

# BOOK REVIEWS

## A MOST EXCELLENT BOOK

By R. W. POSTGATE

*Proletcult. By Eden and Cedar Paul. 4s. 6d. Leonard Parsons. "New Era Series."*

LEONARD PARSONS, a new publisher, has apparently set out to capture the "Labour Market." His well bound and (in this case) badly printed books are beginning to obtrude themselves on every Labour bookstall. Most of the books in the series are not particularly exciting—books by Robert M. Dell, by Snowden, by Emil Davies. But there are three (Lansbury's *What I saw in Russia*, William Mellor's *Direct Action* and Brailsford's *After the Peace*) which are well worth reading and keeping. Here is a third—in its way even better.

Without question, this book is one to be bought and kept. The title must not drive one off. It is bad enough, God knows. It happened that I wrote recently in *THE COMMUNIST* lamenting the absence of a text book on workers' self-education, and the Pauls sent me a cutting from a picture paper mentioning the forthcoming publication of the *Proletcult*. Now, the cutting said:—

We understand that Proletcult is the name of a new revolutionary education which is to set the world afire. As a name for a tinned food or even a hair-restorer, it might be good enough, but until subversive education selects another name we shall sleep in our beds comfortably.

The Pauls took no notice of this profoundly true comment—nor could they be expected to, for do not they in this book claim proudly the infamy of having invented the word "ergatocratic" in spite of the chorus of justified rage what that word produced?

Hence we must explain here that "proletcult" is a Russian word meaning education of the workers in the interest of the workers—class-conscious education. It is applied in Russia to an institution which (being post-revolutionary) differs profoundly from the workers' education over here. The word will not and must not become naturalized here, as the Pauls want, for three excellent reasons:—

(1) It is an ugly, and to those who know none but English, a very foreign word. In some languages it may be all right, but it would be years before Proletcult lost, to the man in the English street, its alien quality. It would be a millstone round the movement's neck.

(2) It doesn't mean what it should. Its connexion with "culture" is not (as the Pauls, who know too much German, think) an advantage. Culture, since the days of Arnold, is a word used only by snobs. To the rest of us, it just means a Haw-Haw accent. And I ask you . . . !

(3) The proper root for such a name (if one must be invented) is before us. It must be some compound of the word Pleb, which we have learnt to know and like as an old friend. And I take this opportunity of repudiating Horrabin's well-meant alternative suggestion—"Independent W.-C. education." He explains that the initials mean "working-class," but the name is still not a good one.

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To turn to the book itself. (And I feel it a sign of its excellence that it stimulates me to digress violently on various questions raised in it). The statement of the case for the class-education of the workers is well done, although it suffers from necessary compression. No doubt as a result of this compression, I feel slightly uneasy at such statements as that quoted from a Mr. Bogdanoff on page 96 (that "economics is [are] typical" of other sciences). Economics are not typical. Such sciences as algebra and geometry are actually impartial. It is only economics, history and perhaps a few others which are poisoned by a deep infusion of bourgeois mis-statement and propaganda. And only one who knows them fairly well can realise how deeply they are poisoned. I know that the Pauls realise (and on page 15 state) this difference, I only suggest that it might be more stressed.

The body of the book is excellent and most satisfying. Not that one does not wish there was more, much more. It is

a description of the origin and present extent of workers' education, and it is good. It is a thing which is very rare—a piece of fine scholarship. The Pauls have read a lot and collected and digested a vast mass of material. One does not bother to correct errors in ordinary books (there are too many) but, in the case of so valuable a book as this I venture to point out two slips. One (on page 35) that to describe a paper of the year 1832 as "Chartist" is a howler. (I know Max Beer does too, but he is wrong). Two, that the Plebs pamphlets have been left out of the bibliography.

I wish to emphasize again the valuable character of the book—its importance to every reader of *THE COMMUNIST*, and its general excellence. I do this because I must in the next paragraph make a violent attack on one chapter of the book, and I do not wish anyone to take this as a general attack on the book, or to use it as a pretext for not buying it.

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That this chapter was coming was to be feared as early as page 14, where the Pauls write "We offer a general apologia for tendency in science. We echo Bergson and say 'we do not aim generally at knowledge for the sake of knowledge . . .,' etc. We echo George Robey and say "Shurrup!" This unnecessary mystification casts a faint trail, like a wisp of mist, over the whole book. Elsewhere, they "conveyed a message in a little volume." They mean they wrote a book. They never indeed reach the heights of a previous book, with the unforgettable, unforgettable phrase ". . . as Bergson calls it, but the present writer prefers to call it an *artifact*."

But suddenly, in chapter 10, all the —isms and cussedness which they have repressed up to then burst out in one loud clamour. There rush out in a stream the names of all the psychologists and psychoanalysts they can think of. Exactly the same effect as this chapter gives can be produced by throwing a stone suddenly into a populated duckpond, or more easily by just listening to rooks settling down for the night. You can hear them caw: "Freud! Freud! Jung! Baudouin! Trotter! MacDougall! Keatinge! Ferrer! Faria! Ferrière! Tansley! Trotter! Baudouin! Baudouin! New Psychology! New Pedagogy! Ego-Complex! Herd-Complex! Sex-Complex! We translated it! Caw! Caw!"

Really, this is no exaggeration. The whole chapter is just a hurried recapitulation of names and fag-ends of theories, hardly connected at all. At one point they get so far back to their subject as to identify arbitrarily class-consciousness with the herd instinct (p. 130) but at that moment (if I may continue my metaphor) one of the rooks found a worm (called Baudouin) and in the clamour necessitated by the discovery the beginning of understanding disappeared.

The object of the Pauls in writing this chapter is to attach the "New Psychology" and "New Pedagogy" in which they are interested, to the workers' educational movement. But in fact they are not vitally connected. The N.P. and N.P. (I cannot write them out in full each time) may be all true or all rubbish, or mixed, but the workers' educational movement would exist without them. I claim to be as good a Pleb (or proletculturist as they call it) as the Pauls, and I will NOT go about with this particular tin can attached to my tail. The N.P. and N.P. are matters for discussion: Plebs education is certainly right. We must not spoil a good case by dragging in doubtful elements.

Meanwhile, while Eden is settling down with his last sleepy croak, I repeat that the book as a whole is very good.

## LIFE IN ANCIENT BRITAIN

By R. W. POSTGATE

*Life in Ancient Britdn. By Norman Ault. Longmans Green. Limp cloth, 5s.*

BOOKS that are good are very difficult to review. One has either to reproduce, inefficiently and dully, a few of the arguments or statements made by the author, or merely to write down vague mutterings of praise. To

hand on to the reader of the review the feeling that he should be a reader of the book is very difficult. Picking holes is much easier and greater fun.

Mr. Ault's book is described on the title page as "A survey of the Social and Economic development of the People of England from the earliest times to the Roman Conquest." Observe every word of that. "Social and economic . . . the people of England." Here, if it fulfils the promise of its title, is a book for us. It should—maybe it has—cause something of a sensation in Plebs and Communist study circles. Certainly, it should be pressed as a text book on circles which are feeling a little fed up with Dietzgen.

It is astonishing, one feels after reading these 260 closely printed and well illustrated pages, that so much is known of the ancient Britons, from the Paleolithic age onwards. Mr. Ault shows us the regular daily life, and even a glimpse of the probable social organisation, of our predecessors for thousands of years. More information is wanted, of course, but the picture is remarkably full and vivid. When we think of the many histories of later England which chronicle little but the exploits of the Famous Duke of York and people like him, we seemed well served by Ault for these dark periods. Many, too, of our most cherished illusions have been destroyed, it appears. Even the blue paint or woad on our ancestors' is only a story.

The writer, perhaps, has a tendency to praise his early men too much, and defend them too heatedly. Yet that is a good fault, for it enables him to enter imaginatively into their life, and his narrative suddenly becomes most vivid. In two places in his book he writes matter that fixes itself permanently in one's mind. The first, where he supposes an early Paleolithic man coming suddenly upon a late Paleolithic cave. The differences he observes, and his astonishment culminating in sheer terror—it is a clever piece of writing. The second is hardly imagination—the ghastly story of the fate of the Bronze Age family which lived in the Heathery Burn Cave.

Such stories may not be countenanced in the best circles, and professors may wag their long beards over them, but they make history good reading, and impress truths which twenty long words would not. One closes Ault's book with reluctance, regretting that he stopped at the Roman conquest. We must look up Haverfield's *Romanization of Roman Britain*. Ault's serial is too interesting for us to stop like that.

## A BAD PAMPHLET

*The Lesson of Black Friday. By Gerald Gould. Labour Publishing Company. 1s.*

THIS pamphlet is so badly written (or dictated?) that there is really very little to say about it. In all its forty pages there is matter for a *Daily Herald* leader—no more. Apparently the idea of the pamphlet is meant to convey that Black Friday was not due to individual treachery but to faults of trade union organisation. On this subject of organisation Mr. Gould imagines he has something to say, but this is not so.

R.W.P.

## A Better Pamphlet

*Trades Unionism. W. McLaine. 3d. Assurance Agents' Press, 132, Gt. Ancoats Street, Manchester. On sale also at 16, King Street, W.C.2.*

THIS little pamphlet is a reprint of a series of articles written by McLaine for that extremely go-ahead Trade Union Journal, *The Assurance Agents' Chronicle*. It describes the rise and development of the Trade Union movement in this country, and deals with some recent phases of capitalist development, emphasising the need for new tactics to meet those developments. For those who have not the time or the money to enable them to read through the large histories of the movement, we can say that a study of this little work will put them in possession of the general lines of Trade Union growth. It will be particularly useful to class students. It is certainly well worth the price asked for it.

I. X. N.