

BIOGRAPHY

PORTRAITS IN MINIATURE by Lytton Strachey (HARCOURT, BRACE. \$2.50)

A FIRST reading of a book by Lytton Strachey must leave us with this above any other feeling: that he is one of the most delightful writers alive. We are put so far in his debt by his style, his wit, his infallible knowledge of what is interesting, that even if we were later able to disprove every word he said we should hardly have cancelled our obligation. There is nothing mysterious about the way he works—he is merely successful at it. His imitators have quite easily deciphered his formula, but their imitations prove that his formula is, if anything, a weakness; it is not his framework but his bricks that reveal Strachey's talent. Though a generation of sceptics who are not scholars may think otherwise, pin-pricking, humanizing, debunking are in themselves unimportant. Any really intelligent person will assume that great men are also bad, or foolish, or intemperate, or tiresome; and the proof that this is true, does not necessarily translate great men into interesting men or even breathing ones. Strachey, almost alone among pin-prickers, has achieved the translation.

Though by no means a companion volume to *Books and Characters*, this new book is in something of the same vein. It deals, however, only with characters. Eighteen people, some of them extremely famous, others extremely obscure, are treated here in the briefest of biographies, their lives spanned in a single curve, their personalities illuminated by a few selected anecdotes. These anecdotes, one need scarcely say, are as descriptive and telltale as possible. If not all of them make the person breathe, they invariably make him

interesting; if we could not recognize him wherever we met him, at least we should never mistake him for anybody else.

Of these people, the most obscure are the most delightful, not only because we are discovering them for the first time, but also because they are the most eccentric. Their eccentricities, indeed, are almost all we learn about them, almost the only reason for writing about them. Why else read of John Aubrey who was "clever enough to understand the Newtonian system, but . . . not clever enough to understand that a horoscope was an absurdity"; or of Sir John Harrington, whose writings would bore us but to whom we are indebted for the invention of the water-closet; or of Doctor Colbatch who spent his life trying to dispossess Bentley as Master of Trinity; or of the amazing Muggleston who convinced seventeenth-century England that the Word of God could be enunciated through him alone; or of the equally amazing Doctor North, also a Master of Trinity, who after a life of great earnestness and application was transformed by illness into a tippler and bawdy jokester? True, these men give us something of the spirit of their times, but that is really incidental: for it is not their resemblance to their age which attracts us, but their uniqueness as human beings. And it is purely their eccentricities we are shown, never their normalities. As character-studies they are often examples of the tail wagging the dog; but they were dull old dogs, Mr. Strachey seems to say, and their tails were the only interesting thing about them.

Writing of these people, Mr. Strachey does not illuminate history for us, or criticize human life; he simply provides delightful read-

ing-matter. His success, of course, is largely due to his literary gifts—his wit, his pulverizing style, his genius for selection; but it is due, too, to his exquisitely malicious curiosity about the idiosyncrasies, the shortcomings, the absurdities in people. Manners, personality, social anomalies enchant him. Though in the last part of this book he proves himself a good critic of historians, he himself is not a historian in any sense. As a reader, the broad movements of history, the interpenetration of human ideas, of economic and political forces, may interest him deeply: but as a writer he is concerned with nothing so wide or so abstract: it is human society affecting the individual, or the individual affecting human society (in the drawing-room sense of the word) that absorbs him. Nobody can equal him at this when he is at his best: in his paper on Madame du Deffand in *Books and Characters* a woman comes astonishingly to life and with her the whole eighteenth-century world in which she moved. That the essays in the present book which treat of kindred people—such as *The Abbé Morellet* or *Madame de Lieven*—are less successful is due first of all to the extreme brevity of their form, secondly to the inferiority of their material. The second reason is more significant than the first; for Strachey's earlier essays of an equal brevity—*Mr. Creevy* or *Lady Hester Stanhope*—excel the present ones. The fault here lies partly in the people: they are good subjects but not the best. But it lies partly with Strachey: he has done wittily and vividly by them, but one detects a certain falling off in verve, in sparkle, in freshness—the Formula is going in for mass production.

The concluding six papers, on six English historians, form a section in this book of their own. As critical summaries of the work of Hume, Gibbon, Macaulay, Carlyle, Froude and Creighton they are often extremely trenchant, and sometimes give us, epigrammatically, descriptions as good as this one of Victorianism: "an age in which everything

was discovered and nothing known, an age in which all the outlines were tremendous and all the details sordid". But when he begins to analyze the men themselves, Mr. Strachey makes, over and over, a mistake that has always been common with him. While appearing to explain his people with fresh psychological thoroughness, actually he simplifies them to the point where they become one-dimensional. Everyone must have noticed in *Elizabeth and Essex* how the Queen gradually came to resemble Indecision in a Morality play; here, in the same way, Macaulay is—no more nor less—a Whig, Froude a man who never outgrew his father, Madame de Lieven an aristocrat. The result, in each case, is a portrait of exceptional vividness; Strachey's historical figures, in their concentration upon master-traits, are like Balzac characters. But the artist in Mr. Strachey has driven out the psychologist. These unified, orderly, beautifully emphatic portraits choose to be loyal to art rather than to life. Nothing spills over, nothing remains unaccounted for—nothing about these men is ever irrelevant! In a word, Strachey's characters are not organic, but synthetic.

That Mr. Strachey handles his "eccentrics" in exactly the opposite way—that with Harrington or Aubrey or Doctor North everything spills over, everything is unaccounted for, everything is irrelevant—clinches rather than weakens the case. For the same end is achieved by reversing the Formula: on the one hand it functions to create uniformity of make-up, on the other to create oddity. But someone who is *all* oddity is, in the long run, as one-dimensional and simplified as someone who is all relevancy.

It is not hard to understand why Mr. Strachey, however suggestive, is an untrustworthy psychologist. He has turned his back on modern life. It might be said of him that he is a sophisticated and worldly man in every age except his own; the France of Louis XIV, the England of Queen Anne or the Regency, would find him more than their

match; but our day leaves him cold, he seldom touches upon it and when he does, his touch is gingerly. He mentions Whitehead not to agree with him or argue against him, but merely with urbane flippancy. I should like nothing better than to read an essay by Mr. Strachey on Freud. Strachey's intelligence is very great, but it works independently of modern thinking, it takes no cognizance of modern knowledge of human character. For all its natural scepticism and sharpness, it is an old-fashioned mind, perfectly attuned to the past; so perfectly, indeed, that it evokes the past rather than illuminates it. And so Strachey sees people, not as they were, but as they plausibly might have been. All his revaluations, it strikes me, will have to be revaluated; and Strachey will be read and admired for his manner and not his judgements.

LOUIS KRONENBERGER

LEIGH HUNT AND HIS CIRCLE *by Edmund Blunden* (HARPERS. \$4.00)

THE sub-title of this rich and engrossing book deserves a special emphasis, for Mr. Blunden has brought before us not a single man alone but a society. If Leigh Hunt had genius of any kind it consisted in a quick and eager sympathy with the genius of others, and his best claim to greatness lay in his prophetic comprehension of the several great men whose lives his own life touched and illumined. Although to a superficial view it may appear that he struck out several novelties both of mood and manner that became important in the writing of other men—witness the remarkable likeness between his poetic style and the early poems of John Keats—one finally concludes that his mind was rather sympathetic than origina-tive. It waved so many and such delicate tentacles through the intellectual air that he was enabled, so to speak, to imitate works not yet composed. This served him well in his capacities as critic and literary discoverer.

He seemed to know what Keats and Shelley and a dozen other neophytes were to do before they themselves had any clear idea of it, and he praised their future performances by anticipation. No man has ever savoured more keenly than he did "the pure joy of praising", and it still seems to us—perhaps partly because we have not yet passed quite through his critical epoch—that almost always he praised the right things, if not quite always for the right reasons. No critic who has also been a creative writer has ever held himself more free from the belittling jealousies that distort and envenom professional comment upon contemporaries. It would almost seem that he was glad to have other men write better than he could and win the fame which he was always just failing to attain. Good writing in prose or verse, by whomsoever composed, was one of the few luxuries that he could afford, and he enjoyed it as simply and with as little thought of himself as he did the arias of Mozart which he played on his cottage piano. To be sure, he was a little "too soon made glad". With his inborn inclination toward sunny sides and silver linings—and most fortunate it was that he had this—he could usually find something to like in whatever he looked at, and his looks went almost everywhere. The point is, however, that this catholicity of his enjoyment and his constant effort as a journalist to share his pleasures with all the world steadily lengthened the radius of his "circle" until it included nearly all the persons of literary importance who could be met in London during his long lifetime. Mr. Blunden has done well, therefore, in grouping about his central figure, holding them only slightly out of focus, the many friends of Leigh Hunt: Keats and Shelley, Lamb and Hazlitt, Byron and Landor, Browning and Carlyle, Mary Lamb and Mary Shelley, Haydon and Novello, to name only a few of the more famous. There is something significant in the fact that all of these people liked Hunt, that some of them—and the greatest most