

Predominantly stories of peasants and Jews in the still largely medieval civilization of Poland, their theme is one of inhuman suffering and of people for so many years crushed in a hopeless and iron vise that they have themselves become inhuman. Mr. Singer's characters are insensitive to each other's suffering, dreadfully cruel, but even worse, they are deeply incurious and resigned. The cause of their misery is nowhere suggested, nor any cure, nor any possibility that the vigor they express in purposeless violence might take another, creative form. In such a rarely compassionate story as "Clay Pits," in which the little son of a ragpicker is stirred to artistic aspiration by modeling the clay surrounding his home, the brutality of environment has already corrupted the child and he is seen as one bent under a gray and menacing sky, victim of a cosmic fate which cannot be challenged. Mr. Singer writes of caged animals who can never escape the cage, who live only by biting and snarling at each other.

The final story in the book is the only one placed in America. A talented boy realizes that his ambitions as an engineer will be frustrated by racial prejudice; he subsides, with an almost happy resignation, into a career of doctoring up old cars. Nothing changes; the people are cursed by an angry God; that is the implication which, consciously or not, emerges. Not unconnected with the moral and political significance of this defeatism is the esthetic result. Man's artistic importance lies in his struggle with environment. If he does not or cannot struggle, not only is narrative interest lost, but even the most brilliant realism fails in its essential purpose of social clarification.

The greater framework of the novel, or the play (*Yoshe Kalb*), which this writer has hitherto utilized, has an inherent necessity for major conflict and mobile character, disguising such weaknesses as are shown in this book. Considered as parts of a larger whole, these fragments are admirable. Mr. Singer's gifts as a stylist, his power of observation, his eloquence, and his ability swiftly to create atmosphere and character are very impressive. In such stories as "Pearls" and "Old City" (in which he delineates a moldering bourgeoisie more effectively than he does the peasantry), the darkly luminous and evocative clarity he gives to detail are literary equivalents of such paintings as Vermeer's.

MARJORIE BRACE.

Home Thoughts From Abroad

BUILDING THE BRITISH EMPIRE, by James Truslow Adams. Charles Scribner's Sons. \$3.50.

ANYONE who has read *Aunt Polly's Story of Mankind* (and how I pity those who have never chuckled over Donald Ogden Stewart's masterpiece!) will have the clue to James Truslow Adams' mental processes and

historical method. A veritable Aunt Polly come to life, Mr. Adams, like his priceless prototype, is committed to the "step forward" concept of history. It is a happy choice; it enables him serenely to dismiss wars, murder singular and *en masse*, conquest, double-dealing, and long centuries of hunger and suffering endured by the exploited hoi-polloi, in brief and casual phrases; why, after all, let such details mar the beautiful panorama of unfolding progress? Especially since progress, it appears, is an exclusive emanation of the British empire?

Yet this book, title and blurb to the contrary notwithstanding, is not really a study of the building of that empire. It is simply another history of England, up to 1783, more inchoate than most such works, at about the intellectual level of high-school sophomores; concerned chiefly with wars, dynasties, and the struggles of rival gangs of racketeers known as kings, dukes, earls, generals, merchant adventurers, and so forth—the sort of history Plutarch wrote, which has been slightly outmoded since J. R. Green wrote his *History of the English People* sixty years ago. The only subject which diverts Mr. Adams now and then from his glorification of monarchs and conquerors who were successful at killing and subjecting other peoples, and his distress over those who failed in this mission which God appointed for the English, is the growth of the power of Parliament. On this point he is interesting, but his attitude of open-mouthed and goggle-eyed admiration leads of course only to bewilderment and darkness.

For Mr. Adams is quite honest. For instance, he frankly discards the fiction that the Magna Charta was a "charter of liberties" for any but the privileged classes. And with respect to English conquest and rule in Ireland he does not conceal its ruthless character. But he is also often ignorant, frequently forgetful, and always naive. The Welsh, Scots, and Irish were comparative savages, hopelessly backward, employed exclusively in anarchic civil wars, and the English just had to take them over for their own good, don't y' know? The fact is (as one need go no further than Mr. Adams' pages to learn) that the English nobles were just as busy cutting each other's throats as the Gaelic and Cymric chieftains, while the English masses were far more ignorant, starveling, and degraded than the Irish, Scots, or Welsh clansmen—but this latter fact you would not learn from Mr.



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Adams. As early as the thirteenth century, he believes, the Irish had already lost their ancient culture; he does not seem to know that in the late sixteenth century Raleigh and Spenser found that culture still flourishing. Forgetfulness and naivete combine when, on page 383, our historian notes that the Irish had mustered eighty thousand fully armed volunteers to demand parliamentary independence, yet on the next page he goes into ecstasies over the spectacle of the English granting the Irish demands "ungrudgingly." One can only admire the tact with which he omits to mention that by beguiling Grattan into allowing the appointment of the administrative bureaucracy to remain with the English Cabinet, the latter were enabled to destroy Irish legislative independence within eighteen years. The grand triumph of naiveté, however, is Mr. Adams' account of how the English acquired India. They were simply the innocent victims of circumstances, who never dreamt of exploiting the 300,000,000 people of the peninsula, and were quite annoyed to find that job on their hands. It is regrettable that Mr. Adams mars this pretty picture by a few casual references to "loot."

Certain embarrassing occurrences between 1770 and 1782 are viewed by Mr. Adams as you would expect; what grosser minds call the First American Revolution was of course just an unfortunate civil war among the sea-divided English people (note: more than half of Washington's armies were non-English), which time, happily, is undoing.

But I have erred. The real cream of Mr. Adams' naiveté is his attitude toward the economic factor in history. Six or eight times in his 413 pages he concedes minor importance to economic conditions, such as an increase of 1,600 percent in the cost of living, the theft of the common lands from the people by the nobles, constantly deepening poverty, or the decline of Ypres from one hundred thousand to five thousand population when England began to manufacture cloth instead of exporting raw wool. A line is given to the fact that Ket's proletarian rebellion could only be subdued by foreign mercenaries; and after describing the treachery and savagery with which Wat Tyler's starving followers were massacred, Mr. Adams goes into raptures over English tolerance and restraint. "The horrors of a French Revolution, of the *present regime in Russia*" (italics mine) "would be unthinkable," Mr. Adams is sure, "in English history at almost any period."

This is indeed such a book as might be expected from a writer who in his introduction traces the greatness of England to the fact that aged *rentiers* adopt prisoners as their "special charges" to the extent of visiting their cells to talk platitudes, and that "At tea in a country house, you will hear local cases discussed—perhaps illness, poverty, or a young Communist whom someone has been talking to, trying to teach him something of the English system." Take heart, ye prisoners of starvation, your cases are being discussed at tea in country houses! SHAEMAS O'SHEEL.

ART

HE FORGOT to wash his face, but he used to come to art class in rubbers to hide the holes in his stockings. He spits a denial at you now if you call him a sissy artist.

Many so-called tough boys and girls of Greater New York, recruited from East Side and Harlem slums, from reform schools and penitentiaries, gave an up-to-date performance of the lives of *Dead End* kids in the Citywide Children's Arts Festival put on last week in Central Park Mall by the Public Use of Arts Committee. They were the children in the free art classes of the Federal Arts Project.

The sculpture displayed was that of artists who love their medium. Many of the smallest pieces somehow had the massiveness of big statues, solid, rounded, molded out of something the children loved to touch. The young artists displayed no compulsion to copy "nature." They used every detail to convey an impression by the treatment of the surface, perception of just that muscle of the face which creates a distinctive impression, by emphasizing without false modesty those parts of the body important to their artistic conception.

Their mass demonstration revealed an execution that was swift, sustained, relieved of over-emphasis on small technical problems, that transformed in a moment a lump of clay into something provocative and distinctive. If there were outside influences, they neither crushed nor corrupted the sense of values and of humor belonging to the child.

Older artists might envy the unimpeded observation of their paintings. Though their mastery of technique was advanced for their years, the significant thing was the degree of simplicity with which they were able to express themselves. Their free choice of subject matter with social significance, their accuracy and imagination all pointed to the dawn of a new attitude toward art, cultivated and fruitful in the children, ready to be transplanted in the public at large.

Creation of works of art seemed a serious part of their lives, arising out of life itself, whether of the mind or of the outside world—something that must be direct and uncoined in purpose to mean anything. Here was an art that called for all their resources of character—not a special inspired effort, but a concentrated earnest drive, a painstaking treatment, an unrelaxing outpouring of energy. Out of such lack of inhibition came a product neither naive nor sophisticated but sane and balanced. And the work of the more advanced students was more indisputably beautiful and saner than that of the beginners.

This is the reason that art classes for children have become indispensable in the psychiatric department at Bellevue under the leadership of Dr. Loretta Bender. This is the