

BRITISH JOURNALISM

by WICKHAM STEED

The other day, in the height of the holiday season when most newspaper circulations drop, the editor of a respectable Sunday journal told me that his circulation was going steadily up, and asked if I could account for it. He agreed with some of my suggestions and then said, "We have been trying to find out and have at last come to believe that the main reason is the wish of a greater number of ordinary folk to read better papers than sensational rags that rely on stunts, crime, competitions and bathing girls; and that the reason for this reason is the effect of the constant broadcasting of good talks on serious subjects by the British Broadcasting Corporation. If we are right, it is a good sign."

"You are probably right," I answered. "If so, it goes to prove what I have long felt—that the British press is behind the times and does not know what the public really wants."

Nearly forty years ago there was a revolution in British journalism. Alfred Harmsworth began it. He saw that the spread of popular education through the County Council schools was creating a demand for reading matter which none of the dull, heavy, daily sheets was able to meet. He has often been accused of having lowered and degraded the public taste by demoralizing the British press with "American methods," and of making millions for himself by pandering to vulgarity. The truth is rather that his own mind was, at that time, the County Council school mind writ large; and that he understood two things which the publishers of older sheets did not see. Of these the first was that the County Council school mind covered a much wider area than snobs or highbrows imagine. The second was that there is nothing which most people are so mean about as the price they pay for a newspaper.

So, at a time when other papers cost six cents, four cents, or two cents at the very least, he produced his *Daily Mail* at one cent. Everybody, himself included, forsook his speedy ruin. So persistently did he circulate stories of his frightful losses that he had a long start of any possible rivals before they found that they had been fooled. The *Daily Mail* paid handsomely from its first issue.

In his own way he put "the news" into it, big news and little, bad news and good, true news and false—though he soon learned that false news is poor journalism. He threw away money in getting the news, and edited it so that the County Council school mind would see what it meant. Soon his *Daily Mail* was the favorite journal of the masses—and of "Society."

Before Harmsworth founded the *Daily Mail* in 1896 he had put his last penny into buying the *Evening News*, a Tory rag on which the Conservative Party was believed to have lost \$2,500,000. With the exception of the old *Pall Mall Gazette* and its successor, the *Westminster Gazette* (with which may be bracketed well-written papers like the *Globe* and the *St. James's Gazette*), London evening journals were then, and still are, a by-word and a reproach. The *Evening News* was the worst of all. Its rival, the *Star*, was nearly as bad, despite its more Liberal hue. By an amusing prank which the late T. P. O'Connor never forgave or forgot, the bankrupt *Evening News* was sold to Harmsworth for \$60,000. He and the man who brought it to him—one Kennedy Jones, who had been a foreman printer and was then the roughest of rough diamonds, cast about for means of making it pay. The strictest economy failed to close the gap between outgoings and incomings. Then Harmsworth had a brain wave. For a few months he had been a "soldier" in the Salvation Army, and had learned that there were other sides to the British man-in-the-street than those to be seen in gin palaces or among the lancers-on of race tipsters. The *Evening News* had been printing as many as eighteen columns of horse-racing copy every afternoon, and the *Star* no fewer than fourteen. Harmsworth cut the racing columns by fifty per cent and filled the space with better stuff. Circulation increased by leaps and bounds and—judiciously exploiting a sensational murder—he made a profit of \$175,000 in the first year.

In the spring of 1921, shortly before the centenary of Napoleon's death, I asked Marshal Foch whether, in his opinion, Napoleon would have done better in the World War than he and the other Allied commanders had been able to do. He paused a moment and then said that it would have taken Napoleon two months to master modern military technique. Having mastered it, he would have found some new dodge and would have smashed the enemy overnight. Harmsworth, better known as Lord Northcliffe, liked to be called the "Napoleon of the Press." This peculiar vanity was one of his weakest points. But I feel sure that if any publisher of genius equal to his were to arise in British newspaperdom today, he would sense the new situation, understand that the noisiest and most blatant English journals lag far behind the real taste of the public, and would sweep the board with a type of popular journal which, in comparison with the *Daily Mail* of 1896, would be high-class without being highbrow.

Some of the staid papers are dimly aware of the change in the quality of public demand, though they have not the wit to perceive that the two canons of successful journalism remain what they have ever been: "Thou shalt not be dull" and "Thou shalt give the news." The nearest thing to a live newspaper of the popular sort in England today is Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express*, but it is so much of a speaking-trumpet for Lord Beaverbrook himself, and so hampered by the limitations of his narrow-track mind, that it repels as many readers

as it attracts. The so-called Labor organ, the *Daily Herald*, which runs the *Daily Express* close in point of circulation, is a mere business proposition run by hard-faced capitalists for the sake of auditor's certificates and advertisement revenue. There are more bathing girls, film stars, prize-fighters and racing tips in it than in any of its competitors. As an instrument of Labor doctrine it is not comparable to the old *Daily Herald*, which could not pay its way.

Until the death of the late C. P. Scott and the tragic drowning of his son and successor a few months back, the *Manchester Guardian* had been, technically speaking, easily the best of the serious English newspapers for nearly ten years. Of late there has been a marked decline in its editorial quality and power, though some of its news is first-rate. A sort of bewilderment has come over it. Like the *London Times*, it is still indispensable and is, on the whole—with the *Tory Morning Post*—the best written of English dailies.

And this brings me to the matter of writing. English journalistic style is in a bad way. It is infected by jargon. People do not begin to do things; they "commence." Nobody behaves well or ill; everybody has an "attitude." Events are "happenings," and may be "amazing," "arresting," "intriguing," or "gripping" according to the sub-editor's or the reporter's fancy. So far has the "attitude" nonsense gone that it is actually to be found in official documents. The Treaty between Great Britain and Iraq, for instance, pledges the High Contracting Parties to "maintain a friendly attitude" toward each other, not to behave as friends. "Schools of journalism" abound, but none of them seems to think it worth while to ground its pupils in Anglo-Saxon.

Worst of all, the English press has become "The Newspaper Industry." The shares of money-making newspaper combines are bought and sold in the public market, and the buyers naturally look for big dividends. Big dividends, in their turn, mean artificial circulations, got and kept by such devices as heavy insurance benefits for "registered readers," many of whom never look at the sheets they buy, and thus deprive advertisers of the publicity ostensibly guaranteed. The hunt for circulation or, at all events, for circulation certificates as leverage for advertisement revenue, goes on with growing intensity. And all the while editors and publishers forget that the one true path to big, steady, solid circulation lies through true news, sound views, independence of character and honest appeal to the higher feelings of an increasingly educated public.

Sooner or later something in this inflated "newspaper industry" will crack. Then, if a new and perhaps a wiser Harmsworth comes along with a nose for the new public, we may have a second revolution in English journalism. Meanwhile, no man can gather from the English press what the nation truly feels and thinks.

THE SUPREME COURT MENACE

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nullify legislation. James Madison sponsored such a provision, but his fellow law-makers voted him down four times in no uncertain terms. It was eventually agreed that no constitution giving the judiciary such unusual powers could ever secure ratification by the states.

As early as 1796 the Court began to think about extending its power, but majority opinions of that period are careful to repudiate the idea that the Court had authority to pass upon the validity of legislation. When Chief Justice Marshall eventually enunciated the principle that the courts might set aside acts of Congress on the ground that they were "repugnant to the Constitution," such a clamor of protest followed that the theory was not revived for years. Later pronouncements extending this right to acts of the states and other local bodies caused even greater agitation.

Eventually, taking advantage of the indifference of a moderately contented people, the Court accomplished what it had set out to do, and firmly entrenched itself behind a series of opinions arrogating to itself supreme and final authority over representative government. It has decreed itself arbiter over such economic issues as arise in cases involving valuation of utilities for regulation of rates, protection of patents, and other matters affecting property; and passing upon such issues the august judges of the Court continue to be, under their impressive robes, the same men, with the same prejudices, that they were when practising law as private citizens. Also, under the vague terms of the Constitution, it is impossible for members of the Court to decide such matters according to law. If they decide them at all, they must decide them according to their own notions of wisdom and expediency. Presidents and Senates, in creating judges, have frankly realized this inevitable truth.

Reform of the judicial branch by appointment to the Supreme Court of men aware of the need for making it responsive to present needs would provide the speediest method of securing flexibility, if a fortunate and improbable set of circumstances should provide us with a President willing to make such appointments, and at the same time should provide him with a sufficient number of vacancies on the Court. But such reform could only be transitory, dependent upon the political fortunes of the executive and the longevity and mental vitality of his appointees. In the end the conservative forces which constantly plot to dominate the government, and which usually succeed, would again secure control and drag us back to where we are today.

STUDY IN SINCERITY

by BRANCH CABELL

You have forwarded me, my dear madam, an advance copy of your forthcoming volume of fiction; with the suggestion that, if I "like the book," your publishers would be glad to have me write a few lines concerning it, to appear on the dust jacket. You have thus put me to the unpleasant necessity of saying I do not like your book. Your latest book appears to me to resemble each one of its predecessors in being a tedious and a meagre and a valueless performance, about which no civilized being could say anything kindly except by lying outright. Hardly any other exercise in the unvarnished could much trouble my indurated conscience, for I find that I lie daily to preserve my quiet, my solvency, my social position, and my domestic peace. Yet I cannot—it is an odd thing—lie about books with a mind wholly at ease.

That your most recent book should be refined, dependable, and dull reading-matter, appears to me rather an affair of necessity; and whether this particular book be much more insulse and humdrum than is the average book acclaimed by our more serious-minded readers, I am not qualified to declare. I know only that for years each one of your books, madam, has revealed, to my casual inspection, the sincere and ambitious and painstaking exercise of third-rate endowments: and I decline to figure, even on a dust jacket, as an admirer of that against which my auctorial life has been a protest.

I make bold to differ with the most of those who review your books. I have read duly their admiring remarks upon your delicately chiseled style, your serene nobility, your unerring choice of the right word, and all that other bleated balderdash which proves how acceptable among us as a substitute for authentic art is your sedate hebetude. It puzzles me sometimes, I confess, to note our intense admiration for the merely inadequate: it troubles me thus to be bidden to a banquet of Lucullus when the entertainment is really modeled after a tea-party among the ladies of Cranford.

Yet I do not, I hope, grudge you your success as a purveyor of sane and harmless and mildly edifying fiction. None can deny your somewhat muzzy admiration of the homelier virtues. One admits the whole-hearted sincerity which transfers to the pages of your books all the more tediously tender features of actual existence. One can charitably imagine that even the too long preserved virginity, whose stalesness appears to permeate all your later books like a small smell, is not in the least your fault, but remains chargeable to the delinquencies of quite a number of men. All these things I, at any rate, concede you with an equable mind: and only when the merits of your prose style are held up for our adulation does my blood boil. Here, to be sure, I am a fanatic: and it is an ebullition, even then, far less of rage against you, madam, than of despair for my native land, which continues in this fashion to regard the third-rate with profound seriousness and respectful awe.

You must bear with me. I speak pettishly, no doubt; I have cause. You are to me an unfailing bother precisely because we both dote on the unmodish idea that writing is an art demanding in its execution almost as much constant painstaking as is needed by a cook in the kitchen or by a chauffeur in the driver's seat. I at least am so unimaginative, so uninspired by aesthetic fervors, as to believe that all words are in the dictionary, ready for anybody's taking, and that the best writer is simply he who extracts them with the greatest discretion and rearranges them most adroitly. That is why it bothers me, madam, to see all your patient labors result in volumes which I find wholly unreadable: it is an outcome which suggests my theories may be wrong, and no male can face any such suggestion calmly.

It seems to me, in brief, that your new book, and all your books in so far as I know them, are not for my reading. I would like to like them. Yet I most obstinately don't. I have tried my honest utmost to this otherwise. Time and again I have made a sortie into your writings, accompanied by hope and charity: faith, I admit, declines to be of our little party any longer. And always I fall back repulsed; always I find you invincibly dull.

Very blessed are the dull: they need not seek to inherit the earth; they already possess it. Very blessed are the dull in their peculiar felicity, that they cannot ever perceive their own dullness, nor ever be convinced of its existence. As well might a blind man be fancied to discover the shallowness of his own complexion. Thrice blessed are the dull in that they admire dullness with entire sincerity. Quadruply happy are the dull in that their numbers are strong and many.

Thus does it follow, madam, that the best-thought-of editors, and the best-thought-of reviewers, and the best-thought-of writers of every kind, must necessarily be dullards, without any of them ever suspecting it, for not out of policy and time-serving, and not, as heaven well knows, by taking thought, do they achieve preëminence, but solely by virtue of their innate large gifts for dullness. Such gifts, if a little cultivated through altruism and some earnestness of purpose, will enable the fatuous to admire one another with entire sincerity, and to be admired also, at a respectful remove, by the un-litrary legions of book borrowers—who reverence in their reading-matter, as in every other matter, dullness, with an entire sincerity.

I can for these reasons, my dear madam, think of no fit and kindly sentiments wherewith to adorn your dust jacket save only that epitaph, slightly altered, which Joe Gargery composed in "Great Expectations": "Whatsomever the failings on her part, Remember, reader, she were that good in her heart." This much I am willing to allow you: but only, be it understood, as an epitaph, in so far as I am concerned. Do not bother me any more.

THE EDITORS: AN APPRAISAL

by MATTHEW MARMOR

In a recent interview, the Editors of *The American Spectator* are quoted as having said that they would be very glad to publish an attack upon themselves by some intelligent person who does not like them. I unblushingly toss my hat into the ring.

Doddering Dreiser, with his experiments in realism, blazed a path through the entangled wilderness of sentimentalism. He is to be congratulated for his courageous pioneer efforts, but now it becomes our sad duty to regard him as *ausgespielt*. Other men have come up to supplant him; men with the same evangelical zeal, men who possess clearer and more lucid styles, whose use of grammar and syntax is impeccable, and who do not bore us with constant repetitions. As a social historian Dreiser isn't so bad. He knows how to depict people and he has a capacity for observation. But merely to be a reporter is not enough. As a social critic he is a farm-hand. He has a one-sided, peasant point of view. Social criticism is vitiated when the critic is unable to see life from a detached position.

Nevertheless, Dreiser may be proud of his "Sister Carrie," which was the pioneer in the movement to gain recognition for sex as a permissible dominant theme in American literature; for his "Jennie Gerhardt" and for "An American Tragedy." But what has he shown since 1923? In the Fall of that year, his "Tragic America" appeared, in which he made his bow as an economist. Critics everywhere rejected his statistics as incorrect, denounced his observations as imbecile, and generally questioned the truth of his conclusions. If this book had been written now, I am sure *The American Spectator* would have, in all probability, selected it as "the worst book of the month."

James Branch Cabell, or Branch Cabell, as he now prefers to call himself, once placed himself on record as desiring "to write perfectly of beautiful happenings." Even his severest critics will admit that he has made good his boast. He is perhaps the best stylist of any of our American novelists, but to me his choice of subjects, although it is distinctly individual, is distinctly unfortunate. If Cabell wrote with the frank realism of Dreiser, if his work were permeated with Dreiser's fervor, and all in Cabell's own beautiful, smooth-flowing language, he would be on his way to recognition as America's greatest novelist. But no! He is devoted to style for its own sake; and the principal and petty action of his works takes place in that cheese-cloth medieval land of Poictesme, where all the women are eroticists and the men are not slow to take advantage of the fact.

Cabell started his career as a pure romanticist. He early secured a small, devoted following, but evidently felt that he was not receiving enough attention. Taking the easy way out, he followed the lead of the late D. H. Lawrence by writing "Jürgen," which, from every and any angle, is pure and unadulterated smut, no matter how subtly it is presented. Of course, it was immediately suppressed and, people being what they are, it became a best-seller and he won a wide reputation. Lawrence has been defended on the ground that he was poverty-stricken at the time and only wrote "Lady Chatterley's Lover" because he knew that it would be suppressed and would consequently bring him large royalties.

THE RISE OF RASSLING

by BURTON RASCOE

I learn from the sports pages of the newspapers that there has been a revival of public interest in the noble art of rassling.

It seems that since Dempsey lost and Tunney abdicated the throne of pugilism, all of the contenders are just so many palookas with glass jaws and belt lines up under the arm-pits; and the public has lost interest in them.

As Reuben Lucius Goldberg once pointed out in a noble essay, the fight fans pay out their money, not to watch a couple of male adagio dancers or two fellows playing tag-you-are-it, but to see one fellow plant such an effective swat on the button that the possessor thereof has to be carried out of the ring on a stretcher.

Mr. Goldberg made his point in a plea to the intellectuals that they leave one form of entertainment free for enjoyment by the rough-neck. For a time many of the writers on aesthetics had glorified in terms of art such endeavors as high-diving, tight-rope walking, trapeze-swinging, juggling and sleight-of-hand. They found esoteric significance in the "Biff!", "Bam!", "Pow!" of the comic strips; they spoke of the custard pie throwing of the movie comics as if it were comparable to composing a symphony. Mr. Goldberg saw them closing in on pugilism when George Bernard Shaw picked Carpenter to win over Dempsey because of Gorgeous Georges' superior mental equipment and aesthetic appeal. Mr. Goldberg, as an embattled low-brow, thought it time to call a halt, because Mr. Dempsey took pity on the Gorgeous One and allowed him to go nearly two rounds.

Meanwhile, it seems, too much art has developed in the prize ring and not enough knock-outs. Mr. Tommy Loughran, it is admitted, is a very pretty boxer, agile, graceful, rhythmical in his movements and expert in technique, but he hasn't got the punch. Mr. Young Stribling can do the old-time Bunny-hug expertly; Mr. Primo Carnera would do very well as an attraction in a side-show; Mr. Jack Sharkey, who can't see so good when he is fighting, might do all right in the talkies; but none of them is a first-class pug.

Cabell, however, hasn't even this flimsy excuse to bolster up his case. He was a Virginia gentleman in no such straits, and only his desire to gain recognition for himself could have inspired him to write "Jürgen." True, he deserved better fortune than was his before he had written "Jürgen," but the steps which he took to win it were not only unethical but inexcusable.

Cabell is out-dated in these hard days of realism. Although it is claimed that from pure romanticism his work is becoming more ironical, philosophic and symbolic, he is clearly a throw-back to the romantic nineties.

Eugene O'Neill, like Cabell, seems to me to be unfortunate in his choice of subjects. This is largely due, of course, to the roving life he has led, and to his unsympathetic environment. (One might expect a man who has been a sailor to write about sailors. Negroes and prostitutes.) That in itself would not be so bad, but O'Neill has acquired along with his varied experiences a philosophy of life that is narrow and bogusly pessimistic. His plays read like the case-book of a glibly pathologist or psychiatrist. His characters range from pervers to neurotics. In "Mourning Becomes Electra," he has taken advantage of the present craze for Freud to portray as lousy and degenerate a group of characters as it has ever been my misfortune to see on the stage.

I am surprised that so obscure a figure as Boyd has been included with such impressive names as Dreiser, Cabell, O'Neill and Nathan on the editorial board of *The American Spectator*. True, he has been responsible for some excellent translations of French and German authors and for some authoritative studies of Irish literature but, as a writer in his own right, he is an unknown quantity. I think I am safe in saying that nine out of ten people are unaware of the existence of Boyd, and while that may not speak well for the people, it speaks still worse for Boyd.

Nathan has long been interested in the theatre. Outside the theatre, however, he helped to found *The American Mercury* and he has also collaborated on "The American Creed" and other first-rate treatises. The majority of his own works have been reserved for the drama and among these are many excellent critiques on the qualities of an ideal critic. However, like other charlatans of his ilk, Nathan never practises what he preaches. Not only is he not consistent in his opinions but he is constantly injecting his own none-too-charming personality into his writings. He has committed the cardinal sin, in my eyes, of arbitrarily setting himself up as the ruling god of the theatre for such persons as may read his reviews religiously. He evidently thinks that the sound critic is the one who "razzes" the most plays every year and that constructive criticism is a sign of weakness on the part of the critic. He claims, in short, to be a critic when in reality he is a satirist. Among Nathan's other affectations is the employment of a vocabulary of rare and obsolete words to impress the morons.

To sum up: who, after all, are these men who have set themselves up as editors of *The American Spectator*? Dreiser is *ausgespielt*, Cabell is an out-dated romanticist, O'Neill is a portrayer of perversion, Boyd is an unknown critic, and Nathan is a poseur.

And meanwhile something has happened to the rassling game. They've cleaned it up. At least that is what I hear and the public seems to believe it, for they are deserting the fights in droves and crowding in at the matches between Neanderthaler men who butt the wind out of each other by diving head-first into the stomach, make blood vessels stand out like rubber hose by squeezing the neck in strangle holds and bounce each other around like garbage men with an ash-can. They go in for eye-gouging and manslaughter.

Which is just what fight fans want. The rasslers are getting back to the grim earnestness of competition when Frank Gotch could wrest an eyeball from its socket in his determination to put his opponent three points on the mat. Let these behemoths with unpronounceable names tear a few eyeballs out, wring off some ears and pull some arms out of joint and the fight fans will forget about boxing altogether and fill Soldiers' Field for a rassling match.

As for me, outrageous as it may seem to a fight fan, I'd rather watch a *fixed* rassling match than one on the level. I've got a neurotic stomach or something. I don't like to see blood spurting from a dozen places in the chopped meat countenance of a Mr. Tiger Flowers, nor do I like to see a face writhing in terrible agony because someone is twisting a man's arm off.

As a reporter in the old days I used to cover minor rassling bouts. They all were fixed, and they were grand. They gave the spectators a good show for the money. The rasslers went through the most elaborate acrobatics, standing one another on the head, imitating Pavlova and Mordkin, hurtling one another through space like Japanese tumblers and playing wheelbarrow around on the mat. Usually they had rehearsed their act before going on and they always looked as though they were in mortal terror of forgetting their routine and hurting each other. They were pathetically eager to please. I liked them.