

ENGLISH CHARACTER

ORIENTATIONS, by Sir Ronald Storrs (*Ivor Nicholson and Watson*, 10/6).

MAN AND BOY, by Sir Stephen Tallents (*Faber*, 21/-).

'For Cairo Society the golden epoch must have been the later 'eighties and the 'nineties. The genius of Lord Cromer had established peace, progress and prosperity. British influence dominated, but had not yet learned to domineer . . . Of this social phase 1904 may be said to have marked the decline, 1914 the fall . . . Officially, and for a time, the change was entirely for the good. Flagrant abuses and "protections" vanished and a score of harmless necessary reforms were made possible for the Egyptian Government . . . But with the decline of foreign political influence and so of foreign social prestige; with the increasing numbers of minor British officials and the extension of the club and sports system; with the multiplication of the hotels, and the mass production of the peach-fed standardized tourist "doing" the whole country in ten days . . . there came less mixing with and understanding of Egyptians and foreigners, and a general diminution of social caste, *cachet*, and character . . . The classic process of colonization had begun. Everybody and everything was becoming cleaner, richer, easier and more proper, but somehow (and I have seen the symptoms elsewhere) there was less fun. . . . Exchanges of visits were now almost unknown and the hundred contacts and humanities that come from knowing people "at home"—from little Ahmad's teething or Mustafa's progress in English or in football—were hopelessly excluded. Nor was there, save for one or two notable exceptions, the faintest effort on the part of the official's wife to make the acquaintance, still less cultivate the friendship, of the wives or daughters of her husband's colleagues or subordinates; and it was with an air of virtuous resignation that she steeled herself to sacrifice an afternoon for a call upon an Egyptian or Turkish lady as likely as not better born, better bred, better read, better looking and better dressed than herself'.

'My companion calling for his tiresome drinks at all hours of the day. I see I shall have to struggle more and more against developing into a Prig: but the whole paraphernalia of whiskies and sodas, the plugging and wadding up of great briar pipes, the bubbling and sucking, the pointless gusty sigh of relief (from what?), the halting oracular utterance of commonplaces!'

'Nearly thirty years of the Near and Middle East have inclined me to the opinion of those who would assist the Eastern Churches to grow stronger within by education and training, rather than weaken them by enticing their members into other denominations. Nothing seemed to denationalize an Arab, a Copt or an Armenian like becoming a Protestant, or "Brutestant" as he more often pronounced himself. I could never see that his almost unctuous

respectability, his open contempt for the venerable institution which he or his father had abandoned, were at all superior to incense and ikons. If he wished you Happy Easter as you left the service, it was with a gentlemanly Nordic restraint, as if sympathizing with a bereavement; whereas his cousin of the old faith shouted aloud "Christ is risen", and in some places fired his gun exultantly against the wall of the Church'.

'Officials, more particularly executive officials (Governors included), cannot be considered as interchangeable parts in a standardized automobile. Some with African experience were unable to mix on friendly terms with educated Cypriots without seeming to themselves to sacrifice something of their position as members of the governing race. The wife of an officer excellent at his work, told me with pride on the eve of his transfer that they had been in Cyprus fourteen years, and never had a "native" inside their house; and was genuinely shocked when I reminded her that she owed to the Cypriots the food she was at that moment consuming (at Government House) and the clothes on her back. I sympathized with these late uprooted officials when, after twenty-eight years' service in the Near and Middle East, I found myself promoted to the rule of a million and a half blacks, of whom one only, the Paramount Chief of Barotseland, could have his hand shaken by a white. I did not dispute the protocol, but found the contrast, after lands where you gave your hand to and shared the food of the poorest Bedu camel-driver (or his eyes wondered where you had been bred) almost overwhelmingly disagreeable'.

'He had been Oriental Secretary for a good many years, and was frequented and admired by a few senior Englishmen. By the juniors I met he was inevitably cited as "knowing the East very well—a bit too well, if you ask me; what you want's a plain straightforward Englishman who'll put these fellows in their places, and keep 'em there". I remember thinking at the time that it was lucky for England he could not, anyhow, much resemble those who discussed him . . . On a deal table a typewriter clacked. Above it there loomed a vast drooping moustache surmounted by a hook nose and melancholy kind dark eyes. I stood at the side and understood that the Oriental Secretary was taking his luncheon . . . Against the plate was balanced the current issue of *al-Mokattam* (then the paramount of Arabic dailies) the leading article of which, as he ate, he read, translated in his head, and transmuted directly through the machine into mellow Johnsonian prose . . . He was extremely well-read, especially in English and French eighteenth-century literature, an exquisite precisian in language and a perennially amusing conversationalist. On most afternoons he walked abroad, dressed with a distinguished improbability. His coat was old, his trousers bagged at the knee and sagged at the waist, his boots were almost mediaeval in their turn up. On his head a battered straw hat; rather beyond heel a mongrel but *sympathique* cur: the whole enclosing a man of genius'.

These are extracts not from works of fiction of the school of E. M. Forster, but from the autobiography of Sir Ronald Storrs, the reissue of which this year provides an opportunity for calling the attention of those who missed the first edition in 1937. It can confidently be recommended as the most entertaining high-level reading, a fat and juicy work, elegantly and sincerely as well as divertingly written. But to describe it as the best of bedside books is to undervalue it. It is of course known as a unique source of information about recent history in the Near East, more especially the history of Palestine since Allenby's entry into Jerusalem. Sir Ronald's thirty years included service as Oriental Secretary at Cairo, Governor of Jerusalem and Governor of Cyprus; while during the Great War he was Political Officer in Mesopotamia, his memoirs supplementing and commenting on what we know from other sources of the personalities and activities of Gertrude Bell, Sir Percy Cox and T. E. Lawrence. He gives the indispensable inside account, impartially sympathetic, of the situation in Palestine during and since his time of office there: it is the classic example of a hopelessly complex problem (more evidently insoluble than that of India) handled with good intentions by those in office and by Sir Ronald himself with inspired goodness of heart and head. No one after reading Sir Ronald's chapters could continue to accuse the British of Machiavellian policy in Palestine or believe that some simple straightforward proposals would solve everything.

This brings us to the real significance of the book, for besides its entertainment and informational value *Orientalisms* is a tribute, chiefly an unconscious one, to virtues of the English governing-class character which it has been the fashion to deny in intellectual circles (centring on Bloomsbury and radiating to India on the one side, America on the other), with incalculable harm. As a desirable and judicially necessary corrective to *A Passage to India* we fortunately have the portrait of the Military Governor of Jerusalem, taking over as the Turks withdrew leaving behind them complete chaos. As soon as the elements of law, order and communal living were re-established, the more difficult problems of racial, religious and natural hostilities arose. Easter meant the culminating ceremonies of three religious cycles, Christian, Moslem and Hebrew and had always brought trouble, but 'Easter came but twice or (in certain phases of the Armenian Calendar) but thrice a year. The Wailing Wall was a perennial anxiety'. Worse still, 'the local and indigenous Christian communities needed alas! for their fratricidal tumults no outside provocation'. The Governor of Jerusalem's contribution to the welfare of Palestine was to participate sympathetically in the difficulties and ceremonies of every party. For many years he took part with reverent enthusiasm, and in the appropriate languages, in the Passover and in the Orthodox ceremony of the Holy Fire, and in the Armenian and Latin religious services; and bandied ribald jests with Moslem processions to avert bloodshed. In addition to protecting the aesthetically and religiously interesting buildings, he founded the Pro-Jerusalem Society for promoting civic

and aesthetic welfare and personally raised large sums of money for it in America and England. He founded a Jerusalem School of Music, for he was passionately musical, and he encouraged artists and craftsmen. These are only a few of many such aspects of a very impressive kind of character, one whose most evident quality was the instinct to make the best of people by sympathetic personal relations and practical assistance. The pleasure in appreciating shades of character and the ability to enter into alien cultures is what might be expected in a novelist rather than an administrator. That the sum total of these characteristics is not peculiar to the author of *Orientalisms*, though more highly developed and exquisitely expressed there than elsewhere, many other memoirs prove. A lesser example is Sir Stephen Tallents's autobiography, *Man and Boy*, which has just appeared. Except for a comparatively brief spell on a mission to settle matters in the Baltic States, where he was Governor of Riga at a difficult period in 1920, he has always been a Civil Servant. But in his book too there is a similar convincing embodiment of these administrative and essentially human virtues, not only transparent integrity and decency but the sympathy which is based not on softness but penetrating intelligence. Sir Ronald Storrs writes of himself at twenty-five going home on leave from Brindisi:

'I went straight to Cook's to enquire the next train for Milan. The clerk said it went at two. "Heavens!" I cried, "Have I got to stay in this hole seven hours?" I can still, with a flush of shame, see and hear him answer: "I've stayed here for seven years". I found my conduct in this matter so dreadful that I returned a few minutes before the office closed and took the clerk out to luncheon'.

To be this kind of person and to remain so is a rare thing no doubt. Sir Ronald Storrs was the product of a really pious as well as cultivated English home, and his autobiography is pervaded by religious belief and Christian feeling in their most impressive form. But the more ordinary virtues that he shares with Englishmen of his class and education (public school and university) are represented for instance by the sometime Governor of Riga.

What these, and many other quite different memoirs, bear witness to is that the strength rather than, as often alleged, the weakness, of England lies in this national character, a product at least as much of the home as of the public school. For the common feature of such memoirs is lack of pleasant memories of school. The defects of public-school training were made good by home, and Oxford or Cambridge supplied the rest—the real training and development of character. Sir Stephen Tallents writes, after a lukewarm reminiscence of Harrow, which 'seemed not only Spartan but Philistine. Undoubtedly it was both': 'But chiefly I look back upon my Balliol time as the opportunity for a first experiment . . . in the art of free living. Encouraging that experiment, Balliol put a simple and austere pattern of living before us. It gave us a lively sense of

the virtues of public service. It tried to give us what Low has admirably described as "a sense of right and wrong with a high flash point". Sir Ronald Storrs, after a really depressing picture of schooldays at Charterhouse, hastens to add 'It is, however, easy enough to criticize public schools and the public-school spirit . . . If negative and uncreative critics would only travel abroad and make a study of youth in general from Calais to Calcutta and Khartoum, instructed (rather than educated) for the most part without any idea of this spirit, they could hardly fail to realize the positive magnitude of the public-school achievement. Like salt in food, it must be absent to be appreciated'. And in a similar spirit this most enlightened and sympathetic of administrators desired that some credit at least should be registered for British efforts, when in Baghdad in 1917 he wrote:

'These people are I suppose as were the Egyptians in 1882; Turkish disgusts and annoyances fresh before their eyes and mightily relieved by *Pax and Progressus Britannicae*. I seriously recommend that now, before anything is altered, an accurate illustrated description of the place be published in English, French, and Arabic so that they may not forget the pit from whence they were digged; so that the future tarbushed elastic-sided-booted patriots may not claim for themselves before all the world the exclusive credit for cleanliness, health, water, electricity and a hundred-fold budget. Let the motto of Mesopotamia be *Non Nobis, Domine*, or *Lest We Forget*'. He notes elsewhere that liberated peoples 'discover that under the mild impersonal British rule lapses from manners (hitherto ruinous) pass unnoticed, anyhow unpunished' with increasingly undesirable results.

The poise that is revealed in so many of these memoirs is that of character, and very easily distinguishable from the false poise that is derived from nothing more respectable or fundamental than a sense of belonging to the best people (as in many Etonian writings). We can see what Professor Brogan means when he writes (in *The English People*): 'That the main capital of a country, within very wide limits, is the skill, industry, character, and view of life of its inhabitants, is a truth easily neglected. That political and educational methods, traditions of certain skills, inherited capital assets, and prestige may all be more important than mere undeveloped natural resources is difficult to believe although in New England the United States has an example of this truth even more striking than that furnished by Old England'. In spite of Bloomsbury, it seems to us that such memoirs as Sir Ronald Storrs's and Sir Stephen Tallents's incarnate the best type of Englishman we have for export or advertisement purposes. And since it is impossible to say how far, or rather how little, they are the product of the public school system (Professor Brogan seems to conclude that there is more to be said for the system than against it), let reformers beware how lightly they undertake to throw away something for which no better alternative has yet been discovered.

Q.D.L.

HUGH MACDIARMID

LUCKY POET : A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas, by Hugh MacDiarmid (C. M. Grieve) (Melhuen, 21/-).

At a time when Scots poetry consisted of the sort of thing that might be imagined to appeal to the Glasgow Stock Exchange, and when research into Scots literature was of the type that collated all the passages in Burns that referred to birds, and classified them under Birds of Passage, Birds of Ill Omen, etc., C. M. Grieve did some necessary scavenging and cleared away a lot of literary scrap by debunking the St. Robert Burns of Burns's nights and reasserting the true claims of Burns to our attention as a poet. He himself employed Scots not nostalgically or sentimentally, but by putting it to adult, contemporary uses. He has been elaborately cold-shouldered by the Scottish press, criticised spitefully by Scottish public figures ('Yahoos', he calls them), and made the subject of a mean-minded 'whispering campaign' for his pains. Almost alone he worked to rescue Scotland from provincialism, and in doing so tended to become a sort of second Admirable Crichton: he tried not only to be its critic and poet, but also its philosopher, arch-linguist, Celtic folklorist, botanist, chemist, professor of semantics, orientalist and so on. To all comers he was also to prove a very good hand at the more virulent and envenomed sort of invective. The magnitude of his task was bound to sour the good nature of the most magnanimous of men and seriously corrode whatever critical acumen he started out with: and these 426 pages bear ample evidence of the strain.

In his *Contemporary Scottish Studies* (1926) we were told that Edwin Muir was 'incontestably in the first flight of contemporary critics of welt-literatur' (typical touch, that *welt-literatur*, but now things have come to a sad pass and Mr. Muir, we are told, is now 'a well-known reviewer whose prose has a marked resemblance to Mr. Ramsay MacDonald's' (p. 20). It evidently would not stand comparison with Mary Webb's, singled out for praise on p. 84, or that of that arch-sentimentalist, William Power, who is quoted favourably throughout the book. Another of Mr. Muir's sins is not to be familiar with Count Korzybski's non-Aristotelian semantics, for which he is castigated on p. 348. We learn on p. 115 that Fred Astaire is a great artist, and later that Day Lewis is preferable to Auden and Spender. (Much of his criticism of the English Literary Left is quite justifiable, but they were less acceptable in Scots left circles, not because these are less gullible than English, but because, *pace* MacDiarmid, they are still less literate). But

'Exclusion from all power be theirs
Who do not know at least
Mazundar's Typical Selections from Oriya Literature', etc.