

MINNESOTA HISTORY

VOLUME 21

MARCH, 1940

NUMBER 1

A LITERARY CRITIC LOOKS AT HISTORY¹

WHENEVER ANYONE REFERS to me as a critic, I find myself wincing and looking for a potted plant to dodge behind. You know why. The critic is the nasty little stepbrother of the arts and nobody really likes him.

He is the ubiquitous, assertive, callow, would-be clever intruder who keeps bustling restlessly about on the edge of the creative world saying how things should have been done differently and better. The natural retort to this kind of impudence is to say between the teeth: "O. K. You come here and do it better." At that the critic turns with a completely shameless display of timidity and scrambles up the nearest tree. From that point of safety, he becomes more infuriating than ever. He goes through his whole wide and varied repertory of urchin unmannerliness, saying in effect: "Just because I refuse to soil my hands with the doing of your job is no reason to suppose that I can't see that you are doing it with infinite stupidity and clumsiness." Let us be for a moment pitilessly candid about it. The critic is a sort of literary "Dead End" kid whom society cannot hope to reclaim for decency. He has the horrid sophistication of the street child and the street child's sketchy knowledge of a great many matters of which it were better perhaps that he knew nothing, since he really understands so little.

That is the secret image of the critic that most good people, especially the artists, carry about with them. I'm not

¹An address presented before the luncheon session of the ninety-first annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, at the St. Paul Athletic Club on January 8, 1939. *Ed.*

sure that I blame them. Living vicariously by picking other people's brains, the critic learns to be sly. Even at this moment I am being sly in my attempt to disarm you of the worst opinions that you have of me by stating those opinions for you.

But in any case, you brought this on yourselves. Probably you feel that the full title of this little discussion should have been: "A Literary Critic Looks at History—and Sneers." If that is indeed your suspicion, perhaps I shall manage to surprise you just a little.

The fact is, of course, that the literary critic has had occasion during the past decade to look at little else besides history. If I, as a young person at the University of Minnesota in the twilight of man between 1916 and 1920, could have had a moment of omniscience and looked all the way forward to the year 1929, my training for the work to which I have given what I shall daringly and stubbornly call my maturity might have been quite different. Instead of brooding over Beowulf, I should have moved over to the history department and studied the foundations of the American republic. Instead of listening with infatuated delight to the perfectly balanced antitheses of Oscar Firkins as he anatomized the novels of Jane Austen and the poems of Walt Whitman, I should have devoted myself to exploration of the roots of the Civil War. I am not sorry that I did what I did because a man cannot repudiate his own past without wishing to destroy a large part of himself. And that way madness and split personality lie. But as things have turned out in our strange world, a young man of letters might better have panted after Plutarch and Parkman than after Walter Pater if he wished to be well prepared to examine the novels and poems and plays of the 1930's.

I presume that I do not have to remind you of the event which shattered our complacency in 1929 and which so completely changed the minds and preoccupations of writers.

We were caught up into what one of the more exuberant British poets has called the "fell clutch of circumstance" and, immediately, all the interests which had seemed important shrank to very nearly nothing at all. A new prospect opened before the world, and the writer, who is the most mercurial of all creatures, rose up from the blow which his personal hopes had received to look with delight upon the fact that here was new material offered him. All things considered, the writing man would rather have something new to write about than a square meal. And that is just as well, since square meals cost a great deal more than new ideas. Thus fate proceeds with a kind of stupid amiability to give each man the rudiments of his requirements for living.

It is strange to look back on any period of one's experience and examine the things that once seemed exciting and that now seem exciting no longer. Before the economic collapse set people to thinking a little more realistically about their objectives and their needs, writers were concerning themselves with very curious toys of the mind. Remember Edna St. Vincent Millay and Sinclair Lewis and James Branch Cabell and Scott Fitzgerald. All of them interested me enormously in the days when I was a student and later when I was first a reviewer. What were their themes? Well, when Miss Millay first brought her bright audacity to our attention, she was exploiting her own personality most attractively. She was telling us with a decorous little wink that her candle burned at both ends, giving a lovely light. More piquantly still, she informed us that she had a little sorrow born of a little sin. She then flattened out the male audience in abject surrender to the perfect woman by announcing that she proposed brazenly to be glad about her little sins.

And Sinclair Lewis! He was tremendously concerned about whether or not Main Street and Zenith had culture. Improbable as it now seems, we allowed ourselves to choose

sides and enter into a mighty struggle over the mental life of poor dear George F. Babbitt. H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan writing in the *Smart Set* and in the *American Mercury* egged us on by jeering at the "booboisie" and collecting scrapbooks of small idiocies out of the American press. Fundamentally, all that excitement boiled down to an Emily Post sort of snobbery about the proper wearing of white ties and the ritual of serving brandy.

Think, if you can do it with a perfectly straight face, of James Branch Cabell. On the theory that he was writing "beautifully of beautiful happenings," he produced the darnedest books of all. They looked in the fussy intricacy of their contriving like lace valentines. But if you examined closely behind the verbal filigree, you saw that a Rabelaisian joke was delicately packed away among the pretty words.

Scott Fitzgerald's theme was whether or not young men should kiss young women, a discussion to which he brought a curious amount of moral earnestness. He was all for the kissing, but there must be, he felt, a splendid lot of sacrificial "whoop-de-do" along with it.

I have chosen these representatives of our literary culture in the 1920's quite at random and I have been grossly unfair to all of them. They have written far better books than the ones I have treated with such scant respect. The poems in the volume called *The Buck in the Snow* make Edna St. Vincent Millay one of our best American poets and compensate for the tabloid journalism of her first efforts. *Arrowsmith* stands magnificently above *Babbitt* in significance. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is a fine and important novel, making the brilliant juvenility of *This Side of Paradise* worth having endured. My point is that in the 1920's clever men could be admired by critics and enriched by the public for the dismal service of exploiting completely trivial subject matter. It is now inconceivable that we ever persuaded ourselves to care so much whether

flappers kissed Princeton boys. And as for the contempt which we lavished upon that honorable citizen, George F. Babbitt, we've had to swallow most of our insults. In *The Living Tradition*, Simeon Strunsky has had the last word about that phase of our passion for culture. In a world where the refinements of gracious living in old societies have come to be associated with the savage brutalities of the Nazi philosophy, the honest and generous values of George F. Babbitt have come to seem of infinite worth.

In the splendid promise of endless prosperity with the sky as the limit, men of affairs warmed themselves cozily during the decade of the 1920's. But in that promise writers were not invited to share. Left to brood by themselves in Grub Street, they inevitably placed their emphasis on what was wrong with the culture which exploited them part of the time and ignored them during the rest of the long days and longer nights. When they turned their attention to biography, it was to quarrel vindictively with the limitations of the men who were responsible for the building of our society. And so we had the debunking period, as the writers who profited from that often petty and destructive impulse liked to call it. Perhaps it might more exactly be called the mote-removing era. A great deal of smugness and hypocrisy is discernible in retrospect in those volumes which undertook to isolate the germ of weakness in every major figure of American history.

And then came that wonderfully leveling event that changed the outlook for everyone. A great many bankers and judges were hustled into police wagons and carted off to jail. A lot of prophets who had been telling us that it was our destiny to get bigger and better until our world became merged with ultimate perfection were cut short in the midst of their improving little sermonettes by the sound of the sky falling on their heads. As we crawled out of the ruins, licking our wounds and rubbing our bruises, everyone decided simultaneously that it was time to sit quite quietly

and think over what had happened to us. For it was clear that we had been living in a world that was founded on nothing more solid or secure than wish fulfillments. It was time to look a trifle more realistically at the foundations of our society.

In the days of our delectable day dreaming, all concentration of interest had been on the future. Even the biographers whose material dealt with yesterday had their eye on tomorrow. They scolded George Washington for his limited outlook in preaching against the entangling alliances and treated him as a cowardly renegade from the ideal of the League of Nations.

Then suddenly everyone's glance reverted toward the past. There were two reasons for this, I suppose. One was the escapist impulse. If things seemed bad in our time it was better to think about the graciousness of another day. If fiction presented the writer who tried to handle the modern scene with insoluble problems having to do with labor conflicts and unemployment, he could retreat into a period when all the problems had been neatly and conveniently solved for him.

But that was the less significant of the reasons which prompted a thorough exploration of the past. The real one was that we wished suddenly to know something about ourselves. We wished to recover a sense of continuity so that we might feel that we had solid ground under our feet. It comforted us to know that life had not been easy for our grandfathers any more than it was easy for us. If they had managed to come through the disasters of their times, we too might weather ours.

If any proof be needed that this desire to recover the past was strong in the whole of our public, it can be found in the tremendous success that the novelists have had in their presentation of such material. One thinks first of all inevitably of *Gone with the Wind*. It was no inexplicable whim on the part of America which sent it stampeding into

the lending libraries and even into the bookstores actually to buy that particular story. No one could have predicted in advance that it would interest three million people enough to make them wish to part with the price of a permanent wave, a bottle of whisky, or one of the great necessities of life in order to possess it. The background of its creation had been austere and forbidding. An unknown ex-newspaper woman had spent seven years reading all the historical works in the library at Atlanta, Georgia, acquiring sufficient knowledge of Civil War history to make her story plausible. She had set down a thousand pages totaling some half million words. The result was a book so formidable in bulk that many a reader felt that he could not hold it until he suddenly discovered that he could not put it down. It's no whim that makes people read such a book.

Enough time has passed so that reviewers are now ready to admit that *Gone with the Wind* was a fabulously over-rated book. It is the work of a woman with a natural gift for storytelling who thinks in terms of sensational climaxes exactly like those which the films have popularized. Yet the impulse which drew the American public to that book, as it has been drawn to almost no others, was fundamentally the desire to establish a rapprochement with the spirit of the past. Because Margaret Mitchell dressed up that spirit attractively and made it vivid, dramatic, and not too difficult to grasp, she profited more than any other writer from America's wish to reclaim the past.

She was, however, very far from being the only writer of our time whose historical explorations have won a grateful audience. Much more important than Miss Mitchell is Kenneth Roberts. It must be very pleasant to be a phenomenon like the lady from Georgia whose success interests income tax collectors as much as it interests literary critics. But it must be on the whole more pleasant to be a consistently useful man of letters like Mr. Roberts. His historical novels, dealing with the beginnings of America in

New England, have been reliable guides through the past for almost as large an army of readers as that which came rushing to Miss Mitchell's shock of war. Of all the writers who have searched the records, Mr. Roberts has done his background reading most conscientiously and thoroughly. In *Arundel*, *The Lively Lady*, *Rabble in Arms*, and *Northwest Passage*, he has not merely marshaled stirring events to make of their passion and their conflict an enlivening drama; he has also re-created a believable world in which men and women whom we easily recognize as brothers and sisters to ourselves suffer from hunger, betrayal, and need. Their experience is a crazy quilt of failures and successes, reminding us of the strange mixture of good and bad in our own daily routine. Hundreds of small incidents which Mr. Roberts has laboriously dug out of old manuscripts point to the familiar humanity of the men and women who began the task of building our world out of a wilderness.

Another novelist whose service has been less conspicuous than that of Miss Mitchell but considerably more consistently useful is Walter Edmonds. He also explores original sources with a conscientiousness which recommends him to scholars. But what recommends him to a comfortably large number of American readers is the fact that he has interested himself in themes which seem to throw light on our present-day struggles with the world in which we live. In *Rome Haul*, he showed man combating the forces of change which it was inevitable that he should resent and to which it was equally inevitable that he must yield. They were very human creatures, those men who brawled and drank and made splendid oaths in the dramatic and amusing scenes of Mr. Edmonds' novel. But their simplicity did not obscure their social significance as gradually they were worsted in the fight which was establishing the railroads as the great means of transportation rather than the waterway system of lakes and canals. Facing problems of change

today, we feel a kinship to those vigorous creatures who somehow survived similar trials. In *Drums along the Mohawk*, Mr. Edmonds showed us a group of spontaneous and self-reliant people who thought that they were fighting, during the Revolutionary War, for the defense of their little plots of ground and found that they had been fighting all unconsciously for nationhood.

These themes, suggested by the need to recover the conception of America as a society in the making, have very greatly enriched the fiction of our time. To the general public their significance has been no less attractive than it has been to the writer himself. Mere facility of craftsmanship has no longer been enough to find an audience for the novelist. He must have something of vital interest to communicate or he might as well save himself the fatiguing effort of pounding the keys of a typewriter. Readers have been ready to receive newcomers in the field of fiction like John Jennings or Taylor Caldwell despite a certain naïve inexperience of style. Both of these writers seem admirable because they have taken the trouble to explore American history for vital material. Mr. Jennings in *Next to Valour* created one of the least believable heroes of recent fiction, a man whose minx of a wife could pull the wool over his eyes without even taking the trouble to get a good grade of wool. But the fascination of careful research into the beginnings of America gave Mr. Jennings a large and enthusiastic following. Taylor Caldwell in *Dynasty of Death* and its recently published sequel, *The Eagles Gather*, has created a family of munitions manufacturers designed to set Senator Gerald P. Nye to his old trick of quivering with moral indignation. From a political point of view, her books seem sometimes touchingly innocent. Yet because they have borrowed from American history important material concerning the ways of rugged individualism in the creation of industrial empires, her stories have power far beyond that of the ordinary works of popular fiction.

Even a frankly popular writer like Rachel Field has turned away from the pleasant subject matter that would once have attracted a writer of her type. In *All This, and Heaven Too*, she explored the story of American idealism and American enterprise as a Frenchwoman with a sensational past made a place for herself in New York among the sober creative workers of nineteenth-century society.

Biography, too, has changed its outlook. Its present mood is one of which historical scholarship can approve. Formerly the trick with which many a writer gained a reputation was to drag the great man down from the pedestal by a belittling obliquity of approach. The Father of His Country, such writers found, could be made faintly ridiculous by an insistence on the fact that he wore false teeth. There were deviations from strict monogamy to tarnish the dignity of Alexander Hamilton. Emphasis was on the shoddy flaw, the moment of scandal. These studies pleased the urchin spite which survives into the maturity of many of us, but they did little to improve our knowledge of America.

But when the passion for a full, sober, and consistent knowledge of the men who made this country took possession of the public mind, books of a different sort began to be written. Perhaps one should rather say, began to be noticed. Douglas Freeman would probably have written his four-volume biography of Robert E. Lee and Carl Van Doren would have made his study of the extraordinary intellectual phenomenon that was Benjamin Franklin whether their work received wide attention or not. But it speaks well for maturing taste of the American public that these books, each of them the product of years and years of the most conscientious study, should actually have made their way to the best-selling lists.

Though much had been written about Lee before Mr. Freeman made his important contribution to our understanding of his significance, the new biography appeared at a moment of peculiar timeliness. One of the characteris-

tics upon which our democracy has a right to pride itself is its tolerance toward the opinions of minorities. Even our Civil War could be fought without lasting bitterness. When Ernst Toller, in flight from the new barbarism in his own country, stood before Lee's house at Arlington and realized that a country could make a national hero of one of its great rebels, he was moved almost beyond control. It is a precedent to be cherished. Mr. Freeman's biography of Lee, appearing at a moment when so many quarters of the world were giving themselves up to riotous indulgence in hatred and blood lust, reminded us poignantly of a better set of values.

Mr. Freeman's conception of his duty toward this subject was ambitious and exacting. He offered, among other things, a full examination of Lee's genius as a strategist in battle. But the impression which remains with a reader of his work is that of a beautiful fulfillment of Chaucer's ideal of the very perfect knight. The sheer goodness of Lee seems dazzlingly bright in this account. As innocent and idealistic as Don Quixote, he was also as disciplined, orderly, and clear-sighted as an honor student of West Point must be. The touching irony of Lee's gentleness in the midst of so much violence gives his story a special meaning for us who are living in another period of violence.

Of similar significance is Mr. Van Doren's re-examination of Franklin. Many of us, I think, escaped from school still carrying the impression that Franklin was a sort of super Sunday-school teacher with a mouthful of pious maxims about not paying too much for a penny whistle. What we resented in this false image—and quite rightly, too—was that it seemed to deny to ordinary folk the right to make their own mistakes.

I can hardly express the personal relief that I felt when I discovered that Franklin was almost nothing that I had thought him. The pious maxims were the smallest and most casual expression of an exuberance that was, in actu-

ality, most beguiling. The richness of Franklin's temperament was unsuspected by most of us until Mr. Van Doren revealed it. He was, as his biographer expresses it, a sort of folk Leonardo da Vinci, a man whose restless imagination nudged him into the exploration of many fields of wisdom. He was the first to appreciate the significance of lightning; the first to study the common cold; the first—God forgive him!—to practice music criticism.

But there were other things about Franklin which we had forgotten or never known and of which we were glad to be reminded by Mr. Van Doren. One was that he had always an extremely good time. A source of vague resentment against the "founding fathers" was the mistaken notion that they spent their time exclusively in the pursuit of terrifying principles of excellence, which they recommended to their descendants in sonorous phrases. The knowledge that Franklin was actually an early American playboy reconciled many to the more sober aspects of his genius. And after all those years of worrying our pretty heads about whether or not Americans were cultured, it was surprising and delightful to find that Franklin was valued by the aristocrats of Paris because of the subtlety, complexity, in short, the cultivated quality of his mind. And finally he embodied that great democratic principle of intelligent concession which served to reconcile the extremes of opinion without loss of the central mass of belief which the extremes held in common. So through our willingness to listen to historians, one of the important sources of national pride was restored to us after years of neglect.

There have been many other important biographies in our time which have helped us to digest our past. Carl Sandburg's *Lincoln* offers an example of honest scholarship. It has the emphasis that one would expect to find in a man of Sandburg's temperament. Despite the bulk of the four volumes, the work is essentially a long, long poem in celebration of the dignity of the human spirit. Sandburg is

first a poet and after that an infinitely curious and wise collector of folklore. His *Lincoln* is not so much the study of a midwestern politician who grew slowly, slowly into a statesman. It is the study of a magnificent phenomenon: a man who embodied in himself the wisdom of the people and who elevated into eloquence the poetry of their spontaneous expression of belief. It is an enormously valuable contribution to the permanent wealth of American biography, especially because it is the work of a very vigorous and sensitive man of letters. Other writers wishing to explore this aspect and that of Lincoln's importance in our national history will be grateful to Sandburg for the work he has done in bringing together such a tremendous mass of folk material.

I meant to say much more about the wealth that a new-born interest in history, particularly the history of our own country, has opened up to the reviewer of books and to the popular audience in general. I wished, for example, to make a public confession of how deeply rebuked I felt when I read Van Wyck Brooks's *The Flowering of New England*. My particular regret was for all the rude things I had thought and probably written about Longfellow. In our day, the "life is real and life is earnest" tradition of didactic verse has raveled out ridiculously into the homey verses of Eddie Guest. Consequently, my irreverent and ignorant generation grew up to repudiate the whole style. What we did not realize in our smugness was that Longfellow, who loved the best in literary tradition, provided a link between two worlds. His adaptation of the methods of classic writers to the telling of American stories, like that of *Hiawatha*, suggested that though our world was new, it was not cut off from what the old could teach us. Continuity of tradition is important in literature, and Longfellow helped to supply it.

But there I go again, letting my old journalistic habit of garrulity get in the way of my awareness of time. I have

not doffed my cap politely as I should have done to Henry Seidel Canby, to Charles A. Beard, to Vernon Parrington, to many of the most important men who have, in our time, been giving back to the whole people the human comedy of our history.

The point that I have wished to make is that literature's air castles are all for rent. No serious novelist could possibly write in our time the innocent, naïve success story in which an earlier day delighted. That is not because we cynically deny the possibility of achievement, but because our sense of values has changed. Writing in America, I assert with confidence, has matured. Circumstances have forced upon us sobriety and a critical sense of values. History has shown novelists, biographers, critics, poets, dramatists the way toward a wider outlook upon our human experience and a more deeply penetrating gaze at its meanings. We can never go back to the old preoccupations and the old formulas. Toward those men and women who, while America slowly matured, have been quietly building up excellent historical libraries and perfecting techniques of study, I feel a profound gratitude.

JAMES GRAY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).