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Book Review. M. H. Smith, Prisons and a Changing Civilisation

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BOOK NOTES

PRISONS AND A CHANGING CIVILISATION—by M. Hamblin Smith.
John Lane. The Bodley Head, Ltd., London, 1934. Pp. x, 150.

Imprisonment of human beings by human beings is a dramatic phenomenon. Does it merely reflect "man's inhumanity to man"—and thus distinguish the king primate from the other animals? Or does it rest upon grounds that are intellectually defensible? May it indeed be some index of that human aspiration which imparts to an otherwise infinitesimal speck of protoplasm clinging to a grain of dust, that awe and dignity which justifies suffering—even that inflicted upon fellow men?

The booklet here reviewed offers little to specialists who have dedicated themselves to the solution of these problems. As part of the publishers Twentieth Century Library, it was written for the "intelligent man or woman." Hence there is no occasion for a critique from the specialist's point of view. The purpose—to inform the lay public—is assuredly a commendable one. And, like many English scholars learned in the art of expression, the author discharges it with notable skill. The need for an enlightened public is obvious to any who have attempted social reforms—and especially in regard to treatment of criminals. Yet the American scholar allows movie director and journalist and sensationalist to fill the public mind with misinformation that retards application of available knowledge.

This book consists of a history of prisons—chiefly in England, and of discussions of imprisonment as retribution, as deterrent, and as a reformatory agency. A number of inaccuracies which would seriously mar strictly professional work, may be condoned in a popular presentation. On the whole, the book reflects wide reading and thoughtful analysis of the problems undertaken. The author's discussion and advocacy of centralization of authority over prisons and his proposals for reform are especially interesting. Even though specialists in the field may query the author's occasional dogmatism, they will find here a competent brief summary of modern penology by a well known psychiatrist. The book contributes to the formation of an intelligent public opinion on matters of vital importance. It should stimulate American scholars to undertake similar publications.

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