

Reviews

New Zealand Letters of Thomas Arnold the Younger with further letters from Van Diemen's Land and Letters of Arthur Hugh Clough 1847-1851. Edited by James Bertram, University of Auckland and (London & Wellington) Oxford University Press, 1966. 257 pp. N.Z. price: \$7.80.

THERE are complicated things about this book merely as a published material object, as is apparent from the above heading, and there are complicated things about the assembly of its contents, and the publishers have really (I think) gone beyond the limit in fixing its retail price; but the reader, once he has got hold of it, need not be deterred. Professor Bertram has given us an excellent piece of work, well-assembled, tactfully annotated, with illuminating appendices on the Arnold family and Tom Arnold's other correspondents, and on some other matters; the illustrations are extremely good; and his introduction is worth reading for its own sake. Perhaps, if he were professionally a historian, he might have picked up one or two things for particular notice which do not strike the literary scholar; but the historian, who will jump on his own bits, can have little complaint. This reviewer, for example, who has spent some time on the history of the Colonial Office, is staggered at one passage, where young Mr Arnold, aged 23, double first at Oxford, and full of his social conscience, describes to his sister his 'uniform and simple' manner of life. It is the year 1847. 'I breakfast at half past 8, practise [at the violin or singing exercises] a little, and read or write, till a quarter past 11, when I go down to the office, generally through the Parks. I have my luncheon or rather dinner at 2. Soon after 5 I leave the office, and have a very enjoyable walk through the Green Park', etc. Young Mr Arnold is a précis writer in the Colonial Office, which the heroic James Stephen, now on the point of retirement, has so long and so hard tried to turn into an efficient organ of government, staffed by able, assiduous and public-spirited men—though he does not ask everybody to work, like himself, from 6 a.m. Mr Arnold, having reached the office, takes time off to write to his family and friends. It really begins to look as if some of the critics of the Colonial Office had a case. The young gentleman, however, finds this existence disagreeable. 'I shall remain here so long as I think honour and duty require', he writes to his friend Clough, 'that is, for such a time as those who placed me here must admit to be a fair trial; and then I shall go to New Zealand.' For his father, the great Dr Arnold of Rugby, had fallen victim to the blandishments of the New Zealand Company, and had invested in a couple of hundred acres in the Wellington settlement. It was these Wellington acres that Tom thought he would go out and farm, helping to build a new and better society, more worthy of an Early Victorian man of feeling and philanthropy, than the England of factories and crossing-sweepers and the Colonial Office. So we have his letters home.

They are not great letters because Arnold was not a great writer; they are not particularly perceptive or evocative; the young man might have double first class honours from Oxford, but he was not a first class brain—indeed, scrutinising carefully the frontispiece to this book, one is visited by the suspicion that he was a bit of a drip. They are, however, educated and interesting letters, and well worth reading. If not much light is cast on individual characters by such descriptions as 'a fine manly fellow', 'a very good fellow', 'jolly fellows', or even 'a conceited muff', at least the

totality does help to evoke a valuable picture of the New Zealand (and Tasmanian) life of the time. Undoubtedly born not to be a colonist—I cannot agree at all with Professor Bertram that he made ‘a good stab’ at farming, or with a few thousand pounds of capital might have been another Samuel Butler—so far as one can see with no practical ability whatever, in the ordinary sense, with no great push or combative power, at least he had principle as well as amiability, and could observe. He might, if conditions had been thoroughly favourable, have made a valuable schoolmaster. He did a little amateur bushwhacking, got a Maori and a ‘Sandwich islander from Tahiti’ to build a whare for him, bought a cow. ‘With this cow, supposing she turns out a good one, I shall manage to live very comfortably, for I shall grow my own wheat and vegetables, and as I shall not eat much meat, I shall have scarcely anything to buy in the way of provisions but tea and sugar and salt . . . My present notion is to try to get a boy and girl to live with me, keep the house in order, and look after the cow, etc.; I shall give them as much schooling as I could, and should treat them more as companions and helpers than as servants.’ Hopeless as the dear fellow (one falls into his own fashion of speech) must have been, one cannot help liking him. And after all, the flashing Julia Sorell would not have liked a mere drip. One cannot be surprised that after his abortive educational experience at Nelson he should have accepted the Tasmanian offer that turned him into an educational administrator and plunged him into years of ‘steady, exacting, and in the end genuinely constructive work’ (Professor Bertram’s words).

The book is useful beyond its New Zealand and Tasmanian interests. There are family letters to as well as from Arnold, and there are the Clough letters. If this sort of book can have a hero, then it is not Arnold but Clough who is the hero. The picture of the family circle and its connections is beguiling, in its way; how very Victorian, solid, British-upper-middle-class-academic, intellectually alive, affectionate, closely-bound, how hearth-and-home and best-element-in-English-life! And how extraordinarily the family was to be carried on, to, among others, the Huxleys, Julian and Aldous!

Clough is possibly the man who interests Professor Bertram the more. He is a poet, which Arnold is not, he is an intellectual (and how these Oxford men toss off their bits of Greek and Latin), he is a sceptical romantic, altogether a harder-headed as well as a more inspired person than his friend; but again, of no very effective force of character. They remind one very much, these men of the eighteen-forties, with their liberalism, distress over the condition of mankind, excitement at the European revolution, high souls, ability to talk, inability to get personally embroiled, of the left-wing intellectuals of the nineteen-thirties. Probably no one in the nineteen-thirties could have praised a friend, as Arnold praised Clough, by emphasising the purity of his soul. And the nineteen-thirties were not bound up in the tortured religious convolutions of the eighteen-forties. On the other hand, the eighteen-forties did not finish up with a world war to exercise their consciences with. Considering all that is in the book Professor Bertram gives us, one comes in the end to consider it a very good index to the Early Victorian age.

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