

Understanding America

AMERICAN THEMES, by D. W. Brogan; Hamish Hamilton; English price, 12/6.

(Reviewed by Alan Mulgan)

YOU may remember that line in *A Yank at Oxford*, when the American student has told the history tutor he wishes to take American history: "I didn't know there was any American history." And then: "I don't think there has been any history since Julius Caesar." I have it from an Oxford man of a generation ago that then, at any rate, there was a basis for this caricature.

American ignorance of Britain and her works has been deplorable. We had plenty of examples of it during the American "invasion" of New Zealand a few years ago, when even well-educated guests refused to believe that Britain did not tax us. This ignorance, however, as my opening quotation suggests, has not been more deplorable than British ignorance of America. There was the official who, acknowledging a message of congratulation from the legislature of an American State to Queen Victoria on her Diamond Jubilee, thanked the senders for their "loyal" sentiments, whereupon the motion was indignantly expunged from the records. But need we go beyond ourselves? How many of us could pass with credit a simple examination on the State make-up of the Union, the method of electing the President, and the constitutional relations between President and Congress?

Fortunately much good work is being done to dispel the mists, and in the front rank on the British side is Professor D. W. Brogan of Cambridge. The American theme is so vast and complex that one would think it sufficient for even a Cambridge don's whole time and energy, but Professor Brogan is equally learned and skilled in exposition of France. References come off his pen like the skilful shelling of peas. He seems to have read everything, and, like Macaulay, to remember what he has read, and he has something of Macaulay's skill in weaving his facts and comments into a lively story.

These papers on American subjects were written between 1931 and 1947, and the author candidly admits a weakness in collecting articles of the hour. It involves "the reprinting of some judgments which I now think erroneous and some pieces showing a low degree of prophetic power." The chapter "The American Movies," written in 1938, is more out of date than "Give up Hollywood?" written in 1946, and since 1946 British films have improved their position a good deal. This, however, is a small thing in a book that every Briton should read as part of his profoundly important job of understanding America. The range of subject is very wide: from the Revolution to the present day; from Tom Paine and the Adams family to Al Capone, "Mr. Dooley," and Franklin Roosevelt; from the decline of Boston,

as a cultural force and the struggle to create an American aristocracy, to the greatest of American problems, the Negro. There are many corrections of current ideas. If Hollywood presents a false impression of American life, are British films any better as a mirror of British life? Those who object to the ceaseless invasion and infiltration of the English language by American words and phrases will get little comfort here. It is a mop against a sea tide. "Of the two hundred million people speaking English, nearly seven-tenths live in the United States, and another tenth in the British Dominions are as much influenced by American as by English English." And those who deplore "Americanisms" frequently use them unknowingly.

I rejoice that when "Mr. Dooley" (Finley Peter Dunne) died, Professor Brogan wrote an appreciation of him.



"Mr. Dooley" was a joy of my youth, and I can still find much freshness in him. It was Dooley who, to the delight of philosophers, described pragmatism as meaning that a lie wasn't a lie if it worked. I learn here that a comment of his on the Boer War, that "only armies fight in the open. Nations fight behind trees and rocks," was printed at the head of British operation orders

in the Thirties. I don't know any American who is more quotable, and it is a pity this generation does not know him. Much of his work is dated, but there should be a public for a well-edited selection.

Professor Brogan's basic correction concerns the American Revolution. That event was not, in the words of an English schoolmaster, "this unfortunate episode in our history." To the American it is neither an episode nor unfortunate, but "basic to the whole of modern American history and institutions." The break with England was more than a family difference; it was a revolution. And American history is much more than the study of Anglo-American relations.

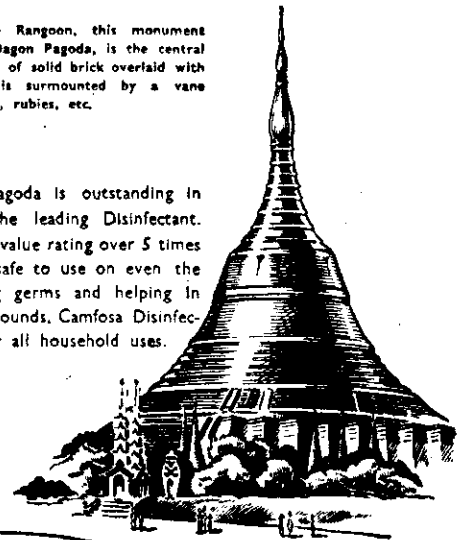
The most important thread running through this collection is the argument that the study of American development in all its aspects should lead us to admire America's achievement the more, or at any rate view it more sympathetically. Professor Brogan might have taken for a text Chesterton's notable saying that while there is no materialism so marked as American, there is no idealism so great. British as well as American surprise and disgust at certain American trends are intensified by the feeling that these are lapses from the lofty ideals of the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, the Gettysburg Address, and countless reaffirmations. The most telling illustration of this lies in the Negro problem. Here Americans are faced with a dilemma that goes back to the Declaration of Independence: "All men are created equal." Though all Americans don't apply this principle to the Negro, they really believe in it. Even

(continued on next page)

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