Books of the Day

The Remnants of English Husbandry

Country Relics. By H. J. Massingham. Illustrated by Thomas Hennell. (Cambridge University Press. 15s.)

FIVE years ago Mr. Thomas Hennell collected and published a record of rural industry, *Change in the Farm,* in which he gathered together some notes on various decayed or decaying crafts in English husbandry. For charm, simplicity and careful authority this book, illustrated by some extremely good pencil-drawings by the author himself, has not been superseded. In dealing with the decay of English rural crafts and craftsmen Mr. Hennell showed no signs of sentimentalism or anger, though his regret was no less real for all that, and the concluding sentences of the book were typically devoted to a sound discourse on mole-catching instead of a peroration. Wisely, Mr. Hennell never preached, issued no propaganda, and was content to let the material speak for itself: with the result that the book remains a classic, inexhaustive though Mr. Hennell's researches were.

He has now collaborated with Mr. H. J. Massingham—he doing the drawings and Mr. Massingham the text—in a more comprehensive book on the same subject. Mr. Massingham's methods of compilation and research were governed by a long illness, which prevented his leaving his door for the countryside and which forced him to bring the countryside to his door, a problem he solved by building in his orchard a thatched summer house, calling it the Hermitage, after Gilbert White, who wrote to his nephew Samuel Barker in 1776 "We have built a new Hermitage, a plain cot: but it has none of the fancy and rude ornament that recommended the former to people of taste." This Hermitage Mr. Massingham gradually turned into a rural museum, bringing together under its thatch, characteristically embellished by a straw spinning-wheel, a collection of obsolete or obsolescent country implements which he had saved from destruction. This collection reads in part like a dictionary of obscure slang: biddle, jad, fromard, topper, plume, mullen, seed-lips, costrels, pleam, break, muller, and contains in all just under a hundred and fifty items. Round these objects, their original uses, their owners and the stories of their owners, *Country Relics* has been written.

The book, as a record, is more ambitious than *Change in the Farm,* which never attempted any assessment of crafts such as lace-making, glovering, basket-work, and quarrying: on the last of which Mr. Massingham has done an excellent chapter. It is also, and I think unfortunately, deliberately provocative. Mr. Massingham comes out with the chip of handicrafts-versus-machines on one shoulder, and the chip of scientific farming on the other. He begins with a rather high-flown appeal to "assist in conserving the remnants of what we have lost before it is too late," and ends with a sermon on rural regeneration. The book would have been better without either and without the many similar digressions which, like stinging nettles, irritate the reader from chapter to chapter. In another book Mr. Massingham confesses:

> "Once, I went with the majority which here offers a descriptive and topographical account of certain characters of the English landscape from the point of view of the detached, unappreciative, aesthetic connoisseur. Now I belong to the minority which considers the English rural scene as made with hands and, therefore, that the canvas is incomplete unless the painter be taken with the picture."

As a convert to this minority Mr. Massingham seems too exuberant. There is no more enthusiastic champion of the lost country craft in England than he is; yet throughout his whole book I can find no single mention of the Rural Industries Bureau, that comparatively obscure, hard-working, semi-Government Department which has striven so hard to accomplish just that economic and artistic survival of country handicrafts for which Mr. Massingham pleads, and there is no sign that he has ever heard of it. The bureau has long struggled to preserve tradition in handicrafts by the careful introduction to the craftsman of better methods of design and work. The saving of many a rural blacksmith by the introduction of oxy-acetylene welding and new but traditionally inspired designs is one of its most successful cases; the resurrection and rejuvenation of the art of quilting, with all its traditional Tudor designs untouched, is another. Mr. Massingham himself feels a similar laudable aspiration towards the resuscitation of country craftsmen, their crafts and the land of which they are so much a part; and he is angry at the deplorable decay into which the countryside generally is falling. Yet the best he can do, for some reason, is to argue that bureaucratic expenditure on roads is to blame for the present poverty of the land, or is, at any rate, a contributory scandal:

> "More gold falls on these roads in a year than rain from the skies. Staggering sums are spent in the interests of motor traffic, but even from this point of view the policy is crazed."

I find this argument, besides being in the more liverish letters-to-the-editor style, very much beside the point. Its peevishness does not suit Mr. Massingham, who is not a happy propagandist, but who in all other respects has done his job of research and recording excellently. His detailed and enthusiastic pages on hedging and thatching, sowing and basket-making, threshing and ploughing, sheep-shearing and reaping, are all rich with uncommon fact, humanity and colour. On only one point of fact would I violently disagree with him. This is his astounding statement (p. 160) that "in the next county, Bedfordshire, pillow-lace had died out in 1803"; on which I could produce family evidence alone that Mr. Massingham is just about a century and a quarter wrong, and indeed evidence that Bedfordshire produces pillow-lace today. For the rest, this book will find a secure place side by side with *Change in the Farm,* to whose author Mr. Massingham, like us, owes a very considerable debt of gratitude for some enchanting illustrations. H. E. BATES.

Prologue to Drama

Undeclared War. By Elizabeth Wiskemann. (Constable. 12s.)

IF tragedy is the conflict between right and right, this War is no tragedy, for it is a conflict between right and wrong. Should any be tempted to think since war began that the foes of Hitlerism have over-stated both their own rightness and the wickedness of the Nazi system, they will do well to read Miss Wiskemann's admirable study of the undeclared war which Nazi Germany was waging before war was declared. Her whole book was written by the end of July. Very wisely she has not attempted to bring it up to date. Thus it stands as a document, a record uninfluenced by the War itself. There is no better proof of her painstaking accuracy, or of the insight which it served, than the fact that her conclusions can be read in the light of war as though they had been reached since last September.

Her earlier work, *Czechs and Germans,* was and is the best exposition in English of the Bohemian problem that was mishandled in September, 1938, and fatally misjudged at Munich. Her *Undeclared War* deals more summarily with Hungary, Roumania, the Southern Slavs, the Poles, Ukrainians and Balts, as well as with Scandinavia and Switzerland. Here and there some detail may need amplification, some adjective a little toning down. But, on the whole and as a whole, this books merits only praise. By publishing it unchanged Miss Wiskemann has rendered a service to all who may need, as the war goes on, a reminder of how things stood before it began. She has set up a "point of co-ordination."

More than one passage has now acquired rare irony. The forced migration of the Baltic Germans into the Third Reich, which intends to settle them in partitioned Poland and elsewhere, has added a pungent footnote to her description of Nazi influence among these people. She writes:

> In districts adjacent to Germany, like Danzig and Memel, the Nazis were helped first by their good fortune and skill in abolishing unemployment, the news of which made a good impression; and, secondly, by the intimidation they were able to practise. In districts farther away from the Reich, in Esthonia, or in Latvia, where some 60,000 Germans lived mostly in Riga, the Germans did not hear so much of the disagreeable discipline imposed in the Reich, but were readier to accept romantic accounts of how splendid everything had become, and particularly enjoyed the idea that they themselves constituted, not a dissident minority in a tiny State, but the advance posts of a mighty Empire, and that, as such, they had a claim to hitherto unformulated privilege.

We may well wonder what these people are thinking today. Are they still beglamoured or have they found Hitler out—as some of our own Ministers tardily found him out? Nowhere does Miss Wiskemann speak more truly than in those pages of her "Conclusion," in which she analyses the Nazi technique. In the pre-Munich days, she says, those who doubted Henlein's