

# Science in This Century

## BACKGROUND TO MODERN SCIENCE.

Edited by Joseph Needham and Walter Pagel. New York: The Macmillan Company (Cambridge University Press). 1938. \$2.

Reviewed by JOHN HODGDON BRADLEY

ACCORDING to the authors of this book, the history of science is an important but neglected branch of learning. Professional historians have been busy chiefly with politics and wars, professional scientists chiefly with observations and experiments. Consequently, what has passed for the history of science has been largely a stringing together of individual biographies, without any serious attempt to show the relationship of scientific thought to the social and economic background of the time.

"Background to Modern Science" is part of a recent attempt at Cambridge University to set forth the history of science as a phase of the history of civilization. It is a compilation of ten lectures delivered at Cambridge by investigators who have themselves made fundamental contributions to science. Rutherford, Ed- dington, Bragg, Haldane—to mention but four of the ten distinguished authors—amply guarantee its authenticity.

The book, however, is not a significant contribution to the task of depicting the growth of modern science against the social and economic background of the time. Readers desiring "social consciousness" in the current sense of the phrase will be disappointed. On the other hand, readers who can be content with authentic and not too lengthy résumés of progress in several fields of scientific investigation should find all these essays informative, and some of them extremely interesting and well written.

Dealing largely with the achievements of the forty-year period between 1895 and 1935, the book might better have been named "Foreground of Modern Science." Excepting the first chapter, which contrasts the deductive and the inductive methods of investigating nature, and the second chapter, which tells how the second method eventually triumphed over the first, the book is little concerned with the background to modern science. Throughout most of the chapters, indeed, the reader has a decided feeling of being at the front of modern science.

Ten fifty-minute lectures can hardly be expected to contain a definitive history of anything so broad as modern science. Several important sciences, in fact, are not even mentioned. Those which are treated—radioactivity, crystal physics, atomic structure, astronomy, physiology and pathology, parasitology, evolution, and genetics—are severely curtailed. Some of the authors practically limit their

discussions to their own particular work and interests. Some in striving for completeness become in places rather too encyclopedic for the comfort of even a well-grounded lay reader.

These, however, are the unavoidable faults of a book that bites off more than it can chew. It must be said that for the most part the authors perform very admirably within their self-imposed limitations. Among the chapters on the physical sciences, "Forty Years of Atomic Theory," by F. W. Aston, is a gem of popular presentation of a difficult subject.

"Forty Years of Evolution Theory," by R. C. Punnett, is equally outstanding among the chapters on the biological sciences. "Forty Years of Physiology and Pathology," by John A. Ryle (which actually deals with a hundred years of research on the human stomach), and "Forty Years of Parasitology and Tropical Medicine," by the late G. H. F. Nuttall (which deals with the fight against malaria and yellow fever), should be full of interest for almost any educated person.

British scientists have a deserved reputation for excellence in both investigation and popular exposition. Any serious reader who has not yet discovered the reason for this reputation can do so with profit and entertainment in this book.

## Editor's Essays

THE LITERARY LIFE AND THE HELL WITH IT. By Whit Burnett. New York: Harper & Bros. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by FLETCHER PRATT

WHIT BURNETT has a hell of a lot of nerve. In the years since he and Martha Foley turned out the first issue of *Story* on a second-hand Hungarian multigraphing machine in Vienna, he has probably fathered more rejection slips than any other man now in America. A good proportion of them must have gone to the ambitious young reporters who, because of reputed tastes for pure literature and willingness to work overtime, are normally assigned by city editors to review books. He has now offered these doubtless moral, but nevertheless human, young men a chance to take a poke at him; and to make sure they will not miss the opportunity, has attached his name to a volume of light, humorous essays, probably the most unpopular literary form now being written and the easiest in which to pick flaws. On top of that he has had the book illustrated by Ludwig Bemelmans, the only cartoonist who ever put Rabelais in a comic strip.

Under the circumstances, his protective protests that he is not writing essays and that he is not and never has known intimately more than one humorist (if getting swizzled on champagne in a Salt Lake City hotel with Ring Lardner can be called intimacy with a humorist) are likely to be received with Bronx cheers from the gallery. To a certain extent they will be justified. Whit Burnett is not much of a humorist, or perhaps he merely has an insufficient stock of such tales as the one about Gertrude Stein being delivered at the Swedish Maids Employment Bureau by an elevator man who could recognize at a glance where his passengers belonged. When most of the stories in this book arrive at the point



Whit Burnett

Pinchot

where a brilliant and unexpected situation should appear they wander off into something else—discussion of the difficulties of printing English in Mallorca (where they have no Ws) for example, or the discovery of a hitherto unsuspected resemblance between Chekhov and Grover Cleveland.

As a matter of fact, the disclaimer of essay-writing is pretty well justified, too. Addison would have some trouble finding anything familiar in the form of the nineteen short pieces that compose this volume; so would Poe; so would Macaulay. But Christopher North would not; and if there exist in America any number of persons who are still pleased by rambling, diffuse, educated, informative gossip which combines odd sidelights on literary people with such topics as the sizes of French beer-glasses and the habits of New Jersey cops, this will be a treasured item to them.

# Notes on Baker Street

BY CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

LIKE all other learned and scientific societies, the Baker Street Irregulars exchange notes of research about this time of year. They are too wise to hold stated meetings, which would belie their name and take the fun out of their indoctrinated amateurishness; and the accumulated records of their memoirs and adventures have been lying in a publisher's drawer now for several years pending certain final perfections of accuracy. If you must know, one of the niceties that has delayed them is to obtain an accurate reckoning of how much Sherlock Holmes spent on hansom cab fares in his journeys as described by the Doctor. A gentleman in London was commissioned to itinerate all these journeys as exactly as possible (by taxi), keep account of the cost, and make a pro-rated diminution according to price scales in the 80's and 90's. Then, however, the difficulty began. Was this envoy to have his actual expenses paid by the Club (which has no treasury)? or should he be reimbursed only what the travels cost Holmes?

The overhead charges of literary work (are you listening, Income Tax?) have never been properly appreciated by outsiders.

However, the album in question will eventually appear. Its title will be *221 B*, it will have 221 pages and an additional B page, and will (I hope) be set in Baskerville type.

As evidence of the affectionate fidelity of the clan, mark a letter from Mr. P. M. Stone of Waltham, Mass., who reports that he has loaned to the Waltham Public Library his own collection of Sherlockiana, on show there until January 28. There are about 75 items, he says, including the excessively rare original *Study in Scarlet* (Beeton's Annual, '87), and monographs, drawings, autograph letters, bookplates, posters, theatre programs, whatnots of all kinds relating to the Master. "It will be interesting to see," says Mr. Stone, "how many enthusiasts, in an industrial city of our type, turn out to reacquaint themselves with an idol of their youthful days."

It has always surprised me that so few of the Baker Street investigators go back to one of the prime sources, viz., the *Strand Magazine* of '91 to '93. A careful study of the *Strand* text is prerequisite for any solid Sherlockian scholarship. Consider the problem faced by Mr. Greenhough Smith, editor of the *Strand*, when his most successful feature, the first 12 of the *Adventures*, came to an end in June '92. Anyone familiar with the anxieties of magazines must be amused and

instructed by Mr. Smith's valiant efforts to fill the gap while Dr. Watson was taking a six-months' recuperation. July '92 a short editorial note remarked "It will be observed that this month there is no detective story relating the adventures of the celebrated Mr. Sherlock Holmes. We are glad to be able to announce that there is to be only a temporary interval. . . . Powerful detective stories by other eminent writers will be published."

Shrewdly enough the *Strand* followed this up, the next month, with an illustrated interview (one of a famous series, done by Harry How) showing—yes, we must name him, I suppose—Conan Doyle in his home at South Norwood, and giving the first intimation that Dr. Joseph Bell in Edinburgh, one of Doyle's old teachers, was the suggestion-germ of Holmes's character. But the powerful detective stories by other hands were not so easy to find. Dick Donovan's series of *Romances from a Detective's Case Book* were a terrible let-down, though Mr. Donovan was given a strong build-up as the author of *Tracked to Doom*, *Caught at Last*, *Who Poisoned Hetty Duncan?* etc. Dick Donovan was in a tough spot, and felt it, as you can see by the way he tried to imitate the characteristic opening strokes of the Watson method. Observe Mr. Donovan in the September '92 issue:—

It was a bitter night in December, now years ago, that a young and handsome man called upon me in great distress, to seek my advice and assistance. It was the third day after Christmas, and having dined, and dined well, I had ensconced myself in my favourite easy chair, before a cheerful fire, and was engaged in the perusal of Charles Dickens's "Cricket on the Hearth," when my visitor was unceremoniously ushered into the room. He held his

dripping hat in his hand, and the heavy top-coat he wore was white with snow, etc., etc.

The intention was excellent, but Oh what a difference.

The series called *Shafts from an Eastern Quiver* tried hard to give some continuity of thrill; and Grant Allen wrote *The Great Ruby Robbery* (illustrated by Sidney Paget, who did Holmes and Watson for the *Strand*; in spite of villainous engraving it was a notable job) and even Greenhough Smith himself lent a hand with a pedestrian mystery of his own. Some Baker Street student should monograph Greenhough Smith, editor of the magazine for so many years. I have always respected him for having had the gumption to rehash some of Bataille's great French criminal trials, though his treatment was heavily uninspired. Anyhow as Watson's first regular editor he deserves our homage. May it not have been Watson's own suggestion (see *The Five Orange Pips*) that impelled Smith to get a sea story by Clark Russell to help fill in? It's in the August number of that year, *A Nightmare of the Doldrums*, with the editorial blurb: "A Terrible Story of the Sea, only to be read by people of strong nerves."

Mr. Greenhough Smith must have been a happy man, one day in that autumn of '92, when the MS. of *Silver Blaze* was actually in his hands and he could put a teaser in the November issue:—

Next month will appear the first of the new series of "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes." Admirers of that eminent detective are also informed that "The Sign of Four," the story of the wonderful adventure by which he gained his reputation, can now be obtained at this office. Price 3s 6d.

That was a little disingenuous, but one remembers that Watson had sold the *Study in Scarlet* outright (for £25) to another house, and there was no way Newnes, the *Strand* publisher, might reprint it. He probably would have if he could: in the *Strand* for December '91,



Greenhough Smith editing Sherlock Holmes stories (*Strand Magazine*, 1892)