

Whose Welfare?

WHOSE CONSTITUTION. By Henry A. Wallace. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. 1936. \$1.75.

Reviewed by FELIX MORLEY

AN Inquiry Into The General Welfare" is the sub-title chosen by Secretary Wallace for his latest contribution to the cause of American political thinking. The sub-title is necessary for descriptive purposes. "Whose Constitution" has no question-mark, and the study, if a curiously rambling and discursive volume may be so entitled, leaves the reader with the impression that no question on the subject exists in the mind of the Secretary of Agriculture. He feels very decidedly that it is "the people as a whole," at any specific moment of our history, who "own" the Constitution.

One need not be a conservative to resent this very sweeping assumption. There is a decided value in tradition, in the field of politics as in any other form of human endeavor. And the assumption that the national heritage may be spent and the national future mortgaged, entirely according to the will of the moment, is one which cannot be admitted without profound reservations. Each generation stands in a dual relation towards the national destiny. It is a trustee of that which has been handed down as well as a custodian of that which will be handed on. Mr. Wallace forgets that "the people as a whole" include those now under the sod and those still unborn.

This impatience with all which is not of obviously immediate importance runs like a theme song through Mr. Wallace's book. The doctrine of States' rights, for instance, he blandly assumes to have been "a barrier to progress even in 1787" while "today it is clear that States' rights are being invoked not for the rights which they defend, but for the privileges they protect." Elsewhere he concludes that "the potency of States' rights as a political red herring has long since passed, but its potency as a legal red herring is still great."

In this, as in many other matters, the Secretary of Agriculture shows himself a pure dogmatist. With a crusading spirit, and with a mind both impatient of opposition and intolerant of the philosophic viewpoint, he tends to regard as meretricious or downright dishonest all idealism which he does not himself share. The sense of spiritual identity with a locality, or the abiding love of local institutions felt by Easterners from Maine to Georgia, is completely alien to Mr. Wallace's thought. In the restless spirit of the pioneer, he proposes to move on to "fresh woods and pastures new." Because he feels such moving to be good in itself, he is absolutely certain that this

is what the people want. One can understand more clearly the activity behind the Resettlement Administration of the Department of Agriculture, after reading this book.

As a convincing presentation of the historical case for loose constitutional interpretation, "Whose Constitution" is highly unsatisfactory. While the book is indexed it is very poorly documented. And a number of instances give proof that Mr. Wallace's mind is not inhibited by scholarly considerations.

On page 195, the Secretary of Agriculture makes the positive assertion that in the Constitutional Convention: "The contest was not between large and small States for States' rights as opposed to a national government, but a contest between large and small States for control of the new government which both groups wished to be national and strong."

Mr. Wallace himself is aware that this interpretation is rather large to swallow at a bite. So he appends a footnote saying: "I realize that this is not the conventional view. Those who wish to examine the supporting evidence for it will find it in the book soon to be published by Mr. Irving Brant."

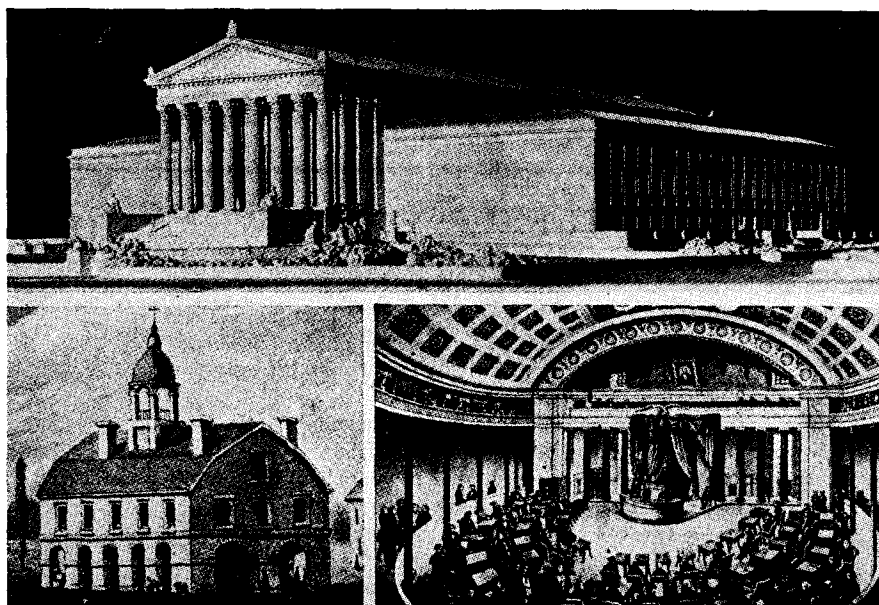
I have not myself yet read Mr. Brant's "Storm Over The Constitution," which I believe is being published simultaneously with the Wallace book. But whether Mr. Brant handles the abundant evidence well or ill is really immaterial. The point is that Secretary Wallace is completely willing to take whatever supports his case as a basis for the sweeping assumptions on which he rears his entire thesis.

It is difficult to determine how much

this propagandist approach is characteristic of the Secretary, and how much it has been forced upon him by his tremendous canvas.

"Whose Constitution" is an exceedingly diffuse book, a consciousness of which in the mind of the author is indicated by its division into four distinct parts. The first of these, "Forces Of Change," is a hasty review, spotted with statistics, of American economic history from Colonial to post-war days. This is followed by a section on "The General Welfare Today," which examines that famous clause in the preamble to the Constitution with reference to various major contemporary problems. In Part 3, entitled "We The People," there are three chapters devoted to a highly selective survey of the Constitutional Convention and the subsequent interpretation of that document by the Supreme Court. For the closing section, which sums up the political philosophy of the Secretary of Agriculture, he has chosen the title "Democracy In Action," culminating in a somewhat mystical but well-handled analysis of what he conceives to be the American way of life.

The book, of course, owes the major part of its importance to the fact that it represents the thought of a leading member of the present Cabinet. And it is easy for the careful reader to find in these pages ample evidence of the very profound influence which Secretary Wallace has on President Roosevelt, and on the general formulation of New Deal policies. It also shows, what everyone in Washington knows, that Mr. Wallace stands rather to the Right of the President and would greatly prefer to work out current problems coöperatively rather than by any revolutionary technique. It is also interesting that "Whose Consti-



THE SUPREME COURT: Top, the new building, opposite the Capitol; lower left, Old City Hall, Philadelphia, where the court held its first session in 1790; lower right, the old Senate Chamber, where the court began to hold sessions in 1859. From James Truslow Adams's "History of the United States" (Scribners).

tution" should be published immediately after the President's acceptance speech, which contained such forthright denunciation of the "new despotism" created by "the privileged princes of new economic dynasties." As Mr. Wallace says: "It has become the fashion to approach this question of corporations and the general welfare by dwelling on the abuses of corporate power, after the age-old custom of seeking for personal devils. . . . This approach is gratifying to the sense of moral indignation, but for my own part I think it will get us nowhere." This is one point of disagreement between the President and his Secretary of Agriculture.

Secretary Wallace, furthermore, does not share the belief, so sedulously promoted at Philadelphia, that Republican iniquities were solely responsible for the depression. But he does believe that a narrow legalistic interpretation of the Constitution is greatly hampering present political leadership in bringing the country back to real stability.

For this viewpoint there will be much sympathy, and there is no doubt that Mr. Wallace outlines his picture skilfully even where his supply of paint is pretty thin. But there are two fundamental shortcomings in his handling. In the first place, while the Secretary of Agriculture shows why serious and sweeping national readjustments are inevitable, partly because of our own past stupidities, he nevertheless refuses to accept the results of his own reasoning. This implies that not even the broadest interpretation of the general welfare clause will prevent a very perceptible lowering of the American standard of living, which may be postponed, but cannot be averted, by the present method of incurring huge governmental deficits. A burning patriotism, coupled with a determined non-conformist religious outlook, combine to prevent Mr. Wallace from admitting that the great days for America may be over, even if every Supreme Court Justice from now on forgets his law sufficiently

to set a clause in the preamble to the Constitution above every specified provision in the document itself.

This unwillingness to face the facts is the more striking because in many parts of his book Mr. Wallace considers the future with great clarity and courage. He is particularly interesting in his examination of the importance of population shifts and their probable consequences. He is excellent, even though a voice crying in the wilderness, in his analysis of the importance of foreign trade. He is always earnestly seeking a national policy worthy of the name. But certain missionary qualities in his thought seem to make him conclude that regardless of the stupidities of Demos an emphasis on the general welfare clause will of itself solve all our problems.

This reviewer holds no brief for a reactionary or rigid interpretation of the Constitution. But there are certain dangers in undermining or seriously weakening the safeguards of that document which the Secretary of Agriculture completely fails to envisage. That failure constitutes the second basic deficiency in his argument. Whatever the ill effects of the growing corporate structure of industry, and whatever the obstacles to enlightened reform which the Constitution, narrowly interpreted, creates, the fact remains that it is a reliable bulwark against the establishments of any centralized political despotism. Secretary Wallace gives the impression that if this bulwark were swept away some instinctive fidelity of the American people to liberal institutions would of itself preserve a liberal and democratic government. He gives no consideration to the probability that a baffled President possessing autocratic powers, but unable to make everyone prosperous in spite of his desire to do so, might slip into dictatorial practices as decisively as have the governments of Italy and Germany.

Felix Morley, editor of the Washington Post, was co-winner last spring of the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing.



ANTHONY THORNE

Balkan Peasant Life in Two New Novels

BALKAN MONASTERY. By Stephen Graham. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co. 1936. \$2.50.

DOWN COME THE TREES. By Anthony Thorne. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by FRANCES SHAPLI

ACCESSIBLE only by tracks through the Serbian forest, the white-walled mountain monastery of St. Roman is the scene of what the author chooses to call a novel, but which is more truly an account in dramatic form of the Great War in Serbia, viewed from one focal point, and its disintegrating effect upon the almost medieval peasant order which still obtained in that country. The shallow plot which threads through the book gives the author a pretext for describing what he knows of Balkan customs and folk-lore but is hardly sufficient for the weight that it carries.

To the sixteenth century ruins of St. Roman, the peasants were wont to bring for cure those among them who were possessed of devils and evil spirits. This gruesome place, presided over by three aged monks, was assigned by the authorities as a refuge for eighty children, motherless little girls, when their own hostel in Belgrade had to be abandoned just before the bombardment in 1914. The most vividly pictured among them is Desa Georgevitch, a Bosnian girl with a brother on each side of the fighting lines. Desa's war experiences, her gradual starvation at the monastery followed by a period of alternate indulgence and abuse as the adopted daughter of a temperamental Bulgarian woman, end with her restoration to a devoted father and brother at the close of the book. Madame Mateivitch, the Bulgarian step-mother,

The Happy Isles

By BABETTE DEUTSCH

THEY say that love, too, has its Fortunate Islands,
Not fabled, not fit for the dead;
But likely out of westering waters lifting
Their drenched-with-sunset head;
Or pale, it may be, as the star of morning,
Or meagre, even, as islands in a lake
That you may see a tethered row-boat nuzzle.
But what airs, oh, of enchantment overtake
Those who set foot upon the incredible beaches!
What winds, what wings, hover, and at their feet
What flowers, or shells, to gather, and on their lips
Blow salty gusts, then sweet.
Some, they say, do know those Fortunate Islands.
Is it only the young? Who on a day must turn
To this harsh country we inhabit,
And cannot leave, or spurn.