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BOOKS

The Riddle of the English

NEVER have there been so many books published about England and Britain, the English and the British, as of recent years, and the stream goes on swelling. We may attribute this partly to the spread of education and the growth of the spirit of enquiry. Britons want to know more and more about their own country. But I suggest there are two other reasons. One is that England, or Britain, is now on the defensive. Gone are the days of the old unquestioned supremacy, when it was not considered necessary to dress the shop window. Customers came, or were expected to come, because they had to. Mr. Podsnap, you may remember, explained that "No Other Country is so Favoured as This Country," and when the foreign gentleman asked how other countries did, he replied gravely: "They do, sir, they do — I am sorry to be obliged to say it—As they do." The fabric on which all that assurance was built began to crack in 1914, and we are reminded in reading this book that only the middle-aged remember when London, Mr. Podsnap's universe, was the unchallenged centre of world finance. Britain has passed through two military struggles for dear life, into an economic struggle for existence as a great country. So she must explain herself. She must tell the world what she has done in every department of life, and how she has done it.

The second reason is that a large part of mankind wants to know. The other western democracies realise Britain's greatness more fully than they did, and the necessity for its continuance in the general interest of a free civilisation. But they have always taken her for granted rather than understood the reasons for her power and influence. It is significant that the Austrian Cohen-Portheim called his between-the-wars book on the subject, "England, the Unknown Isle." His central theme was that the continent was sadly ignorant.

Europeans thought of England as powerful in arms and commerce, but almost wholly devoid of culture. The same attitude, I am told, was to be found in South America. So highly was English character rated that "The word of an Englishman" became a common saying, but people pictured Britons as honest traders and little or nothing else. Their cultural home was Paris, and it was a tremendous shock when France fell in 1940. It is the task of the British Council to correct such pictures, to show the British mind and the British way of life.

WE may take it then that this large, well-written, admirably illustrated, and sumptuously produced study of England* has not been issued for home consumption alone. It is part of a campaign. Nor should the Dominions flatter themselves that they have little to learn on this vital question. They will do well to read its twenty-six chapters on many aspects of English life, written by different authorities. The subject is specifically and by purpose England, not Britain. The contributors would not deny the value of other parts of the Kingdom, but their job was to explain England and the English as such. Even the most perfervid Scot might admit that England was overwhelmingly the predominant partner. This method of presenting a national record and analysis has obvious drawbacks. Each writer is confined to a chapter for what has often been given a volume or a library. He must therefore freely use the dangerous method of generalisation, and economise in exceptions. There may be a tendency to over-praise. But there are important advantages. The reader is given main facts in a small compass.

Moreover, he can thus obtain between two covers a panorama of England—her economics and arts, her home life, habits and sports, her law and religion, and the characteristics of her people. It is like seeing from a height Housman's "coloured counties" spread out before one in a vast landscape. One can look, study, and compare.

Thus we find here threads running from one theme to another. The reign of law, the basis of that freedom which is the chief mark of English life, is not confined to Lord Simonds' excellent chapter on law.

*THE CHARACTER OF ENGLAND. Edited by Ernest Barker. Oxford, at the Clarendon Press.



"Gardening, for example, is a national art in England"

It crops up in English financial supremacy. It wasn't only because they were skilled that London bankers ruled the money world; it was because they were honest, systematic, and dependable. It comes into the consideration of games, which must be played by rules. And the English press, we are told, works within the framework of a libel law more severe than in any other great nation. It is a factor in "The English at War," for the old-time antipathy to and neglect of the Army sprang partly from fear lest it be used by a tyrant. It is pointed out that what sent Englishmen round the world was private enterprise rather than official policy. Often it wasn't a case of trade following the flag, but of the flag following the trader or adventurer. In New Zealand the adventurer Wakefield forced the hand of the highly reluctant British Government. But the same individualism, so Lord Kennett maintains in his chapter on town life, was responsible for the horrible scandal of unplanned industrial towns, and it still hampers urban progress because the Englishman centres his thoughts on his home, to the neglect of its outside social relationships. He has treated the country more wisely than the town. "Certain it is that at all times Englishmen have distrusted planning and respected action, have feared analysis and been delighted with achievement." This vital generalisation occurs in the section on recreation and games. This is a penetrating and witty review, but it contains nothing more illuminating on the subject than Lady Violet Bonham Carter's story, in "Childhood and Education," of her illustrious scholar-statesman father. "Completely devoid of athletic accomplishment," Asquith took up his only game, golf, at forty-five, and "would get a glow of pride and self-fulfilment from holing a long putt, which no intellectual achievement ever came near to giving him."

AT some time or other in the last five centuries, every great capital in the western world has been occupied by an enemy, save London. Protected by their moat, the English could give their full attention to securing their personal freedom. It is stressed here that the impulse of life in England has come from below and not been imposed from above. Great public services now in the hands of the

(continued on next page)



"A libel law more severe than in any other great nation"