

As Mr. Nock Sees It

A JOURNAL OF THESE DAYS. June 1932—December 1933. By Albert Jay Nock. New York: William Morrow & Company. 1934. \$2.75.

Reviewed by ROYAL J. DAVIS

CAUSTIC, anecdotal, reflective, humorous, sentimental, in turns, but always piquant, these jottings of a year and a half by one of the keenest of observers range from characteristic condemnation of American civilization to curiosity over the absence of mosquitoes in Seville and enthusiasm for a performance of the "Petit Faust" in Brussels. On one page we have the protagonist of the old *Freeman*—"editor" is far too mild a word for the challenging Mr. Nock—with his devotion to Henry George and the single tax. On the next appears the literary man-about-town, who explains that he prefers New York in the summer ("if I must be there at all"), because while the physical discomfort is great, "the spiritual discomfort is enough less to give a balance."

The most piquant condemnation of our sad state occurs in a quotation from an unnamed French journalist: "Americans are the only people who have passed directly from barbarism to decadence without knowing civilization." Mr. Nock believes this to be true; "at least," he remarks slyly, "I know of no other people who have done so." He would no more give his favorite doctrine of the single tax to the American people than he would give a watch to a child: "Our people are incapable of managing even the bad economic system that they have, and it would be utter lunacy to entrust them with a good one." The only remedy for a people like us, then, is to have no economic system at all.

Occasionally Mr. Nock's disgust with his country leads him into absurdities. "Why," he asks, "do not the newspapers print the day-to-day index of unemployment under a standing head, like the weather-reports?" As well ask why they don't print the day-to-day number of people in the country or the number of radios in actual use during the preceding twenty-four hours. Worse is his blundering dictum: "By requiring representatives to live in their district, the Constitution precludes the consideration of any question by any other than a purely local aspect." The requirement that a Representative must live in his district exists only in Mr. Nock's imagination. All that the Constitution requires is that he live in the State from which he is elected. A district may choose its representative from any other district in the state. Does any district ever do so? And does Mr. Nock fancy that if the present restriction were removed, districts in different states would be competing for the glory of being represented in Congress by the best men to be found anywhere in the country? If he does, he knows his countrymen too vaguely to pass judgment upon them.

He also reveals an egregiously mistaken idea regarding the number of Americans on the public payroll in proportion to the population. "I believe," he says, "our ratio is now about one in ten." The idea draws his scorn, as well it may: "One thinks very little of the sense of humor in a people who submit to such a ridiculous assumption—that it takes one out of every ten to govern and floor-manage and dry-nurse the other nine!" Before Mr. Nock unloosed his derision, he might have taken the trouble to find out whether the thing he proposed to deride was fact or fiction. He is accustomed to challenge conclusions based upon erroneous premises and to hold the person making a statement as responsible for his data as for his deductions. If one person in every ten in this country were on the public payroll—national, state, or local—the number would exceed 12,000,000. This is more than twice as many as were on the public payroll in 1918, when that payroll had been swollen by three million soldiers. Is there any reason for supposing that the number of Government employees has increased by several million since the disbanding of the soldiers—especially with the retrenchment of the past few years?

Mr. Nock finds some things to approve, even in his own countrymen. He has seldom seen an American whose table-manners were not up to standard; he thinks that in purely personal relations "there is a better ground of understanding between our high-life and our proletariat, at least in some sections of it, than there is in most countries," and his own American acquaintances are "simply unmatchable"—but without any influence whatever upon our society. Especially interesting are the jottings in which his penetration enables him to give something a surprising turn, as when he remarks that the peculiar richness of our language assists us in our tendency to indirectness of expression.

The paradox of his journal lies in its picture of a traveller who almost everywhere is offended with the human race and who nevertheless can be downright sentimental. Back in his own country, a friend gives him a drawing of the Monnaie on a rainy night, the opera-house which played a part in making him think Brussels "the most delightful place in the world." He knows that rain, but as he looks at the drawing and sees the murky lights of the Monnaie struggling through it, he "would gladly close out the whole Western Hemisphere at eight cents on the dollar, gold, if only" he might be there.

Royal J. Davis is an editorial writer on the New York Evening Post, a newspaper with which in the past Mr. Nock has been connected.

Vigorous Humor

(Continued from first page)

place in Scotland, and the Scots are subjected to an intimate satire which only a native could bestow on them. But satire is only one ingredient of the humor in "Magnus Merriman"; much as there is of incidental satire, directed at nations, public personages, or characters in the story, the satire seems to be a by-product of the gusto which is the real quality of this novel. And Mr. Linklater's gusto embraces every kind of humor; he weaves the humor of situation with that of character so skilfully that the result cannot and should not be analyzed, but can and will be vastly enjoyed.

Even when, as occasionally happens, there is nothing going on at the moment, Mr. Linklater still gives the reader a good time. His strong, intelligent Saxon prose is equally invigorating whether he is dis-



FROM THE JACKET OF "MAGNUS MERRIMAN"

cussing Magnus's state of mind or describing Edinburgh. One has constantly the sense of the author's enjoyment of life, an enjoyment keener for having dispensed with illusions, richer for avoiding the bitterness of disillusion. Magnus on the surface is a buffoon; he might easily have been either a misunderstood genius or a mountebank. Instead, he is human. And the novel on the surface is an extravaganza; the author's intelligence is so constantly evident as occasionally, but briefly, to make his characters seem like amusing marionettes. But their basis is in reality. Only at the end, when the hero is reduced to his essentials, do we understand what a very human novel "Magnus Merriman" is.

The Irritant of His Time

SAMUEL JOHNSON. By Hugh Kingsmill. New York: The Viking Press. 1934. \$2.75.

Reviewed by CHAUNCEY B. TINKER

IT is difficult to understand why Mr. Kingsmill has written this book. Strictly speaking, it contains nothing new, though much material recently collected by scholars has been laid under contribution. Very little is said, very little can be said, in so brief a book, of Johnson's vast contribution to English literature and to English scholarship. The object of the essay is apparently to discredit Boswell as a biographer. Many previous critics have despised him, and many more have deplored his vanity and his perpetual talk about himself and his private affairs; but it has remained for Mr. Kingsmill to assert that he is "deliberately dishonest," and "unscrupulous." These are amazing charges, and the attack upon the world's greatest biographer is not strengthened when one finds Mr. Kingsmill expressing a preference for Miss Burney's account of Johnson in her "Diary" or Mrs. Piozzi's "Anecdotes." The former presentation of Johnson is heightened and colored; the latter, inaccurate and biased—facts which have been known to students of Johnson for a century and a half. Yet Mr. Kingsmill can assert in apparent sincerity that Mrs. Piozzi's little book gives us "a man," while Boswell's great record presents merely "a character." Such charges are too irresponsible ever seriously to be brought into court.

It is remarkable that the flow of publications about Johnson and Boswell goes on increasing from decade to decade. During the current winter we have seen the completion of Professor Pottle's "Boswell Papers" in eighteen volumes, and the issue, by the Clarendon Press, of a group of monographs by various hands entitled "Johnson's England." A revision of Hill's great edition of the Life is approaching completion, and Dr. Chapman is engaged on a definitive collection of Johnson's correspondence. Here indeed is evidence of Johnson's immortality.

That a man of such obvious weaknesses as Johnson's should prove to have so enduring a fascination for mankind is a thing to give us pause. Over a hundred years have elapsed since Macaulay drew attention to this phenomenon; yet there has been no dwindling in Johnson's bulky but impressive figure as it recedes into the mists of the past. Why is this? Of late there has been apparent a tendency to regard Johnson as being somehow the symbol and exponent of the age in which he lived; and he has been said to unite in himself the typical characteristics of the Englishman. But this view is hardly acceptable. Carlyle pointed out in 1840 that Johnson who "worshipped in the age of Voltaire" was certainly not typical of his century. And such Christian faith is no less unique than his stalwart opposition to the advance of democracy.

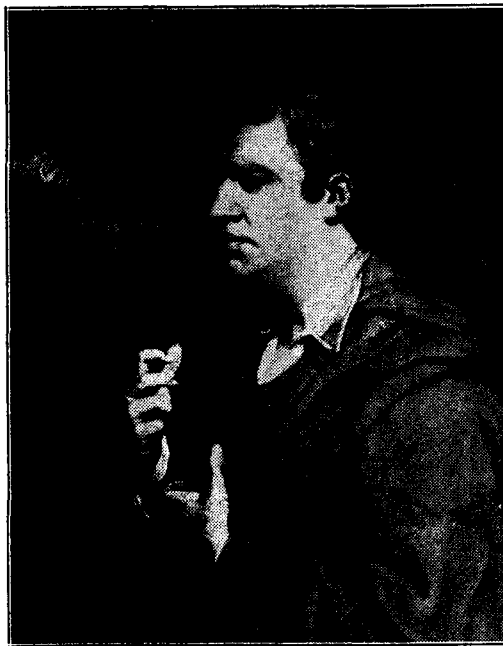
If we look critically into such assertions we shall hardly convince ourselves that Samuel Johnson was even a "typical Englishman"—if such a being may be said to exist. An Englishman is usually supposed to have a power (highly prized by himself and assiduously cultivated) of self-possession which ignores the possibility of rivalry or the need of correction. But though Johnson despised "foreigners"—those not born east of the Severn and south of the

Tweed—he had no skill whatever in the art of self-control. He surrendered readily to every fleeting prejudice; he expressed with picturesque violence emotions which he regretted half an hour later; he never hid his affection for his friends, his dependants, his black servant, his dead wife, his college, or his cats. He begged the indulgent sympathy and the prayers of all who came into contact with him. Is this, one queries, "typically English"? If so, we must revise our notions of that remarkable people.

Nor is there any evidence that Johnson had the typical English love of sport, that one passion of the Englishman which is wholly unrepressed. For though Johnson was perhaps athletic in a spasmodic fashion, running races barefoot, swinging on gates, climbing trees, and rolling down hill, there is no hint of any regular attention to "exercise" or even to life in the open air. There is, so far as I know, no evidence that Johnson ever went a-fishing; and though he boasted that he could ride to hounds "as hard as anyone," there is no proof that he often did so. He was not seen at boxing matches or at race-courses. Squire Western would have considered him more of a milksop than Parson Supple. Is this indifference typically English? Johnson described himself as a retired and uncourtly scholar, and such, indeed, he was, with no remarkable breadth of interests. To music and the plastic arts he was in general indifferent, though he could rouse himself to write a preface to Sir Joshua's "Discourses" or Dr. Burney's "History of Music." Politics bored him, save when he gave himself to the writing of such (perhaps regrettable) pamphlets as "The False Alarm" and "Taxation no Tyranny." Even the reading of history, but in particular conversation about history, bored him. When the conversation turned on the Punic Wars, he "divorced his mind and thought about Tom Thumb." But to poetry and to religion, to the failings and the fortunes of his friends he was never indifferent.

Upon the ordinary routine and the chaotic confusion of life Johnson brought to play a continuous stream of ideas. He drew the casual affairs of the day and the ordinary topics of conversation into a perspective in which new lights and shadows were suddenly revealed. He lent to the humdrum of human life a novelty that was sometimes splendid and sometimes terrifying, but which was always forceful and stimulating even when it was unreasonable. To speak in medical terms, he is the great irritant of his time. Yet in his power there is nothing that is aloof or saintly, for he clearly belongs to our world. He is doomed, like ourselves, to struggle with disease and disappointment, ever conscious of the lost opportunity and the unfulfilled task, with a loving heart which he was for ever disgracing by outbursts of spleen and bigotry, with a mind conscious of heroic powers yet a prey to melancholy and to a fitful purpose:—in a word, a genius, yet a fretful, sinful, and hungry creature like ourselves. Such is the enduring fascination of the man.

Chauncey Brewster Tinker, Sterling professor of English at Yale University, is one of the outstanding authorities on Johnson and Boswell. Among his books are "Dr. Johnson and Fanny Burney," and "Young Boswell." He is the editor of "The Letters of James Boswell."



SAMUEL JOHNSON

From a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds

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Profits of "Cussedness"

Mr. Schneider, in his article on Dreiser in last week's *Review*, maintains that the triumph over Victorian inhibitions and reticences in matters of sex was futile; the profits of that victory have accrued not to art and to truth, but to the exploiters of pornography—salacious periodicals, "art" magazines, burlesque shows, and depravity in general.

Was it futile? This break through the lines of reticence and hypocrisy was certainly one of those major events which mark the end of a period and the beginning of something new. With entire fitness the old principle applies here; that it is better for many guilty to escape than for one innocent to have continued to suffer. The conflict between pornography and morals was not begun in our time, nor will it be ended: what is important in this change of front is the new freedom for writers with something to say and a genius for saying it, to enter upon every province of life, with no territory forbidden by convention. That gain outweighs the license given to the vicious minded. "Thou shalt" is more helpful to culture than "thou shalt not," and no art was ever built up on suppressions.

But the innate "cussedness" of human nature to which Elmer Davis refers in his review of Professor Niebuhr's book, also in last week's *Review*, is inextinguishable here as elsewhere. It is "cussedness" that makes the munition maker an instigator of war if he can get his price; it is "cussedness" that defeats attempt after attempt to make the city a decent place to live in; it is "cussedness" that makes capitalism unworkable and communism and fascism tyrannies. And it is "cussedness" that takes advantage of the end of sexual reticence to peddle printed dirt in the streets.

But why be defeatist about it? This particular kind of original sin is now out in the open, and both reader and critic can form their own judgments as to whether a book is really dirty without having to make equivocal concessions to the prudes.

When Lowell attacked the indecent there was a faint smell of hypocrisy in the air. One felt that Whitman shocked him because he had never dared distinguish between the honest instincts of human nature, his own included, and the salacious. Unwilling to admit the full range of his own emotions into literature, his attack on what he called immorality was futile because his own sexual morality was a convention. The naughtiness of the later nineties, like the verbal impudence of Ezra Pound, or the *doubles entendres* of Cabell, was not so much indecency as a protest against such prudery, the irrepressible sticking out its tongue at the respectable. We were all ill at ease in those days, since we had to defend a good deal of adolescent nastiness because we knew that it was a symptom of a desire to break down a taboo. In the same way, one gave a grudging loyalty to the intolerable preciousness of the *fin de siècle* because it was a protest against the cheap ugliness of current journalistic prose.

Today, when the reader of sensitive spirit must feel that the sexual organs themselves have been given tongues, one

at least is enabled to make free and responsible judgments between the literature of truth and the literature of salaciousness. No court will ever decide this matter to permanent satisfaction; no government will enforce standards without the danger of such horrid results as one finds in Ireland and in Germany. It is for the reader to decide whether a fornication is described because it is a fornication or because it is an indispensable part of the imaginative creation of a life worth imagining. Such decisions will make our new mores. (See in this connection Hervey Allen's letter on this page.)

But "cussedness" falls short of a full explanation of these results of taking the lid off reticence. Honest indecency, some maintain, is good for the mechanized man that we all dangerously tend to become. Nudity for its own sake, even pornography for its own sake, probably never hurt any mature and balanced personality. Unfortunately a frightening percentage of our population is immature emotionally and unbalanced in intellect, which raises difficulties not to be dealt with here. However this may be, no real justification can be argued for the exploiting of the sexual instinct, where the purpose is clearly not art or truth or protest but making money. That way lies true salaciousness, and worse than salaciousness. No matter how honest the emotion, the exploiters have a way of making it vicious, and we make no distinction here between sexualism exploited for profit and the false idea of life played up in the movies. Of the two the latter is probably more dangerous. Vulgarizing for profit is a social damage against which the state has a right to protect itself, especially when the harm is done to the impressionable minds of youth. But the state has not taken action in any intelligent way because the state has made profit sacred. In the widespread exploitation of sexualism of which Mr. Schneider complains, both morals and art are out of court, except as frames of reference. This is a disease of the profit-making system, an inflammation of the profit-making motive. The idea that what pays must somehow be right is deep in the core of our capitalist civilization. We have forgotten how specialized is the principle of private profits. We remember only its immense apparent success, especially in this continent. Our fabric of laws protects it, our own instincts protect it. If there is danger in the new freedom, it is because the "cussedness" of human nature is exploiting this freedom, and there is no defence against this exploitation except to reconsider the economic basis upon which our sense of right and wrong in these matters is based. As in everything one touches in discussion today such a searching question points toward a single answer, which—one speaks tentatively, not prophetically—is neither communism, nor fascism, nor even socialism, which are only names for experiments tried elsewhere or theories never brought to earth, but a redefining of *human* values, and a rigorous and ruthless attempt to make profits profitable for the social good—and for art—and for the full life, which is a great deal more important than decency as the prudish have defined it.

Superannuated Professors

Literary Awakening in Harvard—a Cambridge scout reports that the Harvard *Advocate* regrets the "balderdash and hogwash poured out weekly in such papers as the *Saturday Review* by superannuated professors whose knowledge of literature stops with Hardy." Alas, the twenties still exercise their baneful influence, for here is the once well-known diction of Ezra Pound on the lips of youth. Ten years from now the *Advocate* will stumble upon the Marxian dialectic as applied to lyric poetry! More in sorrow than in anger we made a statistical survey of reviewers in the last two numbers of the *Review*. The score stands ten professors, active or ex, forty-four non-academic reviewers. Average age of the professors, say thirty-eight, which one supposes does seem hopelessly old to an undergraduate, especially if there has been a difference of opinion as to a review or a question on an examination paper.



"TWO MORE POEMS AND A SHORT SHORT-STORY AND WE'LL HAVE THAT LITTLE PLACE IN TUDOR CITY."

To the Editor: Hervey Allen Replies to Monsignor Lavelle

"Anthony" and Censorship

SIR:—The letter which follows was given last week to the Associated Press, but I think has been printed only in part.

Seldom has so purely personal and wrongly aimed a statement found its way into the press as that recently credited to Monsignor Lavelle, of St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York. Mgr. Lavelle's action in setting himself up as the moral censor of modern literature is typical rather of the isolated crusades led by ignorant zealots of certain puritanical sects than of the liberal and understanding attitude to be expected from, and usually to be found in a great Catholic tradition.

In particular, his choice of "Anthony Adverse" as an example of vice in modern literature can only be described as amazingly misdirected. It is true that certain experiences in the life of Anthony Adverse are frankly described in the novel, but they are so treated for the sole purpose of making real and so doubly understandable, the human difficulties to be overcome in the development of the hero's moral character.

Now Mgr. Lavelle, according to his own statement to the press, "read only a few pages and threw the book into the furnace." It is quite evident therefore, if Mgr. Lavelle's statement was correctly quoted, that he could have had no adequate idea whatever as to the nature of the contents of the book which he so outrageously denounced. He could not even have known what it is really about. Burning a book without reading it is one of the strangest methods of becoming acquainted with the moral or immoral significance of its pages that anyone has ever heard of. Does Mgr. Lavelle really intend to accuse the public at large of being interested in "Anthony Adverse" because as he asserts, without having read it, the book contains "descriptions of vice"? If so, he underestimates the ethical understanding of the intelligent reading public.

I can scarcely believe that Mgr. Lavelle really intended to convey the impression that he as the head of a great metropolitan parish could do no better than to assume the old-fashioned role of Anthony Comstock and the Watch and Ward Society when other ministers of the Gospel, rabbis, and editors of religious journals, some of them of his own faith, have been drawing material from the very novel which he denounced, for sermons, editorials, articles, and reviews.

Must I believe that those who claim that they have found a strong religious and

moral theme in the book are all mistaken and that Mgr. Lavelle is the only one who is right?

Since a great many of the incidents in "Anthony Adverse" deal with material taken from the lives of saints and missionaries, some of them martyrs for the Roman Catholic faith, it is more than unusually unfortunate that, possibly in order to obtain publicity for his crusade against obscenity in modern literature, Mgr. Lavelle should have settled upon one of the few pieces of popular fiction published in recent times which lays prime stress upon the necessity for religion in modern life.

HERVEY ALLEN.

Miami, Fla.

Unemployed Writers Association

SIR:—This to advise you of the organization of the Unemployed Writers Association, 146 Macdougall St., New York, for the purpose of forcing through a project for writers in this national economic emergency, and bettering the condition of the writer in his present extremity. We have written everyone, including the President, that we stand for the recognition of the profession of writing by the government, the right to a secure existence as writers, [and] work or wages for all unemployed writers. . . .

Since our formation we have outlined a project which would enable the local CWA, CWS, ABC, or XYZ to start immediately setting authors to work—if there were money; we have demanded of Harry L. Hopkins that he ask Congress for the money, although the bureaucrats below may not have communicated this to him as yet; and we have exacted the promise from Miss Gosselin in New York that 250 writers will immediately receive work when the money comes. We have been steadily registering and classifying writers of all kinds, and now have 500, half of which are already registered with CWA. A few of the provisions of our project are:—a government subsidized printing house to distribute authors' work free to libraries, museums, etc.; bureaus for translating foreign newspapers, lecturing for poets, novelists, etc.; a colony or camp for unemployed writers in the summer.

We are also supporting such projects as that of the Authors' League for 500 writers until May 1, etc., although our own project is more inclusive. . . . But so far we have been unable to advance very far, except in sending delegations to the authorities.

ROBERT WHITCOMB.

New York City.

The Saturday Review recommends

This Group of Current Books:

IN SIGHT OF EDEN. By ROGER VERCEL. *Harcourt, Brace.*
A story of seamen and the frozen North.

ROBERT E. LEE. By ROBERT W. WINSTON. *Morrow.*
A biography that is at the same time a history of the Civil War period.

SENSE AND POETRY. By JOHN H. A. ANGUS. *Yale University Press.* Essays on contemporary verse.

This Less Recent Book:

STICKS AND STONES. By LEWIS MUMFORD. *Norton.*
A study of American architecture now issued in a new edition.