

# EXPLAINING THE ORIENT

By Lyman Bryson

THE favorite occupation of publicists at present seems to be explaining the Far East rather than trying to understand it. Naturally enough, the usual approach is through the observer's own prejudices. What is surprising is that no one tries to interpret events in China by comparison with the history of his own country. We Americans rail against the political ineptitude of the Chinese without any evident recollection of how long it took our own inspired colonists to make a nation after their revolution. Even our cautious school histories tell us that Hamilton said the country, ten years after the Declaration of Independence, presented "an awful spectacle . . . a nation without a national government". His description was mild. But Oriental peoples are expected to make over an ancient régime in the twinkling of a subtle, slanted eye. If they don't, it betokens innate political stupidity or an Oriental "soul". This last ineluctable entity will explain anything.

In the budget of books at hand, however, the level of good sense is rather higher than usual. The most illuminating and helpful volume is Professor Paul Monroe's *China: A Nation in Evolution* (Macmillan, \$3.50). Probably no work since the classic of E. T. Williams has packed so much information in brief space. Neither sentimental nor exasperated (reverse English for sentimental) Professor Monroe sees the celestials as human beings for good and evil. He is sensible about Chinese psychology without falling into obscurantism about "souls". For example, there is the question of the continuing local self-government. From many books and nearly all newspaper correspondence, the anxious western reader gets the impression that the bulk of the Chinese population, when not busily engaged in starving to death, is sitting about wringing long-nailed hands and crying for some sort of government, alien or otherwise. After describing the village

elders system and the guilds, which were as independent of Manchu domination as they are now of the *tuchuns*' squabbles for supremacy, Professor Monroe says, "about eighty or ninety percent of the Chinese population are thus capable of complete and adequate self-government. . . . An understanding of this system will indicate how it is that China goes on in a normal way, indifferent to the disturbance of the wars of the militarists if these wars are not in their immediate region".

The real disturbance in Chinese life is industrialism. But political accidents have made the Russians intensely interested in China, and Russian agents have introduced communistic interpretations of industrialism almost before there were changes on a scale large enough to make interpretation possible. Professor Monroe may overrate the extent of Russian influence but he does not lose his head over it. He recognizes that industrialism itself is more revolutionary than political doctrine. "But the introduction of modern industry means also modern individualism, which undermines China's traditional moral and social control as found in the family or clan system. Individualism is replacing the old family socialism; no moral or religious or social control adequate to the transition has been developed."

This statesman-like commentator happens to be a pedagogue. Sao-Ke Alfred Sze, present Chinese Minister to the United States, says in his introduction to the book, that Dr. Monroe's contribution to Chinese educational progress has been immense. It is especially interesting, therefore, to find him saying a good word for the derided ancient civil service examinations. "What is most needed in the educational system situation is not more Western ideas . . . but a revival of the traditional Chinese educational ideals of thoroughness, of actual testing of ability, of actual attainment, and the rewarding of

attainment with actual authority." And in connection with religious education he cuts the ground from under a good many confused zealots by asking the real question—not "Can the Chinese become Christians?" but "Can Christianity become Chinese?"

Mr. Thomas F. Millard, in *China: Where It Is Today and Why* (Harcourt, \$2.75), has gathered together a prolix but well-balanced book out of his newspaper correspondence from the scene of action in China. He has definite convictions and escapes the triviality of day-by-day reporting. He also sniffs unafraid at an Oriental "soul". "The idea of a mysterious Orient which is impenetrable to occidental minds is a myth." Political events occupy most of his space. The immediate problem for the United States, he says, is shall we get out or get in? Confusion in China was not caused by foreign powers, although they have contributed to it; but the Chinese have an anti-foreign psychosis which will continue to give occasion for hard feeling and interventionist talk. Any intervention, Mr. Millard thinks, will be blamed eventually on the United States. "Chinese national leaders think that other powers will not undertake a coercive policy without America." He does not argue that intervention should not be our program, but for the sake of realism he says truthfully and flatly, "It should be understood that no foreign intervention in China now can possibly have a friendly character to the Chinese". He makes it plain that America can cast the die in favor of coercion in China if she wishes to destroy the last traces of traditional friendship, and try afterward to build up trade and cultural relations on the basis of murderous bad manners.

Mr. Arthur Ransome's book, *The Chinese Puzzle* (Houghton Mifflin, \$2.00), is chiefly useful as a statement of the liberal British point of view. Great Britain is customarily the villain of the piece when Asiatic dramas are written. Mr. Ransome insists that his own country has no more idea of intervention than the United States. That is possibly true. He explains, moreover, that the dispatch of extra troops to Shanghai was a gesture to quiet Tory howls at home and among the "Shanghaianders" (the term is his own).

It was not meant to frighten the Chinese at all. The explanation is ingenious but to accept it takes a considerable faith in the subtlety of governments—even of the Foreign Office. Mr. Ransome's most searching study is of the minds of foreign business men in the Orient and of their opinions. They are foreign residents by nationality, neither Chinese, nor international, nor representative of their native countries—Shanghaianders!

Professor Todd is a sociologist from whom one expects a thorough analysis in his *Three Wise Men of the East* (University of Minnesota, \$2.50). Industrialism in the East, he thinks, is going to create a greater upheaval than it did in Europe. The Chinese may possibly be, by reason of their industrious adaptiveness, the meek who shall inherit the earth.

The Three Wise Men are Gandhi, the *mahatma*, Tagore, the *guru*, and Bose, the plant psychologist. Professor Todd is not fired by the visions of the Great Soul; sociological absurdities fall too recklessly from the holy lips. But he sees signs of advance for India in the poet's practical help among the village farmers and also in Bose's discovery of the "feelings" of plants which "extends our kinship beyond cows and carrots to the stars", incidentally making vegetarianism for ethical reasons rather foolish.

The *Interpretations* (Appleton, \$2.00) of Dean Emory Johnson are less interesting than the Todd lectures and less informing. China Today, China Tomorrow, the Home of Confucius, these themes are drily discussed. The book seems to be more the pious tribute of preservation for the papers of an eminent teacher than any real contribution to the study of the East.

With a screed like Scott Nearing's *Whither China?* (International, \$1.75) it is difficult to be patient. Mr. Nearing's partisanship is infectious, but in a healthy mind it is more likely to breed "anti-bodies" of restraint than any responsive fever. The lack of economic information about China was a great opportunity. Mr. Nearing fumbled it. Obscure authorities are cited to lay what is a shaky foundation for his examination of present conditions. For example, he quotes S. Wagel

to the effect that ancient China had "no intercourse with the outside world". Soothill, Aurel Stein, Reichwein—almost anybody who knows anything about China could have told him better. But it was necessary to paint the picture of a happy recluse into whose paradise modern capitalistic imperialism shot its ruthless way. The saviour is Soviet Russia. The extent to which Mr. Nearing is willing to misinterpret facts or is incapable of understanding them is shown in these extraordinary statements: "A century of contact with the Western Empires had brought China humiliation, military attacks, seizure of territory, control of customs and of taxation. Five years of the Soviet Union brought China the promise of national sovereignty and freedom". And this: "When the Washington Conference ended, imperialism was more firmly entrenched than ever. All of the leading empires had agreed to co-operate in partitioning the spoils of a helpless China".

Recklessness like this alienates the students most anxious to find some solution for a problem that exists in fact—not in the vacuum of doctrinaire debate. The record of western nations in the East is a sorry affair. But it is not such a simple picture of blood-thirsty greed as this book makes of it. There have always been genuine liberals in western countries, fighting to mitigate the cruelties of expansion and, if possible, to persuade all nations, including the eastern, toward justice. There still are such influences. Mr. Nearing would perhaps say they are futile and that only radical measures are helpful. We may be permitted to disagree and to believe that hope lies rather in the more difficult effort toward calm reconstruction.

An answer to anyone's effort to indict the whole of western civilization is found in such a book as Miss M. L. Christlieb's *An Uphill Road in India* (Houghton Mifflin, \$2.00). Here are devotion and heroic faith. Her missionary diary does not debate the question of the right of any religion to make proselytes abroad. That question persists. But missionaries like Miss Christlieb, whose name has a curious propriety, exist in China as well as in India. They are not "in imperialist service", but servants of mankind.

Mahatma Gandhi's second series of papers

*Young India* (Viking, \$5.00) is much like the collection published several years ago except that his later opinions contain less political dogmatism. His essential message is given, diluted in lengthy discussion of many local controversies. He calls to purification of self, to the creation of spiritual force, to the worship of God. He does not try so much to interpret India to the West as to interpret the best of India to her own people. The West may listen if it will.

"Khub Dekhta Age," evidently an Englishman who prefers a symbolic Indian pen name, offers, in *India Tomorrow* (Oxford, \$1.50), a brief discussion of steps to be taken by the Commission for reforming the government of India. His advice is moderate. The fundamental race and religious problems among Indian peoples, the sensitiveness of educated Indians, the elusiveness of "facts", are all taken into account. Consultation with the best Hindu and Moslem opinion is taken for granted as desirable. How much the Simon Commission, now at work with an exclusively British membership, will care to consider advice of this kind is a question.

Professor Gowen's *Outline History of Japan* (Appleton, \$4.00) is a sound compilation of known facts about that Empire. The natural inevitability of Japan's transformation from isolated feudalism to modern competition, due to influences internal as well as alien, is clearly stated, and a good case is made out for present policies. Professor Gowen believes that Showa, the present era of Enlightened Peace, is sincerely named.

Mr. Crosbie Garstin's book, *The Dragon and the Lotus* (Stokes, \$2.50), is last in the list because it solves no problem except the important one of keeping amused in a serious world. He went from London to Bangkok at high speed, tells of his travels in a sprightly way, decorates his text with apt drawings and vigorous ballads. He is a wise-cracking Herodotus in the little known south-east corners of the world. It is pleasant to conclude with a book on entertaining. Writers about the East, involved in trying to "explain", have a way of changing people into abstractions. Crosbie Garstin gets a lot of fun out of their reassuring humanity.

# A Shelf of Recent Books

## CABBAGE-HEADS AND KINGS

By Louis Sherwin

THE CORRESPONDENCE OF KING GEORGE III.  
*Vols. I, II, III, IV, and V, from 1760 to 1782. Edited by Sir John Fortescue. Macmillan. \$8.00 a volume.*

FOR all of a century and a quarter George III has been the pet whipping boy of the historiographer. "Nincompoop" was the kindest epithet applied to him, and his champions have been as few as General Sherman's in Georgia. So the principal novelty that emerges from the voluminous pages of his correspondence is a slightly different light on the character of this famous loser.

To me the fact seems obvious now that he was, personally, rather a decent old boy. Not merely because he did not rampage around cuckolding his subjects at their own expense in the manner of other members of his family. Quite aside from his notoriously domestic virtues, his letters are unmistakably those of a sincere, loyal, not ungenerous man with a strict code of honor. In short, a gentleman. To a man he liked, such as the hapless Lord North, he went out of his way to be kind. Not merely a condescending master, but a staunch and steadfast friend. Even to the family of the great Earl of Chatham, whom he despised "as the result of seventeen years' observation" he could be liberal with a thoroughly noble and disinterested gesture.

Neither does he appear to have been altogether the blockhead that the Whig and Liberal commentators have made him out. He worked not only hard but lucidly at every detail of the business of governing the United Kingdom and his electoral dominions. The equipment and organization of the troops, the material and personnel of the fleet, the search for the best men to be employed in the civil offices of state—all had minute and painstaking attention from George III. He knew something about every one of his officers, and

he was familiar with the construction of every ship and with the quality of the bolts used in his dockyards.

Unfortunately the one thing he did not know was the most important of all. His Majesty did not, to England's irreparable loss, know a good man when he saw one. He had the mediocre man's aversion for genius and he could not endure being surrounded by any but his own kind—to that extent anticipating democracy.

It was Britain's tragedy that such a magnifico of bourgeois qualities should be occupying the throne in an era and a crisis that called for either the brilliance and capacity of Frederick the Great or the incomparable tact of Augustus Caesar. A king with even half the latter's hard-won skill in ironing out feuds and jealousies, or his flair for picking capable lieutenants, would have so altered the world's history that we Americans probably would not now be drinking synthetic gin.

The recently published Volumes III and IV of these state papers carry us from 1773 to 1779, through the thick of the troubles with Chatham and the early years of the American War of Independence. They effectually help to demolish one amiable theory that was made popular through propaganda in the late war and naïvely perpetuated by H. G. Wells in "The Outline of History". The doctrine that the Revolution was a fight between the Colonists and the British Government and in no sense a conflict between the two countries is, of course, just plainly disingenuous rot. An overwhelming majority of the British people wanted the Americans to pay their share of the cost of the wars victoriously waged by Pitt. And the Colonists just as decidedly proposed to see England damned first. There was no section of Great Britain in which public opinion was not predominantly on the side of the King. His unpopularity was due to the fact that he did not win.

One gets from these papers a tremendous compassion for the much abused Lord North.