

OPINIONS about BOOKS



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

Reviews by

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A Brilliant Enigma

SWIFT, by Carl Van Doren; Viking, \$3.00.
Reviewed by GRANVILLE HICKS.

AT LEAST in the field of biography the eighteenth century is faring uncommonly well. Last spring gave us Lord David Cecil's book on Cowper and Edith Sitwell's *Alexander Pope*, and the new season has brought us Carl Van Doren's *Swift*. If only because Pope and Swift were the outstanding literary men of their period, were both uncommonly difficult persons, and were friends, it would be natural to compare Miss Sitwell's book and Mr. Van Doren's; but the books themselves suggest the comparison by their differences. There is no irritating special pleading in *Swift*, though the temptation might have been great; there is balance, vigor, and perfect candor. It is, in short, a biography, not an apology.

It is very good biography, an achievement that goes far to redeem the new biography from the odium attached to its name by charlatans and opportunists. Van Doren has seen that the secret of biography as an art is not to be found in the use of psycho-analytical jargon, fictitious conversations, and daubs of local color. The secret — an open secret but a disregarded one — is selection, selection based on two rare qualities, the patience to examine all the facts and the wisdom to determine what facts are important.

It is a joy to follow Van Doren as he moves rapidly and confidently through the masses of material relevant to his subject. He will not dally over a letter because it is new or over an anecdote because it is picturesque. As far as possible he draws on Swift's own words, and whatever his sources he keeps Swift always in the center of the picture. Through the tangle of Queen Anne politics he hews a straight path, never failing to make clear what is important to his story, never wasting a moment on what will not serve his purposes. His aim is always to keep within the facts, and if his account of Stella and

Vanessa, for example, fails to answer a hundred interesting questions, it does give a clear and reliable statement of Swift's relations with these women. When the book is finished, the reader knows what can be known of Swift. If he feels that "conjured spirit," "extraordinary man," and "born to hatred" scarcely explain the mystery of Swift's personality, he is consoled by the realization that the longest words in Freud's vocabulary would, in



CARL VAN DOREN*

this case, be merely a different cloak to cover the same failure.

Where the book is disappointing is in the treatment of Swift's writings. The passage on *Gulliver's Travels*, for instance, is not dull, but certainly it is neither original nor stirring. It would be objected that the author is interested in biography, not criticism; but the answer, as Van Doren clearly realizes, is that the life of a literary man cannot be separated from his books. Indeed, Van Doren's conclusion is that Swift, who failed to win the victories of which he dreamed, triumphed with the weapon he scorned, the pen. Why, then, does not Van Doren interpret and evaluate Swift's books for our time? Either they are important in the twentieth century, in which case he can hardly be excused for not defining their importance, or else

* Drawing by D. C. Parrot, courtesy of The New York Evening Post

they are not, and then the subject is scarcely worth treating.

Edith Sitwell's *Alexander Pope* was in many ways a bad book, but it achieved a certain effect because the author conveyed to the reader something of her own sense that Pope was a real, important, and admirable person. *Swift*, on the other hand, is a magnificently written book, but it never makes clear why its author chose that subject rather than any one of a hundred others. It will be remembered that most of Carl Van Doren's work has been in the field of American literature and that if he has written with less skill on American authors, he has written with more warmth, a greater sense of discovery, a deeper sympathy. One hesitates to draw a moral, for it would be ill advised to assert that Americans must always and under all circumstances write about Americans; but at least there is a point worth pondering.

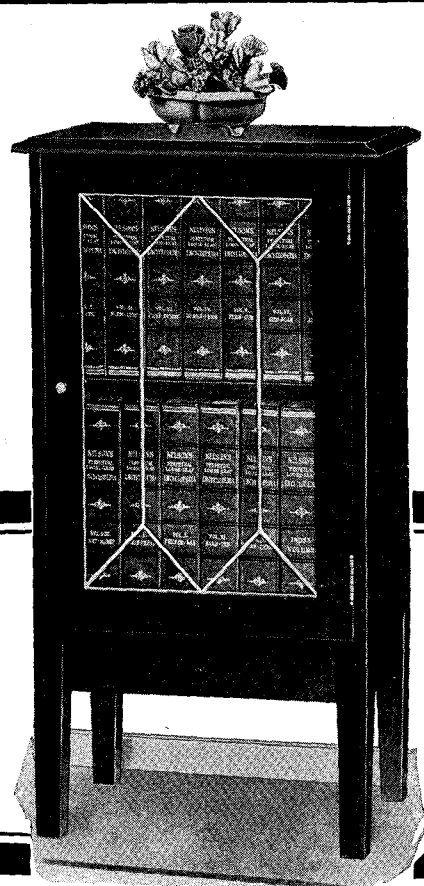
Trampled Justice

SUCCESS, by Lion Feuchtwanger; Viking \$3.00.

Reviewed by VIRGILIA PETERSON ROSS.

WITH the belief that "to distill a drop of higher reality he needed endless quantities of raw, unsifted material," Herr Feuchtwanger has looked through a magnifying-glass at the city of Munich during the inflation which followed the War. He unearths closet skeletons, pesky pains, and deep-seated dreams in tavern, home, and institution. He digs in a hundred bosoms for the precise grain of desire which determines these hundred personalities. With a passionate patience, then, he spreads his findings before you, the fruit of his indignation and his irony. As in *Power* he turned back through documentary evidence for historical truth, so now, for this modern chronicle, he has used this same device to give you perspective, entering the spirit of some future historian. The pivot of the book is justice. The demand for justice and its meting out

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