
“The Wonderful Century”

Its Successes and its Failures. By Alfred Russell Wallace. Dodd, Mead & Co.

THE attention which is given to the approaching end of the nineteenth century deserves to be ranked as one of the most interesting features of that vanishing age. We all know full well that this term of a hundred years has no logical or actual significance. It is a mere accident that it happens nearly to coincide with the utmost term of human life. It has no relation to the great series of human events which gives us such true divisions of history as those afforded by the Renaissance or the so-called French Revolution. We must find the explanation of this last expression of the centennial motive in the desire of men to take account of the work of their kind, to rejoice in its successes, and, let us hope, to face its failures.

The task, at once agreeable and unpleasant, of facing the truth of men's doings in the last ten decades, the author bravely sets about. In the first division of his book, in all less than half of the text, he gives an admirable, well-rationalized résumé of the successes that have been won in the nature of invention and discovery. It need not be said that the account is uneven and incomplete. No man has the range and scope to do it otherwise. There is nothing about the advance in the methods of correction in the social order, or in the sympathies which are sure to be reckoned in the times to come as among the gains of our own. Still, in all the like books that have come, or are on their way, it is doubtful if the story of the good deeds of this time has been or will be so well told. Good as is the presentation which the author makes of the credit side of the century's account, it is evident that he felt it to be but the prelude for the reckoning he has set down against it. It is indeed a curious array of sins of omission and commission which, in his judgment, the weary century has to bear. First of these, as he lists them, is its neglect of phrenology, which he regards as a well-established branch of physiological anatomy, one of the utmost value to men. He fails to show how it has come about that in a time when men were never so eager to profit by any knowledge that personally concerned them, a body of learning such as he believes this to be, one that offended no faith and ran counter to no ancient tenets of any kind, should have fallen into such contemptuous neglect. So, too, he fails to see how utterly unreasonable is the classification of faculties on which the determinations of phrenology are made to rest. If this abandonment of a once popular notion that failed to show itself well founded is to be the foremost charge against this century, we may surely go lightheartedly into the next.

The second iniquity is “the opposition to hypnotism and psychical research.” The author claims that we have in this realm a vast area that we should have brought into profitable culture, but which we have left untilled, and it is expressly charged that the use of

the mesmeric sleep in surgical operations has been neglected ; though by this simple means it would be possible to ensure insensibility to pain with no risk of ill consequences from the anesthetic agent. Here again the advocate for things as they are may make answer that this century has dealt with the claims of the witch and the wizard in a much more generous way than did its predecessors. They have been given a fair chance to prove the truth of their claims, and have failed to make them good. Whatever verity there may be behind the vast body of fraud that psychic research has disclosed, and there appear to be some grains of truth in that mass of fraud, nothing of measurable value has yet been disclosed. Surely, inquirers are justified in their conclusion that these fields are not likely to give a fair return for the labor that may be devoted to their tillage.

It is against the process of vaccination that our artist makes his third and most persistent assault. In this effort of protective medicine he sees more than absolute folly, for the reason that it not only affords no protection, but is in itself an agent of disease. Moreover, he revolts against the tyranny of the law which requires the individual to submit himself and his progeny to the process. The array of statements going to show the futility of vaccination, which are set forth in this chapter, may well arrest the attention of the general public. From the evident heat with which the matter is treated the reader is led to believe that there is much else to be heard before there is fair ground for judgment. It is, however, clear that when a writer of such authority sets forth such apparent evidence of national blundering, his statements demand earnest consideration. They require immediate action—either refutation of the argument or repeal of the laws that require vaccination.

It is in the denunciation of the appalling poverty of the lower class of our great cities that the author shows at his best, though in the remedies he proposes he is most open to criticism. These remedies, at least in the case of England, should, in his opinion, be two. First, to meet the immediate hunger, he would confiscate the revenues of the rich in so far as they rise above fifty thousand pounds a year. This sum, which he reckons at a total of millions, should be turned into bread, the loaves to be given out to all those who urged the need. For the more permanent cure he would, by a like use of public money, proceed to found self-supporting coöperative colonies. To the immediate objection, which he foresees, that the proposed dole would tend to pauperize men, his answer is brief, beginning with the statement, "This first objection is absurd, because the effect of this free bread would be to check and almost abolish pauperization." It is hardly to be believed that there is no reference to the failures which have been met in practically all the experiments of colonial coöperation when there has not been a firm bond of religion to unite its members. Although we may regret that an illustrious man of science has failed to deal with these questions in the truly learned way, we cannot but regard the lofty motive which animates him as in itself the best evidence that the grave and ancient problem goes forward to the next century with more hope for its solution than came with it from the centuries before.

The last chapters are devoted to "militarism—the curse of civilization," to "the demon of greed," and to the "plunder of the earth." Here, too, is much that will quicken the sympathy of the reader and make him long for an overlong life that he may see the end of many ills.

The book is defaced, as far as so good a book can be, by multitudinous poetical quotations, which are gathered about the beginnings and ends of the chapters. I. H. Dell, Sir Lewis Morris, T. L. Harris, and A. H. Burne there shine along with Shelley and Emerson in strange constellations!
