

The Cultural Tradition and Other Essays

By FRANCIS NEILSON

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IN these days, if a person believes that mankind lives on land and not in a vacuum, that wealth is produced by labour not by politics, and that the basis of all wisdom is common sense, the universal tendency of radio and press might well make him doubt the evidence of his own eyes. And what are considered to be the profoundest modern scholars present the great teachers of the past as if they also would concur in the same protectionist/collectivist insinuation that the time has now passed when the ordinary citizen can be the captain of his own soul; he must obey the direction of the more qualified pilots. The plain man, having to maintain both himself and an immense burden of parasites, cannot at his own expense acquire the knowledge necessary to challenge these scholars on their own ground. This is the task which Mr. Neilson has been performing in England and America for some fifty years, keeping always abreast of the latest currents of thought, and presenting the results in a style worth reading for itself alone.

Mr. Neilson takes culture to mean, not an instrument for ministries and committees but, as Mathew Arnold construed it, the striving for perfection, leading us "to conceive of true human perfection as a *harmonious* perfection, developing all sides of our humanity; and as a *general* perfection, developing all parts of our society."

Mr. Neilson contrasts this idea with the conception of education as a handmaid in the competition for employment, and with the current habit of referring all social questions to the specialist, to the intellectual who has never steeped himself in the seminal fountains of our religion and poetry, "the expert who could not for the life of him give you definitions of fundamental economic

terms." Culture is the active and civilisation the passive element, and a perverted culture—a culture of barbarism—tends to develop at a certain stage of civilisation.

The author traces the line of true culture through the contributions to thought made by Machiavelli—"the permanent member of parliaments"—Locke, Kant, Goethe and Lord Acton. From this he proceeds to consider Communism in its various stages and from several different points, leading to an examination of the various interpretations of "equality of opportunity." In his final essay, on The Gospel of Justice, he collates his earlier conclusions with the philosophy of Henry George. He frequently cites eminent modern thinkers, notably Oswald Spengler; and he puts in sharp relief the Fabian element so often overlooked in professed liberals.

Mr. Neilson is likely to set many readers vigorously re-examining ideas they have too easily accepted. He shows that communism—so feared by Western politicians—is, in any logical interpretation, as impossible in practice as it is false in theory. The Russian system is only state servitude and conditions in the so-called free democracies tend towards this same crude negation of any principle of government.

The thought in these essays cannot be swallowed at a gulp, but each re-reading will give Georgeists further information by which they can identify their philosophy with the deepest current of the stream which has been the impetus of true culture, in all spheres, through the ages. It will probably inspire some of them to further appreciation of many of the great masters of thought.

Our criticism would be that in some passages Mr. Neilson dwells too much on the dark future. Further general decay is, indeed, almost inevitable; but all progress has always started with an infinitesimal minority, and even if we can only somewhat check the tempo of the decline in a bypath we are helping towards ultimate resurrection and progress. Young people, as generous and as intelligent as any in the past, are joining the crusade; and there is joy in the struggle itself: a sense of purpose conspicuously lacking in the barren protests of some individualists who make individualism look like mere petulance.

F.D.P.



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