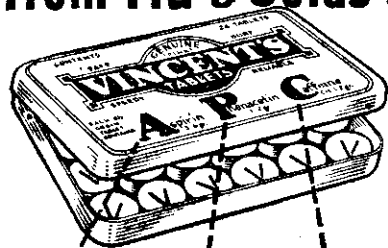


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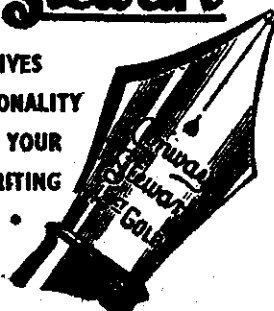
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## BOOKS

# The Classics and English Literature

THE CLASSICAL BACKGROUND OF  
ENGLISH LITERATURE. By J. A. K.  
Thomson. George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

THE classics have long lost their supremacy in education, and are everywhere under attack. In New Zealand, outside the university, Greek is taught in only a few schools, which means that nearly all university students who take Greek have to start from the beginning. In some schools it is positively difficult for a parent who believes in Latin to get a child taught it. Perhaps with a bit of a shock one finds students taking an arts course—say in history—without having learned any Latin at all, and wonders how they get on. How do they manage with words and ideas—their history and significance—and literary and historical allusions? Into our language and literature is interwoven the immense heritage from Greece and Rome. To those who have a feeling for words and literature and history, not a day passes but a slight knowledge of Latin or Greek or both adds to the interest of life. Pass by Latin, my son, it might be said—adapting an American witticism—and you will be happy, but you will miss a lot of fun.

Every secondary school pupil learns that our language is heavily Latinised. Every university student in English is taught something of the effect the classical writers have exercised on English literature from Chaucer to the present day. The subject is so vast, however, that before very long it is seen to be one for specialisation. What Professor Thomson has set out to do—he is professor Emeritus of Classics in the University of London—is to reduce it to a reasonable compass, in a book that will help the student and interest the general reader who has a taste for letters. Professor Thomson has already made a name for himself as an interpreter of the Greek world. Among his books is the delightful *Greeks and Barbarians*, one of the best expositions of the Greek spirit in literature and life. What happened was that there was an extraordinary flowering of literature in Greece, and largely as a result of this, a flowering in Rome. These two literary movements spread through the western civilised world. But then came the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages, and to change the metaphor, the streams which had flowed clear and definitely became to a large extent lost in a world of sand and swamp. What happened in this period must have puzzled many people.

Mr. Thomson tells us what each significant writer in Greece and Rome did—he is rather less concerned with what he wrote than with how he wrote it—and then skilfully tracks the stream through the sand and swamp. In that long period before the Renaissance, Latin was the language of culture, but it was monastic, not classical Latin, and the world of learning knew its Greek and Latin classics largely through secondary sources. Almost all that the Middle Ages in Western Europe knew of Plato was a dialogue done in Latin from an Arabic translation. Much of classical literature was irretrievably lost.

The old conception of the Renaissance as "a sudden explosion of dawn at the



MATTHEW ARNOLD  
Significant both as poet and critic

end of a long night of Stygian darkness" has gone. It was a slower movement. But it had immense and lasting effects on Western culture. It was Greek literature more than Roman that was revived. Scholars cultivated classical, not monastic Latin, and it was thought that men of letters everywhere would write in this tongue and style. The vernacular languages prevailed, but they were reorganised, revived, and almost transformed. Professor Thomson guides us through the effects of the Renaissance in English literature. The emphasis on correctness in the 18th Century produced the Romantic Movement, of which an American scholar has said that it was the worst thing that ever happened to the modern world, because it so largely destroyed the old respect for order. The two ideals will be more or less opposed to each other to the end of time. The classical stands for order, with its peril of stagnation, and the romantic for freedom, with its peril of license.

Yet the two are not incompatible. There was a romantic element in Greek literature, and classical and romantic are mixed in our own. Many of the writers who brought the Romantic movement into English literature or developed it, had a classical background. Tennyson is steeped in the classics, especially in Virgil, and his poem on his master is one of the noblest ever written by one great poet about another. To Professor Thomson, Matthew Arnold is particularly significant, not only for the classical element in his poetry, but for the ideas about poetry that he set out so precisely in critical prose.

One example of the enormous influence exerted by the classics must suffice. Cicero is not highly regarded to-day as a philosopher or a statesman, but Professor Thomson says, "no other writer ancient or modern is so important in the history of prose style." Moreover one of his books, his letters to his student son at Athens, "a popular treatise on the public and private duties of a Roman gentleman," became a handbook of practical ethics in England, and greatly influenced the English conception of what a gentleman should be. "A Whig statesman of the 18th Century, for example, is far more like Cicero's Roman than he is like anything in the Bible." But might we not go further, and say

that the public school ideal of the 19th Century, despite the strong Christian emphasis that Arnold gave it, also shows this Ciceronian influence? In the Englishman of that class there is a good deal of the Roman. Professor Thomson takes the story right up to the present day—to T. S. Eliot and Aldous Huxley. Some great writers have not been influenced by the classics at all. On the whole the direct influence of the classics has decreased, but this is balanced to some extent by the greater vogue of translations, which has spread second-hand knowledge of classical literature, history and art. Professor Thomson goes so far as to say it would be unreasonable to assume that a man who has made a special study of English or French should as a matter of course acquire a knowledge of Greek and Latin literature in the original. He thinks it not at all impossible that classical education "will become so impoverished as to be hardly worthwhile for the ordinary student," but this has happened before, and the study of the classics has always revived. "There is no reason even to expect that the immediate and direct influence of the classics on authors will disappear."

Since we in New Zealand are the inheritors of European and especially English culture, what Professor Thomson says applies more or less to our own literature. But one special point may be made. We need the spirit of the classics, but not necessarily all their forms and themes. Some years ago A. R. D. Fairburn made a proper protest against the vogue of Greek woodland deities in Australian and New Zealand poetry. Pan and nymphs have really no place in the bush of either country.

—A.M.

## A PERIODICAL FOR POETRY

POETRY QUARTERLY: WINTER 1947-1948. Edited by Wrey Gardiner. Grey Walls Press, London.

THE urge to write poetry is stronger than the urge to write prose. It is accepted that poetry does not pay, but any editor or publisher will tell you that this does not deter the poet or the would-be poet from writing it. Moreover, there are quite a number of publications devoted to poetry. We have them in New Zealand and Australia. No doubt some or most of them find the slopes of Parnassus a tangle of financial worry which obstructs the view, but they carry on bravely. In this number of the *Poetry Quarterly* we notice that the *Poetry Review*, founded in 1909, is still going, with a new editor; that *Poetry (London)* has appeared again after a long silence; and that there is a new periodical called *Verse*. The editor also mentions a new quarterly *The Changing World*, but it is not clear whether or not this is wholly devoted to verse. Poetry, says the editor, "is on the move." Many people would like to know where, and perhaps they will find some of the answer in *Poetry Quarterly*. There are 20 pages of verse, and the rest is criticism of poets past and present, including Richard Aldington's *Poetry of the English-speaking World* (which, by the way, contains nothing from Australia or New Zealand), and recent anthologies of the

(continued on next page)