
A VARIED SHELF

THE HISTORY OF BRITISH CIVILIZATION by *Esmé Wingfield-Stratford* (HARCOURT, BRACE; TWO VOLS.; \$12.00)

It is no small task to compress within two volumes a history of British civilization from the time of the Piltdown skull to the catastrophic days of 1914; yet Mr. Wingfield-Stratford has done it with a skill that recalls Green's *History of the English People*. The clean pages, uncluttered by footnotes and vivid with telling phrase, are neither academic nor journalistic, but the work of an intellectual who follows English rather than Teutonic methods of scholarship. One begins to read and in five minutes the present has slipped away and one is back in primitive England, living again the conflict between Saxon and Norman, recognizing kinship with remote ancestors, understanding their struggles and sympathizing with their hopes and fears. The past has been recreated for us. Dead men walk the earth once more. Philosophies, Catholic and Protestant, systems of law, theories of kingcraft, principles of architecture, the economics of craft guilds—the body of ideals and institutions as well as the personalities of men—unfold themselves before us. There is a sense of continuity, of action and drama and the flux of life, that is as real as a stage play. Periods do not separate themselves mechanically nor great social movements become shut up in artificial bounds; they flow into each other and, as the stream of national experience broadens, it sweeps into an engulfing current the many-sided life of the English people. Politics, religion, economics, art, literature, manners, dress, customs, all fuse in a common integrated whole.

Is it true—this picture that Mr. Wingfield-

Stratford spreads before us in panoramic amplitude? Is it an authentic rehabilitation of long dead centuries? How do I know? How can anybody know? The Piltdown skull has no tongue in its jaws and York Cathedral is only a pile of chiselled stone. We try to trace the pattern from broken odds and ends and the only outcome is a guess. History is imagination playing over a handful of facts, seeking their hidden meaning, fusing them into a whole; and the excellence of these two volumes lies in the fact that centuries of British civilization have taken on life in the scholar's imagination and he has made them live again in ours.

I know nothing about Mr. Wingfield-Stratford except what these pages tell me, and they reveal an eager intellectual, competent in scholarship, familiar with all the creeds, programs, pretenses and hocus-pocus of present-day civilization, who turns the light of a fine intelligence upon a past that he loves. He is an artist as well who can compress a civilization into a phrase and dissect a character with an adjective. He is dissatisfied with the dull spademen who dig up their little plots and label their findings history; and he will have nothing to do with the philosophical historians who turn out plaster-of-paris casts of their own prejudices. He is, rather, a humanist whose heart goes out to the lovely dreams of Sir Thomas More; who puts aside the pessimism of the determinists and believes that by taking thought men may create a civilization worthy of the name; who looks forward wistfully to a potential Utopia as he looks back wistfully to the primitive Christian democracy before the rise of nationalism and capitalism set men by the ears and destroyed the commonwealth. Yet, he is a modern also, a sceptic in the matter of

current *isms*, immunized against the fallacies of present hopes, who, while the spademen are digging and the philosophers are modelling their plaster grotesques, prefers to enter the past through other portals. Psychology, sympathy, imagination—with these he will draw his scattered facts to a pattern and write the biography of England.

It is an impossible task, of course—to penetrate the hearts and minds of countless generations of Englishmen, to understand their motives and judge their works—a job where one is certain to go wrong at every turn. Chronicle history is possible but, when it comes to disintegrating generations into individuals and reintegrating them into social wholes, writing the biography of civilization, it is not possible. Yet, somehow, the impossible must be done and, English fashion, Mr. Wingfield-Stratford has done it and to one reader's mind has done it beautifully. Who can know whether it is true or not?

VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON

THIS BOOK-COLLECTING GAME by
A. Edward Newton (LITTLE, BROWN; \$5.00)

IN a little essay I once wrote about this author I said: "It is this knowing his books so well that constitutes much of the charm of Mr. Newton's writings about books. He knows what he is talking about and the variety of his tastes gives variety to his writings". To Mr. Newton book-collecting is the finest of indoor games and, as he says, it is a game in which each player may make his own rules. Probably Mr. Newton's first and most famous book, *The Amenities of Book-Collecting*, did more than any other to start people playing this game. This latest work, which he has proclaimed as his "bibliographical swan song", is destined to keep the players at it. Those who are looking for information about first editions, children's books, bindings, American literature, Dr. Johnson, the format of the English novel and a host of cognate subjects, will find it here, in lan-

guage "suited to the meanest capacities", as the old schoolbooks used to say. But it is not the tabular information that one finds in encyclopaedias and many bibliographies. It is so cleverly worked into the story of his own books that one absorbs information without knowing it.

Mr. Newton's books are little masterpieces of the familiar and friendly essay. The by-product of book-collecting, he says, is the acquiring of friends, and, as in the case of some manufacturing concerns, the by-products have come to surpass the original product in value. In *This Book-Collecting Game* Mr. Newton not only talks about books and their authors, he makes personal excursions into literature and life. Once his foot slips—when he comes to telling others what to collect and gives a list of "One Hundred Good Novels", he is making the rules by which others are to play the game, which is contrary to his own dictum, although he carefully avoids calling them the hundred "best". In many respects this volume is more informative than any of its predecessors. But it retains, with the authority, the humor, the informality, the cheerful prejudice, the delightful personality which have made Mr. Newton a "collected" author himself, and the book, with its wealth of illustrations and its fine typography, will add to his circle of readers and friends.

GEORGE H. SARGENT

THE CRADLE OF THE DEEP by *Joan Lowell* (SIMON & SCHUSTER; \$2.75)

SOME doubt has been cast upon the authenticity of this rattling chronicle of sixteen years and one month of life on the ocean waves. One critic has arisen to say that Joan Lowell's story of how she learned about Life from examining the innards of a female shark is biologically catawampus, since a shark is a fish and lays eggs, as a fish should. Miss Lowell's contention is that a shark is a mammal, like a whale. A careful investigation of the question reveals the fact that