

The "Autobiography" of a Roman Emperor

I, CLAUDIUS. By Robert Graves. New York: Smith & Haas. 1934. \$3.

Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

MR. GRAVES gets himself all set to write a really fine historical novel; and then, after five hundred pages of increasingly wearisome preliminaries, decides not to write it after all. In the Roman Emperor Claudius (the First) — whose autobiography, confidentially set down for remote posterity, the book purports to be—he has chosen a protagonist immensely fascinating; and not merely because he happened to be the first great executive who lived down the effects of infantile paralysis. Claudius, stricken in childhood, was lame, he stammered, he was deaf in one ear—so appalling a contrast to his brilliant father and brother that his family always considered him a halfwit. He was shoved off into the background, where he devoted himself to writing histories that nobody read; and then at the age of fifty, discovered hiding in a closet after the murder of his nephew Caligula, he was made Emperor simply because he was the brother of his brother—and became one of the ablest of Emperors, shaping the outline of the imperial administration for two centuries to come.

The character has perplexed historians, ancient and modern; but it is no puzzle to Mr. Graves, who makes it coherent and plausible historically as well as artistically. This is the sort of man who would have done what Claudius did and lived as he lived; the way he thinks, the discursiveness, the blend of pedantry and real erudition, is the way Claudius thought, as shown in the fragments of his letters and speeches that survive. Once this character begins to unfold, in the early chapters, you expect something first-rate; especially as Mr. Graves recreates Rome of the Julio-Claudian period, makes you feel that all this really happened, once more achieving historical and artistic plausibility combined. These are the first two hurdles which any historical novelist must clear, and they are high ones; Mr. Graves takes them in his stride. Nothing is left for him but to write his novel; which unfortunately he fails to do.

The most interesting part of Claudius's life came after his accession to the throne; the book stops there. Agrippina barely appears as a minor character, Messalina is no more than mentioned near the end; there is nothing, naturally, of the work Claudius did, a work whose effects were not wholly ruined even by his bad taste in women. What we get here is the story of the fifty years in which Claudius was only an observer in a corner—a history of the reigns of Augustus, Tiberius, and Caligula which will bore the average reader to extinction. It is almost wholly personal and palatine—transcription of Tacitus, Dio, and Suetonius, whichever happens to give the most lurid version of any particular event; and including some things which even Suetonius, the Gaston Means of ancient historians, mentions as unsubstantiated rumors. All that Mr. Graves has contributed is to make Livia—Claudius's grandmother, Augustus's wife—the villainess; every man or woman of distinction who died over those fifty years seems to have been poisoned by Livia. Grant

that Livia was a sinister old lady, suspected of some poisonings; Mr. Graves's endless succession of them eventually stirs the reader to untimely mirth. You wonder if Livia did not also poison Jesus Christ.

One other fault mars the book for people who will read it at all. Mr. Graves was apparently aiming at readers who never heard of Rome and do not know a word of Latin. But such persons are not going to read a novel about Rome, unless it is of the "Quo Vadis" type. The sort of people who will read "I, Claudius," or at least commence it, will be constantly irritated by the use of such modern geographical terms as France and the Balkans; and by the turning of the most familiar words into their English equivalents—or, where no equivalent exists, into awkward circumlocutions. It might be supposed that such terms as legion, toga, gladiator, and tribune would be plain enough. Why drive readers to the continual necessity of re-translation to find out what the author is talking about?

Mann's Story of Joseph

(Continued from first page)

poetry. With Joseph we gaze down into the abyss of our beginnings, of the beginnings of time, and we feel with him a sense of dizziness. The impression Mann succeeds in creating in this prefatory chapter is indeed remarkable, and altogether equal to the wonderful presentation of the atmosphere of disease and heightened excitement which we find in "The Magic Mountain."

Leaving the Creation, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel, Mann comes to the story of Jacob. It was a risky undertaking to touch so delicate a flower as this inspired love story, and we cannot think that Mann has escaped the dangers. He has, it is true, taken the facts for history. But one cannot avoid the impression that some of this narrative, especially that which deals with Laban's successful attempt to "put off" Jacob with Leah, instead of the younger, more comely, and best-beloved Rachel, has been written after a study of the works of Sigmund Freud or D. H. Lawrence. The artless simplicity of the Old Testament has been overlaid with psychology; one must consider Goethe wrong in wanting to add "details" to this matchless love story. But it was admittedly a severe test for a modern writer.

Elsewhere Mann has been more successful. He is particularly admirable in his description of the primitive, half-nomadic life of Laban and his family. This breathes the air of the desert, while the stirring story of the vengeance taken by Dina's brothers for her raping, or the account of the flight of Jacob and Rachel with Laban's family-gods, is excellent in every way. Something of the *tour de force* that Flaubert accomplished in "Salammbô" has been achieved by Mann here also; he has, out of long and deep study, the effects of which are well concealed, recreated scenes from the remote past, and that without any hint of cheapness, such as one finds in "Ben-Hur," or even in Lion Feuchtwanger's "Josephus." There is often a real austerity about this writing, which enables us to consider it as characteristic of its famous author. The two remaining volumes, which are to appear in the course of the next year, will reveal whether Mann has written his masterpiece.

Alec, Meet Life!

BACHELOR—OF ARTS. By John Erskine. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company. 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by TESS SLESINGER

ON the jacket of Mr. Erskine's "Bachelor—Of Arts," his publishers have plaintively written: "Life, meet Alec!" The sad truth is that Life and Mr. Erskine's Alec, projected as the average B. A., model 1934, seem congenitally unacquainted, and destined to remain forever strangers; they have far too little in common.

In the magazine section of *The New York Times* for May sixth appeared an article by Irwin Edman entitled "Portrait of an Undergraduate of 1934." Mr. Edman disposed of the undergraduate Alects in a sentence: "the richling, the Babbitt in embryo, the college athlete, the snob, the routine mediocrity—all these persist as ever"; and then turned his attention to the more significant Fredericks, representative of current collegian thought. It is difficult to see why, in these lively days of undergraduate societies, student indignation meetings, and generally healthy signs of realistic intelligence on the campuses of America, Mr. Erskine has chosen the least significant undergraduate to portray: the perennial sophomore who is fundamentally no different in 1934 from his older brother who was graduated from Columbia just before the war. Still Mr. Erskine, having made his choice, might have endowed his portrait with contemporary importance. Alec might have been shown up, in contrast to the Fredericks, a shallow nonentity. But "affection prompted these pages," writes Mr. Erskine in his Note; and actually he appears to find Alec, for all his stupidities, quite a nice boy. Well then, Mr. Erskine, liking Alec, had still another chance; he might have made him, however insignificant, a living person in himself, at least as real a human being as, say, Penrod.

If we had to accept Alec as an authentic portrait of even the "average" 1934 college boy, we should be depressed. But luckily both Alec and his campus (a kind of musical-comedy Columbia University) are thoroughly unconvincing. There are unfortunately still undergraduates who seek refuge in their study of the Renaissance and take relatively little interest in liver contemporary issues; there are no doubt still college boys who, like Alec, after mauling an unloved girl in a hammock consider themselves "abnormal and unworthy," and go "back home to grieve."

But there never was a student at Columbia, or even at old King's College, who played such pranks as Alec did with Prexy. Imagine a freshman, drunk in the morning, staggering into Nicholas Murray Butler's office and reporting that the Library was out of the important books; and imagine Nicholas Murray Butler (who, with the Dean, was drawn from "an honored colleague") picking up the telephone: "What! The Librarian is out! Oh, he's at a committee, is he? Well, I wish to see him, at his earliest convenience!" Then there is Alec's totally unconvincing romance with Mimi, to whom he proposes eleven pages after meeting her. There is the burlesque chapter entitled "Alec is for Peace," in which Alec, angered at finding one of his letters a menacing invitation to see the Dean, looks with benevolence upon the second, which happens to be a document put out by an undergraduate pacifist society. "By gad, it was true! He hadn't seen it in that light before . . . If he went in for pacifism, the fellows would ride him." Whereupon Mr. Erskine, his tongue mildly lolling in his cheek, goes on to show Alec that same evening fighting with his friends, with his girl, and at last with a speaker on Union Square—which is presented like a circus tent with side-shows; Alec is then run into jail, from which the Dean bails him out; it is at this point that his letter to the President is providentially returned, the Dean gives him another chance, his fraternity initiates him, his girl says he is just grand. . . .

But it is impossible, in justice to Mr. Erskine and his past achievements, even his earlier novels, to take this one as anything more than light-weight summer reading, and to hope that Mr. Erskine

meant it as such. We prefer to think of the new college boy as he was portrayed by Irwin Edman; by George Milburn in a fine short story called "A Student of Economics"; by George Anthony Weller who depicted every possible type in "Not to Eat, Not for Love"; by the college boys themselves who have recently declared themselves opposed to war—and surely in such numbers there must be many representatives of the 1934 "average boy."

Tess Slesinger, whose recent novel, "The Unpossessed," includes as characters a group of Columbia University students, is a graduate of the Columbia School of Journalism.

A Novel of the Spanish Conquest

MARIA PALUNA. By Blair Niles. New York: Longmans, Green & Co. 1934. \$2.

Reviewed by FRANS BLOM

THE highlands of Guatemala is a land of rare beauty and fascination. Mountains, volcanoes, valleys, and lakes diversify this country of an Indian people who live today much as they did four hundred years ago, when the Spanish hordes under Pedro de Alvarado, "the



BLAIR NILES

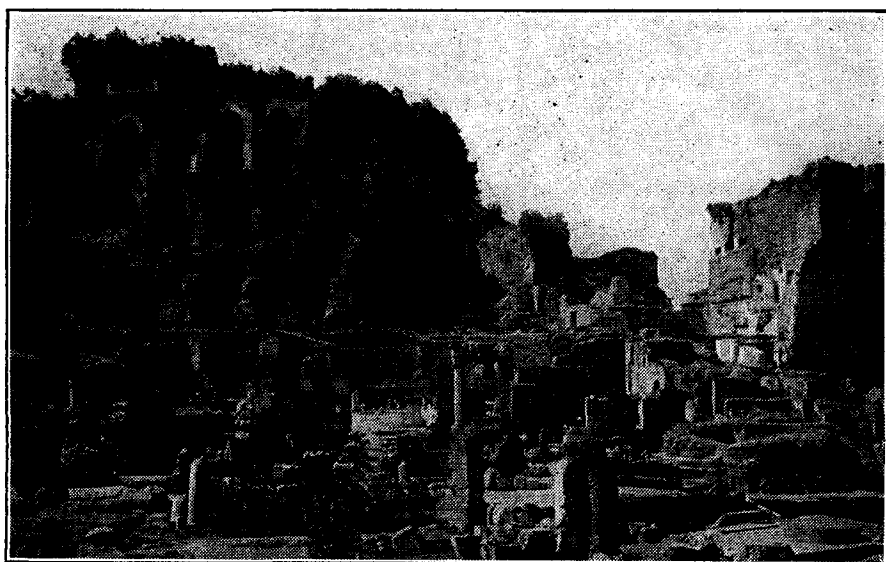
Brutal," introduced among them European "civilization" and Christian cruelty. All the zeal of soldiers and priests has not converted the Indian.

There are three sources from which one can create a picture of Indian life at the time of the conquest; first, archeological material and Indian records such as the Popol Vuh, the Titulos de Totonicapán, and the Rabinal Achí; second, the records of the conquerors, such as Bernal Diaz's "True History of the Conquest of New Spain," and Cortez's and Alvarado's letters to the king; and, finally, a close study and understanding of the Indians of today.

Modestly Blair Niles calls her book a novel. It is a splendid novel, and, what is more, it is founded on a diligent study of sources. Blair Niles has not only consulted archeological records and early documents but she has lived in Guatemala, has seen the mountains and tropical valleys. She must have visited the ruins of the once mighty city of Utatlán, and she certainly must have watched the Indians tending their daily chores, followed them to their religious ceremonies, and seen the "brujo" make his divinations.

To my mind Miss Niles has succeeded in a most remarkable way in converting the source material into a clear picture of that amazing period of American history when the cultures of two continents clashed in a desperate struggle. My only criticism of it is that the story is a little too poetic, the persons are a little too sweet. The great battle between the cultures of the old and the new worlds was filled with passionate fury.

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PANORAMA OF THE ROMAN FORUM, WITH THE PALACE OF CALIGULA

Selling the Oxford Group Movement

I WAS A PAGAN. By V. C. Kitchen. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1934. \$1.50.

Reviewed by ALBERT CLARKE WYCKOFF

THIS new book of the Oxford Group Movement bids fair to surpass the popularity of "For Sinners Only." Like that, it tells the story of a changed life. This convert, however, instead of being an English journalist, is a very successful American advertising man doing business at Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, New York City. It is curious how the Holy Spirit selects such practical writers to present the Oxford Group Movement to the general public! At least they are not "highbrow." There is nothing new in the conversion experience of the author, it is "The Old, Old Story." And since the confessional details of previous pagan living are abundant, and nothing new is told about the Oxford Group Movement, we shall pass over these features and turn immediately to the unique contribution of Mr. Kitchen's book. It lies in the fact that a very clever, well-educated, psychologically dissatisfied, partially pagan, advertising man comes under the influence of the Oxford Group Movement, and experiences a changed life so remarkable that he finds in it the key to the solution of all the problems to which humanity is heir.

The genuineness of the author's conversion experience, his evident sincerity, and his high purpose to change for the better the lives of individuals and the life of the home, the church, the state, business, the world—all combine to make us reluctant to offer any disturbing word of criticism. But we have caught just enough of the author's passion for "absolute truth," and his newly acquired moral indignation against the wrongs of high-pressure advertising, to make it impossible to resist these moral forces in their reactions to this book. Hence, what follows.

The fact that Mr. Kitchen is so thoroughly sold on the Oxford Group Movement himself makes his endeavor to sell it to others a task to which he brings all the varied gifts of his life and experience, together with the resources of his highly specialized profession. The title, "I Was A Pagan," is the natural creation of the advertising man's mental work-pattern, which is the "Before and After Using" display idea. This furnishes the literary form around which the material of the book is organized. And it opens the way for the author to slip over unconsciously from the facts he has at his disposal to the fictionalizing of his emotional appeal. This practice becomes almost inevitable because the Oxford Group Movement technique is organized around five absolutes—all of which are fictions.

Mr. Kitchen cannot resist contrasting what he was before his conversion with what he has become. On pages 89-90 he presents the following parallels:

In My Old Life	In My New Life
I most liked:	I most like:
Myself	God
I hated most:	I hate most:
Poverty (for myself)	Sin. Self, because "I" is the middle letter of SIN.

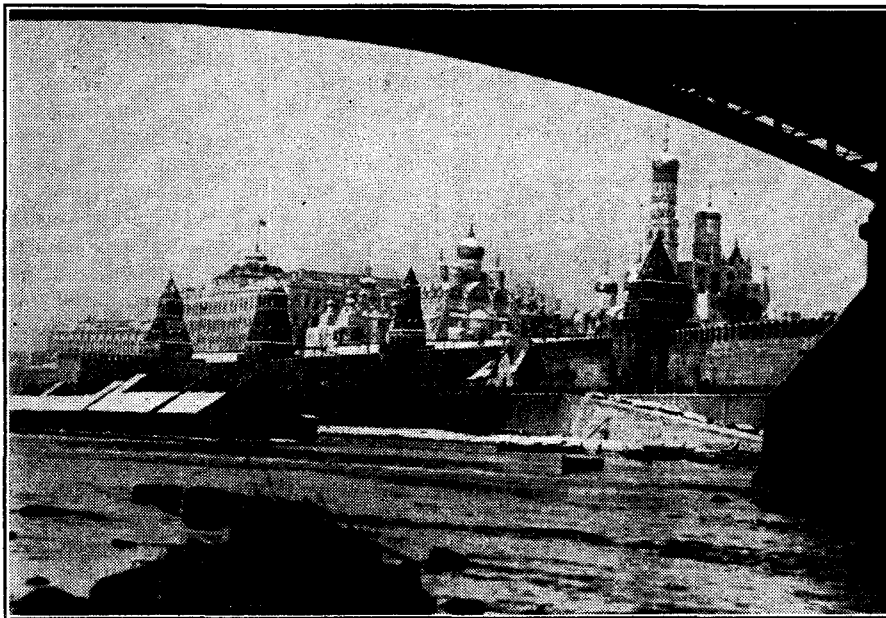
It is easy to see that these absolutes are over-simplifications of the real problem. Psychology recognizes this fact. The "I" that was the center of his pagan life in sin, has not entirely disappeared in this present book. To be absolutely honest in the matter, the modest, humble, agnostic "I" of Mr. Kitchen's pagan days seems like a pygmy by the side of the new, confident, pangnostic "I" in his God-and-I combination which lends him the assurance to sweep away with a gesture all philosophy, ethics, science, theology, church, and psychology, and offer in its place the knowledge that is to be derived from direct God-guidance. The old seasoned theologian cannot repress a smile when this lay child of less than five years in the Faith, casually explains the Trinity in a passing moment. And the reviewer wonders whether it is quite fair to God to hold Him responsible for the philosophy, ethics, science, and psychology, as well as the

theology and ecclesiology of this author. But one cannot escape from this new self-assurance, well expressed in this passage:

And the Holy Ghost Himself would always have remained . . . a power God could not trust me with because I did not know how to use it.

Today, however, He is sending me His Holy Spirit because He knows that I am following His Son.

This is the kind of spiritual pride all genuine religion fears most. It grows out of the feeling of the converted advertising man that he must sell what he has to every one else. If the Oxford Group Movement would only learn from the centuries of experience of the historic Christian Church to seed down these new converts and give them time to grow and season



MOSCOW IN WINTER

The Kremlin seen from the Moscow river. Photo by Intourist.

and mature before using them, they would save the Movement from repeating the mistakes of so many similar movements which have preceded it. But, then, Mr. Kitchen never would have written this book.

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Shavian By-Products

SHORT STORIES, SCRAPS AND SHAVINGS. By Bernard Shaw. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by TEMPLE SCOTT

THIS latest collection of Shaviana may, perhaps, be more appropriately entitled "Shavings." It consists of a number of short stories and sketches, two scenes from "Back to Methuselah" which were omitted from the published form of that play, the story of the "Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God," and other "scraps and shavings" recovered from the periodicals in which they were first printed in the eighties and nineties of the last century. Collectors of Shaw's writings will welcome "Aerial Football" which appeared in a now forgotten magazine, *The Neolith*, in 1907, and "The Emperor and the Little Girl" which was written in 1916 for a Belgian War Charity for Children and which, we are told, had to be published furtively since it rebuked the war spirit of the time too pointedly. In the discarded scenes from the play the reader will recognize and enjoy an amusingly friendly and delightful caricature of Mr. G. K. Chesterton.

In addition to the set of John Farleigh's strikingly arresting drawings which appeared in the original edition of "The Adventures of the Black Girl," a set of new drawings by that artist are also included, completing the series made for this essay in criticism of missionary Christianity. Shaw is still of the opinion that it is wiser for the Black Girl to take Voltaire's advice and cultivate her garden. But what is she to do if she can't get a garden to cultivate? Is she to go to Russia for one? There, at any rate, as Shaw tells us, they have thrown the Old Testament into the wastepaper basket, so that the Black Girl can use her knobkerry to a more useful purpose than swatting missionaries and theologians on the head. She may rake her garden with it.

Mirrors of Moscow

WINTER IN RUSSIA. By Malcolm Muggeridge. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1934. \$2.50.

MR. MUGGERIDGE, correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* in Soviet Russia, came back after eight months there bitterly disillusioned. That which disillusioned him wasn't the Revolution as such—an objective fact in history, the tremendous implications of which he feels it still too soon to attempt to evaluate—but the so-called Dictatorship of the Proletariat, the actual Soviet Government; and the whole complex of careerism, maudlin sentimentality, poisonous psychological "compensations" of one sort and other masking as idealistic

taking care to let fall a drop or two of his own corrosive acid into the test-tube to change its color completely. Some of his more guilelessly amusing thrusts are obtained by very accurate imitations of bits of cable correspondence, in various styles, he first having taken us, in turn, inside each correspondent's head and revealed the flimsy grounds on which each particular dispatch was based.

But, the reader may inquire, isn't this universal lambasting, a bit one-sided and unfair? Undoubtedly. Mr. Muggeridge knows his facts, nevertheless; there is such a thing as wholesome indignation, and there has been so much leaning over backward to be fair to Russia's present dictators, so much pussy-footing and "on-the-other-hand" stuff, let alone downright misrepresentation, that it is refreshing to come across an intelligent observer who is just plain disgusted all through and doesn't give a hoot who knows it.

A Philosopher-King

(Continued from first page)

impossibility under a democracy. People don't elect representatives to "go against the crowd." Knowing that Andrew Mellon and Calvin Coolidge were busy with tax refunds at the very time when a "compensatory" State should have been using taxes to liquidate the public debt, Mr. Lippmann is aware that representatives of the people are fallible. Yet he hopes. But even if the Federal Reserve had raised the rediscount rate in 1928, thus preventing the boom from getting out of hand, trouble would have resulted, according to some competent authorities. For the raising of the rediscount rate would have made lending more profitable, with a consequent shifting of capital from abroad, say, to New York. And such a shift would have its consequences, perhaps, in a disastrous unsettling of foreign economies. "Compensation" at one point means an alteration of the equilibrium at another. It seems to me that crisis would be just as endemic under "compensation" as it was in 1928. Mr. Strachey has indicated why.

Mr. Lippmann, I think, mistakes a general clutching at straws for a permanent government principle. If the rate of profit is not doomed to shrink to zero (Mr. Strachey thinks it is), then the time for straw clutching will pass as prosperity returns. If it is doomed to shrink to zero, there won't be much left to "compensate." But of course "freedom" is not necessarily



WALTER LIPPMANN

devotion—the gigantic racket, as he sees it, which has gathered around it.

Toward the Revolution, as such, Mr. Muggeridge must be presumed to be sympathetic, else he would never have been correspondent for the *Guardian* and never have been sent to Moscow. The result is a book, at last, with something really new to say about Soviet Russia. For here we have neither dull reactionary complaining, nor the equally crass enthusiasm of the visitor determined to make all his dreams come true (two classes into which many books about Soviet Russia fall) but the revulsion of an intelligence, modern and favorably disposed, against the whole Show as it actually exists.

The result might be described very roughly as a sort of "Mirrors of Moscow," for "everybody" is here, from the clever, tight-rope-walking American journalist up and down; commissars, Foreign Office types, diplomats, correspondents, visitors of all sorts, occasionally mentioned by name, more often slightly masked, and the whole combined into chapters of acute, savagely ironical, and highly entertaining reporting thrown into fictional form.

A lot of it will go over the heads of those unacquainted with the scene, but it may be said that behind every one of the names in the book there is an actual individual, and while some of the characters may be composites, the better you know present-day Moscow, the more priceless, in their witty and devastating accuracy, do Mr. Muggeridge's pictures become. He is quite ruthless with his own countrymen, but no less with some of the Americans.

"My name," a grey-haired American said, "is Dr. Canning. You may know, or have heard of, my daughter, Beatrice Canning."

She was on the other side of the table; an immense woman, red-cheeked; a kind of passionate stupidity in her eyes, a monumental idiocy . . .

Miss Canning's book, "Sex and the Soviets," had made a great stir in the States. She had stood shoulder to shoulder with the toiling masses of Russia for no less than ten years in their struggle to create a classless, socialist society. Trotsky, it appeared, had once made advances to her in a taxi. He had, she often recounted, rested his historic hand on her knee; and she, perhaps mistakenly, had withdrawn the knee from his grasp.

One of the telling things about the narrative is that the author dodges none of the propaganda; keeps quoting it, in fact, literally and with all its eloquence, just

indissolubly bound up with the capitalist system, in spite of Mr. Lippmann's assumption. As Hitler and Thyssen have proved in Germany, capitalism can make use of a dictatorship. And theoretically, socialism can be democratic. It doesn't happen to be democratic in Russia, but that may be the fault of a country that had no capital plant to speak of when the Bolsheviks broke the Kronstadt rebellion (the Kronstadt sailors demanded "free election") and went in for a one-party dictatorship to control the New Economic Policy. I think Mr. Lippmann does socialism an injustice when he identifies it with absolutism. If one can vote for and recall one's "compensators," why can't one vote for and recall a board of "planners"? One would need a book to argue the question, which may be a tribute to Mr. Lippmann's powers of stimulation.