

SOCIAL MEDICINE

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CATHOLICS are so accustomed to be shocked or disillusioned by popular books on social science, that they may well be tempted to give these new Pelicans¹ a wide berth. This would be a mistake, for both are well-written, pleasantly informative, and contain much encouragement for those who do not despair of welding Catholic principles into the British way of life. In Peter Archer's symposium one will find a keen recognition of the importance of stable family life, a warm acceptance of the need for voluntary effort to supplement state action and a thoroughly wholesome attitude to officials. They should be supported and assisted in the performance of their duties, one gathers, but firmly protected by a wide-awake proletariat from any temptation to dictatorship.

Social Welfare and the Citizen makes no pretext of giving a complete picture of the modern Welfare State. Those topics have been selected for discussion which prove to be 'the most constant source of practical difficulty to the citizen'. Several of the essays are entirely factual, those for example which deal with Income Tax, National Insurance, Landlord and Tenant, Public Health, Property and Town Planning, Law and the Motorist. No comment is required except a word of praise for their clarity and accuracy. But most of the contributors have made some effort to show the historic background of the service they are describing and to indicate in what ways it needs reform. In an excellent chapter on National Assistance Mr R. E. Prentice reminds us that the old Poor Law of 1601 established a 'public responsibility for the relief of distress', impeccable in principle, but discharged over the centuries 'with a strange mixture of charity and harshness'. A curious feature of the relief of the destitute in this country has been the movement away from local to centralized administration in the interests of humanity. The old Boards of Guardians based on the parishes were notoriously the best-hated institutions

¹ *Social Welfare and the Citizen*. Edited by Peter Archer. (Penguin Books, 3s. 6d.)
Patients and Doctors. By Kenneth Walker. (Penguin Books, 3s. 6d.)

in the country; the Public Assistance Committees of the local authorities which replaced them in 1930 were much more humane and popular but showed excessive variation, and now that the claimant for relief has a private interview with an official of a central National Assistance Board 'it was rightly felt that this was a more dignified proceeding'. Not everyone is aware that in the course of their duties, the Board's officers carry out many friendly services for their charges such as finding clubs for lonely old people and arranging for retraining for the down-and-outs who haunt the few remaining centres for 'casuals'. The Local Authorities and many voluntary societies are also deeply concerned in the care of the elderly (dealt with in a separate chapter by Miss Graham Hall) and in problems of rehabilitation, and it would appear that co-ordination in this sphere is close and economical. Mr Prentice thinks that the machinery in the Act for dealing with persistent individual scroungers is adequate, but most workers consider that the law has left the authorities too helpless against the ne'er-do-weel families who sponge persistently on the rates.

The modern preoccupation over the family is well brought out in two essays, the 'Law and the Family' by Mr Francis Petre, and the 'Child and his Family' by Mrs Peggy Jay. Mr Petre indicates tactfully that he is a Catholic but his very lucid account of the English matrimonial law and procedure is completely objective, and is greatly enhanced by shrewd practical advice to those in marital difficulties. Mrs Jay is concerned both with the preservation of the normal family group and also with the protection of the child where parental care has in fact broken down. No one can now complain that the 'deprived child' is not generously catered for by current law and philanthropy: what worries its many friends is that the efforts are ill-organized and tend to overlap. A Home Office Committee is now making a strenuous attempt to concentrate responsibility for what may be called 'family guidance' into one channel. There is some risk in overdoing this scheme, for the social worker who claims to be a universal guide to all human problems is making a dangerous bid for omnipotence. The specialized social worker, e.g. for mental cases, for moral welfare problems, for child health, has a very real value and has been one of the factors which has brought British social services to their unique standards of efficiency.

As for the future, Miss Jay supports Dr John Bowlby in believing that now that the 'social services have largely overcome the natural evils of hunger, disease, extreme poverty and ignorance, the remaining problems to be solved are those centring on the intangibles of human happiness and personal relationships'. One might almost say—on a Christian standard of behaviour and the grace of God to live up to it, but that would carry us into regions now considered too controversial for a book for the general public. Miss Betty Vernon's informative paper on 'Education, a National Responsibility', alive as it is with genuine enthusiasm both for education and children, suffers from the same defect of failing, as we Catholics would think, to get down to fundamental issues, and to remember that education should have a spiritual as well as a material aspect. (This is the point Mrs Jay was apparently making.) Her overriding, and completely unrealistic, passion for streamlined equality (she would abolish the fee-paying school out of hand) is typical of a large section of thought in the educational world today and may easily prove a real danger to fruitful implementation of the great 1944 Act.

It is probably fair to say that the chapters on the National Health Service, the provisions for the care of the mentally defective and the mentally ill, and of the handicapped, show the British social services at their best. They are ably described by Miss Graham Hall, who regards them with pride but not complacency. She shows an unusual understanding of the value of the work being done for the mentally afflicted, even though the existing law and regulations are out of date. The National Health Service presents a different sort of problem. It is a fair claim that it has made universally accessible to British citizens a clinical service of the highest quality, a feat that no other nation has ever attempted. Its gravest defect at the present moment is discontent among the personnel, a fact which Miss Graham Hall does not quite face. The family doctor, she rightly says, was intended to be the key man of the whole scheme; he has been given many privileges, but he is on the verge of revolt. Patients have to wait interminably for some services, but young doctors find it hard to break their way into general practice, and there is a troublesome congestion in the lower ranks of the consultant services. Until these vital maladjustments are solved it is difficult to see how any minor administrative changes can produce a

happy, smoothly running service. With good will they can be overcome, and this is happening in many areas already, but the good will is too often lacking.

Another basic need for a satisfactory health service, intelligent understanding between doctor and patient, is the theme of Dr Kenneth Walker's treatise. So much unprofitable nonsense has been written on the 'doctor-patient relationship' that one turned to it with some reluctance, but never has one known this perceptive writer more interesting and stimulating. He is convinced that the day of the docile and ignorant patient is over. Starting with the modest aim of explaining to the layman the *rationale* of medical treatment, he finds himself deep in a discussion on the nature of organic life, with special reference to the part played by bacteria. It is fascinating to learn how the theories of the structure and mechanism of the human body have throughout the centuries influenced medical treatment. The point that so deeply impressed Pasteur, the rôle of bacteria in maintaining the continuance of life on this planet and the fact that death and putrefaction are a necessary part of the life cycle, is admirably developed. Dr Walker writes as a person of philosophic outlook, acutely conscious of the limits of the scientific approach and of the doctor's inadequacy to deal with the spiritual side of man. His simple account of the origin of psycho-somatic disease, and of the conquest of fear and pain, should be of great value to the young doctor as well as to his patient. Dr Walker is a keen protagonist for the right of the patient to be treated like an intelligent being, to be given reasonable explanations of what is being done to him, to have access to a second opinion, but I know no one who has expressed more sympathetically the dilemmas of the conscientious doctor. This is a picture of medical practice of great quality, not presented as an impossible ideal, but as it can and should be seen in a community of reasonable beings.