

The Million Words of Mr. Barnes

THE HISTORY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION, by Harry Elmer Barnes. Illustrated. Two vols., 911 and 1170 pages. New York. Harcourt Brace and Company. \$10.

THE difference between experts and sociologists has been said to lie in the fact that experts know more and more about less and less, whereas sociologists know less and less about more and more. Mr. Barnes is a sociologist. He is also, in intent, a political scientist, a criminologist, a journalist, a teacher, and a historian. To suggest that he is jack of all trades and master of none would be unkind. He has to a peculiar degree the type of encyclopedic erudition which passes for learning in American academic circles. He compiles bibliographies. He masses footnotes. He quotes authorities. He persuades other professors to read proofs. He pours forth hundreds of thousands of words and gets them published. Often he gets people to read them, for his liberal middle-class attitudes are seasoned with just the correct amount of heterodoxy to induce liberal reviewers to dub him "provocative" and "stimulating." In these "scholarly" arts he has no peer.

But for all of this Mr. Barnes is not a scholar and in all likelihood will never be one. He is a pedantic popularizer. In this ambivalent role lies his strength and weakness. Clemenceau once said: "Briand knows nothing and understands everything; Poincare knows everything and understands nothing." Mr. Barnes is like Poincare, whom he once accused of having instigated the Great War. He knows the literature of philosophy but understands no philosophy. He knows names and books in many fields of knowledge but understands none of them. He is never guilty of an original idea and seldom develops fully the implications of old ideas. He is an admirable copy-writer and stage manager. He can organize and display in brave parade half the learning of the world. But he cannot think, analyze, interpret, integrate or synthesize. As a rehasher, he is unsurpassed. As a creative intellect, his rating is zero.

These characteristics were never displayed to better advantage (and disadvantage) than in this literally monumental effort to write "new" history. The merits of this work will exhaust the superlatives of reviewers. It is colossal, gigantic, stupendous. It is readable and refreshing. It is packed with facts. There are few errors, thanks to the author's meticulousness and to his dozens of academic proof-readers. Here in well organized form are the elements of archaeology, anthropology, geography, sociology, economics, theology, military science, education, penology, law literature, astronomy, chemistry, physics, mathematics, folklore, etc. The index is excellent. The book is a gold mine of information. It will probably be a gold mine

of royalties, since it will doubtless be adopted as a history text in many colleges and will be purchased by the kind of people who liked Wells' *Outline of History*.

This circumstance, coupled with the fulsome praise of the more respectable reviewers, should enable Mr. Barnes to bear with fortitude a few comments which might otherwise be painful. These volumes are not history, "new," "old" or otherwise. Neither do they contain very much (apart from some well-chosen quotations) which would enable the reader to understand the development of Western Civilization. Masses of unrelated facts are not a contribution to knowledge, any more than a pile of bricks is a house, or a series of still photographs, lacking in continuity, a motion picture. Mr. Barnes' "history" is static, not dynamic. It has movement only through tricks of style and cross references, not by virtue of the material itself. From Pithecanthropus to Pharoah, from Lyncurgus to Luther, from Heraclitus to Hitler, from Sargon to Stalin the tale proceeds. But it is not a narrative and still less an interpretation of a narrative. The subject matter is dead, disintegrated, disparate. There is no *motif*, no sequence of causation, no dialectical progression, no theme of unity, no clue whatever to the meaning of all the sound and fury, the science and superstition, the order and chaos, the beauty and despair of the human adventure.

Why? In the first place, Mr. Barnes has misconceived the mission of the "new history." He assumes that cultural and institutional history is somehow more important than political and military history. But the older historians who confined themselves to political and military events did, within their limitations, deal with intelligible processes

of change. Because these processes were sufficiently intelligible by themselves, late historians delved into economic, social and cultural changes for explanations of political change. The springs of political action and the dynamics of politics can in part be revealed in this fashion. Mr. Barnes, however, has forgotten what his cultural materials are supposed to explain. He slights political events and all but omits military events. There are no decisive battles in these two thousand pages (the Napoleonic Wars get three lines, though Caesar's conquest of Gaul receives three pages), despite the fact that the destinies of mankind have often been determined for generations to come by the clash of armies. There are descriptions of political institutions, but almost no political history, though the State has ever been the dominant agency of social control and the arts of politics have often decided the weal or woe of millions. The cultural materials are interesting and no doubt worthy of attention by themselves. But they throw no light on social processes. By themselves they are irrelevant both to history and social science.

In the second place, Mr. Barnes, like most historians, not only has no perspective, no criteria of selection and interpretation, no standards of judgment, but he is proud of this failing. He sets out to tell "the whole story of human development." He modestly offers the reader "the complete record of man's development on our planet." "This book . . . is not based upon any preconceived notion of social evolution, nor have I been governed by any rigid schematic conception of historical interpretation." Does Mr. Barnes tell the "whole story"? Obviously not. No one could, in a million words nor in ten million words. Such a record would be meaningless. He necessarily selects facts for inclusion, exclusion, casual mention and emphasis. But he selects

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purpose in mind, with no goal explicitly formulated and stated, with no objective of presentation which will explain human interrelationships and the nature of social change. He selects blindly and in accordance with his subjective and unacknowledged prejudices. These prejudices, while familiar enough, are neither organized nor consistent with one another. Mr. Barnes likes science and dislikes revealed religion. He hates France and loves Germany. He is interested in Russia and not interested in Spain. He admires democracy and scorns dictatorships. He is skeptical of capitalism and sympathetic toward social radicalism. Admirable (or detestable) as these prejudices may be, their unconscious use as criteria of selection results only in hodge-podge.

In such a work, any unifying scheme of interpretation would be preferable to none. Buckle, Hegel, Marx, all gave meaning to history in terms of some central theme of causation. Barnes toys with all these schemes, accepts none and ejects none, but cooks them all up together in a murky soup. He leans towards Marxism cautiously—presenting the English, American and French Revolutions as middle-class revolts, describing Finance Capitalism, perceiving the class implications of fascism, evaluating realistically the American Constitution, the Supreme Court and the New Deal, and devoting a whole chapter to Soviet Russia. But he does not (or will not) comprehend historical materialism. He cannot relate social stratifications to modes of production (for example, he discusses manorial economy *after* the feudal social system), nor can he understand the social bases of culture and the class content of politics.

This is not to say that all history written from a non-Marxian viewpoint is worthless. Only fanatics would accept such a position. But Marx offered an interpretation of history which does explain social change and political change.

Barnes has no consistent viewpoint and no illuminating explanation of anything. He has, in short, no *Weltanschauung*—and without this no history of civilization can have the slightest significance. These volumes have no significance save as an encyclopedia of unrelated facts. They contain only Mr. Barnes lost in a million words.

ARNOLD W. BARTELL.

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Miner vs. Fink

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BLACK EARTH, by Thomas Rowan. Hillman-Curl, Inc. \$2.50.

I WOULD like to see Tom Tippet and Thomas Rowan both start working in the same mine and then I'd like to see which side of the barbed wire these two writers would select in the event of a strike. My point is this. I'm willing to bet my right arm up to the elbow that we would find Tippet at his post on the picket line and Mr. Rowan scabbing for all he's worth (his worth, incidentally, to the mine bosses as a scab would prove immeasurably more than his value to his publisher). Mr. Rowan's allegedly true account of the Alabama mine fields is a unique piece of pornographic penny-dreadful writing. Inasmuch as I am not a book critic but a field organizer, I hope the editors of *THE NEW MASSES* will permit me the liberty of going out of bounds for a moment. In short—Mr. Rowan's book (my apologies to Margaret Marshall and Mary McCarthy) stinks. I feel safe in stating that even Hearst who specializes in horror stories of gentlemen returning from the Soviet Union via the Chicago loop, would not hire Mr. Rowan for his anti-Red slobberings, merely because Rowan is too obviously a rat and writes like one.

The author of *Black Earth* tips his hand on the book jacket when he says, "I assure you most faithfully that I do not base this book only on the types of union leaders it was my lot to know in the coal fields of Jefferson County, Alabama. I base it—and with the full knowledge of what I am saying—on leaders and organizers I have met and known from the Atlantic and Pacific. I have been on both sides of the fence—a striker and a strike-breaker."

And I, in turn, assure Mr. Rowan most faithfully—at the risk of being accused of practicing clairvoyance—that the only time he could ever have been even slightly accused of being a striker was that particular time when he found the picket lines so solid that it wasn't worth his skin to try to abide by his congenital inclinations. So, undoubtedly, he stayed on strike with the lads who would have softened him to a bleeding pulp if he had tried to sneak into the pits. He "struck."

Mr. Rowan says that he doesn't like unions. He doesn't like union organizers. He doesn't like miners. He absolutely hates strikes. In one passage, after ranting for several full pages, thus: "God damn union organizers! Why in hell couldn't they go to work and earn their living by a little toil instead of the constant wagging of their tongues? . . . Were they all so ungodly cowardly . . . while they *themselves* kept their precious souls and bodies far back and safely clear when filthy and stomach revolting work was

to be done?" . . . he goes on to describe a rallying of striking miners to prevent a trainload of scabs coming into the mine, as "like buzzards on the wing, they came from every direction."

Throughout the book, which tells the heart-rending story of a poor but oh-so-loyal-to-the-company miner, Mr. Rowan pauses every third word or so to describe the miners as "bullet headed, gorilla like, surely not born from the womb of a woman" or as being on the picket lines because "it kept their nagging women-folk from seeing the actual cowardice quivering and shaking like jelly-fat beneath their skins."

The story, aside from the general stench, is stupid. The loyal miner, confused by the false promises of the organizers, strikes, witnesses the strikers slaughtering a whole trainload of scabs, goes back to work, falls in love with the superintendent's daughter, loses a leg in the mine (romantically!), comes out of the hospital and hobbles on one leg (just in the nick of time) up on the platform of the union meeting and (rah, rah!) wraps himself in an American flag and prevents the second strike from taking place. The "hogfat" union organizers get theirs in the neck from the suddenly aroused miners who murder them while singing the Star Spangled Banner. The organizers get killed, and by some strange quirk of the author's mind his hero dies too. In fact, at the end of the book, everybody seems to die. Is the author of *Black Earth* around?

Rowan is by nature a Bergoff "noble." He probably wrote *Black Earth* between breaking strikes. I feel a little sorry for the publishers who were wangled into printing the book. In fact, I feel so sorry that if they will drop me a line I'll get them in touch with a big paper concern who will give them a fair price (by the pound) for the unsold copies of *Black Earth*. Perhaps I'm a little too sensitive in suggesting this roundabout way of disposing of the book.

I am reluctant to give my opinion, on the same page, of Tom Tippet's really splendid story of the early struggles of the miners in *Horse Shoe Bottoms*. After reading *Black Earth*, it's very much like coming out of a slaughter house and plunging into a cold crystal stream which makes you catch your breath and sends the blood singing joyously through your veins.

Aside from the hard beauty often attained by Tippet in the story of the founding of the miners union, the book has rendered a distinct service to the American working class by reviving a history of struggle of which we can justly be proud. Selecting a segment of virgin coal land, surrounded by Illinois prairies, Tippet opens his story in the '70s. Old Bill, symbolic of pioneering paternal capitalism, buys a strip of coal land and envisions the building of a little empire