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BOOKS

Culture Undefined

NOTES TOWARDS THE DEFINITION OF CULTURE. By T. S. Eliot. Faber and Faber. 10/6.

(Reviewed by J. C. Beaglehole)

THERE can have been few books ever written as unreviewable as this. It is not a big book. It is not a good book. It is not an easily-read book. Yet it is not a book easily disposed of, for it has the interest which attaches to the struggles of any good mind with a large and important subject. The difficulty of disposing of it seems to have afflicted other reviewers: I read three columns about it in the *Times Literary Supplement*, and I was not much farther forward then, except that I knew the reviewer respected Mr. Eliot, and wanted to be polite to him, and had been thrown back on his heels more than once; so that I finished up not much wiser than when I started. Obviously I could not merely make a précis of the *Times Literary Supplement*. My own copy of the book is treated as no book should be treated by a cultured person—it is a mass of underlinings, marginal queries, exclamation marks, comments long and short, potted argument, references back and forth to contradictory statements, accusations of bad reasoning, as well as occasional ticks of agreement. All that can't go into a review. For the book has this merit, that it provokes argument, and could well be taken as a starting-point, irrespective of its real merits, for a study-course on the meaning of "culture." Anybody who reads it for this purpose would be well-advised to start with the three broadcast talks to Germany on the unity of European culture, printed as an appendix; here Mr. Eliot has something to say worth saying, and says it simply and well. The rest of the book is not written simply, and it is not written well; it gives no impression of lucidity of thought, nor of depth, but of laboriousness, of labour rather clumsily—the word must be used—employed to justify Mr. Eliot's prejudices. "My purpose in writing the following chapters," he says, "is not as might appear from a casual inspection of the table of contents, to outline a social or political philosophy; nor is the book intended to be merely a vehicle for my observations on a variety of topics. My aim is to help to define a word, the word *culture*." But he can't help himself; the social and political philosophy is there all the while, in bits; Mr. Eliot

can't help it, any more than Burke could help the social and political philosophy of *Reflections on the French Revolution*.

()NE keeps thinking, indeed, of Burke; this is the sort of thing that Burke might have written if Burke had been reading sociological anthropology, as well as brooding over modern democracy—and had not been able to write. Mr. Eliot has Burke's reverence for tradition, his awe for religion, his veneration for aristocracy as the embodiment of some



T. S. ELIOT, O.M.

"The culture of the highest level is of particular importance"

aspects of culture; he also, like Burke, makes the wildest generalisations, is violently and gratuitously contradictory and wrong-headed, indulges in some appallingly bad history, and displays once or twice what can only be called a measure of intellectual snobbery. For instance: "The writer himself is not without political convictions and prejudices; but the imposition of them is no part of his present intention. What I try to say is this: here are what I believe to be essential conditions for the growth and for the survival of culture. If they conflict with any passionate faith of the reader—if, for instance, he finds it shocking that culture and equalitarianism should conflict, if it seems monstrous to him that anyone should have 'advantages of birth'—I do not ask him to change his faith, I merely ask him to stop paying lip-service to culture." Is that arrogance or mere pettishness? It is embedded in a series of scrupulously reasonable preliminary observations.

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