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## BIOGRAPHY

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THE PASSIONATE PILGRIM: A LIFE OF ANNIE BESANT by *Gertrude Marvin Williams* (COWARD-MCCANN. \$3.50)

A SMALL girl in a Victorian household resented very bitterly the privileges of her elder brother. Henry was taken to the Great Exhibition and came back with his pockets stuffed with treasures. Annie must keep modestly at home. When Father died, Henry rode in state at the very front of the funeral procession, right behind the hearse. Annie was packed upstairs with the female relatives, creatures too tender for the shock of the interment.

Annie rebelled. She climbed trees and played cricket; and when her brother's friends eluded her attempts to join in their games, she dreamed of herself as a knight in armor, slaying dragons and rescuing princesses. Her struggle for recognition continued all through her life; and perhaps a feeling that after all she was only a woman always accompanied it. She challenged the supremacy of men, but she never liked or respected women. Her achievements were astonishing; but they were always carried through under the influence and inspiration of some more definite character.

When she married the Reverend Frank Besant, she was young, romantic and "as proud as Lucifer". The marriage was a failure from the beginning. For a few years the misguided rector tried to bring her under control, but finally she broke away and went to London. She met Charles Bradlaugh and was swept into atheism. She lectured militantly all over England. With Bradlaugh she fought the first notorious battle for Birth Control. She became an infamous woman,

and won the hearts of thousands by her seriousness, her courage and her beauty.

Under the influence of another friend she joined the Fabian Society, organized and led the first great strike of women-laborers in England and worked on the London School Board. She helped W. T. Stead in his grandiose and rather vague crusades. And just when she was losing interest in Socialism and feeling herself stale and worked out, she reviewed *The Secret Doctrine* and went to see Madame Blavatsky.

The meeting was decisive for the rest of her life. Madame Blavatsky died; and in time Mrs. Besant succeeded her as head of the Theosophical Society. She still had the need of a self-elected guide and superior, and she installed in that position the very questionable and compromising "Bishop" Leadbeater. Her work in Indian politics and education has passed into history. At the age of seventy she became President of the Indian National Congress. But for the past forty years it is undoubtedly the personality of Madame Blavatsky that has set the main lines of her career.

Mrs. Williams tells the story of Mrs. Besant's life in a sober, straightforward way. There are not many graces to her book; but perhaps that is all to the good. The plain tale is astonishing enough. Where Mrs. Williams admits interpretations, she is temperate and sensible. She has little sympathy for Theosophy; but it is impossible to finish the biography without feeling almost of veneration for a spirit so energetic and so capable.

The anecdote which tells most is of Mrs. Besant's reception in London, fifty years after her meeting with Bradlaugh. Cables of congratulation were read from the Prime Minis-

ter and half the members of the Cabinet. Five hundred organizations for social work had sent their delegates. She addressed her audience and turned white with emotion at the cheers which followed. Leaning on the arm of a friend she whispered, "It would have been much easier if it had been a hostile crowd".

ALAN PORTER

THE LIFE OF ROBERT BURNS *by Catherine Carswell* (HARCOURT, BRACE. \$3.75)

OF ALL the English Romantics none has managed to divert attention from his work to his life with more complete success than Robert Burns. There is hardly any respectable criticism of Burns's poetry in existence; there is only the endless stream of biographical chit-chat that began early in his own lifetime. Even the earwigs and bluestockings of eighteenth-century Edinburgh, the Doctor Creeches and Mrs. Dunlops of the time, were unable to approach his work without being overcome by the consciousness that he was a ploughman, or a patriot, or a kind of rustic Don Juan. Since then, of course, the disentanglement of his amours has provided a steady source of academic recreation. His reputation, indeed, has come to depend rather more than less on his various extraneous accomplishments.

The most excellent feature of Mrs. Carswell's study is the thoroughness with which various aspects of eighteenth-century Scotch life have been reconstructed to situate Burns in his proper time and place. Her method adheres to the most scholarly traditions of accuracy, completeness and fairness. The only difficulty is that a reluctance to commit herself to an interpretative point of view toward her subject causes the final picture that emerges to be little different from the one that stands out in even the baldest account of Burns's life in a college text-book. All that is accomplished without such a point of view is a somewhat more amplified out-

line than the one already existing in most people's minds. Although Mrs. Carswell frankly professes sympathy toward her subject her attitude never enters defensively in her treatment of any of the wholly disconcerting episodes of Burns's life. The name of D. H. Lawrence on the dedication page may suggest a possible identification of the subject with one of the more Dionysiac of Lawrence's heroes. But this is no more than a suggestion.

While Mrs. Carswell has taken pains to build up the social background of Burns's period she has made little effort to show the influence of its various ideological stresses on his sensibility. She records without comment that he read Rousseau at eighteen. She refers to his enthusiasm for Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* with too little awareness of the permanent effect that this apostle of eighteenth-century Sentimentalism had on Burns's whole process of feeling and thinking. Yet all those influences of Naturism, Sentimentalism, Equalitarianism that flourished around him undoubtedly led to the excesses of conduct to which he has so largely owed his reputation. There was Burns the rustic libertine, the lover of coarse-grained Jean Armour, the "Natural Man" of Rousseau's utopia. And there was Burns the sentimentalist, the darling of the Edinburgh salons, the Sylvander of Mrs. Dunlop's honeyed correspondence. Never are the two men quite reconciled in Mrs. Carswell's biography—and perhaps they never were.

WILLIAM TROY

WILSON THE UNKNOWN: AN EXPLANATION OF AN ENIGMA OF HISTORY *by Wells Wells* (SCRIBNER'S. \$2.50)

WOODROW WILSON was a great man. He was, perhaps, the greatest man whom America has yet produced. It is the thesis of this extraordinary character study that Woodrow Wilson was a very intelligent man, that "he was the first successful politician of *all* time