MR. ASQUITH TAKES THE STAND

By Charles Seymour

DESPITE the prejudice against war books which the booksellers insist upon, the statesmen continue to publish their memoirs. Within five years of the close of the war we can read accounts of its inception by the French and British Prime Ministers, the Chancellor of the German Empire and the Kaiser, the Prussian Foreign Secretary and the President of France. Never before have the materials of history appeared so soon after a capital event. But the very fact of the readiness of the chief participants in the crisis of 1914 to describe the part they played, diminishes the historical value of their memoirs, for in every case they are obviously incomplete: the statesmen authors are willing to tell the truth as they see it, but they are by no means willing to tell all the truth as they know it. This is especially true of Entente statesmen, and Mr. Asquith's revelations are about as carefully circumscribed as those of Viviani or Poincaré.

This does not mean that Mr. Asquith's book is not important nor that any person desiring to understand the genesis of the war can afford not to read it. If it seems exaggerated to say that no other book can transcend this one in importance, it is equally certain that a reasoned and on the whole convincing defense of British foreign policy written by the Prime Minister is of the first significance. Whatever disappointment the reader may experience arises merely from the fact that Mr. Asquith uses so much of his available space in arguments based upon the impressions and records of others rather than in autobiograph-

ical retrospect. Thus an entire chapter of peculiar interest to Americans (that upon Mr. Page and Colonel House) is founded on excerpts from Mr. Hendrick's "Life and Letters of Walter H. Page", which is certainly an illuminating but not a comprehensive nor final authority, for it pictures conditions merely through the eyes of Mr. Page and his biographer. Similar use is made of the works of Haldane, Poincaré, and Ballin. Mr. Asquith's utilization of such material is skilful and his appeal to our sense of logic cogent; his book gains thereby something of the value of a critical history, designed to call into service a variety of sources, but it loses in value as a memoir. The discussion of Sir Edward Grey's policy in 1914, before and during the crisis, is admirable in tone and bearing, probably the best that has thus far been published, but one looks in vain for new light on the cabinet discussions that led to the attempted *détente* with Germany and which finally settled the question of peace or war.

On the other hand, Mr. Asquith does contribute new material on two points of the greatest importance. He has exposed ruthlessly the lack of basis for the Kaiser's thesis of the encirclement of Germany, and he has explained with adequate documentation the attitude of the British Cabinet on the problem of preparations for war just before 1914. The Kaiser alleged that in 1897 a "Gentleman's Agreement" was concluded between Great Britain, France, and the United States, stipulating that in case "Germany or Austria or both of them should begin a war for the sake of Pan-Germanism [sic], the United States should at once go to the support of these powers with all its resources." Mr. Asquith not merely emphasizes the utter inadequacy of the authority upon which the Kaiser based his assertion, but has taken the trouble to secure from the British Foreign Office, the Quai d'Orsay, and the United States Department of State a formal denial, resting upon official investigation of the archives, that such an agreement was ever concluded.

He has also given us a clear analysis of the delicate position in which the British government found itself between 1908 and 1914, and his account must elicit some admiration for the manner in which the Cabinet made the essential preparation for the war they feared but which obviously they so ardently hoped to prevent. He emphasizes the labors of the committee of defense and the understanding with the Dominions. Not to have undertaken such preparations would have been the most criminal neglect for, "we were often conscious that we were skating on the thinnest ice and that the peace of Europe was at the mercy of a chapter of unforeseen and unforeseeable accidents." But he shows also how impossible it was to make real military preparations without disturbing the political atmosphere to an extent that was likely to precipitate the very war they wished to avoid. "If the English had raised an army in 1912", wrote Mr. Page, "and made a lot of big guns, Austria would not have trampled Serbia to the earth. There would have been no war." This, Asquith insists, is "something very like claptrap". In these chapters he is at his best, and it is fair to say that they provide the clearest and most complete justification of British policy during the critical years that has been printed.

The Genesis of the War. By the Right Honourable Herbert Henry Asquith. George H. Doran Company.