

THE SPECTATOR.

April 30, 1921.

BOOKS.

AMERICAN ERA.

By H. H. Powers. New York: The Macmillan Company. [7s. 6d. net.]

It is specially interesting just now to read the writings of American political thinkers, because we may learn from them the tendencies which are shaping the new relations of America with Europe. A study of these tendencies, which President Harding is bound to respect and by which he will therefore be guided, will tell us quite as much as we have yet learned from Mr. Harding himself. The most interesting of the political studies by Americans which we have read lately is *The American Era*, by Mr. H. H. Powers. No reader of this book will be left with any doubt that America is coming into much closer relations with Europe. A great many Englishmen assume that because the Covenant in the Peace Treaty has been repudiated by the American nation, America returns to her isolation. Nothing, in our opinion, could be further from the truth. America is coming in to some kind of association of nations—the only question is, On what terms?

Mr. Powers's interpretation of the war and its sequels is that the Anglo-Saxon idea, having triumphed, will set the tone for the whole world. He also believes that the real depository and expositor of this idea in future must be America. Britain, he thinks, in spite of her great geographical gains from the war—he considerably exaggerates these—has sung her swan song of leadership. Europe has lost the hegemony of the world. We cannot altogether agree with Mr. Powers's analysis. He represents the Kaiser as having tried, before it was too late, to prevent the preponderance of power passing from Europe to America. But surely it is a little hard upon Europe to be told that the Kaiser was its representative! We ought to explain that Mr. Powers considers that Britain reaped so many strategical advantages from the war that she would be not in a weaker but in a much stronger position than ever if only she could still be considered as a European power. He declares, however, that Britain has definitely sundered herself from Europe. He is surely mistaken. The war made every Englishman recognize, as he never did before, that the frontier of the British Isles is no longer the British coast, but a line somewhere in Flanders and France. More than a hundred years ago Napoleon said that armies congregated at the ports nearest to England were daggers aimed at our heart. That was an hallucination, but it is not an hallucination in these times of aircraft and very long-range guns.

Such points of disagreement, however, do not matter, because Mr. Powers develops a doctrine with which we enthusiastically agree. Great Britain and America, the representatives of the Anglo-Saxon idea, must never on any pretext whatever be driven apart:—

“We regard ourselves as a separate people. The world does not. Britain does not. We are the Anglo-Saxon reserves, reserves inexhaustible in men, in wealth, and in creative power. We go by a separate name. We pride ourselves upon local distinctiveness. We reserve the right to carp and criticise our kindred (an unlovely Anglo-Saxon characteristic). But one great fact stands out above all these symptoms of separateness and repulsion. We shall never again fight against Anglo-Saxons. I have put that question to persons of every shade of opinion, to persons jealous and critical of Britain as well as to her sympathizers. ‘Is there the slightest probability—a probability of which a prudent people need to take any political account,—that England and America will ever again be at war?’ And the answer, whether willing or reluctant, has always been the same. ‘No, that is one of the things that will not happen again. We shall quarrel and scold, but we shall make up our quarrels without war.’ If this is true, it is a supremely important truth. It is a sheet anchor not only to the Anglo-Saxon peoples, but to a storm-tossed world. The assurance of peace within the Anglo-Saxon domain is the largest conquest that peace has thus far made. It is the one great steadying force in time of world crisis, the one substantial reality in the dreamland league of nations.”

Mr. Powers sums up his examination of the redistribution of power with the words: “This, then, is the true legacy of the war; Anglo-Saxons the mainstay of the world, and America the mainstay of the Anglo-Saxons.” Whether that be fully true or not we do not complain of it. Rather we rejoice in it, because it means that thinking Americans accept the *ethos* for which Great Britain has always stood. They take over our obligations, they adopt our interpretations. There is no room for jealousy there. The co-operation for which we have always worked and hoped clearly emerges.

Mr. Powers's panorama of the Anglo-Saxon world is impressive:—

THE AMERICAN ERA.

"Our race then, with the additions that the war has brought, controls directly through its several national divisions about seventeen and a half million square miles of territory, or more than a third of the earth's surface, inhabited by nearly six hundred million souls, or more than a third of the world's population. This territory includes the British Isles in Europe, two thirds of Africa, nearly all of southern Asia, practically all of Australasia and Oceanica, and substantially the whole of North America and the Caribbean area. More than half of this vast territory is white man's land, that is, land on which the Anglo-Saxon can live without prejudice to his energy or to the character of his civilization. Contrast this with the French domain which, though twenty times the size of the home land, is almost wholly unavailable for the propagation of the white race. The Anglo-Saxon shares with the Russian the world's reserves of white man's land. If quality as well as area be considered it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the Anglo-Saxon holds half the world."

Mr. Powers might have argued that the two great branches of Anglo-Saxondom, having guaranteed perpetual peace between themselves, could snap their fingers at the rest of the world and dissociate themselves from all the weariness of watching and interfering. But that is not his line at all. He sees that the modern world is much too closely knitted for anyone to stand apart in selfish aloofness:—

"The plain fact is, we must finance Europe. It isn't a case of charity. It isn't merely business. Yet it partakes of the nature of both. Europe asks no gift. She can and will repay and will pay good interest. She has learned the lesson of business honor. So far it is business. But it is more than business. The transaction involves something more than good credit and good interest. There is in it the best guarantee we can have of world peace and orderly social evolution. If the honest masses of Europe have a chance to earn a decent living they will do so. If they do not, they will turn brigands. They will not accept peaceably a lower status than that of five years ago. Indeed it is much to be doubted if they will again be satisfied with that. The war with its unstinted pouring out of the world's accumulations has accustomed millions of men to a scale of living that is woefully in contrast with a condition of world poverty. That scale of living they will not willingly surrender. It will be useless to argue, to expostulate. The alternative of revolution with its world-wide contagion is always there. The scale must somehow be maintained. There is but one possible way. Appliances more efficient and productive than any they have known must be placed in the hands of industry. The destroyed capital must be replaced and more than replaced if we are to avoid disaster, a disaster from which we shall nowise be exempt. It is a good investment but a compulsory one. We refuse it at our peril. It is time we outgrew our provincial psychology."

Turning from the international aspects of his problem to the affairs of his own countrymen, Mr. Powers writes with such a combination of vivacity and good sense that we should like to quote page after page. In the present circumstances of industrial upheaval, caused by class bitterness and the mistrusting of the employer by the employed, Mr. Powers's reflections make extraordinarily pertinent reading. His demonstration that capital is the servant of the whole community and that its functions and service are independent of ownership is quite admirable. Let us quote one happy illustration which he gives to explode the suspiciousness of those who resentfully watch the accumulation of capital in the hands of others:—

"It is but a little while since there was a great shortage of wheat in this country. The situation was desperate and we were all put on short rations. Yet I know a man who during that anxious winter hoarded several thousand bushels of wheat which he refused to share with his needy fellow citizens. A preposterous amount for a single family, was it not? Vastly more than their share. But wait a minute. That man was a farmer. He had three thousand acres of wheat land which he was waiting to sow in the spring. That was what he was hoarding his wheat for. Supposing he had distributed it among us to eat. That is in principle the case of the business man's income. His share is bigger than ours, but he has his field to plant and we do not."

Take, again, Mr. Powers's remarks on the doctrine, which is in danger of developing in America, that the necessity of work is a grievance imposed upon men by capitalistic governments:—

"Working is living, just as much as play. To a man who is half a man it is a great deal more so. I know work in all its main varieties, and I know that it is God's best gift to man. No one could rob me so grievously as he who took away my work. No punishment would be so horrible to me as to compel me to spend my time seeking amusement. Possibly I could get used to hanging around the movies, the pool room, the clubs, the highbrow or lowbrow time-killing performances. One can get used to anything, and there are people who seem to accomplish even this task. But to tell me that this is living and that working is something else is arrant nonsense. If there is any such distinction, then I prefer the something else, and I pity those who do not. This is a point on which I am qualified to express an opinion."

Delightful, again, is Mr. Powers's advice to trade unions on the subject of how to make themselves indispensable:—

"I believe I can tell labor an easy way to unionize every shop in the country, and raise their wages besides. Let them require their members to do *at least* a specified amount of work—something more than the poorest man can do, perhaps—and insist upon a certain standard of efficiency and honor, punishing offenses against the employer with fines and expulsion.

THE AMERICAN ERA.

How long would it be before every sane employer adopted the closed shop? To the non-union man he would say: 'I can't afford to employ a man who can't get the union guarantee. When I employ a union man I know what I am getting. I would no more hire a man without the union card than I would buy silver without the stamp of sterling.'"

Perhaps the greatest compliment Mr. Powers pays to Great Britain is his little lamentation that the British Parliamentary system did not exist in America during the disputes over the Peace Treaty. Mr. Wilson, if he had been in the position of a British Prime Minister conscious that his majority had left him, would have had to resign or to appeal to the country. The controversy would have been quickly settled one way or the other in either case.