

THE EXPANDED INTEREST IN POETRY

BY AMELIA JOSEPHINE BURR

WHEN the war broke out, people were concerned as to the effect it would have on their own special preoccupations. Particularly did those who were interested in poetry worry over that art's reaction to the world upheaval. There were those who predicted its barrenness, if not its destruction; others affirmed that since poetry springs from strong emotion and thrives upon it, this time should be far more rich in song than less stirring and more prosperous days. We all know which prophecy proved the right one. It has been in poetry as in the fighting force—death has not spared the best, but as the leaders fell, the rank and file carried on. Nor did the supply outrun the demand; the readers of poetry multiplied with the writers. Now that peace of a sort has come, the question reopens with the changing conditions. How will the cessation of the war affect poetry, its writers and its readers?

In view of the reversion to old ways almost appalling to some who had thought them forever outgrown—which has come with the relaxed tension, it seems strange that war poetry should still be the best seller of its class. One gets the same verdict, however, from the scholarly aristocrat of bookshops; from the department store that sells at cut rates, frequented by the thrifty whom one used to call bourgeois before that term became opprobrious; and from the largest department of verse maintained by any bookseller in the country, a place where one meets con-

servative and radical, barbarian, Scythian, bond and free. There has been a slight falling off in the sale of war anthologies, but the poems of Service, Brooke, Sassoon, Nichols, Kipling, Seeger, and Kilmer are now ranked as staples. In connection with the last name, here is a quaint bit of popular psychology which one can fancy causing a ripple of amusement in the poets' corner of paradise. I asked the presiding genius of the department-store counter what books of poetry the public found most attractive nowadays.

"The war poetry", she replied without hesitation. "Why, we simply can't keep Kilmer's 'Trees' in stock at all."

"But none of those poems are about the war!" I exclaimed, remembering that smiling book. She considered, with the expression of indignant bewilderment which comes over us all when we realize that a condition we had taken comfortably for granted needs to be thought out.

"No—" she admitted. "No—that's true; but people think of them that way!"

Of course they do. *Finis coronat opus*—the glow of a red aureole reaches far. But when the war is history, people will still love "Trees", and "Dave Lilly", and "The Snowman in the Yard". The author lives by virtue of more than his heroic death; and because he knew how to sing to the hearts of the plain people, I shall not be surprised to hear him quoted some day by tram-conductors, as one

hears the gondoliers singing Tasso to the rhythm of their oars.

I believe that as the world grows normal again, there will remain a deepened and expanded interest in poetry as an expression of the meaning and beauty of life. Among forthcoming volumes one finds not only the familiar outstanding figures—Masefield, Masters, Amy Lowell,—but minors more or less known and many names that are new, the more hopeful sign because the field they represent is so broad and diversified. There are many of the poets of revolt, but we must credit the camp of the conventional with the most picturesque of the new figures. By a pleasant paradox, some of the most virile of modern verse is the work of a young woman, a discovery on our side of the Atlantic though well known in England. Miss Fox-Smith can give us sailor songs with the tang of Masefield and Kipling at their best, and nobody who follows the sea in body or mind can afford to miss her two books, "Small Craft" and "Sailor Town". See how she brings to life in a few lines one of the deepest of passions, a sailor's love for his ship:

"At last we knew that she was gone, as best
and worst may go,
The good ship and the bad likewise, the fast
ship and the slow.

A fast ship was the Matterhorn, when all
them kites was spread,

A fast ship and a fine she was——"

"Aye, she was fast," I said.

* * * * *
From course to skysail up she soared like a
midsummer cloud;

In all this earth I have not seen a thing
more brave and proud;

And she is gone, as dreams do, or a song
sung long before,

Or the golden years of a man's youth when
they are his no more.

By Casey's Occidental Rooms a bitter thing
I heard,

With a heavy heart I turned away, and long
I spoke no word;

I bared my head there where I stood, "God
rest her soul," I said,
As if some woman I had loved in a far land
was dead.

Some may feel that her style echoes the poets with whom I have named her. I grant the echo, but maintain that when ideas stand as squarely on their own feet as hers do, they have a life of their own and the right to live it. I agree that Kipling might have written "The Gypsy Soldier"—but as it happens, he did not write it and Miss Fox-Smith did. Again, read,—

SHIPMATE SORROW

I was shipmate with Sorrow in a time
gone by.

We shared wheel and look-out, old Sorrow
and I.

Good times and bad times, foul weather and
fair,

The old grey face of him was always there.

There was never chanty raised, there was
never song I heard,

But his voice would be in it like a crying
bird;

I was dull in the dog watches when the
laugh went free

Because of old Sorrow sitting down by me.

I thought I could lose him in the stir and
change

Of bright wicked cities all sunlit and strange.
Came a hand at my elbow and a voice at
my ear—

It was old patient Sorrow saying, "Lad, I'm
here!"

And by the bustling harbour, up the busy
street,

Many a time I see him, many a time I meet
The old grey face there of one I used to
know—

And it's old Shipmate Sorrow out of long ago.

And the watch at the halliards, they may
sing with a will,

But the voice I used to hear—oh, sometimes
I hear it still,

Like a wind in a shroud piping or a seabird's
cry—

And it's old Sorrow singing out of times
gone by.

Masefield might have written that?
True—but since he did not. . . .

What is original verse anyway?
(This topic, inevitable in a time like
the present, when poetry is largely

produced and people are sufficiently interested in it to discuss it, can fill a daylight-saving evening and spill over into the real dark.) If form is the point, what is an original verse form? For most of us, there has been a bright day when we thought we had the answer to that question. We invented or were inspired, according to our temperament, and enjoyed the sweet delusion of our own originality till some too well-educated kill-joy identified our treasure as a Gaelic dirge or an Esquimaux epithalamium or a drinking song of the Jebusites. As for ideas, originality in that field is a hopeless mirage—we have Solomon's word for it after a long and intensive experience. There is nothing new under the sun, not even revolt—the most insurgent verse is as derivative as the offspring of Gray's "Elegy" and the "Ode to a Skylark".

Travail and bondage, battle-flags unfurled,
Earth at the prime and God earth's wrongs
above,

Honour and hope, youth and the beckoning
world,

Peril and war and love.

Well-worn themes these, and yet I doubt if this generation sees them exhausted. Human nature will interest the world as long as nature continues to produce humans. The unusual attracts and the familiar retains—Amy Lowell and Sara Teasdale are equally popular in the reading world.

Of course, it is always a temptation to try for new ideas, or at least for a startling rearrangement of the old ones. We may be glad of that—what would life be without its explorers? Of course there are varying degrees of achievement. Some of these efforts remind me of an image so cherished that comparison with it implies no disparagement. One of the clearest memories of my childhood is an

attempt at an unusual form of beauty. It was nameless in our home except when referred to with shudders as "the thing Aunt Prissy made", but I have since heard it appropriately called an Everything. Upon a basis of simple crockery—ours had, I believe, been a bean-pot in private life—was a layer of putty that held imbedded every form of domestic jetsam, hairpins, buttons and buckles from the intimate to the formal, corkscrews, wishbones, ex-jewelry—memory fails—the whole richly gilded. I linger before some of today's verse as I did before our Everything, fascinated by the profusion of detail, trying in vain to trace the outline of the common clay upon which all this gorgeous irrelevance is plastered.

The Everything in verse as in domestic decoration is of course not the work of the artist, though the craving for expression which it represents is entitled to respect. It has a curious kinship, though, with the work of the real artist in some manners of poetry—the artist who seems so intoxicated with his own skill that while he revels in theoretical nakedness, he swathes nature in a robe so stiff with embroidery that the great heart beneath can scarcely move the rich stuff with its beating. The lovers of simplicity may not care for this style, but it has its admirers; and, thank Heaven, one of the growths of our time is a recognition of the truth that there are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays and every single one of them is right. It would be impossible today, I hope, for intolerant criticism to compel one of the best known of our women writers to justify her existence as a poet by the thousands of letters from those who had found comfort and delight in her verse. We have learned that there

is room on the world's book-shelf for Wordsworth and Lorenzo and Shakespeare and Heine and Beranger and Euripides and Isaiah and Poe. Blessed be the broad and catholic mind which ungrudgingly recognizes as poetry the expression that narrower and more academic days would have scorned, whether its reason for being

be helpfulness to the world, an attempt to throw new light on beauty, or only the delight it gives its creator. When mankind realizes poetry and religion as spirit transcending substance, encompassing and penetrating as the air we breathe and as essential to everyday life, will not the kingdom of heaven be at hand?

NOVELS OF CHANGE

BY H. W. BOYNTON

AFTER all, there are only two or three, or four or five novels in each "season's output" that reward the professional taster with a really fresh savor. Most of the time his palate is engaged in considering whether So-and-So's latest is up to his well-known mark, whether it tastes right for that kind of brew; or in trying not to dull itself altogether in a necessary (if momentary) contact with various imitative compounds alleged to be original and new. How far the matter has to do with the famous distinction between highbrow and lowbrow methods and constituencies cannot be laid down with certainty. But it is tolerably clear that the lowbrow demand is almost invariably for more of the same, and that what it reacts to with enthusiasm is a slightly new flavoring of the old stuff, rather than a fresh basic savor. How much of the popularity of "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" is the result, I wonder, of our pleasure in recognizing our own human nature and our own attitude toward the war-time world, beneath the exotic surface of the story? How much of the charm of "The Gay-Donbeys" (for which I

predict a large hearing) lies in its linking of a beloved if officially sniffed-at past, the Victorian and post-Victorian past, with our own uneasy present?

Yet I for one do feel a fresh savor, the real thing, in this book. No doubt this is largely a distillation of a singularly full and varied experience. But Mr. Wells (who supplies as enthusiastic a preface as if the book were his own) goes, as usual, too far in the generalization it inspires. Here is his concluding summary:

This book is one of the best first novels I have ever read. Would that more men who have handled realities would write in the same fashion. I have long had a lurking persuasion that nearly any man of experience who cared to be frank about his business could produce at least one better novel than the sworn and addicted novelist. We have too many mere novelist's novels. Sir Harry does much in this book to rescue the novel from its present unhappy entanglement, the posings and pretensions of "art", and restore it to literature.

I believe Mr. Wells shares the general contempt (general in all ages) for professional critics, and offers this, presumably, as the kind of thing they should write. Would that more men who have handled realities *could* write