

Albert J. Nock: An Appreciation

HENRY REGNERY

THE FIFTEENTH ANNIVERSARY issue of *Modern Age* would seem to be an appropriate time and place to reconsider the career of Albert J. Nock. Although rather surprised to find himself in his later years classified as a conservative, there can be no doubt that he contributed substantially to the development of modern conservatism, and the spectacle of the generation in revolt which was raised on Spock, taught in progressive schools on Dick and Jane, and educated in colleges and universities almost completely dominated by liberalism, makes a reconsideration of Nock's views on such subjects as education, the state, and the place of the individual in society particularly timely.

Nock is something of an acquired taste, but for those who don't mind his strongly-held opinions, his prejudices, and his numerous dislikes, he can be refreshing and stimulating. Most of his books are now out of print, and the journal he edited in the early twenties, *The Freeman*, considered by some to have been the best magazine

ever published in this country, is a collector's item, but a small group of believers keeps his memory alive, and the fortunate person who for the first time happens to come upon his *Memoirs* has the exhilarating feeling of having made an important literary discovery.

Nock was born in Brooklyn in 1870, the only child of an Episcopal minister. He came from a large family connection, and grew up in a secure, established environment. The family later moved to a lumber town in Michigan on the shores of Lake Huron, where Nock spent the rest of his boyhood. From the time the ice froze in the fall until the spring thaw the town was completely isolated. He describes it affectionately as a self-reliant, independent place, full of characters; it seems to have been an ideal community for such a person as Nock to grow up in. He was sent to a boarding school in Illinois where he received good training, and then to a small college in New York State, St. Stephen's, which, from his account, must have been a no-nonsense sort

of place. Students were expected to have a fluent reading knowledge of Greek and Latin on arrival; the course of study consisted, in Nock's words, of "Readings and expositions of Greek and Roman literature; mathematics up to the differential calculus; logic; metaphysics; a little work on the sources and history of the English language." That was all; there were no courses in English, for instance—English was one's mother tongue and a student was expected to use it properly; as for English literature, that was in the library. After college Nock seems to have played professional baseball for several years while doing graduate work, and at the insistence of his mother, who is reputed to have been a rather purposeful woman, became, as his father had been, an Episcopal minister. He served in several parishes, but never seems to have been entirely satisfied with the calling of pastor, and in 1909 left the ministry to join the staff of the *American* magazine.

The *American* magazine had grown out of the reform movement of the early 1900's, and included on its staff Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, Ray Stannard Baker, Finley Peter Dunne, William Allen White and John Reed. Nock wrote frequently for the *American* and had a hand in the planning of many articles. He was by then a follower of Henry George, was active in some of the groups that promoted George's ideas, and by this means extended his circle of friends and acquaintances beyond that of the *American*. He met Brand Whitlock, for example, the reform mayor of Cleveland, and became a close, life-long friend. Another acquaintance of this period was William Jennings Bryan who, while Secretary of State in the first Wilson administration, asked Nock to make several trips to Europe on his behalf. The first months of World War I were spent in Brussels with his friend Brand Whitlock, who had become American ambassador.

Many of Nock's associations during those years must have been with liberals and reformers, but any inclination he may have had in those directions was soon dispelled. Mr. Wilson's eagerness to get into the European war, the peace that followed it—an "orgy of looting," Nock later described it, the enthusiasm of liberals for such "reforms" as the income tax and the direct election of senators, and finally the penchant of liberals to solve all social problems by legislation soon cured him of any temptation he may have harbored to embrace liberalism. He was later to write in the *Freeman*:

We can not help remembering that this was a liberal's war, a liberal's peace, and that the present state of things is the consummation of a fairly long, fairly extensive, and extremely costly experiment with liberalism in political power.

During the war he served on the editorial staff of the *Nation*, then edited by Oswald Garrison Villard, and enjoyed the distinction of having caused a whole issue to be suppressed by Mr. Wilson's post office department because of an article critical of Samuel Gompers. In 1920 he became the founding editor of the *Freeman*, a weekly journal of comment and criticism, which was supported financially by Francis Neilson, a former member of parliament who had opposed the war, resigned his seat, emigrated to America and married a Chicago Swift. According to Nock's account, when a young writer asked him about the magazine's editorial policy, and particularly whether there were any "sacred cows," he replied that there were three, "as untouchable and sacred as the Arc of the Covenant." These, he went on to say, were as follows: "You must have a point. You must make it out," and finally, "you must make it out in eighteen carat, impeccable, idiomatic English."

When the *Freeman* was discontinued in 1924 Nock enjoyed a considerable reputation in literary circles—there was still in those days something which could be called a republic of letters. He had no difficulty finding publishers for his books, although none of them made any concession to popularity or current intellectual fashions and all, he said, lost money, and he had a ready outlet for his witty, pungent essays in such magazines as *Harpers*, the *Atlantic*, the *American Mercury*, the *Century*, until World War II made Nock's kind of realism unwelcome. He wrote biographies of three of the men he greatly admired—Rabelais, Jefferson and Henry George, and edited an edition of the selected writings of another, Artemus Ward. Nock also edited a complete edition of Rabelais, for which the biography, later published as a separate book, was written as the Introduction. The book on Jefferson is still in print, and is a useful, interesting and penetrating study. The *Rabelais* is said to be somewhat dated by recent scholarship, but is well worth reading, if for no other reason than Nock's love of the subject and its fine writing. There are several collections of essays, and near the end of his life, in 1943, he published his last, and perhaps best book, *The Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*.

From all accounts, Nock was a man of considerable charm—distinguished looking, a brilliant conversationalist, proud of his skill as a billiard player, but intensely jealous of his privacy, and rather inaccessible except to those few favored by his friendship. According to one apocryphal story, the best way to get a message to him during the *Freeman* days was to leave it under a certain stone in Central Park, but it does seem to be true that he would go to a different town to mail letters to make it difficult for his correspondents to disturb his privacy. His oldest and most intimate friend had no idea that he had been mar-

ried and had two sons until he happened, by chance, to meet them on a ship. Nock spent much of his time between the two wars in Europe, chiefly in Belgium and France, but for all his dislike of the self-confident, rich, rather arrogant America of the time, he was, with his scepticism, his realism tempered by idealism, his independence, a true Jeffersonian American.

With the wreckage of the liberal theory of education all about us, it is refreshing and instructive to go back to Nock's rather heretical views on the subject. Much of his *Memoirs* is devoted to education, and there is a beautifully worked out book, based on a series of lectures he gave at the University of Virginia in 1931, *The Theory of Education in the United States*. Nock's views on education begin with a sharp distinction between intelligence and what he called "sagacity." It was the gift of sagacity and cleverness, he said, which made it possible for frail, weak *Homo sapiens* to survive in a hostile environment; it was sagacity which "enabled man to build up the prodigious apparatus of civilization." He seemed rather doubtful that intelligence or wisdom had much to do with this process. Intelligence, on the other hand, is required if man is "to civilize himself, or even to understand what civilization means." Unfortunately, Nock thought, having been given the sagacity and cleverness to build the elaborate mechanism of civilization, man has never had at his disposal the intelligence to give civilization sufficient direction and purpose; it is the lack of balance between these two gifts which makes human societies so unstable. Corresponding to his distinction between sagacity and intelligence, Nock distinguishes between two kinds of training—that which is functional and that which is formative. It is only formative training which can, in his opinion, truly be called education, but only the intelligent are capable of being educated.

Functional training, he said, can produce an Edison, while education may produce an Emerson. These two pairs of distinctions, between intelligence and sagacity on the one hand, and education and training on the other, are central to Nock's critique of contemporary education in America.

The title Nock chose for his autobiography, rather characteristically, was *The Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*. He was superfluous, he went to some length to explain, because, having belonged to the last American generation offered what he considered to be a proper education, he was an educated man, and America had no place for such a man—he was an anachronism. A society devoted to what he called “economism”—the social philosophy “which interprets the whole sum of human life in terms of the production, acquisition, and distribution of wealth” needed Edisons, Henry Fords, Andrew Carnegies, all clever, sagacious men, but none of them educated, nor in his opinion intelligent, but what was such a society to do with an educated man? In a society essentially neolithic, as Nock thought ours to be, there is no place for an educated or educable person which a trainable person could not fill. In making such observations Nock, of course, was indulging in a considerable amount of conscious overstatement, but when one compares the curriculum, say, of Michigan State University with its courses in beginning and advanced fly casting, with that offered to Nock at St. Stephen's College, it isn't all overstatement.

But what for Nock were the marks of intelligence? “The person of intelligence,” Nock wrote in his *Theory of Education in the United States*, “is the one who always tends to ‘see things as they are,’ the one who never permits his view of them to be directed by convention, by the hope of advantage, or by an irrational and arbitrary authoritarianism.” To this he added, “. . . and thus we may say that there are

certain integrities at the root of intelligence which give it somewhat the aspect of a moral as well as an intellectual attribute.” Wyndham Lewis came close to saying the same thing in the observation, “. . . the ability to *perceive* the true—which is under everybody's nose but not seen by everybody—is confined to people of considerable intelligence.”

If it is only those of intelligence, those who “always tend to see things as they are” who are capable of being educated, what did Nock understand education to be? For him, the purpose of education is to produce a disciplined and experienced mind, and the means to do this is the study of the literatures of Greece and Rome, which “comprise,” he said, “the longest and fullest continuous record available to us of what the human mind has been busy about in practically every department of spiritual and social activity.” It was “these studies,” he went on to say,

which were regarded as formative because they are *maturing*, because they powerfully inculcate the views of life and the demands on life that are appropriate to maturity and that are indeed the specific marks, the outward and visible signs, of the inward and spiritual grace of maturity. And now we are in a position to observe that the establishment of these views and the direction of these demands is what is traditionally meant, and what we citizens of the republic of letters mean, by the word education; and the constant aim at inculcation of these views and demands is what we know under the name of the great tradition in education.

Nock was of the opinion that education in the spirit of the great tradition had virtually disappeared in the United States; it was the victim of Gresham's law which, he thought, applied not only to money, but to everything else. When the idea became generally accepted that because higher educa-

tion was of benefit to some, it should be made available to all, then training had to be substituted for education, because it is only the few who are capable of being educated. "When we consider what the average is, we are quite free to say that the vast majority of mankind cannot possibly be educated." Nock, greatest heresy of all, even questioned the usefulness of trying to teach everyone to read. It was a noble intention, he admitted, and his much admired Jefferson was in favor of it, but considering the results—the sort of things most people read, and the effect of popular literacy on the general level of writing and publishing, Nock wasn't at all sure that it had been worth the effort. "Henry Adams," to quote Nock again,

said that the succession of Presidents from Washington to Grant was almost enough in itself to upset the whole Darwinian theory. . . . So one may say that the course of the *North American Review* from its illustrious editorship under Sparks, Everett, Dana, Lowell, Adams, down to the present time, is quite enough to upset the notion that universal literacy is an absolute good. The *North American Review* stands today as intellectual America's monument to the genius of Sir Thomas Gresham.

Nock's advice, needless to say, was not sought by any presidential commissions on higher education, nor did another university follow the example of the University of Virginia by inviting him to expound his views on the subject. With such disasters as that of Cornell before us, however, his firmly held opinion that everyone is not capable of being educated doesn't seem so preposterous as it may have in the 1930's. Nock would not be at all surprised at the turmoil and dissension now prevalent in the colleges and universities; he would no doubt say that it is a necessary and inevitable consequence of the misguided at-

tempt to educate people completely incapable of meeting the demands of higher education—they quite naturally feel threatened and out of place, and those capable of doing university work feel cheated by the watered down curriculum mass education has made necessary.

Nock had no objection to what he called "functional" training, nor did he deny it its proper place in society; what he did object to was confusing training with education, which he thought was detrimental to both, in fact placed real education in danger of extinction—Gresham's law again. Nock's two pairs of distinctions—intelligence as opposed to sagacity, and training as opposed to education, are no doubt too finely drawn, but they are useful nevertheless, and could certainly be helpful in resolving the major crisis in which our entire educational establishment now finds itself. Do the people really know what they are talking about who glibly assert that higher education should be available to everyone, and are we really doing all those people a kindness who are sent in masses to gigantic universities at public expense, when what most of them need is a chance to learn to make a living to enable them to earn an honorable place for themselves in society? Nock's distinctions may be drastic, and are certainly unwelcome to many, but they are honest, and were made by a man who tried to "see things as they are."

It should not be assumed that because of his use of the word "economism" to characterize the dominant attitude in the United States that Nock would have had anything in common with some such ADA type as, for example, John Kenneth Galbraith. While it is true that he didn't have a high opinion of men typified by Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie or Jay Gould, at the sight of a liberal he "sweat with agony." It was the liberals who were loading up the statute books, as he said, with social legislation,

thereby increasing the power of the state at the expense of society, reducing the individual to a "condition of complete state servitude," and "bringing forth the monster of collectivism, ravenous and rampant." He had no illusions about either liberals or liberalism, and his objection to the Henry Fords and Andrew Carnegies of the world was not that they had been spectacularly successful in producing goods and making money, but that for them these were the principle aims of life. Nock was a classicist, he believed that man should strive to create a society which would bring the various aspects of life into a harmonious whole. In one of his *Freeman* essays, which is included in a small collection of essays called *The Book of Journeyman* he puts this idea particularly beautifully:

The Great Tradition contemplates a harmonious and balanced development in human society of the instinct of workmanship (the instinct for progressive material well-being, with which industry and trade are concerned); the instinct of intellect and knowledge; the instinct of religion and morals; the instinct of beauty and poetry; the instinct of social life and manners.

Nock, as has been mentioned before, was a Jeffersonian American: he admired the self-reliance, the independence, the strong sense of individual worth which, in his mind, the Jeffersonian American represented, and which he remembered of the lumber town on Lake Huron of his boyhood, which didn't even have a police force, and didn't need one. But the America dominated by "economism" was something else again—"It [economism] can build a society which is rich, prosperous, powerful, even one which has a reasonably wide diffusion of material well-being. It cannot build one which has savour and depth, and which exercises the irresistible power of attraction that loveliness wields."

Nock's attitude toward the state was solidly Jeffersonian, and is succinctly expressed in the title of a collection of his essays on the subject, *Our Enemy the State*. Nock believed that there were three inexorable laws in all realms of human affairs, in politics, economics, culture, social organization or whatever: Gresham's law, the law of diminishing returns, and the law of exploitation, to which he gave the name, after the friend who formulated it for him, Epstean's law. Epstean's law, he thought, operates with the same immutability as the other two in human behavior, or the law of gravitation in physics—"Man tends always to satisfy his needs and desires with the least possible exertion." The trouble with all political theory, in Nock's opinion, was that none took these three laws of human behavior into account: the theory of republicanism, for example, is based on a conception of man not as he is, but as he ought to be, and is therefore doomed to failure.

Republican society must follow the historic pattern of gradual rise to a fairly high level of power and prestige, and then a rather sudden lapse into dissolution and displacement in favour of some other society which in turn would follow the same pattern.

Because of Epstean's law, Nock argued, the state always tends to become a well-organized system of exploitation; for the same reason all schemes to improve the lot of man by state action are doomed to failure—those in control will always distort such schemes for the purpose of satisfying their own needs and desires with the least possible exertion. How amused Nock would have been by the "War on Poverty." When the representative of a Chicago newspaper some months after the war on poverty had gotten under way was investigating the spending of "poverty" money in a county

in Southern Illinois, he reported that when he remarked to the man in charge that most of the money was apparently being used to give jobs to deserving Democrats, the latter, with remarkable candor replied, "But isn't that what it's for?"

Nock thought that to understand the workings of the state it was necessary to understand the difference between state power and what he called "social power." The more or less spontaneous mobilization of the resources of individuals to meet an immediate need is social power; Nock gave as an example the voluntary help extended at the time of the Johnstown flood. Our private schools, colleges, and universities, hospitals, art galleries, symphony orchestras are all expressions not of state power but of social power. The state, Nock thought, uses every contingency as an excuse to assume such powers to itself, but every increase in state power, which involves coercion, is at the expense of social power. How far we have gone in this direction, as Nock predicted we would, is illustrated by the plight of most private institutions—schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, art galleries, symphony orchestras. The state, by its power of unlimited taxation, takes such a large share of the national product that all such institutions now face a choice between extinction or state support on terms set by the state. But, as Nock said,

It is unfortunately none too well understood that, just as the state has no money of its own, so it has no power of its own. All the power it has is what society gives it, plus what it confiscates from time to time on one pretext or another; there is no other source from which state power can be drawn.

The growth of state power, he went on to say, is always at the expense of social power—as the state waxes, society wanes, and since the state derives its power from coercion, while social power is voluntary, the

whole process comes down to the substitution of force for freedom.

Nock believed that there were no accidents in history; events move with the iron law of necessity from cause to effect.

Because the nineteenth century was what it was the twentieth century must be what it is. . . there is no way of cutting in between cause and effect to make it something different from what it must be.

Because of the enormous growth of state power he saw under the New Deal, he didn't hold out much hope for American society. He thought that the process of collectivism would continue, was irreversible, in fact, and would probably end in military despotism.

Closer centralization; a steadily growing bureaucracy; state power and faith in state power increasing, social power and faith in social power diminishing; the State absorbing a continually larger proportion of the national income; production languishing, the State in consequence taking over one 'essential industry' after another, managing them with ever-increasing corruption, inefficiency and prodigality, and finally resorting to a system of forced labor.

So Nock, writing in 1935, saw the future. It has not yet gone that far, but who is to say that the chain of events isn't developing as he saw it?

Nock called himself an individualist. Where, in his inexorable chain of cause and effect, does the individual find himself, what is he to do about it all? Nock came to the conclusion, after a fairly long and active life, that something he had learned from a misplaced German aristocrat who was working as a church janitor in the Michigan lumber town of his boyhood, and who, in turn, had it from Montaigne, summed it all up very well:

Human beings are very much what they are, and their collective society is very much what it is, and nothing of any conceivable consequence can be done about either.

We are left, therefore, with ourselves. "In a word," he wrote,

ages of experience testify that the only way society can be improved is by the individualist method which Jesus apparently regarded as the only one whereby the Kingdom of Heaven can be established as a going concern; that is, the method of each *one* doing his very best to improve *one*.

In another place, he expressed the same idea by saying that the only way to improve society is to try to present it with one improved unit.

Along the same lines as his view of the individual in society is his theory of the Remnant, which he developed in an essay called "Isaiah's Job," which has often been reprinted, and is included in William F. Buckley's recent anthology of conservative writing. In the essay on the Remnant, it seems quite clear that Nock, consciously or unconsciously, was explaining his own position as a writer. God's instructions to Isaiah, as paraphrased by Nock, were to take care of the Remnant, the

. . . obscure, unorganized, inarticulate, each one rubbing along as best he can. They need to be encouraged and braced up, because when everything has gone completely to the dogs, they are the ones who will come back and build up a new society, and meanwhile your preaching will reassure them and keep them hanging on.

It is not the mass man, Nock thought, to whom anyone having something to say should direct his attention, but the Remnant, a word, he said, Plato also used in exactly the same way it was used by Isaiah. "The mass man," Nock said,

is one who has neither the force of intellect to apprehend the principles issuing in what we know as the humane life, nor the force of character to adhere to those principles steadily and strictly as laws of conduct; and because such people make up the great, the overwhelming majority of society, they are collectively called *the masses*. The line of differentiation between the masses and the Remnant is set invariably by quality, not by circumstance. The Remnant are those who by the force of intellect are able to apprehend those principles, and by force of character are able, at least measurably, to cleave to them; the masses are those who are unable to do either.

Nock's position with regard to the Remnant is of a piece with his distinction between intelligence and sagacity—the Remnant are those who make social life possible; they represent the element of any society which maintains standards and thereby keeps civilization going, but as Nock points out, and knew by experience, a writer who directs himself to this group isn't going to be overwhelmed by financial rewards—the publishers and editors of the *Playboys* of the world are far better paid than those who get out such journals as Nock's *Freeman*. One can be sure, however, as Nock was careful to point out, that the Remnant is there and is listening, besides which there are other compensations. In his own career Nock was rewarded in the way to which he no doubt attached the greatest value—by the recognition of people whose opinions he could respect.

From the selections from Nock's work quoted in the foregoing, and the emphasis placed on his views on education, a false impression may have been given of the sort of man he was. While he had no illusions about his fellow man, he viewed him with charity and understanding. Nock's view of man, it seems clear, was far more Christian, more tolerant and more humane than

that of the liberal intellectual with his talk of welfare, civil rights, equality and all the rest, who wants everyone to be integrated, adjusted, tested, analyzed and educated to fit a preconceived liberal image of what man should be—if we aren't equal, the liberal will make us so, whether we like it or not. Nock's choice of heroes—Jefferson, Rabelais, Artemus Ward and Henry George, all men who viewed their fellow man with tolerance and affection, and without illusion of any kind, says much about Nock himself. In his book on Rabelais there is the following observation, which may help to give balance to some of the Nockisms quoted before:

Men do about the best they can, as a rule, and it is the mere delirium of egotism to expect more from them. One may smile at their inconsistencies and stupidities, one may make a diverting study of their absurd faults and failures, and yet be quite aware that the essential

humanity underlying these untoward manifestations is pretty sound and by no means unlovely.

In the history of thought, Nock will probably not be considered a major figure. He had none of the driving creativity of his contemporary Wyndham Lewis, for example, whose general position was not unlike that of Nock, he made common cause with no one, and made no effort to work out a consistent, systematic body of ideas, but he was a wise, highly cultured man, he wrote a book, the *Memoirs*, which is an American classic, and he was an important, perceptive social critic. He saw what was going on and where we were going, and understood the trend and direction of his time as did few others. And finally, what he had to say he put into "eighteen carat, impeccable, idiomatic English," and it is still, a generation later, as it will be for generations to come, pertinent and well worth reading.

Books consulted for this article, and from which the quotations have been taken:

Crunden, Robert M., *The Mind and Art of Albert J. Nock*, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, 1964.

Nock, Albert J., *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*, Harper & Bros., New York, 1943; Henry Regnery Co., Chicago, 1964.

The Theory of Education in the United States, Harcourt, Brace, New York, 1932; Henry Regnery Co., Chicago, 1949.

The Book of Journeyman, Books for Libraries Press, Freeport, N. Y., 1967.

On Doing the Right Thing, Harper & Bros., New York, 1928.

Our Enemy the State, Caxton Printers, Caldwell, Idaho, 1946.

"Isaiah's Job," reissued in *American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century*, edited by William F. Buckley, Jr., Bobbs-Merrill Company, Indianapolis, 1970.

Francis Rabelais (with C. R. Wilson), Harper & Bros., New York, 1929.