

IRONIC AND SOCRATIC*

‘PLATO’S BRITANNIA,’ by Douglas Woodruff, is one of the flowers of the Belloc movement, varying as a flower should, from its common factors. Belloc’s humour is vast, Rabelaisian, abrupt, and his irony is sometimes fierce to the point of self-destruction, but this book is a well-sustained display of pawky fun, almost Caledonian at times, and no intrusion of the bludgeon mars or neutralises the anatomising rapier. The noise is, to our slow ear, sufficiently like the noise of Jowett’s Plato to polish the genial jest. The English find it hard to be patient with the Irish, who return the compliment with interest, but here is an Englishman who sees all sides of what is wrong with the English, sees them steadily, too, and never departs from the serenity of the good physician who seeks above all to cure the patient.

It is an easy book to read rapidly, and yet he who reads too rapidly will miss a great deal, from the ‘Foreword by Peter, Bishop of Philepompus,’ to the promise, more or less veiled, at the end, that the Scots are to have a turn from Plato. ‘I have known Mr. Woodruff since his schooldays. I taught him then and have prayed for him ever since’ (he is not past praying for, then) ‘and am frankly amazed at the amount of truth the book contains. (He always *was* a little liar.) ‘for whatever tincture of the cardinal and other virtues (I am writing in the country, far from books, and have not the complete list by me),’ etc. etc.

The work is in eight books, the first dealing with Socrates’ account of his attempt to get a foothold in England. He is directed to the Athenaeum Club, where he finds the English Athenians either asleep or

* *Plato’s Britannia* by Douglas Woodruff, author of *Plato’s American Republic*. (Sheed & Ward; 6s. net.)

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doing cross-word puzzles or hidden behind newspaper-screens, which give him new light on the reason for the superior *size* of English newspapers. All he gets from the Athenaeum is a recommendation to go to the Professor of Greek at Oxford. He takes a 'bus, and when 'the soldier in charge' hears of his desire to go to the Oxford Professor of Greek, Socrates is informed that the blood-stained chariot does not go to Oxford but to Olympia. This is so promising that he goes on, and finds himself in the Ideal Home Exhibition. But looking in vain for an ideal family, or any family at all, in any of the Ideal Homes, he discusses with Lycis, Agropatus, and Phaelon, how the English came to be the 'marvellous mugs they are' and how they do not find themselves out because they are extremely rich. This ends Book the Third. The next treats of the Great War, the New Enemy, Russia, and the Puritan influence on the comforts of the people, with some remarks on how they stand for food. Book the Fifth deals with the mentality of the rich, the 'Problems' of 'Empire,' and the failure of England to rule educated peoples in any land.

In the Sixth Book Socrates details his adventures at Oxford with Professors of Greek. *The* Professor engages him to speak at a Garden Party for the League of Nations! He also with great gentleness and consideration breaks the news that Rhodes Scholarships are not for Greeks. In fact, little does Greek trouble Oxford, young or old. The explanation is that the sons of the rich come to Oxford to learn how to govern, and that to fail in examinations looks like filial impiety. The unfilial get no more money to spend, and become submerged. But the English do not select their governors from the teachers or the taught. The governors select themselves!

A visit to Cambridge throws up some weird discoveries of the Cambridge mentality. 'They spend

much of their time inventing new vocabularies, like great nets, to catch and tie down anything they cannot otherwise explain.' And they accept no responsibility for the mental training of the youths confided to their charge, but set them to amuse themselves in the laboratories, since the mistakes of the young provide data for the experienced. Socrates on English education is, well, a revelation. It is designed to accustom the people to reside in towns! he says.

Books Seventh and Eighth treat of Politics and Journalism in their less restricted sense, and the reasoning is even closer, the dainty humour more penetrating and the truth of things more cogent. The whole book is full of wisest saws and most topical instances, and all we have done is to provide a few pointers to the contents, for it would take a long, serious article to analyse half the arguments. It is eminently one of those books you read on and on, and afterwards keep to read in and in.

JOHN O'CONNOR.