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SCRUTINY

A Quarterly Review

Edited by

L. C. KNIGHTS DONALD CULVER
F. R. LEAVIS DENYS THOMPSON

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A CURE FOR AMNESIA

THE English have been unfortunate in writers about their country. Gibbs' *A Cotswold Village* (Cape, 3/6d.) is representative, a sticky confection, the literary effort of a clubman down among the rustics, a Nature Lover fond of cricket, beer, and blood sports. A gentleman in his view is a person who sends in no bill to the Hunt for a loss of fifty fowls, and in praise of the villagers he can only produce a smug approval of their morals. Almost every page is littered with clichés, floating in Ruskinese, and quotations from Horace are liberally applied. The author was at Eton. After the war we have Mr. Henry Williamson. Upon reading *The Village Book* (Cape, 7/6d.) anyone could have foretold that his next effort *The Labouring Life* (Cape, 7/6d.) would be a Book Society runner, for in these two books of mainly pointless anecdotes there is nothing to disquiet the comfortable. In the former there is an interesting note (p. 68) on idiom, and in the latter there are one or two pages on the same subject. If Mr. Williamson had been brought up on Sturt's books, he might have produced some useful observations: as it is, they are conventional and superficial, if not grossly indulgent in feeling like Gibbs. From neither writer does one gather that any particularly significant change has happened to English life in the last hundred years; and books like these discredit those who have something to say.

That the power age destroyed the agricultural basis of life and thereby the best soil for a satisfactory civilization should be a generalization trite enough. D. H. Lawrence realized this and its implications for us more acutely than any—see *Twilight in Italy*, p. 217, *Mornings in Mexico*, p. 145, and *Letters*, passim—but he had not the opportunities for particular, local observation that fell to George Sturt (he wrote as 'Bourne,') whose percipience is comparable only to Lawrence's. It was very lucky that there should have been an observer as intelligent and aware as Sturt to record the dying, and some of the life, of the English rural culture; how fine it was, how fertile for individual living, does not seem to be known. He beautifully elucidates this popular civilization, and a

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reading of his work should save a good deal of misapprehension among critics of *Scrutiny*.

In the best of his available books, *Change in the Village*, Sturt describes the peasant system:

> 'The "peasant" tradition in its vigour amounted to nothing less than a form of civilization—the home-made civilization of the rural English. To the exigent problems of life it furnished solutions of its own . . . People could find in it not only a method of getting a living, but also an encouragement and a help to live well. Besides employment there was an interest for them in the country customs. There was scope for modest ambition too. Best of all, those customs provided a rough guide as to conduct—an unwritten code to which, though we forget it, England owes much. It seems singular to think of it now; but the very labourer might reasonably hope for some satisfaction in life, nor trouble about "raising" himself into some other class, so long as he could live on peasant lines. And it is in the virtual disappearance of this civilization that the main change in the village consists.' (See the whole chapter, *The Peasant System*).

But to notice his work is to quote it: one can only summarize inadequately. The lives of the peasants were fulfilled, their relation to each other and their environment adjusted, in a way now unattainable by anyone. They subsisted upon what their industry could produce from the soil, they lived in touch with the seasonal rhythm, and with it they inherited a 'religious sentiment, pagan, not Christian.' There was delight in their work itself, however arduous, daylong and lifelong; it was interesting and varied for men and women were learned in numerous exciting crafts, and before the enclosure of their commons the peasants were independent of wages, enjoying a comparative prosperity. Even after the enclosures, the country work for the labourer was interesting, almost worth doing for its own sake, 'when it still called for much old-world skill and knowledge, and when the praises of the master were the praises of an expert who well knew what he was talking about. On these terms, it was no mean pleasure that the able labouring man had in their labour. They took a pride in it . . . And master and man were not greatly out of touch in the matter of civilization. It made

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a vast difference to the labourer's comfort.' He was in touch with the ideas and purposes of his employer, and as the demand for labour was steady, 'they enjoyed what their descendants would consider a most blissful freedom from anxiety.' And as the farmers were the inheritors of a set of rural traditions nearly akin to those of the peasants, the townsmen too 'were extremely countrified in character.'

Where work was the staple of living, leisure was little valued. But with the modern labourer's employment 'the money-valuation of it is the prime consideration; it is a commercial affair; a clerk going to his office has as much reason as the labourer to welcome the morning's call to work. As in the clerk's case, so in the labourer's: the act or fruition of living is postponed during the hours in which the living is being earned; between the two processes a sharp line of division is drawn; and it is not until the clock strikes, and the leisure begins, that a man may remember that he is a man, and try to make a success of living.' The problem raised by this passage is central and urgent; when work is adjusted to needs and reduced to four hours a day or less, men may forget that they are men. The modern worker, factory-hand or millionaire, is unfitted by the nature of his work to make use of his leisure for any real recreation: they destroy themselves in commercially purveyed decreations. And (pp. 206-208) Sturt compares two cases, typical of the old and new systems; first, of the impoverished versatile jobbing labourer, proficient in a dozen crafts, rich in folk wisdom, he says:

> 'He is a man who seems to enjoy his life with an undiminished zest from morning to night. It is doubtful if the working hours afford to nine out of ten modern and even "educated" men, such a constant refreshment of acceptable incidents as Turner's hours bring to him.'

And then he shows how the contrasting case miserably fails to provide any kind of living.

Again of Turner Sturt notes:

> 'At the outset he saw and had part in those rural activities, changeful, accomplished, carried on by many forms of skill and directed by a vast amount of traditional wisdom, whereby the country people of England had for ages supported themselves in their quiet valleys. His brain still teems with recollections of all this industry . . .'

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And throughout he insists that at the core of this beautifully sufficient culture there throve a life-giving tradition. The Village he describes was not representative of the English popular civilization; the Villagers were descendants of 18th century squatters, and in other places, he suggests, the tradition could put forth its 'fairer, gentler features,' offer still better opportunities for living. But the measure of satisfaction they enjoyed they owed to tradition; 'they had a civilization to support them,' and they would not have adapted themselves so successfully, had there not been 'at the back of them a time-honoured tradition teaching them how to go on.' But the tradition was not static, taken over like a bank-balance. 'You must obtain it by great labour,' as Mr. Eliot has remarked in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, and this truth is finely exemplified by many passages in *Lucy Bettesworth* (a book worthy of its author, especially the latter chapters), in the chapter on *Our Primitive Knowledge*, for instance, where he says of traditional knowledge not to be picked up in schools:

> 'But after all, it is only a preparation. Skill cannot act upon knowledge, nor the adaptation be made, nor the struggling beauty begin to appear and fascinate us, until the owner of this knowledge adds judgment to it . . . It is by judgment—that product of personal experience; that skill of the intelligence; that incommunicable knowledge which every workman must acquire afresh for himself because none can impart it to him—that the final judgments are perfected (p. 218; cf. p. 129 seqq., p. 183 seqq.).

Sturt's work is admirably adapted to education, and specially for a literary training it offers precise elucidations and analogies for literary tradition and criticism. And all of this note is meant to bear on literature. The tradition which Sturt recorded has much to do with the success of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and with that of Hardy and Mr. T. F. Powys; the pleasure derived from reading Hardy's novels results not, as is commonly assumed, from literary art—his literary technique is naïve and clumsy—but from contact with the rich traditional country round of life. An understanding of this life will help to explain how Shakespeare's use of language differs from Milton's, in what way the idiom of newspaper and best-seller and advertising is destructive of fine language and of

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fine living, and why, since English traditional culture is dead, it is of the first importance that tradition should be sustained through literature. And the education to be had from Sturt would put to better ends the naïve enthusiasm of the later Georgian or pylon-poets. To revert, the expressive rural speech was related to rich and decent living, and contrasts with our mechanical suburban idiom, the evidence of shallow, insignificant existence. Sturt's villagers had a fine social life: the English middle classes (*i.e.* most people) have to-day no personal life, are incapable of relations with each other. Instead we have the imitation of such a life described in *Stardust in Hollywood* (see the account of the Breakfast Club and compare English Rotary and similar associations and the pathetic attempts to recreate a genuine social club in the garden-suburb or city).

It was fortunate again that Sturt should have been in a position to give an insight into one of the folk arts of the rural civilization in its flourishing state. Not much of *The Wheelwright's Shop* can be quoted; it is out of print and hard to obtain; and long passages of it have been used in a recent book. But it is likely to be considered a great book by anyone who agrees that *Change in the Village* is a work of rare importance. Sturt himself learned the craft from 'the men, eight friends of the family'—they were not 'hands' on the same footing as dock facilities and electric power, and before Sturt's time a skilled man was known as 'Master' So-and-so. Learning the art (a matter of years) was a complete education, compared to which the most expensive school education obtainable nowadays seems a sterilization; the same integrity which prevented the men from taking advantage of their young employer's inexperience made them ashamed 'to have to do work twice over because the original material had been faulty'—any piece of work had to last for years. Nor was this integrity peculiar:

> 'I should soon have been bankrupt in business in 1884 if the public temper then had been like it is now—grasping, hustling, competitive. But then no competitor seems to have tried to hurt me. To the best of my remembrance people took a sort of benevolent interest in my doings, put no difficulties in my way, were slow to take advantage of my ignorance. Nobody asked for an estimate—indeed there was a fixed price for all the new work that was done.' (p. 53).

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And commercial travellers treated him well; one could hardly be persuaded to take a large order lest his client should be overstocked. The men, though overworked and underpaid, enjoyed life; they were fulfilled in their work, and their work was totally useful.

The traditional ways of life were destroyed by being ground in with the commercial machine, but no higher standard of living can compensate for the loss:

> 'Although throughout their long years they have worked continually for a profit of which they have been as continually relieved by others, country labourers are still able to carry with them into old age a set of feelings, of tastes, developed in them by the nature of country industry. In the labour-market no one is able to strip away from them that one possession. They are connoisseurs of local handiwork; they know from the inside the meaning and attractiveness of simple outdoor crafts; in the texture of materials—timber, stone, lime, brick-earth, thatching-straw—there is something that goes familiarly home to their senses; and so there is in the shape of tools, such as they themselves have handled. The fields, the meadows, the woods, the quarries, have never been to them a form of riches, but have always been an interesting theatre for the play of their strength and skill and knowledge; and the intimacies of the village are theirs too—the village where talk has even to-day so much of the folk tinge, and where men's habits are so self-reliant and so little used to inspection and organized routine.' (*Lucy Bettesworth*, p. 109).

And finally, to summarize the loss, the reason for the accomplished efficiency of this English culture: 'The coherent and self-explanatory village life had given place to a half-blind struggle of individuals against circumstances and economic processes.' To repeat a phrase used earlier in *Scrutiny*, the organic community has dissolved, and with it 'the only basis for a genuine national culture.' An organic community existed in Sturt's village—a society, engaged in pursuits satisfying in themselves and relevant to human ends, whose members were finely adjusted in their relations to each other and to their environment. England consisted of such communities: 'Although Farnham fancied itself a little town,

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its business was being conducted in the spirit of the village . . . Men worked to oblige one another.' Any idea that theirs was a merely stupid or brute contentment could not survive a reading of Sturt's books; and it could hardly occur to anyone who is aware of the manifestations of traditional rural art, for instance in pottery, furniture, churches and tombstones, which often exemplify what tradition could do for local talent, what vitality it imparted and what variety it allowed—for the peasant was not standardized, as someone suggested to me. For amplifying the point, see J. E. Barton's *Purpose and Admiration* (Christophers, 10/6d.), a most useful book to anyone engaged in education; there are very few books on art so apt for training sensibility. Its undue optimism need not impair its value.

Three other books by Sturt—*A Farmer's Life, Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer, William Smith, Potter and Farmer*—are complementary to those already named; the persons they describe (to say they are shrewd, tough, self-reliant and extremely well-educated is not enough) are excellent advertisements for the tradition which produced them and Sturt himself. He is incomparably more intelligent and more important than the conventional classics. Tone and feeling (except perhaps in the early *Bettesworth Book*) are impeccable, over a tract where there have been disasters, and he is as potently evocative of what we have lost as Lawrence; the writings of the two supplement each other. That Sturt has further affinities with Lawrence is hinted at by the extracts from his unpublished journal given by Arnold Bennett in his back-slapping introduction to *A Small Boy in the Sixties*, a not very interesting book.

There must be a number of books on the various forms of the culture that Sturt describes. Immediately notable are *England's Green and Pleasant Land*, an angular and salutary book, *A Shepherd's Life*, of which the opening chapters are poor and not representative, and *Small Talk at Wreyland* (that the author is unintelligent and artless strengthens his testimony to the life of a flourishing community).

Instead of continuous organic life, we have organization—machine technology with a malignant impetus of its own, progressing away from human ends. Where before a man had a place in a desirable scheme, now as worker he is an easily replaceable component, and as consumer, a mere goose to be fed with a

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force-pump—no way has yet been found of eliminating man as the circulator of the necessary monetary lubricant. In the past, satisfying ways of living have grown out of the struggle with the natural environment for the means of subsistence; now men are pitted against each other in a squalid fight for survival in which art, religion and morality go by the board. The power age was founded on a cypher (the decimal) and it is ending in cyphers, on bank balances.

If the wheelwright's shop was representative of the old, its destroyer and successor, the car, symbolizes the new civilization. It is the foundation of American prosperity, and typical of the stimulated pleasures to which machine workers are adapted; and in America, according to *Middletown*, it has destroyed the family, reduced religion and radically altered social custom.

It is one of the chief and most demoralizing insulators from the sources of vitality; and with its intentionally rapid rate of obsolescence it is typical of the mass-produced commodity which has to have a demand created for it. The wheelwright's training constituted an excellent education and his work a full and humanly sufficient life: the garage-hand's apprenticeship is usually a course in petty deceit. The contrast between the wheelwright's shop and the motorcar trade as a specimen of amoral big business will bear a great deal of working out in detail. (See *e.g.* p. 29 of *The Nemesis of American Business*).

One sometimes meets a touching faith that the machine will produce a culture of its own, as right as those of pre-power civilizations. But we are already, here and now, in the midst of any 'culture' the machine is likely to produce spontaneously, and contemptibly inadequate it is. Our suburban (no matter where you dwell) civilization is already well adapted to the machine, and likely to become more so as the memory of something more sufficient withers, and in it humanity is uprooted and atrophied in an unprecedented way and on an unprecedented scale. Mass-production demands sales, sales need advertising. So the decisive factor is the 'adman,' and what we derive from him; and what more we are to expect may be found out from the book which was the occasion of the note *Advertising God* in *Scrutiny* Vol. I, No. 3; the extent to which the 'adman's' civilization is in operation is less adequately realized than most problems. That the menace recorded

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in that note was not an extravagant Americanism, but part of the atmosphere of this country, is enforced by the February issue of the *Advertising World* (16 Plough Court, Fetter Lane, E.C.4, 1/-). It is a frightening document, the evidence of a hostile world, organized, solid, effective (see the article *Getting Culture through Advertising*). It is an apt educational tool, and it also disposes of the contention that the 'adman' does not after all exhibit a very high degree of cunning: the diagram on p. 96, showing a tree of 'human urges' branching out of the 'urge to race continuance,' is not reassuring. 'The unremitting, pervasive, masturbatory manipulations of "scientific" Publicity' degrade man into an unpleasant kind of ape; 'modern youth' is as the advertiser would have it, cheaply sophisticated but vacuous, cocksure but easily coerced by suggestion, inoculated in fact against living. 'Coerced' is not the right word; for as the wheelwright and the peasant gained a complete education from their environment, so the young to-day absorb their ideas and attitudes from the formative advertising environment.

Two quotations from Vol. I should show why it is part of *Scrutiny's* policy to make Sturt's work known, and how it implements any serious education:

> 'The memory of the old order, the old ways of life, must be the chief hint for, the directing incitement towards, a new, if ever there is to be a new. It is the memory of a human normality or naturalness (one may recognize it as such without ignoring what has been gained in hygiene, public humanity and comfort)' (p. 178).
>
> 'To revive or replace a decayed tradition is a desperate undertaking; the attempt may seem futile. But perhaps some readers of *Scrutiny* will agree that no social or political movement unrelated to such an attempt could engage one's faith and energy. The more immediate conclusions would seem to bear upon education' (p. 31).

The danger is that a new generation may accept the present dessicating environment as normal, that when every artisan is on the two-car standard it may be forgotten that there are more human ways of occupying leisure than valeting machines. If any education can obviate this, the kind of education needed is to be

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