

BOOK REVIEWS

WILLIAM S. O'CONNOR, Editor

MODERN MAN AND THE LIBERAL ARTS.

By Francis Neilson. New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1947. 329 pp. Indexed. Cloth. \$3.50.

In this companion piece to his earlier work, *The Roots of Our Learning*, Francis Neilson challenges the opinions of such men as John Dewey, James B. Conant and Arnold J. Toynbee. The result is a group of critical essays written with clarity, simplicity and enthusiasm.

Throughout his long life, Mr. Neilson has watched and taken part in educational, political and economic movements. Thus, in his essays on education he speaks as one who has seen at close range the experiments of modern educators and is able to weigh in the scales of achievement the results so far attained by the so-called progressives. Mr. Neilson is strongly of the opinion that we are losing out in the educational field by present-day methods. He is firmly convinced that to be truly educated, a man or woman must be steeped in the wisdom of the past, must have studied the successes and failures of bygone civilizations, and must really know what he is talking about when it comes to such important matters as, for instance, human liberty and economic justice. He finds little to comfort him in the current scene. "There is an illiteracy of the educated today," he says, "that is far more dangerous than the illiteracy of the illiterate."

In sharp contrast to this century's crop of miseducated youngsters, hopping off the collegiate assembly line every twelve months, Mr. Neilson cites Henry George whose Alma Mater was no vine-clad hall but the crowded fore-castle of a four-masted Indian ship and the ink-splashed office of a printer's shop. Yet, in his later years, Mr. Neilson points out, this self-taught scholar wrote a book which reveals "not only a tenacity of purpose, but a thoroughness of review which covers all the known works of the chief economists . . . during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, *Progress and Poverty* shows a familiarity with studies that lie on the fringe of the science of political economy. There are innumerable references to authors who are not mentioned by writers on economic subjects, even so late as John Stuart Mill." And Mr. Neilson concludes: "To a man like Henry George, the pursuit of knowledge meant toiling to the heart of the subject along the rough road of thorny problems; the best way in the end for a man to equip himself with the thought of his worthy predecessors."

In a two-part essay entitled, "The Conspiracy Against the English Peasantry," the author traces in short compass the war of the nobles against the tillers of the soil. For seven hundred years at least, through forced enclosure of the land, the villages were depopulated and the people driven into the towns. "It was a great misconception," it is stated, "to treat the so-called Industrial Revolution as a cause of the impoverishment of the people. There was evidence enough to be found in the first records of the Fabian Society to convince any earnest student that . . . the migration of the country men to the towns resulted in a superabundant labor market, with the result that wages fell as prices of commodities rose." The true story of this dark period in English history has been ignored by the chief historians, but here it is told

in a way to make his sober lesson clear.

The author's own career in British politics gives him the source material for his discussion of Liberalism and Radicalism. In "The Decay of Liberalism" he traces the historical background and scope of the movement in England from the time of its inception, through the days of its greatest influence, to its decline and death at the beginning of World War I. He also examines Dr. Conant's stand on American radicalism and the possibility of its revival.

Mr. Neilson deplores the loss of vitality in our present-day political movements and the absence of vigorous protest against the wrong-doings of those in power. In his essay, "The Silence of the Opposition," he says, "We have no Swift to make a frontal attack upon the bastions of political iniquity . . . no Hazlitt to shake the very foundations of an Edmund Burke; no Junius to reveal the sordid methods of statesmen and their toadies. The opposition is silent."

Against a broad cultural background the theme of these essays is brought to a dramatic climax in the two concluding pieces and the author's discussion of the various philosophies of historical interpretation. Here he compares and contrasts Spengler and Toynbee, Freudman and Brooks Adams, Vico and Burckhardt in a manner which leaves no reader confused as to his purpose and most strongly impresses every thoughtful person with the importance of knowing how to apply the knowledge of the past to the conditions of the present day.

Mr. Neilson is also the author of *The Elements of Commandment*, *In Quest of Justice*, *The Tragedy of Europe* (five volumes), *The Roots of Our Learning*, *Man at the Crossroads*, and many other works. Now in his eighty-first year, he is an indefatigable writer, and his articles are constantly being published in such distinguished magazines as *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*. Indeed, it was in this journal that many of these essays first appeared, and the enthusiastic reception which they received there encouraged the author in the compilation of the present book.—V. G. PETERSON

ON UNDERSTANDING SCIENCE. By James B. Conant. Yale University Press. New Haven, 1947. 145 pp. \$3.00.

The introduction to Dr. Conant's book inspires confidence in the man and respect for the philosopher. Fittingly in the preface he has sought to appraise and set in proper perspective the atom bomb. The scientist, he relates, had hoped that their researches would develop atomic energy for power and demonstrate the impossibility of an atomic explosive. But, since the discovery of the bomb was in a sense inevitable in a scientific age, he is consoled with the thought that the democracies were fortunate in the timing. Noting the many beneficent discoveries of science he invokes the wisdom so abundant in one of the greatest of all philosophical essays, Emerson's Law of Compensation. "With every influx of light comes new danger. . . . There is a crack in everything God has made. . . . But the doctrine of compensation is not the doctrine of indifference."

The main treatise reveals the scholar in action—a stimulating and enlightening teacher. He cites the growing importance of science with the attendant need for clarification of pop-

ular thinking about methods of science that it may be assimilated into general culture. The demonstration of objective, factual analysis based upon controlled experimentation would, he believes, tend to give greater weight to the rational elements as determining factors in a progressive free society. It is not sufficient to be well informed about science. The essential thing is understanding. He prefers the historical rather than the philosophical approach for achieving this end.

His demonstration of his theories is an absorbing and fascinating story. He combines the technique of the laboratory with the eloquence of the lecture room into a living, documented history of the evolution of scientific method and discovery. At the dawn of the 17th century Aristotle's dogma that nature abhors a vacuum continued to hedge the concepts of the scientists. When Galileo pondered the reason why water would not fill a vacuum more than 34 feet above the level of the source he sought to extend the vacuum concept by speculating that the column broke of its own weight. His pupils, Torricelli and Viviani, equipped with the long used mechanical pump and the known but little considered weight of air concept, abolished the vacuum theory by supporting a column of mercury with air pressure. Pascal gave additional evidence of the "spring of air" by showing that the mercury column shortened with its elevation above sea level. Von Guericke devised the Magdeburg hemispheres that with air expelled defied the strength of horses to separate them but fell apart when the atmospheric pressure was equalized within and without. Robert Boyle with more elaborate contrivances confirmed Torricelli by demonstrating the rise and fall of the mercury column as the air pressure upon it was increased and decreased.

The twitching of a frog's leg in proximity to an electrical machine attracted the excited interest of Galvani. Volta through controlled experiment revised Galvani's speculative concept and the electric battery was born. Roentgen investigated what others had noted—the fogging of photographic plates near an electrical discharge—and by the route of accidental discovery and planned experiment the X-ray was evolved. How the arbitrarily entrenched element, phlogiston, in a long battle of polemics, accidental discoveries and controlled tests, was transmuted into the scientific concept of combustion is dramatically but factually unfolded and chemical science was emancipated from the Aristotelian concept of the four elements, earth, air, fire and water.

The reader is left with the longing that Dr. Conant will reconsider his original concept—a guide for teaching the methods of science—and expand in his own engrossing style the glimpse he has exposed of a magic world into the complete panorama of science. And in the process we wistfully hope that he will again consult the great masterpiece of his—and our—favorite philosopher, Emerson's Law of Compensation, and extend his great talent to the field of social science with his mentor's admonitions constantly in mind. "Nature hates monopolies and exceptions. . . . Things refuse to be mismanaged long. . . . If you tax too high, the revenue will yield nothing. . . . Nothing arbitrary, nothing artificial can endure."

—W. S. O.