Book Review

THE STORY OF MANKIND: By Hendrick Van Loon. New York, Boni and Liveright. $5.

(Review concluded from last issue.)

When the Norsemen descended upon Europe during the latter days of Charlemagne, they found a well established "Empire" crudely patterned after Ancient Rome. The "Emperor" was but a barbarian chief, and his "Capital" but a collection of rude wooden houses, notwithstanding the boastful titles.

The northern pirates soon overran all the outposts of this "Empire" and, in time, gave to a considerable portion of it dynastic monarchies and aristocracies: England, many parts of France, of the Mediterranean and Russia for example. This accomplished, society could at last settle down to the pursuits of peace without the eternal dread of burning and harrowing by wandering bands of barbarians. Feudalism entered into the period "when knighthood was in flower." It was the great grandchildren of these pirate chiefs who first realised the power of base artificers and commodity peddlers. The grandchildren of this aristocratic progeny of pirates encountered the grandchildren of these lowly people in open conflict, and Feudalism gradually gave way to the autocratic state.

Mr. Van Loon has no delusion about the Magna Charta, although he affirms the traditional wickedness of King John. But it is John's son, Henry III, that now commands our attention. During his reign a council was called of representatives from various classes, which we Britons proudly claim as the first parliament. Of course, as Mr. Van Loon tells us, it was nothing of the kind. Such bodies existed in many parts of Europe years before they appeared in England. Just like a foreigner to assail our proud eminence! These councils developed by degrees into our modern parliaments. Mr. Van Loon, however (page 188), in company with the orthodox historians, conceives in this development a constant struggle against the king for liberty. It was anything but that. They were totally subjective, and their development synchronises with that of the absolute monarchy. More of this in its place.

The middle ages, we learn, was a time of terror and ignorance. "They moved in a time of devils and spooks and only a few occassional angels." The Bible was their only book and "as a handbook of astronomy, zoology, botany, (etc.), the venerable book is not entirely reliable." Something we have long suspected! But it is remarkable in what a vile mess mankind appears at that period (p. 193): "In the 12th century a second book was added to the medieval library, the great encyclopedia of useful knowledge, compilled by Aristotle the Greek philosopher. . . ." Why the Christians of this age were willing to accept Aristotle "whereas they condemned all other Greek philosophers on account of their heathenish doctrines I really don't know." Well, there is nothing very mysterious about it. Mr. Van Loon traces the footsteps of Aristotle from Greece, through Asia Minor and Africa, into Spain, and in Spain the Christian students attended the heathen colleges to acquire knowledge. He says Aristotle was translated into Arabic in the 7th century. This must be a printer's error. A moment's reflection would dissolve the possibility. It was not until the 9th century, when the conquests were secured, and the dynastic wars settled, that time and means could be found for organising those great seats of learning at Cordova and Bagdad. Averroes, the translator of Aristotle into the Arabic lived in the 12th century; however, partial translations had been made earlier. Now as to his influence on the Middle Ages. We meet in history at all periods the sentiment that from Greece came the first fruits of our knowledge. This is not mere rhetoric. Aristotle was exhausting the world's store of knowledge and enormously adding to it when Rome, lacking a better medium, was writing on wood and stone. And so the Imperial City, as mistress of the world and arbiter of its destiny for almost five centuries was indebted to Greece for all her culture.

Before proceeding further, let us glance at the statement that the Christians "condemned all other Greek philosophers." This is not consistent with the statement that the Bible and Aristotle were the only books possessed by Europe. The latter statement is not true. Europe had all the writings of the Christian fathers—known as the Patristic Writings—and, having them, could not possibly fail to have Seneca, the great Roman Stoic whom the pagans set against Christ as a pattern, and whom the Christian fathers actually attempted to connect with St. Paul by a series of impudent forgeries. Not only did they know Seneca, but his work on physics was well studied by them.

Now as to Aristotle's influence. St. Augustine, a man of giant and restless intellect, who conceded that the world might be round but could not be inhabited on the other side, took Aristotle as his master. He was the greatest of the Christian fathers, and where he led there was every likelihood of succeeding Christians to follow. From his age, 400 A.D., to that of Thomas Aquinas, 1225 A.D., is a far cry. Yet he was the next outstanding figure, in the Catholic world at least. At this latter time when a teacher became famous he invariably taught everything from letters to science; judge then what a priceless treasure was to be found in the encyclopedic work of Aristotle, its many foolish (to our mind) conceits notwithstanding. The sneer that Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas did not investigate sturgeons and caterpillars at first hand is not kindly, considering the demand upon them and the limited scope of their resources; besides such perversity is not uncommon today, to which end we might put even Mr. Van Loon in the witness box.

However, contemporaneous with Aquinas was Roger Bacon, among other things an Arabic scholar. He asserted the need of observation, and applied himself so diligently to his own teaching that his discoveries soon threatened the entire structure of medieval science and, of course—a necessary corollary—theology and property. This brought enmity and finally a fifteen years' sojourn in prison, but not until the death of Pope Clement IV. who was his friend, and to whom his Opus Majus was dedicated. Mr. Van Loon does not mention this latter curious fact, in itself indicative of the intellectual state of Europe. Bacon, in writing his Opus Majus did so at the request of this enlightened prelate and, having been enjoined by his order—the Franciscan—from writing, and also by the Pope to secrecy, had endless trouble in completing that work. The Church and Empire were then at war. By the way, a perusal of the life story of Roger Bacon will reveal the then state of European knowledge very fully.

As further material reasons why Aristotle should appeal to European scholars at this time let us enumerate the Albigensian heresy, strongly tainted with communistic theories, and destroyed by a series of crusades just prior to Aquinas; the opening up of the rich Bohemian silver mines; the rise of the Hanseatic and Lombardian Leagues, evidence of a new power in society; and the consequent effect of all this on the current feudal property concept. Aristotle in his Politics had assailed the communist theories advanced by Plato in his Republic, so here was "great argument about it and about" by two great minds on the very subject then agitating humanity.

All this brings us to the Renaissance, or rebirth of learning. Mr. Van Loon warns us, very properly, against the principle of dividing history into set boundaries beyond which we arrive in an entirely new age by taking one step. While we set a date for Feudalism it is not merely to air our historic understanding; no exact date can be assigned to the beginning or to the end of that system or any other. But the rebirth can be distinguished with greater accuracy than any great movement. It followed the sack of Constantinople by the Christian Crusaders, 1204. We are greatly tempted to linger here and perform a task our author surely scamped, reciting the spoil which came to Europe, from the Lyons of St. Mark of wartime memory to a bottle of the Blessed Virgin's milk. We are told, however, that the people of this period were international, not English, French, etc., but if asked where they were from they replied Sheffield, or Genoa, and so on. All books were written in Latin, and all Europe looked to Rome as head of the religious world. When a great teacher like the ill-starred Peter Abelard spoke to his scholars in Paris he spoke in Latin, and whether from England, Italy or Austria his scholars understood without requiring to learn French first.

Also at this time came the great struggle between Pope and Emperor. Then came the capture of Constantinople by the Saracens and the last of the old Roman Empire was at an end. Europe was open to receive the Greeks and an added impulse to learning resulted. We pass that great age of art and literature and find John Huss and the Hussites wars dismissed in a paragraph. We are informed also that two popes were cursing each other. As a matter of record there were four. And all the goodly company which are enumerated as attending the Council of Constance were there to decide which pope was the legitimate Vicar of Christ and real successor of Peter; not to reform the Church, as our author informs us. We consider this should have been allotted more space, having in mind our author's own dictum (p. 228), that history "should cast a vivid light on certain important causes, on those which are best and greatest. All the rest should be left in the shadow or should be indicated by a few lines."

However, we have to admire the manner in which the age of discovery is handled. There is also a fine chapter on Buddha and Confucius, if we except the suggestion that the latter's doctrines are responsible for the backward condition of China. A study of China's geography would incline to a more rational conclusion. The account of the Reformation does not satisfy. We have a fair view of all the religious causes, but of the great Saxon silver mines not a word. Of the rise of even then powerful manufacturing towns not a word. And of the desperate struggle of the proletarians to establish a communist municipality at Muhlhausen and elsewhere we have this: "The starving peasants, following the leadership of half crazy agitators, made the best of the opportunity and attacked the castles of their masters and plundered and burned and murdered with the zeal of the old Crusaders." Martin Luther himself, who exhausted invective and scurrilousness in his denunciation of Munzer and the peasants, is a prince of good fellows compared to the author of these few words.

Those who imagine that the late war was the most terrible ever will be surprised to read of the "religious" Thirty Years' War, when "a population of eighteen million people was reduced to four million." Mr. Van Loon forgets to mention that after the fighting was over and the spoils allotted almost all the combatants returned to the Holy Catholic faith; he does state that the Catholic powers remained Catholic and the Protestant remained faithful to the creed of Calvin, etc., but this is putting it mildly. The national spirit had developed, and instead of the strife for spoil being between the barons and the Church it was between nations. So we find Catholic and Protestant peoples fighting side by side from that day to the present. The sixteenth century saw the absolute monarchy in its most complete form. It also saw parliament exercising State powers. Thus we find in the next century the great struggle between these two factors which in England set a period to the monarch's absolutism. We have an account of this on pages 286, 295. It is merely a chronicle of names and battles, and even at that a very glaring error is made. We read: "In August of the year 1648 after the three days' battle of Preston Pans Cromwell made an end of this second Civil War and took Edinburgh." Clearly, Mr. Van Loon is at sea. He confuses the battle of Preston in England with the 1745 rebellion, when "Bonnie Prince Charlie" defeated "Johnnie Cope" at Preston Pans in Scotland. Again, he does not mention the battle of Dunbar, fought in 1650, which really ended the second civil war. Cromwell had no occasion to "take" Edinburgh in 1648, it was his.

We regret to note the absence of any comment