

## OBITER

THE P.E.N. CONGRESS. That liberal humanism which is the gentle, scrupulous, puzzled posthumous child of Christendom determined the atmosphere of this year's P.E.N. International Congress in London, the largest on record. It was inaugurated on July 9, St Thomas More's day, at the Royal College of Surgeons, in his own Lincolns Inn. The Lord Privy Seal spoke, who had once been Lord Chancellor, and Minister of Education. Problems of the Welfare State were discussed, and the level of public taste, and the relationship between literacy and literature, Siamese twins joined back to back. Erasmus was remembered, and there were arguments as to the need for cultural understanding and for the exchange of ideas between nation and nation. But no one mentioned that particular Christian humanist, that English and international figure who was Lord Chancellor, and fascinated by problems of education, who was Erasmus' friend and host, who produced so many writings besides *Utopia* in which the Welfare State was foreshadowed, and who was killed for the unity of that Totalitarian State to which it can so quickly turn; such a totalitarian state as those whence the 1956 groups of contemporary writers in exile had fled.

This curious and symbolic omission would have been rectified if there had been any general discussion; but this was impossible. There were 750 members of the Congress; the principal speeches were translated from English into French and *vice versa*; and time did not permit. There was of course a great deal of stimulating and rewarding individual talk among members as they sat in the big buses that throbbed their way about London, or as they ate and drank in the beautiful halls of the Tate Gallery (where bubbling words seemed to bump against the ceiling and back again like taut bright balloons), and the Mansion House, and the Guildhall, with Gog and Magog presiding, squat and gilt, on the high wall above a throng of old friends waving and meeting, and new acquaintances clinging to one another. But this talk was of necessity between one atom and another, not general; and it was not quite enough to dispel the recurrent sense of a certain tenuousness of mutual understanding, a tenuousness that seemed to originate, when one thought it over, from the polite assumption that all those present were agreed on matters of fundamental importance, however much they might differ as to techniques, or the functions of a critic or novelist or historian, however much they might waver, in considering the problem of communication, as to what was to be communicated to whom, and how, and why.

That they were not so agreed appeared plainly from the slight disconcerted *frisson* which greeted Robert Henriques's dictum that a good critic must have a sound moral standpoint; a view implicitly contradicted by William Empson's presentation of him as the 'fundamental relating mind' between the public and the writer whose work must be to 'express the feeling of his society with sincerity as if it were his own'; a view set in a different focus again by Peter Green's admirably down-to-earth examination of the contemporary scene and its great gulfs not only between nations, but very much more between humanist and scientist, with their wholly different idioms and presuppositions, and again between those who have learned to think as well as read, and those who have learned only to read.

It was clear that several speakers were aware of this last gulf. R. A. Butler implied it, Angus Wilson glanced at it, Denis Saurat recognized it. But no one liked to dwell on its presence, and even in the discussion of 'mass media' of communication, radio, cinema, television, it was one of the points that were approached as reluctantly as cut stinging nettles. Can writers as such, whose first concern is the word, be *primarily* interested in the visual presentation of their work? Is it possible to get any but the simplest ideas across to that public which corresponds to the D stream in the secondary modern school (ideas as distinct from sensations and convictions and the agreeable but dangerous sense of knowing all about everything without thinking out anything) and if so, can it be done by the creative writer of integrity, or is it really the job of the skilled educationalist or publicist? Is it not time to face the fact which Denis Saurat again acknowledged, that in every country it is only a minority which takes much interest in the things of the mind, the pursuit of truth for its own sake in accuracy of detail and clarity of interpretation, the achievement of beauty in style and significance in matter?

Nevertheless, though these primary issues lay almost unexamined, the assemblage was united in good will, the love of freedom of speech, and a deep interest in literary approaches to various themes and literary techniques in handling them. Perhaps the most significant of all the sessions was that devoted to the work of historians. C. V. Wedgwood, gentle and brilliantly perceptive, put forward the view that they were apt to be either of the contemplative or of the active temperament, the first inclining to find a pattern of meaning in history, the second interested in the actions of men for their own sake. A. L. Rowse exemplified the attitude of a third sort, the artist, in his condemnation both of history *à thèse* after the manner of Spengler, and history as a mere technique of amassing documented dated occurrences. André Maurois, discussing biography, amplified this; it could not, he

said, be regarded either as 'a card-index or a scramble of eggs with their shells on', it must be 'portraiture based on organized facts'.

The art of the spoken word, warm, flowing, deep with experience and learning, lit with geniality and wit, was admirably demonstrated at the final banquet by Charles Morgan, C. V. Wedgwood, André Maurois and Compton Mackenzie. For a while tradition, continuity, the long life of European culture, shone like the candles in the king's hall where the sparrow flew; but I sat next to a writer in exile from Estonia, and in his nearness felt the outer night, and remembered *de la Mare* and 'look thy last on all things lovely every hour'.

RENÉE HAYNES

## REVIEWS

THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS. By Millar Burrows. (Secker and Warburg; 30s.)

This book, announced as the British edition of the work which appeared in 1955 in New York is, apart from 17 additional lines in the preface, nothing else than an exact photomechanic reprinting of the American book. The paper may not be as good as in the Viking Press edition, but the price is considerably lower.

Dr Burrows is one of those privileged scholars who have been in contact with the great scrolls, discovered in 1947 in a cave near the Dead Sea, almost since the beginning of the discoveries, and in the present book he presents his well balanced and judicious views on the most important problems which have been debated so far. In the book itself there are no notes, but there is an extensive bibliography at the end (pp. 419-435); it is clear that the author has studied all the publications he mentions, because he constantly refers to them, explicitly or even tacitly, in his text. In his preface, which he calls, alluding to some texts of the scrolls, 'a word to the wise', he says that the book is not intended for the scholar; as a matter of fact it is written in a scholarly way and discusses many scholars' problems. This makes the character of the work somewhat ambiguous; whether this is the author's own idea, or is due to restrictions imposed on him by the original publishers, I cannot decide.

As a whole, and with the restriction that the method of treatment is not included in this judgment, the book is excellent and is probably the best we have at this length on the subject. It should be read by everyone who wishes to have more than a superficial judgment on many parts of the problems raised by the scrolls. Unlike several other publications in America and on the continent of Europe, the book has