

H L Mencken

A Phenomenal Skeptic

Colin Keay

The first time I encountered *Minority Report*, the Notebooks of H L Mencken, I felt like Cortez discovering the Pacific Ocean: whole new vistas of entertaining scepticism lay before my eyes. Like most readers I had often been amused by Mencken's pithy epigrams, which usually delivered a penetrating observation with barbed wit. Some examples:

"Archbishop: a Christian ecclesiastic of a rank superior to that attained by Christ."

"We must respect the other fellow's religion, but only in the sense that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart." (1).

"The chief contribution of Protestantism to human thought is its massive proof that God is a bore." (309).

"The average clergyman is a kind of intellectual eunuch."

"Love is the delusion that one woman differs from another."

"Adultery is the application of democracy to love."

"A man is inseparable from his congenital vanities and stupidities, as a dog is inseparable from its fleas."

And here is one last Menckenism which is not at all humorous but every bit as true these days as it was when he wrote it, which was just prior to the infamous Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925:

"As skeptics endeavour to pursue the truth, most of the general public does not care."

The above epigrams are tame, however, when compared to Mencken's lengthier writings which appeared for decades in Baltimore newspapers. One of these, and I have not managed to obtain a verbatim copy, was Mencken's thoughts on the Monkey Trial. I found it on the Internet, complete with spelling and other conceivable errors which is why I am loathe to reproduce it in full here. However I cannot resist quoting a few paragraphs, hopefully as accurate as the original text in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* on June 29, 1925, two weeks before the trial began:

"Such obscenities as the forthcoming trial of the Tennessee evolutionist, if they serve no other purpose, at least call attention dramatically to the fact that enlightenment, among mankind, is very narrowly dispersed. It is common to assume that human progress affects everyone - that even the dullest man, in these bright days, knows more than any man of, say, the Eighteenth Century, and is far more civilized. This assumption is quite erroneous. The men of the educated minority, no doubt, know more than their predecessors, and some of them, perhaps, it may be said that they are more civilized - though I should not like to be put to giving names - but the great masses of men, even in this inspired republic, are precisely where the mob was at the dawn of history. They are ignorant, they are dishonest, they are cowardly, they are ignoble. They

know little of anything that is worth knowing, and there is not the slightest desire among them to increase their knowledge.

"Such immortal vermin, true enough, get their share of the fruits of human progress, and so they may be said, in a way, to have their part in it. The most ignorant man, when he is ill, may enjoy whatever boons and usufructs modern medicine may offer - that is, provided he is not too poor to chose his own doctor. He is free, if he wants to, to take a bath. The literature of the world is at his disposal in public libraries. He may look at works of art. He may hear good music. He has at hand a thousand devices for making life less wearisome and more tolerable: the telephone, railroads, bichloride tablets, newspapers, sewers, correspondence schools, delicatessen. But he had no more to do with bringing these things into the world than the horned cattle of the fields, and he does no more to increase them today than the birds of the air.

"On the contrary, he is generally against them, and sometimes with immense violence. Every step in human progress, from the first feeble stirrings in the abyss of time, has been opposed by the great majority of men. Every valuable thing that has been added to the store of man's possessions has been derided by them when it was new, and destroyed by them when they had the power. They have fought every new truth ever heard of, and they have killed every truth-seeker who got into their hands.

"The so-called religious organizations which now lead the war against the teaching of evolution are nothing more, at bottom, than conspiracies of the inferior man against his betters."

After a couple more paragraphs lambasting ignorant religious mobs and their imbecilic leaders, Mencken goes on:

"The inferior man's reasons for hating knowledge are not hard to discern. He hates it because it is complex - because it puts an unbearable burden upon his meager capacity for taking in ideas. Thus his search is for shortcuts. Their aim is to make the unintelligible simple, and even obvious.... No man who has not had a long and arduous education can understand even the most elementary concepts of modern pathology. But even a hand at the plow can grasp the theory of chiropractic in two lessons. Hence the vast popularity of chiropractic among the submerged - and of osteopathy, Christian Science and other such quackeries with it. They are idiotic, but they are simple - and every man prefers what he can understand to what puzzles and dismays him.

"The popularity of Fundamentalism among the inferior orders of men is explicable in exactly the same way.

The cosmogonies that educated men toy with are all inordinately complex. To comprehend their veriest outlines requires an immense stock of knowledge, and a habit of thought. It would be as vain to try to teach it to peasants or to the city proletariat as it would be to try to teach them about streptococci. But the cosmogony of Genesis is so simple that even a yokel can grasp it. It is set forth in a few phrases. It offers, to an ignorant man, the irresistible reasonableness of the nonsensical. So he accepts it with loud hosannas, and has one more excuse for hating his betters."

Have matters improved in the last seventy years? Fundamentalists of all stripes are still with us. If Mencken wrote and published the above sentiments today, he would be caught in the net of antidiscrimination legislation and goodness knows what other politically correct enactments which lurk like bear-traps amid the dark jungles of the law to snare and disable him. Our present-day legalities, right here in Australia, could probably silence a new Mencken were he to emerge, whereas the clergy in the first half of the century were powerless to gag the Mencken of yesteryear. To the point, Mencken's use of the phrase "inferior man" would not be acceptable these days. It is therefore worth quoting his definition: "By an inferior man I mean one who knows nothing that is not known to every adult, who can do nothing that could not be learned by anyone in a few weeks, and who meanly admires mean things." (287). Seven decades later, there are still a lot of them around.

Mencken was a great believer in the efficacy of common sense. He saw it as the antidote to presumption, effrontery and dogmatism and wrote "On some bright tomorrow, so I hope and pray, someone will write a history of common sense. The gradual development of the prevailing metaphysical, political, theological and economic delusions has been recorded in a vast series of books, but no one has ever thought to record the evolution of the sort of wisdom that really keeps human society a going concern. I'd certainly like to know, if it can be found out, who was the first man to doubt the magic of priests, and likewise who was the first to note the vanity of all so-called philosophical speculation. These fellows were enormous benefactors of mankind, and they are as completely forgotten as the lost inventors of the plow, the boat and the wheel. They were the real begetters of everything properly describable as sound information and rational thinking. Their ribald hoots were worth the soaring fancies of all the sages, and ten thousand times as much. Every time anyone says anything worth hearing today it goes back to them, and every time a new fallacy is launched it is in contempt of them." (183).

Fatuous philosophy earned many slings and arrows from Mencken.

The only department of so-called philosophy that shows any general utility is epistemology - the study of the nature of knowledge and the means of attaining it. All the rest is mere logic chopping, and as lacking in genuine significance as a series of college yells. It would no doubt surprise the average man, even the average intelligent man, to learn that he harbours an epistemology, but such is the fact. In all men save those poisoned by metaphysical toxins it is the epistemology of common sense - a product not of professional philosophers, but of a line of enlightened practical men

stretching back to the beginnings of the race. The chief aim of all professional philosophers, now as in the past, is to break down this admirable epistemology and substitute something more mystical. They are failing as their predecessors failed - even as another Plato would fail if he came into the world today. Science in all its ramifications has no truck with them. They are intellectual acrobats, and of no more value to humanity than those in the circus. Indeed, they are of less value, for the circus brethren are at least amusing." (285).

Mencken defined common sense harmoniously with the avowed aims of the formalised skeptic movement half a century later.

"All professional philosophers tend to assume that common sense means the mental habit of the common man. Nothing could be further from the mark. The common man is chiefly to be distinguished by his lack of common sense: he believes things on evidence that is too scanty, or that distorts the plain facts, or that is full of non-sequiturs. Common sense really involves making full use of all the demonstrable evidence - and of nothing but the demonstrable evidence." (44).

In another commentary, Mencken expounds on the role of evidence.

"The believing mind is equally impervious to evidence. The most that can be accomplished with it is to substitute one delusion for another. It rejects all overt evidence as wicked. Thus Americans in general go on whooping up democracy, though every even half-intelligent American, put on the stand, will admit freely that it is full of holes. In the same way Christianity survives, though very few Christians believe in it at all, and only a small company of admittedly psychopaths believe in it altogether. Put into the form of an affidavit, what the latter profess to regard as true would make even the Pope laugh." (125).

Now we might as well take a closer look at Mencken's assessment of religion, although I'm not so sure his assertion about magic is true, even at this distance in time.

"The time must come inevitably when mankind shall surmount the imbecility of religion, as it has surmounted the imbecility of religion's ally, magic. It is impossible to imagine this world being really civilized so long as so much nonsense survives. In even its highest forms religion runs counter to all common sense. It can be defended only by making assumptions and adopting rules of logic that are never heard of in any other field of human thinking." (300).

This, of course, encapsulates the conflict between science and religion. Another of Mencken's expositions expands on this:

"... such a thing as a truly enlightened Christian is hard to imagine. Either he is enlightened or he is Christian, and the louder he protests that he is the former the more apparent it becomes that he is really the latter. A Catholic priest who devotes himself to seismology or some other such safe science may become a competent technician and hence a useful man, but it is ridiculous to call him a scientist so long as he still believes in the virgin birth, the atonement or the transubstantiation. It is, to be sure, possible to imagine any of these dogmas as being true, but only at the cost of heaving all science overboard as rubbish. The priest's reasons for believing in them is not only not scientific; it is violently non-

scientific. Here he is exactly on all fours with a believer in fortune-telling, Christian Science or chiropractic.” (232).

On the other hand, according to Mencken,

“The scientist who yields anything to theology, however slight, is yielding to ignorance and false pretences, and as certainly as if he granted that a horsehair put into a bottle of water will turn into a snake.” (45).

This brings us to a minefield of Christian beliefs where Mencken played the part of a minesweeper of unsurpassed efficiency.

“There is no possibility whatsoever of reconciling science and theology, at least in Christendom. Either Jesus rose from the dead or He didn’t. If He did, then Christianity becomes plausible; if He did not, then it is sheer nonsense. I defy any genuine scientist to say that he believes in the Resurrection, or indeed in any other cardinal dogma of the Christian system. They are all grounded upon statements of fact that are intrinsically incredible. Those so-called scientists who profess to accept them are not scientists at all -

The current revolt against the so-called liberal theology is perfectly sound. That theology is nothing save an excuse and an evasion. It reduces both science and theology to the ridiculous. If a man can’t believe that Jesus rose from the dead he should say so frankly and be done. It is not only foolish but also dishonest for him to pretend to accept all the implications of Christianity without admitting the basic postulate. In this field the Catholic Church, as usual, has been enormously more intelligent than the Protestant. It has rejected so-called Modernism in toto and refuses any compromise with it. The Protestant’s attempts to compromise have simply made Protestantism ludicrous. No man of any intellectual dignity can accept it, or even discuss it seriously. The only really respectable Protestants are the Fundamentalists. Unfortunately, they are also palpable idiots, and so Christianity gains nothing by their adherence - in fact, it is gravely injured by their adherence, just as spiritualism would be made preposterous, even if it were not so intrinsically, by the frowsy old imbeciles who believe in it.” (118).

Mencken was unsurpassed in his ridicule of the Christian concept of God and His declared omnipotence:

“It seems to me to be perfectly imaginable that there may exist orders of intelligence as far superior to that of man as that of man is above the intelligence of a dog; or that of a dog is above that of, say, an earthworm; or that of an earthworm is above that of, say, a bacillus. Here there are plain differences, not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively.

“But mankind almost always insists on picturing God as only a greatly magnified man. He is thus endowed with all the puerile weaknesses of man, and the notion of His omnipotence becomes absurd. This absurdity lies at the heart of Christianity. It is completely inconceivable that a really omnipotent God would have been forced into the childish device of sending his Son to save His own creatures. He could have saved them by simply willing it, and the miracle would have been no greater in any sense than the miracle of impregnating a virgin - which, in fact, may be feasible soon in the

laboratory.

“Having this nonsense at its heart, Christianity is not hospitable to clear thinking, and its whole history has been a history of combats with rational ideas. If it had started off, like some of the other Eastern religions, with a God completely unimaginable and superhuman, it would have been more persuasive to civilized man. As it is, it has lost ground in proportion as man has come to reflect seriously and effectively about the universe. If God be imagined as a creature with an order of intelligence entirely different from and superior to that of man, the whole question as to who created God loses some of its force, for it is entirely conceivable that God’s intelligence may be sufficient for self-creation. In brief, once we admit that there is a kind of intelligence entirely different from that of human beings, we can credit it with any powers that seem necessary and still escape absurdity. But when that intelligence is depicted or thought of as substantially identical to human intelligence, all its miracles become incredible. Even the moral system of a Christian God is dubious. Reduced to its essentials, it is simply the moral system of any somewhat fussy Presbyterian. It is absurd to ask civilized man to revere such a donkey.” (409).

When it comes to absurdity, Mencken analyses the doctrine of the Atonement in no uncertain terms:

“Of all Christian dogmas, perhaps the most absurd is that of the Atonement, for it not only certifies to the impotence of God but also His lack of common sense. If He is actually all-wise and all-powerful then He might have rescued man from sin by devices much simpler and more rational than the sorry one of engaging in fornication with a young peasant girl, and then commissioning the ensuing love-child to save the world. And if He is intelligent, He would have chosen a far more likely scene for the business than an obscure corner of the Roman empire, among people of no influence or importance. Why not Rome itself? Why was Jesus not sent there, instead of being confined to the back alleys of Palestine? His followers, after His execution, must have asked themselves something like this question, for they proceeded at once upon the missionary journeys that He had never undertaken Himself. Their success was only moderate, for they were men of despised castes, and the doctrine they preached was quickly corrupted by borrowings from the various other cults of the time and from their own ignorant speculations. Indeed, the whole machinery of propaganda was managed so clumsily that Christianity prevailed at last by a series of political accidents, none of them having anything to do with its fundamental truth. Even so, the overwhelming majority of human beings remained unaffected by it, and it was more than a thousand years before so many as half of them had heard of it. During all this time, by Christian theory, they remained plunged in the sins Jesus was sent to obliterate, and countless multitudes of them must have gone to Hell. To this day there are many millions still in that outer darkness, including all the Moslem nations, all the great peoples of Asia, and nearly all the savages on earth. Certainly, it would be impossible to imagine a more inept and ineffective scheme for saving humanity. It was badly planned, its execution was left

mainly to extremely stupid men, and it failed to reach all save a minute minority of the men and women it was designed for. I can think of no human reformer, not clearly insane, who has managed his propaganda so badly." (198).

After a broadside like that, one can readily imagine the clerics of Baltimore forbidding their faithful to read the newspapers carrying Mencken's devastating material, which he cheerfully repeated whenever he felt there was a need for it:

"Man's limitations are also visible in his gods. Yahveh seems to have had His hands full with the Devil from the start. His plans for Adam and Eve went to pot, and he failed again with Noah. His worst failure came when He sent His only begotten Son into the world to rescue man from sin. It would be hard to imagine any scheme falling further from success." (389).

And he exposed other aspects of religion which, with the passage of time, have proved correct, as witness the number of priests and pastors found guilty of sex offences over the years.

"No other religious system has such troubles with the sex question as Christianity. It is, indeed, the most unhealthy of religions... Paul was plainly a pathological case, and the same thing may be said of many Christian heroes since." (227).

In another essay, Mencken attacks on a different front:

"Moral certainty is always a sign of cultural inferiority. The more uncivilized the man, the surer he is that he knows precisely what is right and what is wrong. All human progress, even in morals, has been the work of men who have doubted the current moral values, not of men who have whooped them up and tried to enforce them. The truly civilized man is always skeptical and tolerant, in this field as in all others. His culture is based on 'I'm not too sure'." (418).

Mencken gave the pious moralists a further hammering when he wrote:

"In the field of practical morals popular judgements are often sounder than those of self-appointed experts. These experts seldom show any talent for the art and mystery they undertake to profess; on the contrary, nine-tenths of them are obvious quacks. They are responsible for all the idiotic moral reforms and innovations that come and go, affecting decent people. And they are the main, and often the only advocates of moral ideas that have begun to wear out and should be scrapped. The effort to put down birth control, led by Catholic theologians but with a certain amount of support from Protestant colleagues, offers a shining case in point. The more the heat is applied to them, the more Catholic women seem to resort to the devices of the Devil, on sale in every drugstore. Many of these women are genuinely pious, but into their piety there has been introduced an unhappy doubt, perhaps only half formulated. It is a doubt about the professional competence of their moral guides and commanders. They have not only begun to view the curious fiats of bishops and archbishops with a growing indifference; they have also begun to toy with the suspicion that even the Pope, on occasion, may be all wet. His first anathemas against contraception were plain and unqualified, but of late he has begun to hedge prudently, and it is now quite lawful for a Catholic woman to

avoid pregnancy by a resort to mathematics, though she is still forbidden to resort to physics or chemistry. This concession is a significant admission that they were wrong about a capital problem of their trade - and that the persons they (the clergy) sought to teach were right." (62).

Lest the reader should imagine that Mencken confined himself to attacks on Christianity, nothing could be further from the truth. Mencken was a true iconoclast - he attacked any belief system based on error or superstition.

"The one thing common to all prophets is their belief in their own infallibility. Their followers believe it too, and so protestantism is an inevitable phenomenon in all religions. But it never actually produced reforms, or moves the central body of doctrine toward a greater plausibility. The Mohammedan sectaries, in fact, are even more idiotic than the body of orthodox Moslems, and in Christianity Protestantism is five times as imbecile as Catholicism." (337).

Eastern philosophies and religions did not escape Mencken's arrows:

"One of the strangest delusions of the Western mind is to the effect that a philosophy of profound wisdom is on tap in the East... The so-called philosophy of India is even more blowsy and senseless than the metaphysics of the West. It is at war with everything we know of the workings of the human mind, and with every sound idea formulated by mankind. If it prevailed in the modern world we'd still be in the thirteenth century; nay, we'd be back among the Egyptians of the pyramid age. Its only coherent contribution to Western thought has been theosophy - and theosophy is as idiotic as Christian Science. It has absolutely nothing to offer a civilized white man." (48).

Ooops. One cannot say that these days. In a somewhat broader thrust, Mencken failed to foresee the future:

"The so-called philosophy of India has found its natural home in Los Angeles, the capital of American idiots. Nowhere else, so far as I know, is there any body of theosophists left, and nowhere else has there ever been any substantial following for Yogi. All the quacks who advertise to teach Yogi in twenty lessons for \$2, and all the high priests of the other varieties of Indian balderdash have their headquarters in Los Angeles, which is also the Rome of the American Rosicrucians." (334).

One wonders what Mencken would write about the New Age. However let us now follow him from religion to politics.

"The most expensive thing on this earth is to believe in something that is palpably not true. The burden of quackery has never been properly estimated. The early Christians sold their property and abandoned their families in confidence that the end of the world was at hand. There was no evidence for this save the assurance of the quacks who operated upon them. The quacks got enormous power out of the process, and in all probability cabbaged most of their victim's property. The victims themselves acquired nothing save the hope of reward postmortem, which was, of course, hollow and vain. To this day the rewards that political quacks offer are quite as valueless." (193).

Moving closer in analogy to our antipodean experience, particularly of recent time, Mencken wrote:

“Under democracy one party always devotes its chief energies to trying to prove that the other party is unfit to rule - and both commonly succeed, and are right. The Coolidge Prosperity and the Hoover Economy of Plenty were quite as bad as the New Deal. The United States has never developed an aristocracy really disinterested or an intelligentsia really intelligent. Its history is simply a record of vacillations between two gangs of frauds.” (330).

Mencken was every bit as uncharitable toward Marxism:

“The Marxian dialectic is simply a theology. That is to say it is a kind of occult hocus-pocus, one of the chief characters of which is that the common people cannot understand it. Reduced to plain English, it always becomes absurd. In order to make it impressive the Communist theologians have to outfit it with a vocabulary of formidable but meaningless words. They maintain it in an extremely clumsy and buzzfuzzian manner. Reading a treatise on it by one of the great thinkers of the movement is a really dreadful experience. The argument becomes as windy and fantastic as the argument for Christian Science.” (230). “‘But you don’t understand!’ This answer of the Christian Scientist caught on a hook is always made by other merchants of blowsy metaphysical systems; for example, the Thomists. The Communists employ it constantly. Their first and often their only answer to a skeptic is to accuse him of not having read the Marxian gospels. If it turns out that he has, then they allege that he hasn’t understood them. This, of course, may be true enough, for they are certainly hard to grasp; in fact, they consist in large part of very palpable nonsense. Not only are Marx’s premises dubious; his logical processes are frequently worse, and so his conclusions seldom ring true. Metaphysics is almost always an attempt to prove the incredible by an appeal to the unintelligible.” (357).

Mencken sets Communism squarely alongside Christianity:

“Like all other forms of theology, Communism runs aground on the fact that there are frequent bitter rows between different factions of its prophets. Down to 1927 the American Communists believed in Trotsky’s ideas as a cardinal article of faith, almost on a par with the Christian’s belief in the Virgin Birth. But when Trotsky was knocked off he became anathema, and soon his former customers were denying the validity of everything he said, or had said, no matter how plausible. If he had begun arguing that 2 and 2 equalled 4 they’d have disputed it loudly, and denounced anyone who agreed as a scoundrel. Such disagreements tend to wreck all religions, even the simplest and most clearly outlined, for example, Mohammedanism, which has split into various warring sects, and indeed had done so long ago as Omar Khayyam’s time.” (337). “Communism, like any other revealed religion, is largely made up of prophecies. When they fail to come off its clergy say that they will be realized later on. Thus, if we have another boom, they will argue that the collapse of capitalism is only postponed. The fact that the greatest booms ever heard of followed Marx’s formal prophecy of the downfall of capitalism is already forgotten, just as millions have forgotten the early Christian prophecy that the end of the world was at

hand. The first Christians accepted postponements as docilely as the Communists of today - in fact, many of them were still believing and hoping two hundred years after the crucifixion. In all probability, Communism will last quite as long. It is still in its first century, so hope still hops high.” (282).

What a ghastly thought! Communism always trumpeted its imagined high standards of morality, which Mencken cuts to size as usual:

“The worst government is the most moral. One composed of cynics is often very tolerant and humane. But when fanatics are on top there is no limit to oppression.” (327).

Mencken had a view on the reason why nations allow demagogues to gain power:

“People crave certainties in this world, and are hostile to ifs and buts. The chief strength of organized religion lies in the fact that it provides plain and positive assurance for poor souls who find the mysteries of this earthly existence an intolerable headache, and are uneasy about their prospects postmortem. In the political field the same appetite for surety is visible, which explains, of course, the prosperity of demagogues. They are simply persons who promise in loud, ringing voices to solve the insoluble and unscrew the inscrutable. At their worst they are palpable frauds, comparable to so many thimble-riggers at a county fair; at their best they come close to the elegant imbecility of theologians.” (288).

Mencken hurled frequent brickbats at education and its practitioners:

“The public schools of the United States were damaged very seriously when they were taken over by the State. So long as they were privately operated the persons in charge of them retained a certain amount of professional autonomy, and with it went considerable dignity. But now they are all petty jobholders, and show the psychology that goes with the trade. They have invented a bogus science of pedagogy to salve their egos, but it remains hollow to any intelligent eye. What they may teach or not teach is not determined by themselves, or even by any exercise of sound reason, but by the interaction of politics on one side and quack theorists on the other. Even savages have reached a better solution of the education problem. Their boys are taught, not by puerile eunuchs, but by their best men, and the process of education among them really educates. This is certainly not true of ours. Many a boy of really fine mind is ruined in school. Along with a few sound values, many false ones are thrust into his thinking, and he inevitably acquires something of the attitude of mind of the petty bureaucrats told off to teach him. In college he may recover somewhat, for the college teacher is relatively more free than the pedagogue lower down the scale. But even in college education has become corrupted by buncombe, and so the boy on the border line of intelligence is apt to be damaged rather than benefited. Under proper care he might be pushed upward. As it is, he is shoved downward. Certainly everyday observation shows that the average college course produces no visible augmentation in the intellectual equipment and capacity of the student. Not long ago, in fact, an actual demonstration in Pennsylvania demonstrated that

students often regress so much during their four years that the average senior is less intelligent, by all known tests, than the average freshman. Part of this may be due to the fact that many really intelligent boys, as soon as they discover the vanity of the so-called education on tap, quit college in disgust, but in large part, I suspect, it is a product of the deadening effect of pedagogy." (127).

I find it hard to wholly agree with Mencken, but elements of his analysis are certainly applicable in this era in Australia. Nevertheless the final excerpt I have chosen surely has a recognisable relevance here:

"The country high-schools of the United States no longer make any pretense to rational teaching. Now that every yokel above the intellectual level of an earthworm is run through them, their more intelligent teachers give up in despair, for not more than a small percentage of the pupils they face are really educable, at least beyond the fifth-grade level. The average curriculum shows a smaller and smaller admixture of rational instruction, and is made up more and more of simple timekillers. The high-school, in its earlier form of the academy, was a hard and even harsh school, but it actually taught a great deal. But in its modern form it is hardly more than a banal aggregation of social clubs. Every student of any pretensions belongs to a dozen - imitation fraternities, bands and orchestras, athletic teams, and so on.

The most salient pupil, next to the champion athlete, is the female drum-major, proudly showing her legs, making the most of her budding breasts, and even offering the spectators a very good idea of the lines and foliage of her pudenda. The State Universities are commonly required by law to take in, sight unseen, the graduates of these burlesque institutions of learning. As a result, they go downhill rapidly, and many of them are already burlesques themselves. As the student body increases in quantity it declines correspondingly in quality." (340).

Enough is enough. The match of Mencken's trenchant analysis of American institutions half a century ago is uncomfortably close to the trends of today in our country. Perhaps we can rest thankful that the American scene has not in the meantime deteriorated quite as drastically as it might have. This may be due to an awakening to these social problems by thoughtful Americans, and in turn it may conceivably be related to the development of organised scepticism.

Notes:

1. The numbers in brackets after each Mencken extract are those used in "Minority Report: H L Mencken's Notebooks", published in 1956 by Alfred A Knopf, New York.
2. A very readable biography is "Mencken" by Carl Bode, published in 1969 by the Southern Illinois University Press, SBN 8093-0376-0.
3. The Mencken epigrams quoted were mainly from Bode's biography and "A Treasury of Ribaldry" by Louis Untermeyer, who was one of Mencken's oldest friends.
4. Another collection of Menckeniana is "The Vintage Mencken" gathered by Alistair Cooke, published in 1955 by Vintage Books, New York. These are mainly essays carefully chosen to omit the more robust and racy items quoted above.
5. Lastly, mention must be made of Mencken's famous tract "In

Virgin Hoax

Harry Edwards

VIRGIN MARY APPEARANCES A HOAX:
CATHOLIC CHURCH,

*San Fernando, Philippines,
September 6, AFP.*

"The Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines said today that the alleged 1993 appearances of the Virgin Mary to a Filipino choirboy near this northern town were a hoax.

A church committee, headed by Father Samuel Banayat, ruled that the alleged apparitions in the town of Agoo, La Union province were "far from being supernatural."

Judiel Nieva, then a 15 year old church choirboy, claimed in 1993 that the mother of Jesus Christ had been appearing before him.

In March that year, tens of thousands of Filipinos in this largely Roman Catholic nation gathered on a hilltop in Agoo hoping to see the Virgin Mary.

Nieva claimed to have seen the Virgin on that day, whereupon he began chanting and rapidly scribbling notes of her message.

But the committee noted that the Blessed Virgin's supposed messages - to spread love and pray regularly - had been plagiarised from at least five sources, including the apparition at Medugorje, which the church has certified as genuine.

Committee members also said they investigated reports that a statue of Mary had shed tears of blood during the apparitions and found that the statue had canals inside the eyes and a tube in the crown.

They said that Nieva's notes of Mary's messages were full of grammatical errors - the words immaculate and serenity were misspelled - and that his chants were rapid, indicating that he had memorised them.

They likewise slammed Nieva for using contributions from believers to build a chapel on the apparition hill, saying that it was not authorised.

Father Mario Valdez, a member of the committee, admitted that many Filipinos would be disappointed by the findings but hoped that "little by little they will accept" the verdict.

Filipinos are avid believers in apparitions and other miracles. (See also original article on Agoo, "Apparitions, Faith and Cock-a-doodle-doo" *the Skeptic* Vol.13, No. 3, p44-45.) ■

... from previous column

Defence of Women", first published in 1923 and issued in The Traveller's Library, by Jonathan Cape, London in 1927.

At first it appears to be shamefully misogynist, but closer reading reveals a depth of sympathy for the plight of women which is only now being realised in society. One of the epigrams at the beginning of this article comes from "In Defence of Women". Guess which one. ■