

In the middle ages there was the great contribution of St Thomas Aquinas, who wrote that the rational creature, being subject to divine providence, has a share of Eternal Reason. Therefore all man-made laws must conform to the law of nature. The same doctrine is embodied in the writings of such English jurists as Bracton, Fortescue, Coke, Blackstone, and Pollock.

In order to maintain the inalienable rights of the individual as a person, it is essential to recognise that there is a moral power higher than the state. Without the sure foundations of the natural law and the law of God, there is no basis upon which to build justice and liberty in society, and there is no hope but a relapse into tyranny.

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A FREE HOUSE: or The Artist as Craftsman: being the writings of Walter Richard Sickert edited by Osbert Sitwell. (Macmillan; 25s.)

This is a rich and glittering book; it is also a disconcerting one: disconcerting, not boring, as an active and intelligent child whose curiosity exceeds his power of concentration can be a trial in a picture gallery or a museum where his attention is constantly drawn to objects about which he asks questions we are not competent to answer.

The book opens with an entertaining *Short Sketch of Walter Richard Sickert* which may or may not form part of that third part of Sir Osbert Sitwell's Autobiography at present said to be struggling through what is so depressingly known as 'the binder's bottle-neck'. Whether we are to meet it again is yet to be seen; here at any rate it stands for our delight today: it gives an animated account of life in literary and artistic London during the interval between the Great and the Greater Wars; it is spiced with Sickert's quoted and Sitwell's authentic wit, and it is illustrated by two of the best reproductions of the artist's drawings in the book, with the anecdotes proper to their inclusion.

But this Introduction does not fully introduce. The reader who does not know a great deal about Sickert already will not be any the wiser after reading it: nor will Sickert's own account of his father, Oswald Adalbert and his grandfather Johann Jurgen Sickert given as the first extract from the extensive volume of his writings, enlighten him. He will gather that Sickert was a great painter; but it will seem, as his enchanted attention is held for over three hundred pages of extracts from *The New Age*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Fortnightly Review* and other periodicals, that he was chiefly a very great critic and a teacher whose style was sharp with wit and sweet with wisdom.

*There is hardly anyone who has not at times said things so silly and so pointless that the first function of friendship is to forget them.*

*A critical system can never be anything but a more or less amusing commentary on already existing achievement.*

*The artist is he who can take a piece of flint and wring out of it drops of attar of roses.*

*. . . the eternal Venetian twilight, when time seems arrested and a blue universe floats in a bath of quicksilver, and it is impossible to say whether we are suspended in a happiness that is divine, or in unutterable fear.*

*Progress is a reality but one must know where to look for it.*

*Protestantism and the increasing jealousy of women have killed both classic figures and conversation pieces. Herself bedaubed she has driven her painted rivals from the canvas and a mediatised army of occupation called by courtesy Landscape holds a melancholy sway: not even, be it noticed, Landscape with Figures.*

Almost every page yields its epigram or its vivid word-picture and shows Sickert to be as able a writer as he was a draughtsman. He was, as is here proved, a lively critic, but his acute and often prejudiced discussion of the work of other artists is nullified by the absence of photographs of the works he praises or attacks, few of which are now accessible to the reading public, so that half the force of the writing about them is wasted. The artistic value of such photographs might be small and their space is filled by thirty good reproductions of Sickert's own drawings and etchings. The owner of this book is thus richer if not wiser for possessing these evidences of Sickert's right to speak of the work of other artists, but beyond the poignant statement that they were chosen on her deathbed by Mrs Sickert nothing in the text extends our appreciation of them. The reference to the painter's wife enhances the regret felt by the reader of two extracts from Sickert's rapturous proclamation of her genius (surely the most profoundly satisfying love-letters any woman can ever have received) that we are allowed no visual confirmation of the wonder of 'a fellow leaning on his bicycle who really leans; an old woman walking away in a wood who really walks'.

Crowded, fragmentary, inspiring and contentious, this book should take its place in the literature of texts for Art Students for whom it has a special technical value in that it defines the business of painting and instructs the draughtsman in the methods of his art. It must also take its place on the shelves of those readers who enjoy the happy bemusement of listening to the talk of an expert on an art they themselves neither practise nor completely understand.

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