

THE BOOK FORUM

Conducted by M. M. C.

JOURNAL OF A TOUR TO THE HEBRIDES WITH DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON — James Boswell, edited by Frederick A. Pottle & Charles H. Bennett (Viking \$5.00 & \$25.00).

NO PEACE WITH NAPOLEON — General de Caulaincourt, translated & edited by George Libaire (Morrow, \$3.00).

REASONS FOR ANGER — Robert Briffault (Simon & Schuster, \$2.50).

SEVEN YEARS' HARVEST: NOTES ON CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE — Henry Seidel Canby (Farrar & Rinehart, \$2.50).

IN PURSUIT OF LAUGHTER — Agnes Repplier (Houghton Mifflin, \$2.75).

THE WORLD AROUND US — Paul Karlson (Simon & Schuster, \$3.75).

How many readers of these columns realize what a wonderful mind the eighteenth-century mind was? The cultivated eighteenth-century mind, I mean. Fed on the classics, it was mellow and unruffled and, in its public behavior, magnanimous. In two books before us we have samples of this: there is the *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Dr. Samuel Johnson*, by James Boswell, and there is *No Peace with Napoleon*, by General de Caulaincourt.

Was it Chesterton who said that in all literature there is just one biographer, his name James Boswell, and that he died leaving no descendants? Of course Boswell was a sort of exhibitionist, and he did not mind making a fool of himself. Neither did Samuel Pepys nor the George Moore of *Hail and Farewell*. Each of these foolish exhibitionists somehow managed to write books that are unique. And is there a pleasanter way for a lady or gentleman of mellow mind to pass an evening than in the company of any of them?

Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides is a sort of study for the great *Life* that Boswell was afterwards to write. He had known Dr. Johnson (it is odd to find him plain "Mr." Johnson in these pages) for some years before he persuaded him to go on a pilgrimage to the island of Iona — a pilgrimage that would be the equivalent of an expedition into the remote parts of Lapland for a Londoner of today. The resulting *Journal* is less a travel book than a memoir written on the march. Boswell did not care so much about the places they saw as he cared about what Johnson thought of them, so he didn't bother to go into the descriptive line. He tells us about the people they met, especially the people who were well enough off to entertain them. They spent an evening at the house

of the great Scottish noble, the Duke of Argyll, whose beautiful duchess was one of the Gunning sisters; she did her best to snub the irrepressible Boswell, and he notes it all down with the accuracy of a realist novelist interested in the factual representation of a little comedy.

That he was made ridiculous did not matter to Boswell. Wherever Johnson was was the most important place in the universe at the moment; what he really wanted is revealed in this sentence: "I shall lay up authentic materials for the *Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D.* and if I survive him, I shall be the one who shall most faithfully do honor to his memory." Could hero worship go further? The result is two of the most delightful books in the world. The *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* was published in Boswell's lifetime in an elegantly refined version, with a good deal of Boswell's foolish self-revelations left out: they are all included in this lively book, which is from a manuscript fished out of a croquet box in Malahide Castle.

That delightful eighteenth-century mind takes another shape in Caulaincourt's *No Peace with Napoleon*. Here we have the mind in action at that stage of civilization before humanity was infected with industrialism, nationalism, pragmatism, the decay of religious discipline. It is also humanity at that most fascinating stage of its development, the period of great belief in the primacy of reason; and what a grand period it was.

When this memoir opens the troops of the Allies — Austria, England, Prussia, and Russia — are on the French side of the Rhine, and the Russians are in Paris. The end of Napoleon and of the French domination of Europe is in sight. But how magnanimous everybody is! No treaties of Versailles or things like that — no talk of punishing or humiliating the French people. Alexander, Metternich, Talleyrand, and even Castlereagh seem to have thought first of all about the peace of Europe. But they all wanted to separate Napoleon from France; the fear of a great man is greater than the fear of a great country. They were all quite willing to leave France a great and wealthy power.

Caulaincourt was a real writer; the narrative has the interest, the suspense, the intimacy, the sense of great happenings that make a memorable story. The climax of the narrative is where Napoleon attempts to poison himself, and the crisis is where Caulaincourt, Ney, and MacDonald, negotiating with the Czar, witness Alexander's being informed that

Napoleon's Sixth Army has gone over to the Austrians. After that everything dissolves. A really interesting and exciting book, revealing a psychological power very like that of Stendhal.

We make a startling transit when we pass from the reasonableness of the eighteenth-century mind to the contemporary communist mind as revealed in Robert Briffault's *Reasons for Anger*. Briffault's is a very curious and not unrepresentative modern case. He has written a book, *The Mothers*, a work of anthropological research which seems to be accepted by people who know as a contribution to human history. Then he wrote a novel, *Europa*, a second-rate best seller purporting to deal in an authoritative manner with the decline of Europe. Its pretentiousness, prejudices, and ignorance of European manners in the class he attempted to portray were startling to find in the writing of an investigator of any repute. And this volume of essays, *Reasons for Anger*, gives us the same impression of unaccountability that *Europa* did.

Some of the essays are informing and reasonable: for instance, the long essay "Family Sentiments" really suggests an unbiased investigator. But when he talks about the "idiocies" of Dr. Millikan, who received the Nobel Prize for determining the charge of the electron, we have a worried feeling that maybe the idiocies are Briffault's.

It is very hard to understand why a man who writes like Briffault should be a communist and why he should perpetrate the astonishing statement that the mind of the common man in Russia today is "as superior to the twisted and crippled mind of the denizen of a capitalist liberal democracy as the brain of the mammal was superior to the saurian's." Why should Briffault think he is doing anything for human liberation when he writes with the intemperance of a soapbox orator?

It is with relief that we turn from such diatribes to a wise and tolerant book, *Seven Years' Harvest: Notes on Contemporary Literature*, by Henry Seidel Canby, a book informed by good sense, knowledge, love of ideas, and a sense of fair play. Fifty per cent of the writing on literature at the present time are characterized by what the ancient theologians used to call "invincible ignorance." But in this book we have the writing of a man who knows the classics of literature and who knows, too, that they were not always

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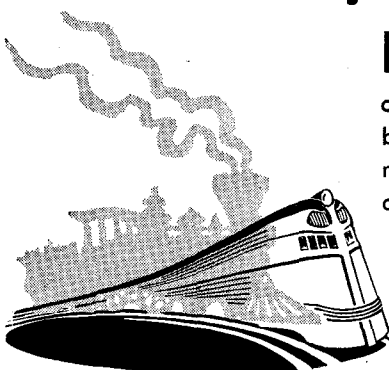
classical, that on the first appearance of many of them they were regarded as a bit on the raw side. So he can look on O'Neill, Hemingway, Faulkner, Robinson Jeffers with sympathy and hopefulness for he can see in them something that in the end — who knows? — may make them classics. When he reveals reasons for disapproving he is never carping; he points out the weaknesses of Faulkner, O'Neill, Hemingway, or Jeffers only after he has shown the promise and power that is in their various works.

A striking section of this book is made up of "Estimates of the Dead," in which he discusses the productions of writers recently dead and whose work is in need of revaluation — Rudyard Kipling, John Galsworthy, Colonel Lawrence, Peter Finley Dunne. The estimates he makes of these writers may not be final, but, at the moment, they seem sound judgments. Like a great many men of his generation, Henry Seidel Canby has a real admiration for the creator of Mr. Dooley. He sees the Dooley dialogues as "each perfectly constructed with a twist at the end as incomparable as the last line of a sonnet." Unaffected by contemporary whims and fashions he can afford to admire Galsworthy's Forsyths. He recognizes that they are pure English and that this racial quality is very rarely found now in novels: the English stock is getting all mixed up with other strains, and an English writer with the undiluted English tradition in his body and bones is a *rara avis*. "The Forsyths . . . are geological and have in them the secrets of racial evolution. . . . Like Hardy's peasants and Shakespeare's Mercutios, Hotspurs and Falstaffs, they are so racial that they can afford to be individualists."

ANOTHER book of essays distinguished for knowledge and tolerance is Agnes Repplier's *In Pursuit of Laughter*. This book is really a miscellany of sketches in honor of such grand people as Sheridan, Theodore Hook, Charles II, Gilbert and Sullivan, and dozens of others. Agnes Repplier writes about the Middle Ages, when laughter did not have to be pursued; she writes about the Elizabethan age, when laughter was being diminished; she writes about Charles II's time, when there was a desperate effort to get laughter back; she writes about the great nineteenth-century humorists — all of them, from Dickens to Mark Twain.

In Pursuit of Laughter is altogether a delightfully civilized book; its author is a salonnière surviving into our time: her writing is like the good conversation that might have been heard at Madame du Deffand's. Her sort of wit may be gauged by a remark she makes about Sheridan: "Yet he had abundant energy, and was industrious, his only labor-saving device

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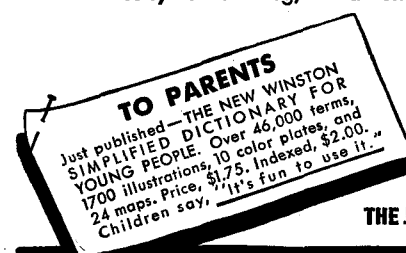


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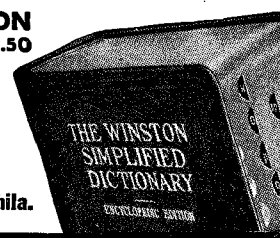
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being to leave his letters unopened; for this no humane man will blame him; but it was an expedient which eventually leads to confusion." With all her gifts, it is noticeable that Miss Repplier's mind is not attuned to poetry: she mangles hopelessly a beautiful verse of Dryden's which she essays to quote.

THERE is hardly a month that we do not get from a publisher an interesting book on some branch of science written in a way that an ordinary intelligent reader can understand. Still, we don't like our science to be too light-hearted and we hereby protest against further tendencies in that direction. In Paul Karlson's *The World around Us*, just as we get all worked up about an electron or an atom, the professor introduces a funny picture which not only has the effect of showing the disintegration of an atom but which also disintegrates the reader's attention. But, taking it all in all, *The World around Us* has a pleasant way of making us feel at home in the modern physicist's world, which will be the world of our children. How differently poetry and art generally will be when the information in this book and one we reviewed last month, *The Renaissance of Physics*, becomes part of the ordinary mentality.

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