

## PERPETUATING THE PLAYERS\*

In the minds of many artists and critics the three elements of naturalness, truth and commonplace seem not clearly separable and exactly divisible. For the first and the third term may each in their entirety express the second, yet how much that is truthful to nature is in its expression commonplace and tedious. There seems to be a relation, for the sake of illuminating a point, between these three terms and literature, truth and books. Assuming all of a group of writers to be truthful, either in fidelity to fact or to the principles of art, how small a proportion will produce literature and how many will evolve mere books! There are more books being written and published in these days than ever before; and for the sake of argument concede the cynic's claim that proportionately there is a smaller percentage of literature; but let this be stubbornly contended against that same cynic, there is more that is literature produced than before.

Every week and every month our libraries are growing in bulk, but they are inevitably perfecting in quality in every branch of literature. So significant is this that interested observers of each technical side of literature will imagine that his own special interest has advanced most pronouncedly. Certainly those who enjoy the study of biography—especially the lives of the men and women of the stage, with the evidence of the tremendous number of biographies, autobiographies and reminiscences which have crowded upon them asking acquaintance and shelf-room during the last four or five years—believe this form of dramatic literature must lead all others.

The library and the drama, after some estrangement, are again making up. Your dealer in rare books will tell you

\*Twelve Great Actors and Twelve Great Actresses. By Edward Robins. 2 volumes. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Some Players. By Amy Leslie. 1 volume. Chicago: Herbert S. Stone.

The Drama of Yesterday and To-Day. By Clement Scott. 2 volumes. Macmillan and Company.

Ellen Terry. By Clement Scott. 1 volume. Frederick A. Stokes Company.

John Drew. By Edward A. Dithmar. 1 volume. Frederick A. Stokes Company.

The Kendals. By T. Edgar Pemberton. 1 volume. Dodd, Mead and Company.

that private collectors are bidding for books on the drama with continually increasing avidity. After the announcements of fiction, poetry, history and politics, it is no longer necessary to weed out the new dramatic publications from the miscellaneous. This division of contemporary publication has its own individual heading, it is again (or at last?) a branch of literature.

The fact is there, let the answer be where it may—in the growth of the publishing business, the advancement of popular education, the multiplication of theatres, the elevation of dramatic standards to a plane where they draw to themselves a new and more highly cultured clientèle, or in the singular and dominant tendency, now in vogue, of actors and dramatists to go to literature, whether standard or contemporary, for characters, themes or whole stories.

This is the golden era of the drama. There is the accumulation of a magnificent though discursive past in literary drama to draw upon; extravagance has never so completely revelled in its levy on the pictorial and musical arts for dramatic expression; the perfection brought to the mechanical arts is a new and important factor to be reckoned with in realising ideals; and whether there have ever been at one time more men and women of genius to quicken the dramatist's creations is a nice question not readily yielded. This exalting condition has sent its virus through all the veins of all classes, and as books are the inevitable expression of any great and widespread interest, so naturally the dramatic library has grown apace with public interest in the stage and its people.

Among the most conspicuous recent contributions are Edward Robins's *Twelve Great Actors and Twelve Great Actresses*; Clement Scott's *The Drama of Yesterday and To-Day*; the same writer's life of Ellen Terry; Edward A. Dithmar's life of the younger John Drew; Amy Leslie's *Some Players*; and T. Edgar Pemberton's biography of *The Kendals*.

In almost every branch of literature there are those energetic delvers who saturate themselves with all that has been written on certain subjects, and

pour out their accumulation into new moulds. They rarely embroider their work with any other originality than that merely formal, and no new material and even no new point of view adorns their reconstructed history. Much that they pour into their crucible is spoiled in recasting, for it loses all the flavour and charm which the contemporary point of view gave it. Yet this seemingly bootless energy is not wasted, since it is energy. It is a good sign and commendable to find these faithful servants of the elder literary masters hovering about the shelves of the past, dusting and furbishing, rearranging the old tomes, disposing them for accessibility, tilting them trickily to catch the eye.

So, while regretting that Mr. Robins gives so little that is new in his sketches of twelve great actors and of twelve great actresses, one must inevitably admire his formative skill, and behind that his wide and expert knowledge of dramatic literature. Once before he made an exactly similar excursion into this field. His *Echoes of the Play-House* was seemingly an abridgment of Dr. Doran's *Annals*. He was too well informed a student of the history of dramatic anecdote, however, not to sense the illuminating value of certain suggestive scraps from other sources which pieced in nicely. It was not plagiarism, for are not the facts of dramatic as well as of civil and political history common property and the heritage of all students?

His present volumes are bookmanship to tempt any bibliophile. But in almost all of the twenty-four sketches the feeling is given strongly that the work is merely a new *pot pourri* of Tate Wilkinson, Colley Cibber, Donalson's *Recollections*, Rogers's *Table Talk*, Lamb, *The Records of a Veteran*, Dibdin, the various reviews and the self-suggesting lives of each of the subjects. In writing of such recent players as the Booths, Fechter, Sothorn, Wallack, Cushman, Neilson and Ristori, he had advantages which show themselves in the continuous freshness and informing value of the sketches devoted to these men and women.

The biographer of departed stage celebrities is at a disadvantage not shared by those who write the lives of statesmen, warriors, writers or great figures in almost any other department of public ac-

tivity. The latter live in their ever-present work or the perennial result of their distinguishing achievement. Their lives, their character and method, and even their crystallized results, may be deliberately and rationally studied under the proximate influence of their achievements. Not so the actor. However illustrious he may have been, his actual greatness was transient as the words that fell from his lips, as the smile that chased away the frown, the silence which awed his hearers. Posterity's legacy is the hearsay of all this greatness. He does not live on in his work, for his work died with him—aye, before him. A chronology of his endeavours and his attainments and some traditional anecdotes sum up the tangible in the great actor's survival. When the last of his generation passed there was an end to the actor's biography. All subsequent is only recasting of the same metal.

To give a more lively originality to his topics, might not Mr. Robins with advantage have dwelt more informally on the personal side of the people of whom he writes? He touches lightly and transiently on their public careers, when he might create an immeasurable obligation to himself by giving some attention to the early and later days and the personal side of the public characters he sets out to make familiars. Yet, after all, so scholarly a writer, so well acquainted with the equipment and the deficiency of dramatic biography, must have found his own defeat in a diligent effort toward this very end. The little that Mr. Robins tells us of departed players, beyond traditional scandal, is no doubt the result of more research than many not less sincere students would find patience to pursue.

With this well in mind, turn to Amy Leslie's voluble and valuable volume about some contemporary actors. She has done a singularly praiseworthy work for the literature of the contemporary stage. Though we founder in words, she has prepared for living readers and those to come after a quality of information which has its counterpart in no previous period of theatrical chronicle. She writes personally and intimately, never as the critic, the arbiter of standard and result, but always as the friend and confidante of private individuals, human beings, with nothing in her text

of the cold, formal sense of remoteness which flavours so much, if not quite all else, in this branch of literary production.

Mr. Clement Scott, too, puts his reminiscences into the personal form. Though he gives us facts and fortifies himself with all manner of dates and details, as opposed to the indefiniteness of Miss Leslie, yet it is he who makes the breathing personality rise up. The personal quality which he infuses is his own personality rather than that of the people whose acquaintance we seek to make. It is the critic who is writing, and however he may have been unconscious of it or fought it consciously, he seems to remind the reader in every page that his relation to the whole subject is so conspicuous that it simply will not down.

Certainly Mr. Scott, if any living writer, has the equipment which should enable him to write the history of the Victorian drama. His experience is comprehensive. His intimacy with all the important figures on the London stage during his lifetime enables him to write with an accuracy which is readily forgiven when it seems to err occasionally, under the influence of roseate reminiscence, on the side of affectionate exuberance. There is not anything so elaborate and valuable in the class to which it belongs as his carefully studied reminiscence of the London stage during the past fifty odd years.

Mr. Scott's work is richly suggestive to an American. Filling with such nicety a gap in the English records, it emphasises the discrepancy in the chronology of the native stage. Ireland begins to recede into remoteness. It is no longer an appendix to Ireland which is needed. The hiatus for the length of time involved, the growth of national character

in play production, and the individuality of the figures who adorn the past forty years of our stage, demand an integral representation in the bibliography of the stage. If William Winter—who as a stylist knows not, in the minds of many, the touch of an elbow to-day—were to bend his experience and his energies to this task, could a richer literary crown adorn the epoch?

In his life of Ellen Terry Mr. Scott presents *en brochure* a personal friend and fervid admirer's account of the career of this English artist. In the way of praise he leaves no superlative untouched. In dignified contrast is the account of the younger John Drew's performances as presented by Edward A. Dithmar. Here security of facts not less than sincerity of expression begets for the little work a confidence which will give it a permanent value. Pemberton's biography of the Kendals has more of the Scott than the Dithmar quality. Unquestionably it is a pleasant thing to be written about as their admiring friend has written of Madge Robertson and William Grimston.

In a profession where diplomatic publicity is so large a factor as in the career of an actor, a life of a player written and published during his active years appears at first not quite as it should be. The personal seems so proximate not merely in the biographer's estimation of his subject, but in the reader's as well. But time rights all that. There is no justice like the judgment of the second generation, and it will confirm or ignore what is now being prepared to it rather than for us. Meantime by all means let the preparations be kept up.

Paul Wilstach.

## AN ELEMENTARY GRAMMAR OF THE SPANISH LANGUAGE

*An Elementary Grammar of the Spanish Language*, by L. A. Loiseaux, just issued, begins in a promising way the Silver Series of Modern Language Text-Books, edited by Professor Adolphe Cohn, and published by Messrs. Silver, Burdett and Company of this city.

In the brief preface the editor says that

Mr. Loiseaux's volume is to be used both as an elementary grammar and as a practical method for the acquisition of a simple vocabulary and of the most frequent idioms of the language by young people in high schools as well as colleges. I would add that I know of no other similar book so well fitted for such a purpose.