

TROY UNCAPTURED

A Tale of Troy.

By John Masefield. (Heinemann.)

News from the Mountain.

By Richard Church. (Dent.)

On a prefatory page of "A Tale of Troy" the following note appears: "I Thank the beautiful Speakers who first told this tale on Midsummer Night, 1932." From which it would seem that this réchauffé of the story of the Trojan Wars was written for performance on Boar's Hill where, on the lips of the Beautiful Speakers, no doubt it made good entertainment. Like many other things that are perfectly suitable for home consumption, however, "A Tale



Richard Church.

of Troy" looks rather tawdry when brought out into the competitive light of the open market. The verse is dull and creaking. The thought is so thin that it often disappears altogether; as, for example:

"Paris came from a Trojan glen,
The prince of the world's young famous men,
With a panther's eye and a peacock air,
Even the goddesses wooed him then."

(Why "then"?) And again, when King Epeios tells of the journey of the Horse up the beach to the temple, he describes how the sea-gulls perched on the Horse's back, preened themselves, and then:

"... after shifting leg for leg, they slept
There in the sun above us."

(A difficult piece of observation, surely, for one cooped up in the belly of the beast?) Similarly, although it is on account of Cassandra's warnings that Priam commands the Horse to be taken into the temple, later on, when she confronts the priests with further warnings, reply is made that

"Cassandra has gone mad.
We cannot waken Priam for such madness.
He has forbidden us to listen to her."

And what is to be said when the Poet Laureate himself indulges in such verse as:

"He took her to Troy, the windy town,
Where the exploit gave him great renown,"

and:

"Then out the parties had to go again,"

and:

"Troy being takeless and the winter coming,"

(shade of Chaucer!) and:

"I... all jagged rocks
And gliddery boulders,"

(shade of Lewis Carroll!) and:

"... might end,
Soon end, in Victory, the lovely thing,"

and lastly, of Helen and Paris:

"The loveliest girl and the loveliest lad,
Ready to learn and ready to teach."

But such examples of amateurish versifying might be multiplied to the point of tedium. Why should the poem be allowed to go out into the world safe under the seal of the English Laureateship? It is not even as if Mr. Masefield had developed a new theory of the old legend. "A Tale of Troy" is manufactured from beginning to end; it is devoid of any kind of poetic inevitability; and it is sentimental—because it is insincere.

The poetry of Richard Church is altogether a different matter. To read his "News from the Mountain" after "A Tale of Troy" is like being transported straight out of the tedious calm of a Sargossa Sea into some almost robot-like, busy metropolis. There is even too much activity. Too many of the poems in Mr. Church's newest volume show signs of having been consciously worked up to a dramatic climax. It is as if he were afraid to trust his vivid powers of observation and so must needs make amends by improving on nature with a (not always sincere and often forced) dramatic twist. How else is to be explained the melodramatic stab in the example of the following last line?

"But being human, bound
By the capricious pull
Of laws all-powerful
Blood-fetter'd to the ground,
We feel, 'twixt kiss and kiss, death's dripping wound."

Similarly, it was a good conceit to see in hailstone-battered irises

"poor maids,
Who fell, and died on their own blades,"

but the conceit will not bear stretching out to the length of a poem. The fault must be emphasised because it lights a danger-signal for Mr. Church's genius. The dramatic metaphor can so easily become a trick to the detriment of what is surely Mr. Church's essential power: passionate lyricism.

Only a stern self-criticism can protect the poet from excess in this direction. Thinness of intellectual content may, at first reading, be apparently concealed beneath a vivid and startling dramatic metaphor; but once the reader has survived the first impact his impatience at discovering the ruse will only be the greater. It is this lack of stern self-criticism that prevents "News from the Mountain" from being as satisfactory a collection of poems as "The Glance Backward." How else is to be explained the fact that, for instance, side by side with the magnificent title-poem itself:

"We climbed
Together in the quiet, unhaunted wood,
Through silence, and the mist of underboughs
Falling in umber veils. Beyond the larches
We rose past boulders, gentian, coralline moss,
And touched the white paws of the mountain creature,
The first snow bedded in a breast of cowslips.
The padded claws dabbled in that fragrance.
Here we reached the roof of sober thought,
The ordered house of Man. Beyond it lay
The white panther, indolent in the light,
Dreaming its lithe and beautiful desire,
Calm snow-death, and the cruelty of ice..."

comes the forced emotion of "Crevasse"? And again, how else is to be explained the inclusion of the thin and altogether unworthy verses with which the volume ends?

When he cares to put the tight rein on his Muse, Mr. Church can be a true poet indeed—otherwise it would not be worth while emphasising such defects as are outlined above. "Then and Now," "The Hand-Glass of Death," and the title-poem are finer than anything we have yet had from his pen.

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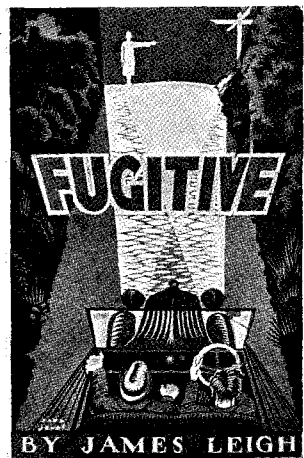
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TOWARDS TO-MORROW!

By Geoffrey West

An Outline for Boys and Girls and their Parents.

Edited by Naomi Mitchison. 8s. 6d. (Gollancz.)

Some years ago—round about the end of the War—Mr. H. G. Wells described the future of civilisation as a race between education and catastrophe, with all the odds on the latter. The uncomfortable truth of the metaphor grows more apparent every year, almost, it seems sometimes, every week. And education, frankly, continues to make a poor showing. A good teacher is a gladsome thing, God wot—but flowers are much easier to grow! Actually teachers, the younger ones at least, are in bulk as fine a body of men and women as may be found anywhere, but the yoke of “the system” is heavy upon them, and too many of their elderly fellows are more concerned with the security than the responsibilities of their position, with their “superiors” rather than their pupils. It is the fact of the system that makes the educational reformer more apt to deliver his attack from without, where he can bombard the whole front, than from within, where he can only irritate a minute sector. His fate is often curious. Wells, writing his “Outline of History” for educationalists, found it totally ignored by them, but a permanent best-seller with the general public. Mr. Gollancz, in his rôle as publisher, no doubt prays nightly for a best-seller. May he have it, as he deserves with this new “Outline” of his, but—if only he could wake up to find himself educational reformer also! We might then begin to see education as running neck-and-neck with that other more apocalyptic steed, instead of, as at present, about a mile and a half behind.

There are certain books, certain types of book, which every home with children should possess as a matter of course. This “Outline” is one of them. (But think of the countless homes in this our modern civilisation which simply cannot afford eight and sixpence even for a *necessary* book.) Children, save as their natural instinct is stifled, are everlastingly curious, and they should be provided with the means to satisfy that curiosity in such a way as not to allay, but stir, their imaginations. Arthur Mee’s “Children’s Encyclopedia,” with all its limitations, had that precious quality. The present volume, if addressed to slightly older boys and girls—but from eleven or twelve up—is pregnant with it.

Compared with the same publisher’s “Outline of Modern Knowledge,” issued at the same price, the “Outline for Boys and Girls” is no less a miracle of cheapness. If there are nearly two hundred pages less (but over nine hundred still) and if the type is larger (an improvement really), still the paper is thicker and there are one hundred and sixty odd drawings and diagrams by William Kermode and Ista Brouncker. The series of portraits of the various contributors, with comments by Mrs. Mitchison, is particularly interesting. In one respect the book improves upon the “Modern Knowledge”—it is much better co-ordinated; not only is there constant cross-reference, but a real co-operation between the contributors. More, Mrs. Mitchison has bestowed upon them all, by selection or persuasion, a common point of view, modern, liberal, looking to the future but with a keen sense of the past. The whole book is, as she says, planned on a definite scheme. “It is all working outward, from Me or You (the one thing of whose existence one is fairly certain) to the Universe. From Now (the present) to all time, past and future.”

The first part, “Science,” after a brief but first-rate

chapter on “What Science Can Do (and What It Cannot),” by John Pilley—every scientist should read this, for there are still grandmothers in their ranks who *need* to be taught to suck eggs—and a History of Science, guaranteed by the names of Dr. and Mrs. Charles Singer, starts with the human immediacies of Physiology (Professor Winifred Cullis and Dr. E. H. Hewer) and Psychology (Dr. Eric Strauss), proceeds to the larger realm of Biology (Dr. J. R. Baker) and Applied Biology (N. W. Pirie), narrows to the analysis of Chemistry (Mr. Pilley again), broadens to Richard Hughes’s discussion of Physics, Astronomy and Mathematics, and plunges into the past to consider the formation and structure of the Earth (Robert Stoneley). They are all good essays, clear, concise, complete. We are a long way to-day from the time when Huxley—was it?—writing a textbook of Physiology, was forbidden by his publishers to deal with reproduction! We are a long way too from the rigidity of nineteenth century science in Dr. Singer’s typical admission that “the nature of life remains still essentially incomprehensible, or at least explicable only in terms of itself. And there are whole realms of experience too, where the laws of science are quite inapplicable.” Here is a liberating, a truly modern science.

The second section, “Civilisation,” studies, in the widest sense, “people in groups.” Again it opens with history—an Outline of World History (N. Niemeyer and E. Ashcroft) and a History of Ideas (Gerald Heard, whose every word deserves adult attention—but so really does the whole book!)—and then broadens out from The Family (Charles Skepper) to the Organisation of Society in the Past (Margaret Cole), the Last Thirty Years (Lance Beales), the Peoples of the World (C. Delisle Burns), Law and Government (G. R. Mitchison), Economics (Hugh Gaitskell—his simple account of a puzzling subject is a real achievement), and Problems and Solutions (Olaf Stapledon). Messrs. Heard’s and Stapledon’s essays may be the last children will come to; they may prove, ultimately, the most seminal in their imaginative visioning of the psychology of past and future.

The third section enters the realm of values, “what makes civilisation worth living in or for”—the sphere of the arts: Dancing and Drama (Beryl de Zoete), Visual Art (Professor R. Y. Gleadowe), Architecture (Clough Williams-Ellis), Writing (Wystan Auden), and Music (J. B. Trend). Each is shown feeling in its own way towards that pattern, that rhythm, in life, the evocation of which is beauty.

“When we read a book,” says Mr. Auden, “it is as if we were with a person. A book is not only the meaning of the words inside it; it is the person who means them.” One is aware of that in reading all these essays—in the best of them continuously. They have a living, an imaginative quality that children will, I believe, respond to. This is a book to leave young readers alone with; they may pass portions by, but they will return to them, drawn by the personalities of the authors as well as by the real interest of most of the matter. It is a forward-looking book to attract to itself the intelligence, and to its clear ideal of a planned world society the loyalty, of the younger generation. It should be circulated just as widely as is possible. Parents should read it, and give it to their children. Teachers especially should read it. It should be in every school and public library in the country. As not it perhaps but its ideals succeed, so is there hope for the future.