

# OPINIONS about BOOKS



*They swayed about upon a rocking-horse, and thought it Pegasus. — KEATS*

## Reviews by

JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

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### T. R. Whitewashed

ROOSEVELT, THE STORY OF A FRIENDSHIP, 1880-1919, by Owen Wister; Macmillan, \$4.00.

Reviewed by JOHN CHAMBERLAIN.

THIS BOOK is the work of a cultivated personality, of one rich in enviable experience of the Great World. Owen Wister is an Older American, one of the breed of Henry Adams, Justice Holmes, and others with whom he had fruitful contacts; and he writes with a charm that is at once magnetic and insidious. The magnetism gathers force because of our twentieth century nostalgia for a civilization that could produce an Owen Wister and endow him with cultivated traits that one looks for in vain in the typical university product of a racketeering age like the present. But the book is the more insidious, in certain respects, because of this very strong pull upon our sympathies.

Not that Wister is to be condemned for his admiration for Roosevelt; the man was, after all, an admirable character in many ways. H. L. Mencken has called him a "mean" man, but the record doesn't bear the prejudice out. One may be repelled by Roosevelt's treatment of Colombia in the Panama Canal case, and still account him a force for good in the President's seat. No matter how much of a common scold T. R. may have become subsequent to 1914, he did stand out as a valuable protest in an age that had been given over, from 1865 to 1900 and after, to uncritical expansion. Mr. Wister sets forth Roosevelt's symbolic and practical virtues as a "trust-buster" very logically indeed.

But Mr. Wister has his own *déformation professionnelle*: as one who supported Roosevelt in his efforts to involve us in the World War he cannot see Wood-

row Wilson: and he cannot think from the World War as a premise, as we all must do if sanity is to prevail. In a corporate world the enemy is not any one country or group of countries, but War itself; and if Mr. Wister won't take the suggestion from a young pup this side of thirty, let him read Stuart Chase on the subject.

To judge from the final pages of his book, Mr. Wister has never troubled his head over the war guilt question from the day the Germans rightly sank the Lusitania (it was their only way of answering the British blockade) until the present. Messrs. Barnes, Fay, Ponsonby, and others might never have written a line for all the effect they have had on Mr. Wister!

Lord Bryce said of Roosevelt that he could not always look at a thing; and Mr. Wister is open to the same criticism. To counteract the false impression given by the closing passages of this book one should go over, carefully, the *Roosevelt, An Autopsy*, of Mr. Mencken, and "Roosevelt: The Story of an Animosity," by Bainbridge Colby, in the August 1930 issue of *Current History*.

Then there is the insidious matter of Mr. Wister's recurrent Toryism and priggishness. "The one type of citizen more undesirable than Haywood," he says, in speaking of Big Bill, "is his sheltered, drawing-room sympathizer." This type of sympathizer Mr. Wister sets down as a "parlor political pervers." Does

such an epithet suggest, for example, John Dos Passos and a number of other admirers of Haywood who are courageous and who are endowed with a salutary vision of evil, even if they are politically misguided? The young Wister who submitted a first novel to Howells would hardly have spun out the phrase so glibly.

It is to be suspected, also, that the young Wister would not have acquiesced so easily to Roosevelt's essentially tractarian view of the offices of literature.

Roosevelt helped pull the teeth of Booth Tarkington as a writer, a thing that Tarkington, perhaps inadvertently, admits in *The World Do Move*. Did Roosevelt's

admonitions cripple Wister to some extent? Lacking the positive evidence, one can only surmise: but it is not comforting to watch Wister let Roosevelt go so easily. Wister lived rather honorably through the period of what Newton Arvin has happily called the "kept writer"; how fine it would have been if the creator of "The Virginian" had maintained a tough-mindedness in criticizing the feebler spirits of his own age!

But we carp too long at a book that will continue to have immense value as a revelation of its times. Some of Mr. Wister's most charming pages are devoted to biographical treatment of Henry Adams, Justice Holmes, Henry Cabot Lodge, Winthrop Chanler, Ambassador Jusserand, and others of the White House "familiaris" of Roosevelt's day. These pages must not be missed, for they belong on the shelf beside *The Education of Henry Adams* as priceless source material for one seeking the key to our American civilization of the industrial epoch between the Civil War and the World War. They are by all odds the best pages in a remarkable book.

### Liberty's Knell

THIS LAND OF LIBERTY, by Ernest Sutherland Bates; Harper, \$3.00.

Reviewed by GEORGE N. SHUSTER.

A LIBERAL might be defined as a person who considers the United States an area of three million odd square miles which produced liberty for one hundred



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