Blaðaúrklippur

Bjarni Benediktsson – Stjórnmál – Utanríkisráðherra – Utanríkismál – Blaðagreinar – What on Earth happened – NATO's cheerful Beginning – The Flavor and Fragrance of the East - 1952

Tekið af vef Borgarskjalasafnsins

bjarnibenediktsson.is

Einkaskjalasafn nr. 360
Stjórnmálamaðurinn
Askja 2-12, Örk 3

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The Flavor and Fragrance of the East

INVITATION TO AN EASTERN FEAST. By Austin-Coates. Illustrated. 270 pp. New York: Harper & Bros. $4.

By WILLIAM O. DOUGLAS

TO one who knows Asia and loves it, this book is a feast. Every page brings back a personal experience — a flavor, a fragrance, a noise, or perhaps a scowl or a smile out of one's own memory. The reason is that this book deals with cooking and eating, dining and conversation, hotel life and family life, bazaars and temples, marriage and death, clothing and diet, beggars and priests, religions and folkways of Asia.

The main countries covered are India, Burma and China. There are also glimpses of Java, where Indian culture has survived to this day in an alien land against all forces. The book also makes some excursions into Singapore, Hongkong and Macao. But they are incidental.

The West long dominated the politics of Asia by gunboats and commercial empires. The West little understood the forces at work there. A bit of this book is, therefore, almost an inquest on the West's relationship to Asia. The China chapters especially tell the story of the decline of militaristic republicanism and the victory of Communist banditry. That, however, is incidental. The theme of the book is social, not political. It is a series of personal experiences in homes, in shops, in tea houses—each illustrating some aspect of the national character of the people being visited.

The author—a British official in Hongkong—is an astute observer, extremely sensitive to the nuances of life. What he has written has overtones that give to this collection of personal experiences a gloss on the entire nation being discussed. As I said, one who knows Asia will feel much nostalgia here. One who does not know Asia will get from this book a beginning of understanding that will make his first journey there unusually exciting. For the book does answer a few of the mysteries.

The gulf between East and West is due to all the differences one can mention — language, literature, religion, eating habits, costumes and the innumerable little things that make up family relations, habits of thought, religious outlook and the like. The way to span the gulf is to understand what those habits and attitudes are. That at least is part of it; and the book does help the Westerner to span it.

Some of the most interesting episodes concern food—its preparation, serving and eating. There are myths about curry powder and chutney; a lovely description of the eating of the juicy mango; pages on eating with spoons, eating with a chapati (a thin, unleavened pancake), eating with one's fingers, and a fascinating account of the function of rice in Indian food. The chapters on eating and cooling foods, on alcohol and tea, give insight into Indian character. The use of banana leaves for plates and clay pots for drinking throw light on the caste system. The whole caste system is put in new perspective for the Westerner by showing not only the vices it has in some of its aspects, but the essentially unifying influence it exerts on the nation as a whole.

The chapter on untouchability—the element of the caste system that Gandhi fought, the one that is outlawed by the Indian Constitution—is specially powerful. So are the chapters on India's dominant religion, its practices, the commercial atmosphere of the outer parts of the temples, the sanctity of the inner temple. These are eloquent bits of writing. The Indian material is, indeed, most revealing of the character of the people, their sensitive nature, their worldlessness, their great capacity for friendship. One of the most moving accounts is the arrangement for an Indian wedding—the selection of the groom and the first formal meeting of the couple. (In India, love is assumed to follow marriage, not to precede it.)

Photographs from "Invitation to an Eastern Feast."

A Bengali housewife prepares a holiday meal.

I have dwelt with the Indian material more than the rest, perhaps because it was to me the most interesting. But the Burma and China material is also illuminating, throwing shafts of light on many of the facets of those countries. One interesting phase of the Burmese episodes is the impact of Indian and Chinese civilization on that of Burma.

The book helps bring these people to life in their personal relations to the West. It makes a contribution to the undertaking necessary, if East and West are not only to live in peace but to become partners in the exciting adventures of peace.

One who goes to the East can travel it and live there for years and still never become a part of it, never once step behind the curtain that separates the two. The author of this book made the transition; and his account of it and how it emancipated him is a stirring account. At least it was a stirring account for me, perhaps because his transition came as a result of eating curds in a bazaar; mine, as a result of eating *poori* cooked on a station platform. It is usually some little thing like that that makes for the transition. Whatever it may be, it opens the door to a new community; and that is the beginning of understanding.

Justice Douglas of the Supreme Court has written several books about Asia, including "Strange Lands and Friendly People."

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What on Earth Happened?

MAN ON EARTH. By Jacquetta Hawkes. 242 pp. New York: Random House. $3.75.

By JOHN PFEIFFER

IN relatively recent times investigators have learned an enormous amount about man as a biological species and a builder of societies. Inevitably, our notions about human nature have changed. We still do not know enough to prevent crime, mental diseases or armament races. But the time is certainly ripe for an examination of the facts, for an effort to make sense of findings and theories gathered from many sciences. "Man on Earth" is the latest book to undertake this ambitious task, its purpose being no less than an "attempt to give an impression of what in fact has happened to our kind on earth."

Jacquetta Hawkes is an archaeologist and anthropologist by training. She has excavated at sites in Great Britain and Palestine and has written several books about prehistoric England. But in developing her ideas and interpretations she brings in evidence from other fields of research and creates a feeling for the continuity of life from the remote past to the present. Her story starts with the coming of backbones, which first appeared some four hundred million years ago in animals such as Jamoytius, a kind of fish which buried itself in sand when scared. "There are * * * many human beings alive today, both eminent and humble ones, whose approach to life is very similar."

Later fossil records indicate that nature rarely favors aggressors when the evolutionary chips are down. Tyrannosourus and other dinosaurs dominated things in their day only to give way to scampering, ratlike creatures, "little incubators of mind." These puny animals were the forerunners of higher forms, including ourselves.

The brain underwent a spectacular evolution over the ages. Miss Hawkes devotes a generally excellent chapter to this organ as a collection of suborgans developed in many different species, a kind of composite of simpler brains built into a structure of overwhelming complexity. The most advanced part of the human brain is its outer layer or cortex, a thin sheet of gray cells playing a major role in thinking and discovery. It was coming into its own during the times of Pithecanthropus. Our heavy boned, chinless ancestors had the rudiments of culture. They made crude chopping and cutting tools, learned to control fire and cook meat and gathered bright quartz crystals in a faint foreshadowing of art for art's sake.

A STEADY development is evident from such beginnings to some of the sophisticated problems and yearnings of more recent times. Wine, beer and other alcoholic potions came during the Stone Age, possibly to console born hunters for the freedom they lost in settling down to build villages and homes. With the invention of writing, nearly six thousand years ago, came an increased concern with ideas and abstractions. "Man on Earth" presents epic poetry from the civilizations of the Tigris and Euphrates valleys to indicate how the necessity and inevitability of death forced itself upon men's minds—and how the notions of imperialism and monotheism grew up at about the same time. Our current problems are traced to "scientific industrialism" and a tendency to analyze too much and overintellectualize.

Miss Hawkes' interesting and stimulating account succeeds in showing that the growth of ideas is part of the same continuing evolution that produced single-celled organisms and backbones. She writes with a poet's feeling for words (in fact, she has published a volume of poetry), although she strains too often and too hard for literary effects in spots where straightforward English would have served her purposes better. The author is also somewhat preoccupied with the fact that she is a woman and builds her preoccupation into a philosophical principle of sorts. The cerebrum of the brain seems essentially masculine to her, while the lower-lying thalamic centers represent femininity—a concept that will please neither brain investigators nor feminists.

Such notions do not intrude frequently enough to distract us from more solid and valid points. They certainly do not impede a basically sound line of reasoning, which leads to balanced conclusions such as the following: "No religion, no philosophical or scientific system claiming any absolute or exclusive knowledge of truth is proper to our condition as inmates of one speck in a universe the vastness and [illegible] of which even our [illegible] minds are beginning faint[illegible] apprehend."

Mr. Pfeiffer's most recent book in the field of science is "The Human Brain."

Photograph from "Man on Earth."

Pharaoh Akhenatan, 14th century B. C.

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Features

PUBLISHED BY
THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PUBLISHING SOCIETY

NATO's Cheerful Beginning

'An Intimate Message from Washington

Registered in U. S. Patent Office

By Richard L. Strout

There was a charming air of inappropriateness about the signing of the NATO pact here 10 years ago. The United States Marine Band string instrument section arrived in good time at 2:15 p.m., and after preliminary warblings and tootlings broke into a medley from George Gershwin including "It Ain't Necessarily So" and "I Got Plenty of Nuttin'." Whether by design or inadvertence, they also picked from "Porgy and Bess" the song "Bess, You Is My Woman Now," and eyes turned rather uncertainly to Mrs. Bess Truman.

Of the three principal foreign ministers there was tall, sad-looking Robert Schuman, looking as though he had stepped out of a cartoon of a French peasant from Le Rire; America's Dean Acheson, tall, aristocratic, distinguished, with a bristling red guardsman's moustache; and massive, solid "Ernie" Bevin, as substantial as a bag of Idaho potatoes.

America was having a love affair with Mr. Bevin. It delighted in the discovery that he not merely dropped "H's" but "G's" too, with rather spectacular results when they were in the same word. He seemed like a man a nation could tie to. Mr. Bevin, America fondly learned, began earning his own living at 11, rose to run the Transport Workers Union, and had then come to head British foreign policy in a cockney accent.

It was hard to keep one's eyes off Mr. Bevin as he sat there waiting to be introduced. When he read his speech he left a little pile of shredded aspirates behind the podium. His powerful figure seemed stretched sidewise like an image seen in an amusement park's distorting glass. Even in signing the document he displayed individuality, holding the pen between the second and third fingers of his square, practical hand.

It is queer how some of the most important events in history leave only the memories of trivialities! There was Bjarni Benediktsson, Foreign Minister of Iceland, for example. He was the youngest and huskiest of the delegates. Others of the dozen foreign ministers attempted eloquence of one sort or another, though they all said just about the same thing. But the young man from Iceland said, quite simply, that his little country couldn't defend itself, and couldn't have an army in the nature of things, and wanted Anglo-American protection. It was unassuming and touching.

After the speeches came the actual signing. Like the "I do" in the wedding ceremony this brought a sudden tension. Some 1,300 sat in the big departmental auditorium, banked with ferns and hydrangeas. The ceiling rose up two or three stories with appropriate fluted columns, rear gallery, and stage in front, where the signatures were affixed. Two crude wooden scaffoldings were erected halfway down the hall, one holding 10 motion-picture cameras, the other the still cameramen. Television was new then, but a couple of instruments had been set up, their red bulbs sucking in the scene like ferrets' eyes.

Each foreign minister followed by an ambassador walked down the three steps from the main stage onto a temporary stage, sat a minute at a long table, and signed his name. A thoughtful State Department clerk with a paper box full of pens handed one to each signer, then took it back, swabbed off the ink and returned it to the delegate. As each finished there was applause. It was as impressive as watching a young couple sign the mortgage for the new house.

The Italian ambassador thought the clerk was trying to get the pen away from him and wouldn't give it up to be wiped. A couple of delegates used their own fountain pens, but got free State Department pens anyway. Far off, preball-point day! Most signers tried their pens out on a blotter before using them.

The United States was last of all. With a genius for disrupting protocol President Truman, coming down the steps with Mr. Acheson, caught sight of Vice-President Barkley below him and practically handed him up onto the stage. There the brow[illegible] Barkley business suit contrasted with [illegible] diplomatic striped pants.

Well, that was the cheerful s[illegible] side the rush-hour crowd th[illegible] stitution Avenue in a cle[illegible] evening. The last of the s[illegible] the green leathery leaves of th[illegible]

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