of "discussions" — largely one-sided—between the author and a character called Theodore. (Date of first publication is not given in our copy; it is, presumably, a reprint of a work dating from, possibly, between the two World Wars.)

Progress, evolution, scientists, critical standards, modern music, the craze for speed, noise, tobacco, the law, politics, democracy, conceptions of hygiene and present-day economics, all come under the lash of Theodore's sharp, if a little supercilious tongue, often with telling and healthy results. On the whole, the book is a welcome breath of fresh air and common sense blowing through the stuffy cloisters of the complacency which passes for thought and imagination in such large areas of the population; and, while some of the allusions "date" the work, it is still very largely of current times.

On the subject of economics, however, Theodore's strictures go a little haywire. He makes some sound points, such as "economic nationalism, like its political counterpart, is a dangerous element, founded upon vested interests plus unsound philosophy" and "happiness is

individual but economics are treated nationally" and "trading is an affair of individuals and there should be no more of an artificial barrier between the French dealer and his German customer than between a Devonian and a Yorkshireman." As the Common Market obviously post-dated his book, Mr. Nibb's views on this development are not known to us.

But, in discussing Henry George, for instance, he betrays his own incomplete grasp of economic principles. ("His economics are falsified by his philosophy," he says without enlarging on this simple assertion.) He is thus brought to the confused position in which he advocates a form of smallholding, or parcelling out of land—a futile method of attempting to eliminate the private monopoly of land-rent, which is the basic cause of poverty. Mr. Nibb seems to imagine, that the trouble is in the size of the area possessed.

It is a pity that an otherwise useful critique of modern society should be marred by such confusion on a subject so basic to the author's main purpose. John Nibb is also the author of *Personism — a Philosophy of Peace* (6s.) and a number of provocative pamphlets on the subject of Internationalism. "Nationalism", he says "is contrary to Christianity."



## How Much Agriculture?

By PAUL KNIGHT.

HOW much agriculture should we have? How far are subsidies to be regarded as a social service, and how far do they induce the right sort of developments in farming? These are some of the questions with which Gavin McCrone deals in his book, *The Economics of Subsidising Agriculture*. (Gavin McCrone, Allen & Unwin, 25s.). They are the kind of questions which should have been asked, and answered, long ago. It was inevitable, in the face of the steady climb of agricultural subsidies (£351 million in 1961/2) that they should be asked sooner or later; now the imminent prospect of Britain's entering the E.E.C. has brought the whole matter sharply into focus.

It may be useful, and ground-clearing, to go first to the heart of the matter and ask the prime question: "Why is agriculture subsidised at all?" Apart from the vested interest of those on the receiving end, whose answer is inseparable from self-interest and therefore obvious, there are several reasons which will be offered by different sections of the community according to their political, social, economic or simply traditional attitudes. The last-

named group, for instance, is likely to say something like this: "British agriculture? Of course it must not be allowed to die. What would Britain be without its countryside? What would the countryside be without the farms? What would we do without British roast beef?" And so forth. In the political sphere, the consensus of opinion would be an unthinking assertion that agriculture must be preserved, the answer to our main question being different only according to the political party to which the answerer belonged.

The Labour Party's position is simply that agriculture is an industry which cannot be allowed to die because it employs a given number of workers. It must be kept going at all costs. "At all costs" means protection and subsidies. The Conservative Party's answer is a more complex one, containing elements of political, economic and traditional attitudes. "Agriculture is a vital part of British life; its social, as well as its economic aspects, are important. While it must be made more efficient by increased mechanisation and lowered costs, a fair return

must be assured to the farmer. If, with all this, agriculture still suffers from the effects of outside competition, it must be protected. We are not happy about achieving this by subsidies and price supports, because this involves taxation, but what are the alternatives?" If the Liberal Party has an opinion on the subject, it is probably very little different from either of the foregoing.

Among any handful of people picked out by a Gallup Poll, the main answer one would get, I imagine, would be the equally unthinking acceptance of agriculture as an unquestioned necessity, an institution as permanent and inviolate as Parliament. But judicious probing would most probably expose the underlying fear responsible for the conviction that agriculture is a vital part of our security in a dangerous world. We have to produce our own food in time of war, or the maximum possible amount of it. A view reasonable enough, if we accept the idea that any "next" war will be like the last one and that "food" means agriculture as we know it in Britain today; neither of which propositions is tenable in the light of modern knowledge. As a recent study, *Principles of Agricultural Policy* (O.U.P., 1960), points out: "The only practical direct insurance against extreme military disaster is to be found, not in agricultural policies at all, but in a food storage programme." The authors of *The State and the Farmer* (Self & Storing, Allen & Unwin, 30s.) agree. "It is both impracticable and undesirable," they say, "to prepare for the possibility of another war by keeping agriculture on the footing of the last one."

Passing over the question whether there is, in Britain today, a place and a need for agriculture — a question very much less rhetorical than some might suppose — there remains the fundamental proposition: how can it be made economically viable, or, if it cannot, who is to pay the cost of supporting it? If the only justification for maintaining an industry, irrespective of its economic viability, is (a) because it employs a given number of workers, (b) because it provides a "way of life" for those engaged in it, (c) because it "is part" of our "rural heritage," or (d) because we cannot "afford" to import more food; then the problem is transferred from the realm of economics to that of social service. Agriculture then becomes a part of the Welfare System, like health and education, and the simple and most honest answer is taxation. Make



the agricultural Department fully responsible; nationalise the farms, put the farmers and their employees on salaries and wages, sell the produce through a marketing department — and write-off the inevitable loss in the resultant inflated agricultural vote. The snag, of course, is that someone, or some authority, would have to fix the prices. And there the fun would start, and the oppor-

tunity for skulduggery.

Obviously, the present situation pleases hardly anybody. The economists, even the most accommodating of the modern school, who should be practising sociology or politics — anything, in fact, but economics — are at odds with one another, lost in interminable arguments on the plane of pure expediency. Even Mr. McCrone, for



all his challenging forthrightness, suggests things like this: (in the event of war) "It may be prudent to produce about half our total food at home, which is not far from the present level, but this could be done with a very much lower level of agricultural subsidies." And (on farm economics) he favours "a change in subsidy policy aimed at reducing costs and a shift from price support to production grants, as under the Small Farmers' scheme."

The politicians all support the subsidies "in principle;" Conservatives because of the steady pressure of the farming lobby, probably the most powerful in the country, and the political realism forced on them by rural constituencies, Labour because subsidies and protection are part of the socialist malady. But none of them, on either side of Parliament, is without a troubled conscience over the situation. Mr. McCrone estimates that price supports account for about 24 per cent of farm revenue. This is bad enough; but one must question his conclusion in the light of an analysis made by Professor G. F. Nash, of the University College of Wales, in 1960. To the figure of £260 million, which was the total of price support subsidies for that year, Professor Nash added another £100 million to cover "hidden costs, such as the protective duties and effects of controlled marketing." His revised total of £360 million represents an average annual subsidy per farm, of the 300,000 in Britain, of £1,200, an amount roughly equal to the average net income per farmer!

How long the British taxpayer-consumer will continue to carry this fantastic burden in the interests of preserving so expensive a luxury as British agriculture is anyone's guess. There is plenty of evidence, however, that the more enlightened among the farmers themselves are becoming uneasy at the utter unreality of the situation.

But, while the argument goes on as to the solution of the problem posed by joining the E.E.C. and its effects on, not only the British farmer, but also on those in other Commonwealth countries, no one appears to have looked below the surface of farming economics to examine the basic factor of the price of land, which is influenced to a significant extent by the subsidy policy itself. To do this is, of course, to probe the very foundations of, not only the farming lobby and the Conservative Party, but of the whole structure of our society.