OUR DEBT TO THE CLASSICS

By H. L. Pangborn

IT is a truism to say that the vital elements of most of our modern literature, art, philosophies, religion, and — one may almost say — science, are rooted in the thinking and the achievements of the ancient Greeks; and that our politics, law, government, and finance derive chiefly from Roman experience. But it is difficult to demonstrate that fact to anyone who is unable to read the ancient originals or who is not equipped for first hand study of comparative literature. No translation is ever entirely adequate. Even the stumbling, fragmentary acquaintance of the average

college student with the classics is better than the best translation. "A pretty poem, Mr. Pope, but why call it Homer?" It is true that we have advanced greatly beyond Pope's method, in such admirable versions as those of the Loeb classics, but the difficulty remains. There is still need of interpretation of the ancients and of explanation of our relations to them.

The series of monographs issued under the general title of "Our Debt to Greece and Rome" aims to meet that need, its primary purpose being to show the continuing influence, throughout the ages, direct and indirect, of Greek and Roman thought, and to connect it with the thinking of today. The undertaking is in the hands of competent scholars, and most of the score or more of volumes already issued are highly successful; some of them, such as Professor Abbott's "Roman Politics" and Dr. Henry Osborn Taylor's "Greek Biology and Medicine", being works of scholarship of primary importance, of value to the expert as well as to the inquiring layman.

The chief benefit of the undertaking, one ventures to hope, may be in the stimulation of the study of Greek in the schools, as a result of the possible enlightenment of parents and school authorities. There has been, recently, a very marked trend in that direction at some of the colleges; in one case the unexpectedly large registration in Greek courses nearly swamped the faculty. But the American practice of "beginning Greek" in freshman year is a manifest educational ineptitude. A deeper lying reason for some hope of a Greek renaissance is the growing consciousness that modern scientific, rational thought cannot live in an atmosphere of mediæval mysticism but must go back to Greek clarity, precision, and freedom of thinking for its metaphysics. It is still more obvious that the literature and art of tomorrow, if it is to represent the spirit of a rational, scientific age, will find its models in Athens rather than in Gothic romance.

The excellent study of Euripides by Mr. Lucas, who is a fellow of King's College, Cambridge, is a model of what the work of such a *liaison* officer should be. It does not attempt too much; it is rather a whet to the appetite of the reader than a full statement, but it does give a surprisingly comprehensive view of the life and work of Euripides, of his tremendous influence in antiquity, his emergence during the Middle Ages and in the neo-classic period, and, especially, his immediate, primary value to the reader of today. Of course, he is the most "modern" of the dramatists: Mr. Lucas's task was easy compared to that of Professor Lane Cooper (of the Cornell faculty) in the attempt to expound Aristotle's "Poetics", yet Professor Cooper has attained clarity in the treatment of his very thorny material. He does well to emphasize, as his main point, that the "Poetics" is of the greatest value as an "antidote to anarchy in criticism".

Dr. Kent is professor of comparative philology at the University of Pennsylvania. He is somewhat hampered by the severe limitation of space in a treatment of the debt of English to Greek and Latin, and by the need of much detail by way of illustration; but he amply proves his case, and he has also made an astonishingly readable book out of rather refractory material. His concluding chapter, demonstrating what happens if you try to make "Latinless" English, is maliciously neat. The plain truth is that not one writer in a thousand is capable of writing "good English" if he is ignorant of Latin and Greek. That is

demonstrated in every daily newspaper, in most magazines, and in a vast majority of books.

To interpret Catullus, the "poet's poet", was also a difficult undertaking, since he is peculiarly "antique" in thought and feeling. But Professor Harrington (of Wesleyan University) succeeds in showing his fundamental humanness, and in explaining something of his consummate art, though, as to that, acquaintance with the original remains necessary for full appreciation.

Euripides and His Influence. By F. L. Lucas. Introduction by R. W. Livingstone.

The Poetics of Aristotle; Its Meaning and Influence. By Lane Cooper.

Language and Philology. By Roland G. Kent.

Catullus and His Influence. By Karl Pomeroy Harrington.

In the series "Our Debt to Greece and Rome", edited by George Depue Hadzits and David Moore Robinson. The Marshall Jones Co.