

## R E V I E W S

THE DECLINE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN THE WEST. By F. W. Walbank.  
(Past and Present Series; Cobbett Press; 7s. 6d.)

The series in which this book appears and the name of its General Editor, Professor Benjamin Farrington, indicate clearly enough the standpoint from which it is written: it is a very intelligent example of the Marxian materialist interpretation of ancient history. Dr Walbank's name however is a guarantee of good historical scholarship and the book can be read with much profit, with the necessary reservations, as an introduction to the subject. It is well written and contains an extraordinarily large amount of valuable and often fascinating information for its size, and there are some interesting illustrations. Dr Walbank's main business is not to pass a judgment on the lasting value of Græco-Roman civilisation: if it were, his rather inadequate chapter on 'Science: Religion: Literature: Language' and scattered remarks elsewhere suggest that there would be cause for much sharper disagreement: though Dr Walbank shows in his judgments more appreciation of real greatness than is often to be found in orthodox materialists (at least till he comes to the art and philosophy of the later Empire—Neo-Platonism is dismissed in passing with one silly remark). But his purpose is to discover the causes of the decline and ultimate collapse of the Roman Empire in the West and to see what useful lessons can be drawn from the discovery for us today. We can entirely agree with Dr Walbank in his insistence that the decline and fall of the Roman Empire has always been, and should be treated as a topical question: and also when he points out that the end of the Roman Empire meant the transformation of a culture, not a complete relapse into barbarism; there was continuity not only in culture but in material techniques. When we consider the amazing toughness and powers of resistance and recovery shown by the Roman Empire under outside pressure of a sort which no political and military organisation could survive for ever, its prolongation in the East and the perpetual attempts at its revival in the West during the Middle Ages, above all the survival of its culture and its continuing influence as an idea down to our own times, we may feel that the interesting thing about it is not so much its ultimate fall as an effective political organisation but its amazing powers of survival, and may think that the sense that it ought never to have fallen at all which inspires our anxious researchers into the causes of its decline is not so much something rational in itself as an unconscious tribute to the myth of the divinity and eternity of the Empire so sincerely and sedulously propagated by its rulers, writers and artists. When this has been said, however, it does remain of some interest to try to trace the causes of the collapse of the Roman Empire as a political and military organisation. The solution offered by Dr Walbank, in accordance with his general outlook, is the technical inadequacy of ancient

civilisation which was due to its social structure based on slavery. The view of the development of ancient science and technique put forward by Dr Walbank and other writers of this school is not generally accepted by those competent to judge (cf. for a summary but effective criticism Dr Sherwood Taylor's pamphlet *Is the Progress of Science controlled by the Material Wants of Man?*; Oxford, 1945). We can perhaps agree that the use of slave labour was one of the principal reasons why the development of industrial capitalism in the Hellenistic-Roman world did not lead to a technical revolution comparable to that of the late 18th and early 19th centuries and that the technical backwardness of ancient civilisation in comparison with the elaborate and economically top-heavy commercial, social, political and military development of the Hellenistic kingdoms, and still more of the Roman Empire, gave it a particular sort of instability (a technical advance parallel to the increasing elaboration in other fields would have brought instability of other kinds). But this is a very considerable narrowing down of Dr Walbank's attempt to explain the whole character and decline of ancient civilisation by its social-economic structure. One of the greatest weaknesses of his interpretation seems to the present reviewer that he regards the passionate concern for the increase of material wealth by technical development which is characteristic of our industrial capitalism as the normal, natural and right human attitude; and consequently regards the Greek, and the still more emphatic and conscious early Christian, indifference to technical progress and the increase of material wealth as something abnormal and unnatural, to be regarded with disapproval and explained as characteristic of a slave-holding society. To the present reviewer it appears on the contrary that the normal man in most societies is not very interested in technical progress and quite rightly and reasonably does not believe that happiness is to be attained by the discovery of more and more methods of multiplying material wealth. It is only in a relatively few capitalist societies or groups that an unbounded concupiscence is canonised. The Greek, by the whole bent of his mind and disposition, which cannot be explained simply as the result of slave-holding, was particularly unlikely to fall into this 'progressive delusion'; and, though he contributed his share to technical progress and far more than his share to the development of that pure science which alone makes technical progress possible, he arrived, in his best representatives, at an attitude to material wealth and the means of its multiplication which was peculiarly sane and human and in fundamental accord with the teaching of our Lord in the Gospels and of the Church from the earliest centuries till today. A. H. ARMSTRONG

ADULT EDUCATION: THE RECORD OF THE BRITISH ARMY. By Major T. H. Hawkins, M.Sc., M.Ed., in collaboration with L. J. F. Brimble, B.Sc., F. L. S. (Macmillan; 15s.)

It is generally known that during the war (and after) education and the diffusion of knowledge were undertaken in H.M. Forces seriously,