

# BOOKS ABROAD

JEREMIAH WELLS

THE FATE OF HOMO SAPIENS. By H. G. Wells. London: Secker and Warburg. 1939.

(Henry W. Nevinson in the *Listener*, London)

**S**IDE by side with Bernard Shaw, Mr.

Wells has been for nearly forty years the major prophet of English-speaking people, and prophets have seldom been cheerful or cheering. Except for a few passages in Isaiah and the Revelation, the Jewish prophets were Wailing Walls. Plato saw that Athens was rushing to ruin. Carlyle and Ruskin were full of lamentation and woe. It is the part of a prophet to perceive his people's errors, to warn, to castigate, and, if possible, to guide. Mr. Wells admirably fulfills all these parts; even the last. He also, like Saul, is among the prophets.

Of all his prophetic books I think this is the best and most definite. Crammed with thought and knowledge, it is difficult to criticize in detail, but the main purpose is never in doubt, and it is written regardless of common opinion. There is much to offend our Labour Party equally with the Communists, and even more to offend the followers of all the main systems of religion. His aspect of religion reminds one of Goethe's saying: 'Who has art and science has religion too, but who has neither art nor science had better have religion.' Mr. Wells's aspect is entirely irreligious in the ordinary meaning of the word, though he reveals a deeper meaning when he writes: 'The world as I see it today is altogether more marvelous, mysterious and profound,' a saying which reminds one of Herbert Spencer's awe in the face of the universal mystery.

But Mr. Wells reviews the forms and rites of the accepted religions and sternly rejects them all, reserving his strongest denunciation for the Catholic Church. He

regards that Church as 'the most formidable single antagonist in the way of readjustment to the dangers and frustration that now close in upon us all.' As to Protestantism: 'It culminates in atheism without qualification.' Does he, then, condemn it? Not at all. 'Its final stage is a world of grown men, free from superstitious fear, and free equally from belief in any guidance of the world that can relieve them from responsibility for the shortcomings and failures of our race.'

The Prophet admits that he has lost most of those hopes that inspired thinkers toward the end of last century, when they liked to call themselves 'meliorists,' sang 'Say not the struggle naught availeth,' and expected the redemption of mankind by Free Trade, Parliaments and imitations of the British faith and institutions. We put our hopes too high, he now thinks, and he has no such hopes left. But he still looks to the study of biology and ecology as possible means of salvation. That new-fangled word 'Ecology' implies the adjustment or adaptation to surroundings for want of which the primeval monsters of earth gradually disappeared, as mankind will disappear unless we adjust ourselves to Nature. Some ninety years ago Tennyson in his noblest poem raised the same question of our destiny:—

*'So careful of the type?' but no.*

*From scarped cliff and quarried stone*

*She cries 'a thousand types are gone:*

*I care for nothing, all shall go.'*

That was Nature's warning, and mankind may be no exception. Mr. Wells makes little account of the appalling forecast that with mankind all arts and literature will slowly be absorbed in slime.

In his subsequent review of the world's peoples the Prophet finds little ground for hope. In spite of a violent contempt for Marx, he rather favors the Russians,

though he calls their country a huge monster with the brain of a newt. He strongly approves of Franklin Roosevelt as a Socialist, but regards the States as a huge monster with the brain of a horse. He loathes the restricting tyranny of Hitler, but thinks Mussolini's Fascism rather less hideous in comparison. He sees little hope in the superstitions of India or the ignorance of Africa. As to ourselves, he naturally charges us with ingrained snobbery and futile traditions, while his onslaught upon our present Prime Minister is equaled in violence only by his assault upon the Catholic Church.

Another approaching danger to the human race was clearly perceived at the beginning of the Great War, when thousands of energetic young men, under the stress and boredom of a mechanized life, could find no outlet for their energy but war. I have seen much of war in all its forms, but I could never write such a description or anticipation of modern war as the Prophet gives us here. It is overwhelming; a picture far more loathly than those dragons of the prime. It is the decline of Man to their level, only to be escaped by adjustment, by that 'ecology' which may be developed by a 'World Brain.' How that World Brain is to grow from the union of a newt's brain with the brain of a horse is not explained. 'Either life is just beginning for mankind or it is drawing very rapidly to its close,' says Mr. Wells in his conclusion. To some small extent, I suppose, the choice of readjustment is still open to us, and we must hope, though hope is slight.

### CHIN P'ING MEI

THE GOLDEN LOTUS. *Translated from the Chinese by Clement Egerton. London: Routledge. 1939.*

(Raymond Mortimer in the *New Statesman and Nation*, London)

THE Chinese novel known as *Chin P'ing Mei* was written about 350 years ago. The identity of its author is uncertain,

and the work contains patches from another hand. 'Till the twentieth century,' I quote from Mr. Arthur Waley's preface to *Dream of the Red Chamber*, 'the Chinese did not class novels and plays as literature. . . . This no doubt is due partly to a Puritan attitude with which our own eye is not altogether unfamiliar. Love, it is assumed, should exist only as a means to procreation. Between whiles, lest it should acquire a scandalous prestige of its own, it ought not to be written about or discussed. Fiction, in China or elsewhere, insists upon treating love as a romantic passion rather than a bourgeois obligation . . .' The *Chin P'ing Mei* was not merely despised by the scholars, it was suppressed, toward the end of the 17th century, by the authorities. The author, indeed, treats love as gallantry rather than romance. Entitled *The Golden Lotus*, the first English translation has now appeared—another version is promised for the autumn.

I began reading the book with some trepidation—it runs to over 1,500 pages—but I continued to the end, and the experience was fascinating. Meanwhile, two friends picked up each a volume, and soon found themselves immersed. I conclude that the book is likely to have a wider appeal than one might suppose. But *The Golden Lotus* is not a second *Tale of Genji*—it is not even, as far as I can judge, a great novel. The author is remarkable neither for imaginative power nor for intensity of feeling. There are many pretty turns of phrase, but I suspect them to be traditional. This is a prosaic book about commonplace people. Here indeed, I think, is the explanation of its charm: gradually, like an archæologist piecing together the evidence provided by palæolithic cave-dwellings or the excavations of a Knossos, we find the picture of a past society designing itself in our imagination. Similarly, Macaulay's New Zealander centuries hence might deduce Victorian England from the novels of Trollope.

In this society there is little we could

call 'thought,' religion is mere ritual, all the energetic characters behave badly. *The Golden Lotus*, indeed, professes to be a cautionary tale about a corrupt man in a corrupt society, and occasionally the author directly addresses us to point a moral, but he impresses one not by any distinction of mind but by the acuteness of his observation. This novel is far more realistic than the cinematographic epics of Zola, or the sumptuous embroideries of Flaubert. Money, food, drink and love-making are the preoccupations of the characters. The 'hero' is a young man living in a city near Shantung, during a period of misrule, nominally during the Sung Dynasty. The action is divided between his seraglio (where he keeps six wives, a daughter, a son-in-law and a number of servants) and the outside world, where by smart trading he increases his inherited fortune, and by well-placed bribery attains official powers. A blend of Casanova and Rockefeller, for three volumes he continues to get more wealth and more women; then the moral of the book, rather belatedly, is driven home; he dies from an overdose of aphrodisiac, and catastrophes overwhelm his accomplices.

The character-drawing is less remarkable, I think, than the translator suggests, but one character, the Golden Lotus herself, is a masterpiece of fascinating villainy, reminding one of Mme. Hulot in *La Cousine Bette*. Anyone who has visited the labyrinthine Seraglio at Constantinople or the Ali Kapi at Isfahan must have tried to imagine the pullulation that once obtained there—not a *Scheherezade* lavishness of lovelies, but swarms of fat, idle, illiterate women, crowded together, quarrelling, spying, lying, eating sweets. Modified by the refinement of Chinese taste and the elaboration of Chinese manners, the life of a gynæceum is in this novel most convincingly painted: we watch the jealousies between the wives, reflected and intensified in the jealousies between their servants; the tale-bearing, the visits of greedy relations, the humilia-

tions, the petty cruelties, the incessant intrigues. The women are less exactly segregated than among Moslems, they receive male relations and on occasion strangers; they drink wine.

The prostitute plays an important part in social life: several of the hero's wives began as 'singing girls,' and when ladies give a party to their female friends, they send to the brothel for entertainers, who are warmly welcomed, even visiting the nursery. Nuns, monks and professional 'go-betweens' (female marriage-brokers) busy themselves with various mischiefs. There is a perpetual interchange of presents, silk, silver, pigs and stuffed ducks being specially appreciated; slaves play Leporello or Antinous; justice is based upon bribery and torture; security depends upon protectors, who themselves may fall, at the Imperial Court; and ultimately the fate of each individual is determined by his horoscope.

The peculiar interest of *The Golden Lotus*, I think, is that it describes with detailed naturalism a society conspicuous for material elegance. If Defoe had lived in the Venice of Titian or of Tiepolo, he might have produced a European equivalent. I doubt if our Chinese author was remarkable for æsthetic sensibility, but he belonged to a civilization with a great tradition of style in art, manners and every department of life; his writing, in verse as well as in prose, is full of phrases and images that are no doubt conventional but surprise and enchant the ignorant Western reader. He has great skill in narrative, so that we always want to know what happens next; and toward the end of the book we perceive that he has a wider sweep of imagination than we had supposed, for the destinies of the characters after the hero's death do more than point a moral—they reveal the inevitable hand of Nemesis.

How far this English version is accurate I cannot tell, but it reads very smoothly, and the style is both euphonious and matter-of-fact. Professor Giles declared

that the translator of the *Cbin P'ing Mei* would need the nerve of a Burton, and at moments Colonel Egerton has taken refuge in the decent obscurity of a learned tongue, which is much preferable to mutilating the original. But the numerous readers who are pained by the details of love-making, though they delight in the details of murder, are advised, even if they know no Latin, to leave this book alone. For my part I am profoundly grateful to the translator for the long labors that have given me a singular and most-pleasurable experience.

### LAUGHTER DOWN THE YEARS

IN PRAISE OF COMEDY: A STUDY IN ITS THEORY AND PRACTICE. By *James Feibleman*. London: *Allen and Unwin*. 1939.

(Sean O'Casey in the *Sunday Times*, London)

HERE in this book, if we haven't a full and perfect account, we have at least a sufficient account of what comedy has been, what it is today, and what it may be like tomorrow. The author has evidently wandered over a world of literature so that he may be able to put before the reader the funny face of comedy, looking through a glass brightly, beginning with the cave man, sitting over his smoky fire, and thinking of all the funny things he will presently engrave upon the wall of his dark dwelling-place, up to the day of Charlie Chaplin and James Joyce. We see comedy prancing about everywhere, in the glory of Greece and the grandeur of Rome, in business, in fashion, in politics—except in the one thing called religion.

It is interesting to read in this valuable book the strange explanations of comedy given by different thinkers who go by the bigger name of philosophers. For instance, some fellow named Gottsched took 'the aristocracy as the norm for reasons of respect, and it was only natural that the only faults he could discover in this light were petty errors committed by the middle class in its efforts to ape the aristocracy.'

The book goes on to tell about the theories put forward by various thinkers to explain the antics of indifferent and dancing Comedy: the nominalistic, by Hobbes; genteel, by Meredith; subjective-metaphysical, by Bergson; subjective-literary, by Jankelevitch; Leacock and others; psychoanalytic, by Freud; and the logical, by Zuercher and Graves; till the mind of the reader reels out a warning to dancing Comedy against a nervous breakdown, and begs her to sit down and rest a little so that he may think these things out in quietude and peace.

There is an interesting chapter on the close relation between comedy and tragedy. It seems to me the following is but a common truth: 'There is nothing that does not have its tragic as well as its comic aspect.' But this truth, common as it is, has been derided, especially on the stage, by the successful efforts made to divide the one from the other. Somewhere, sometime, tragedy of some sort comes into every man's life; but through this darkness there is always a seam of laughing light, and well for us it is so, for by laughter can man surmount the insurmountable, and we remember Cuchullain laughing loud, as he lay dying, at the antics of the raven slipping about in the blood that flowed from his wounds.

Religion, politics, and life itself need more comedy than they are allowed to get—comedy that is free from sanctimonious timidity and triviality, comedy that will slap the face hard, and, if necessary, will even cut to the bone so that the things laughed at may shed some of their vanity and fooleries. Richer and deeper comedy than the respectable fun of *Alice in Wonderland*, that hits too light and runs away too quick.

So argues this book, agreeing with Nietzsche, who could not believe in a god that never laughed. And if the somewhat dry nature of the writing be overlooked, here we have a study of Comedy running through all its degrees that is well worth reading.

# OUR OWN BOOKSHELF

## BACKGROUND TO SEPTEMBER 3

NOT PEACE BUT A SWORD. By Vincent Sheean.  
New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company.  
1939. 367 pages. \$2.75.

MR. SHEEAN'S book is a bitter and compelling description of the year of Fascist victories, March, 1938, to March, 1939. Somehow or other, or perhaps because he has the foresight of a good journalist, he always managed to be on hand when decisive events were taking place in Spain, Czecho-Slovakia and elsewhere in Europe. Readers of *Personal History* need not be told that he has turned out an eloquent tract; more important, he has written a call to arms against the fury of Hitlerism.

The epilogue of *Not Peace But a Sword* was finished on March 20, 1939, a few days after Hitler had marched into Prague. By that time Mr. Sheean had very definite opinions about the responsibility for Czecho-Slovakia's tragedy, for Spain's conquest by General Franco and his German and Italian henchmen. The villain of the European piece, as Mr. Sheean saw it, was Neville Chamberlain and men of his type in Britain and France 'who consistently put the interests' of their own class above those of their 'own nation or of humanity itself.'

Mr. Sheean doesn't stop there. In Prague, on the night of September 29, 1938, he learned of Munich. 'From that night on I knew that France and Britain would never fight for anything worth fighting for; that their resistance, when it came, would come for their money-bags or for their empires, never for a principle of any consequence to the human race; that no pledged word, no law and no reason could henceforth count in the processes by which governments determined the fate of mankind.'

Perhaps Mr. Sheean has now changed his mind. Was he at the radio, listening on the morning of September 3, when the tragic voice of Neville Chamberlain declared, 'We shall be fighting against brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution, and against them I am certain that right will prevail.' Has he read what Mr. Chamberlain told Parliament that day, 'I trust I may live to see the day when Hitlerism has been destroyed and a

restored and liberated Europe has been reestablished?'

Mr. Sheean is probably ready now to change a few of his conclusions. Nevertheless, his criticism of British and French policy in the year prior to the conquest of Prague still stands. For it is likely that if British and French statesmen had understood from the beginning the aims and methods of Hitler—as it was their duty to do—the headlines from Europe today would be different. Had they taken a stand earlier against Hitler and Mussolini they might have had a better chance to head off war.

Much of Mr. Sheean's book is devoted to his observations of the fighting and of the life in war-torn Spain. Here are some of his best pages. Here, and in the rest of the volume, are powerful portraits. Here, in other words, is a book which provides a tragic background for the war which is now upon us.

—SHEPARD STONE

## SOCIOLOGY AS ART

AMERICAN SOCIAL PROBLEMS. By Howard Odum. New York: Henry Holt and Company.  
1939. 549 pages. \$4.00.

NO OTHER volume of general sociology even remotely approaches this one by the director of the Institute for Research in Social Science of the University of North Carolina. Written clearly, and frequently with considerable eloquence, it presents all the major problems of contemporary America, and from every angle, historical, political, economic, æsthetic, religious, and in the international frame-work. The colossal amount of information in it does not hinder the reader, for Dr. Odum has managed to weave it into a stirring story, at once rigorously scientific and genuinely patriotic. Often, and most unusual for an academician, he stops to transform a mass of facts and historical attitudes into a brief prose poem that brings back the aroma of events and people that have become mere chronicle. This, for example, comes from the section dealing with the natural resources of colonial America:

'Whatever of romance and beauty may have been in the earlier forest picture must have been reflected in hidden ways or in retro-