

A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

WHAT IS PUBLIC OPINION?

By William Starr Myers

TO the student of history or political science there is nothing more fascinating as a subject of study than public opinion. Sometimes vague or elusive, at other times clear cut and direct in its working, it is always of great political influence and all-powerful in the final analysis. Upon its habitual presence or absence of course depends in large part the existence of that government by public opinion known as democracy.

Mr. Lippmann makes the latest contribution toward a study of the subject, and offers a definite theory of public opinion, a reason for the limitations of its action, and a specific remedy for its shortcomings as a determining force in popular government. Briefly stated, his thesis is as follows: Those features of the world outside which have to do with the behavior of other human beings, in so far as that behavior crosses ours, is dependent upon us, or is interesting to us, we call roughly public affairs. The pictures inside the heads of all human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationship, are their public opinions. Those pictures which are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals acting in the name of groups, are Public Opinion with capital letters.

It should also be noted that, according to this theory, there is one common factor. It is the insertion between man and his environment of

a pseudo-environment. To that pseudo-environment his behavior is a response. Mr. Lippmann then focuses his attention upon one phase of the subject: the world wide spectacle of men acting upon their environment, moved by stimuli from their pseudo-environments. The pseudo-environment is a hybrid compounded of "human nature" and "conditions".

What each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him. The way in which the world is imagined determines at any particular moment what a man will do, though it does not determine what he will achieve. Democracy in its original form never seriously faced the problem which arises because the pictures inside people's heads do not automatically correspond with the world outside. But representative government cannot be worked successfully unless there is an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions. Therefore, personal representation must be supplemented by representation of the unseen facts. This alone would permit a satisfactory decentralization and allow us to escape from the intolerable and unworkable fiction that each of us must acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs. To discover the agency that may supply these facts is the present problem of political science.

Some eight or ten years ago, in his work upon the subject entitled "Public Opinion and Popular Government" President Lowell of Harvard pointed

out that public opinion must be both *public*, that is, widely held, and also *opinion*, or based upon some innate acceptance amounting to a *conviction* upon a subject. Mr. Lippmann would seem to devote his attention to the "public" side of this analysis, and either belittle or else totally disregard the matter of "conviction". Herein lies the essential weakness and inadequacy of the book. It falls far short of and can never rival President Lowell's work, which will continue to rank as the undisputed and recognized authority upon the subject.

As usual, Mr. Lippmann writes with the confidence of the Almighty but, unfortunately, he is lacking in the necessary omniscience. He is essentially a propagandist, and his work is influenced by this characteristic attitude of approach toward any subject.

Public Opinion. By Walter Lippmann.
Harcourt, Brace and Co.

FOR PEW AND PULPIT

By William Norman Guthrie

"PAINTED WINDOWS" is a masterpiece of journalistic impressionism. The author is a reporter rather than an artist, but one of superior honesty and sincerity. His sympathies, however, are limited by his prepossessions. He can sketch with remorseless vigor, sometimes with humor, and so dexterously that one watches him with keen delight. The chief value, however, lies in the intrinsic merit of the product. He caricatures the features, the postures, the gestures of his man, in a spirit of boyish fun. He catches him alive in what he deems the revelatory moment.

His conception, however, of what that would be, is unconsciously affected by its fitness for pointing a moral—its sensational, spectacular value—its power for exhibiting critical virtuosity. The song it would seem has been composed for the sake of the trill, and the trill was inspired by a love of the thrill, and is executed neither by lark nor angel!

If this be fair criticism of our author, it would merely indicate that he is not a Rembrandt, nor even a Hogarth. His portraits seem to be uncomposed notes for literature: a series of snapshots superintended over by the modern muse of the movies.

Our second criticism of the book is to us a defect which will constitute a virtue in the eyes of many. The author is not trailing and snapshotting his big game for its own sake, nor for the sake of the sport or for his scientific records. He uses his heroic victims as cover from behind which he shoots at the pet convictions of the reader. Once or twice, as in the sketch of Dean Inge, or that of Maude Royden, he almost forgets his purpose not really to show us the leaders of British religion, but to give his passion for anonymous preaching a safe chance. It is a case of "Woe is me if I preach not", a gospel which he has received in the course of his appraisal of contemporary prophets. He zealously and, we think, somewhat unfairly recommends his panacea after "damning with faint praise" the regular practitioners!

After making these two objections to "Painted Windows", one must express gratitude (yes, in spite of one's sense of dignity and decency, one's conscience, good taste, and reprehension of gossip) for the titillating impertinence, the scandalous familiarity,