



## *The ROVING CRITIC*

CARL VAN DOREN



BACK TO NATURE:—Let no son of Jefferson fool himself. The sons of Hamilton have always dominated and governed this country, and they continue to do so. Jefferson and his circle were in power only a few years, after all, and there has never since been another thoroughgoing Jeffersonian in the White House. The interests of stability and of property have prevailed over the interests of flexibility and of labor. Even in the midst of the present restlessness those dominant interests are so strong that the Democrats who boast that they are the sons of Jefferson can hardly be distinguished, as to their political principles, from the Republicans who boast that they are the sons of Hamilton. It is left for the scrupulous, insistent, legitimate Jeffersonians to play the part of critics to administration after administration, with no more actual power than critics ordinarily have.

But the Jeffersonians do have their revenge and triumph. They write much better than the Hamiltonians. The two best books on Jefferson which have been brought out by the sesquicentennial year side emphatically with him against Hamilton. This might have been expected. But likewise the best book of the year on Washington inclines to

the side of Jefferson, when it has occasion to do anything of the sort at all.

It is of course not quite just to class W. E. Woodward's "George Washington: The Image and the Man" (Boni & Liveright) with the documents in this old American political duel, for the reason that it goes at so many points beyond the controversy and that it stands squarely on very modern feet. Still, the Jeffersonians will take comfort from its analysis of Washington's character and of the circumstances through which he moved. They will do this in spite of the fact that Washington is shown, more clearly than ever before, to belong to the opposite party. Strangely enough, the Hamiltonians, to whose party Washington is freshly assigned, will many of them be vexed, not because of the assignment itself, but because of the terms which are used.

Mr. Woodward, far from regarding Washington as an elusive or mysterious person, finds in him something reasonably familiar.

"Washington's mind was the *business mind*. He was not a business man, in the modern sense; he did not live in a business age. But the problems which he understood, and knew how to solve, were executive

problems; and he approached them in the great executive manner.

"His type of personality is not uncommon in America. There are many Washingtons among us to-day. . . . Such men are usually found in executive positions in large-scale industrial or financial enterprises.

"It is not the highest type of mind. Far from it. But it has a certain hard greatness of its own.

"Washington was an intense realist. . . .

"The mind of the realist revolves around men and things. He likes to bend men to his will, and he likes to possess things, but he has more pleasure in getting things than he does in owning them. He likes to play with things as the dreamer plays with ideas. In war he is on his highest plane of being, for there he is able to use men in packs and hunt with them as one hunts with dogs.

"When there is no war the realist tries to create the similitude of one. He contrives to have business wars: campaigns in which salesmen are the soldiers, and in which the objective is the defeat of business rivals. And in the intervals he engages in war on animals, or on something else—on works of the imagination which he happens to dislike—on people who hold opinions differing from his own. Sometimes he organizes laudable wars against disease, or poverty, and then the realist is at his best. He has a constructive as well as a destructive side, and his two opposing impulses are intermingled and confused. But his wars are always physical wars. He does not fight with ideas, but with material forces of one kind or another.

"Washington possessed the superb self-confidence that comes only to men whose inner life is faint, for the inner life is full of nameless doubts. . . . He had the great qualities of confidence, courage, perseverance, fortitude—and, even more, he had good luck, without which these qualities would have been unavailing."

At first glance it appears that such an analysis of Washington's character ought to be highly satisfying to contemporary Hamiltonians, who as business men might well be pleased at being told that the first president of the United States was also the first American captain of finance. That they are told this by a biographer from the other camp ought not to make any difference.

It will make a difference, and the explanation is simple. The political descendants of Hamilton, for all their intense realism in respect to present affairs, have regularly dressed up the past in the oddest stiffest costumes. They have admired and followed Washington and Hamilton because they have recognized in them a congenial spirit. But the man of affairs, at least the mere man of affairs, is extraordinarily naïve when history comes into the picture, bringing elements and colors which confuse him because he has had little to do with them. He has been used to looking at everything face to face. With a century or so between him and any object, he is lost. The distance breeds a fog. Moreover the mere man of affairs, having repressed whatever poetic impulses there may be in him, is at their mercy when they do assert themselves. This they do in the matter of history. He therefore credulously accepts the

legends concerning dead heroes. Only, he does not realize that these are legends. He takes them for things as positive as his impressions of objects near at hand. In the end he becomes the stanchest upholder of the legendary, and is likely enough to attack any more critical person who questions it.

The result, in the case of Washington and Mr. Woodward, is a singular tangle of paradoxes. Washington has here had to be interpreted, and more convincingly than ever before, not by a mind of his own stamp, but by a mind as supple and eager as Jefferson's. That interpreter has put Washington at the head of the line which virtually begins with him, in the United States, and comes down to the actual rulers of the United States in the twentieth century. These rulers have recently been making enormous efforts to lend to business the weight and dignity of a profession, to gild, as far as possible, the commercial hierarchy. If they were consistent they would snatch at the chance to have Washington ranked among them. That they will not, and that many of them will be offended, is further evidence that the practical mind has its mysteries of behavior.

Perhaps the principal solution of the mystery is that Mr. Woodward has no reverence for the executive mind as such. "It is not the highest type of mind. Far from it." He genuinely admires the character of Washington, but he makes clear that he misses in his subject any signs of a conspicuous intelligence. Furthermore he refuses to approach his theme with trepidation. He puts the legend aside and looks at the man,

whom he finds a badly educated youth, an unsuccessful lover, an aggressive land-hunter, a good but not an astounding soldier, a sometimes bewildered president, and, in general, a man who owed a good deal to luck. The total result is to get Washington out of the region of statuary and back to nature. There is still plenty of greatness left, and it is heartily ascribed to him. But there is no resounding talk about ideals, and here the trouble lies. Why must practical men be so hungry for the language of idealism? Is there not enough food for them in their own world? Probably not. At any rate, they can be expected to complain because Washington, so long a marble hero, is now set down among them in flesh, blood, and expensive clothing.

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WHAT MAKES THE MARRIAGE Go:—Persons who venture into "The Book of Marriage" (Harcourt Brace), edited by Count Hermann Keyserling, in order to learn something about the general problem of marriage, will learn almost everything. Persons who go there to find out about any specific task of marriage will take almost nothing away. In the first place, the book is written, except for the chapters by Havelock Ellis and Beatrice M. Hinkle, in the solemn German manner which, however impressive when met in its native tongue, looks top-heavy in translation. In the second place, the twenty-four contributors, including Count Keyserling himself, are confined by the scheme of the compilation to statements so broad that each of them makes but a bare

beginning to his argument. In a sense, the book reads like a collection of two dozen prefaces to as many treatises on a single theme. Something of the sort is what the editor has aimed at. "The most personal of problems dealing with life," he says, "can only be solved by acquiring an insight into its universal nature. On the other hand, if this insight is acquired, it suffices to show the only right method of solution in each individual case." Perhaps it is true that a human being who understands the universal nature of a problem is on the right way to an individual solution. But is it true that a universal problem is best stated in general terms? Are there general terms which apply to cases so special and intimate as particular marriages? Is it not the trouble with marriage that most men and women enter the state with nothing but general terms to go by?

What every young or inexperienced or troubled married couple most wants to know is not what the universal problem of marriage is, but precisely how other married couples, or even a single married couple, have solved their difficulties. As it is, they are ordinarily put off with general observations which are of the slightest value to them. But if they could have a few case histories to study, detailed, candid, and reasonably impartial chapters of autobiography, they would have something to work with, and might, if they had the disposition, go on to their own understanding and statement of the universal problem. But without those case histories they are really helpless, no matter how much they have philosophized. At this

point appears the weakness of "The Book of Marriage." The contributors to it must be acquainted with countless matrimonial examples. They have, however, in boiling their knowledge down to simple general terms been obliged to discard just what was needed to make their counsel really pertinent. There is no such thing as marriage by itself; there are only married people.

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UNSUBMERGED:—Though the late Frank Moore Colby had been a professor of economics and was long the editor of an encyclopedia, neither of his dire trades was ever able to bury him. He had the peculiar advantage that he could not be taken in by what are called facts; he had met too many of them. "There is nothing stubborn," he once wrote, "about a fact. It is a time-server and a lickspittle and whenever it meets a fool it is ready to lay down its life for him." Mr. Colby declared that he himself, after each new edition of his encyclopedia, found his mind so stuffed with facts that he "had to pluck them out of his memory one by one, like slivers." But he did pluck them out. All that remained was the habit of knowing, or of trying to know, what he was talking about. This habit, fortunately, he carried over, as specialists rarely do, into the world of general opinions. The consequence was that among men of the world he had the authority of the specialist, and among specialists he had the charm of the man of the world. The two qualities, agreeably joined, appear in "The Colby Essays" (Harper), edited from his published writings.

It is possible to read these two attractive volumes without once coming upon a passage in which the writer seems to be talking merely out of a love of his own voice. It is impossible to read them without being struck now and then, and perhaps frequently, with the discovery that on this or that point Mr. Colby is one step beyond his reader. Where the reader has let his mind slump into some first thought, Mr. Colby has gone on to a second; where the reader has reached a second by himself, Mr. Colby is likely to have moved on to a third. Yet nowhere in the collection is there any sign of the restlessness or noisiness which ordinarily goes with an "active mind." The hard work seems to have been done before the writer began to write. If the atmosphere of the essays is dry, it is dry, not as dust is, but as air is. It satisfies while it stings. All that Mr. Colby lacked was a certain greatness which comes from an audacity in making passionate guesses at truth and beauty. He did not make passionate guesses, but within the range of his reflections he hardly ever missed his mark.



THE SEQUEL OF A GESTURE:—With each new book by Willa Cather it needs to be pointed out that her quiet lucidity reveals as many implications as the most tortured intricacy of manner could conceal. "My Mortal Enemy" (Knopf) is a very simple story, of a woman who gave up the expectation of a fortune to marry the man she loved, came gradually, despite her love, to regret

her heroic gesture, and dragged out her days through a limping sequel as unhappy as anybody ever prophesied for her. The story is too brief, as written, to do more than hint at its main bearings; and the material, as handled, is too slight to give the book the impact of certain of Miss Cather's fuller novels. And yet to demand something else of the narrative is perhaps to demand mere reiteration, mere piling up of proof. What else is there to tell of Myra except that a single romantic gesture, however magnificent, was not enough to build a life upon? What else, for that matter, is there to be told of any human being, in a book or out of it? The theme of "My Mortal Enemy" is central and crucial. In it poetry and prudence are shown at war, youth and age, ecstasy and disillusion. Another writer, dealing with the theme, might have insisted, in the face of all experience, that Myra's gesture never gave way to weariness or eventual regret; another might, with a cynical satisfaction, have argued that the gesture should never have been made. Miss Cather is above either partial view. She knows that if human beings are to be better than calculating-machines they must make these very gestures, but also that no one of them is sufficiently better to live forever by one gesture alone. Men live both to-day and to-morrow, and between the two days there is no possible absolute accord. Myra's fate is everybody's fate. Miss Cather, however, manages to tell so general a story without making it in any sense a treatise. Myra is everybody, but Myra is still Myra.



## SHORT CUTS

**Americana, 1926.** Edited by H. L. Mencken.  
Alfred A. Knopf.

The second year of this anthology shows no decline in the collector's ardor and, of course, no failure in the annual crop of imbecilities. An Appendix from Foreign Parts brings the whole world into the silly circle.

**Before the Bombardment.** By Osbert Sitwell. George H. Doran Co.

An insolent, witty, but somewhat uneven comedy of a tempest going on in a British tea-pot on the east coast just before the Germans blew the tea-pot up.

**The Sun Also Rises.** By Ernest Hemingway.  
Charles Scribner's Sons.

The most alcoholic novel on record, dealing curtly with a group of Americans lost in Europe. The story has more edge than meaning.

**That Last Infirmity.** By Charles Brackett.  
John Day Co.

The fictive history of a social climber who climbed with kindness as one of her main assets. Satirical but humane.

**Amorous Fiametta.** By Giovanni Boccaccio.  
Navarre Society (A. & C. Boni).

A handsome edition of a remarkable psychological romance.

**Translations and Tomfooleries.** By Bernard Shaw. Brentano's.

The horse-play with which Bernard Shaw lets off steam is occasionally very funny, but here he is funny only very occasionally.

**You Can't Win.** By Jack Black. Macmillan Co.

The candid decent autobiography of a thief who after thirty years in the underworld, half of them in prison, decided that dishonesty is the worst

policy. In his book he neither boasts nor sniffles.

**Victor Hugo.** By William F. Giese. Lincoln MacVeagh.

An anti-romantic falls thunderously upon an arch-romantic and tears a reputation into tiny bloody pieces.

**The Heart of Emerson's Journals.** Edited by Bliss Perry. Houghton Mifflin Co.

Ten volumes of sap boiled down to one of syrup lose nothing but water. No other book explains so well as this just what it was that Emerson tried to do. Moreover he remains his own best critic.

**Up from Methodism.** By Herbert Asbury.  
Alfred A. Knopf.

Another sign that the Protestant churches in America are under fire. Mr. Asbury, bored and nagged by Methodists in his youth, now evens the old score. His weapon is a club.

**The Pulse of Progress.** By Ellsworth Huntington. Charles Scribner's Sons.

A solid contribution toward a new philosophy of history, in which special stress is laid upon the geographical and biological elements.

**How We Become Personalities.** By Edward Huntington Williams. Bobbs-Merrill Co.

It seems the ductless glands are to blame. The author, a medical man, writes intelligibly.

**Valentine's Manual of Old New York, 1927.** Edited by Henry Collins Brown.  
Valentine's Manual.

The charming pictures of "New York in the Elegant Eighties," which is the subtitle of "Valentine's Manual No. 11," do more than the crotchety text to prove that, as the compiler insists, the city was far more beguiling in that decade than in the present.