

Two Views of the English

THE ENGLISHMAN, by W. Macneile Dixon. 6s. $7\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{3}{4}$; 224 pp. London: *Edward Arnold & Company*.

THE ENGLISH: ARE THEY HUMAN? by G. J. Renier. \$2.50. $7\frac{3}{8} \times 5$; 304 pp. New York: *Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith*.

DR. DIXON, if not an Englishman, is certainly a Briton, and one who very fairly represents his race; Dr. Renier is a Hollander with French and Italian blood in him, and as foreign in Britain as any white man could well be. Their books thus differ very greatly. Dr. Dixon writes as a professed patriot—he begins, in fact, with an eloquent defense of patriotism—; Dr. Renier, who spent many years in England as a university student and newspaper correspondent, writes as a highly intelligent foreigner—sympathetic but not deluded. The two books thus complement each other admirably, and deserve to be read together. Dr. Dixon is at his best in expounding the Englishman's peculiar notions of liberty, loyalty and duty; Dr. Renier shines in showing how the practical effects of those notions strike an impartial and philosophical observer.

The two authors differ diametrically in describing what they conceive to be the dominant English trait. Dr. Dixon believes that it is a strong feeling for the rights of the individual, and to it he ascribes all the familiar figures in the English pattern of behavior—the personal reserve, the general distrust of government (at least at home), the disdain of uniforms and dignities, the contempt for mere learning, the excessive and sometimes almost comic self-sufficiency. England, he says, houses more cranks and fanatics than any other country.

Every Englishman remains in some degree aloof from his society, keeping company with some pet idea of his own. He prefers

to see things for himself, to look through his own eyes, to act on his own initiative. He does not take kindly to the suggests of others, but works in his own garden on his private plan, planting what he wishes there. He declines to be standardized, to conform to a pattern, and asks of his would-be adviser or instructor, if not in words at least in actions, "Am I not, too, some one?"

Dr. Renier dissents sharply from all this. He grants freely that a sturdy self-reliance lies deep within the English character, and he believes that it is still strongly marked in the lower classes, both rustic and urban—among those Englishmen, as he puts it, who are uncertain about their *h's*. But in the classes that have mastered the aspirate he finds little sign of it. They are, in fact, rigidly standardized—perhaps the most rigidly standardized group of presumably educated people in the whole world. Every act of their lives, from the way they take in their food to the way they reproduce their kind, is surrounded by formidable rituals and taboos, and breaking any of them is a matter almost as serious as cutting a throat. Opinion may be free in England—but only within certain narrow limits. Eccentricity in conduct may go so far—but no further. There is quick recognition of talent, so long as it can spend itself within the conventional bounds, but nowhere else is the way so hard for a genuinely original man.

Dr. Renier believes that this caging of the upper-class Englishman, once so free and gay, was largely achieved by one man—the celebrated Dr. Arnold of Rugby. Arnold, though he has been dead less than a century, was the real founder of the public school tradition, which Englishmen are fond of thinking of as immemorial. He invented the doctrine that the one aim of a liberal education is to make the individual fit for command—in other words, fit to be

an officer. In order to attain that fitness he was willing to sacrifice everything that an officer would find inconvenient—a sensitiveness in æsthetic matters, a love of books and ideas, a taste for oddity in costume or manners, a free and lively spirit. The result is the ideal upper-class Englishman of today—that sore puzzle to all the rest of humanity. Dr. Renier questions humorously whether it would be scientific to call him really human. He has become something that, in some ways, is truly admirable, but the more he is studied the more it becomes apparent that he is either greater or less than a normal civilized man.

The notion is a pretty one, and there is plain merit in it. Think of the Englishman as simply a cavalryman, and he becomes measurably more comprehensible. All of the characters of a good cavalryman are there—a correct personal demeanor, an animal-like delight in physical activity and especially in those forms of it which simulate combat, an unquestioning attitude toward fiat from above, a naïve belief in rank and ritual, a hearty contempt for all the concerns of the mind, a dog-like concept of duty, and a high degree of physical courage. "Theirs not to reason why; theirs but to do or die!" In this complex one discerns some admirable things: it is easy, indeed, to imagine worse men than cavalry officers. Moreover, there are many situations in which their peculiar virtues are indispensable. But there are also situations in which what they have to offer is not only useless, but downright deleterious. They are almost incapable of anything rationally describable as sound or original thought. They learn nothing and forget nothing. It may very well be, as Dr. Renier hints, that some of the appalling difficulties of England today are due to a too

ready and widespread acceptance of the Arnoldian ideal. The country plainly needs less doggedness and more resiliency.

Dr. Renier appears to believe, or, at all events, to hope, that it will be provided by MM. of the new invasion of barbarians—the Scots, the Irish, the Welsh, and the Canadians. Already they begin to seize many of the major offices of state, and as the old empire resolves itself into a confederation their influence and power will undoubtedly increase. Unfortunately, they are all new people, and in the face of the massive English self-assurance they tend to seek protective coloration. That is, they succumb to the public school tradition, and become honest cavalymen too, though not such good ones as the actual English. Perhaps there is more hope in the *h*-less nether stratum of the native stock. It, also, is now coming to the fore. Maybe it will resist the seductions of Arnoldism better than the intruders from Boetia. As Dr. Renier shows, there is little of the cavalryman in the low-caste Englishman. He retains the lively iconoclasm that marked the England of more spacious days. As yet, he remains ignorant, but that is being remedied. He has a smartness that his betters plainly lack, and in the long run it may turn out to be of more solid value to England than all their devotion.

Both of these books are thoughtful and stimulating. Dr. Dixon, after setting forth the English ideal very persuasively and charmingly, appends chapters on the English Bible and Shakespeare. He is professor of English literature at Glasgow, and the author of a number of works on poetry. Dr. Renier is a quite different sort of man. He is a scholar as well as a journalist, but his book is essentially journalism—journalism, indeed, at its shrewdest and best.

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