

## SELECTED NOTICES

*The Eighteenth Century Background*, by Basil Willey. Chatto. 15s.

If the number of times it is mentioned in contemporary footnotes is any guide, Basil Willey's *The Seventeenth Century Background* is already a standard work on the subject. His new survey of the following century is a welcome sequel and should be as highly valued. The Victorians and the Elizabethans still await Mr. Willey's attention, and I hope he will tackle them without delay; they are indeed necessary for the completion of his picture of post-Reformation thought, which loses some of its unity by a necessarily arbitrary division into centuries.

*The Eighteenth Century Background* has as its sub-title, 'Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period'. 'Nature' is one of those pantechnecon concepts which accommodate the most diverse elements and which provide us with virtually unlimited opportunities for saying the same thing without revealing our differences of meaning. It is indeed a cult word, a word with an elaborate *mystique*, which almost all thinkers try to annex for the sake of its prestige. Christian and atheist agree in this, if in nothing else, that what is *contra naturam* is therefore bad. Perhaps no century more than the eighteenth has so ardently exalted Nature and striven to give it precise definition, and perhaps no century has produced such numerous and irreconcilable expositions of the same concept. The exploratory splitting-up of 'Nature' into natural religion, rationalism, natural and perfectible man, a vague theism and an even vaguer pantheism, produced what we are apt to think of as characteristically nineteenth-century thought, and still dominates our own intellectual climate.

'Nature' became dynamite when the Christian synthesis broke up. To reject the doctrine of Original Sin and the idea of Divine Revelation is to become uncertain both about Man's nature (his essential quiddity) and his place in Nature

(the evident Cosmos). Fortunately the 'vegetable universe'—in Blake's phrase—presents itself as the *magnum opus* of a supernatural architect, and thus breaks the fall on a cushion of theism. God is still on the map, even if He has been bypassed. But the student of Nature (in all its ambiguities of meaning) makes other discoveries: that it is subject to deterministic conditions and to entropy, and that it offsets this by an inherent principle of constant self-maintenance. The first analogy suggests that Man is 'caused' by environment and circumstance, the second suggests that he is informed with a principle of 'natural' goodness. This innate perfectibility would show an inevitable upwards graph if men were not hampered by the artificial (i.e. 'unnatural') conventions of society; and here the right use of Reason enters to remove the obstacles which block the progress of emancipation. In the sphere of Nature, vernal and visible, there is the same progress towards the untrammelled essence. The ruined priory of Shenstone's *ferme ornée* marks the first stage, when Kames awarded Horticulture a full-blue among the Arts; but a stricter primitivism required virginity in Nature—the beauty of an 'unspoiled' countryside, the nobility of original and spontaneous Man, the eloquent promises potential in the basic 'nature' of mankind. The French Revolution and the Romantic Movement (epitomised in Mr. Willey's account by Godwin and Wordsworth) came as the consequences of eighteenth-century speculation, seeking to restore the virgin condition of pre-Adamic Man and to fulfil his promises. As a philosophical tradition it suffers from that intellectual equivalent of entropy, which ravages all Thought that fails to reduce its epistemology to a viable dogma about the nature of Man. The wreckage of it still dominates Europe, and we are the heirs to its disorder. Mr. Willey need make no apology for summarising such a subject in a time of war, for it is most intimately relevant. Hume, Hartley, Priestley and their colleagues merit our attention, and Mr. Willey has made them accessible in a lucid and compact framework. I wish he had not kept himself so modestly off-stage, since his rare comments are acute,

and I wish he had shown the relation of Philosophy to Literature: the connection between Shaftesbury and Richardson is worth noting, so, likewise, are the researches of Shenstone and Bishop Percy, and the full treatment of Wordsworth enhances one's surprise at the entire omission of Blake. These things aside, Mr. Willey has provided a comprehensive and most admirable survey.

## DESMOND HAWKINS

*Jail Journey*, by Jim Phelan. Secker & Warburg, 12/6. In a book that is always lively and readable, the thing that stands out as truly important is Mr. Phelan's straightforward discussion of the sex life of prisons. The existing penal system simply ignores the fact that man is a sexual animal. In Mr. Phelan's book, and especially in Chapters XIV-XVI, you can study the results of this, and they make horrible reading, but genuinely horrible, and not just pornography in disguise.

The essential fact about a prison is that it is a place where you are cut off from the opposite sex. As Mr. Phelan points out, it is not enough to say that this is part of the punishment; it *is* the punishment. And sex-deprivation does not simply mean the cutting-off of a luxury, like tobacco, but the starvation of a powerful instinct which will take its revenge in one way or another. It is perfectly well known to anyone with even a third-hand acquaintance with prisons that nearly all prisoners are chronic masturbators. In addition there is homosexuality, which is almost general in long-term jails. If Macartney's *Walls Have Mouths* is to be believed, some prisons are such hotbeds of vice that even the warders are infected. Mr. Phelan's revelations are less lurid, but they are certainly bad enough. Over sixty unnatural forms of the sexual act, he says, are now practised in Dartmoor and Parkhurst. The thing is taken for granted and joked about by prisoners, warders and everyone else connected with a prison, at the same time as it cannot even be