THE GREAT THOUGHTS

From Abelard to Zola, from Ancient Greece to contemporary America, the ideas that have shaped the history of the world

Compiled by

George Seldes

With a Foreword by Henry Steele Commager

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Ballantine/29887/$14.95 in USA • $19.95 in Canada

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BALLANTINE BOOKS
NEW YORK

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 84-45673

ISBN: 0-345-29887-X

Text design by Ann Gold
Cover design by Ray Barber
Manufactured in the United States of America

12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

This book is dedicated to the memory of my wife, Helen Larkin Seldes, who helped me for many years gather and evaluate the great thoughts which rule the world; and to my neighbor Edna Belisle, the Woodstock Ambulance, and Dr. Hugh P. Hermann, who together saved me from death one morning, when the final draft was only half completed. . . .

And to twenty-six friends, my neighbors in Hartland and nearby towns who make living here possible, and to whom I have dedicated my birthday parties ever since I was ninety. . . .

And to everyone who made publication possible, including editors Joëlle Delbourgo and Elizabeth Sacksteder at Ballantine Books, and Mary Lee Coughlin, who struggled with every one of the thousands of paragraphs for many months, until *The Great Thoughts* achieved its final form.

George Seldes
Hartland-4-Corners, Vermont

FOREWORD

Because Americans have had, from the beginning, a "free" press, we have had a longer tradition of the congenital nay-sayer, the contrary-minded, and the "come-outer" than most other nations. That tradition began with *Common Sense*, and with *The Crisis* (written as a series of newspaper articles). It was continued by William Lloyd Garrison and his anti-slavery *Liberator*, which insured that he "would be heard"; by Theodore Parker, the Great American Preacher, who dissented from the Dissenters and preached to the largest congregation in the country; and by Frederick Douglass, who published his own paper to carry on the work that Parker left unfinished. In the next century the tradition was carried on by Bryan, whose *Commoner* was his private organ; by Fighting Bob LaFollette, who gave his *Weekly* his own name; by William Allen White, who made his Emporia *Gazette* a national newspaper; and by I.F. Stone, whose *Weekly Newsletter* is alas no more with us.

It is to this tradition that George Seldes belongs. He had, from the beginning—that was way back in the first decade of this century—the right credentials. His father had set an example: a failed pharmacist, he was not at all a failed radical, what with his admiration for Tolstoy and Kropotkin and Thoreau, and for Henry George, whose name his own son bore (the son was forced by his *Chicago Tribune* service chief to drop the "Henry"). Young George blundered into journalism, as it were. He was the star reporter for the Pittsburg *Post* and the Chicago *Tribune*, then a member of Pershing's press corps of war correspondents, eventually becoming head of the *Tribune* bureau in Rome and Berlin. As a correspondent he discovered a knack—almost a genius—for being *there* at the right time. He was there in Lenin's Moscow, there in Mussolini's Rome, there in Hitler's Berlin, there when the French stormed Damascus, there when Franco conquered Spain; sooner or later he met almost everyone and took their measure—usually one that fitted a bit tightly.

But twenty years of journalism disillusioned him—not with life, not with the American people, but with journalism—all except his own. So, in 1940—could he have picked a worse time?—he launched his own private newsletter, called quite simply *In fact*. Ever sanguine, he hoped to reach a million readers—working people, mostly, and intellectuals. That hope was doomed, but in fact *In fact* did pretty well—not far from two hundred thousand, which was more than all the major liberal weeklies combined. The time was not, after all, propitious for either independence or candor.

From the beginning, Seldes boasted that he "belonged to no party, no organization, no group, society, or faction." He might have added "to no nation," for with Tom Paine he could say, "My country is mankind." Better yet, he might have said with Paine that while "moderation in temper is always a virtue, moderation in principle is always a vice."

The accuracy of that depends, to be sure, upon the principle. In Seldes' case the principle was quite simply that the truth shall make men free.

After the war Seldes returned to his home in Vermont, where he could cultivate his garden and at the same time cultivate philosophy. Out of that retreat came, some twenty years ago, his compendium of Great Quotations. Since then he has been collecting and—we may be sure—assimilating Great Thoughts.

The Great Thoughts is a tribute not only to those thinkers who have influenced George Seldes, but to Seldes himself, who lived with them and by them, who has found them comforting, stimulating, and challenging. Clearly it is his hope that they will serve this purpose for others.

Henry Steele Commager
Amherst, Massachusetts
December 1984

INTRODUCTION

"Great men are they who see that spiritual
is stronger than any material force, that thoughts
rule the world."

—Emerson, *Progress of Culture*

No one, so far as I know, has ever challenged the Rev. Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson's impressive dictum. The philosopher-king Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (120–180 A.D.) believed that the "universe is change," and that "our life is what our thoughts make it." Paracelsus (1493–1541) wrote that "thoughts are free and are subject to no rule. On them rests the freedom of man, and they tower above the light of nature . . . create a new heaven, a new firmament, a new source of energy from which new arts flow." In the seventeenth century the French mathematician–philosopher Blaise Pascal (who indeed may have influenced Mr. Emerson) wrote that "man's greatness lies in the power of thought," and in my own lifetime the English mathematician-philosopher Bertrand Russell, whom I once met, confirmed these views on my present subject:

> Men fear thought as they fear nothing else on earth—more than ruin—more even than death . . .
>
> Thought is subversive and revolutionary, destructive and terrible, thought is merciless to privilege, established institutions, and comfortable habit. Thought looks into the pit of hell and is not afraid. Thought is great and swift and free, the light of the world, and the chief glory of man.

A hundred notable men and women, from A to W, from Henry Adams to Sir Henry Wotton, have similarly expressed themselves. Nor are these sentiments confined to great men or intellectuals.

On reading the paragraphs above, one of my native Vermont neighbors who frequently helps me with my manuscripts, recently remarked, "Words are weapons." (My friend assures me that he had never read Hazlitt's *Table Talk* nor any Hazlitt commentator who quoted the famous remark, "Great thoughts reduced to a practice become great acts.")

My own efforts to record the greatest thoughts of the ages began some fifty years ago, in the 1930s. At that time I was writing a great deal on freedom of the press, and often needed suitable epigraphs for books or chapters on the subject. Although a number of collections of quotations were then available, I could find in them nothing of John Stuart Mill, whose *On Liberty* I had read not once but perhaps five times, nor anything I needed

from Milton's *Areopagitica: A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing,* one of the great landmarks not only of freedom of the press but freedom of mankind. I became convinced that a book of not merely familiar but of truly *great* quotations would be welcomed by many people. After many years of work on the project, *The Great Quotations* was published, and my feeling was almost immediately justified by sales—which have now passed the 1,100,000 mark, clothbound and paperback.

Yet from the day in 1960 when I held the first printed copy in my hand, I began to think of improvement, of additions and eliminations, and when technical difficulties prevented them, I had a vague idea—this vagueness was twenty years ago—that I could abandon "quotations" altogether and gather from the literature of the world, and perhaps even the morning newspapers, only the great thoughts which Mr. Emerson told me rule the world.

Further food for thought came from an unexpected source. In preparing *The Great Quotations* (as well as the volume you hold in your hand) I had written to scores, perhaps a hundred, notable persons of my time, asking them to verify the accuracy of the quotations that I had selected from their work. Curiously enough, the world famous with whom I corresponded—Einstein in 1954, Shaw in 1937, and Freud in 1924, for example—all replied, whereas many others who never achieved greatness ignored the matter of correcting their proofsheets. All were asked for suggestions, and the most notable reply was a 2-page holograph letter from Aldous Huxley which cost me weeks of work but was nevertheless of utmost value. Mr. Huxley seems to have sensed or suspected that I had been working for many years under the impression that "great" thoughts must necessarily mean "good" thoughts, that I was not including the great and powerful and most important evil thoughts of princes, kings, dictators, and demagogues who had, not only in ancient times but only yesterday, ruled a large part, in fact a major part, of the self-styled civilized world. Mr. Huxley concluded:

> It might be interesting to have a short section in your book devoted to what may be called negative quotations—utterances of pure nonsense, pollyanna uplift, anti-intelligence and anti-liberty—all drawn from the speeches or writings of the eminent. E.g. passages in praise of the executioner as the main pillar of civilized society from Joseph de Maistre's "Soirées de St. Petersbourg." Passages from Louis Veuillot's "Parfums de Rome," holding up the papal pre-1870 government as the best in the world. Passages on infant damnation from St. Augustine and from the Calvinists. Passages on Jesus as a salesman from Bruce Barton. And so forth. A few pages of these wd constitute a stimulating Chamber of Horrors—or, divided up, might serve as a preface to the various sections of your book.

Although several of our century's greatest evil thinkers had already gone to their rewards at the time Mr. Huxley wrote this letter—Hitler by his own hand and Mussolini shot by his own people then hanged by his feet from the rafters of a gas station—Stalin was still murdering dissenters by the tens of thousands; the nation which boasted one billion inhabitants, China, was still an absolute dictatorship; and their little imitators were ruling countries by force, by imprisonment, torture, and death, and at best by brain-washing and mind-manipulation, while addressing their populations and the world with words, good or evil, important enough to be recorded. While Mr. Huxley's suggestion changed substantially the content of *The Great Quotations,* it has had perhaps an even greater effect on this

book. I have endeavored throughout to represent the evil and destructive ideas of the ages that have periodically made the world a worse place in which to live.

Some fifty years ago I began underlining passages and making notes in the margins of my books—never the first editions, never the well-printed, well-bound copies, but the early dollar reprints and the later paperbacks. It made the work of years later much easier, and today, it is just one year short of a quarter of a century since I began copying, on ten thousand filing cards, the collected *great* thoughts, and some eight or nine years since I began the actual preparation of this manuscript.

Although the marked pages and passages have been a great help, I have had to read or reread many of the books which have moved or changed or ruled the world, and almost every day has been worthwhile—whether it involved rereading all or parts of *War and Peace,* or *Moby Dick,* or *Walden,* or perhaps Plato's *Republic* or the *Nichomachean Ethics* of Aristotle, or even Theodore Dreiser's turgid masterpiece, *Sister Carrie* (which Sinclair Lewis insisted honestly should have won the Nobel Prize years before he got his).

Most of the world's masterpieces are read because they are required reading in high schools and colleges; they make little impression on young minds and are immediately forgotten by almost everyone. Except one day the graduate may read somewhere a list of "the ten best novels" or "the hundred greatest books of all time" and can contentedly say, "I have read every one of them." How many people read a great book again in their mature years? How many of the millions who do read books realize they are missing one of the truly great pleasures of life by not *re-reading* books?

One of the real purposes of this collection is to recall to the reader one or more of the great thoughts he or she found in the great books years and years ago, and to stir the reader's imagination to the point of finding the book in the library and reading it again. Not only the *Nichomachean Ethics* but *Sister Carrie* will take on new dimensions of greatness—as the present writer found out only recently.

In addition to the extensive reading that I have done in preparing this collection, I have also actually talked to a number of men who have given us thoughts that changed the world in our lifetime—or, having now passed my 94th year, I should perhaps say, my lifetime. Among them are Lenin and Einstein, and I missed meeting Freud in Vienna only through the trickery of a journalistic colleague. I did become an intimate visitor, if not a personal friend, of another great man who in the course of history will be recognized: I am referring to the Vienna psychiatrist Alfred Adler, "the father of individual psychiatry"—a man big enough to open his home every Wednesday afternoon to a score or two of foreigners, psychiatrists, Americans studying medicine, and even a journalist or two.

The only words Hitler spoke during the two-and-a-half hour reception the Baron von Maltzan gave for the foreign press and the leaders of all seven political parties in 1925 were "*Guten Tag*" and "*Guten Abend.*" But later, in Nürnberg in the 1930s, I heard him rant and rage and roar for hours without adding anything to his two previous profound remarks. (It is my view, based on considerable information I had during my years as a correspondent in Berlin, that the great if evil thoughts in *Mein Kampf* are not Hitler's but those of his cell companion, Rudolf Hess, to whom, the story goes, Hitler "dictated" his book.) On the other hand, while I lived in Italy I heard Mussolini denounce the Goddess of Liberty and proclaim the "profoundly moral values of violence"—and incidentally, in an interview he granted me, try to pass off Nietzsche's famous or notorious views as his own. Lenin, in one interview, and the three or four times I heard him speak, said nothing especially noteworthy, but unlike his fellow dictators, Lenin did smile on many occasions, and even at

times illustrated his views with a little commonplace humor. Like many great men, these historic figures were in many ways banal; it is not (except possibly in Lenin's case) the greatness of their thoughts but the thoroughness of their execution of them that changed history—illustrating again the truth of Hazlitt's famous remark.

In the literary world, it has been my good fortune to know Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser very well, Thomas Wolfe slightly; and during the Spanish Civil War my wife and I lived in the same little hotel as Hemingway (and scores of war correspondents from all parts of the world). But I cannot remember a phrase spoken by Lewis, Dreiser, Wolfe, Hemingway, or any other notable writers I have met worth reporting—whereas in their books they demonstrate their great worth, whether recognized by the Nobel committee or not.

Although I never met him personally, Freud serves as the best illustration of the work which has occupied most of my past decade. For a good six months of that time, forsaking all others, I read and copied out from the complete British edition of his works what has now become known as the Freudian philosophy. When finally assembled and edited and typed cleanly, there were just 40 pages or about 12,000 words, all of which I valued and could not destroy. (In conventional collections of quotations Freud is represented by a few short selections—if anything at all.) Obviously 40 pages is an impossibility in a volume seeking to encompass the whole world in say 1500 manuscript pages—but what are editors for? In the end I had to thank them humbly for reducing Freud to twenty, perhaps eighteen pages—which is still, I believe, the largest section devoted to one human being, living or dead, and representative of his lasting importance as a great thinker.

CENSORSHIP AND SUPPRESSION

"Every burned book enlightens the world." —Emerson, "Compensation"

One of the first impressions received from reading the original works—books, letters, contemporary reports—of thinking men and women on all important subjects must be that censorship and suppression have always existed. Incredible as it may seem, especially to professional patriots, not only the military leaders who established this Republic but the politico-philosophical leaders who guided the course of the American Revolution were both victims of contemporary and later witch hunters. As late as 1956, before the Senate Judiciary Committee, when a representative of Americans for Democratic Action read a statement of Thomas Jefferson's, one of the Senators from the State of Utah, A. V. Watkins, denounced it as false and unbelievable. Confronted with the evidence—a letter from Jefferson to Madison in 1787, available in most history books in most of the nation's libraries—Senator Watkins declared: "If Jefferson were here and advocated such a thing, I would move that he be prosecuted."

What Jefferson had written to Madison was simply this: "I hold that a little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing."*

*Mr. Jefferson also wrote in 1787 to Colonel W.S. Smith: "What country can preserve its liberties, if its rulers are not warned from time to time, that its people preserve the spirit of resistance?"

The reader will not find Jefferson's views on an occasional "little rebellion" keeping his country on the course originally planned for it in any of the popular, conventional, safe, and harmless compendiums of the thoughts of the Founders of our country. It may also come as a surprise to Conservatives to learn that their idol, the First President of the United States, wrote in 1789 of mankind becoming more "liberal" and expressed the hope of seeing America "among the foremost nations in examples of justice and liberality"—one of his many similar remarks. The world "Liberal" has not changed its meaning throughout the centuries, and this is why Mussolini proclaimed that "Fascism . . . does not hesitate to call itself illiberal and anti-liberal" and "Fascism now throws the noxious theories of so-called Liberalism upon the rubbish heap," and again, "Communism and Fascism have nothing to do with Liberalism."

On the other hand, President Eisenhower was generally hailed for his Conservatism, "Dynamic Conservatism," and "Progressive Dynamic Conservatism"—if one can imagine such a political policy—and Gladstone once referred to the American uprising of 1775 as "a conservative revolution." If one is fair-minded in quoting FDR's 1939 radio address in which he said that "A Conservative is a man with two perfectly good legs who, however, has never learned to walk," one must also quote the preceding definition: "A Radical is a man with both feet firmly planted in the air." Conservatism is equally a part of the American tradition although not always given equal time in literary and academic circles.

Modern bookburning and censorship have especially interested me since the day in 1924 when the English writer William Bolitho, hearing that I had been assigned to Rome, suggested I make it my first business to collect everything extant on Mussolini's past. The Italian dictator was then suppressing all documentary evidence of his former political incarnations as a radical, communist, socialist, and atheist, notably his own youthful writings, including a 1904 pamphlet entitled, *Dieu n'existe pas.* Forty years later, revisiting Russia secretly, I was able to investigate Stalin's success in censoring and destroying every printed word about his past which did not make him the Soviet hero and leader, next only to Lenin. He had suppressed Jack Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World* and had it rewritten, substituting his name and eliminating Trotsky's as co-founder of the R.S.F.S.R. in 1917. Stalin actually succeeded in withdrawing the Great Soviet Encyclopedia and eliminating Trotsky from its pages. There is no mention of the great Russian famine of 1922 when American help saved the lives of between six and ten million Russians—several of them now the rulers of the country. Every day for a week I questioned fifty or sixty of the 70,000 students in Moscow University, the brightest young minds in the country, and never in my life have I heard so many falsifications and distortions believed in as "the true history of our country."

As for Hitler, if one were to search for something to say in his favor, it might be the fact that he destroyed books in a public bonfire and published their titles throughout the world rather than eliminating them by stealth or having them forged.

Nor can the United States escape censure in the matter of censorship and suppression. The State Department not only purged its Army libraries abroad after World War II but in several cities burned the censored books secretly.* When, shortly afterwards, for-

*In 1953 Senator Joe McCarthy subpoenaed no less than 100 authors, myself included, whose books were found in overseas libraries. Those who refused to take an oath saying they were not communists were held for public hearings, Hollywood style, with cameras and voice recorders, and held up to public ridicule. Several were thereby deprived of a livelihood.

eign correspondents were able to publish the news, public opinion was so aroused that President Eisenhower concluded his 1953 Dartmouth College commencement oration with the memorable words, "Don't join the book burners"—words which may outlive all the others spoken or written by him.

It is unfortunate, however, that in the three decades following the Dartmouth Declaration there has not been a year or two without headlines reporting censorship. And, for the first time, the nation has become aware of the disgraceful pressures which have been brought to bear upon publishers by the buyers of books for the vast public school system, with the result that books have been withdrawn and expurgated—*Huckleberry Finn* one of the many victims.

As for this volume, it must speak for itself. No subject called "controversial" by those who want to censor or suppress it has been omitted, no Ism because it was a "sacred cow"; throughout the following pages the reader will find, whether he approves of them or not, subjects generally omitted elsewhere. For example:

Libertarianism, Liberalism
Conservatism, Toryism, the status quo
Democracy vs. Fascism
Radicalism, Socialism, Communism, Anarchism
Atheism, Agnosticism, Deism, Freethought
Capitalism, Free Enterprise, Laissez-faire
Individualism, Collectivism, Totalitarianism
Sex, Love, Passion, Lust

Even before the present era, when "Liberal" has become a dirty word in the dull lexicon of narrow-minded people, the word "Libertarian" has always been suspect—although Liberty is a subject sacred to every American school child, and perhaps even to many who have grown up. But call yourself a "Libertarian" and perhaps a majority of those who hear you immediately grow suspicious, and sometimes even angry.

As for "Individualism" and "Non-conformity," one has only to compare the writings of such men as Jefferson, Monroe, Madison, Ethan Allen, and Tom Paine with the almost daily propaganda of the new Conservatives to realize how far backwards from the time of the founders of the nation and its first thinkers we have gone in recent times. The great waves of censorship in the past few years, most notably in the schools of the generation soon to reach its maturity and eventually to run the country, are the latest example of modern thought control in America. (At the same time we are far from the totalitarian Soviet regime, where everything is censored, everyone is brainwashed, the vast masses of people are mind-manipulated; in non-dictatorial countries like our own, despite censorship and all attempts at thought control, one is still free to speak, to publish, to form a political party, to vote according to conscience, and to change everything.)

The honest compiler of great quotations or great thoughts, working for honest readers, must of necessity leave his own prejudices, convictions, and perhaps stupidities, behind; he must never omit or even consider omitting anything important in his chosen field—even at the risk of the enmity of the narrow-minded and the prejudiced, many of them in powerful positions, who can censor and distort and falsify and suppress without ever being found out.

BOOKS RULE THE WORLD

"Books rule the world, or at least those nations which have a written language; the others do not matter."
—Voltaire

Long before picture-writing was superceded by an alphabet, long before illuminated manuscripts, and even before Gutenberg "did use at an early period in his career a mechanical press of some kind," important thoughts in the form of laws to be obeyed by the populace—for example, the Babylonian code of Hammurabi—were cut into stone pillars and displayed in the public squares. Centuries later the most civilized of all people, the Greeks, could read not laws, regulations of property ownership, threats of imprisonment, but the greatest words of their Seven Sages cut into marble pillars of the temple of Apollo at Delphi. My Britannica tells me that the first inscriptions in history were the cuneiform characters on clay tablets dating "as early as 2400 B.C.," and that Gutenberg printed the Bible before 1456—the first printed book.

If books have ruled the world for some 4400 years, the question logically arises, which books? This question has intrigued the literary and educational world for a long time. According to Dr. Robert B. Downs, onetime president of the American Library Association and head of the University of Illinois Library, in 1935 *Publishers Weekly* asked three of the most noted literary men of the time which books published in the past fifty years they thought had had the greatest influence on the American people. John Dewey, Charles A. Beard, and Edward Weeks each prepared a list of fifty titles, but only four of them appeared on all three lists:

Marx: *Das Kapital*
Bellamy: *Looking Backward*
Frazer: *The Golden Bough*
Spengler: *The Decline of the West*

In 1939 Malcolm Cowley and Bernard Smith polled the leading educators, critics, and littérateurs of the day to find out which were "Books That Changed Our Minds." From the 134 entries they received, they selected the following to discuss in their book on the subject:

Freud: *The Interpretation of Dreams*
Adams: *The Education of Henry Adams*
Turner: *The Frontier in American History*
Sumner: *Folkways*
Veblen: *Business Enterprise*
Dewey: *Studies in Logical Theory*
Beard: *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*
Parrington: *Main Currents in American Thought*

Lenin: *The State and the Revolution*
Spengler: *The Decline of the West*

Numerous literary men and women, most notably in England and America, have engaged in this fascinating business of list-making. Of the dozen or more that I have come upon in the past half century, the majority place the Bible first, and several include not only the Koran but St. Augustine's *City of God* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress.* Shakespeare is of course a popular choice. Those compilers who have limited themselves to modern times usually agree on Darwin, Marx, Freud, Einstein, and Harvey's *De Motu Cordis.* Only one modern work of fiction crops up on these lists of great books, and even it is not generally mentioned: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, which every school child in my time was forced to read because, teacher said, it was a powerful attack upon slavery and helped justify the Civil War which ended it.

All in all, there are so many repetitions among the lists that the total number of titles is probably no more than a hundred. Although all are credited with having "ruled," "changed," or "moved" the world, or having had a great influence on the rather small minority of civilized people who read books, several titles have been censored and burned in public—and in more cruel ancient times not only have great books been burned but their authors have been reduced to ashes along with their works.

Dr. Mortimer J. Adler, one of the best minds of our time, to whom I have already paid tribute in my introduction to *The Great Quotations,* once engaged in a more unusual list-making project. With the assistance of a large research staff, he spent eight years judging no less than 700 possible candidates for the answer to the questions, "What is an idea?" and "What are the great ideas?"

In answering the latter question, Adler came up with an "irreducible minimum of 102." In the six years that followed the publication of this list, Dr. Adler wrote that he had received no suggestions for additions of comparable magnitude to his original items. Inasmuch as the original list includes Liberty, Justice, Labor, Life and Death, Love, Man, Opinion, Philosophy, Progress, Religion, Truth, War and Peace, Wealth, Will, Wisdom, World, and 83 similarly all-embracing ideas, the reason no one proposed an addition is obvious.

If Dissent and all modern Isms—Socialism, Communism, Naziism, Fascism, even Republicanism and Liberalism are not named among the 102, most of them are probably included under other headings. Dr. Adler has stated that some great ideas—God, State, Man, Knowledge, and Wealth—involve as many as forty or fifty different topics. He does not list either Rebel or Radical, neither Agnosticism nor Non-Conformity, but here again they may be covered by such general ideas as Government, Politics, and Religion.

It is my hope that in this volume none of Dr. Adler's great ideas have been neglected. They are, however, arranged by thinker, rather than subject, as my aim has been not only to record the great thoughts, but to provide an overview of the thought of particular great thinkers. Readers who want to achieve a basic understanding of the entire work of, say, Aristotle or Freud or Marx or Proust will, I hope, find this book suited to the purpose. Those who prefer to explore a variety of thinkers' approaches to a particular idea will find the index helpful.

Certain of the absolutely greatest ideas have, however, been intentionally omitted—specifically, those found in the Bible, as well as the Koran, the various books of the Sayings of Confucius, and the sacred books of Buddhism, which have shaped the lives of not a few

great thinkers, but millions, probably billions of people. The reasons for this omission are, first, the technical impossibility of the task—a hundred times more impossible than devoting a mere 20 pages to Dr. Freud—and, second, my desire not to duplicate the efforts of others. In the case of the Bible, in almost every library in the country one can find concordances which list every thought, every idea, almost every word, not once but several times; and there are guides and quotation books for every religion that survives today, as well as most of the forgotten ones. Similarly, Shakespeare is not quoted in these pages; not only are concordances readily available, but he is relatively well represented in the conventional quotation books. Nor have I included proverbs and other sayings of anonymous origin. Not only are these recorded elsewhere, but, in my view, few qualify as great thoughts; whatever greatness they may once have had has been lost through over-familiarity. "A stitch in time saves nine" may be a good idea, but it's also a cliché. I have preferred to stress the fresh, not the stale; the unfamiliar, not the hackneyed; the profound, not the glib.

GREAT THOUGHTS: A BOOK, A PAGE, A PHRASE

As we have seen, the qualified persons who have made this subject their study have agreed that books have changed the world, moved the world, and in fact ruled the world. Yet many of us who read books have limited leisure for reading and cannot begin to determine for ourselves exactly which books (or portions of books), out of the millions in our bookstores and libraries, will reward us with the most insight into the world we live in. Fortunately for us, learned men have for centuries devoted years of study to providing us with this kind of guidance. The Oxford University Press, for example, has succeeded in producing in two volumes of some 4500 pages its *Anthology of English Literature,* covering the Middle Ages through the twentieth century; and Dr. Mary Warnock, Fellow of St. Hugh's College, Oxford, has produced for the New American Library a volume on Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill in a mere 352 pages.

And yet, the biographies of many notable men tell us that one great thought in one paragraph, or on one page, or, in an amazing case, one great phrase, was enough to change the career of its reader, a great man. In this way one thought can be said to have influenced many persons for many years—and will continue to do so, perhaps for centuries.

One example of this phenomenon is Mr. Bernard Shaw. Anyone who ever heard him speak in public with his strong Irish accent, as I once did at the Albert Hall in London, may have heard him say, "Henry George made a man of me."* He had been accustomed to going from book shop to book shop in the Charing Cross Road, picking up a shilling volume and reading a paragraph or a page before deciding whether or not to buy. He does not name the book by Henry George that he found on that fateful day when he achieved manhood, but it could have been none other than *Progress and Poverty.*

I myself was brought up on this book. My father, without knowing Mr. Shaw's views on the subject, told his sons that his whole life changed when, as a very young man work-

*Shaw frequently also said in public, "Karl Marx made a man of me." But, as the anecdote will show, I have a personal reason for preferring the former statement.

ing for a living in New York City, he stumbled upon a parade one day in 1886 and joined it. He heard Henry George, candidate for mayor, the favorite of the whole population, expound the Single Tax, and my father immediately offered his services on Sunday, his free day, at George's headquarters.

I have always wondered what page it was that Mr. Shaw read which made a convert of him, what great idea he came upon in his youth which so influenced him. Could it have been these few paragraphs which were underlined in the copy my father gave me:

> This association of poverty with progress is the great enigma of our time. It is the central fact from which spring industrial, social and political difficulties that perplex the world, and with which statesmanship and philanthropy and education grapple in vain. . . . it is the riddle which the Sphinx of Fate puts to our civilization, and which not to answer is to be destroyed.
>
> So long as all the increased wealth which modern progress brings goes but to build up great fortunes, to increase luxury and make sharper the contrast between the House of Have and the House of Want, progress is not real and cannot be permanent. . . .
>
> This then is the remedy for the unjust and unequal distribution of wealth in modern civilization, and for all the evils which rise from it:
>
> *We must make land common property.*

Henry Steele Commager, in his *Living Ideas in America,* says of *Progress and Poverty:* "Few other American books and certainly no other American economic treatise exercised a comparable influence in the world at large." Although younger Americans may today be unfamiliar with this work, it lives on in the ideas of others, as readers of the excerpts quoted in this book cannot fail to recognize.

Mark Twain (or Samuel L. Clemens, as his living relatives inform me they want him to be known), in his *What Is Man?,* states that "the chance reading of a book or of a paragraph in a newspaper, can start a man on a new track and make him renounce his old associations and seek new ones that are in sympathy with his new ideal; and the result for that man, can be an entire change of his way of life."

As for Eugene V. Debs, whom a generation knew as the perpetual Socialist candidate for President of the United States, it was not until he was sent to jail for the first time that he began to read Karl Marx and so became the Socialist leader of his time. He had been brought up on Hugo and Voltaire, whose books he had found in his father's library, but it was his reading in prison that changed his life.

The most amazing conversion, it seems to me, is that of the English philosopher and jurist Jeremy Bentham, whose lifework was the result of reading not one great book or even one page of a great book, but of a single phrase.

"In 1768, when he came back to Oxford to record his vote at the University parliamentary election," writes Dr. Warnock, Bentham "happened to go into a circulating library attached to the coffeehouse near Queen's, and there he found a copy of Joseph Priestley's new pamphlet, 'Essay on Government.' In it he found the phrase 'The greatest happiness of the greatest number.' On this discovery he says: 'It was by that pamphlet and this phrase in it that my principles on the subject of morality, public and private, were determined. It was from that pamphlet and that page of it that I drew the phrase, the words and the import of which have been so widely diffused over the civilized world.' "

"Upon certain ideas derived from Helvetius and Beccaria," continues Dr. Warnock,

"and upon this phrase of Priestley's he decided that he would build a foundation for scientific jurisprudence and for legislation; in fact he devoted the whole of his life to this task."

While it is unlikely that any of my readers will experience a conversion comparable to Bentham's as a result of reading a phrase or a paragraph collected in *The Great Thoughts,* the example does serve to illustrate the potential value of my approach. Quotations lifted out of context in a compilation like this one obviously cannot replace the experience of reading a great thinker's work in its entirety. But sometimes an isolated phrase or paragraph will work on the reader's imagination more forcefully than it might when buried in a possibly difficult text. Each time a quotation in this book makes a reader think about a problem in a new way, I shall have achieved my aim.

Of course not every thought contained herein will speak to every reader in this way. To some readers, the greatness of certain quotations may in fact seem obscure. I confess that I am unable to answer the pertinent question: What constitutes a *great* thought? As we have already seen, when the most competent persons of the time were engaged to choose the great books, it was found that all agree in very few instances. Nevertheless I am sure that every reader of the great Greek philosophers, coming upon the following from the "Aphorisms" of Epicurus, will agree with me that it is a great thought, probably one of the greatest, for it aims directly at one of the vital problems which has afflicted man since he began to think, the problem of good and evil. Epicurus wrote, circa 300 B.C.:

> The gods can either take away evil from the world and will not, or, being willing to do so cannot; or they neither can nor will, or lastly, they are both able and willing. If they have the will to remove evil and cannot, then they are not omnipotent. If they can, but will not, then they are not benevolent. If they are neither able nor willing, then they are neither omnipotent nor benevolent. Lastly, if they are both able and willing to annihilate evil, how does it exist?

Any judgment as to "greatness" must inevitably be subjective. In making my selections I have looked for profundity, the excitement, the clarity, the lasting influence exemplified by the above from Epicurus.

I have also been guided by all my predecessors, some of whom have devoted the best part of a literary lifetime to one great man or one great cultural idea. Lists made by persons in whom one has faith are invaluable. Certainly one must have faith in the Britannica, which has proved to be an indispensable source in preparing this collection.

Whether or not this compiler has produced a worthwhile volume which does justice to the great thoughts that rule the world—and which have interested me from the day exactly fifty-one years ago when I needed epigraphs from Mill and Milton—is for the reader to say. The compiling of, first, quotations whose greatness was without question but which nevertheless had been censored and popularly omitted, and later on, the great thoughts of all ages, has occupied the best part of my lifetime. The purpose, above all, has been to produce a book which will be read for a lifetime.

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Hartland-4-Corners, Vermont
October 1984