About Books, More or Less: A Liberal's Pilgrimage

By SIMEON STENYK

W
othing concretely setting off the author as ambitious a task, this book has made a valuable contribution to theoretical thought and action in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. His "Confessions of a Reformer" (Berkley) is a book of which he can be justly proud. It has dragged in no ten-mile canvas the background of the author's record. If the spacious background is nevertheless there, the reason is that the author was a good enough fence to touch on big men and big issues.

The "Liberal" does not occur in the greater part of Mr. Howe's text. He does, however, belong to the role of reformer, which in itself requires no more than a good name with a chief value of his story, at least to the present reviewer, is precision in the route-chart, it supplies for the programs from reformism to liberalism. It starts with the days of American's awakening, when ardent young men were ready against the selfish and the sinister, and it reaches these prehistoric times, when the field of battle has widened into a battle of civilization, begins with the fight against the railroads and the trusts, and ends with the battle against the automobile and the large insurance companies. It is as if Mr. Howe, in his turn, were out for empire and Conservativism, as if he were ready with the national banks behind him. Logically, he meets the "liberal" as a thing, as a Spinozian Libertin at the right hand of the author, as the Mark Hanna interdicts in Cleveland, and as the later Grover Cleveland and in Ohio. If Tom Johnson's statement of Poverty and Power of Woodrow Wilson's statement of the New Freedom and the world into which freedom had been received with small bit of enthusiasm in which we have a right to expect from men who have not been among the world about the disillusionment and the liberal of five years ago and of the Liberal of five years ago would not be so keen.

But his real education began when he came into contact with Tom Johnson at Cleveland. What did he learn from Johnson in the matter of doctrine? He might be talked about poverty, about how to be rid of it. He might think that society should be changed, not by getting good lines into office, but by making it possible for all men to be good. He might think that the world because people were poor. The trouble was not with people but with poverty. It was social conditions that were bad rather than people. This bothered me, as most of his followers, surely some people were good, while others were bad. My classifications were wrong. Roughly, the members of the University Club and the Chamber of Commerce were good; McKsoon, Bernstein, and the socialists were bad. This is an innocence of the world, a naivete almost, that is rather striking in a man of 35 who had worked his way through two colleges—partly by writing speeches for pirate candidates—but had his film with New York Journalism, had studied law and bluffed an impressionable Pittsburgh examiner into admitting him to the bar—and lived at university clubs and associated with members of commerce. Yet this naivete is not necessarily wrong; it is not necessarily wrong to have a right to expect from men who have not been among the world about the disillusionment and the liberal of five years ago and of the Liberal of five years ago would not be so keen.

Incidentally greater justice would thereby be rendered to Tom Johnson and Woodrow Wilson in their respective spheres.

To be intimately associated with Tom Johnson of Cleveland was hardly to fit into the traditional picture of the "reformer"—stiff-necked, painstaking and sclerotic. Mr. Howe's discreet of the "good citizen" of his community would have saved him, if he were not on the positive side an欣赏ing and judging of the politicians he fought. In the word leaders, the bosses and the lobbyists he peopled to the warmest quality on which their power was based, as it continues to be based. It is an anomaly in our politics that the "machine" is so largely a human institution grunted to feudal loyalty. Mr. Howe's tribute to the Irish in politics is more than warm. It is the Irish, "unconsciously aiming to shape the State to human ends that have made New York what it is." Their instinct for "collectivity," for "small entorses" must have us, according to Mr. Howe, our parks and playgrounds, our water supply, Fire Department, library service and "as good a public school system as is to be found in any large city." Of the public utilities he has built—member of the Cleveland Water Board, President of the Shinking Fund Commission, State Auditor and Commissioner of Insurance at Ellis Island—Mr. Howe directs that his work on the Cleveland Tax Commission was the most difficult of his life. He did not find the model for his own tax system in the Chicago or Cleveland. In the work of Lawyers Purdy. And who was Mr. Purdy? The most corrupt Tammany and the most popular name of the century. Mr. Howe has given him a fine hand in working out an honest and equitable assessment of real property. No city in New York has been as far as I know, approximated New York at that time in the honesty of its tax system, and Mr. Purdy has made one of the most distinguished contributions to municipal politics of any man in this country or abroad.

If a corrupt political machine can, indirectly, make a distinguished contribution to honest government, it means that the old formulas about good government and bad government need analysis and modification. Mr. Howe himself as, I have indicated, early abandoned his ideal in the box and ward leader as the prime source of municipal wickedness. But he substituted an even more rigid formula when he found the final cause of bad government in the bankers, the politicians, the property, the entire propertied class. He simply broadens Mr. Hearst's Prussian bund to include the whole middle class and its vested interests. In the local sphere it is called The Interests. In the world sphere it is called economic imperialism. But if the inter- ests behind Tammany Hall permitted the development, not of a perfect city but of a very good sort of city, as Mr. Howe finds our New York to be, it is not conceivable that the economic imperialists and the international bankers might consent to the development of a fairly satisfactory world order.

Let us put it more directly. Mr. Howe, as he says, is interested in most of the accepted dooms of re- form when he discovered that the position of good city was merely one of complexity rather than of cor- poration. If he had been more consistent, he might have expected to view the bigger problem of world government in the same spirit. He did not. His account of German Kaiserism and the imperial dom- inion of what has now become, frankly, the war-time Imperial tra- dition; how Wilson landed in Europe, how they buried col- lodies before his picture in peasant cottages in France, Italy and Spain.