

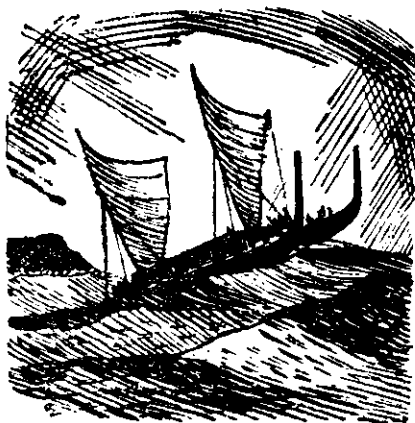
SENSE OF THE PAST

VIKINGS OF THE SUNRISE, by Sir Peter Buck; Whitcombe and Tombs, 35/-.

(Reviewed by Ernest Beaglehole)

SOCTETIES differ greatly—Seven pre-literate societies with no method of recording historical events—in their interest in the past. The Hopi Indian of arid New Arizona is at one end of the continuum. He views the universe as a place in which there is no room for a one-dimensional, uniformly and perpetually flowing time. He is only interested in the manifested and the manifesting. By contrast, the Maori and his Polynesian kinsmen of the Pacific have appeared to be supremely interested in the past. So interested, in fact, that for some, even today, the present is only a sort of necessary addendum to a past that is peopled with real persons, living in ways that are more absorbing than those of the present.

It is quite understandable, therefore, than when Sir Peter Buck, Te Rangi Hiroa, came to write the story of the Polynesians he should have chosen a title that carries us back to the heroic age of the northern seamen of the eighth Century. It is also quite appropriate that he should use much of his



text in the effort to disentangle the mystery of those migrations of the Polynesians which finally brought them into the eastern Pacific about the beginning of the Christian era.

This attempted reconstruction of the past is history that depends not on written documents or eye-witness accounts, but on the conscientious and painstaking comparison of the form and function of cultural products that range all the way from myth, through art decoration to fish-hooks and lashing patterns. As a result of these comparisons,

inferences and theories are propounded. This is the stuff out of which the pre-European history of the Eastern Pacific has been traditionally cut.

None could do this work so well as Sir Peter Buck. After half a lifetime of field work and museum study he thought, breathed and practically lived the subject. This book is a summary of his views, now re-issued with the illustrations and end maps of the American edition (originally published in 1938), readable, sometimes racy, at all times advancing views that still require the very serious attention of those similarly attracted by the need to put the proto-historical past of the Polynesian into some kind of orderly perspective.

In the past sixteen years there has been only one serious attempt to present a theory that contradicts in all major particulars Buck's conviction that the first migrations of the Polynesians were from west to east. But Heyerdahl's voluminous documentation of the view that the ancestors of the Polynesian are to be found on the western shores of the American continent has hardly convinced academic anthropologists that Buck's reconstruction of the past is faulty. Much more light may come from further archaeological exploration in Fiji, in certain parts of Micronesia and from the application of radiocarbon dating techniques to the archaeological finds.

In fact, it seems more and more probable that it will be the archaeologists who will have the last words to say

about the pre-history of the Polynesians. This is right and proper. The contemporary social anthropologist thinks of his problems in the Pacific as being of a rather different nature. He is more concerned about present changes in present-day Polynesian societies. His baseline for studying these changes is the coming of the white invader into the Pacific. His goal is to understand how the Polynesians are adjusting to the stresses introduced into their personal and social life by contact with the ideas and technology of Western European society. It is most unlikely, therefore, that the problem of reconstructing the Polynesian past will be tackled again by a social anthropologist. Buck's achievement will stand at the end of a long series of attempts, the last but also the best.

AMERICAN VOICES

THE PENGUIN BOOK OF MODERN AMERICAN VERSE, edited by Geoffrey Moore; Penguin Books, 3/6.

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