Why are we fighting this war? We are fighting it, for one thing, to preserve all that is precious in civilization. We are fighting for freedom, but not merely freedom to do as we wish. We are fighting for freedom to push forward in our conquest of poverty and disease, in our understanding of ourselves and of nature, in our cultural and spiritual growth. And because this is so it seems no breach of modesty for the editors of The American Scholar to feel that this periodical symbolizes in its own way one of the chief reasons why we are fighting this war. For among its ideals is the freedom of the spirit to pursue the multitudinous interests that make up human culture as we know it.

In the midst of war the praises of men are showered chiefly, as they should be, on the sacrifices and courage of the fighter. But after war has ended men look back and are proud to recall that in the midst of death and terror there were those who could quietly pursue the life of the mind. Diogenes asking Alexander not to stand between him and the sun, Goethe calmly pursuing his optical and morphological studies in the era of Napoleonic oppression are among the heroes of this spiritual detachment.

Not that the reader of the present issue of The American Scholar will find it a secluded ivory tower. On the contrary the articles on India and on England, on farm relief and the national debt are all closely related to the present conflict. The article “War on the Visual Front” is directly concerned with it. But perhaps some future historian or antiquary happening by chance on this issue will feel a thrill of pride in human dignity when he is thus reminded that at the very height of this savage war our scientists and inventors were not solely concerned with turning out new and deadlier instruments of destruction. For our
The American Scholar

future historian will here learn how, by a series of triumphs of the human intellect, the scientists of today invented the electron microscope. And many present readers, though they now read every day the dramatic story of the struggle for some island in the far Pacific, or the bombing of some German city, or the stupendous campaign in Russia, are likely to find the account in this issue of how the electron microscope came to be invented as exciting in its way as any of these. It has all the fascination of a superb detective story. The electron microscope itself may prove as important an instrument as any that man has ever devised for conquering disease and increasing his control over nature. But the discovery is in itself a magnificent victory of the human mind. It is a discovery, in short, worth achieving for its own sake apart from any practical application.

I have been speaking of the soldier and the scholar as if they were two different types of men. But, indeed, we are not so much comparing two types of men as two aspects of the same man. Every first-rate man has in him both the qualities of a good soldier and of a good scholar. An inspiring demonstration of this was reported by Harold Denny, a correspondent of The New York Times, in his account of his life in a prisoner-of-war camp for British officers at Poppi, Italy. The prisoners there might have sat around bemoaning their lot. Instead, they decided to pool their knowledge. They organized themselves into what they called “Poppi University.” They formed classes in French, German and Italian. One prisoner, who had been a chartered accountant, taught bookkeeping. Several New Zealand doctors gave popular courses in physiology, medicine and psychology. Captured British pilots lectured on aviation science. There were classes in contract bridge, ropemaking and American government. The prisoners rented a piano; one gave up part of his food ration to buy a sheaf of Beethoven; some British officers wrote out from memory the scores of several musical classics.

These men, one cannot help feeling, knew what kind of world they had been fighting for.

Henry Hazlitt