

Books and Things

TO have made a subject your own is to find yourself, thenceforward, whenever you espy another man approaching it, in one of two attitudes, both of them unjust. Either your superior information goes to your head, and you break out in wholesale and retail censure of the intruder, or else you are so grateful to him for reminding you of a beloved time or person or place that you are blind and dumb to his shortcomings.

In the smoking room of a boat I once scraped acquaintance with a middle-aged man who had mistaken all women to be his province, and who night after night showed his knowledge. All the evening he would sit at the table he regarded as his table, nor ever lacked listeners, mostly youthful and changing listeners, through any knot of our way across the Atlantic. Firmly did he repress, implacably did he ignore, omnisciently did he set right everybody who tried to tell him anything about women. He was a man of many impressive beginnings. His best and most prognathically delivered speech began like this: "Passion, in woman, commences at the age of twenty-nine." Spoken slowly.

As high as that gyneolater rated his knowledge of women, so high do I rate mine of Switzerland. High, I mean, when I compare it with such knowledge as most other American book reviewers possess of those ozonic cantons, than which I have yet to see a country more stimulating to one's legs. But the bias that living in Switzerland has given me is the grateful sojourner's, not the repulsive omniscient's. To this day I cannot pick up a new Swiss guide book without an impulse to bid its author welcome; to thank him, by praising what he has done, for making me think of old friends and old times.

So I am sorry I cannot praise *How to See Switzerland, a Practical Guide*, by Frederick Dossenbach (New York: G. E. Stechert. \$2.50). Sorry for another reason, too, since Mr. Dossenbach is of an innocence rare among persons old enough to get into print. Hear him on Winter in Switzerland: "And while all rejoice over this initial phase of the season of white, another event follows closely the first—a myriad of snowflakes suddenly decide on their opening ball. How swiftly they dance, how merrily they chase each other! Like ever so many butterflies they descend on the ground and when the morning sun rises above the clearly outlined silhouettes of the mountains we behold a new world, a fairyland of resplendent magnificence." So many pages, 90 out of 285, are given to railway fares, to hotels and their prices, that the author gives only half a line to Evolena and part of a line and a half to Zinal. It is to consider Zinal and Evolena too incuriously to consider them so.

Baedeker is still, to the best of my information and belief, the best guide to Switzerland. I haven't seen the new edition, published this year or last, but I have no doubt it is as good for our day as its predecessors were for theirs. The earliest Baedeker in my library is a French translation of the second edition, and is dated 1854. That was somewhat before my time, but the book reads as though it were up to its date. The translator, M. Girard, a professor in the University of Bâle, praised Karl Baedeker as an "observateur impartial, esprit pratique, voyageur infatigable et homme de goût." Justly did M. Girard say of K. B. that "il a trouvé le secret de ce milieu dans lequel un manuel doit rester, pour n'être ni un livre superficiel, ni une oeuvre de science." My collection of Baedekers being incomplete, I can't say when some member of the

Baedeker family composed that sentence which has embellished so many of the later editions: "Over all the movements of the traveller the weather holds despotic sway." I cannot find the equivalent of this in my 1854 copy, but it does contain one maxim that generations of Baedekers have not tired of: "Chi va piano va sano; chi va sano va lontano." Of the emendations which a roving textual critic notices not all are improvements. At the end of the walker's day, we read in modern Baedekers, "a substantial meal (evening table-d'hôte at the principal hotels) may be partaken of." The older text says of the walker, more simply: "Son souper sera copieux." Some of the changes in words are due to the disappearance of things. Gone is "le thé Anglais, à 8 h. du soir, avec pain, beurre et viande."

As a student of Baedeker, as an admirer of his phrases, I yield to a friend of mine with whom I used to take Swiss walks. His knowledge of English seemed to have been acquired exclusively from Baedeker, whom my friend rather oddly preferred not to read in either of his native tongues. He hoped that Bonivard had found the Castle of Chillon "suitable for a prolonged stay." He pronounced the goat's milk we drank in the Loetschenthal "trying, for adepts only." He said it would "repay a robust and steady-headed expert to go as far as" a third bottle of Yvorne. The one English church service in summer that he sampled struck him as "very fatiguing, but without danger for proficients," and to him English curates were "the enemies of repose." For aught I could tell he said these things without humorous intent. Which was just as well.

The greatest of all Baedeker's sentences, from my point of view, is this: "Most travellers err in giving too large gratuities." It cannot be quite true, for gratuities of a size given by most travellers will not long remain too large. True or untrue, however, the sentence goes to my heart. I never read it without pride. For a month we had been staying, my family and I, at a hotel where we had often stayed. Its owner, a Hollander, and his wife, a Belgian, were by that time old acquaintances. When the day came for us to go I made out a list of persons to be tipped and of amounts to be given. Then I asked the proprietor and his wife to make each a similar list, without consultation, to be compared with mine. You may conceive my self-satisfaction when we found that the average of my tips was a little lower than his average and a little higher than hers. This expertness had been learned by two years of hit-or-miss Swiss tipping, and learned too late, for I was soon to leave Switzerland.

Not to leave for good, I hope, the land where I have walked longest and breathed deepest in pleasant company. Shall I see them again, those old friends, before we are grown too old for them to yank me up places that they found easy? Not all of them. One was too old the day we first met him, waiting for us on a foreland near the Val de Bagnes. "My wife saw you and told me of your coming," he said. "She said to me, They are strangers who have lost their way. Go and meet them. So I came. Of what country are you, sir? Of England? And you, sir, an American? I knew a countryman of yours who came here because he had fallen sick. And his doctors had told him to bathe in pure and quiet waters. And he did so in this valley. And he was cured. Last summer? No, not last summer. It was—let me see—it was eighteen years ago. . . . You are far travellers, gentlemen. And I too have travelled in my youth. I have been, yes, as far as Chamounix."

P. L.

Biography, Adulation and Criticism

My Boyhood, by John Burroughs, with an introduction by his son Julian Burroughs. Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Company. \$2.50.

The Life of Donald G. Mitchell, Ik Marvel, by Waldo H. Dunn. New York: Charles Scribners Sons. \$4.50.

American Portraits, by Gamaliel Bradford. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company. \$3.50.

I SUPPOSE that the use of the terms Biography and Criticism as though they were not different names for the same process, is partly because in one case the process is applied to books and in the other to personalities, and partly because most alleged biographical writing falls so far short of what it ought to be. People do not generally enough remember the pertinence of Hennequin's conclusion that criticism is the science of the personal equation. Whether a man is recorded in his living or in his writing makes no difference on the surface, and under the surface it makes only the difference that as his living is mostly unconscious and his writing mostly calculated, the challenge to the critical powers of the biographer is doubled and the problems of selection and evaluation multiplied many times.

The equations that Hennequin alluded to were primarily, of course, that of the man written about, and hardly less important, that of the man writing. Each of them is made up of more or less determinable x's and y's and z's; the highest common factor is the chief determinant of the point of view; and the lowest common multiple is the biographical resultant, which depends chiefly on the degree of acumen of the biographer and the degree of detachment with which he is able to approach and follow through his task. When the chronicler is almost completely the product of the man chronicled, a Boswell's Johnson is turned out; a mutual hatred of a smug conventionalism results in a Strachey's interpretation of a Florence Nightingale; an eager desire to preempt claims in the newly opened and undeveloped territory of psycho-analysis leads excursionists like Brooks and Anthony to stake out and offer stock in the Mark Twain sheep-ranch or the Margaret Fuller gold-mine. And always before the product is actually completed a third personal equation must be reckoned with—that of the reader. If it is a hard matter to write a good biography, it is, or ought to be, an adventure to read one.

Here, for example, are two kindly American octogenarians, John Burroughs and Donald Grant Mitchell. Both were casual witnesses of the country's coming of age; neither was an active participant in affairs; both were in some measure attached to the soil, and neither was wholly dependent upon it; both were quietly independent in conduct and conviction, but neither was in any sense a radical; both were inclined to speculate on life and to accept the universe; both were immaculate in character and enriched in later years with honor, love, obedience, troops of friends; both were prolific in authorship, and both relatively undistinguished "good Americans." Granting all the distinctions between the lesser Mitchell and the greater Burroughs, one might expect something like comparable estimates from their spiritual heirs. But no.

We owe the little informal volume *My Boyhood* to

John Burroughs' son Julian. It is addressed to him and was evidently written at his request. It has not an exact title, though it has so little system that one would be hard to find. It begins with a general foreword, rambles on pleasantly through early farm experiences, mentions half-way along that he was seventh in a family of ten, comes to his birth toward the end, later discusses his great-grandfather and other forebears, and ends, as far as the direct reminiscence goes, with comments on the countryside in which his boyhood was spent, and a charming passage about the springs on the old farm. It is the casual talk of the old naturalist with the visitors for whom he was never too busy at West Park or at Slabsides. "I have had no grouch, I have not wanted the earth. I am pessimistic by night; but by day I am a confirmed optimist, and it is the days that have stamped my life. I have found this planet a good corner of the universe to live in, and I am not in a hurry to exchange it for any other."

To pass from the simple, uninflated recollections of the old man to a second part of the book entitled *My Father* offers a dubious prospect to the reader who feels that John Burroughs would survive in his affections without the help of filial tribute. But the first paragraph of the tribute is reassuring: "The earliest recollection that I have of Father was of one spring day when he was chasing and stoning the cat, who had caught a blue-bird. I remember . . . the speed and strength with which Father pursued her, and the language he used, language that impressed me, at least, if not the cat, and which discredited the cat and her ancestry as well."

He is a human and credible father,—affectionate, care-free, improvident, irascible, and on the whole thoroughly amiable. The picture smacks of genuineness because the son does not see fit to cover up homely frictions or the traces of them. It is critical because it contains real details of daily life and lets them stand for what they are worth. John Burroughs was not a demi-god, but he was a real man who lived on the slopes of Parnassus. Moreover, the slopes were honestly rock-sprinkled. He had none of the desire of the "nature-lover" to paint the lily. He did not ecstasize over the world out of doors, though as a "finder-out-of-things" he tried to understand its behavior. He derived much more from Calvin than he did from Rousseau; he is the very last of men to turn to for sentimentalism.

Nature was the farm, and the farm was a work-place. The oxen kinking their tails, humping their backs, and throwing their weight against a boulder they were pulling out of a field to lodge in a stone-wall, were a subject missed by the painters. The relaxed freshness of a late summer day, after a cooling shower offered a good time for odd jobs. He was the logical descendant of "a line of farmers with a decidedly religious bent." He abjured their grim theology, but not their rectitude. He retained the warmer quality of their mysticism, but tempered it with science. There is not word of praise or of self-praise in the book.

And now for Donald Grant Mitchell as presented by Professor Dunn. Mitchell was a Connecticut boy and man. His father was an old-line Congregational clergyman; his mother of a little less sober heritage. He was one of nine children, born within sixteen years. At the age of eight he was shipped off to boarding-school, never to return home. At seventeen he was orphaned, and a student at Yale under the guardianship of a practical uncle who could not understand him, but who hoped for the