

would on occasion—I am told—discourse over food barely touched while his dinner companion downed a hearty meal. “Lingering over the table,” writes Felix Morley, “we touched on many subjects, all of them irradiated by the light of his brilliant mind and mellowed by the warmth of his personality.” “Ideas never failed him,” Ellery Sedgwick adds. “Others have their storehouses of learning, but Nock’s mental files were available on the instant. The classics, all of them one might say, French memoirs, learning polite and impolite, everything neatly classified and pigeonholed.”

All this is as it should be. In “The Decline of Conversation,” an essay in the collection entitled *On Doing the Right Thing*, Nock remarks that “The civilization of a country consists in the quality of life that is lived there, and this quality shows plainest in the things people choose to talk about when they talk together, and in the way they choose to talk about them.” In good conversation there is a symphonic quality, themes and variations, a blending and harmony of widely ranging minds which take delight in ideas for their own sake, minds able to play freely over and around ideas without prepossession and willing to follow an argument wherever it leads them. In a debate there’s a loser, but in a discussion there are only winners.

Nock projected some quality—we’d

call it charisma today—which caused those in his company to surpass themselves. “You find yourself coming out with things you didn’t know you had it in you to say,” recalls a friend.

A Living with Others

Conversation is “a living with others,” the dictionary tells us, “a manner of life.” It’s a cultivated way of handling leisure, and it has a synergistic effect on the people involved—provided they meet Rabelais’ test, being “free, well-born, well bred, and conversant in honest companies.” For it is the amiable who shall possess the earth, sang the Psalmist (Ps. 37); not the sectaries who see things through the distorting lens of the ego and try to conscript every idea into the service of a faction. The True Believer cannot become a good conversationalist, for “conversation depends on a copiousness of general ideas and an imagination able to marshal them.” It’s an intellectual dance of reciprocal inspiration, exhibiting “a power of disinterested reflection, an active sense of beauty, and an active sense of manners.” AJN thought of his *Freeman* as a sort of conversation, “a fellowship of fine minds in all parts of the globe.”

Nock came into full possession of his powers during his editorship of *The Freeman*, 1920–1924, from his fiftieth to his fifty-fourth year. He

had had a solid grounding in the classics at St. Stephens, and his valedictory address to the class of ’92 reveals a remarkably disciplined mind for one so young. He went on to earn a graduate degree in theology, then furthered his education informally during the next two decades by reading and travel—steeping himself in the worlds of scholarship, culture, and affairs.

As his inner life ripened the visible man followed suit; slim, poised and assured, impeccably attired—a commanding presence. He became the Albert Jay Nock his friends knew during his *Freeman* days and after; a man of immense reserve, a person around whom legends cluster, a writer whose erudition and prose style earned him a select following—larger now than the corporal’s guard he had a generation ago. It was not in him to become a popular thinker and writer; he wrote for the Remnant and tried to do a solid body of work for the future. “The first rate critic’s business,” he wrote, “is to anticipate the future, work with it, and look exclusively to it for his dividends.” The future Nock worked for is catching up with him!

Autobiography of Ideas

Nock was a virtuoso in these matters, and we shall not see his like again. But we can follow his development as meticulously set forth by the man himself in *Memoirs of a Su-*

perfluous Man. This book (whose title summons up Turgenev) is not an autobiography in the usual sense of that term. Every suggestion that he write a book about his life was rejected with annoyance—until a friend suggested “a purely literary and philosophical autobiography.” Nock fell in with this notion because, as he said, “every person of any intellectual quality develops some sort of philosophy of existence; he acquires certain settled views of life and of human society; and if he would trace out the origin and course of the ideas contributory to that philosophy, he might find it an interesting venture.” Thus, the *Memoirs*, “the autobiography of a mind in relation to the society in which it found itself.”



The Nockian Society,
30 South Broadway,
Irvington, N.Y. 10533,
offers Nock’s *Memoirs* at
a discount price of \$3.00.

Nock closes his final chapter, privacy still intact; but the attentive reader’s mind has been subtly invaded, and it would be a dull fellow indeed who could deny that the hours spent with this book were not among his most memorable reading experiences. Nock discourses on education, literature, women, politics, economics, religion and death, and he does so in matchless, eighteen