The Case Against Wallace

HENRY WALLACE—THE MAN AND THE MYTH. By Dwight Macdonald. The Vanguard Press. $2.50.

This timely but formless little book reads like a publisher’s inspiration gone wrong. Much of it appeared in the form of articles in Dwight Macdonald’s magazine, Politics, and when the Progressive Citizens of America decided to make the third-party plunge, it was inevitable that a publisher should want to throw these pieces between book covers, with the quick addition of a little fresh material, a new conclusion, and some miscellaneous scraps by way of an appendix, a postscript, and some “close-ups.” The net result is a blast of buck-shot, some of it painfully wide of the mark but a good deal of it even more painfully lodged in the hide of Henry Wallace.

Major party campaigners will find the volume a handy compendium of those rash observations that Wallace makes so readily and the next day tries so earnestly to explain or disclaim. A number of these gems dug up by Macdonald pour a revealing light on the third-party crusader. The Munich pact, for example, struck him as a “blessing” to the American farmer, who would be spared the maladjustments of war. As late as 1940 he could write that “even if Germany wins, there is nothing wrong about trading with a German-controlled Europe after the war, so long as we conduct that trade in a way which strengthens our American way of life and our national security.” And once we were at war, he seems to have been no more concerned about our aims or post-war plans than General Patton. “That’s not a thing an executive should be thinking about these days,” he is quoted as saying. “It’s like a boy in the middle of a football game letting the dance that night take his mind off playing.” a widely held concept for which we are now paying a heavy price.

Since this “football game” there have been a profusion of ill-considered statements, and Macdonald knows how to make the most of them. “For the peace and prosperity of the world,” Wallace told a social gathering of newspaper people, “it is more important for the public to know the liberal truth than the reactionary truth. Perhaps some day all of us will be strong enough to stand the real truth.” It was perhaps this same concept of “liberal truth” that caused him to rhapsodize about Soviet Asia before setting out on his journey of discovery in that region of the world. He subsequently compared Siberia with the American frontier of the last century, making the point that “men born in wide free spaces will not brook injustice” and “will not even temporarily live in slavery,” though, Macdonald points out, the Stalin regime has in two decades sent more prisoners into Siberian slavery than the czars did in sixty-four years, and practically all of them for political reasons.

Even more telling for the purpose of the coming campaign are Wallace’s political comments over the past year. Until the Russians turned down the Marshall Plan, Wallace hailed it as “what I have been advocating right along.” Asked his position on the Truman Administration in January, 1947, four months after his departure from the government, he remarked that two events seemed to him “to strengthen the position of the Administration very materially”—the President’s economic report to Congress and the appointment of George Marshall as Secretary of State. And even on his famous tour of Europe he told an American audience in Paris that his differences with President Truman were “not very great,” though he had been conveying a rather different impression to strictly foreign audiences, an adaptability which Macdonald shows to be highly developed in Mr. Wallace.

There is a great deal of effective ammunition of this sort, and some still more potent shot in the account of Wallace’s relations with Roosevelt. Wallace followers who are given to invoking that magic name the better to heap scorn on Harry Truman are reminded of how Roosevelt ruthlessly fired Wallace from the Board of Economic Warfare and replaced him with Leo Crowley, a utilities magnate of rather lower standing in progressive circles than any of Harry Truman’s admittedly vulnerable appointees.

It is good to have these matters spread on the record, and it is good to have Mr. Macdonald’s entertaining and persuasive probing of the mind of Henry Wallace, “an attractive and even admirable person” of “decent instincts and intellectual ability who has been perverted by political life.” Macdonald’s Wallace is divided against himself, by turns “a cold fish” as “sudden and low-spirited as Hoover” and again “wildly exhilarated, often with arm thrown high to an unseen crowd.” He is a “Man of Paper, emotionally feeding on paper phrases” and yet longing for the tactile satisfactions of the farm and the laboratory.

While Macdonald’s book is more than a cut above the usual campaign document, it misses being a definitive study by a good deal. It is hasty, padded, and sometimes remarkably careless for a journalist of his caliber. For example, David Kauf is introduced as a Wallace associate who took “a forty-six-thousand-dollar job in OWL,” thereby becoming “one Common Man [who] seems to have found his Century.” The epigram is bright, but surely Macdonald should know that $46,000 is more than the combined salaries of the Secretary of State and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Nor is the book improved by the inclusion of strained and far-fetched matters that suggest the prosecutor rather than the analyst. Wallace is berated for having allowed himself to be played occasionally while presiding in the Senate during a filibuster on the poll-tax bill, the theory being that had he stayed in the chair, “sleeping there if necessary,” he might have dramatized the issue or taken advantage of parliamentary opportunities to end the filibuster. The charge is repeatedly made that Wallace has never willingly separated himself from power or the source of power; yet Macdonald, citing Wallace’s testimony before the
Senate committee that was to pass on his nomination as Secretary of Commerce, gives him no credit for an uncompro-
mising pledge to use his powers to im-
plement the President's "economic bill of rights"—a proposition that could not conceivably increase his chance of con-
firmation. The author admits that the
"Zenda" letters "were probably for-
geries," but he gives more than three pages to them on the ground that "they did not clash with the spirit of much that Wallace had indubitably written." And he is not beyond some rather weird theorizing of his own, such as the link-
ing of Wallace, Upton Sinclair, and Bernard Shaw to show a possible con-
nection between health faddism and a leftist political orientation "highly un-
critical of Stalinism." Both indicate a
"shallow rationalism which is insensi-
tive to human values." But in spite of
these forced flights of fancy and a
pretty clear stacking of the case, there
is enough explosive matter in the book
to blow many a dreamy "progressive"
out of the ranks of the third party.
ROBERT BENNINGER

The British Story

ENGLAND: A HISTORY OF THE

IT IS misleading to label this book
"England" for the United States, denoting the British title to subtitle. The author is a Scottish professor who
rather overdoes filial piety in the space
devoted to his part of the island. Surely
this was a chance to break the publishers' taboos which is based upon alleged
American resentment of the adjective in
Great Britain.

Professor Hamilton is a missionary of history. His creed rests on the script-
tures of the best historical studies, but
the form of his sermon is his own, and
he gives the reader ample advertisement of what to expect by his evangelical in-
troduction. He will display "the past as
balance sheet of man's increasing com-
mand over nature by advancing know-
ledge and new social technique emerging
from the multitudinous activities of
practical life" (p. 11); emphasize "our
debt to men and women of different
social origins and of other nations"
(p. 13); and illustrate his belief "that
history can furnish us with rational
grounds for hope in the future of the
human experiment" (p. 19).

He aims to do this by breaking events
up into five parts comprising some
twenty-two chapter subjects, most of
which run roughly from the Middle
Ages to now. His internationalism
requires the inclusion of short histories
of the United States, the Common-
wealth, and the Empire, as well as of
other parts of the world when their
history interlocks with Great Britain's.
He provides over a hundred excellent
illustrations, five graphic maps (but
none of England!), and twenty-four
time charts made by J. F. Horrabin,
which furnish visual patterns of the
interrelated events within the various
subject categories.

While Hamilton the social historian
cannot begin to compete with G. M.
Trevelyan or G. M. Young as a writer, he
sticks closer to the majority of the
people than Trevelyan ever gets, and
unlike Young he is matter-of-fact and
substantial for those who want to learn
instead of tantalizingly allusive for the
initiated. He is particularly good in Parts
I and II, Our Needs and Our Work, be-
cause he conveys by fresh, well-chosen
evidence an intimate sense of how the
people have labored and lived. In Parts
II and III, Human Relations and Other
Human Beings, the eight separate essays,
on such things as The Specialist, Com-
munications, and Economic Imperialism,
while welcome and frequently unusual,
simply break out of their embracing
classifications. Gradually the technical
difficulties implicit in the book's method
begin to emerge. They really come home
to roost in Part V, Our Institutions,
where the author seems to tire and be
defeated by the problem of saying the
necessary without some repetition and
a lot of uncongenial new matter.

In other words, there are powerful
limitations to this kind of history. It is
all very well to start out determined to
have nothing to do with history as "past
politics," but if the British people have
been persistently conscious for one
kind of behavior down to the general
election of 1945, that has been political.
Hamilton writes about political democ-
racry as if it were something to be denied
or turned on like tap water by the rul-
ing oligarchy, whereas it had to be pain-
fully learned by the people in the Trades
Union Congress as well as in national
politics over two, perhaps three, gen-
erations. Or take the politics of empire.
Hamilton's readers are not taught to un-
derstand the imperialism which was
merely strategic—in protection of com-
merce—or the anti-imperialism concern-
ing colonies judged capable of self-
government which characterized both
British political parties for at least thirty
years of the nineteenth century.

Finally it seems odd to read a socially
conscious account of the industrializa-
tion of Great Britain without mention
of Burns or Blake; indeed, the almost
complete omission of letters and the
arts must be regarded as injurious. Con-
ceivably the general populace may not
have partaken of these insights directly,
but many artists sprang from the people,
and the greatest artists were those whose
genius distilled lasting, often prophetic
essence from the circumstances of their
times. This volume, therefore, is ex-
cellent social, not political, economy
and good prose positivism without much
poetic insight or imagination.

J. B. BRENNER

Uncorrupted Pragmatist

ANDRE GIDE. By Van Meter Ames.
The Makers of Modern Literature.
New Directions. $2.

A NDRÉ GIDE'S first aims have cer-
tainly been those of a poet: to dis-
cover and define the self, to record a
pilgrimage, to convey life and nerve
through style. But he has also wanted to
teach—that is, to demoralize and cor-
rupt, to disturb all binding complacen-
cies. He has therefore always hoped for
young and uninstructed readers: corrup-
tio optimae optima. And he has always
wanted the critical study of his work to
become a debate—an act of understand-
ing but also of youthful resistance.

The role of the demoralizer is not al-
ways appreciated, however, especially if
the devil be a saint. Most of Gide's
French critics have been Catholics
and/or traditionalists, pious tradition-
alis or Catholics on pragmatic grounds.
Firmly rooted, these men have merely
recorded and condemned Gide's drift-
ings past and away from their own
fixed points and fidelities. A few others,
recognizing the peculiar savor of this
lost soul, have tried to assimilate Gide
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