

Books and Things

A FRIEND of mine says his dearest wish is to serve his country in this crisis. But what can he do? He is past military age. Life has not taught him how to organize and administer. From his vocation he has learned nothing but the art of detaching, sorting, labeling and depositing coupons. He is hunting for some official person who will set him a definite task.

He is sincere when he names his dearest wish. But I think he is mistaken. I think his desire to serve is two-fifths desire to serve and three-fifths desire to be ordered about. His deepest need is to have his decisions made for him, to have responsibility for his actions lodged outside himself. His agitation will not subside until he has given his will into somebody's keeping.

Since the war broke out a like impulse to surrender our wills has infected many of us. Distracted by all this new world, which differs to our sense most sharply from our older world in this, that we are never under the illusion that we understand it, we are sometimes tempted to give up the struggle to understand, and we look for peace of mind in submission to an authoritative guide.

Have you never felt, when you were climbing a mountain you didn't know, and had been making one difficult traverse after another, and were exhausted by the strain of deciding which of the too few handholds and footholds would bear your weight, have you never felt, upon coming to the last traverse across the last rock-face, a thrill of escape from labor and danger when you saw, fastened to the cliff, an unhoped for chain, over which you had only to hook your arm in order to loiter at ease across that mountain wall? You haven't? Neither have I, but this defect of experience shall not keep me from saying that nowadays, when "weary of myself and sick of asking," I look, as I have often looked for that chain, for a mind and a will I can cling to. I look, and do not find.

Remains the alternative of strengthening the will which is one's own. The magazines advertise many books on will-training. Each of them promises to heal the sick self, to strengthen the feeble knees, to turn the poor in heart into dominating personalities, to make live wires out of hard-bound brains. Pleasant is the picture, very pleasant and alluring, which these advertisements paint of the future. Your inhibitions shall be cast out of you, they shall perhaps enter into your Gadarene competitors, who shall be driven violently down a steep place into the sea, leaving your once faint heart free to win fair wages. Unless, indeed, your competitors happen to better their wills by buying and reading these same books, in which case the future looks less clear.

Yet it is not this chance that holds me back, or any kind of doubt. I do not doubt that the will-books can perform what their advertisers promise, or that this cloud of witnesses speak truth. Many a man who once was timid and uncertain whenever he had to approach the captains of industry, and whose lot it often was to be turned down cold, unheard, is now aggressively gainful, full of pep and propositions, having the punch. He has an eye of steel, a chin of granite, a compelling smile, and he has the big men, the smokers of maravillas and the riders in Rolls-Royces, coming round to his office and eating out of his glad hand.

What books have done books may do. It is not doubt of their power which keeps me from reading them. It is fear. I am afraid they would change me beyond recognition by any friend, any child, any wife. Your new

convert is notoriously a bigot, and I might fall to dominating the home, the office, the day coach, the golf links, the club, the saloon, the church. My own rector would not know me when he saw me in his own vestry. I should have gained the whole world and lost my own identity, which, after all, I rather like, being used to it, and to the special faults of which I have cultivated a pertinent blindness.

Your plight may resemble mine. You may shrink from strengthening and aggravating your will, lest it should crush the rest of the world and of you. You may have abandoned hope of finding an authority to whom you can surrender it in toto. So be it. But why not tone down your longing to surrender, why not put up with a second best, why not look for an authority which will control you in a few details of life, say in your diet, smoking, reading or exercise? Are you a believer? Then listen to the voice of the Church. Suffer yourself to be guided by her firm inerrant hand. She will tell you, for example, as she has told so many of the faithful through many ages, what not to read. Even if you are not a believer there is nothing to prevent your acting like one, which you may easily discover how to do. No need to buy one of the more expensive books about the Index. For thirty-five cents, either direct from the publisher, B. Herder, St. Louis, or at any Catholic book shop, you can procure *The Roman Index of Forbidden Books, Explained for Catholic Booklovers and Students*, by Francis S. Betten, S.J.

"That the Church has the right," says Father Betten, "to legislate on the publication and use of all books that touch on questions of faith and morals must be evident to every Catholic." I could wish this truth were as evident to me, since I am about to let the Church direct my reading. My best course is to proceed as if the truth were already plain, to assume that the Church, as Father Betten says, "is the kindest of mothers; but she is also the wisest." But I shall not be reckless. I shall not imitate those early Christians at Ephesus, who burned all the superstitious books in their possession, and of whom Father Betten writes: "This example of loyalty to the Church cost them, as Holy Scripture says, between eight and nine thousand dollars."

No, I will not be precipitate. I shall pick my way. Perhaps I shall begin by restricting my reading to those thousand books which in 1897, when Leo XIII was Pope, were dropped from the Index. Or I may browse upon books still forbidden, taking my cue from Father Génicot, who says: "Were one to read only a few lines which he sees contain doctrine directly opposed to faith or good morals, he would sin grievously. But when nothing so extraordinarily harmful occurs, good moralists hold that as much as six pages may be read without mortal sin." Or perhaps the simplest plan would be to consult the short list printed at the end of Father Betten's book, to compile therefrom a list still shorter, to resolve not to read, for the next six months or so, either Addison's *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy*, Goldsmith's *Abridged History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Death of George II*, Erasmus Darwin's *Zoönomia*, Hallam's *Constitutional History*, Mill's *Political Economy*, or Whately's *Elements of Logic*. Such a partial surrender of the will will be balm to my troubled spirit, but it does nothing for the friend mentioned in the first paragraph. Like Prince Florizel of Bohemia, who confessed he had no great opinion of books, except to amuse a railway journey, my friend could eschew all reading without noticing a difference in his life.

P. L.

Misinforming England

Misinforming a Nation, by Willard Huntington Wright. New York: B. W. Huebsch. \$1.25.

UNTIL the Encyclopaedia Britannica was boomed in this country there was no paramount reason why it should be criticized from the international point of view. It was not planned as an international work so much as an encyclopaedia Britannica, and quite naturally it followed the lines of the successive Britannic editors' habits of thought. Because it dealt with the universe, a sort of informative department store, people reasonably expected it to carry a large assortment of stock, to show a fair degree of sophistication and impartiality. But so long as it was sold to Englishmen in the main, the readers did not get excited if it showed rather a Britannic bias. In fact, they liked a Britannic bias. Who wouldn't, being a Briton? It is one of the things one is a Briton for. Only when the Encyclopaedia Britannica came to be pushed into prominence as a "supreme" book of international knowledge, and promoted as indispensable to Americans, did its internationalism require to be scrutinized. Is the work really sophisticated and impartial? That is the question which, regardless of the purely national origin and history of the enterprise, an American book buyer might fairly be induced to ask.

One who reads *Misinforming a Nation* is left in no doubt as to Mr. Willard Huntington Wright's answer. The publishers assert, he says, that the Britannica is a supreme, unbiased and international reference library. It is, he himself responds, "a narrow, parochial, opinionated work of dubious scholarship and striking unreliability." It is "characterized by misstatements, inexcusable omissions, rabid and patriotic prejudices, personal animosities, blatant errors of fact, scholastic ignorance, gross neglect of non-British culture, an astounding egotism, and an undisguised contempt for American progress." He feels, it is evident as early as pages 11 and 12, a combination of rage, disgust and anger—and this, without ever culminating, sweeps like an encircling tornado through his eleven chapters of protest. His book is a savage indictment of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and the last word in contemptuous arraignment of the claims to being trustworthy that distinguished its American advertising campaigns.

There are 30,000 pages in the work; 500,000 references; 44,000,000 words. On that account it becomes few people to make sweeping judgments of the performance as a whole. Defects and deficiencies in a work of 30,000 pages are hardly to be wondered at. One might suppose that there would be a great many debatable opinions among half a million references, and a number of erroneous statements in so vast a field of fact. To indict such a work, with its thousands of contributors selected from all over the world, it would clearly be necessary to do more than score a number of individual points. It would be obligatory to find some means of comparative criticism that would be exacting and at the same time just. For readers who themselves can never trouble to examine the 44,000,000 words that are criticized, the defects and deficiencies must be established not only by putting some of them in evidence but by exhibiting some other encyclopaedia which shows how the international job can be done. Without such a criterion the array of complaints may look heavily imposing, and yet afford no sufficient ground for condemnation. It would be a rare encyclopaedia, indeed, that could be all things to all men.

It is unfortunate for Mr. Wright's remorseless purpose that he has proceeded in an unscientific spirit and given so little objective justification of his criticism. On individual points he has made effective criticism. What he has to say is said in a nasty spirit, but it is seriously damaging. It raises ugly suspicions as to the work as a whole. Those suspicions, however, are never conclusively verified and until some one more reasonable and more sagacious than Mr. Wright undertakes the critical examination of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, it will still be worth house-room to persons who have space for that sort of work. Had Mr. Wright gone about his task in a different spirit, shown what could be fairly expected from an international encyclopaedia by giving the relative accomplishment of a German or French or American work making similar pretensions, the failures of the Encyclopaedia Britannica might have been made inescapably clear. Then it would be certain, in the light of French or German or American omniscience, how venomous, contemptuous, ruthless, unscrupulous, and the rest, the English production really is. To make it certain merely by asserting and proving the work's nationalistic character is impossible. There is too strong a presumption in every normal mind that no impartial cyclopaedia exists.

In his chapter on the novel Mr. Wright supports his charges of prejudice by holding up for ridicule such facts as that "George Meredith is accorded almost as much biographical space as Balzac," and that "giants" like Sudermann are shamelessly neglected. Matters of opinion like these are questionable aid in the indictment of an encyclopaedia. The telling arguments against the Britannica are supplied by simpler and more self-evident accusation. It is true that the account of Oscar Wilde is caddish. It is true that the estimates of Turgeniev and Nietzsche and Anatole France and Hauptmann and Joseph Conrad are fatuously inadequate. The crushing truth, however, is the large comparison that is made between the space allotted to English drama and non-English drama, English music and non-English music. For example, "In that division of the article entitled, Recent Music—that is, music during the last sixty or seventy-five years—we find the following astonishing division of space: recent German music receives just eleven lines; recent French music, thirty-eight lines, or less than half a column; recent Italian music, nineteen lines; recent Russian music, thirteen lines; and recent British music, *nearly four columns, or two full pages!*"

Such bias as this proportion reveals is quite characteristic of this national encyclopaedia, as probably of all national encyclopaedias. The only disconcerting item in this regard is the advertising that said the Britannica was "international." If one is shocked to find that Sir Arthur Sullivan gets more space than Brahms, it is by no means the last of surprises. Nietzsche is apportioned a column. William James is covered in twenty-eight lines. Stendhal is perfunctorily treated. And no biography whatever is given for any number of distinguished persons—Cézanne, Gauguin, Zorn, Redon, Van Gogh, Twachtman, Robert Henri; d'Albert, Charpentier, Mahler, Sinding, Max Reger, Sibelius, Busoni, Josef Hofmann; John Dewey, Stanley Hall, Freud, Jung, Josiah Royce, Bergson, Boutroux; Jacques Loeb, Simon Flexner, Burbank, Crile, Ehrlich, Percival Lowell, Metchnikoff; A.E., Rémy de Gourmont, Lady Gregory, Synge, George Santayana, Edith Wharton, Schnitzler, Korolenko, Clara Viebig, Tchekhoff, Romain Rolland. Mr. Wright lists 200 of these names. "Their omission is nothing short of preposterous,