BOOKS

WORLD HISTORY IN CAPSULES.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF MODERN CIVILIZATION. By H. C. Thomas and W. A. Hamm. (The ABC of History Series, Vol. 1) Vanguard Press. Fifty cents.

THIS volume has its strong points; but the inherent difficulties of writing a book of such a nature are so great and are here so inadequately met that we must say frankly that we do not see what very useful purpose it can serve.

"Outlines" of this nature can be really valuable if they are devoted to the formulation and clarification of the basic laws of social development and if the bare facts and events—the "raw materials of history"—are utilized simply to illustrate and explain the main thesis. If, however, the attempt is made to provide a compendium of world history from the earliest times to the end of the 18th century in 200-odd pages, what else can be the result but failure from the scientific and literary standpoints?

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The countless events in man's historical development are so violently and mechanically condensed as to produce a dry and indigestible mass, unintelligible to those very readers to whom it is supposed to appeal and who need it most. Will anyone say that this "catalog" style makes interesting reading? To a large extent this criticism is valid for the entire book: it is merely confusing to the elementary reader; it is valueless to one who knows some history; and it is tiresome. This is an indictment, not of this book in particular, but of the whole class of books of which this is, perhaps, a favorable example. These ABC's are the bunk. The belief in their value is a superstition on the par with the belief of some savages that they can get wise by chewing and swallowing the pages of the white men's books. Outlines, popularizations, and the like are necessary and useful; but they must not be compendiums—they must be the elucidation, in simple and popular terminology, of the laws of science (in this case of history) with the "facts" utilized only to serve this purpose.

Yet we must make some reservations about this book in particular. There are parts of it, whole sections, that fortunately stray from the "compendium" road and these sections are readable, even valuable. For example, the section on the Protestant Revolt where the chapter is devoted to the elucidation of the thesis that "protestantism was the religious expression of nationalism"; or the interesting description of the structure of feudal society; or the sections on the development of trade and the decline of serfdom.

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As to the historical perspective of the book we are sorry to say that the introduction gives us the promise of an "objective" and "social" method that the bulk of the book fails to justify. The sections on the rise and spread of christianity, on the decline of the Roman Empire, on the role of monasticism, on the rise of nationalism are singularly superficial, showing very little comprehension of the basic social forces at work. For example, when the authors tell us that the development of the Egyptian empire was due to the ambition of the kings, that the defeat of the English in the Hundred Years War was due to the inspiration Joan of Arc was able to infuse into the French forces, or that the Crusades were due to the "mistreatment of pilgrims" or to the plan of Urban to unite all christians in "one lofty purpose"—what is this but falling victim to the most vulgar prejudices of popular history?

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The worker who wants a sketch of world history from the Marxist standpoint will not find it in this book; first, because it is undigestible and uninteresting, secondly, because its historical method is uncertain, lapses far too often, and at best is only a superficial recognition of historical materialism. The field is still open—but it is strewn with dangers.

—WILL HERBERG.