

profound her psychology! Perhaps it is just because the young women of today are so reluctant to take Jessie Conrad's view of a wife's position, that they so rarely discover their husbands to be geniuses. . . .



## *Archaeology in Literature*

By E. F. BENSON

THE VICTORIANS AND THEIR READING, by Amy Cruse. \$4. 6 x 9; 444 PP.  
Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

MRs. AMY CRUSE's literary excavations have led to the most entertaining results. By dint of delving into diaries and contemporary correspondence she has enabled us to realize what the early Victorians of true sensibility demanded of the fiction and poetry of their times. This is the most interesting and elaborated part of her book, because in matters of literary taste those years are far more remote from our own day than many preceding epochs. The Victorians, for instance, seem to have read novels largely in order to be made to cry: their tears were the standard by which they measured artistic achievement. Dickens, it is true, made his first great success, the year before the Victorian age proper began, with *Pickwick Papers*, but it is important to observe that the intelligentsia of the day did not, in spite of the colossal popularity of the book, think very much of it. Miss Deborah Jenkyns of *Cranford*, it may be remembered, could not understand why her less cultivated friends found it so entrancing, and proved her point by reading aloud a passage from *Rasselas*: leaders of literary taste agreed with her. But *Pickwick* was followed by the great series of immortal

novels, and then indeed the elect took Dickens to their hearts for he complied with their demands. They wept profusely over Smike's death in *Nicholas Nickleby*, but that was nothing to the storm of tears which broke over *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The book came out in parts, and when it began to be clear that Little Nell was going to die, tens of thousands of readers took out their handkerchiefs and revelled in woe. The actor W. C. Macready wrote to Dickens, entreating him to spare her, but the author with a stern sense of duty replied that in spite of his own inexpressible sorrow, he must be firm. Macready dreaded to read the fatal chapter, but he had to get it over, and again he wrote: "I have never read printed words which gave me so much pain. I could not weep for some time." Daniel O'Connell, the Irish agitator, sobbed aloud in a railway carriage when he came to this passage, and Lord Justice Jeffrey was similarly moved. *Dombey and Son* was equally successful. Macaulay, after reading the first chapter, wrote: "I cried as if my heart would break". Thackeray was quite overcome, and Macready when next he saw Dickens after Paul Dombey's death could not speak because he sobbed so chokingly. All these hard-headed eminent men had got exactly what they wanted. It was not that they did not appreciate the humor, the rich humanity, the grip of these superb narratives, but most of all they prized the pathos. That is where early Victorians are so remote from novel readers of today. Dickens has retained his huge popularity, but those who delight in him now appreciate least what contemporary readers appreciated most. Even the most ardent find his pathos intolerably mawkish. "Sob-stuff" is a verdict of contempt.

Another early Victorian writer whom

for the same reason the elect took to their bosoms was Miss Charlotte Yonge, and *The Heir of Redclyffe* drowned English readers in the spontaneous flood of their own tears. The death of Sir Guy Morville was a supreme tragedy in thousands of happy lives, and the incandescent respectability, the high religious tone of all the main characters in the book, made a further appeal to the public taste. Mrs. Amy Cruse hazards the suggestion that the national devotion to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, and the national admiration of their blameless domestic lives, were the cause of this taste, but it is impossible to accept this, for at the time when *The Heir of Redclyffe* came out in 1853, both the Queen and her husband were extremely unpopular owing to their German sympathies: indeed, just before the Crimean War, the streets of London fluttered with libelous broadsides. Simply, the early Victorians wanted to read about "nice" people, and again, how infinitely remote that makes us feel. Dickens certainly had villains enough, but they all, Squeers and Ralph Nickleby and Uriah Heep and the rest, came to hideous ends; thus justice was done and moral standards vindicated. And he never introduced the sex problems which could bring a blush to the Victorian cheek. The eternal triangle temporarily faded from the pages of fiction.

The early Victorians had an insatiable appetite for poetry, and their board was sumptuously spread. The passion for Byron was beginning to cool—so much of his work was not "nice". Mrs. Hemans was completely nice, and she enjoyed a prodigious popularity: so also did the Master of Platitudes, Martin Tupper, whose *Proverbial Philosophy* was thought to rival in moral beauty the Proverbs of Solomon. For pathos, equal to that of Little Nell, they had Thomas Hood, whose

*Song of the Shirt*, appearing originally in *Punch*, was sold in vast quantities in the street for one penny a copy and was printed on handkerchiefs: the reader could thus con his handkerchief and wipe his eyes on it afterwards. Besides these wayside shrines there were great temples of song built or building. Southey, a respectable poet-laureate, had only a small congregation, and Wordsworth, who succeeded him, was already enthroned. But the greatest of all, to early Victorian taste, was Tennyson: his *In Memoriam* became to readers of poetry what the *Christian Year* was to orthodox churchmen, but before his *Idylls of the King* appeared a reaction from his suavity had begun. The eternal triangle of King Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot certainly had all its disconcerting angles rounded off, but it was jeered at for the flaccid nobility of the "crowned curate" and for the lifelessness of the offenders. Readers of poetry demanded more vitality, and they found it in Browning. His tumultuous vigor, his audacious dissections that disclosed the beating heart of humanity, thrilled the Victorians with a new species of ecstasy. They were not accustomed to think when they read poetry, but only to feel. It required an unusual effort, but having braced themselves to it, they found that here was poetry indeed, the true tingling romance of life itself. . . . Then from Swinburne came *Poems and Ballads*, and "the libidinous laureate of a poet of satyrs", as John Morley elegantly called him, gave to English lyrical poetry a music never heard before.

Reaction was bound to come not in fiction and poetry alone, but in books of scientific and religious speculation. The faith of early Victorians was professedly rooted in an orthodoxy that accepted the literal truth of the six days of Creation

and of Jonah's whale as unquestioningly as the spiritual truth of the Sermon on the Mount. As Mrs. Cruse points out, they were "fiercely preoccupied with questions of religion", and again to what an infinite distance they seem to recede! Already the anonymous *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* had profoundly disturbed them: in certain points it foreshadowed the *Origin of Species*, and Charles Darwin was suspected of being the author of it because he was writing far more scientifically on the same lines. The young intellectuals hailed it as a rebellion against the adamant orthodoxy in which they had been reared, and the withering sarcasm of the celebrated Dr. Cumming, who summarized it, "the monkey is the embryo man, so that if you keep a baboon long enough it will develop itself into a man", did not stifle inquiry. Curiosity had been awakened; Harriet Martineau kept it alive, and when, late in the fifties, the *Origin of Species* appeared, the whole system of Victorian religious belief got derailed, and no one could put it back on the traditional lines. Cardinal Manning denounced Darwinism as "a brutal philosophy—to wit, there is no God, and the ape is our Adam". Carlyle was equally vehement: he never read the book, but *more suo*, he knew. Next year appeared *Essays and Reviews*, a series of articles written almost entirely by clergymen. The Reverend Frederick Temple was the author of one of these, then held to be almost atheistic. Mrs. Cruse should have added that he lived to become Archbishop of Canterbury.

Realism in literature was keeping step with rationalism in religion. From the grim parsonage at Haworth had issued three supreme works of fiction, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë (I purposely omit *Shirley*), and *Wuthering*

*Heights*. The latter, which many fine judges now regard as the supreme novel in the English language, attracted no real attention at all for many years: even Emily's devoted sister apologized for the "brutality" of it. But the modernist movement was well under way, and in the fifteen years from 1845 to 1860 the great novelists of the period revolutionized national taste. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* was running in serial when *Jane Eyre* appeared; *Scenes of Clerical Life* by George Eliot was partnered by Trollope's *Barchester Towers*, and followed by *Adam Bede*. Utterly diverse as were these books, they were all founded on the bedrock of human nature, and all, in the true sense of that misused word, were realistic. Fiction took a determined step in the direction of actual life. Once taken it could never be retraced, any more than religious thought could go back to pre-Darwin days. The mists of false sentimentality were dispersing. Victorians dried their eyes and began to think. With many hesitations and panic alarms they seriously wondered whether human experience of any sort was not a fit subject for fiction, even as they were beginning to suspect that in religion the pursuit of inexorable truth overrode traditional reticence.

Mrs. Cruse's book is far too well documented with the opinions of weighty authorities to permit any doubt about the truth of the main conclusion. The early Victorian age, derided for its narrowness, was in reality an age of religious and literary emancipations. She does not seriously tackle the subject of how the unshackled used their freedom, but it is interesting to observe how all later developments were founded on the earlier. The gospel preached by Ruskin of the essential need of beauty in human life, received its first practical application by

the pre-Raphaelites, and was echoed afterwards by Walter Pater and the aesthetic movement of the eighties. The gospel of the efficiency of women and their rights to exercise it, which was preached from the parsonage at Haworth, developed into female suffrage and the opening to women of practically all professions, while from the purely literary standpoint the noble work of Thomas Hardy was reared on the ground first surveyed by George Eliot. Indeed Mrs. Cruse's method of assembling contemporary opinion, though long obsolete, furnishes a new angle for the observations of subsequent criticism.



### *Barbusse Looks at Stalin*

BY EUGENE LYONS

STALIN, A NEW WORLD SEEN THROUGH ONE MAN, by Henri Barbusse. \$3. 6 x 8½; 315 pp. New York: Macmillan.

THERE are extenuating circumstances. Henri Barbusse was a sick man when he wrote this, his last book—sick and embittered and in a transport of feverish faith. I saw him occasionally in Russia while the book was in gestation; a gaunt, stooping figure, sharp-featured, with flashing eyes, always preoccupied by his inner emotions, moving in a cloud of his own excitements. When he spoke at a public meeting, his voice and his whole personality seemed high-pitched with passion, challenging and condemning like some Hebraic prophet. It was rumored then that he was engaged on a biography of Stalin. But those aware of the hectic flush in his emotions and his thinking could hardly look forward to a detached and informative portrait of the Soviet leader. At most they could hope

for an intense and very personal expression of the Russian Revolution—not its facts and figures, but its furies and hyperbolic visions.

This hope is in some measure fulfilled by the book. In those passages where Barbusse depicts, castigates, and hurls curses at the iniquities and stupidities of capitalist society he recaptures some of the eloquence of *Under Fire*. Where he gives his robust imagination free rein in picturing a socialist world-to-be of perfect peace and surpassing justice, he achieves both strength and beauty. The chapter on the Bolshevik theory of nationalities is a moving piece of imaginative composition. But throughout the volume facts are subordinated to ardent wishes and logic is sacrificed to artistic unity. Under the thin disguise of factual writing, the book is really a curious and often powerful work of religio-political mysticism.

Stalin, from that point of view, is no longer a human creature with human attributes and responsibilities, but the revolution incarnate, the spirit of proletarian vengeance and unlimited hope. By the same token Trotsky and others who dared oppose Stalin are the counter-revolution and the dank hobgoblins of the old vile world. In the titanic tussle between these forces of Good and Evil, Good emerges victorious and will continue to emerge victorious, for the simple reason that—and Barbusse states it again and again, simply and trustfully—those in the right always triumph. Stalin, according to this theological simplification, “is a leader for the same reason that he is successful: because he is right”. And, “if Trotsky had been right he would have won”. If Barbusse had renamed his characters Prolet and Anti-Prolet, understanding his theme would have been easier.

In the guise of a biography of Joseph