

# THE DRIFT OF THE CURRENT

*A Distinguished Novelist Casts His Veteran Eye Over the Literary Scene*

By Robert Herrick

DRIFT is often better shown by small objects in the stream rather than the large ones which may have their own laws, and occasionally defy nature. So I find it in testing the currents of our national life, that the less pretentious, the more usual expressions of its spirit give a fairer picture of the general movement than do those occasional phenomena, which the critics naturally prefer to isolate and exalt. Latterly I have been looking over what might be called the "mine-run" of contemporary American fiction, novels about American life written by the younger authors, many of them first books, not one by a distinguished name, yet all found worthy of bearing the imprint of some well established publishing firm. If one were to judge these specimens by themselves according to precedent and tradition none would be worth much thought, but taken as a whole, as part of a single season's output in fiction, they gather significance, with volume. Involuntarily I contrast them with the similar crop of the time when I was beginning to write fiction, thirty years ago; and there are obvious and interesting contrasts. Those were the days of *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, *Janice Meredith*, *The Crossing*, *To Have and to Hold*, *A Kentucky Cardinal*, *Monsieur Beaucaire*, and *Eben Holden*.

These titles suggest readily to anyone familiar with the literature of the previous generation the sentimental, thinly romantic, unreal atmosphere of the world our novelists worked in, when no matter where the scene might be the writer was moved by alien ideals of conduct and life. That era of pseudo-romance succeeded an age of provincial realism, when Mary Wilkins Freeman and others tried to hew to the line of observed experience, in a limited and arid environment.

The chief distinction that I find between this earlier picture and the present day is really a vast one: the majority of these "mine-run" stories of today try, in varying moods and degrees of sincerity, to reflect something actually felt and observed in the life about them, not necessarily always realistic in method—if that old school term has meaning any longer. These younger writers are busy painting the different aspects and corners of our vast Main Street—and not flatteringly. There are stories—too many of them!—usually written by women, that deal with New York, its night life and day life, gin and sex and Art; others which painstakingly depict our tamed prairie, with its towns all so much like each other and like the new New York; not a few that holding to a sound tradition prefer to exploit some less known, more primitive corner of the country, such as Miss Roberts's *The Time of Man*, or Mrs. Peterkin's *Black April*. These latter, however, are not genre pictures; the impulse behind them is no longer the romantic one of getting a kick out of the unfamiliar, the "quaint", but rather the scientist's desire to investigate, the poet's to realize. I do not include, of course, the popular "cowboy" fiction, which has become a stale commercial product, allied to the motion picture industry. . . . What is going on is a kind of sociological survey of these United States in the guise of fiction, and I venture to say that if one were to look over the several thousand dead and forgotten pieces of fiction published since 1910 hardly a town or hamlet or countryside of the forty-eight States but has received some sort of picturing by our novelists.

Something of the same process had been going on in the previous generation, as I have

suggested, but this modern survey is being made in quite a different spirit from any former one. A spirit of criticism, sometimes acid with discontent. One likes to visualize motion by objects: perhaps Mr. Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* is the most salient landmark of the new spirit, although years before Mr. Dreiser had been pounding in his heavy stamp mill much the same matter that the younger novelist presented in *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, and Mr. Masters dissolved acridly in *Spoon River* and subsequent chronicles of the mid-west. I am not sure that in the long, long run these earlier revelations of the American spirit, rejected because of their grimness, will not loom larger in memory than the clever journalism of the younger writer. But Mr. Lewis got himself read by the multitude who live in *Main Street*. I am not here so much concerned with ultimate values as with passing phenomena. Mr. Lewis has made a much bigger dent in the national consciousness than any of his predecessors, from Howells on. What remains to me most notable about his achievement is that *Main Street* became suddenly interested in seeing itself, that the Rotarians read and pondered *Babbitt*! That surely marks an epoch in our national growth. It is astonishing evidence of an uneasy consciousness (such as Mr. Lewis finely depicts in *Babbitt* himself toward the end of his story) that all is not satisfying in this best of all civilizations, in the best of all possible countries. The note so firmly struck by Mr. Lewis has been implicit if not dominant in most American fiction since—and is today. The War created a diversion, but the War so far as it got itself expressed at all from an American angle as in *Three Soldiers* and the popular play-movie *What Price Glory* was revealed solely on its seamy sides—which were many. More recently there have been numerous instances of this spirit of dissatisfied inquiry and frank revelation, such as Mr. Adams's chronicle of the Harding administration (and one might add its sequel, *The President's Daughter*). No longer do our little Babbitts among the reviewers hiss "scandal" at such frankness.

Neither poetry nor drama is as good a test

of the national current as fiction because both are affected by extraneous considerations. As everybody knows there is no theatre, properly speaking, outside of New York City and the stale productions sent over a limited circuit of the larger cities: the playwright must cater to that heterogeneous herd on Broadway, selected solely by ability to pay extortionate prices for its pleasures. Also, as everybody knows, many of the better "shows" are still borrowed from England (less frequently of late from France), our more serious playgoers being largely indebted to Messrs. Galsworthy, Maugham, *et al.* The most indigenous theatrical piece for the moment is the murder-mystery, tough-life play, with the scene in New York or Chicago, although crime in Chicago differs slightly from crime in New York, and with crime seen through the hardened eyes of the newspaper cynic. Not much chance of art or ideas in such plays, and when, as in *Spread Eagle*, there is an effort to introduce them into the melodrama the subtle censorship of a complacent *Main Street* promptly kills the piece. When I was a young man we got our crime in a more diluted, possibly more accurate medium, through the muckracking articles of the popular magazines such as *McClure's*. There was crime aplenty lurking between their covers, but crime of a legal and social sort, not mere violence and thuggery. The muckraker tried to link his felonies to predatory wealth and political corruption, but these modern scenes from Chicago and New York present crime merely for its sensation values. The inevitable result is that the sensations are increased beyond the bounds of credibility, indicating that this source of excitement will quickly lose its zest and dry up without the aid of police censorship. . . . Along with diluted musical comedy which has become a staple article of theatrical entertainment of no possible significance, we have had innumerable "uplift" and small theatre efforts to create a national drama. As I look back over the thirty years during which I have been interested in such matters I must admit that the net results of all these idealistic impulses to give us plays that have reality and some pretention to art is almost negligible. If all the well-meaning money

that has gone to naught in launching "high-brow" theatrical productions had been concentrated on the support of a single powerful repertory theatre sending its productions annually on the road, something might have been accomplished! But that is not the individualistic method of American civilization! . . . I am looking at the theatre solely as an agency supplying some comment on our national life, and except for the grosser manifestations mentioned above I fail to find much contribution of this sort.

No doubt the present vogue of crime melodramas is useful because to a few thousands of our people they will bring home a realization of the flimsy "securities" of our boasted civilization. But that realization any half awake reader of the daily papers could acquire. As for contributing to our knowledge of national life and our spiritual culture, if we have one, the theatre remains practically nul. Except—and it is a very large exception—for the creations of the one playwright who has imagination (some say genius) who can think in terms of the theatre and still attract considerable audiences to his pieces. I do not have to mention his name—highest tribute! O'Neill is a perplexing and contradictory subject, nevertheless. Just because he has imagination, strength, individuality, he steps forth beyond the typical, and it is unsafe to make large generalizations from his unique contributions. For instance the American reaction to the problem of color could not safely be diagnosed either from *The Emperor Jones* or *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, nor to those of labor from *The Hairy Ape*, and, I trust, not to those of sex relations from either *Desire Under the Elms* or *Strange Interlude*. All these interesting pieces are indigenous, could not have been conceived by any but a contemporary American spirit, and yet not one is either typical (as *Main Street* is indubitably typical) or quite convincingly universal, as *Hamlet* or *A Doll's House* is universal. They all lack something which might make them either purely national or beyond national in appeal. Perhaps the only play by this powerful artist which fulfills these exacting requirements is his *Anna Christie*, which at all events is the best *pièce de théâtre* that America has

yet produced. But I see on the horizon no "school" deriving from O'Neill—which is regrettable.

In the case of poetry, unlike that of the theatre, there is for the purpose of judging the social record the disturbing factor that the creator is working in a medium still recognized as one of pure art, which possibly Mr. Masters alone of our modern poets has been able wholly to ignore. The impulse to create something of itself beautiful, in a void if need be, is still strong in the poet, the holy tradition of his profession. Sandburg and Frost and Vachel Lindsay, among others, have notably tried to fuse the intractable slag of American life into shapes of beauty with occasional success. Mr. Robinson has gone off by himself to play with old dialectics; if his verbal subtleties and innuendos are often clever they are as often dubiously poetic and only inferentially American in flavor. In his latest long poem, *Tristram*, proclaimed by his admirers as a masterpiece of the first rank, he has joined the band of those who in prose or verse seek for a new inspiration in rethinking with twentieth-century sophistication the ancient myths of the world. That has been the privilege in every age of the poet: to restate in the terms of his own time the familiar legends of past literature. But these recent American attempts at rewriting myths, or rather using the old bottles for the poet's new wine, betray unconsciously the acidity of the wine and the pallor of imagination without faith. Frankly I do not care to see Helen of Troy on Broadway, and for all of Mr. Robinson's verbal felicity (which is often mere agility) I had rather forget his reading of the old love tragedy and recollect it as it echoes through the tumult of Wagner. However improved psychologically the new version of *Tristram* may be, it has lost all its splendor. I wish our poets and popular novelists would let the old myths alone, instead of rewriting them to decorate their ingenious analyses of contemporary life. The simplicities, the faiths of the age of myths, which still haunt our memories, serve but to set off the metallic quality of soul for which we have exchanged them.

I spent too many words on our theatre, which because of obvious economic and cultural facts has been and must remain the least important of all forms of literary expression. (In a country where good seats to popular shows cost a plumber's daily wage, how can the theatre be creative?) It would be more to the point to discuss the motion picture and the radio as cultural expressions—certainly the newspapers. And advertising! Which brings me inevitably to modern developments in the magazine. There was a time not so many years ago when the American magazine was distinctive the world over. That combination of informative cultural "general article" with a judicious admixture of carefully selected fiction has quite passed. Now we have thick signboard tomes, where thin columns of "reading matter" are wedged between display pictures of "refined" automobile bodies and modernistic gowns, and plumbing. The influence of advertising on literature and the national imagination is a fascinating theme—how it has destroyed forever Grub Street, and put the literary producer and the illustrator and editor into the country club class along with the successful doctor and lawyer; how it has disciplined the uncouth and the unseemly writer so that he may not shock the sensibilities of the patrons of the adjoining merchandise. . . . Even rebels like the *Mercury* somehow do not make up for the "old line" magazine. No doubt they are clever, no doubt they induce some people to reflect occasionally, and they are an excellent outlet for the Semitic intelligence. But the creed of criticism becomes as arid as any other creed, exclusively pursued. Whether Mr. Mencken has had any influence in improving American style by his animadversions against "professors" (God save the mark!) and his monthly sermon of fluent invective, I doubt. American style is becoming more flexible, less pedantic, more individual, but I attribute its improvement to the newspapers, who both destroy and create. In a word the present day American magazine is negligible either as recording or stimulating imaginative expression: at their best they are Sunday supplements or debating pamphlets, at their worst as with *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Liberty* they are

mere bulky billboards for advertising "high class" merchandise.

One ought before leaving this corner of our cultural effort consider the journals of opinion, such as *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, of which kind England has at least a dozen excellent examples and France and Germany as many more. This form of intellectual entertainment has never taken firm root in the United States any more than Socialism or Buddhism or Tolstoyism: they remain exotic, caviar to the general public (even the educated minority) and oddly enough are supported by the munificence of capitalistic altruism. So far, right or wrong—and they are often right—their earnest editors and contributors seem to be making futile gestures over the muddy stream of our national consciousness, which sweeps turgidly on without the shadow of recognition. I estimate that there must be at least two hundred thousand intelligent people, with a modicum of the higher education and some interest in matters of the mind and the spirit, in these United States; the largest number of them that any of these superior "journals of opinion" have been able to reach is a bare forty thousand—one fifth, and not all of them continuously.

Having wandered over the rough fields of movieland and periodical journalism, which of course are "industries" rather than media of cultural expression, etc., I might as well add another quite recent manifestation in our cultural life, and that is the new kindergarten movement in the buying of books: the book-of-the-month clubs and so forth. Although I have the highest respect for the ability and the integrity of such guides as Mr. Canby, Mr. Van Doren and the other sponsors of this new movement, I am appalled to discover that so many thousands of my fellow reading men and women are willing to put themselves docilely, confidingly, in the hands of any tribunal of high intelligences and to take what is thus served out to them. But so it seems to be. Increasingly the better class of readers and bookbuyers submit their intelligences and tastes to the judgment of small groups, who thus assume dictatorial power not only over the intelligences of their

subscribers (who have confided themselves to the extent of eighteen or twenty-five dollars a year, each) but over publishers and authors as well. I am amazed at the vista of a more than Soviet dictatorship thus opened up by such a combination of arbiters and readers and publishers. No doubt there will always remain a free market in ideas: print and paper and the spirit of gamble are too strong not to permit "outsiders" still to venture. Yet practically all chance of extensive publicity for any book will depend more and more on the combined judgments of these priestly guides. What a picture of the American mind this development completes! We go to our banker (or broker) for advice in investing our savings; we go to our priest or our pastor (reservedly) for spiritual leadership; we go to our Rotary Club or Chamber of Commerce for what to think politically and socially; and now we are to go to Messrs. Canby, Van Doren, Phelps, *et al.*, for what to read to nourish our spirit. Next shall we seek a collective judgment in the selection of our wives?

Americans, aware in the confusion of countless appeals and opportunities, that somehow life is not as rich, as satisfying, as it might be under the most perfect of cast-iron constitutions, in God's most chosen country, etc., are striving, pathetically in earnest, to find out how it can be improved, at least exploited to its uttermost possibility. They are breathlessly afraid lest they may miss the way to salvation—or "development"—just as the crowd pressing into the stadium is afraid that all the good seats may be taken. As a people we are so willing to be led, to be "shown"! It is humorous when it is not pathetic. We are losing our old gross pioneer appetite for knowing what we want and getting it and being proud of it, no matter how bad it is. Feminizing ourselves all along the line we repeat—"Show me the way to think, believe, act, feel, so that I may not be peculiar, a freak!"

Another development in letters of the present generation, which seemingly has not yet run its full course, is the widespread curiosity about notable lives,—the popularity of biography, not only the romanticized biography supplied by a Ludwig or a Guedalla,

but the more indigenous product of our own soil such as the lives of Barnum, Brigham Young, and Boss Tweed. Note this trinity of monstrosities, for each subject was in his way a unique, an exaggerated, personality. The biographical analysis of these native sons has been on the whole neither damnable nor palliative, mainly expository and truthful, as if our more thoughtful readers and writers realized that the facts speak loudly enough of themselves. This effort to restate our own past in its own terms without bias, without national conceit, I consider as perhaps the most notable impulse in contemporary American letters. Evidently, despite the restricted circulation of the professed journals of opinion, there is a large and growing appetite in and out of Main Street for books that reveal us to ourselves—a healthy sign of coming maturity.

I am aware that I have left small space for the clamorous voice of the young—from Mr. Sherwood Anderson to Mr. Ernest Hemingway. It is intentional. For in spite of the self-conscious and self-assertive press notices about their product I find nothing memorable which differentiates it advantageously from the work of older writers, when they too were young. I do not believe that youth, which fortunately we always have with us in varying stages of adolescence, needs or should have set apart any special platform or exhibit room. Whatever contribution it can make must enter the general competition. I have listened closely during thirty years for the joybells of a new literature, and on several occasions have hurried into the street and thrown up my cap in the belief that it was about to arrive. Only to discover after a little while that what made so much noise in reality differed hardly at all from what had been coming downstream all along. Naturally youth discovers sex with a fresh surprise at its potency and a violent reaction against the attitude of the elders, who know that it has existed all the time and are no longer much excited about it. From Mr. Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* to Mr. Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* there is no progress, except possibly in style, no startling discoveries. The elder novelist, to be



sure, did not take a slut for his heroine as our youngest one did, nor make a sentimental tragedy over his hero's loss of sexual faculty. In simple truth there is not much the young writer can do with the sex life of human beings except to describe it accurately (which should be a record of *moeurs* rather than a clinic) and trace as deftly as possible its infinite spiritual ramifications, for which latter process youth is no better equipped than the mature. If the younger writers are less overtly sentimental about the race process, they betray worse manners and a more insensitive consciousness to the finer implications of sex than their Victorian grandparents. But just as the majority of gin-drinking, "necking" flappers must ultimately marry and become mothers, so the majority of sex-conscious writers, male and female, sink into the stream, where no doubt they discover other more urgent mysteries than that of coition. Youth naturally has a peculiar contribution to make to literature, that of freshness of perception rather than of ideas, but I do not find many instances among young American writers of capacity for fresh perception. More among English writers. . . .

Today youth means largely female youth, so far as writing goes. Just as women are taking over zestfully those political activities that have grown stale to men, so they are exploiting avidly their own notions of the world and putting them into books. Surely more than a half, possibly three-quarters, of recent fiction and poetry, has been written by young women. It is evident to me that this increase in self-expression by women has

already wrought a real change in the character of general literature, just as the increasing number of women motorists has feminized the appurtenances of the ordinary motor and popularized the sheltered car. But this is hardly the opportunity to discuss what women are doing to our literature.

Coincidentally with this feminization of our literature there has come, it seems to me, a lessening of its emotional tension. I do not mean that literature deals less with sex—on the contrary! Women writers are at least as much preoccupied with sex as their brothers. But it is sex for the most part without high voltage, without passion. And other passions are absent or correspondingly subdued. Is it necessary to state that there are several human passions other than the sexual one which are suitable, nay necessary, for the creation of significant literature?—passion about God, about beauty, about life! American literature today has a low passional content: it is life observed, often minutely and precisely, but without any strong emotional conviction. What troubles me most when I test it here and there, is this lack of fervor, of passionate participation. For with all the rich material at hand, with all the technical experience won through generations of experiment, we should be ready to say something to the world in memorable words. But the best we can offer—a very fair best, too—is Will Rogers and Anita Loos, both ironists. While the most we can find to discuss politically is how best to get a drink or keep "prosperity" booming.

# A CHRISTMAS GARLAND OF GIFT BOOKS

By Robert Benchley

AMONG this little bundle of books especially selected for Christmas-Wistmas, perhaps the most pat is *Rubber Hand Stamps and the Manipulation of India Rubber*, by T. O'Connor Sloane. Into it Mr. Sloane has put the spirit of Yuletide which all of us must feel, whether we are cynical enough to deny it or not.

Beginning with a short, and very dirty, history of the sources of India Rubber, the author takes us by the hand and leads us into the fairy-land of rubber manipulation. And it is well that he does, for without his guidance we should have made an awful mess of the next rubber-stamp we tried to make. As he says on page 35: "It will be evident from the description to come that it is not advisable for anyone without considerable apparatus to attempt to clean and wash ('to sheet'), to masticate, or to mix india rubber". Even if we had the apparatus, we should probably be content with simply "sheeting" and mixing the india rubber and leave the masticating for other less pernicky people to go through with. We may be an old maid, but it is too late now for us to learn to like new things.

It seems that in the making of rubber stamps a preparation known as "flong" is necessary. Mr. Sloane assures us that anyone who has watched the stereotyping of a large daily newspaper knows what "flong" is. Perhaps our ignorance is due to the fact that we were on the editorial end of a daily newspaper and went down into the composing-room only when it was necessary to rescue some mistake we had made from the forms. At any rate, we didn't know what "flong" was and we don't want to know. A man must keep certain reticences these days or he will just have no standards at all left.

It is not generally known how simple it is to make things out of rubber. "The writer has obtained excellent results from pieces of an old discarded bicycle tire. The great point

is to apply a heavy pressure to the hot material. Many other articles can be thus produced extemporaneously" (page 78). This should lend quite a bit of excitement to the manipulation of india rubber. Imagine working along quietly making, let us say, rubber type and then finding that, extemporaneously, you had a rubber Negro doll or balloon on your hands! A man's whole life could be changed by such a fortuitous slip of the rubber.

Not the least of Mr. Sloane's contributions to popular knowledge is his sly insertion, under the very noses of the authorities, of what he calls the "Old Home Receipt" (ostensibly for "roller-composition", but we know better, eh, Mr. Sloane?). The "Old Home Receipt" specifies "Glue 2 lbs. soaked over night, to New Orleans molasses 1 gallon. Not durable, but excellent while it lasts". We feel sure that we have been served something made from this "Old Home Receipt", but would suggest to Mr. Sloane that he try putting in just a dash of absinthe. It makes it more durable.

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We can recommend Laurence Vail Coleman's *Manual for Small Museums* to all those who have received or are about to give small museums for Christmas. Having a small museum on your hands with no manual for it is no joke. It sometimes seems as if a small museum were more bother than a large one, but that is only when one is tired and cross.

From Mr. Coleman's remarkably comprehensive study of small museums, we find that, as is so often in the case, income is a very serious problem. In financing special projects for the museum, such as the purchase of bird groups (if it is a museum that *wants* bird groups), there is great play for ingenuity, and Dr. Abbott of the San Diego Museum of Natural History, tells of how they, in San Diego, met the problem: