

BALANCE OF POWER

THE STRUGGLE FOR MASTERY IN EUROPE, by A. J. P. Taylor; Oxford, at the Clarendon Press, English price 30-.

(Reviewed by F. L. W. Wood)

THIS is, of its own kind, a brilliant book and by any reckoning an important one. It fairly crackles in one's hands with pungent comment, vigorous exposition and sharp characterisation. Out of the enormously voluminous printed source material Mr. Taylor has absorbed a staggering amount of detail which he sets out with a blaze of verbal fireworks and with an assurance of mastery. Even those familiar with his subject will find, with pleasure, sharp and revealing comments on its every aspect, and new teeth added to that vague concept, "The Balance of Power." The Balance, though challenged, preserved until 1914 a precarious equilibrium among five or six Great Powers. The means was an elaborate and rather personal diplomacy, which is the main subject-matter of this book, and which offers instructive reading for those who view with some apprehension the prospect of a Two Power world. It is instructive, too, to note the evidence here pre-

sented that Europe's suicide was produced by muddle-headed mediocrities rather than by clever knaves; and that, among a poor lot, some English statesmen show up rather well.

Few historians in the next few years will be able to express themselves within Mr. Taylor's field without checking up on what he has to say, and rather anxiously asking themselves whether or not he is right; for in spite of a splash of footnotes, many of his most devastating assertions and best stories are not supported by direct authority. Moreover, confidence often spills over into speculative matters: the unexpressed calculations of tortuous men are set out with the assurance of Holy Writ. As for the general reader, the detail is too minute and indeed too dazzling for comfort. Yet for him, as for the expert, the volume has outstanding value. It can be read with pleasure by a well-informed, though inexpert, reader, who is content to skip what is indigestible and feast upon Mr. Taylor's treatment of big issues and famous personalities. All Europe is a stage on which his puppets perform an endless intricate dance. He knows their every act and intention and the accents of their voices, he reveals their follies—and the follies of previous

commentators—and he moves among his creatures with brilliant effect. After all, a mediocre Emperor is no match for the dialectic skill and detailed knowledge of a first-rate Oxford don.

Two further comments come to mind. In the first place, this is professedly diplomatic history, following a brilliant introduction on underlying realities—changes in population, economic resources and so forth. Mr. Taylor's case is that in the end decisions are made by individual men; for example, he virtually divides the blame for the outbreak of war in 1914 between Berchtold (who wished to show a jeering colleague that he was not irresolute) and Schlieffen (who in 1892 taught the German Army that France must always be defeated first). The proportionate importance of individuals and of impersonal trends must always be a matter of opinion; yet the reader of Mr. Taylor's book should constantly bear in mind that the world is not populated exclusively by excited politicians.

The second comment is this. Disregarding some irresponsible vigour of writing—of which those most defenceless of men, the statesmen of Imperial Russia and Austria-Hungary, are principal victims—the impression remains that the book, both in arrangement and conclusions, is forceful rather than revolutionary. Mr. Taylor, among others, has already exploded some of the myths that have bedevilled thought about the 19th

Century; his own essential views are already known, and not much more destruction is here undertaken. On the other hand, his use of material is, as always, highly individual, and the unwary should be warned that on many issues there are different opinions, often more charitable, though seldom so picturesque.

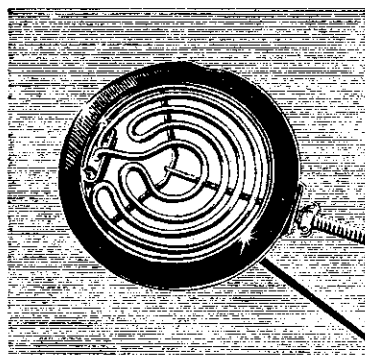
PORTRAIT OF GAUGUIN

THE NOBLE SAVAGE, by Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson; Chatto and Windus, English price 21-.

THE duldest part of a biography is usually the first chapter. Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson, who have already written good books on the Brontës and George Eliot, avoid this awkwardness by introducing Paul Gauguin when he first meets Mette Gad, his future wife. Family background and early years are described as if Gauguin himself were telling the story. The method, skilfully used, allows information to be acquired as easily as if it came from the pages of a novel.

Nevertheless, this is a serious study of a turbulent and powerful man. Gauguin has become a classic figure of revolt among the artists. Many people, influenced by a Somerset Maugham novel, think of him as a business man who suddenly became a painter, deserted his wife and five children, and went off to Tahiti to produce pictures which have unaccountably become masterpieces. The

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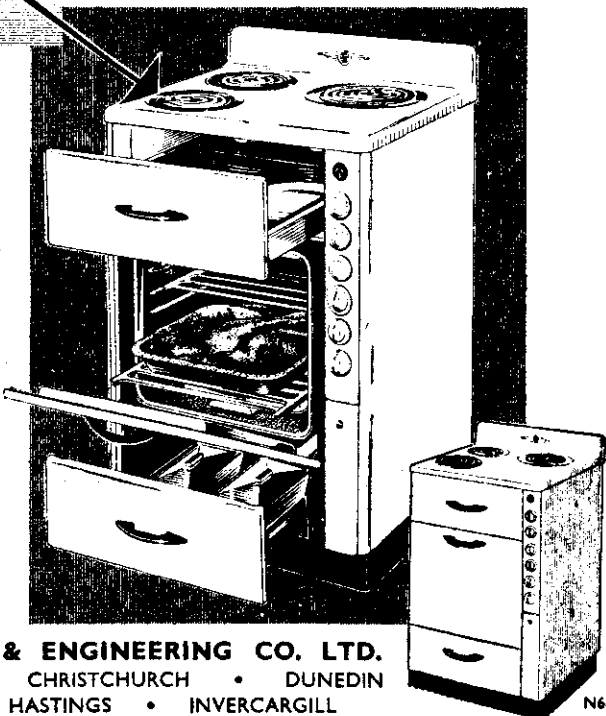
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