

Down with the Absolute

OF HUMAN FREEDOM. By Jacques Barzun. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. 1939. 334 pages, with index. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ROBERT BIERSTEDT

DEMOCRACY means many things to many men but only in a democracy can it or any other word mean so many things. Untangle that sentence and the thesis of Mr. Barzun's remarkable new book will become apparent. Undaunted by the plethora of definitions of democracy, this important young writer, who also teaches history at Columbia, uses some acute reasoning to discover that no particular institution or groups of institutions can exhaust the meaning of democracy. For democracy is primarily an attitude of mind, a climate, or a culture. It may exist wherever men enjoy freedom in art, in science, in philosophy, or in common living, regardless of the particular form of government, although totalitarianism militates against it. In other words, neither democracy nor freedom represents an absolute, but rather a refusal to rely upon absolutism in any sphere of human endeavor.

Mr. Barzun continues his superb defense of relativism by showing its application in art, science, semantics, social science, and education. The chapter entitled "The Myth of Revolutionary Culture" fairly coruscates with brilliant writing and an ingenious wit, and goes to show that no necessary correlation exists between cultural creation and political conditions. Corroboration comes from an analysis of the periods of the French and Puritan revolutions; and those who insist that all art is propaganda, that only proletarian fiction can attain artistic excellence, or that revolution intensifies creative activity will have to search long in unaccustomed places to find a rebuttal. Mr. Barzun distrusts anything tainted with absolutism; and revolution itself, as Robespierre pointed out, is an absolutistic system though the derivations, in Pareto's sense of the word, change from day to day.

The author dislikes materialism too, although it is difficult to see why, except for his supposition that the mind must be real in itself in order to attribute freedom to it. Here he unnecessarily confuses political freedom with biological indeterminism and fails to see that materialism does not exclude the belief in political freedom any more than idealistic pragmatism encourages it. If Mr. Barzun had tempered his William James with a little Santayana, he would not so quickly have equated materialism with the

mechanical, the formulated, the dry, the rigid, and the absolute, nor would he have looked with so dour a countenance upon the application of natural scientific methods to the problems of social science. Pragmatism itself, which the book so enthusiastically defends, is more of a method than a metaphysic, and may be either idealistic or materialistic. While Mr. Barzun accepts only the idealistic kind, he graces it with an uncommon and de-

lightful thing, a historical perspective.

In spite of such dissents, however, which the author's thesis incidentally requires him to welcome, the book exhibits a competence seldom associated with its subject and sparkles with eminently quotable apothegms. Though its excessive stimulation comes from the pointedness of many thumbtacks rather than the profundity of a single hatpin, no person can better nurture his intellectual life than by reading it immediately. A reviewer wedded to the relativism which the author insists upon can offer no higher praise.

"Multiple Originals"

A TREASURY OF AMERICAN PRINTS: A Selection of One Hundred Etchings and Lithographs by The Foremost Living American Artists. Introduction and description by Thomas Craven. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1939. \$3.95.

Reviewed by OLIVER LARKIN

THE purchaser of this book will have acquired superb reproductions of lithographs and etchings by living American print makers at a cost of less than four cents apiece, any one of which, detached from its binding and hung on his wall, will convey many if not all of the qualities of its original. The Associated American Artists, who collaborated in the selection of the prints, believe that the day of the unique collector's original is passing, and with it much esthetic snobbishness, the misleading evaluation of a drawing in terms of its scarcity. They share the attitude of the writer who said to Ruth Green Harris, "I'd much rather be read by masses of people because I'm good than owned by two people because I'm rare."

The process here used—aquatone—narrows the margin of difference between reproduction and original, a dif-

ference which remains, of course, a useful challenge to one's discrimination and sensitiveness, a stimulus to the more complete utilization by artists of the machine press for the quantity production of what Rockwell Kent calls "multiple originals" without loss of quality. "A Treasury of American Prints" will have, one hopes, the wide sale which its high standard deserves and its low price makes possible. It will create a wider public for the graphic arts in America; one which, having here obtained a speaking acquaintance with John Sloan, Peggy Bacon, Reginald Marsh, Adolph Dehn, and nearly fifty others, will desire to deepen and refine that acquaintance to the mutual benefit of patron and artist.

The editor's choice of prints is, on the whole, representative, although one could ask for more of Soyer, Jones, and Robinson, and less of the strident and lifeless arabesques of Thomas Benton, the increasingly taxidermic forms of Grant Wood. The introduction and the brief notes on the reverse of each plate were written by Thomas Craven, who, in the field of art criticism, is America's number one isolationist.



Quiet Day—lithograph by Stow Wengenroth

"I Told You So"

STEP BY STEP 1396-1339. By Winston S. Churchill. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1939. 323 pp. \$4.

Reviewed by JOHN C. DE WILDE

WHENEVER in recent years there has been talk about reorganizing the Chamberlain cabinet in Britain, the discussion inevitably centered about Winston Churchill. His ability, vigor, and prescience have contrasted sharply with the general mediocrity which has characterized the conduct of state business. He is the Borah of Britain, although his talents and spirit are more constructive than those of the Idaho Senator. More than any of the Labor or Liberal leaders, Churchill has been a constant thorn in the side of Conservative governments. The Baldwin and Chamberlain cabinets have in particular felt the rapier-like thrusts of his vigorous, logical mind. But now that war has for the time being set aside all other differences the Government is once more availing itself of his dynamic energy.

The book under review consists of a series of brief fortnightly essays on international affairs, the first dated March 13, 1936, the last May 15, 1939. With the exception of occasional excursions to the Far East, Palestine, and India, Mr. Churchill deals with the disastrous development of affairs in Europe. In his writing he shows his usual literary skill. Even independent of the content, his pungent and lucid style affords the reader much pleasure.

With equal appropriateness these articles might have been gathered under the title, "I Told You So." Certainly no statesman has more justification for assuming the cloak of the prophet. For years he had been "pointing with alarm." Again and again he assailed the British for their tendency to temporize and let things drift. He tried to shake them out of their complacency while revolutionary changes were taking place in the world about them. On September 4, 1936, he bemoaned the fact that "only unarmed, unthinking Britain nurses the illusion of security." Repeatedly he called attention to the danger to be expected from Germany. When Hitler repudiated the Locarno pact and marched into the Rhineland, Churchill urged immediate counteraction so that "a reign of law may be established in Europe, the sanctity of treaties may be vindicated, and from that commanding eminence Germany may be welcomed back to the family of nations . . ." "Stop It Now" was his



Winston Churchill

slogan. With great persistence he demanded more vigorous prosecution of rearmament and the creation of a Ministry of Supplies to speed this process. As early as June, 1936, he counseled Britain to take the lead in organizing every possible country in a united front to resist further aggression. One by one, but with much delay, these policies were all accepted. Will Churchill have to write another mournful essay entitled "Too Late?"

An Empire in Its Anecdotage

A NUMBER OF PEOPLE. By Edward Marsh. New York: Harper & Bros. 1939. 409 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by GEORGE DANGERFIELD

IN 1937, Edward Marsh was invested with the K.C.V.O.—a fitting reward for a long and faithful career in the Civil Service. Beginning in the Colonial Office, ending in the Dominions Office, he served in between as Private Secretary to four ministers, one of whom was Winston Churchill. On less official terms, as well, his knighthood seems not undeserved. The official and upper classes of England have not shown up any too well of late years, one might even say without exaggeration that they have shown up rather badly. "A Number of People" puts them in a more favorable light. It is their apologia. Up and down its pages they wander—all of them genial, all of them worth knowing, all of them telling good stories and calling the author Eddie.

His, however, is not a trifling figure. Edmund Gosse claimed that Marsh would be a second Tottel, a claim which the author underlines in a modest affirmative footnote. Was he not associated with, if not entirely responsible for, the editing and publishing of "Georgian Poetry?" Ever since,

as a schoolboy, I purchased the first volume of that anthology in Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop in Theobalds Road, I have remembered with gratitude the name of Edward Marsh. Then again, there is his "Memoir of Rupert Brooke," the only one worth consulting, indeed the only one in existence.

Kindness is the keynote of "A Number of People"—a genuine, unaffected kindness, though limited in scope. Now kindness unrelieved is apt to be exceedingly tedious. Edward Marsh relieves his with anecdote—such anecdote as few people are able to remember, let alone to tell. From this point of view, "A Number of People" must be described as one of the most enjoyable books to be put on the market for a long time.

Some memoirs are informative, some evocative: "A Number of People" is of the latter description. Letters from D. H. Lawrence, T. E. Lawrence, Maurice Baring, Rupert Brooke; conversations with Robert Bridges, Bernard Shaw; endless engaging people, some titled, some running after titles, some running the country . . . do they add to our stock of knowledge? Not in this book. They start us remembering verses we have read, fragments of novels, or bits of history. Above all, they summon up an image of the English ruling class in an *al fresco*, or picnic mood — neither too aristocratic, nor too exclusive, and liberally peppered with artists and writers. Beyond, in the unsocial wilderness, are all those people, those "non-descript people," as Sir Edward puts it in a telling phrase, "who looked as if they had left their galoshes in the hall"; and beyond them are the millions and millions who have no galoshes to leave anywhere. When they present themselves to him in the shape of cooks, butlers, bus-drivers, valets, and clerks, Sir Edward is kind; otherwise he is unaware.

The charmed circle itself has cut a poor figure in international politics of late years. Now, at last, urged on by the subterranean anger of all those Englishmen who have left their galoshes in the hall, or would if they had any galoshes to leave, it is showing a sterner front. Perhaps it is too late; perhaps the sun that never sets is setting, though one hopes not, so horrible would be the succeeding darkness. Now, too, is the time to read "A Number of People." Reading it, one seems to hear—proceeding from the reds and sables of that catastrophic sunset—a rattle of tea-cups, a popping of corks. The voice of an empire in its anecdotage. The voice of Sir Edward Marsh. But not, I think, the voice of England.