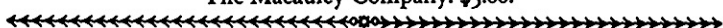


SCIENCE AND TABOO



SEX IN CIVILIZATION. Edited by V. F. Calverton and S. D. Schmalhausen.
The Macaulay Company. \$5.00.



THE post-war interest in sex, both principally and theoretically, has been notable in all the countries that were belligerents, but it has been most noticeable in Germany and the United States. In America the subject seems to have become almost an obsession with reformers and reactionaries alike. There can, however, be little doubt that in the end, as a result of all the discussion and hysteria, some mode of life will be reached which will be less cruel and less wasteful of human potentialities of happiness than the old system for which the reactionaries are still fighting. This book is a symposium of thirty-two contributors, most of them modern in their point of view, but a few quite old-fashioned. The most notable of the latter is Professor McDougall. A very characteristic thing in this article is that, in a discussion of Isadora Duncan's unhappy later years, it does not occur to him that her unhappiness could have had any connection with the death of her two children in an accident. This may be taken as typical of the outlook of those who are always prating about maternity as the sole function of Woman.

After an introduction by Havelock Ellis dealing largely with the dubious benefits of mechanisation, the book opens with two anthropological articles, one by Briffault on "Sex in Religion," and one by Alexander Goldenweiser on "Sex and Primitive Society." Both of these articles are full of interesting matter. Then comes an article on "Woman in Transition," by Mrs. Forbes-Robertson Hale and next the aforesaid article by Professor McDougall on the question "Should all Taboos be Abolished?", to which question, as might be expected, he gives a negative reply. One feels that if he dared he would say no taboo should be abolished. Several articles deal with the question of sex enlightenment for children and young people, and there is an admirable article on "Sex in Education" by Harry Elmer Barnes. We then come to "Sex and Psychoanalysis," in which four articles present the psychoanalytic point of view, while one is a thorough-going but rather unconvincing criticism of Freud. The next section, on "The Clinical Aspects of Sex," discusses many important topics in an enlightened manner. There is first a very persuasive article by Mrs. Sanger on "Birth Control," then a discussion on "Sex in the Adolescent Girl" by Phyllis Blanchard, which contains a considerable amount of case material. Then comes a very interesting discussion on "Physical Disabilities in Wives," and the book ends with "Sex in Poetry and Fiction," which is the only part of the book that strikes me as seriously inadequate. The connection of sex with art, with mysticism, with literary culture and with men's attitude towards life in general, raises difficult questions. They are none the less important for being difficult. Is all hard work and difficult achievement bound up with sadistic social systems? Who knows? Miss Mead has written a fascinating book showing how happy the Samoans are owing to the paucity of their sex taboos, but it is possible to urge, as McDougall does, that this very happiness and freedom is connected with the unprogressive character of their society. I do not myself accept the view that all good work is due to pain and repression, but at the same time I can see a good deal to be said in favour of this view, and I think it very necessary that advocates of reform should tackle this question if they are to make their case unanswerable.

The editors are to be warmly congratulated upon their courage in undertaking so vast an enterprise and their success in carrying it through. The book is packed full of information which educated people ought to have but frequently do not have, and I have repeatedly found, in reading it, enlightened and civilized points of view on matters concerning which it is very rare to find anything in print except ignorant barbarity.

The book is to be recommended wholeheartedly to all who wish to base their opinions about sexual questions on reason, not on prejudice and tradition. Fortunately the number of such persons is increasing very rapidly. I say fortunately, since the traditional opinions in this sphere have almost nothing to recommend them except that they afford an apparently justified outlet for the sadism of the ultra virtuous.

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