# REVIEWS

ALTERNATIVE TO DEATH. By the Earl of Portsmouth (Viscount Lymington). (Faber & Faber: 8s. 6d.)

THE TREE OF LIFE. By H. J. Massingham. (Chapman & Hall; 8/6).

These two books both recall our bewildered nation from industrialism and totalitarianism to the realities of the soil, the family and individual responsibility. But their approach differs considerably; Lord Portsmouth is concerned with concrete problems and their solution, Mr. Massingham with the intellectual and spiritual foundations on which can be built a renewed tradition where man is once more in harmony with nature and with God.

If we wish to restore a normal rural life, there are many practical prerequisites; if these are neglected, a return to the land can scarcely be possible for more than a few individuals and a few small communities. Hence Lord Portsmouth gives the greater part of his book to discussing such things as finance and credit, land tenure, death duties, education, domestic economy, and the relations of farming and forestry. On all this there are two things to be said: first that nearly all the proposals made are sane, consistent, and valuable; secondly, that it is a very great pity that they should be presented in English which is not merely slipshod but often so clumsy as to baffle one at first reading. Lord Portsmouth himself is conscious of weakness here, and his book has been partly revised by friends, but more thorough rehandling is due to the very importance of his work. He has, however, some powers of plain vigorous statement which may be exemplified in a few characteristic sentences:

'In any civilization there comes a moment when, if it is to continue, civilization must become ruralization.'

'It is an error to consider that could we guarantee the permanent security of imports and food for all from overseas, it would bring us either health or spiritual fulfilment.'

'To-day, when barely one wage or salary earner in ten is a primary producer, it is clear that the parasite is in disproportionate excess of the host. It has been computed that those engaged in checking dishonesty by book-keeping, inspection, ticket collecting, etc., are nearly 50 per cent. of the total wage-earning population.'

'While we have begun to look down upon creative, especially manual, self-expression, we have simultaneously learnt not to think.'

'Bread and circuses were no danger to our character when we had roots in our own soil. We grew our own bread and made our own circuses.'

Mr. Massingham's book traverses so much ground that it seems impossible to review it adequately. One may say that it has a main thesis which is both true and timely, and that this is developed from

many sides, sometimes fruitfully and illuminatingly, sometimes in an unbalanced and illegitimate way which obscures or even contradicts the thesis itself. The thesis is this : ' The modern world has drifted so far away from Christianity and Nature alike that few of those who call themselves Christian perceive any necessary connection between them, while even the wisest of those who advocate a new organic way of living as a means of arresting the rapid decline of civilization content themselves with the vague and pious aspiration that the revival of rural values should be ' spiritual ' no less than practical and cultural. Yet the right name for Western civilisation is surely Western Christendom; it is a definitely Christian culture, and any attempt to indicate lines of rescue from its present *descensus Averni* must recognise the Christian actualities of the origins and growth from which it has so widely departed.'

It is sometimes said by the urban-minded that the Early Church, after all, belonged to the great towns rather than to the countryside. Mr. Massingham reminds us that our Lord chose for his birthplace, not Rome or Byzantium or Alexandria, but a region not only rural but opposed in its rural character to the surrounding urbanised world. The language of the Gospels, like that of the Old Testament, is the language of peasants and country craftsmen, whose vivid and often poignant exactness is too often lost on the Christians of to-day. And the great Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries, though familiar with city life, were also familiar with rural monasticism; hear St. Basil or St. Augustine describe the activities of a farm, and contrast their wording with that of modern sermons! Then there is the long sequence of saints who successfully countered Manichaean currents, who delighted in the visible world and had a profound sense of the holiness of things. (Mr. Massingham speaks particularly of Celtic and ' British ' Christianity, which he romanticises somewhat and isolates unduly from the main body of Christian thought; his illustrations might well have been reinforced from St. Gertrude, for instance). Nor did the Christian vision of Nature vanish at once with the division of Christendom—witness the English seventeenth-century writers lavishly quoted in this book (though the author sees them in scarcely their true perspective). It remained for the mechanistic philosophies of Descartes and his descendants to begin that severance of man from Nature which received its practical consummation with the Industrial Revolution.

Such is the main course of Mr. Massingham's argument. Valuable though it often is, it is often vitiated by various causes, of which the chief is the attempt to treat matters on a philosophical and theological plane in spite of what the author himself modestly calls ' a signal lack of qualifications ' for the task. His fundamental defect is a misunderstanding alike of the nature of philosophic truth and of the function of the Christian Church as the giver and guardian of

supernatural truth. Thus he continually denounces 'abstraction' as the enemy of the 'concrete,' but though there are false abstractions, it is only through abstraction that we can really understand the concrete. Again, he seems ready to defend all peasant beliefs without distinction, yet it should be evident that such beliefs are either true or false. Some are perfectly good natural theology; some are either in fact Christian or are misunderstood fragments of Christian teaching which need to be reintegrated into their proper context; others are simply false, and anyone who calls himself a philosopher or a Christian shoud be prepared to say so. Then there is a section on 'doctrine' (pp. 182—186) which has all the haziness of old-fashioned Liberal Protestantism with its invective against 'credal formulae'; and an unfortunate allusion to Shakespeare's freedom from 'philosophical and ecclesiastical fetters' (if Mr. Massingham knew something of Dante he might be better able to assess the relations of truth and freedom, and might incidentally acquire surer standards of literary judgment).

More generally, Mr. Massingham has not really considered what is implied by that acceptance of Christianity which he desires for his rural England. He has some belief in Christian doctrine, but seems seriously concerned only with that part of it which touches his own thesis and is directly applicable to the unnatural conditions of present-day industrial England; this, he seems to say, is what must be preached with authority, and the layman may decide as he pleases about the rest. Well, there is indeed such a part, and the preaching of it is most important; but it comes from the same authority from which comes all the rest. There are many contingent needs which make the stressing of this point or that (whether 'abstract' or 'concrete') desirable and natural in a particular age. The Divinity or Humanity of Christ, the sanctity of marriage, the need for contemplative prayer, the moral theology of war—these are all things which in certain conditions can be taken for granted and in others need special emphasis, but all belong to a consistent body of doctrine which is ultimately indivisible; unless one accepts that doctrine and the authority which teaches it, one does not really accept Christianity. The integration of man with Nature, yes; but also integration with Christ in the Church. A sacramental view of life, yes; but also the Christian Sacraments. That is Christianity; otherwise we remain on the natural level where the South Sea islander enjoys an organic life outside our reach.

WALTER SHEWRING.

CAPITALISM, SOCIALISM AND DEMOCRACY. By Joseph A. Schumpeter. (Allen & Unwin: 15/-).

At a time when even the salvage-collector absent-mindedly performs his duties with a reconstructional gleam in his eye, political