

BOOKS

An Enigmatic Giant

BETWEEN contemporary judgement of a man and the judgement of history there often occurs a phase when uninformed public opinion instinctively anticipates definite ideas. That is the Bismarck situation at the moment. Contemporary judgement of Bismarck was diverse and bewildered, ranging from Queen Victoria's open disgust to the adoration of his admirers in Germany and abroad. Today he figures in popular ideas as a "bad thing," a great and brutal man of genius who ruined Germany by setting her on the path of aggression. Final agreement with or refutation of this judgement is likely to be deferred for some time yet, not only because Germany remains an emotional subject, but because Bismarck's complexity can make him obscure to those who study him most. Great as he was, he lacked the simplicity of greatness.

Mr. A. J. P. Taylor, of Magdalen College, Oxford, the author of entrancing essays on Hohenzollern Germany, now appears as the latest biographer of the founder of the German Empire. He has evidently long pondered and studied his subject, and the resultant book* is a worthy addition to the literature of Bismarck, all the more needed because the British contribution to that literature is smaller than it should be. It is a book which should hasten the formation of a lasting opinion.

As in his memorable essay on the same subject, Mr. Taylor is never unaware that he is dealing with one of the great paradoxes of all time. The Iron Chancellor stands before us in his brilliant Prussian uniform, his steel helmet and big boots and spurs, this man who only spent a year in the army (after try-

ing to mangle his way out of it); who created the greatest military state of the modern world and was the last German civilian of the second Reich to keep soldiers in their place; who despised Prussian bureaucrats and formed an Empire whose strength was in the size, efficiency, and discipline of its bureaucracy, and whose weakness was in the inflexibility and lack of mental breadth that goes with excessive civil service. The modern belief that the state is total master of the individual received its greatest impetus from a man who had never read Hegel and had but the flimsiest notions of what that philosopher had written about. Many people see in Wagner the bard of the Germany which, under Bismarck's political direction, conquered in 1871. Bismarck said Wagner was a monkey.

In his work for the Prussian royal house we see the contradiction at the root of Bismarck's character in a formidably clear light. He raised the Hohenzollerns to dizzy heights, but he was no royalist. He was a courtier all his life but never learned respect. He needed King William and the King needed him, and they spent their lives in a titanic if usually disguised quarrel. Their predicament received perfect expression at the proclamation of the King as Kaiser in January 1871 amid the conquered glories of Versailles. William was not Imperially-minded, but if he had to rule an Empire he wanted to be called "Emperor of Germany," a territorial title indicating something better than presidency. Bismarck wanted just presidency (so long as he was around), and for that reason insisted on the alternative title "German Emperor." At the very last moment William tried a bold move. He cornered the Grand Duke of Baden and told him to lead the cheering for the "Emperor of

* *Bismarck*. By A. J. P. TAYLOR. Hamish Hamilton. 18s.

Germany." Unfortunately Bismarck had noticed the King's staircase intrigue and firmly commanded the Grand Duke to lead the cheers for "Kaiser Wilhelm." Baden obediently did so. This was too much for Kaiser Wilhelm altogether, and he cut Bismarck in front of the whole assembly as soon as the proclamation was over! But the mutual need persisted in spite of such things, and it was so great that, on Bismarck's side, it called forth something like affection and admiration in his cold, contemptuous heart. This did not prevent him talking to Disraeli in 1878 about "the horrible conduct of my King." The Iron Chancellor sobbed distractedly when he announced William's death to the Reichstag, but as Mr. Taylor shrewdly observes, the grief was as much for his own weakened political position as for the departed "*greiser Kaiser*." No harsher fate could have overtaken this bully of royal personages than his expulsion from office by the greatest goose ever to wear a crown.

AMONG the contradictions, the frequent tears shed by this most virile of men are perhaps the least perplexing thing about him. He was indeed a great crier, and in his memoirs there are several records of weepings in which he was sometimes joined by William. They had one especially big cry together in a railway train. Behaviour of this sort is not likely to strike people who have studied Oliver Cromwell, as out of character, and, as Mr. Taylor insists, Cromwell is the closest parallel to Bismarck in European records. It is stranger to learn that this fierce and gluttonous giant had a voice of such gentleness and sweetness that it could be mistaken for a woman's, and yet more strange to remember that the supreme virtue of this ruthless and emotional warmonger who never forgave an injury was moderation in victory. In this he resembled the otherwise very different Richelieu. He was a natural revolutionary who was forced by circumstances into conservatism. He was never reconciled to the restrictions of fate and necessity.

It is a custom nowadays for the biographer to legislate about his subject as though he has been favoured with a long and frank session on the psychiatrist's couch. Mr. Taylor is far above such tricks and he only offers one profoundly interesting hint in psychoanalytical

DENT

A Prospect of the Sea

Stories and Essays by
Dylan Thomas

The contents, none of which has previously been published in book form in this country except stories from *The Map of Love*, now out of print, range from stories written in the thirties, including the title-story, 'A Prospect of the Sea,' which belongs to the time when the author first settled at Laugharne by the sea, to the essay 'A Story' which appeared in *The Listener* a few months before his death. 10s. 6d.

Shoddy Kingdom

a novel by
Derrick Boothroyd

Nelson Shaw, the hero of this novel, is a creation on the grand scale in the tradition of Arnold Bennett. From his earliest youth he makes the acquisition of 'brass' his sole aim in life. Only when his obsession brings him and those who love him face to face with utter ruin does it dawn on him that there may be other values in life. The story is set in the Heavy Woollen Industry of the West Riding—the 'shoddy kingdom' which is also the scene of the author's humorous book and film, *Value for Money*. 12s. 6d.

The Field of Roses

a novel by
Phyllis Hastings

This story reveals fearlessly, sometimes cruelly, but always with the redeeming touch of compassion and humour, the heart of a woman in love. Rose meets a seemingly decorous young Frenchman, a waiter at a fashionable Bournemouth hotel, but her love-marriage to him proves a bitter disillusionment, and later her life at his sordid little hotel in the North of France ends in domestic disaster. The scene shifts to the earthy South, to Provence, where the developments lead to a dramatic climax which brings Rose at last within sight of inner peace and self-fulfilment. 12s. 6d.

COMING AUGUST 18TH

Commando Climber

Mike Banks, Captain R.M.

FOREWORD BY SIR JOHN HUNT, C.B.E., D.S.O.

The arduous and joys of climbing and exploration, described from an entirely new angle by Mike Banks, whose experience of Commando training, in Cornwall, Malta and Cyprus, and as a member of the famous British North Greenland Expedition, throws new light on the thoughts and actions of men in hardship, danger and loneliness. 16 pages of photographs. 18s.

terms to elucidate the great enigma. He says:

It is a psychological commonplace for a son to feel affection for his mother and to wish his father out of the way. The results are more interesting and profound when a son, who takes after his mother, dislikes her character and standards of value. He will seek to turn himself into the father with whom he has little in common, and he may well end up neurotic or a genius. Bismarck was both. He was the clever, sophisticated son of a clever, sophisticated mother, masquerading all his life as his heavy, earthy father.

Since this book is short for its long theme, there are inevitable gaps in the story. Most of these are unimportant, but not all. I think Mr. Taylor ought to have given more space to William I's successor, "*der weiser Kaiser*." Was he so wise? His reason for joining the Imperial party—that his father had to walk behind the Russian Emperor at the Paris Exhibition of 1867, suggests that under a noble presence and a respectable disposition Frederick was nothing much. Mr. Taylor tells us too little about a characteristic Bismarck intrigue, the appointment of Prince Alexander of Battenburg to be Prince of Bulgaria. Bismarck made a miscalculation here, since he cast a man of spirit for the rôle of a man of straw, and this put on him the painful duty (which caused him no pain) of betraying the man of spirit. It is a minor episode, but the events following Alexander's attempt to marry Princess Victoria of Hohenzollern throw much light on the character of the Empress Frederick, and explain Bismarck's determination that that tragic, attractive, and exasperating woman should never have influence in German affairs.

Mr. Taylor also makes no mention of the Arnim business in which the dark side of Bismarck's nature appeared at its most odious. He persecuted Count von Arnim for ambassadorial insubordination (he got him condemned to penal servitude), and in so doing he exposed a trusty servant, Holstein, as an informer. This was bad for Holstein and perhaps explains his later insane aversion to all things Bismarckian, a potent cause of the state of things which led to World War I. A smaller and more doubtful point which is not touched upon is Bismarck's mistaken idea of Edward VII's character and career. Did not Bismarck teach William II to see in his genial Uncle Bertie an arch-Machiavel,

and was it not a cruel irony that the Imperial pupil could absorb the errors and none of the wisdom of the only great man who served him? A larger question which ought certainly to receive more prominence than Mr. Taylor gives it is Bismarck's conduct of the *Kulturkampf* in Poland where, for the first time in modern history, a highly civilised Western State indulged in mass-expulsion on racial grounds. We British must be careful not to throw stones, having encouraged and condoned that crime on two subsequent occasions, but we can say that Bismarck opened an appalling chapter of modern politics. There is no need to forgive him.

THE gaps may indicate that Mr. Taylor takes a somewhat favourable, benefit-of-the-doubt view of Bismarck, but the bias is very slight. What impresses a reader of this book is not bias but detached understanding illuminated by imagination. Mr. Taylor is sometimes reproached for Puckishness. I think that often this means nothing more abominable than readability, though it must be confessed that he is sometimes glibber than he ought to be, as for example when he argues that Bismarck, in spite of his warmongering, had a "deep sense of moral responsibility." I am sure that Mr. Taylor could defend the paradox, but I am also sure that he ought not to raise vast questions and then dismiss them in one sentence. But for every such passage there are many more which show a rare grasp and judgement. Here is one:

The great Napoleon had had to fight many wars in order to impose his Continental System. Bismarck had done it by magic. There lay the weakness. The differences between the Great Powers had not been settled. They were conjured away, and they reappeared as soon as Bismarck's back was turned. Content himself, he had nothing to give the peoples and rulers of Europe except lassitude. . . . He should have lived in the despairing twentieth century, not in an age when men still believed in a Progress without limits.

There are great scenes in profusion to be found in Bismarck's long and strange life. I find one of the most dramatic in the last visit of William II to the old statesman, in 1898. During lunch Bismarck maintained a grave demeanour, but William insisted on triviality

and gaiety. He made clumsy efforts to shine as a royal butterfly in the style of Uncle Bertie, and he is supposed to have interrupted Bismarck by saying: “Why is a cigar like a mother-in-law?” At length the old man obtained attention. He recalled at some length Napoleon III’s difficulties and his dependence on his Praetorians, and then suddenly turning to the young Emperor, “Your

Majesty,” he said, “so long as you have your present corps of officers you can do what you like; but if it should ever be otherwise with you, then things will be very different.” There was an awkward silence.

When the goose had left, Bismarck prophesied that disaster would come in 1914 or thereabouts. Frankenstein had recognised a monster in this noisy and paltry creature.

Christopher Sykes

“TO KNOW AND YET NOT TO FEAR REALITY”

Most of these essays were written as introductions to books, and all of them were written for occasions which were not of my own devising. The occasions were quite discrete from one another, the subjects are in some ways diverse, and I wrote the essays with no thought of achieving an interconnection among them. In each case my intention was only to serve the given subject, to say what made a particular book or author interesting and valuable to us. Yet inevitably an interconnection among the essays does exist—apart, I mean, from whatever coherence is to be found in their writer’s notions of what constitutes the interesting and valuable, of what constitutes “us.” The essays deal with episodes of the literature of the last century and a half, and they all, in one way or another, take account of the idea that preoccupies this literature and is central to it, and makes its principle and unity—the idea of the self.

I HAVE quoted in full the first paragraph of Professor Trilling’s introduction to his new volume of eight essays,* not only because it describes the contents of the book, but also because it speaks so excellently both in defence and in condemnation of the essays that follow it. The essays, in fact, have little unity, and such as they have derives from the author’s own general standpoint towards life and literature. That attitude is only partially and imperfectly represented by the “idea of self” as the dominant concept of post-18th century literature, which he develops in the

rest of the introduction. The thesis by which he attempts to unify these unrelated pieces is characteristically wide and abstract. “The modern self,” he says, and by this he means the self that has emerged from the late 18th century onwards, “is characterised by certain powers of indignant perception which, turned upon the unconscious portion of culture, have made it accessible to conscious thought.” And in language hardly less difficult, he explains that this is a description of the writers’ hostility which has extended beyond society in its purely institutional and formal aspect to embrace unconscious assumptions, unformulated valuations, habits, manners, and superstitions. This is clearly true. There is and has been for the last 150 years a growing and deepening criticism of the very texture and style of our civilisation. Literary expression of this criticism has inevitably made more explicit the nature of this texture and style, which Professor Trilling more conveniently than aptly has called society’s “culture.”

In stating that from 1780 or thereabouts writers have been more deeply preoccupied with the antagonism of the self to the unformulated penumbra of society which he calls “culture,” Professor Trilling is not perhaps guilty of expounding a truism; the analysis has not perhaps been so exactly made before; yet it is hardly a surprising one. Above all, it is a very wide and abstract thesis which extends far beyond the position of the writer. To apply it to individual authors, and more still to individual books, would hardly seem likely to illuminate more than a very

* *The Opposing Self*. By LIONEL TRILLING. Secker and Warburg. 16s.