

The Individual and Society

MAN'S QUEST FOR SIGNIFICANCE, by Lewis Way; Allen and Unwin, for European Digest Ltd. English price, 12/6.

(Reviewed by Mary R. Barkas)

THE significance of this book is out of all proportion to its size and price; it achieves a much-needed synthesis of the growth and progress in time of man's relationship to his social environment; of his own growth of separate individuality, with rights and duties; and his relationship—material, emotional and spiritual—to his social setting and organisation in groups and in One World. The author takes the standpoint of Adler, stressing the too often overlooked fact that man and his society influence and change one another in a sort of reciprocal action and reaction, so that external conditions, individual psychology, and the inter-relationship of both must be looked at as an ever-changing process of growth. The bird's eye view is the background or key plan from which the author points out the general trends appearing in different phases of the journey—progress or upward movement, and regression or the pull backward to the familiar ruts; shows how balanced swings to and fro in time bring equilibrium by revealing opposites as complementary rather than antagonistic, from which we may orientate ourselves on the Middle Way, the Tao, of growth to harmony.

But this philosophical background is not obtruded; on the contrary, the author writes with commendable simplicity and clarity, giving close-ups of town and country planning in detail, showing different aspects of man and his social situation and present discontents. Here he puts his description into vivid phrases and realistic examples, so that every reader, however inexpert or unlearned, can say to himself: "Yes, that's just where the shoe pinches," and will find help to understand just why and where it pinches. At every point the author manages to consider not only a great variety of factors, but the important element in enabling the individual to understand both his own feelings and thoughts and his changing world.

In this vein, after a brief preface, the first chapter deals with man as worker, shows how the individual feels increasingly helpless amid the vast forces of world finance and industry, and how he seeks solace in collective action and security in a protective state. Seekers for incentives should read this carefully. Chapter Two, on the Frustration of Sex, is perhaps the least satisfactory one, yet it does show how changing social ideals and theories of marriage and love modify the relationships of the sexes and the social function and importance of the family. It is written rather from the man's standpoint, but though it at least attempts to understand too the woman's side, it is rather superficial. The author's presentation of ideas alleged to be Freud's, is distorted

and inadequate. His account of sublimation, for instance, is completely mistaken and confused with asceticism, and he uses the term Reason as identical with Intellect. But on the whole he offers much that will provoke fruitful thought and a broadening of horizons.

Chapter Three, on the decline of social standards, unites these maps of man as worker and as family man into a general social frame. Here the author is, I think, unduly pessimistic. He stresses the levelling down of values and taste, and by implication prefers a feudal or caste hierarchy. Thus he fails to give adequate prominence to the possible dawn in the East, where long static conditions and traditional values may grow a fresh "grass roots" democracy without repeating the mistakes and horrors of the industrial revolutions in the West. Our Rewi Alley's work may point here to a more hopeful future.

Chapter Four, on Individuality, strikes the key-note of the book. It shows the growth of the individual from

a being having value mainly as an interchangeable unit of a group, feeling and acting together under leadership, to which is delegated all initiative and new adaptation (as with the Maoris, on whom the author quotes Elsdon Best). This stage is succeeded in time by the exaggerated and aggressive individ-

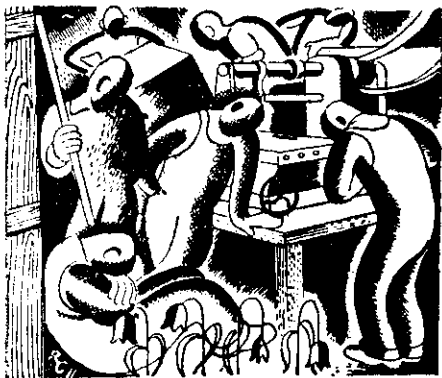
ualism of the Protestant Reformation and the utilitarian age of laissez faire, which saw conflict and competition as the way of progress. And so to our present crisis, in which we are faced with the need to learn to live together in amity or perish together from the product of our science. However much we may wish to love our neighbour, the problem is how to do so without losing our own integrity and self-respect, our freedom and free-will. We have made an idol of intellect, but are still apt to lose our tempers (and our self-respect) because we cannot control our emotions. We are afraid to love, lest love enslave us.

Later chapters deal with various aspects of the application of these ideas to the current social, political and economic situation. The author offers no final solution—rather discusses processes and trends—and the need for an answer to the universal question "To what end?"

This book is one to be bought—not for the facts, though these are ample food for thought, if not "all that are known"—but for the stimulation it will give to further investigation and discussion; and one will want to read and re-read it, and ask for more. Here comes its one grave defect: there is no bibliography. A few incomplete references are given in footnotes. It would be enormously improved if each chapter and the whole could have added a list of at least a few key books from which more specific information and guidance to wider reading, on the lines of the reader's personal interest, could be provided.

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N.Z. LISTENER, OCTOBER 21, 1949.



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