

# Antiquity

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## Editorial Notes

IT is the aim of these Notes to state that ' which oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed ', and to judge by the letters received our last Notes seem to some extent at least to have achieved their purpose. Several readers wrote expressing satisfaction, and only one to protest. The subject is important enough to justify further discussion.



We criticized the attitude of the British Government and Universities to archaeology and history (and also, parenthetically, to some other subjects outside our province). We deplored the narrow outlook of the average educated person, and cited as evidence the weekly culture-content of the *New Statesman and Nation*. We put the blame on an educational system which ignores or under-values vast tracts of knowledge, and makes little or no use of the work of those who are creating it.



What, in our own subject, are the major achievements of the last few decades? How, and in what directions, have archaeologists enlarged the view of man and his past? By their spade-work in the East they have discovered the origins of civilization, of urban life, and of many of the arts, including writing. (All this has been set down in language that all can understand by Professor Gordon Childe in his books, especially in *Man Makes Himself* and *What happened in History*). They have shown that civilizations rose and fell, and that religions which lasted longer than any modern ones and were accepted as true by millions of people vanished as completely as the societies which made them. They have unearthed (at Ras Shamra) an epic poem which throws a flood of light upon the early religions of Syria and Palestine, including Judaism and Christianity. They have rediscovered lost languages and found the clues by which to translate them. By spade-work alone they have reconstructed a picture of the society which produced the poems of Homer and the literature of the Old Testament. In Crete and India they have brought to light civilizations whose very existence had been forgotten, which lasted as long as ours or longer and then vanished. In our own island they have revealed more than 2000 years of prehistory, and made it possible to describe in some detail the four centuries of Roman occupation, about which history tells us almost nothing. The descriptions have been written by horny-handed archaeologists such as Haverfield, Macdonald, Collingwood, Wheeler and Richmond, in books and articles many of which are themselves masterpieces of literary style.

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Many of these enlargements of world history have been made by British archaeologists, financed not by the Government or by the Universities but by private societies and individuals, and sometimes (as in Crete and Egypt) by the excavators themselves. British archaeologists have also been responsible for the chief technical advancements in excavation, and for such wholly new instruments of research as air-photography and the use of distribution-maps. The equally important techniques of tree-ring study (dendrochronology), pollen-analysis and clay-varves were invented by American, Danish and Swedish archaeologists respectively; and German, Swiss and Scandinavian archaeologists have long led the world in the art of museum exhibition. One of the chief refinements of excavation technique (the detection of post-holes) has been elaborated by a German archaeologist whose name will always be associated therewith, though he would not claim to have been the first to use it. Readers of ANTIQUITY have been kept regularly informed of all these advances.



It goes without saying that similar progress has been made in other branches of knowledge (such as, for instance, astronomy, biology, meteorology and geology) which, though beyond the scope of ANTIQUITY, should come well within the purview of a weekly journal that has a cultural section. We say 'cultural' because it is the chief ground of our criticism that space which, in our opinion, should be given to culture generally, has become the stamping-ground of a literary clique. It is not literary people so called but those who are advancing the bounds of knowledge who are the creative artists of today. It is they who have something to tell the world that it did not know before, and they are doing so to the best of their ability. Some of them tell it in better English than many professional writers; but whether they tell it well or ill, their story is alive with the spirit of research, and they write with inward conviction. When therefore our protesting correspondent contrasts 'creative writers' with 'scholars' and objects to the 'anti-intellectual tone' of our last Notes, we can afford to smile at his naive ignorance. By what right can these literary gents claim the monopoly of creative writing? Are historians, then, not creative writers though they recreate the past instead of inventing it? Are not the works of the scholar-archaeologists we cited above as much entitled to be called 'creative' as those of some third-rate novelist or minor poet? Is not the discovery of new knowledge and its synthesis in books creative work of the first order? Of course it is; but no echo of it all seems ever to reach Great Turnstile.



Let no one confuse the issue by accusing us of attacking good literature, which we enjoy as much as anyone else. To do so would be ridiculous and rightly bring us into contempt. We are merely protesting against the narrow-mindedness of a literary clique, and their pretentious claim to a monopoly of culture. This attitude is an insular survival of pre-Darwinian Times, and is not found in other countries which have progressively integrated the elements of their culture. The cultural sections of papers published (for instance) in Switzerland are not exclusively, or even predominantly, 'literary', but cover a wide range of knowledge. As an example of this narrow outlook we would cite an article published in the *New Statesman* soon after the war ended. The writer was reporting on a visit to Germany after years of bombing. But it did not occur to him to tell us what had happened to any of those once famous museums in which so

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much of the world's culture was stored. He could so easily have found out what really happened to the treasures of the Berlin Museums, and especially to the Pergamon altar and the Ishtar gate (see *ANTIQUITY* VI, 1932, 60-70)—did they survive the bombing only to be carried off (with much else) as loot by the soldiers of the U.S.S.R., as we were told in Switzerland? But either he didn't think we should be interested in museums or (more probably) had never heard of them.



The real trouble with archaeologists, of course, is that they are of the earth, earthy, savouring of manual labour. Some are even said to do their own digging. In India one of them once broke every taboo and used a trowel, thus simultaneously letting down the side, the old school and the officer caste, and shocking an unknown number of caste-ridden Indians. Not for such are the Ivory Towers or meditations on the Meaning of Existence. They do not understand that culture can only exist in a vacuum, and that form comes before content. ('The most beautiful books are those with the least matter', wrote Flaubert, whose ideal was to write a book 'about nothing'). They believe in the unity of theory and practice and write about what they have done. Their views on the 'literary' racket are usually given in a few well chosen, but unprintable, words.



Though we may criticize individuals and groups, they are after all the victims of a civilisation which is in its second childhood and has lost all faith in itself. But some of those who know most about human history have not lost faith in humanity. Their outlook is perforce a world outlook, oriented to the future, and inspired, consciously or unconsciously, by a belief in world unity. Just as national history formed the background of national culture, so will the history of mankind form the background of world culture. It will then no longer be necessary for anyone to live in Ivory Towers.



**PERSONAL NOTE.** Mr O. G. S. Crawford has retired from the Ordnance Survey, and has been succeeded as Archaeology Officer there by Mr C. W. Phillips. Mr Crawford asks that readers who have occasion to write about matters of topography should in future address their letters to his successor (Ordnance Survey Office, Chessington, Surrey) and not to him.