

A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

MR. GUEDALLA PURSUES A SHY LADY

By Dorothea Lawrance Mann

REVERENCE is not a modern virtue. So often it does not seem compatible with truth. And truth — no matter in what strange guises you find her — is the elusive lady to whom our modern historians do homage. Possibly it is her elusiveness which makes men like Mr. Guedalla find her worth a lifetime of pursuit. Your truth and my truth — British truth and American truth — is there or is there not a truth behind them which is not colored by the personal attributes of the man or woman who looks upon it?

Like paternity, history is a hit or miss matter. It is a discerning father who is able to identify his own child, but it would require superhuman intelligence for a leader to foresee the result of any act of his a hundred years hence. History is plotted far less carefully than fiction. History used to be considered a pageant. Now it has become a long series of problems in psychology, no two of them alike — a series of problems of behavior not only of individuals but also of crowds. It would be a perfectly natural thing to prefer the old idea of the American Revolution with a bloody tyrant on his throne — I have never been able to discover whether that phrase is profanity or literal description — and a host of scarlet clad soldiers, the pick of the British Army, fleeing before the ragged Continentals whom George Washington had trained. Have you ever noticed that the Continentals

were always combating the flower of the British Army — that is if you learned your history in the United States? And yet how much more intriguing it is to think that after Franklin became popular at Versailles the bloody tyrant took down Franklin's lightning rod from the Queen's House and substituted one of another make. The childishness of the fathers of history is so appealing!

If a man could know what he was starting, would he not in most cases prefer to jump off Brooklyn Bridge? Paternity is so often less casual than unexpected. Washington, Franklin, and Hamilton were apparently quite ready to sponsor great events. Yet what great events would have ensued had not George III become interested in a book on the divine right of kings, and had not Lord North in advance of Abraham Lincoln pronounced that no part of the state had the right to sever its connection with the state at will? Even then, had George III proved an Edward I or Lord North an Iron Duke, how different the story might have been! How everlastingly important is that incalculable element of chance! It makes fiction seem a mathematical problem in comparison. Imagine the terrible light of understanding which must dawn on those so similar faces of King George and his minister, could they sail up New York harbor today, and realize how penny wise they were in that matter of the tea.

Statues, according to Mr. Guedalla, are never placed where they belong. There should be a statue of Lord North in every American city to celebrate the part he played in making the thirteen

colonies into a nation. Instead, for some of the same principles which gave Lincoln immortality, he has been execrated by generations of American schoolboys, and ignored by British ones, for he is "one of the few Tory statesmen for whom a club at Oxford has never yet been named".

Mr. Guedalla pursues a shy lady called truth. During the chase he comes to decide that most of what is known of the Revolution on both sides of the Atlantic is folklore. It is as idle to consider that very British gentleman Washington a dangerous revolutionary as it is to think of Lord North as an Alva, or George III as a Nero. Between the brass bands and the centenaries on the one hand, and the little busybodies with their microscopes and stove black on the other, the shy lady has had a hard time of it. And she has strange stories to tell!

"Fathers of the Revolution" ranks as an important contribution to history. Mr. Guedalla is a brilliant phrase maker, but he is also a searching student. How different from the conventional figures of history are these which emerge from his pen! He is a broad minded man. He allows the Revolution twelve fathers, six of whom are British, two French, and four American. Together they accomplished the prestidigitator's trick of producing two nations where only one had been.

The shy lady truth leads Mr. Guedalla into queer places and brings him to devastating conclusions. Every realist, he confesses, would be the better for a taste of reality, and the biographer would have his eyes opened could he be left for even an hour in the presence of his subject. "A few years of writing, a few more of reading and a spell of politics" leave an author wondering what has become of the hero legend. Where are the Great

Men gone? We have believed so long in the cult of the Great Man, that the perplexed historian has acquired the habit of producing one to cover his dilemma. Even more than in the searching biographies we find Mr. Guedalla himself revealed in his epilogue — "A Footnote on Greatness". It is there, pondering on the anonymity of great historical movements, that he suggests that the Unknown Soldier has a double symbolism. Mr. Guedalla is often brilliant but never glib. He prefers to suggest rather than to propound that no one man is great enough to father a great age, to begin or to end a revolution. He offers us the symbolic number of twelve fathers, and he leaves us to our own deductions — as wise historians should.

Fathers of the Revolution. By Philip Guedalla. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

SENTIMENTAL BIOGRAPHY

By Jacob Zeitlin

IT is very seldom that one learns anything significant concerning a man of genius from his nearest kin — unless, indeed, there exists some antagonism to sharpen the critical intelligence of the observer. Where there is a boundless and trusting love no illuminating detachment is to be expected. The circumstances of Mme. Dostoevsky's relations with her husband were not favorable to truthful biography. An active and ambitious girl of twenty, she met Dostoevsky when he was already famous as the author of "Crime and Punishment". Though he was twenty five years her senior, a widower, a sufferer from epilepsy, and sinking under a load of debt, she married him without hesitation. To escape creditors and in the hope of benefiting