

History of Alchemy

PRELUDE TO CHEMISTRY: An Outline of Alchemy, Its Literature and Relationships. By John Read. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1937. \$5.

Reviewed by JOHN RIORDAN

THIS book of curiosa and of research in forgotten knowledge is probably most interesting in that its author is the professor of chemistry in the United College of St. Salvator and St. Leonard in the University of St. Andrews, a fellow of the Royal Society as well as a scientific doctor. Alchemy, Islam's word for the knowledge of Egypt (al Khem, Khem being the word for Egypt), has had, possibly, no interpreter so distinguished in the world of science. Though nominally writing a study of primitive knowledge of the properties of materials now fructified into modern chemistry, Mr. Read has had perforce to extend his scope to the "philosophic and exact science of the regeneration of the human soul from its present sense-immersed state into the perfection and nobility of that divine condition in which it was originally created." In the latter aspect only have the Alchemists, either as curiosities or possessors of a lost knowledge, anything of importance for the present. As scientific precursors, their studies of the transmutation of elements, still their popular embodiment, are spurious; and the field of metallurgy, in which Agricola (publicized by former President Hoover) had conspicuous success, may be regarded as apart from their main spirit.

In fact, the parts of the history of alchemy which are easily intelligible to the modern scientific mind appear foreign to its nature. For alchemy, unlike modern science, had as its primary aim the perfection of man; the study of nature was incidental. The transmutation of lower metals into the noble element, gold, was a reflection or allegory of the same process in man, and was to be reached as much in the psyche of the alchemist as in the materials in his Hermetic Vase. The substantial unity of nature, the universe, and God so focussed on man is a concept quite contrary to modern minds, and indeed constitutive of another culture.

Thus the task of alchemy's historian is not easy. He has to make persuasive a point of view inevitably somewhat repugnant to his readers. He has to overcome the same tendency in himself. Moreover, the alchemical transmission of knowledge was largely oral and personal, its written texts being designed as much to conceal as to reveal: "all haile to the noble Companie of true Students in holy Alchemie, whose noble practice doth them teach to vaile their secrets with mistie speech," a practice not particularly helpful. In fact, the leading criticism of this book might be that Mr. Read has relied too exclusively on texts, giving little attention to the possibility of a continuance of the oral tradition, contact with which might have facilitated his work; but that is asking for the definitive history. And if he is not content with curiosa, his work must seem always in danger of losing point. He needs the text of his opening chapter:—"The systems which confront the intelligence remain basically unchanged through the ages; although they assume different forms . . . there is nothing so disastrous in science as the arrogant dogmatism which despises the past and admires nothing but the present." But this is written by a mid-nineteenth century scholar, himself a historian of chemistry. Perhaps more to the point is the evidence, on the one hand, of the interest in alchemy taken by a founder of modern science, Isaac Newton,

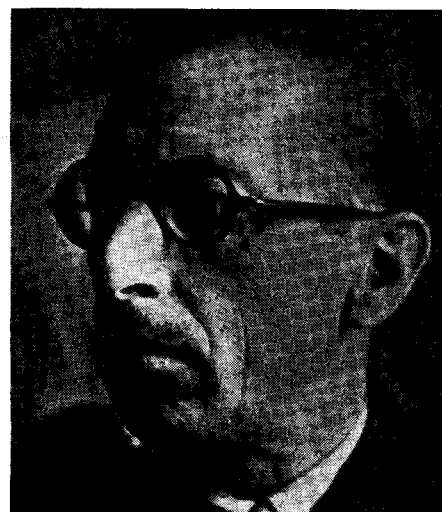
"surviving manuscripts on alchemy in [whose] hand comprise some 650,000 words" and, on the other, of the current work of A. S. Eddington, the prominence in which of the number 136 (as involved in relationships of fundamental physical constants) has, as has been observed by E. T. Bell, a Pythagorean or alchemical tinge.

Mr. Read has surmounted these obstacles, producing a skillful, charming, and as well as may be intelligible account of the central ideas and particular conceits of

writers who were always irritatingly ambiguous while always bent on objects now as then the most interesting of man's aims. The book is beautifully produced, with seventeen text illustrations, sixty-three plate reproductions of alchemical engravings, transcription of the music of four alchemical canons, and a striking Artzybasheff jacket.



AN ALCHEMICAL INTERIOR
From "Prelude to Chemistry."



Erik Schall

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Stravinsky's New Opus

STRAVINSKY: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1936. \$3.50.

Reviewed by PAUL H. LANG

THE autobiography of Stravinsky is a welcome human document contributing to the understanding of the most original and most powerful musician of our era. It is not really an autobiography. "It will be a simple account of important events side by side with facts of minor consequence." And, indeed, the events and facts follow one another with kaleidoscopic variety. Stravinsky's crisp sentences, often naked in their brevity, recall the "motoric" rhythms of his *Noches*. They are often irritating in their bluntness and naiveté but more often highly interesting and significant in their revelatory glimpses.

People will criticize this autobiography as they did Stravinsky's compositions, yet we cannot approach it with critical eyes because it is neither a profession of faith nor an autobiography in the Wellsian sense. It does not matter whether he likes Tchaikovsky and dislikes Wagner, there are many people who will endorse his opinions; it does not even matter that, under the influence of French civilization he denies his blood and heritage, Russian folk music. The composer of *Petroushka*, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, and other orgiastic, breathtaking, and overpowering Russian works changed to an elaborately archaistic Western European style in *Apollon Musagète*. It is highly interesting to read his remarks in which he tries to justify his conversion, because every one of his moves caused a new orientation among musicians throughout the world. The great composer's remarks concerning the practice of music, conducting, and composition are penetrating and timely.

No one who is interested in the destiny of musical art should miss this thought-provoking book.

The Power and the Glory

THE ULTIMATE POWER. By Morris L. Ernst. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company. 1937. \$3.

Reviewed by CHARLES P. CURTIS, JR.

THIS is a popular and vigorous book which might have been called, "Our Constitution and Our Court, Their Cause and Cure." It is not for scholars, nor intended to be, any more than, as Mr. Ernst says, it was designed for lawyers. It is written, although Mr. Ernst is himself a lawyer, with an "earnest disrespect for what lawyers and judges have done to us all." Disrespectful it is, yet it is not too earnest; nor, when you come to Mr. Ernst's conclusion, is it as radical as his attitude would lead you to expect.

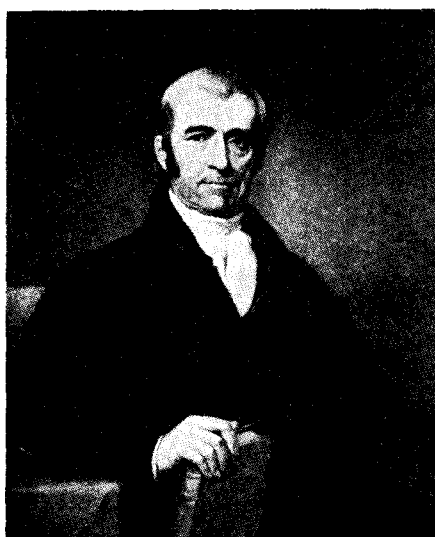
It is a happily readable book, so its 326 pages of text, broken on almost every page with a sort of news flash in italics à la Dos Passos, are not too long. For two-thirds of it we are given the background of the Constitution, the thirteen colonies struggling against England and then against themselves, the Constitutional Convention sitting in Philadelphia in secrecy, the Constitution it produced there, and the narrowly successful, but graceful coup d'état with which it was adopted. Then comes the way Jefferson captured the result from Hamilton, and finally the way Marshall salvaged the power for the Supreme Court to declare acts of Congress unconstitutional.

That really brings us to what Mr. Ernst has to say. In *Marbury vs. Madison*, in 1803, Marshall set up this power of the Court as a standard to which good men might repair. Senator Beveridge calls it "a coup as bold in design and as daring in execution as that by which the Constitution had been framed." Mr. Ernst tells it as a dramatic story of "judicial impropriety and political jobbery." Good men had little or no occasion to repair to the standard until after the Civil War. But since then they have gathered round it more and more often, until Mr. Ernst is disgusted and alarmed. So much so that he gets excited and says that the Court's judicial vetoes "are no doubt one of the main causes of our economic depression."

The last third of the book is skimmed. There is something, but not enough, about the recent batch of judicial vetoes, on the A.A.A., the Guffey Coal Act, the Minimum Wage, the N.R.A. Yet those are the ones that most concern us now. There are little thumbnails of the present judges, but not enough. They are the ones we are now watching. And Mr. Ernst's analysis of the Court's attitude is too superficial. He suggests that it is due to the fact that practically all the seventy-six judges past and present have

come from the Eastern seaboard. But all the judges of the present court who have shown self-restraint about acts of Congress come from the East, Brandeis, Stone, Cardozo, Hughes, and Roberts. The vetoers come from further West, Van Devanter of Indiana, McReynolds of Tennessee, Sutherland of Utah, Butler of Minnesota. He says, "We must remember that these men are lawyers. They belong to a profession which has always been basically dishonest." But Brandeis, Stone, and Cardozo, the most self-restrained, are as much, if not more, disciplined and distinguished lawyers than their colleagues.

His conclusion is, as I have said, less radical than his disrespectful attitude will have led the reader to foresee. He wants us now to adopt Madison's suggestion that when the Court declares an Act



JOHN MARSHALL
Portrait by James R. Lambdin.

of Congress unconstitutional Congress should have power to override the decision by a two-thirds vote of both houses. He thinks this "would in time enhance the stature of the Court," for it would be inspired to build up enough popular support for its decision to cause Congress to hesitate about overriding it. And so it well might. Constitutional questions are political questions. Let them be argued out politically, and not pseudo-legally. Let the Court pronounce judgment between the true parties, who are We the People vs. Congress, not as if it were only between the individuals whose private controversy only happens to be the occasion for a decision. Marshall put the Court into politics. Instead of taking it out of politics by denying it the power to declare acts of Congress unconstitutional, let us all, including the Court, recognize the fact. The Court might well be the better and the stronger for it.

Mr. Ernst closes by calling to his sup-

port "none other than John Marshall." He quotes from that letter to Judge Chase which is well worth quotation. Judge Chase was under impeachment for what were really political reasons. On January 23, 1804, Chief Justice Marshall wrote his associate to deplore this modern doctrine of impeachment and to say that it "should yield to an appellate jurisdiction in the legislature. A reversal of those legal opinions deemed unsound by the legislature would certainly better compost with the mildness of our character than the removal of the Judge who has rendered them unknowing of his fault" (not faults, as Mr. Ernst prints it). There is a facsimile of this letter in Beveridge's *Marshall* opposite page 176 of volume III.

A Diplomat's Memoirs

THEATRE OF LIFE. By Esme Howard. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1936. \$4.50.

AMERICANS will remember Esme Howard best as the British Ambassador in Washington. In "Theatre of Life," the second volume of his memoirs, Lord Howard writes pleasantly of his career from 1903 to today. His work has taken him to Crete, Hungary, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. Once again we get the behind-the-scenes story of the Peace Conference, this time with particular emphasis on the Polish and Baltic questions.

Constant readers of memoirs will find the usual good supply of stories about prominent characters—Lenin, Clemenceau, Hoover, Lincoln Steffens, Coolidge, and Mussolini all appear. The anecdotes are not always new but they are told with pleasing gusto. Lord Howard's quiet sense of humor can be gauged from the way in which he reports that, after listening to a remark of President Coolidge, "I laughed, which was what I was supposed to do."

The book is a mixture of inconsequential chit-chat, sensitive descriptions of places, and asides on the political and social customs of the various countries to which the author was accredited. Most adequate of these latter is the very favorable account given of Swiss democracy. Many of the principles which have worked out so successfully there, Lord Howard thinks could be imitated with modifications elsewhere.

The author writes with quiet assurance of politics and international affairs. But it is the traditional assurance of the British aristocrat and not the result of any connected system of thought. There are, therefore, contradictions. On one page he can write, "How anybody not a lunatic can sing the glories of war passes all comprehension." Later he devotes several pages to praise of the man who has done this as much as any other—Mussolini. "Theatre of Life" is a well-told story of a suave, cultivated diplomat.