

BOOKS

DREAMS THAT KEEP MEN AWAKE

DREAMERS OF DREAMS: THE RISE AND FALL OF 19TH CENTURY IDEALISM.
By Holbrook Jackson. Faber & Faber Ltd., London.

IS it true that the ideas of great writers are only dreams? Holbrook Jackson seemed to have that thought when he chose his title, and throughout his book the feeling returns that we are being shown the spinning of illusions. The six authors studied in this volume were giants in their day. They were men who had been touched with the fire of prophecy, and since the prophet tends to be declamatory, and to declaim the meaning of a vision that is not easily transferred to other minds, it may not be surprising if the world remained unaltered. But dreams that have been shared may become influential in ways that are not noticed by historians.

What were the practical results of the teachings of 19th Century prophets? The greatest of them was Carlyle, a man who delighted in telling his countrymen that they were heading, collectively, for perdition. He saw no good in the reformers, no possibility of universal peace, no sense in the theory of evolution, no grace in religion, and no virtue in democracy.

The surprising fact, however, is that he was able to believe in the possibility of improvement through a partial return to the past. Admittedly, Carlyle's "feudalism" was a personal conception, remote from historical reality. He advocated a return to authoritarian government; but he could not see that authority under industrialism could become the morbid growth known to-day as fascism. Holbrook Jackson believes that most of the time Carlyle was writing about himself. But he was a man of strong personality, and in expressing himself vividly in writing he must have had some sort of influence on other people. If Carlyle could not change the world, he could make many thousands of readers think and talk about uncomfortable matters, and he could stimulate productive minds.

Ruskin acknowledged Carlyle as his master. When, however, ideas are transferred from one powerful mind to another, they do not remain static. Ruskin agreed with Carlyle that civilisation had taken the wrong turning; but where Carlyle found a remedy in work, Ruskin believed that work should be linked to aesthetics. William Morris went further, and became the advocate of a way of life in which art was to be associated with religion, morality, and politics. Moreover, un-



THOMAS CARLYLE
He found a remedy in work

like his masters, he was ready to practise what he preached. Yet his solitary example, even though it created an enclave of beauty, could not check the wheels in their busy turning. The hated machine became dominant.

IN America the teachings of Carlyle were absorbed by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. For them, too, there was need of great men—not merely to take upon themselves the burdens of society, but to generate greatness in others. They disliked and feared the commercialism of the age, and exerted themselves to defeat it. Emerson was an intellectual, somewhat cold in temperament, and fastidious in taste. He wrote his essays and gave his lectures; and he seemed to hope that ideas expounded vigorously could somehow bring a change of heart in the multitude.

Thoreau was closer to Morris in that if he had an idea he was prepared to carry it into practice. He wanted to live fully, taking the richness of life from hours that moved too swiftly. The civilised man has many encumbrances, many interests and obligations which cut him off from idleness. Thoreau, a complete individualist, tried to make time slower by reducing his physical and social needs and by immersing himself in Nature. Like Carlyle, he wanted to go back to a quieter age; but he was ready to go alone, and to taste silence himself instead of preaching its value to others.

Holbrook Jackson points out that Thoreau was to die young; but it is surprising that he does not make greater use of this fact to explain the man's consistency of thought and action. In the midst of a long analysis there are only two sentences dealing with Thoreau's physical condition: "Probably he knew instinctively that his reaching after the 'tonic wildness of Nature' is partially inspired by his own physical weakness. For the valiant spirit of Thoreau has to endure imprisonment in a consumptive body." This, surely, should have been a fundamental, rather than an incidental, reference. Once it is known that Thoreau was consumptive it is not difficult to understand why he should have devoted himself to vivid living.

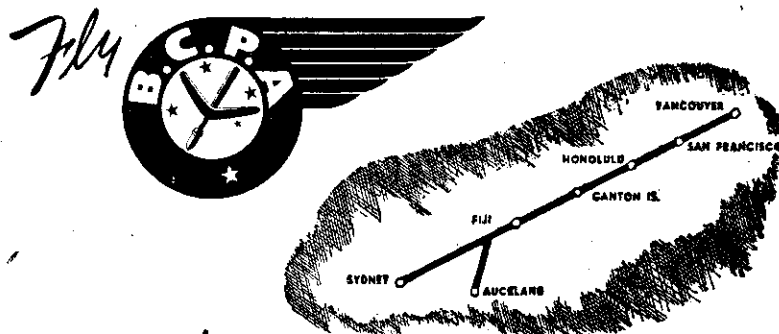
Elsewhere in the book the author touches on the possible significance of Carlyle's alleged impotence and the sexual coldness of Ruskin, Emerson, and Thoreau. Indeed, it is easy to gain the impression that most of these 19th Century prophets were thin-blooded males, in spite of their masculine writings. Only Whitman and Morris (continued on next page)



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