

THE LIBRARY

Fortunes and History

By MARY M. COLUM

ALMOST every significant writer in the modern world has been making some sort of contribution toward the understanding of history, and this whether he is a novelist like Proust, Joyce or Jules Romains, a poet like Eliot or Yeats or a philosopher like Croce, or one of the serious newspaper commentators or journalists writing books on what he has observed in Europe. It looks as if the next great period in writing would come out of a concern with history or be historical writing in some form.

Until recently the really modern and illuminating ideas of history came out of Germany or Italy; it was the Germans who, as Benedetto Croce shows in his *History as the Story of Liberty*, first pointed out the difference between the idea of a thing and the thing in itself — that is, the thought about the thing and the thing in action; the difference, for example, between the French Revolution and the ideas that brought it about.

We might, in our time, point out the difference between Marxism in action in Europe and the Marxist thought that brought about that action. They are related, of course, but in such a complicated way that some of our idealists think they are different things.

History in America is very different from history in Europe, and various books which seem only tracts for the times are really a contribution to America's historical material, needing only the historical intelligence to make them into history. This is true of John T. Flynn's *Men of Wealth*¹ and also of a lively if less significant book by Harvey O'Connor, *The Astors*.² Both books are material for American history. Both bring back to my mind with a resurgence of interest an incident in a New York theatre at a first night some time ago.

Descending the balcony stairs I

¹ *Men of Wealth*, by John T. Flynn. \$3.75. Simon and Schuster.

² *The Astors*, by Harvey O'Connor. \$3.75. Knopf.

noticed that the crowd in the foyer were standing gazing at something. They were so quiet and intent that at first I thought there had been an accident. But soon I beheld the object of their interest. It was a tall woman in early middle age, dressed in black, and with what are called ropes of pearls round her neck. She was standing alone by a pillar, doubtless waiting for somebody to find her car. Her face was familiar from the society pages, and her name, passed round among the crowd, was that of one of America's wealthiest families. She was not interesting-looking or in any way striking except that she gave the impression of vigorous health and physical strength. But the crowd regarded her with something of that awe with which queens are looked at in Europe; and she, on her side, looked back indifferently with a haughty remoteness such as no queen could have afforded for fear of alienating the masses. Fairly near me there was a young man accompanied by a somewhat older man who had the attitude of a protector, and this young man, too, stopped for a second and gazed with the crowd. My companion mentioned his name: he was a prince in exile, and belonged to what had been once a great European reigning house; and while he

looked as if he had more interior life than the woman he was not very interesting-looking either, and the people in the foyer paid no attention to him.

Now, after reading John T. Flynn's book, I realized I had been present at something as dramatic as the play I had seen, something that for a writer of historical intelligence might have been an illumination. For the ancestors of the young man and of the tall woman figure in *Men of Wealth* — the young man's all through it, the woman's only in that part of the nineteenth century when a few men were getting control of the resources of America. The forebears of the young man had been rulers in Europe for centuries, and they come in and out of the pages of this book as a sort of accompaniment to the rise of many of the fortunes written about. They had borrowed funds from those early capitalists, the Fuggers, who flourished about the time Columbus was discovering America; they had borrowed from the first Rothschilds, about whom John T. Flynn manages to do some debunking; they bought munitions from Zaharoff, not so sinister in private life as in his role as a merchant of death. They must naturally have borrowed money from the Morgans:

what is left of them are probably trying to borrow money from what is left of the capitalists Flynn writes of—in short, from the relatives and connections of the lady with the pearls.

The young man and the woman both represented what had been powerful isms: it was feudalism that had given the young man's ancestors their place in the sun, their power in history; it was capitalism that had given the lady her pearls and her hauteur. Capitalism was but an infant ism when the Fuggers first rose to power years before the discovery of America, a period at which, to quote Flynn, "men everywhere saw with dismay that their world was mortally sick." Feudalism was dying slowly, but a vigorous infant ism was coming to birth. Some of us in the theatre foyer felt that our world was mortally sick and that new isms were coming to birth. What they might grow to be we could not guess.

Though John T. Flynn writes more interestingly about the Europeans in his book, he manages to give more immediate significance to the Americans. What he is writing, as he tells us, is an account of a number of people whose fortunes were representative of the economic scene in which they

flourished. But the Americans were not only representative of the scene—they dominated it. How they made their money and what they did with it really formed the history of the country. The Europeans he writes of, the Fuggers, the Rothschilds, Cecil Rhodes, Zaharoff, etc., flourished under such a different civilization that their inclusion produces a certain lack of unity in the book.

In Europe the influence of capitalism did not displace the influence of the feudal nobility: capitalism was just another ism laid over the previous isms, and when the capitalists had made enough money to buy their way in, they did their best to join the ranks of the feudalists. In America this was impossible, for wealth was the chief order of privilege, and what the men of wealth did with their money will explain to historians the civilization of the nineteenth and half of the twentieth century; it may even explain the wars and the foreign policy. The Americans, as the European capitalists did not, gave away their money in large sums; they gave to philanthropies, they gave to universities, to medical and scientific foundations, to libraries and learned institutions.

Being acquisitive men them-

selves, the types of intellect they understood were the acquisitive and assimilative intellects; they endowed learning, but not one of them, with the possible exception of the Jewish families, the Guggenheims and the Pulitzers, had a notion of the role creative art plays in a civilization. Did they back any native art? Did they buy any contemporary pictures? If they did, it was to an extent so slight that nobody noticed. They bought the art treasures of the old world which had a well-established market value. Unless intellectual activity represented some form of scholarship or pedagogy or philanthropy, it seemed to them a form of vagrancy; spiritual outlook had to be a missionary outlook or they did not understand it. All these capitalists professed religion: the reported last words of Commodore Vanderbilt to a sympathetic world were, "I'll never let go my trust in Jesus," and the Rockefellerers were God-fearing Baptists who taught Sunday school.

II

Another book before me, *The Philosopher in Chaos*,³ by Baker Brownell, which would have been

³ *The Philosopher in Chaos*, by Baker Brownell. \$2.50. D. Van Nostrand.

better titled by the name of its fullest section, "The Actions of Men," can be read as a commentary on the civilization produced by the personages in *Men of Wealth* and *The Astors*. What the book is for the greater part is a study of the effects of finance-capitalism, the concentrated power of great corporations and mass production on the actions of men. The section called "The Actions of Men" includes intellectual action, individual action, nutritive action, symbolic action, social action. In the opening chapter, which deals with the intellectual life, the acquisitive nature of a lot of academic activity is shown as one of the obstacles to the intellectual life. Acquisitiveness, mass production, concentration of power, have given a pattern which has influenced even the most enfranchised seats of learning. To quote:

Our higher educational system is well organized for the production and storage of factual material; it remains largely indifferent to the needs of an intellectual life. . . . Acquisitiveness of facts, the triumph of mere possession, motivates academic activity.

For this reason a natural interest in "generous ideas" is weak, and there is a failure in modern society "to make formulations of action that are adequate to the new knowledge, power, and ideology of the

modern world." These new formulations, Baker Brownell shows, should work toward decentralization and the break-up of mass production — mass production which has made human lives more fragmentary than they were in any other age. It might be well to draw this author's attention to the sad fact that the countries that did not go in heavily for mass production have gone down in the present war.

The finance-capitalism behind mass production assumes "that men and their labor are collective units that must operate industrially, socially, and politically in masses." Does not this mean that finance-capitalism and mass production produced totalitarianism? However, Baker Brownell gives us what he says may be the new version of democracy — "a type of social theory, an economic system . . . that will be far removed from those of a Marx, a J. P. Morgan, or a Mussolini." This new version of democracy will come through decentralization, for the new technology, Baker Brownell claims, can make products in small quantities as cheaply as mass production can make them. The small group, with the new and more pliable electrical power, the family, the local guild,

the farm, the individual, the small town, can manufacture a good deal of what they need and so replace the great centers by many foci of interest and organization; and so, as the author concludes, we can again have a human world if we want it.

The difficulty with this impressive and hopeful book is that the author sometimes takes it on himself to deal with subjects outside the range of his knowledge: his remarks on art, and especially on poetry, are lamentable. When he tells us that art "in its more profound and vital manifestations is largely muscular behavior," he shows that he is even more deluded than the college professors whom he condemns for their resistance to the intellectual life. When he tells us that works of art, "meaning completed productions suitable for the museum, library, phonograph disk, or other place of storage, are an unimportant adjunct of art and might well be forgotten," he says something that contains a minimum of sense and a maximum of nonsense. This sort of talk comes from that cult of art as action that in its own place has something to be said for it, but when carried to the point reached by some progressive educators who make children "act out" great pictures, pieces

of music, and poems, becomes vandalism.

In spite of a certain amateurishness about his writing and thinking, Baker Brownell has sound and brilliant ideas. His book is not only a useful commentary on recent American history which is the history of mass production and big business, but has value for everybody anxious about what we are heading toward. But to pass from it to either Benedetto Croce's *History as the Story of Liberty*⁴ or Ortega y Gasset's *Toward a Philosophy of History*⁵ is, of course, to pass into a world of far more disciplined and mature thought; nevertheless, many of the ideas in all three books have the same direction: they have come out of the widespread human need of the age.

Croce's has been a familiar name to American intellectuals since Joel Spingarn put his ideas on esthetics into circulation here. In this, his latest work, he takes Hegel's statement that history is the history of liberty and develops it in his own way. He maintains that liberty is the eternal creator of history and is itself the subject of every history. Then he tells us

that "the anguish that men feel for liberty that has been lost, the words of love and anger that they utter about it, are history in the making." History has little to do with the chronicles, the collections of facts and anecdotes, that the textbooks present us with. It is idle to divide it into epochs, as our conventional historians are so bent on doing, or to try to find a beginning for it, for history begins every time the need arises for the understanding of a situation in order to act.

History, as Croce memorably defines it, "is an act of consciousness arising out of a moral need which prepares and invokes action." The knowledge of history, then, should not be treated as a subject subsidiary to anything else: it is in itself one of the great disciplines, like religion, art, and science, and it includes philosophy. Historical culture, a knowledge of the past, is always necessary to human society to furnish it with what is required in the choice of the paths it is to take — that is, to make any decision rightly, human society has to know its own past. If this book, with its strong condemnation of nationalistic, party and racial history, was published in Italy, as it seems to have been, expression must be freer there than

⁴ *History as the Story of Liberty*, by Benedetto Croce. \$3.75. Norton.

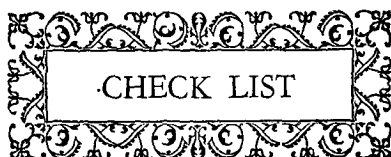
⁵ *Toward a Philosophy of History*, by Ortega y Gasset. \$2.75. Norton.

we have been led to believe possible in a Fascist state.

A conception of history very close to Croce's underlies Ortega y Gasset's *Toward a Philosophy of History*, which in a manner popularizes the Italian philosopher's thought. We will have, Ortega tells us, to turn from the belief which has been Western man's since the seventeenth century, the belief in natural science, to a comprehension of history. But he makes us aware that the shift from our present discipline, that of science, to history will have momentous consequences. Why have we to shift at all? Because we have really lost our faith in science, or, rather, our faith has ceased to be an active faith as it was in the last century and has become inert, as the faith in the supernatural became inert.

Science told us much about the outside world, about nature, about all that was not man; but it told us nothing about man. Now man sees himself forced to a concern with his past, and this not out of curiosity nor in search of examples which may serve as norms, but because it is all he has, all that is real for him. Ortega y Gasset is not a philosopher as Croce is: he might be described as a brilliant and learned publicist. He writes viva-

ciously, and he brings over to us ideas that are coming to be regarded as significant for the future ordering of the world by the most modern-minded of thinkers.



FICTION

THIRTY-FOUR PRESENT-DAY STORIES, selected by John T. Frederick, \$1.25. *Scribner*. This book does not include all of the fine present-day short stories, but those it does present are excellent, representing every type of modern short story, from James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, to Thomas Wolfe and Dorothy Parker. It has stories by accomplished technicians like Somerset Maugham and E. A. Coppard, delightfully American folk stories like Stephen Vincent Benet's "The Devil And Daniel Webster," stories by Western writers like Ruth Suckow, Southern writers like Caroline Gordon and William Faulkner. As far as interest, variety and range go, this is the best recent collection of modern short stories.

TADPOLE HALL, by Helen Ashton, \$2.50. *Macmillan*. A skillfully written and impressive novel of wartime England. To Tadpole Hall in August, 1939, come an Austrian Jewish lawyer and his aristocratic Aryan wife, and the story is woven around them and their employer, Colonel Heron. The novel with its strong projection of actualities gives a vivid picture of the revolution that is taking place in English country life, with discontented evacuees from the centres overrunning the quiet countryside, the food difficulties, the aliens' tribunals, the spy scares, the bombings, the everlasting drone of airplanes —